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A semiotic view of symbol and identity in the film Farewell My Concubine

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Abstract: Adapted by Li Bihua and Lu Wei and directed by Chen Kaige, Farewell My Concubine was first released in mainland China and Hong Kong in 1993. It gained strong momentum and went on to break the box office for mainland Chinese literary films in the USA. Against the background of traditional Peking Opera culture, the film spans nearly half a century and follows the love–hate relationship between Cheng Dieyi, played by Leslie Cheung, and Duan Xiaolou, played by Zhang Fengyi. It shows the changes in human nature and the rise and fall of classical art in the city of Beiping in different eras. Taking “symbols” as the entry point, this paper analyses and explores the characteristics of the cultural symbols and metaphors that accompany the main narrative line of the film so as to further trace and understand the multiple interpretations that “anti-identity construction” brings to the film, as well as the ethical implications reflected in the symbols.

Keywords: anti-identity; culture; ethics; metaphor

1 Introduction

From the early stages of human development, the use of the simplest symbols such as gestures, facial expressions, and indistinct cries, the gradual emergence of spoken and written language, and the intervention of symbolic media have transformed human beings from instinctive, passive responses to external stimuli into active, conscious, and proactive responses (Wang 2023: 5–25). Twentieth-century German philosopher Ernst Cassirer states clearly that, from the perspective of human culture, “symbolic thinking and symbolic behavior are the most representative features of human life” (Cassirer 2010: 38). Ever since the concept of language was extended from natural languages to include all symbols used by culture, film has been understood to have its own language, i.e. the various symbols that carry cultural information. In the context of national culture, the “symbols” of a film not only reveal

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the ethnicity and the boundaries of culture, but also include the exchange and interaction of cultural symbols of different nationalities and the resulting mechanism of cultural meaning innovation. Since its release in 1993, the film *Farewell My Concubine* has had an enduring charm, not only moving audiences of its time, but also transcending time and space with its power to carry traditional cultural symbols, arousing strong feelings in audiences both at home and abroad.

The film begins in 1924, in the middle of an unusually cold winter. Nine-year-old Douzi, who has a deformed finger on his left hand, is abandoned by his mother after she cuts off his finger and leaves him with an opera troupe. This is the first of a series of betrayals that dominate Douzi’s life. In the opera troupe, he is befriended by another member, Xiaooshi (also called Shitou), who lives with him in the dormitory and whom he comes to look upon as a brother. Supervised by his strict master, Guan, who also later betrays him, Douzi is trained to sing the opera. A decade passes, and Douzi has become very dependent on his “brother,” Xiaooshi. At this time, the two young men are given the stage names Cheng Dieyi (Cheng) and Duan Xiaolou (Duan). In accordance with the practice of only using male performers in the tradition of Peking Opera until the early 1920s, Cheng is trained to play the female role of dan (旦) and Duan is trained in the male role of sheng (生) (Liu 2022: 30). Soon after, Duan decides to marry the prostitute Juxian. Cheng is shocked. He goes to his brother’s place of residence in the hope of deterring him from marrying her. As a symbol of his feeling of having been betrayed, Cheng gives a sword to his brother that he himself had obtained by betraying his own reputation, saying that he will never work with his brother again. Duan nevertheless goes ahead with the marriage.

As the times are turbulent and Cheng’s skills are not valued for a long time, Cheng tries to prop himself up with opium, leading to an addiction that causes great damage to his voice. Later, during a performance, his voice breaks, and he realizes the seriousness of the situation, which makes him determined to become free of his dependence on opium. With the help of Duan and his wife, Cheng gradually emerges from his addiction. However, Xiao Si, an abandoned child Cheng once took in out of the goodness of his heart, becomes the one who hurts Cheng the most. He takes over Cheng’s role as the consort Yu Ji and sets it up to look like Duan is responsible for ruining his reputation and replacing him.

