

# The Development of Queer Film Identity

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**Abstract:** As a medium of visualization, the film has provided a vivid visual record, using its unique strengths in restoring reality and historical reenactment as an important means of documenting how human society has explored, perceived, and understood gender identity and emotional desire over the centuries. Queer films, as a branch of cinematic development, have their unique artistic appeal and logic of thinking in terms of gender awareness exploration and erotic expression. In this article, I will focus on the development of queer in Asia, especially in China and Hong Kong. Comparing the different attitudes towards LGBT in western countries and Asia. The analysis is done through the perspective of some queer in the representative movie "Farewell My Concubine".

**Keywords:** LGBT, Development of queer, Farewell My Concubine.

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the first two decades of development in the 21st century, homosexual subcultures have been accepted to a much more tolerant extent than in the 1990s, especially in some countries and regions represented by the Netherlands, the UK, and the US, where same-sex couples are recognized as legal. (Cass, 1979. pp.219-235.) In today's social environment, queer films have shifted more towards a more subtle portrayal of same-sex emotions, with the conflict between family and worldly vision becoming the biggest conflict, rather than the hunting and voyeuristic view of the gay community that queer films took in the 1990s. The hegemony of heterosexuality has kept sexual minorities in the shadows, and the rise of queer films has provided a good means of interacting with the general public. Film and television have become a major way for the public to understand sexual minorities and for sexual minorities to find their own identity, and it is becoming apparent that film is not only a form of entertainment but also a social responsibility, with the film becoming an intuitive channel for queer people to seek dialogue with the public. However, in mainland China, the development of queer films has been limited, and it has taken decades of difficult development before they have gradually gained international attention and recognition. Beginning with Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, the film subtly shifts the public's attention to a critique of feudal culture and a reflection on history, due to its use of transvestite elements attached to traditional Chinese opera, and the mixed emotional treatment of reality and drama between Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, the "Consort Yu" and "Xiang Yu", which also weakens the homosexual feelings between the couple. Because of its gay tendencies, the picture is still believed to be the beginning of the production of queer Mainland cinema, despite its purposeful avoidance of a positive image of homosexuality.

## 2. Formation of Queer Theory

Queer theory, founded by famous feminist Laurotis in the early 1990s, is an emerging theory. Originally used in the West as a derogatory term for the gay community, the concept of the Queer as a social group encompasses gay, lesbian, and

bisexual positions, as well as other potential orientation positions. The 1990s saw the emergence of a new wave of queer cinema, which focused on the unruly and rebellious nature of homosexuality but also reflected social issues such as sex, drugs, and AIDS, as well as the conflict between society and the homosexual community, the lack of social acceptance and the gender perception of the LGBT community. In the 21st century, queer films began to shift towards a more objective portrayal of homosexuality, gradually moving towards self-identification and a more realistic portrayal of homosexuality through a variety of historical and realistic perspectives. This has influenced the creation of queer films in Asia and elsewhere. Queer films have gradually become localized in Asia, especially in Thailand where the acceptance of the gay subculture has been greater, and the development of queer films has been faster. For example, films such as *Love of Siam* and *Yes or No* are localizations of Thai queer films, successfully incorporating commercial elements into a queer film rather than a purely artistic one and expanding the audience beyond the gay community. (Yue, 2014. pp.145-151.) At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese cinema could also see the expression of queer films, showing Chinese social issues more profoundly through queer and bringing queer into the public eye, although of course at this time China's vision of acceptance was not overly broad, so much so that many films showing queer were banned. However, the representation of queer films in China was more open in Hong Kong and Taiwan than on the mainland.

## 3. The Symbolism of Queer Theory

The sensitivity of the LGBT subject matter has contributed to the subtextual status of queer films, which use visual symbols to express the desire to pursue and the courage to fight behind the vehicle of same-sex love. Queer films use specific elements to express ideas and attitudes through metaphors, using symbolic imagery to portray the emotional development of gay people. Firstly, the symbols that express emotional desire. This type of figurative symbol is the most common and most depicted in queer films. There are more distinctive images such as butterflies, goldfish, perfume, and high heels. In addition to the symbols that have been

documented and used extensively in the films, some do not have an erotic connotation of their own but are given that meaning in the films. For example, *Silver Ornaments* are used as a symbolic mapping to imply the deep-seated homosexual desire of the young master who loves to wear silver jewelry. Secondly, in heteronormative mainstream society, the diverse and tolerant queers are considered to have unique norms of behavior and ways of thinking that go against conventional wisdom and mainstream consciousness. Most queer films deal with traditional cultural ideas and show the contradictory relationship between the mainstream and the niche, so that symbols representing traditional consciousness appear in the films, creating an unshakable obstructive force for the queer community or moving from confrontation to integration as the narrative progresses. *Farewell, My Concubine* is a representation of the character's inner metamorphosis. The pipe symbol serves as a hint of the character's identity replacement, allowing Cheng Dieyi, under the oppression of mainstream consciousness, to make the illusion reality and identify with his image in his imagination. LGBT films use symbols to convey and communicate the community's taboo, hidden, and sexy emotional content. Since the 1990s, many pioneering and anti-traditional gender elements have emerged in Chen Kaige's films. Under the vision of queer theory, Chen Kaige's films show a plurality of genders that breakthrough traditional gender boundaries in breadth. In-depth, it dissolves the essence of gender and achieves a free state of performance. These gender performances are, however, deprived of history in the vertical dimension of time and have no future because of the inability to achieve reproduction. It can be said that Chen Kaige's films both demonstrate the orgy of queer and reveal its potential crisis. One of his masterpieces, *Farewell My Concubine* is a cross-disciplinary and multifaceted film.

