

Gaze, Performativity and Gender Trouble in *Farewell My Concubine*

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Abstract:

Directed by Chen Kaige, a famous fifth-generation Chinese film director, *Farewell My Concubine* was crowned with the Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival in 1993 and received many other international film awards and nominations. In the film, Cheng Dieyi, a Peking Opera *huadan* actor impersonating female characters, becomes obsessed with his role as the concubine of the King in his enchanting performances following a long and strict professional training. While most previous studies have taken the psychoanalytical perspectives, this paper makes use of the gender theories of male gaze and performativity in analyzing the gender trouble that Cheng Dieyi has undergone in his self-identification and sexuality.

Like most of the male *dans* in the Peking Opera theatre, the role Cheng Dieyi plays has to display the female charm in the eyes of the male audiences and Cheng's feminine manners both on and off stage are indicative of his internalization of the male gaze. In his everyday life, Cheng Dieyi behaves like an elegant lady, speaking in a lady's low and soft voice, maintaining the delicate *Lan huazhi* (artificial pose of hand of *dan*) and wearing a look of sexual appeal. In addition, he also internalizes the inscribed patriarchal ideology embedded in male gaze. While many male *dans* are consciously imitating these stylized acts, Cheng Dieyi gradually transforms these repeated acts from "performing" into "being." 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.

Cheng Dieyi's transformation of gender identity, breaking the taboo in the Peking Opera tradition, is not accepted by people around him, especially Xiaolou, the actor playing the King. Apart from the anxiety and pain his cross-gender identity has brought him, Cheng Dieyi has also suffered from maltreatments and humiliations in the Chinese political turmoil. During the Chinese Culture Revolution in the 1960s and 70s, his dignity as well as his art was tramped down. Furthermore, Cheng Dieyi's life and art becomes an allegory for the inflicted Chinese culture and the repressed individuality and subjectivity during the turbulent periods in the 20th century China.