Eleven years later, Cheng and Duan return to the stage to perform *Farewell My Concubine* together, but this performance becomes the “final curtain call.” Duan brings Cheng out to sing “I am a man, not a woman.” Only then does Cheng realize that “she” is actually a man and that all the misunderstandings are due to the fact that he is “living in a play.” So, with the last line of the song, he uses the sword he once “poured his emotions and fantasies into” to end not only his career, but also his tragic life of “suffering and splendor” (Liu 2021: 8–10) in his brother’s arms.
2 Symbols in the film and their cultural metaphors

2.1 Target symbols sought or rejected – Peking Opera

Hu (2005) has referred to “art” as an important part of the human symbolic world. He emphasizes the need for material intermediation between performers and audiences, and that much of this communication comes from the symbols in the performance (Hu 2005: 48). As a traditional Chinese art form, Peking Opera is unique in its own inherent artistic structure and symbolic system. Every artistic image in Peking Opera is a combination of materiality and spirituality. The singing, costumes, movements, and other symbolic systems are all imbued with a special meaning.

Throughout the film of Farewell My Concubine, we can clearly see a main thread, namely the life experiences and emotional entanglements of Cheng and Duan, with the story revolving around their relationship: friendship–love–betrayal. However, behind this explicit thread, there is also a hidden thread, that of “Peking Opera.” Peking Opera is the most important common experience between the two main characters and plays the role of the “glue” in the construction of their relationship. In other words, Peking Opera is not just an accompaniment to this “romantic and legendary tragedy”; it is a symbol of purpose that the protagonist pursues or rejects, with its own history and character (Li 1996: 187–205). It is this “attractive” and “exclusive” art form that determines the course of the film in its own powerful way.

The film opens with Duan and Cheng, who appear in costume. Cheng is dressed in a pink and white brocade robe with a Ruyi phoenix crown, while Duan is dressed in a black and yellow costume with a crown and a long beard. As an important part of the art of Peking Opera, the costumes have corresponding ideographic functions and symbolic references (Zhou 2010: 75–78). The pink and white brocade robe shows the opera character’s “feminine beauty,” where pink is often given to the “female commander,” while white points to nobility and purity. It is evident that the costume Cheng is wearing in the play is a foreshadowing of Cheng’s life of external softness and internal strength, purity, and loyalty. In contrast, the costumes of Duan are black, which alludes to the old-fashioned dullness of Xiaolou, and yellow, which is often given to the “overlord.” However, the “overlord” that he is playing is not an “overlord” in the traditional sense, but a “collection of contradictions,” a person who is tough on the surface but weak on the inside. This “contradiction” is revealed as “darkness and betrayal” over the course of the film.

At the same time, the plot of the film shows that Cheng and Duan are subjected to the beatings of their master from when they are children, and it is the “master’s sticks” that have “made” them famous. Cheng is arrested by a warlord of the nationalist party for performing Peking Opera and put on public trial. In the
courtroom, Yuan Siye, a reputable businessman, is eager to defend Cheng. He uses the story and words from *The Peony Pavilion* to do so, inadvertently employing obscene language. However, it is precisely this lack of awareness that reveals Yuan Siye’s subconscious inner thoughts. It demonstrates that the art of Peking Opera is declining in the hearts of the people at the time. Later on, when Xiao Si replaces Cheng in playing the role of “Yu Ji,” it can be seen that what Xiao Si sings is a kind of modern opera instead of traditional opera, transforming the performance into a satire of Peking Opera rather than a celebration of the art form. This in fact highlights the loss of Peking Opera. During the Cultural Revolution, Duan sets fire to the costumes and props in an attempt to demonstrate his party loyalty, and as the plaque above him blackens in the fire, Cheng shouts, “You represent the King of Chu, you must not kneel and beg for forgiveness, otherwise what will be the fate of Peking Opera?” This all points to the survival, development, and destruction of Peking Opera as a hidden thread throughout the film.

As can be seen, Peking Opera reproduces an indicative symbolic system through its actions and stillness, marking the transmission of messages through the coding and decoding acts of the performers and the audience; through certain programmatic and ritualistic symbolic representations, it reveals the special psychological states within the characters and effectively conveys the connotations of the film.

