

Queer Culture in "Farewell My Concubine":

A Representation for Social Change

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Abstract

This paper delves into Chen Kaige's 1993 film "霸王别姬" (Farewell My Concubine), which, during China's tumultuous 20th-century history, spans 54 years, following the trials of two Peking opera performers, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou. The analysis reveals the film's defiance of heteronormativity through the complex relationship between Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou. The film's exploration of homosexual desire is at the heart of the story, revealing the subtle emotional connections between its protagonists and highlighting Cheng Dieyi's subtle challenges to social expectations, humanizing the gay experience. The essay also critiques oppressive social structures and their impact on individual lives, drawing parallels between the characters' struggles and broader historical events such as the Cultural Revolution. Additionally, the film's depiction of gender norms comes under scrutiny, with a focus on Cheng Dieyi's depiction of femininity and its challenge against traditional male-centric gender roles. The characters in the film echo the real-life interpretations of BL (boys love), revealing society's acceptance and resistance to homosexuality. The paper concludes with a discussion of the film's representation of gay life and trauma, highlighting cultural resilience and adaptability. Through multi-perspective analysis, this article aims to reveal the film's in-depth exploration of gay identity, social pressure and the pursuit of self-acceptance in the context of Chinese cultural upheaval, and ultimately to provide insights into the role of Farewell My Concubine in challenging and shaping progressive social and cultural change.

这篇论文深入探讨了1993年陈凯歌执导的电影《霸王别姬》，该片跨越了中国动荡的20世纪历史的54年，讲述了两位京剧表演者程蝶衣和段小楼所面临的考验。分析揭示了电影对异性恋规范的反抗，通过程蝶衣与段小楼之间复杂的关系。电影对同性恋欲望的探索是故

事的核心，揭示了主人公之间微妙的情感联系，突出了程蝶衣对社会期望的微妙挑战，使同性恋体验人性化。论文还批评了压抑性社会结构及其对个人生活的影响，将角色的挣扎与如文化大革命等更广泛的历史事件相提并论。此外，电影对性别规范的描绘也受到了审视，重点是程蝶衣对女性特质的描绘及其对传统以男性为中心的性别角色的挑战。电影中的角色与现实生活中对BL（男孩之爱）的解读相互呼应，揭示了社会对同性恋的接受与抵制。论文最后讨论了电影对同性恋生活和创伤的表现，突出了其文化韧性和适应性。通过多角度的分析，本文旨在揭示电影对同性恋身份、社会压力和在中国文化动荡背景下自我接受追求的深入探索，并最终为理解《霸王别姬》在挑战和塑造进步社会和文化变革中。

Introduction

The story of "霸王别姬" (Farewell My Concubine), directed by Chen Kaige and released in 1993, spans a significant period of China's history, encapsulating 54 years of China's tumultuous 20th-century history. The film delves into the intertwined lives of two Peking opera performers, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou. Their journey unfolds amidst political upheavals, societal shifts, and personal struggles. Beginning in the 1920s, Cheng Dieyi, a young boy sold to a Peking opera troupe, forms a profound bond with fellow apprentice Duan Xiaolou. Both undergo rigorous training in opera, with Dieyi specializing in female roles and Xiaolou in male roles. Their friendship and artistic collaboration become central to the narrative as they confront the challenges of their profession and navigate their personal lives. As decades pass, the characters are swept up in pivotal moments of Chinese history, including the Japanese invasion, the rise of communism, and the Cultural Revolution. These political tumults deeply influence their lives, leading to betrayals, sacrifices, and personal tragedies. At the heart of the story lies

Cheng Dieyi's unrequited love for Duan Xiaolou, a captivating and enduring theme of the film. Despite their profound connection, Xiaolou's marriage to former courtesan Juxian and societal expectations strain their relationship. Through its exploration of 痴情 (infatuation), 忠孝节义 (loyalty, filial piety, justice), and 嫉恨 (envy and hate), "霸王别姬" offers a poignant portrayal of love and loss amid tradition and change against the backdrop of China's tumultuous history. This paper seeks to focus on the main facets of which the film connects to queer content and how that reflects and contrasts upon social change both depicted within the film and out.

