

Queer and Transgender Representations in Chen Kaige's 1990s Films

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Abstract: This paper analyses the queer and transgender representations in Chen Kaige's films from the 1990s, highlighting their significance in the context of mainland Chinese queer cinema. The decade marks a crucial turning point, with Chen's *Farewell My Concubine* (1992) emerging as a foundational work that navigates complex narratives of homosexual identity and cross-dressing through its protagonist, Cheng Dieyi (Leslie Cheung Kwok Wing). Subsequent films, including *Temptress Moon* (1996), *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999), and *The Promise* (2005), further explore themes of gender fluidity and the dismantling of traditional gender norms, reflecting the avant-garde spirit of queer theory. By integrating diverse artistic expressions, these films challenge entrenched patriarchal structures while offering a nuanced examination of love, identity, and power dynamics. This study ultimately illustrates how Chen's cinematic contributions have shaped the discourse surrounding queer identities in contemporary Chinese culture.

Keywords: Queer Cinema; Transgender Representation; Chen Kaige; Gender Fluidity; Homosexual Identity; Mainland Chinese Cinema

1. Introduction

Queer culture has emerged as a prominent field of research in Europe and America in recent years. Since the 1990s, with its significant disciplinary inclusiveness, queer culture has swiftly integrated with other disciplines, leading to the formation of queer cinema. The development of mainland Chinese queer films has faced challenges over several decades but has gradually gained attention and recognition internationally.

The 1990s can be considered a pivotal period in the development of mainland Chinese queer cinema, marked by the emergence of numerous

outstanding queer narratives. Even though Chen Kaige, the leading figure of the Fifth Generation directors in China, continuously denied his portrayal of homosexuality [1], his film *Farewell My Concubine* (Ba Wang Bie Ji) (1992) inevitably signified the inception of mainland Chinese queer cinema. The film delves into the exploration of homosexual identity, using Cheng Dieyi (Leslie Cheung Kwok Wing) as a focal point [2]. It also skilfully incorporates elements of cross-dressing inherent in traditional Chinese opera to represent transgenderism, showcasing a widely recognised initiation into mainland Chinese queer cinema. Following this milestone, Chen Kaige continued to integrate avant-garde elements, particularly in transgender representation, making groundbreaking attempts in films such as *Farewell My Concubine*, *Temptress Moon* (Feng Yue) (1996), *The Emperor and the Assassin* (Jing Ke Ci Qin Wang) (1999) and *The Promise* (Wu Ji) (2005). These films present various queer qualities.

2. Gender Identity Issues in Queer Theory

2.1 Overview of Queer Theory

Since the 1990s, queer theory has become a sweeping intellectual trend in the Western world, emerging as the most influential gender studies theory after feminist theory. Queer theory intentionally questions existing meanings, categories and identities related to gender, sexual behaviour and sexual orientation. Gayle S. Rubin [3], a pioneer of queer theory, points out that sexuality is a natural force that exists before social life and has the power to shape human mechanisms. Therefore, "queer," beyond its explicit connection to homosexual issues, encompasses a framework that includes cross-dressing, androgynous individuals, sexual ambiguity and gender-affirming surgery [4]. In other words, it includes all individuals in terms deviating from mainstream cultural and dominant societal gender norms or sexual norms in terms of sexual orientation [5]. While "queer"

was initially a derogatory term used to mock and insult homosexuals, it was embraced by radical sexual activists from the late 1980s and later adopted for ironic self-naming and reference. Dismantling gender boundaries is one of the main objectives of queer theory [6]. It provides a comprehensive approach that takes into account sexual minority groups that deviate from societal conventions regarding sexual orientation or gender norms.

2.2 Transgender Films in Queer Cinema

There are currently a limited number of films in queer cinema that primarily focus on transgender individuals. However, there exist remarkable films that display excellent artistic expression and cultural significance that have garnered awards at film festivals. *The Danish Girl* (2015), a poignant portrayal of one of the first known transgender individuals in history, garnered significant recognition in the film industry. While it did not clinch the Best Picture category, it received critical acclaim, particularly in the Best Actor and Best Actress categories at various prestigious awards. Notably, the film was nominated for several Academy Awards, highlighting its exceptional performances and direction. Additionally, it was a contender at the Venice Film Festival, earning a nomination for the Golden Lion, and was recognized at the Golden Globe Awards. It is important to note that these were nominations, which, while prestigious, differ from actual award wins. *Girl* (2018) is the debut feature film by the Belgian director Lukas Dhont. The film follows the journey of a transgender young adult pursuing a career as a ballerina. *Girl* won multiple awards at the Cannes Film Festival.