2.2 Frequent cultural symbols – the sword

Swords around the world are cold weapons devised for the battlefield, with a similar basic form. In *Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary*, “sword” is defined as “a weapon with a long blade for cutting or thrusting,” i.e. the feature of having a long blade highlights its practical function. Western historians record that the single-edged knives with a certain degree of curvature were the predecessor of the sword, and “developed naturally from the knife in Minoan Crete and Celtic Britain […] between 1500 and 1100 B.C.” (Oakeshott 1999: 25). In the long evolution of the form, thrusting or slashing had different emphases depending on the needs of actual combat. With the development of sword-making techniques, the evolution of weapon types, armor, and other protective devices, and the need to meet the demands of combat (battlefield or duel), the Western sword changed in form mainly in terms of the width of the blade and the length of the blade, with a wide blade for slashing and a thin, pointed blade for stabbing. Throughout the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu) period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States (Zhanguo) period (475–221 BCE), the sword and dagger, a combination of one long and one short weapon, were weapons required by the knightly classes.
However, “sword” is defined in *Cihai*, an encyclopedic dictionary of Chinese words, as “a weapon to be carried on the person. It has a long blade with two sides, a spine in the middle, a pointed tip, and a short handle” (Chen 2020: 2065). According to the definition and description in *Cihai*, the Chinese have a strict distinction in the perception of sharp weapons such as swords, knives, and daggers. Unlike in the West, the sword was withdrawn from combat in China with the advent of the Han dynasty, when its utility was reduced and symbolic functions such as identification were separated from its practical significance. With the rise of Taoism and the popularity of gods and demons, the sword was given the function of suppressing evil and eliminating demons and further developed into the usual imagery for literary creations such as legends and monsters and props for various artistic performances (Ai and Zhang 2010: 144–145).

As Yiheng Zhao puts it, “In human society, every practical object, or act with a practical purpose, has the potential to carry symbolic meaning; in turn, every object for use can become a symbolic carrier” (Zhao 2016: 27). In this kind of object symbol, the pragmatic meaning precedes the symbolic meaning, and the two meanings can coexist or there is a tendency for them to be mutually exclusive. When the pragmatic meaning is greater than the symbolic meaning, it is called “objectification,” and, by contrast, when the symbolic meaning grows and the pragmatic meaning declines, it is called “symbolization” (Zhao 2016: 28). A sword is a typical universal sign that is common to all cultures. When used in battle, it has a practical meaning, and when used as a marker of identity and status, it has a symbolic meaning, which is common to swords. Whether originally used on the battlefield or after it had lost its usefulness, the sword was a cultural symbol of power and prestige. In addition, the sword, with its “thin, double-edged, soft but rigid” character, was revered as “the ruler of a hundred blades” and “the commander of a hundred weapons” among other cold weapons (Jia and Xu 2022: 91–99). According to *Taiping Yulan – Family Words*, “When Zilu met Confucius in military attire, he danced with his sword drawn and said: ‘In ancient times, a gentleman defended himself with a sword’” (Li 1994). It is evident that people have associated the sword with people of good character and high morals. In addition, the sword also represents an “extraordinary chivalry.” Li Bai, for example, spent his life with a sword, saying, “The sword is not the enemy of ten thousand people, but the text steals the reputation of the four seas” (Cheng et al. 2017). It is evident that he was hesitant and full of ambition before he had achieved great things. Other examples are Li He’s “I have the sword of resignation, the jade peak can cut off the clouds” (Yuan 1990: 24) and Du Fu's “draw the sword to fight with the dragon and tiger” (Liu 2017: 186), both of which endow the sword with “strength and courage” and express the practical wisdom of the sword-wielder.

As such an important cultural symbol, the sword is seen in five different ways throughout the film *Farewell My Concubine*. Its first appearance is in the house of
Eunuch Zhang, where Duan expresses his love for the sword, which reflects the sympathy between the “gentleman” and the “sword.” The second time, Cheng prostitutes himself to Yuan Siye, who now owns the sword, in order to obtain it and give it to Duan to remind him of a promise they once made, but Duan has forgotten this altogether and Cheng feels betrayed. With the sword, the relationship between the two men goes from hot to cold. The third time, Cheng gives the sword to his brother and takes the initiative to reconcile with him, and the sword sustains their relationship. The fourth time, the sword appears during a so-called “struggle session,” an aggressively staged public denunciation of the troupe as class enemies. Despite Cheng denouncing her as a prostitute, Juxian risks her life to retrieve the sword for him because of its special meaning to him, but when Duan shows only apparent indifference to her, she falls into despair and commits suicide using the sword. Her fate arouses the sympathy of the viewers. The sword endows Juxian with a bold, romantic, uninhibited character and a sentiment that transcends the norms of reality, as well as with a sense of social responsibility to punish evil and promote good. The last time the sword motif appears is during Duan and Cheng’s last performance, when Duan recalls Cheng’s words as a child, “I am a man, not a woman,” which echoes the beginning of the play and shows Cheng’s return to his male identity and self-identification, and ultimately his choice to end his life with the King’s sword. The gleaming, straight-bladed sword becomes a symbol of the gentleman’s character in Cheng, alluding to his bright, upright, and open-minded pursuit of character. It can be seen that the sword not only symbolizes Cheng’s personality traits, but is also closely linked to the ups and downs of his fate.