Defiance Against Heteronormativity

Cheng Dieyi's subtle yet profound romantic attachment to his male counterpart, Duan Xiaolou, serves as a challenge to heteronormative expectations within "霸王别姬" which might have otherwise been fulfilled by Xiaolou's heterosexual union with Juxian. While Dieyi and Xiaolou are not explicitly depicted as romantic, they convey undertones of love and intimacy that go beyond conventional male-male relationships. This aspect of their relationship becomes even more significant when considering the social status of 戏子 (actors) and 同性 (homosexuals) within traditional Chinese society, which was often comparable to that of 妓女 (prostitutes) like Juxian (Chou, 2008, pp. 248-250). China's history of censorship, particularly concerning 'sex,' including prostitution and homosexuality, extends far before and during the film's timeline (Ruan, 1991, pp ix). Despite the thirty-year gap between the Cultural Revolution and the release of "霸王别姬" in 1993, censorship persisted, leading to the film's initial ban. Cheng Dieyi's role as an actor is closely paralleled with his identification with 男色 (male homosexuality), both key aspects of his identity. This depiction, along with the film's portrayal of the Cultural Revolution and its 'pessimistic ending,' were among the reasons for its ban, although

it was eventually reintroduced after censorship modifications (Song, 2002, pp. 73-74). Facing similar pressures in the film, Duan Xiaolou 批斗 (criticizes and denounces) Dieyi, proclaiming 「只管唱戏,不管什么人,不管什么阶级,他都卖命地唱!」,「他唱给日本侵略者,他当了汉奸!」 ("just sings operas, no matter who he is, no matter what class he is, he sings with all his heart!", "He sang to the Japanese invaders, he became a traitor!"), even revealing Dieyi's relationship with Master Yuan (Chen, 1993). Despite these accusations, Dieyi's steadfast commitment to his art and identity remains unshaken. He accepts the scrutiny without shame and even believes the opera could have been shared with Japan, reflecting a deep desire to spread values akin to his own. The film's sympathetic portrayal of opera and, by extension, queer identity challenges social norms, especially within the context of traditional actors. The exploration of these themes, combined with the film's initial ban, highlights the resistance faced by queer representation in Chinese media and sheds light on the evolving landscape of societal acceptance and artistic expression.

Exploration of Same-Sex Desire

The exploration of same-sex desire in “霸王别姬” is subtly interwoven throughout the narrative, most notably in the complex relationship between Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, extending to Dieyi's other relationships as well. The protagonists' affection for each other transcends mere friendship, with hints and tensions indicating a deeper emotional connection that acts to humanize queer experiences and challenge stereotypes. As they mature, their bond becomes increasingly intricate due to personal ambitions and the broader political landscape. Cheng Dieyi's unrequited love for Duan Xiaolou intensifies, leading to jealousy and heartbreak, while Duan Xiaolou becomes romantically involved with Juxian, further complicating their

dynamic. This romantic entanglement reflects on the socio-political climate, where conflicting ideologies and personal desires intersect, leading to both minor and major conflicts. While “霸王别姬” skillfully uses these queer and political parallels to enrich its narrative, some directors, such as Tsai Ming-Liang, express discomfort with the label of "gay film," viewing it as sensationalized and limiting (Song, 2002, pp. 83). Despite the negative connotations associated with their discomfort, the mere existence of such discourse is crucial for the cultural visibility it brings to LGBTQ+ communities. Similar visibility can be found in the film’s exploration of ‘taboo’ topics, exposing hierarchical oppressions associated with acting, homosexuality, and prostitution. Scholars like Song argue that regardless of labelling, cinematic representations of homosexuality serve as political statements in debates surrounding identity politics and multiculturalism (2002, pp. 84). A distinction can be drawn between directors who intentionally support the concept of 同志 (a colloquial equivalent to ‘queer’) Cinema and those who do not. The latter often see homosexuality as a genre, while the former believe in using cinema to illuminate social, cultural, and political power dynamics. Despite the inevitable categorization of certain films as “gay films,” the growing number of these movies highlights the increasing representation and support for queer communities within Chinese society (Song, 2002, pp. 83).

Critique of Repressive Social Structures

“霸王别姬” offers an expert examination of historical events and political ideologies, providing a lens to scrutinize individual lives and showcasing what life might have been like during the Communist and Cultural Revolutions. Duan Xiaolou's compromises stand in stark contrast to Cheng Dieyi's unwavering artistic integrity, representing contrasting responses to the pressures of conformity and personal conviction amid societal upheaval. The replacement of

