

# *The Impact of Culture Differences on Film --Taking Farewell My Concubine as an Example*

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**Abstract:** Almost all of Chen Kaige's works, such as the film *Farewell My Concubine*, include a significant historical and cultural theme to express his views and understanding of traditional culture and human nature. The film illustrates the ups and downs of Peking Opera performers' lives in the context of a tumultuous society, with the art of Peking Opera serving as a point of reflection. *Farewell My Concubine*, as an epic work of cinema, is unusually rich in the use of cinematic symbolism and aesthetics, which not only adds to the film's vivid connotation but also inspires people to think profoundly. A huge variety of realistic metaphors hide the character and fate of the film's three major protagonists under rich cinematic symbols and aesthetics. As an important medium for cultural transmission, the film is a popular choice for cultural imports from other countries. This paper investigates the influences of cultural variations on viewers' understanding of film in the context of cultural diversity, as well as the reasons for this impact and the techniques available to overcome it, so as to offer some references for future researches.

**Keywords:** *Farewell my Concubine*, Film, Culture Differences, Chen Kaige

## 1. Introduction

*Farewell My Concubine* is a culturally significant work based on writer Li Bihua's novel of the same name and directed by director Chen Kaige. Since its release in 1993, the film has been highly acclaimed, and no matter what angle it is analyzed from, it draws the audience into the plot and provokes thought. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau points out that the American trade paper *Variety* stated in a report on Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* that "he learned to tell Westerners a story they can better understand", but the author is more interested in the limitations Chen faced in trying to create a film that transcends national boundaries [1]. Although the director adopted a Hollywood-style dramatic tale structure for the storyline, the epic form of *Farewell My Concubine*, with its complex meanings and multicultural substance and issues, has resulted in multiple interpretations by audiences from many cultures. This paper investigates the influences of cultural variations on viewers' understanding of film in the context of cultural diversity, as well as the reasons for this impact and the techniques available to overcome it, so as to offer some references for future researches.

## 2. The Impact of Cultural Differences on Understanding Films

The film is an essential medium for communicating a country's culture, and cultural symbols are significant carriers for conveying distinct cultural connotations. In contrast, Chinese films, as an inherent element of Chinese culture, directly represent the Chinese nation's traditional culture [2]. Culture clearly has a nuanced, far-reaching, and long-lasting influence, and its impact on people's comprehension of a film is no exception. Many cultures differ from one another because of their varied social origins and upbringing histories. According to a survey and research conducted by the Chinese Academy of Culture and International Communication, 47.5% of foreign viewers believe that cultural difference is the main obstacle to understanding Chinese film, followed by 43.3% who believe that dialogue is the main obstacle to understanding Chinese film, and the least chosen barrier is the frame, which accounts for only 10.2% [3]. As a result, visual pictures are the easiest for individuals from other countries to understand when viewing Chinese films, whereas cultural differences and dialogues are the most challenging. Therefore, one of the primary factors influencing one's understanding of a film is cultural variations, and different cultural settings produce distinct symbols.

A symbol is a visual image used to express a specific idea [4]. As signs, words, sounds, gestures, concepts, and visual images are utilized to express other ideas and beliefs. Symbols are items that can convey affection, the inner meaning of metaphorical events, and deepen the connotation of films, and they can all be found in films. At the same time, a variety of symbols, such as montages, camera motions, movie scales, and so on, are used to express film [5]. There are numerous repeating symbolic objects in movies. If you think about it, every statement and object in the film may be a message from the filmmaker to us. There are numerous symbols in *Farewell My Concubine* that cause various people to interpret the film differently. For example, western critics widely accept Freud's set of myths. He considers women to be non-male and the female body to be a human body "lacking sexual organs." This film fully reflects the gap in thinking styles. Master Guan refuses to accept Dieyi as a disciple because she has six fingers, and Yan Hong is forced to hack off Dieyi's sixth finger cruelly. The finger represents Dieyi's male sexuality, and its amputation means the castration of his mind and the disappearance of his masculinity, completing the initial gender transition and creating the dramatic basis for the rest of the story. However, western psychoanalysis cannot be fully transplanted into Chinese films because most Chinese people have never heard of the relevant theories. When watching this film, they will only think that Yan Hong mercilessly cut off Dieyi's finger so that Dieyi could be accepted as Master Guan's disciple without associating it with theories like castration.

### 3. Language under Cultural Differences

Language is a tool that humans use to express and transmit their ideas. Language is also an aspect of culture, and different peoples have different ways of thinking, acting, and expressing themselves. Sapir, an American linguistics professor, stated, "There is something behind language, and language cannot exist without culture; the so-called culture is the sum of customs and beliefs inherited from society, by which he can determine the organization of our lives" [6]. In the film, the yell "sharpen the shears, clank the kitchen knife" appears four times. The first occasion is when Yan Hong takes Dieyi to Master Guan's house to learn from him, and a few gloomy yells set Dieyi on his path to mastering the skill. The second yell occurs when Master Guan refuses to accept Dieyi's apprenticeship because he has six fingers, forcing Yan Hong to hack off Dieyi's sixth finger ruthlessly. As previously stated, this heel finger is a symbol of Dieyi's male sexual characteristics. The third yell comes when Dieyi continually sings, "I am a boy, not a girl," while staring at his own bloodied hand, which the master has beaten. It can be seen here that Dieyi is becoming confused and dubious about his own gender, and this yell can also be seen as a reminder that his manhood has been cut off. The fourth time is the night after Dieyi is molested by Eunuch Zhang, the sound of