2.3 Environmental symbols of story development – the changing times

With every change of times, a new Signifier is born, and each new noumenon retrospectively changes the meaning of tradition, which Zizek calls the “Master-Signifier,” reconstructing the narrative of the past and making it more readable. It reconstructs the narrative of the past, making it more readable. In this way, Farewell My Concubine recreates and repeats that particular period of history, and it can be regarded as the “Master-Signifier.” The meaning of events and their historical dimension are always determined afterwards by inscribing them into a network of symbols (Žižek 2014: 170–259). The timeline of the film spans several historical periods: from the chaos of the Northern Warlords to the victory of the War of Resistance against Japan, and from the War of Liberation to the Cultural Revolution, building up a time frame based on different historical periods, dividing the storyline, and indirectly presenting the characteristics of the institutional culture of different periods.
In the minds of the two heroes, “art” is indestructible and sublime. In order to be able to act well, they endure the cruelest of tortures, the abuse and beatings of their master, exercising a will of steel, “inexplicably queued up outside the banal cycle of ordinary human passions and weaknesses” (Žižek 2014: 170–259). In the context of the times, they were recognized and celebrated by the world and thrust into a sacred and empty position. However, the first time art appears as traumatic is in the time of the Japanese invasion of China. Cheng is accused of being a “traitor” after the victory of the war and is taken to court for this reason. In order to save Cheng, Duan and his wife commission the businessman Yuan Siye, a patron of the arts and an admirer of Cheng’s, to bribe the judge to intercede. It is clear that corruption in old China is based on power. In fact, the torrent of the times not only damages art, but is more of a moral critique or a political attitude, referring to a symptom that “arises from the failure of words, from the collapse of the symbolic circle of communication, from a specific, pathological symbolic composition” (Žižek 2014: 170–259). In other words, art is already changing quietly in the minds of both men.

After the founding of the new China, Cheng openly opposes modern opera on the grounds that it does not meet the standards of Peking Opera. Unfortunately, he is constantly ostracized and even condemned as a rightist. As can be seen, traditional art is used as a means and a tool to achieve political ambitions and goals at this time. When Cheng sings the words of a passage from “The Peony Pavilion – A Dream of Fright,” “The beauty of a beautiful day is not to be missed, but to be enjoyed in the courtyard of someone’s home,” he is overcome with a sense of humiliation and resentment that the traditional art of Peking Opera has been trampled upon. Times have changed, and the art of Peking Opera, which once held a place in mainstream culture, has gradually fallen into decline. It seems that Peking Opera is no longer the popular art it once was, but has become a tool to blackmail Cheng into compromise. In a ritualistic Peking Opera performance, Cheng uses his consummate skills to present a sacred and glorious aesthetic image, set to beautiful Peking Opera music, which conveys the character’s momentary emotional state.

During the Cultural Revolution, people who were engaged in the arts, such as Cheng and Duan and their involvement in the art of Peking Opera, were criticized and persecuted, and were even required to expose each other for any potentially reactionary statements they may have made or supposedly antisocial behavior they may have engaged in. Such scenes in the film reflect the problems of the cultural system and the harm and suffering caused to the people and society. The question of “which is more important, the law or power” raised a lingering doubt in the minds of the people (Liu 2014). Thus in the film, faced with a tragic reality, Cheng pours out all his complex emotions into the art he loves so much. His sorrow and pain, his anguish and catharsis, all these unresolved conflicts are resolved “imaginatively” on the stage. In other words, the outer form of art and the inner thoughts and emotions of the subject are perfectly
united in Cheng. Ultimately, his madness, obsession, pain, disorientation, obsession with art, disbelief in the times, and hatred of reality all come together in a long, drawn-out tune, which means art is sublimated in the most beautiful way.