Dieyi as the performer of Concubine Yu, due to his controversial political stance towards the Japanese, illustrates the harsh realities faced by individuals during these tumultuous times. In a scene where the 新虞姬 (new Concubine Yu) speaks to Xiaolou, saying:「台下坐的可都是劳动人民,唱不唱您自个儿掂量着」(“Those sitting below the stage are all labourers, whether to sing or not is your decision alone”) (Chen, 1993), Chou describes this as an understatement given Xiaolou's reluctance to jeopardize his own honour (2008, pp. 252). This scene highlights the precarious position individuals like Xiaolou find themselves in, where their decisions are constrained by political reputation and societal expectations.「戏子的命运真是太悲惨了」(“The actor's fate is so tragic”), says Chou (2008, pp. 252). Such an observation further emphasizes the deep-seated struggles and injustices inherent in repressive social structures that marginalize and discriminate against queer and outcasted individuals. Through Cheng Dieyi's journey of grappling with societal and self-acceptance, the film critiques the oppressive forces present in conservative and heteronormative societies. By shedding light on these issues, “霸王别姬” encourages viewers to contemplate the detrimental effects of discrimination and the urgent need for social change to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Challenging Gender Norms

Cheng Dieyi, depicted as a delicate and effeminate boy in his youth, finds solace in portraying female roles, contrasting with Duan Xiaolou's rugged and masculine persona. Initially adhering to these stereotypical male and female archetypes, Dieyi's portrayal of femininity goes beyond surface-level representation to challenge traditional gender norms prevalent in both traditional Chinese society and modern global contexts. His embodiment of female characters not only reflects his personal identity but also serves as a commentary on the fluidity and

complexity of gender roles, challenging rigid expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity. This contributes to broader discussions on gender identity and expression. Though nuanced topics of gender expression, especially within the realm of Chinese Opera, are by no means new, they have become less sensitive in practice, as evidenced by historical language usage. Words like 相公 (male prostitute) were indiscriminately applied to actors playing female roles and homosexuals alike during the Qing dynasty, a label certainly applicable to characters such as Cheng Dieyi. This term later evolved into 相姑, a feminized modification denoting feminine features, similar to the derogatory term 'she-male' in English (Ruan, 1991, pp. 115). Such vocabulary may have been intended to define what Chao articulates as “tongzhi camp”, characterized by “irony, theatricality, aestheticism, and humour”, and mediated by “gay shame and gay melancholy in their particular Chinese cultural manifestations” (1991, pp. 302). This collection of vocabulary reflects the complex interplay of gender and sexuality within Chinese cultural contexts, where expressions of gender fluidity are intertwined with societal norms. Female impersonation present within 昆曲 (Kunqu opera) can be ‘divorced’ from the social stigmas associated with diverse gender presentation due to being justifiable as a ‘国粹’ (national heritage), separating the art from the artists (Chao, 2020, pp. 291). While linguistic associations like 相公 and 相姑 attempt to categorize gender fluidity within a framework reminiscent of modern drag culture, a great dichotomy is formed (Ruan, 1991, pp. 147). While operatic cross-dressing may be celebrated, drag remains marginalized within taboo queer culture. This overarching discrimination underscores the complexities of gender representation and the ongoing struggle to challenge traditional norms and embrace diverse expressions of identity.

Representation of Queer Life and Trauma

The Peking opera serves as the central motif in “霸王别姬”, symbolizing the characters' lives and struggles. Cheng Dieyi's portrayal of the Concubine Yu becomes emblematic of his own identity struggles and the challenges he faces as a gay man in a society that condemns homosexuality. In a pivotal moment, around 60 years old, he performs once more with Duan Xiaolou. When Dieyi declares, “I am not a delicate young woman-” Xiaolou retorts with “Wrong!”, Chou reflects 「也许就是这一句「错了」,使程猛然惊觉,他这辈子都错了。「错」的开始,便在当初「男儿郎」被迫变成了「女娇娥」。回顾他这一生,是错了又错。」 (“Perhaps it was this utterance ‘wrong’ that made Cheng suddenly realize he had been wrong all his life. A ‘wrong’ start, from the beginning ‘young boy’ was forced to become a ‘delicate young woman’. Looking back on his life, it was wrong after wrong”) (2008, p. 256). Cheng Dieyi was always 四面楚歌 (under fire from all sides), from his traumatic childhood to his struggles with identity, and it resonates as representative of the trauma frequently faced by queer individuals in societies that marginalize or reject their identities, that ultimately leads to his death by 自刎 (cutting one's own throat). His journey toward self-acceptance offers a poignant narrative of the challenges and tribulations inherent in the quest for identity, contributing to broader discussions on queer empowerment. Furthermore, the actor portraying Cheng Dieyi, Leslie Cheung, was openly gay, lending the film an added layer of authenticity (Song, 2002, pp. 81). Representation is a form of social change, and Cheung's casting reinforces the film's role as a pedestal for queer representation. Despite directors often distancing their films from being labelled as "gay," film serves as a vehicle for normalizing homosexuality within a broader context. Chen Kaige emphasizes that the film is ultimately about “human nature,” reinforcing the idea that homosexuality is intrinsic to the human experience (Song, 2002, p. 81-83). Having relatable

figures in positions of power or fame fosters a sense of normalcy and broadens exposure to diverse identities and experiences.