“sharpening the shears, clanking the kitchen knife” rings out again. This time Dieyi is in tears since he has understood that he has lost his male symbols, and presumably because he knew that after the first “sharpening the shears, clanking the kitchen knife,” his fingers were cut off, and his male symbols were gone. The phrase “sharpen the shears, clank the kitchen knife” is a typical hawking sound in China that depicts the film’s historical setting and foreshadows the fate of the characters. However, for viewers from other cultures, it is only a background sound they do not understand and may even ignore. Meanwhile, when Duan Xiaolou’s wife Juxian commits suicide in the film, the revolutionary modern Peking opera model “The Red Lantern” is playing on the radio: “Listen to my grandmother talk about the revolution, heroic and tragic, but it turns out I was born in the wind and grew in the rain.” It is ironic to write about Juxian’s death using lyrics from the last red Peking opera, *The Legend of the Red Lantern*. Juxian is both heroic and tragic, and this is the pinnacle of her life. The final statement is entirely accurate, capturing the sorrowful tone of Juxian’s character. According to Wang Hongyan, this juxtaposition of contrasting conditions accurately represents the catastrophic blow to traditional Peking Opera [7]. However, for those who have never heard of *The Legend of the Red Lantern*, this could simply be the movie’s background music.

#### 4. Educational Environment under Cultural Differences

The educational environment that people are exposed to, especially in the context of cultural diversity, plays a role in how they view this movie. Education and culture share a strong connection, and it is essential to note that this connection works in both directions; education can have an impact on culture, and culture can have an effect on education [8]. This is because various national cultures each have their own set of values, as well as varied educational approaches and goals. Western parents have a greater propensity to lay an emphasis on praising and encouraging their children. Because they feel that learning should take place in a relaxed setting, western parents place a more significant priority on the human rights of their children. On the other hand, the teaching of their children by Chinese parents is based on authority, and Chinese parents rely on authority to get their children to follow their instructions; as the adage goes, “Spare the rod, and spoil the child.” As a result, many western viewers will experience discomfort after watching *Farewell My Concubine* due to the fact that the play features many children who are physically punished. These viewers will believe that this constitutes child abuse and may even consider the scene in which Dieyi and Xiaolou are beaten as adults to be a representation of SM. For instance, Bonnie S. McDougall suggests that the frequent beating scenes in *Farewell My Concubine*, especially the naked beating scenes, should be interpreted as an intention of brutality, or art and sacrifice, in the old society in general [9]. In point of fact, in ancient China, it was encouraged to educate children strictly. The rigid belief that “No beating is not a talent,” “Strict family produces filial children,” and “To beat is to kiss, to scold is to love,” is still present in the collective consciousness of the Chinese people, the majority of which will not give these scenes a second thought, mainly because the film is set in the past. Dieyi and Xiaolou, two characters in the film intent on achieving fame, decide to sign up for opera lessons in order to get knowledge from their instructor. When they do not sing well, they are required to take the initiative to lie down on the bench and endure the back of the knife chastisement, all while shouting at the master to beat them well. According to a well-known Chinese saying, “one day as a teacher equals a lifetime as a father.” It involves acting in the same manner toward a master as if they were one’s own parents. People used to adore their teachers in ancient times because they believed doing so would help them become better artists. Not only do people honor the teacher in the role of father, but they also adore the master’s wife, who is known as the mother, as well as the master’s children, who are known as the brother and sister, respectively. Therefore, even after Dieyi and Xiao Lou have reached adulthood and achieved fame in the movie, they continue to admire Master Guan and will not put

up a fight if he beats them. Cheng Dieyi never changed his attitude toward physical discipline, even after he became an adult and began instructing others.

Shi Song offers several solutions for how Chinese films can transcend cultural differences. One of these is to investigate the possibility and feasibility of Chinese films being accepted by overseas audiences as well as academics based on a systematic combing of Chinese film studies in the English-speaking world, standing in the Western context and thinking differently from the perspective of heterogeneous cultures [10]. In addition, subtitle production necessitates transposition from a different cultural perspective in order for them to play a significant part in assisting people in understanding and interpreting films, as people typically employ subtitles when watching foreign language films. Gao Wenfang also points out that western films and TV shows reflect western popular culture, so when creating subtitles for Chinese and Western films, they are influenced by various factors such as Chinese and western regions, historical traditions, religious beliefs, customs, and ways of thinking [11]. *Hidden Figure* is an excellent example. The film itself is in English. However, there are various versions with Chinese subtitles. The film begins with the three female leads being pulled over by the police and told, “In the future, you can choose to sit in the back of the bus.” The subtitles are displayed at the top of the screen, signifying that blacks had to sit in the back of the bus during that era. Because not everyone is aware of black history, some viewers may be perplexed by the main character’s statement. So, how does this take on the subtitles apply to *Farewell My Concubine*? For example, Eunuch Zhang in the film is an excellent example of a male eunuch, or eunuch, who in ancient China was a male who entered the court to serve the emperor after having his male genitals castrated. However, viewers from other cultures may be unaware of this. When Eunuch Zhang molests Cheng Dieyi, he makes Cheng Dieyi pee in front of him and tells him that his urine is an excellent thing not to squander since his long life of castration has turned Eunuch Zhang perverted; this is the unquenchable nostalgia and needs for a castrated man for his sexual organs. And this may cause the audience to misunderstand or not understand, which, although not affecting the overall appreciation of the plot, does have an impact on the audience.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the success of the film *Farewell My Concubine* can be seen in director Chen Kaige’s grasp of the tale, characters, and narrative maturity, which can reflect his pursuit and discovery of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese people’s behavior, and values. The film *Farewell My Concubine* plays a vital role in exporting Chinese culture. Yet, cultural differences and the excessive use of cultural symbols prevent the audience from correctly understanding and interpreting them. *Farewell My Concubine*’s directors must be unique as an art picture or author film. A film may not be for everyone, and it may not be understood by everyone.

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