3 “Anti-identity construction” in Farewell My Concubine

The concept of “anti-identity construction” was first proposed by Hongbing Yu and Jie Zhang in 2015. From the perspective of contemporary semiotics, they emphasize that the reason why an excellent literary work can be appreciated by different readers of all generations, exceeding the bounds of its own age of creation, is not only that it reflects the social reality of the time and has depicted a “vivid” description of typical characters in a typical time and space environment, which means “like or unlike,” but more often that the work has achieved relatively higher degrees of fullness in portraying these characters, thus allowing a pluralistic space of interpretation and fulfilling the truthful reflection of shared human emotions. In order to achieve these goals, a literary text needs to adopt a unique way of representation in the creation of characters, to wit, “anti-identity construction,” that is, the use of representational techniques that exceed or even contradict the preconceived images in the minds of their audiences in the construction of literary texts (Yu and Zhang 2015: 59–67).

Different from “defamiliarization,” the intent is not to deliberately pursue a sense of formal or structural strangeness; on the contrary, it only seeks a kind of representation of human experiences with fidelity as well as their global restoration, and to construct a “panorama” with novel perspectives, thus demolishing stereotyped models that people have in their minds. Fundamentally, it is a return to dynamic Umwelten capable of facilitating the pluralistic generation of textual meanings and the ultimate semiotic reflection of shared human emotions (Yu and Zhang 2016: 1–10). In other words, “anti-identity construction” is the construction of a “panorama” from a novel perspective, a representation of the text that goes beyond or even against the preconceived images in the minds of the audience. This technique is also used in the film Farewell My Concubine.

3.1 “Hidden love”: the conflict between real emotions and moral constraints

The greatest conflict between emotion and morality in the film Farewell My Concubine is the “hidden love” between Cheng and Duan in the film. This love
germinates during their opera studies and performances, developed by the emergence of the sword, and their relationship is a constant ebb and flow as the times change and reincarnate. It is a “hidden love” because this type of “love” is contrary to traditional Chinese moral culture.

Confucianism advocates the “middle way,” and this attitude of “no faults, no failures” continues to permeate all aspects of life. Since feudal times, the Chinese have focused on marital happiness, family stability, and the reproduction of offspring. As an important part of success, family is of paramount importance. If a man acts as a woman, it is often treated as a “family scandal” “not to be publicized,” as this will have a negative impact on reputation (Zhang and Zhang 2010: 182–183). At the same time, Confucianism places great value on future generations and considers “having many children and a prosperous family” to be an important expression of family continuity. If there were no heirs to carry on the family tradition, there would be shame in facing one’s ancestors. As Mencius said: “There are three types of lack of filial piety, but no offspring is the greatest of these” (Yang 1988: 69).

It is the discrimination and accusation of “hidden love” that is expressed from the opposite side. However, the film does not hide this kind of love, but instead uses it as a “rebellion” against tradition – through the “anti-identity construction” of Cheng’s persona, which has been transformed from compromise and submission to the historical times as represented in the film to a representation of the ideal principle and the pursuit of perfection – and from the inseparable process of growth and the situation of the two men, the audience is led to understand this love from an objective perspective. The Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud emphasized that “the identification of gender is an internal, unconscious, lifelong requirement for any subject” (Gan 2009: 38). Cheng emerges as in the female role of dan in Peking Opera, but in fact he was not born that way. Having endured beatings and torment, he is told that if he suffers, grows in ability, and becomes successful, he will be able to eat the food rewarded by his masters. That means in the present and even in the future, Cheng must act as requested by his master. Food, as a necessity for survival, is the most fundamental and essential category of human needs. However, the most basic needs in life have become the medium and means of his oppression. Even though he is very resistant to this, he has no choice but to gradually “feminize” himself for the sake of his role and his food. As a result, “I am a man, not a woman” is suppressed and stifled, while the “I am a woman, not a man,” which caters to the society represented in the film, is strengthened and grows into the dominant personality.

