



Too Much: Melodrama on Film

# Farewell My Concubine

**Farewell My Concubine** Ba wang bie ji

Director: Chen Kaige

Production Companies: Tomson Films, China Film

Co-production Corporation, Beijing Film Studio

Executive Producers: Hsu Bin, Jade Hsu

Producer: Hsu Feng

Line Producers: Li Zhenduo, Zhang Xia, Sun Ying

Associate Producer: Donald Ranvaud

Unit Production Manager: Bai Yu

Production Managers: Cai Rubin, Lu Yinpei

Production Co-ordinator: Sunday Sun

Post-production Co-ordinators:

Gao Xulan, Chi Xiaoning

Artistic Director: Chen Huaikai

Assistant Directors: Zhang Jinzhen, Bai Yu,

Jin Ping, Zhang Jin-ting

Screenplay: Lilian Lee, Lu Wei

Based on the novel by: Lilian Lee

Director of Photography: Gu Changwei

Camera Operator: Zhao Faquan

Steadicam Operators: Dong Gang, Li Bao-quan

1st Assistant Cameraman: Tao Shiwei

2nd Assistant Cameraman: Shen Zhiming

Film Editor: Pei Xiaonan

Art Directors: Yang Yuhe, Yang Zhan-jia

Set Decorators: Wang Chunpu, Zhang Ruihe,

Song Wangxiang, Cui Xiorong

Set Dressers: Liu Zhiping, Xie Xinsheng,

Zhang Jungui

Costume Designer: Chen Changmin

Make-up: Fan Qingshan, Xu Guangrui

Music Composed by: Zhao Jiping

Music Performed by: Central Orchestra of China,

Orchestra of the Peking Opera Academy

Music Conducted by: Hu Bingyu

Peking Opera Music Designer: Tang Jirong

Sound Recordist: Tao Jing

Soundmer: Yang Zhanshan, Han Lin

Sound Re-recordist: Hu He

English Subtitles: Linda Jaivin

Peking Opera Director: Shi Yansheng,

Peking Opera Academy

Cast:

Leslie Cheung (*Cheng Dieyi*)

Zhang Fengyi (*Duan Xiaolou*)

Gong Li (*Juxian*)

Lu Qi (*Guan Jifa*)

Ying Da (*Na Kun*)

Ge You (*Master Yuan*)

Li Chun (*Xiao Si as a teenager*)

Lei Han (*Xiao Si as an adult*)

Tong Di (*old man Zhang*)

Ma Mingwei (*Douzi as a child*)

Yin Zhi (*Douzi as a teenager*)

Fei Yang (*Shitou as a child*)

Zhao Hailong (*Shitou as a teenager*)

Li Dan (*Laizi*)

Jiang Wenli (*Douzi's mother*)

Zhi Yitong (*Aoki Saburo*)

David Ng (*red guard*)

Hong Kong-China 1993

171 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

+ introduction by Carol-Mei Barker, BFI Programme Lead for Schools and Specialist in Chinese Cinema

Covering much the same historical period as *The Last Emperor*, and with much the same Steadicam sweep, *Farewell My Concubine* looks very much like a political corrective to Bertolucci's epic. *The Last Emperor* (in which Chen Kaige had a prominent cameo role) moved from Qing Dynasty imperial exotica to Japanese-fascist decadence to a benign view of the Communist 'reinvention' of Chinese society, faithfully reflecting Party-line clichés at every stage of the historical pageant. Chen's film, however, offers a diametrically opposed reading of China's modern history. It starts out with grass-roots hardships at the Peking Opera Academy in the 1920s; the emphasis on poverty and on physical and emotional pain effectively blocks any underlying impulse to romanticise the 'old society'. It sails through the nightmare of the war and the years of Japanese occupation with the minimum necessary denunciation of Japanese militarism, preferring to stress the indifference of art to politics, and to note that there were Japanese officers perfectly capable of appreciating the finer points of Chinese culture. And it views China's decades under Communist government as a rising tide of lies, hypocrisies and betrayals, with the 'new masters' behaving at least as badly as their Japanese predecessors. This is a strong (and, for a made-in-China film, brave) account of China's agony, and it has recognisable roots in Chen Kaige's four earlier features.

In other respects, of course, this is a major departure for Chen. His first big-budget, studio-shot film, it also marks his first work with established movie stars and his first hesitant engagement with the demands of melodrama. It seems fitting that the result shared the Cannes Palme d'or with *The Piano*, since Chen, like Jane Campion, had suffered a bruising in previous years at Cannes. *King of the Children* and *Life on a String* both played in competition without winning prizes; neither attracted the kind of critical hostility that *Sweetie* did at the festival, but both ran aground on the general ignorance of Chinese history, politics and culture. Critics and audiences were unable to supply the larger perspectives needed to make sense of Chen's subtle and aesthetically refined allegories. *Concubine* confronts that ignorance head-on, using Lilian Lee's popular novel as the basis for a flagrantly unrealistic drama of love, treachery and death that is readily accessible to any audience willing to watch a subtitled movie. Miramax's acquisition of rights for all English-speaking territories, concluded before Cannes, clinched Chen's shift from small art-house audiences to a broad public. It also resulted in some Hollywood-style 'fine tuning': Miramax negotiated 14 minutes of cuts with Chen after the Cannes showing, and the original English title *Farewell to My Concubine* was abridged.

