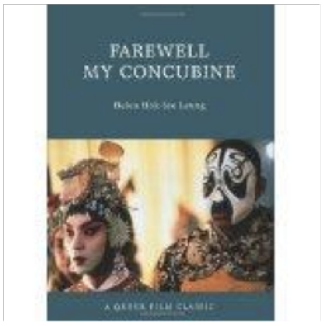
Reconstruction Vol. 16, No. 2

Return to Contents»

Leung, Helen Hok Sze. *Farewell My Concubine: A Queer Film Classic*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1-55152-362-0 (pbk). 129 pp. / Andrea Lingenfelter



<1> As Helen Hok-Sze Leung points out in her introduction to this slim volume, over the two decades since the release of Chen Kaige's 1993 *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬 Ba wang bie ji), scholarship on it has "run the gamut." Nonetheless, while much has been said about nearly every aspect of the film, its treatment of "(trans)gender and (homo)sexuality" has remained a vexed question. This, along with the passage of time, affords Leung an opportunity to revisit this now classic film.

<2> The book is comprehensive in its approach and is in general highly accessible. I would not hesitate to assign it to students as a companion to in-class viewing of the film. Leung's prose style-with the exception of one sub-section-is a model of clarity and poise, moving seamlessly between exposition, personal observation, and analysis.

<3> The author begins with a synopsis of the film, followed by the credits. This information provides the concrete framework that supports the rest of the book. The first chapter proper, "Evolution of a Sacrifice: From the Battlefield to the Big Screen," traces the evolution of the story of the eponymous 2nd century BCE concubine Yu Ji and her lover, the General Xiang Yu, from its earliest mention (by the Han dynasty scholar Sima Qian in *Records of the Grand Historian*) to its place in Beijing Opera, culminating in Lillian Lee's novels and Chen's film. Leung describes how Yu Ji, originally mentioned only in passing, ultimately comes to eclipse the formidable Xiang Yu in the popular imagination. This transformation does not reach its apotheosis until 1921, when the Beijing opera star

Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), an internationally renowned *dan* actor (one who specializes in female roles), greatly expands Yu Ji's role in the by-then famous suicide scene.

<4> Leung goes on to discuss the four versions of *Farewell My Concubine* penned all or in part by Hong Kong writer Lillian Lee (Li Pik-wah): a 1981 screenplay that was produced for television; the 1985 novel adapted from that screenplay; the revised 1992 novel, which incorporated elements from the screenplay for Chen's 1993 film; and Chen's 1993 film. Leung illuminates the ways in which the intrinsically collaborative nature of film and the multi-regional background of its team of writers, producers, director and actors (drawn from the "two coasts and three regions," aka Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong) complicated and enriched the narrative and its meaning, while also leaving it open to criticism from various constituencies. After all, in reflecting multiple points of view, it could not hope to satisfy any particular region or interest group.

<5> The second chapter, "In close-Up: Anatomy of a Film," is a detailed analysis of the film as such, in terms of visual and metaphoric structure. It includes close examinations of key scenes, which would be useful in any class discussion and enhance the film literacy of new viewers. Leung's readings are astute and lucid, and as someone who has watched the film many times (and not without personal interest, as the translator of Lee's 1992 novel), I found many of Leung's observations fresh. Her attention to symbolism, both metaphoric and visual, and her identification of the recurring patterns that bolster the film's thematic content combine to produce an analysis that is compelling and persuasive.

<6> Chapter Three, "Queer Afterlives: New Takes on a Classic," arrives at the complex question of how and where *Farewell My Concubine* fits into the category of queer cinema. This is the most conceptually ambitious portion of the book, but it is also the most uneven, for it contains the only passages where Leung's engagingly lucid style breaks down, under the weight of theoretical jargon, specifically in the subsection, "Beijing Opera: A Trans Practice." Throughout the monograph, Leung liberally incorporates direct quotations, and overall and in most of Chapter Three, she does so smoothly; but her insertion of undigested chunks of Susan Stryker's work injects unwelcome patches of tediously dense prose that serve no one well-not Stryker, not Leung, and especially not the reader. Stryker's clunky prose style is so out of keeping with the rest of the book, one wishes that Leung had been able to see past her abundant respect for Stryker long enough to recognize that Stryker's work demands further unpacking-and not merely by recapitulating points using the same specialized terms in which they're originally set forth.