At the same time, similar experiences make the two boys who grow up in misery a “golden couple” on stage and close friends off stage. When Cheng needs love and care, it is Duan who fills the lack of mother’s love; when he is caught in the dilemma of “role of male” or role of female,” it is Duan who accompanies him out of his confusion. The tacit understanding between them gradually becomes transformed
into deep affection in the slow passage of time. This is precisely the “anti-identity construction” in the relationship between the two. The infatuation of Cheng with Duan is treated in the film as an extension of the roles in Peking Opera. This kind of construction reveals the transcendent glory of Cheng’s personality. His love for Duan is “a quest for perfection in art and in himself” (Luo 2002: 266). He desires to be faithful to the ideals of Peking Opera, hoping to act for the rest of his life and to become the lifelong lover of Duan, both on and off stage. It can be said that not only is Cheng emotionally dependent on Duan in real life but that they are complementary halves of each other, both sharing the same theatrical and life ideals. Therefore, when Cheng finds out that Duan is entangled with Juxian and no longer devoted to acting, he feels as if his ideal is about to collapse. His resentment toward Juxian focuses more on the fact that she has pried away the other half of his ideals and thus destroyed his own.

While we are deeply conflicted by the love between Cheng and Duan, it seems that we can also feel Cheng’s struggle in the film. Even though he wants to escape from this “hidden love,” it is already in his blood and buried deep in his heart (Ma 2015: 25–27). It is evident that in a “rebellion” against conventional thoughts, the combination of love and tragedy of death, which transcends the world’s vision, has resulted in an unprecedented classic. Over the years, it has not only brought a rich and different aesthetic impact to audiences at home and abroad, but has also added more scope to the “incestuous emotion of love.”

3.2 “The transformation of humanity”: the conflict between life in the film and moral values in reality

While presenting artistic images, the film constantly weaves in and out of scenes of real life and the changing attitudes of different characters in the face of life. Juxian, the wife of Duan, who is the star of the brothel Hua Manlou, is fed up with the bullying of the dignitaries in old times and spends all her money to marry Duan, just because he was once kind to her. When Duan is arrested, she chooses to bow her head and beg Cheng to save Duan. Even though she has been spat upon and insulted, she never changes her heart. In the end, she chooses to commit suicide to show her chastity in the face of her husband’s request to “draw a line in the sand.”

In contrast to Juxian, who adheres to moral values, there are also characters in the film who give up on themselves early on. The first of these is “Little Laizi,” who commits suicide when Cheng is a child. He is a playful braggart, but still imagines being the main character in the play. When he sees how harsh the training is and how brutally strict the master is, he eats the only candy cane left and chooses to kill himself, ironically in death ending up with the mask of his favorite King on his coffin.
The second one is Xiao Si, an abandoned child picked up by Cheng. Xiao Si is earnest and hardworking as a child, but as he cannot bear the hardships of Peking Opera, he begins to be full of tricks. In order to take a shortcut to modern drama, he chooses to betray his master, not only stealing Cheng’s role but also forcing Duan to denounce Cheng, thus embodying the sinister side of human nature. Another such character is Yuan Siye, a knowledgeable patron of the classical arts. As one of the few people in the film who can really understand the play they perform, he points out the shortcomings in the performances of Duan and Cheng. Yet he always wants nothing but to possess Cheng, choosing to monopolize him when he has no senior brother, and painting on the face makeup of the Overlord to join him in the play. However, at the time of revolution and the liberation of Beiping, Yuan loses everything he owns and is abandoned by the times. The last of these characters is Duan, who is initially a straightforward man, willing to stand up for Cheng, who is being bullied, and who defends Cheng from their master. But he is too busy eating, drinking, and playing to study acting. For him, the purpose of acting is just to make a living. When confronted with the deficiencies pointed out by Yuan, he does not think seriously about them. When confronted with Cheng’s acting for the Japanese, he humiliates him without asking the reason why. When confronted with the sword that Cheng offers, he just glances at it and replies with “a good sword,” failing to recognize its significance. During the Cultural Revolution, he even denounces Cheng, as does Cheng Duan, until they touch upon the background of Juxian. Faced with the possibility of disaster, Duan, under coercion and threat, tells Juxian that he does not love her and wants to draw a line under her, which leads Juxian, who is deeply in love with him and seeing no reason to continue living, to commit suicide. Cheng dedicates himself to the Peking Opera, and achieves the role of Yu Ji. However, Duan contrasts the “King” of deep-rooted loyalty with his heartlessness and unrighteousness.