Purists are already lamenting Chen's 'sell-out' to commercialism without, however, suggesting what other way forward he might have found as a Chinese director needing a global audience to survive. It's true that *Concubine* is a much less 'personal' film than Chen's previous ones. This time, no character represents the director's point of view, and the sprawling storyline resists being reduced to any level of metaphor or allegory. As in Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*, events here mean exactly what they seem to mean; there is no resort to ambiguity or evasion. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Chen has opted for high artifice rather than 'realism' in his approach to China's unresolved traumas.

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**The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant**  
Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant  
Wed 5 Nov 20:20  
**Stella** Fri 7 Nov 20:45; Sat 22 Nov 15:00  
**Breaking the Waves** Sat 8 Nov 11:50  
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**Mamma Roma** Sat 8 Nov 20:40; Fri 28 Nov 18:15  
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Sun 9 Nov 12:20; Fri 14 Nov 20:50  
**The Eternal Breasts** Chibusa yo eien nare  
Sun 9 Nov 14:50; Fri 21 Nov 20:45  
**The Life of Oharu** Saikaku ichidai onna  
Sun 9 Nov 18:10; Thu 20 Nov 17:50  
**Now, Voyager** Mon 10 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by film programmer Caroline Cassin, curator and founder of Women & Cocaine); Mon 24 Nov 20:40  
**The Nightingale's Prayer** Doaa al-Karawan  
Mon 10 Nov 20:40  
**Stella Dallas** Wed 12 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London)  
**7th Heaven** Wed 12 Nov 20:35  
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Fri 14 Nov 18:20; Sat 22 Nov 12:30  
**Melo-dramarama** Sat 15 Nov 11:00-17:00  
**The Cranes Are Flying** Letyat zhuravli  
Sat 15 Nov 20:45  
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Sun 23 Nov 14:50  
**Madonna of the Seven Moons** Sun 23 Nov 18:20  
**Splendor in the Grass** Mon 24 Nov 18:00  
**Spring in a Small Town** Xiǎochéng zhī chūn  
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**Leave Her to Heaven** Sun 30 Nov 15:10

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Although the storyline spans some five decades and the background chronology respects historical fact, Chen makes no attempt to age his main characters convincingly and plays fast and loose with historical credibility. Chen's point is that the film's central *gestalt*, the eternal tension between male and female, between adults and children, between people and the roles they play, is essentially timeless. Xiaolou, Dieyi, Juxian and Xiao Si are all semi-detached from their historical roots; they are in their own time warp, fated to act out their passions and conflicts oblivious (or, better, impervious) to most of what happens around them. The main characters are represented ahistorically because they measure themselves against operatic archetypes, not everyday role models. Their reality, one could say, is purely existential.

Where this concept becomes problematic is in the depiction of homosexuality. Lilian Lee's original novel (since rewritten to bring it into conformity with the screenplay) was straightforwardly a gay love/hate story, squarely centred on the relationship between Xiaolou and Dieyi. Chen Kaige's major change to the book was to boost the part of Juxian from a two-page walk-on to a full scale role for Gong Li; this is perhaps justified by the resulting sharp contrast between Concubine Yu as a courtly female archetype and Juxian as a brassy and opportunistic hooker. But the inflation of Juxian's role also prevents the film from dealing with Dieyi's homosexual feelings for Xiaolou; in fact, it helps it to evade the issue altogether. The introduction of Douzi/Dieyi as a child with six fingers on one hand suggests that he is a freak of nature (biological determinism?), but the following scenes in which the boy is forced against all his instincts to accept female roles seem designed to offer ammunition to the Clause 28 lobby: ruthless cultural conditioning is shown to 'promote' homosexuality in the boy. As a child, Shitou/Xiaolou is sensitive to the plight of his effeminate friend and becomes a virile young protector, sharing his blanket and caressing Douzi tenderly in the bath; but the adult Xiaolou is crassly insensitive to Dieyi's feelings in a way that makes nonsense of the boyhood scenes. Whether this evasion of the gay issues is evidence of directorial homophobia, as some critics are claiming, or whether Chen Kaige simply failed to think through the implications of his borrowed storyline remains moot. Either way, the resulting blockage leaves a major dent in the film's credibility as psychodrama.

Much less controversial is the overall success of the film's visual and aural aesthetics. Cinematographer Gu Changwei and sound designer Tao Jing achieve wonders in creating the fictional space for the film's abstracted characters, giving the film a persuasive unity and coherence. It is their contribution that enables Chen to pull off the feat of simultaneously rooting his story in the historical process and abstracting his main characters from that process. Fittingly, the film's sense of the push-pull of history comes to a head in the Cultural Revolution scenes of betrayal and mutual recrimination. These are undoubtedly the scenes that have the strongest personal meaning for Chen, who here publicly makes amends for denouncing his own father at the time by crediting the man himself, Chen Huaikai, as the film's 'artistic director'. These same scenes, with Dieyi and Xiaolou confronting each other across a bonfire of opera libretti, also contain the film's key image: an inserted close-up of Xiao Si experiencing something like orgasm at the moment that Xiaolou cannot bring himself to say that Dieyi was Master Yuan's lover. All of the film's tensions, contradictions and evasions come together in that one shot, making the film more than worthy of the director of *Yellow Earth* and *King of the Children*.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, January 1994