Had Leung further explicated and expanded on them-let a little air in, so to speak-the concepts Leung finds so valuable might have been effectively integrated into the work as a whole.

<7> On the positive side, Leung does a good job of laying out the history of same-sex relationships in the world of traditional Chinese opera and linking this to broader trends in Chinese social history. She notes that not only were same homosexual relationships between connoisseurs and *dan* performers considered a "tasteful pursuit" among the upper classes of late Imperial China, such relations were essentially institutionalized. (She asserts, however, an absence of relationships between social equals, an assumption disproved by Matthew Sommer's research on homosexual relationships between men of the laboring classes.) Leung illuminates the process whereby Mei Lanfang worked to remove the queer stigma from *dan* actors and performances through his assiduous cultivation of a patriotic, heterosexual and "modern" identity in his private life. This served the larger goal of protecting Beijing Opera from the wrecking ball of the New Culture movement, which held traditional Chinese culture to be backward and toxic and, hence, an obstacle to China's development and national recovery. Leung astutely connects this ideology to the more virulent form that overwhelmed China's cultural world during the Cultural Revolution, while showing its relationship to gender practices. She further casts light on how the film brings out these themes and their complex interplay.

<8> In order to make one of her key points-namely that the character of Dieyi is neither gay nor trans, but rather belongs to a disappearing category, a subjectivity that existed in a particular historical period but exists no longer-Leung brings to bear the conflict between director Chen Kaige's conception of the story and that of Leslie Cheung, the actor who embodies Dieyi in the film. Chen's ambivalence towards homosexuality, and his awareness of its sensitivity in a PRC context, was at some level not only incompatible with Lee's novel (which treats homosexuality frankly) but also with Cheung's sense of Dieyi's character and experience. (Like Cheung, Chen saw the film as very personal, but in Chen's case the film was more about the PRC and the Cultural Revolution.) Leung locates these meanings in the ambiguity created by Chen's "evasive" attitude and Cheung's embrace of Dieyi's queerness. While I appreciate Leung's desire for intellectual finesse, I have to question whether we can read too much meaning into something that was essentially an accident. Chen had one agenda; Cheung another. As Cheung stated in a thoughtful 2002 lecture on his roles in *Rouge* and *Farewell My Concubine* (a portion of which appears as an appendix at the end of the book), he in effect subverted Chen's

notion of the film. Can we really use the admittedly beautiful accident resulting from this collision of conflicting ideas as the basis for a reading of the film as a testament to and record of a vanished type of subjectivity? I am not entirely persuaded.

<9> On the other hand, Leung is on firmer ground when she attributes the film's rehabilitation in the queer community to Leslie Cheung's 2003 suicide, an event that sealed Cheung's identification with Dieyi in the eyes of many. The ambiguity of Cheung's life mirrored the ambiguity of Dieyi's, and their suicides completed the identification of actor and character.

<10> Not only did Cheung's death make him a gay icon, it elevated the film, which many gay activists had regarded as a flawed or inadequate portrayal of gay life, to the status of queer classic. Leung also brings to light (in Cheung's own words) the origins of the final scene of the film, which departs dramatically from the ending in Lee's novel. Cheung states that he and his costar Zhang Fengyi authored the final scene, replacing Lee's ironic anticlimax with a suicide which renders the blurring between life and theater complete. This blurring is another central theme of *Farewell My Concubine*, and in the context of Cheung's suicide, it becomes almost overwhelming poignant.

<11> In summation, Leung's profound enthusiasm for the film and her admiration for Leslie Cheung have provided the impetus for a thorough study. Her often personal style of writing may not appeal to all readers, but it is the hallmark of Leung's humanistic approach, and I find it quite welcome.

Return to Top»