Loyalty and righteousness are the most fundamental and universal portrayals in traditional film. “In a society with turbulent currents, we watch over the home of ideological values in our hearts” (Zhang 2003: 45). From this point of view, the portrayals of humanity in Farewell My Concubine are also anti-identity constructed. During the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, the love of husband and wife and the loyalty between brothers seem insignificant in the face of self-preservation. The love and friendship that existed before are gone. The reversal of right and wrong in historical times as represented in the film forces people to abandon their original moral values and ethical standards. In essence, this change of image is intended to create a fuller and more realistic perception of human nature. The transformation of human nature is thus more profoundly compelling, especially for a generation of viewers who share the same historical and cultural backgrounds, which makes the film more accessible on a psychological level.
3.3 “The answer to death”: the conflict between subjective consciousness and the chance factor

According to modern semiotic theory, “reality” is a special and complex concept. A truly objective reality is difficult to access, and what the author “captures” or “reflects” through words is only a part of the world in the subject. All living beings, including human beings, can only perceive the world through their own perceptual systems by using symbols. Each subject seems to be at a specific point in a vast “absolute reality” that cannot be reproduced or appropriated by other subjects. Subjects access a “subjective reality,” also called the “subjective world,” in which they live, which can be represented by various symbolic systems (Yu and Zhang 2015: 59–67). That is to say, all reality is external to subjectivity. In other words, what is entirely objective cannot be the same as what is perceived. Thus, for human beings, “death” seems to be a destiny that can never be escaped. It hangs over us like the sword of Damocles, and can come at any moment (Shen 2021: 6–10, 36). Based on instinctive fear, human beings have never given up searching for the answer to death. Ethicists often see death as a reflection of an attitude toward life. For Hegel, death is “this universality which the individual human being achieves as an individual, which is purely existential […]”. It is the result of direct natural change, not of an act of consciousness” (Hegel 2017: 165, my translation). It is clear that “death” in the sense of Hegel is “natural” and is “driven by the laws of nature.” In order to distinguish the death of a human being from the death of animals or plants, Hegel complemented this with the idea that “death is natural” (Hegel 2017: 182). In relation to the death of a human being, nature acts as a mere “surface phenomenon” (Hegel, cited in Shen 2021: 6–10, 36). In other words, nature “obscures” the true nature of death, making it look natural. In addition to being “natural,” the death of a human being can also be “self-made,” i.e. the death of an ethical entity. Similarly to Hegel’s claim that death can be both “natural” and “self-acting,” there is in Confucianism also the idea that “all men die since the beginning of time” (Yang 2009: 69) and that “death is not their fate” (Yang and Song 2009: 182). On the one hand, Confucianism stresses the universal inevitability of death, which cannot be changed. On the other hand, it advises people not to squander their lives and wait for death at will, but to treat life with a positive attitude and rigor. In fact, death is an inevitable act of the subject’s consciousness. At the same time, it is mixed with many contingent factors as well (Wang 2009: 26–27).

Throughout the film Farewell My Concubine, many characters “exit” by “dying.” Behind the seemingly identical “deaths” there are different outcomes and meanings. The master of the opera troupe with the family name of Guan is the first person to die in the film. The master worships heroism and makes it his life’s pride to have trained Cheng and Duan. However, the rumors of a scandal between Cheng and Yuan and
Duan’s reluctance to appear on stage make Guan both hateful and sad. Seeing the bleak state of the troupe and its hopeless future, the master dies from apoplexy. His death is a choice of human dignity and was inevitable. Also inevitable is the death of Yuan and the unborn child of Juxian. Due to his admiration for Cheng, Yuan is determined to become his partner on stage. However, in Cheng’s heart, his perfect partner can only be Duan. As his destined partner, Duan has been rooted in Cheng’s mind for a long time. Therefore, for Yuan, after all his hardships, all he gets is a shattered ideal. Even though he still acts on stage playing the role of “the King,” the loss of Cheng, who is the perfect “Yu Ji” in his heart, becomes his greatest regret and sadness before his death. Despite her humble origins, Juxian also has a heart for heroes. Duan’s help and kindness fascinate her and make her fall in love with him. However, Duan, the hero in her heart, does not stand by her side when she falls into difficulty. The betrayal of Duan leaves her devastated, which ultimately causes the miscarriage of her child. In contrast to the deaths of the aforementioned characters, Cheng’s death creates a sense of ruined pathos in Peking Opera, rendering an idealized image of his dedication to the pursuit of his art.