Escape (2017) is a short film by students from the High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China. It delves into the self-exploration of a transgender high school student. However, due to the sensitive subject matter, it was not featured in the Renmin University of China film festival. *The Drum Tower* (2018), directed by renowned Chinese queer filmmaker Fan Popo, transcends the depiction of a solitary societal reality and experiments with a more avant-garde visual style. Fan has been dedicated to documenting and constructing the history of sexual minority groups, contributing to be a localised expression unique to mainland China. Overall, films representing sexual minority groups in China still remain restrained. Films

serve as a way of recording reality, and the depiction of transgender phenomena in such films becomes a significant subject for researching transgender culture.

3. Breaking Gender Boundaries in Chen Kaige's Films

In Chen Kaige's films, gender takes on a flat, fluid and performative nature, exhibiting a state of unrestricted ease without depth. In line with the central aim of queer theory to dismantle gender boundaries, Chen's films present a groundbreaking exploration of gender mixing, incorporating various perspectives on homosexuality, cross-dressing and transgender elements.

3.1 Homosexuality Depicted Through the Stage in *Farewell My Concubine*

In the realm of queer theory, gender essentialism is considered as a cultural misconception and a nostalgic illusion of deeply ingrained patterns. The true sense of gender exists on stage in the performance through the enactment of roles. *Farewell My Concubine* "critically analyses the spiritual state of Chinese people and traces the cultural traditions woven into this condition" [7]. The destinies of Cheng Dieyi and the concubine Consort Yu intertwine in the film, bringing a new understanding of gender [8]. Cheng Dieyi's affection towards Duan Xiaolou (Zhang Fengyi) can only be sustained on the stage, concealed behind the characters of Consort Yu and the hero Xiang Yu. Relying on the stage, or rather the setting of the opera, the truth is hidden and manifests as Cheng Dieyi's transformation from heterosexual to homosexual. When Chen Dieyi is still Xiaodouzi, he intentionally mistakes the nandan's (male actors specialising in female roles) line "I am by nature a girl, not a boy" with "I am by nature a boy, not a girl." Only after Xiaodouzi is punished by Shitou (young Duan Xiaolou) with a pipe and sexually assaulted by an eunuch, does he finally emerge into the role of nandan. From that point on, Chen Dieyi lives only on "stage," without a "real" life offstage. He is always performing, and as a result, his personality undergoes changes. The essence of heterosexuality and the extension of homosexuality are constructed and Chen Dieyi transitions from "heterosexual" to homosexual.

3.2 Dismantling the Boundaries in *Tempress*

Moon

Beyond the realm of the opera stage, other spaces can also serve as a “sanctuary” for queer culture. *Temptress Moon*, directed by Chen Kaige, adapted from Ye Zhaoyuan’s 1994 novel *A Flower’s Shade* (Hua Ying). The film is highly controversial but it continues Chen Kaige’s dissection of humanity. Set in a small town near Shanghai during the Republic era, the film recounts a tragic love story within an old aristocratic family that occurs during the clash of modernisation and tradition. The beautiful female protagonist Pang Ruyi (Gong Li) appears as a disruption to the integrity and continuity of established gender norms, leading traditional gender pairing towards new practices of gender fluidity.

Ruyi, the beloved daughter of old master Pang, emerges as the sole female ruler of the Pang clan in an era of diminishing male heirs. She transcends the constraints of her identity as a well-bred young lady, asserting her own views on love. She enters the scene as a disruptor, acting freely and displaying formidable vitality. For instance, when Ruyi falls for Yu Zhongliang (Leslie Cheung) and discovers a photo of an alluring woman in his belongings, she concludes that he prefers non-virgins over conventional women. Ruyi decides to lose her virginity to Duanwu (Kevin Lin), who has long admired her despite her indifference towards him. Later, when Ruyi engages in sexual activity with Zhongliang, she declares, “I tried with Duanwu for you.” Ruyi is wilful and unconventional, doing as she pleases. She praises Duanwu, expels her father and brother’s concubines, engages in a secret rendezvous with Zhongliang, swiftly moves on from Zhongliang to accept Jingyun’s (David Wu) proposal. Ruyi’s actions blur the established boundaries of gender, creating ambiguity in emotions, rationality and gender roles. This unleashes the potential for queerness that has been isolated and abandoned by gender norms. When these boundaries are successfully dismantled, gender gains greater fluidity and freedom.