#### 4. Farewell My Concubine

The theme of gender in the film *Farewell My Concubine* is mainly reflected in the gender identity of Cheng Dieyi. A classic character in the history of Chinese filmmaking, Cheng Dieyi is the archetypal example of how biological sex does not match social sex. Most heterosexuals would explain his gender ambiguity and misidentification by saying that it was "due to the circumstances" and accuse the film of negatively portraying gay men in a feminine representation of Cheng Dieyi's feminine identity. (Lau, 1995. pp.16-27.) The actual society and the theatrical society coexist in *Farewell My Concubine*. Cheng Dieyi is the female "Consort Yu" who is manufactured in the theatre society if Duan Xiaolou is a man existing in real life. His biological gender is male, but in the process of learning theatre in the theatre class, his psychological and social gender has become a woman. His lifelong anguish stemmed from the conflict between his biological and social genders. Butler's theory of performance argues that no gender is really gender and that those so-called fixed identities are constantly shifting performances. (Judith, 1999.) Traditional Chinese opera has become common imagery in queer Chinese movies due to the abundance of cross-dressing, which is used in *Farewell My Concubine* as a sign of Cheng Dieyi as a gender-reversed person.

Cheng Dieyi is frequently costumed as "Consort Yu" when Cheng Dieyi, Juxian, and Duan Xiaolou establish a triangular connection in the same scene. In other words, it is the "Consort Yu" he is performing who is fighting with the love interest of Juxian. The film does not devote a great deal of space to the triangular relationship between Cheng Dieyi,

Duan Xiaolou, and Xiao Si, which even exists for a very brief period. But here, power is concretely and directly obliterated by personal emotions. Xiao Si exists as a figurative manifestation of the new political power. He uses his closeness to political power to crowd out Cheng Dieyi from the stage, and Duan Xiaolou is confronted with a picture in which two "Consort Yu" appear, one a pure playwright, the other a power-mover. It is thus clear that the multiple triangles in the film are all, in a way, a tug of war between power and the individual, and while true feelings can be felt, they are suppressed and destroyed by power. In traditional societies, under heteronormative discourses and male domination, even when those emotions that deviate from the mainstream do exist, they are not given room for tolerance to exist.

After 22 years, they reunite to play the roles of "Consort Yu" and "Xiang Yu". Cheng Dieyi looks back on his life as a dream and realizes that he was wrong from the start. In the realm of opera, he was built and performed like a woman, but society did not allow him to take this performance to reality. The queer theory argues that gender inversion is not distorted and that any person should have the right to choose his or her way of life. Cheng Dieyi is a typical example of a man whose sentiments, desires, and sexuality are not easily summarised by the label homosexuality in the film. Cross-dressing in traditional Chinese opera allows him to express himself and his Cheng Dieyi, and watches are the mirror image of this third gender. (Trouble, 1990.) Yuan Shiqing does not present in the film as a simple sexual oppressor, according to queer theory. In the words he uses to tease Cheng Dieyi, he proposes and celebrates other genders than the dichotomous structure.

#### 5. Conclusion

After *Farewell My Concubine*, Chen Kaige's films have adopted many pioneering elements and made many groundbreaking experiments. In terms of spatial dimension, the film's gender-mixed imagery breaks through existing gender boundaries in terms of breadth, bringing about an expansion of gender diversity. His films reveal why gender has no depth and how gender performance is performed through the face masks of Beijing opera. (Garber, 2012.) Thus, in his films, gender can take on a flat, fluid, performative nature with no sense of depth and freedom. Although the current focus on queers in Chinese cinema is still on a monolithic level, *Farewell My Concubine* has inadvertently become a magnificent prelude to how mainland cinema has begun to consciously focus on and represent queer relationships. The issue of sexuality and gender is a hot topic in society today, and as a means of reproducing social reality and with its sensitive social perception, it is one of the subjects that films are keen to represent. In China, the growth of queer cinema has been a long and winding road, with different regions showing different tendencies. In the last two years, the active activities of queer people have forced mainstream discourse to pay attention to this obscured group of de facto existence, and queer images have begun to appear increasingly in mainstream films. Although documentaries and short films are currently the main form of creation for queer image creators, the changing social environment has improved the living space for queer people and the public opinion of queer images. The new media environment has also provided new channels for the production, broadcasting, and promotion of queer films.

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