Cultural Resilience and Adaptation

Cheng Dieyi's portrayal of Concubine Yu challenges traditional male-centred gender roles both literally and figuratively. It resonates with younger generations today, who are bound by traditional male-centered gender norms, and seek alternative outlets like BL (Boys' Love) to express desires for freedom, equality, and independence (Zhang, 2016, p. 257). Dieyi's unwavering dedication to his craft and artistry in portraying female roles symbolize cultural resilience and adaptation in which queer communities can relate to and connect with. Although Dieyi and Xiaolou's relationship is not explicitly stated, it is conveyed through undertones and gestures, much like the use of coded language and substitutions in the BL fan community. "Many unique terms, such as '攻' (seme/top) and '受' (uke/bottom), were produced from BL texts and are widely utilized in fans' social conversations" (Zhang, 2016, p. 261). Terms like "1" (攻) and "0" (受), or euphemisms like "黄瓜" (cucumber) and "菊花" (chrysanthemum), allow fans to adapt to restrictions while maintaining the essence of their discussions (Zhang, 2016, pp. 261). BL fans have collectively developed a new set of rules, terms, and shared knowledge derived from BL texts. This development of a unique vocabulary shows how cultural groups create and adapt to their own cultural norms and expressions, showcasing fortitude against mainstream cultural expectations.

Zhang further explores the complex relationship BL fans have with heteronormativity. Some fans appropriate marginalized BL stories to voice desires for idealized heterosexual relationships, while others genuinely challenge heteronormative expectations (Zhang, 2016, pp.

263). This duality indicates a form of cultural negotiation where fans navigate between mainstream societal expectations and their own subcultural values. This battle with heteronormativity is mirrored by the characters of “霸王别姬”, where Dieyi and Xiaolou navigate identity amidst societal expectations. Even groups of “腐女” (fujoshi in Japanese), female enjoyers of male-male romantic and pornographic fiction, provide mixed reports on whether homosexuality is considered acceptable. While many find reading about homosexual relationships in BL fiction normal and even embraceable, real-life portrayals still evoke hesitation and discomfort for some (Neville, 2015). This suggests an evolving cultural attitude towards homosexuality, with fictional settings in BL serving as a stepping stone towards broader societal acceptance. The film's release and initial ban due to its queer themes reflect this societal struggle with acceptance. The film portrays characters who challenge traditional norms, navigate their identities within a cultural context, use coded expressions to convey their feelings, negotiate with heteronormativity, and reflect shifting societal perceptions of queer identities. All these resonate with broader themes of cultural resilience and adaptation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "霸王别姬" stands as a cinematic masterpiece that masterfully intertwines the personal struggles of its characters with the broader socio-political landscape of 20th-century China. Through the captivating narrative of Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, the film delves deeply into queer identities, resilience, and cultural adaptation. The film courageously challenges heteronormative expectations, spotlighting the societal pressures faced by those who defy traditional gender and sexual norms. Despite facing initial censorship due to its queer themes, it has emerged as a potent symbol of queer representation in Chinese cinema. The exploration of

same-sex desire and the nuanced relationship between Dieyi and Xiaolou humanizes queer experiences, dismantling stereotypes and fostering greater understanding. The critique of repressive social structures and the portrayal of characters navigating the tensions between conformity and personal conviction resonate profoundly, shedding light on the struggles of marginalized communities. Cheng Dieyi's journey towards self-acceptance offers a poignant narrative of queer empowerment, adding depth to broader discussions on identity, representation, and social change. The film's nuanced approach to gender roles challenges traditional norms surrounding masculinity and femininity, prompting viewers to contemplate the complexities of gender identity and expression. Moreover, the film's themes of cultural resilience and adaptation resonate with real-life experiences, such as those found in BL, and reflect evolving attitudes towards homosexuality. This mirrors a society in transition, grappling with acceptance and change. By weaving together elements of queer culture with broader cultural and political themes, "Farewell My Concubine" provides a timeless reflection on love and the challenge of societal norms. It fosters an empathetic understanding of queer experiences and underscores the imperative for social change.

Citations

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