3.3 The Reproduction of Patriarchy in *The Emperor and the Assassin*

Queer cinema’s portrayal of gender identity has become a spectacular cultural phenomenon, serving as a medium for exploring paths to freedom. There is an extended period of exploration throughout this process of identity

formation. This is exemplified in *The Emperor and the Assassin* which illustrates the reproduction of patriarchy (masculinity). The traditional model of fatherhood is deeply rooted in long-standing value of power, morality and admonitions associated with the paternal role [9]. The growth of Ying Zheng (Li Xuejian) embodies a typical process of paternal reproduction (masculinity). The heteronormative social structures are subtly and consistently adapted without conscious intent or oppressive design, altering the fabric of our society [10]. From Ying Zheng’s perspective, besides his mother Queen Dowager Zhao (Gu Yongfei), he is raised by two father figures - his biological father, Lü Buwei (Chen Kaige) and his nominal father, King Zhuangxiang of Qin. Ying Zheng holds a deep respect for the gender roles within the family hierarchy, leading to his alignment with class politics in the societal order. For example, the repetitive line in the film, “Emperor of Qin, have you forgotten the great aspiration of the ancestors to unify the world?” establishes its influence on Ying Zheng’s life. Each time this line is uttered, Ying Zheng responds with humility and obedience. In the final part of the film, it is Ying Zheng himself who say this line, fully embracing this directive. The great aspiration of the ancestors becomes the symbol of desire that has been controlling Ying Zheng the entire time.

The relationship between Ying Zheng and power mirrors the “two fathers” structure of the real world and the film metaphorically represents a diverse family. However, by ensuring the centrality of heterosexual ideology in the nuclear family and the exclusivity of reproduction within a heterosexual family structure, challenges resembling the “two fathers” structure are destined to fail. Ying Zheng eventually forces his biological father, Lü Buwei, and birth mother, Queen Dowager Zhao, to their deaths, completing the final transformation of Yin Zheng into Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China).

3.4 Construction of Sexual Essence with the Crimson Armour in *The Promise*

The Promise incorporates the narrative of Oedipus’s tragic fate by integrating the Western Goddess of Fate into Chinese Daoist metaphysics. It seamlessly blends elements from both Eastern and Western cultures while exploring themes of power, love, freedom and

destiny. The film begins with a tracking shot in a sea of flowers where Qingcheng (Cecilia Cheung) and Wuhuan (Nicholas Tse) are placed amidst a desolate wilderness filled with dead bodies, showcasing the absence of power. Combine the crimson armour, which represents power, to present the themes of power, love, freedom and especially destiny. *The Promise* offers a queer perspective within a two-dimensional context, as it interprets cultural myths related to the essence of gender. The film also subtly advocates for gender equality, aligning with the “queer theory” that emerged in the West during the 1990s.

Masks and cross-dressing frequently appear as props and themes in Chen Kaige’s films. Throughout history, “masks are made and used in various religious ceremonial cycles or events performed in association with numerous events” [11]. In *The Promise*, armour and masks, utilised for human disguises, rise above their prop functions to become integral narrative elements, equal in importance to the characters themselves. The prophecy devised by Manshen (Chen Hong) centres on the crimson armour, which Kunlun (Jang Dong-gun) dons while saving Qingcheng. The story unfolds around the fights over the crimson armour and the hunt for its rightful owner. In a postmodern context, the crimson armour appears to break free from manipulation behind the scenes, driving a story of seeking subjectivity. The audience constantly searches for the truth behind Manshen’s prophecy throughout the film, creating a persistent quest. From a postmodern viewpoint, Manshen’s prophecy states that the owner of the crimson armour will kill the King. When General Guangming (Hiroyuki Sanada) is injured by an assassin, he orders Kunlun to wear his crimson armour, return to the capital and rescue the King. Adorned in armour, Kunlun faces no obstacles during his journey. However, upon arriving at the palace, he mistakes the defenceless and unarmed Qingcheng as the King and unintentionally kills the real king. The prophecy is fulfilled. The crimson armour inherits the personality and accomplishments of General Guangming, breaking free from the control of an underlying “essence” and gaining subjectivity.

4. Conclusion

Since the turn of the millennium, the emergence of the queer community as a driving force has become a prominent characteristic of mainland

Chinese queer cinema. This showcases the spontaneity of group creation and viewer self-awareness. Queer cinema has evolved from a marginalised topic to an indispensable and significant subject in mainstream discussions. The social image of the queer community is quietly undergoing changes, providing audiences with more opportunities to engage with queer cinematic works. Examining Chen Kaige’s four films - *Farewell My Concubine*, *Temptress Moon*, *The Emperor and the Assassin* and *The Promise* – reveals Chen’s ongoing explorations of gender perspectives. His exploration of queer themes and transgender representations in these films presents a unique perspective in exploring and revealing the intricate nature of human beings. Additionally, these films also highlight his distinctive artistic and aesthetic features.

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