

Alyx Beaudoin

East Asian Language Studies

Doctor Wei Cai

February 12th, 2024

### Film Study of "霸王别姬"

"霸王别姬", is a highly acclaimed film directed by Chen Kaige in 1993, based upon the tragic opera *The Conqueror Bids Farewell to His Favorite Concubine*, by Mei Lanfang. Set against the backdrop of 20th-century China, spanning from the 1920s to the 1970s, the story delves deep into the turbulent political and social landscape of the era and into the life within Peking opera. The protagonists are performers Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, whose stories are portrayed between prepubescent ages and well into their adulthood. Their experiences entwine together the topics of cultural revolution, political defiance and loss of tradition between intense bouts of betrayal, following the characters through the plot and their eventual love triangle. This incredibly moving story is also very heavy, capturing the abuses of production culture and the harms caused by changing moral ideology.

The novel explores the complex relationship between Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, who begin their journeys as Douzi and Shitou; young, orphaned boys forced to vigorously train opera. After the abandonment by his mother and the first few horrors, he would long come to face, when he is shown kindness for the first time by none other than Shitou, he becomes infatuated. A very loyal, loving and familial bond forms between the two, which sets the stage for the future ahead. The story of Douzi is unfortunately a very painful one, who experiences betrayal after betrayal through every portion of his life. The first of which is the loss of his

mother—the second occurs in their youth, first by Shitou and then by himself. When Shitou harms him in response to losing a benefactor's favour, Douzi decides to give up the last few fragments of the male identity he held onto. Both actions leave deep scars on Douzi and leave him deeply vulnerable to future betrayals. Cheng Dieyi's unrequited love for Duan Xiaolou leads to jealousy and heartbreak when Xiaolou gets involved with the courtesan, Juxian. He treats her very poorly initially, which fades into neutral acceptance, but he never quite forgives her for coming into Xiaolou's life. The betrayal of Xiaolou marrying Juxian complicates their bond of a decade and brings an abundance of further turmoil and conflict. The final instances come before the hands of the communist party, whose rioters push Xiaolou to give up both Dieyi and Juxian for the sake of himself, ultimately leading to their suicides, one immediate and the other long contemplated. A story of such deep traumas and horrendous abuses is undoubtedly painful, but the act of betrayal in particular, manipulated by the treacherous world around them, is what harms these characters the most.

One of the biggest impacts of this film is Chen Kaige's critique of the political ideologies that shaped China during the 20th century, including the Nationalist and Communist regimes. As the Communist Party rises to power and the Cultural Revolution unfolds, the characters are challenged by their comrades and leaders in pursuit of political goals that catch them in the crossfire of larger political forces. The opera, once a cherished art form, became a tool for political propaganda, which had to withstand the forces of the communist regime when the performance of the Japanese and the pursuit of tradition were contested. Cheng Dieyi's devotion to his craft and his portrayal of Concubine Yu become symbols of defiance, especially in a society where masculinity and conformity are highly valued. Despite facing persecution and discrimination due to their identities and personal choices, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou

persist in pursuing their art and their relationship. They use their performances in Peking opera as a form of resistance against political oppression, combatting even their own younger troupe mates. This association of their opera performances to the outside political agenda is then contorted by the communist rioters, who force them to put on their makeup and costumes, only to humiliatingly parade them through the streets. The film uses the personal struggles and triumphs of its characters to comment on broader political and social issues, offering a nuanced exploration of defiance and resistance in the face of oppression.

The film depicts the decline of Peking opera, through the character's hardships and political chaos, despite it once being a popular and revered art form in Chinese culture. As societal values shifted and political ideologies changed, the traditional forms of entertainment in China, like Peking opera, were marginalized and suppressed. The film showcases the dwindling audiences and external forces opera troupes had to face in such changing times. Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou were forced to confront the loss of their artistic traditions as the opera became a target for ideological purges and erosion of China's cultural heritage. As traditional practices are marginalized and suppressed, characters like Dieyi and Xiaolou grapple with a sense of loss and displacement. Xiaolou struggles with the choice of staying with the opera or finding other work and struggles to find meaning and purpose in their rapidly changing society. The film further depicts a stark generational divide between older characters who honour traditional values and younger characters who embrace modernity and revolutionary fervour. This aspect is portrayed by the boy Cheng Dieyi raises, Xiao Si, and the younger troupe members of the later opera group that creates tension between preserving tradition and embracing progress. Cheng Dieyi, though, shows unwavering dedication to his portrayal of Concubine Yu which serves to represent a last

stand for traditional values and artistic integrity. His struggle embodies the broader theme of individuals sacrificing themselves to preserve tradition in the face of societal change.

Against the backdrop of China's political upheavals, including the Japanese invasion, the rise of the Communist Party, and the Cultural Revolution, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou navigate the challenges posed by their personal desires and the changing society around them. External pressures and temptations push the characters into painful positions of deceit and abandonment, testing their loyalties and the strength of their love. The intertwined themes of devotion, betrayal, identity, and the transformative power of art reflect on the broader social and political transformations of China during the 20th century, creating an incredibly impactful and forever memorable journey through time.