There is only a brief narration of this story in Biography of Xiangyu in Records of the Historian. Sima Qian does not describe the death of Yu Ji, nor is there any other historical text on which to base this episode. Although the authenticity of this event is worthy of investigation, people continue to discuss the tragic love between the two. It is only in the Ming dynasty novel Romance of the Western Han that Zhen Wei describes in some detail the episode in which Yu Ji kills herself. The frequent appearance of this fictional episode in literature is not a random fabrication, but more a result of the imagination of later generations of Yu Ji’s virtues of loyalty and the beautiful sentiment of love. This emotion is rooted in history as well as in human kindness and has survived to this day. The death of Yu Ji, for the sake of love and loyalty, is artistically in line with the emotional logic and aesthetic ideals of shared human emotion, modernizing the myth of love from one generation to the next, which has not faded with the changes of history.

Like Yu Ji, in the film Cheng has love and righteousness. But Duan is not exactly a king worth following. Disappointed, he is only dissatisfied with reality. For him, the emotional connection between history and reality breaks down, thus giving rise to tragedy, i.e. the individual eventually breaks down under the double oppression of historical circumstances and inner repression. In this way, Cheng can only place his ideal in the illusory world of art. This is the first level of “anti-identity construction.”

The second level of “anti-identity construction” is based on the change of ending in the film. Instead of having the protagonists reunite in Hong Kong in 1984 to act Farewell My Concubine and then go their separate ways, Chen Kaige changes the year to 1977 (the first year after the end of the Cultural Revolution) and the setting to Beijing, with the performance of Farewell My Concubine culminating in the suicide of
Cheng. In the dreamlike light and shadow of the stage, Cheng literally kills himself. He finally gets what he wants, to stay forever in the role and identity of Yu Ji, to complete his faith, ideal, and pursuit of the King, of Peking Opera, of his life. It is an ending that death helps him achieve, one that will never change with the passage of time, political changes, human nature, or even his own desires or compromises. Henceforth, he will always be the ideal and perfect Yu Ji. Death is eternal, death is perfection. At the end of the film, Cheng is framed by death in the image of Yu Ji, from mortal to saintly, tragic, and gloriously perfect. In the course of his life, Cheng in the person of Dieyi follows the principle of “reality,” going with the flow of the times and compromising with reality. In contrast, Cheng in the person of the artist follows the “principle of the best” on the stage, pursuing perfection, clinging to his ideals and beliefs amid the changes of the times, confronting the illusion and confusion of reality by committing suicide, shining with the light of an ideal that is above the times (Wang 2022: 140–142).

4 Conclusion

Whatever the ways in which aesthetic worlds are formed, they are essentially relations to the world in which people exist. This world is a construction of society and concepts, as well as of symbols and emotions. The film Farewell My Concubine reveals a variety of symbols and themes, which include art and life, dreams and reality, loyalty and betrayal, women and men. These symbolic themes connect the characters and the audiences of the film, and serve as an excellent way to bridge the worlds of different subjects. Under such preconditions, the film achieves a transformation of the subject, providing more appropriate conditions for further ethical and moral reflection.

The film Farewell My Concubine portrays the protagonist as a dual character. Cheng appears to be compromised and helpless during the historical times as represented in the film. Although he has his own moments on stage and a kind of bitter love, he is still an ordinary person in life, with real needs and considerations, mediocrity, and humdrum. However, on stage Cheng is imbued with the ideals of perseverance and innocence, as well as loyalty and dedication to art. He becomes the role he played, the “Yu Ji” of his dedicated imagination, a man who is committed to his artistic ideals in a turbulent and changing world.

The film Farewell My Concubine presents the life of Cheng, as well as the life of Duan. After half a century, the upheaval in society is finally over. When Cheng and Duan perform Farewell My Concubine once again, Cheng comes back to life in the role he played and finally realizes his long-cherished wish to reunite with Duan. But having experienced the world, he has long been relieved of everything. He enters the
play again, putting his life into the role of “Yu Ji,” and ends his life with the sword given to him by the “King.” Thus, in their pursuit of art, the two artists achieve the ultimate reflection of emotions shared on a symbolic level, while also reflecting traditional Chinese culture and history in the changing times.

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