

Am I a Girl or a Boy -An Analysis of Gender Misperception in the Film Farewell My Concubine

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ABSTRACT

Farewell My Concubine, a 1993 Chinese drama film directed by Chen Kaige and starring Leslie Cheung, Zhang Fengyi, and Gong Li, is adapted from the novel of the same name by Leslie Cheung. Douzi, a boy whose stage name is Cheng Dieyi, plays the concubine Consort Yu, and his senior fellow trouper Shitou, whose stage name is Duan Xiaolou, plays the hero Xiang Yu in Peking Opera Farewell My Concubine. In life, Cheng Dieyi falls in love with Duan Xiaolou just like Consort Yu deeply loves Xiang Yu. In traditional Eastern culture and Western culture, gender is binary, that is, a person is either male or female, and there is nothing in between. In the traditional Chinese society with a dichotomous view of gender, Cheng Dieyi has a queer tendency. Based on Sigmund Jacques' and Lacan's theories of the Oedipus complex and castration complex, this article explores how Cheng Dieyi's experiences of "castration" leads to his gender misperception in three aspects: Cheng Dieyi's family background, troupe experience, and self-fantasy.

KEYWORDS: Farewell My Concubine; Gender misperception; Oedipus complex; Castration complex; Reverse Castration; Self-castration

1. Introduction

In the film Farewell My Concubine, Douzi's mother is a prostitute. Unable to raise Douzi up on her own due to her terrible socioeconomic situation, she abandons Douzi to an all-boys Peking opera troupe, where Douzi, due to his feminine features, is trained to play dan (female roles in Peking Opera). At first, Douzi is reluctant to admit his female identity in plays. He intentionally mistakes the line "I am by nature a girl, not a boy" with "I am by nature a boy, not a girl," which subjects him to severe punishments by Master Guan. By chance, Douzi runs away from the troupe and witnesses an opera performance by famous Peking Opera actors. Realizing that only hard practice can help one attain success, he returns to the troupe. In training, Master Guan and Shitou force Douzi to admit he is a girl through harsh punishment. In the end, Douzi completely believes that he is a girl. Years later, Douzi becomes a well-known dan with the stage name Cheng Dieyi. He and Shitou, whose stage name is Duan Xiaolou, stage love stories again and again in Farewell My Concubine. In life, Cheng Dieyi falls in love with Duan Xiaolou just like Consort Yu deeply loves Xiang Yu. As Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou undergo the turmoil and turbulence of the times, their relationship experiences deterioration, breakdown, and reunion. After the Cultural Revolution, the two perform Farewell My Concubine again. At the end of the rehearsal, Cheng Dieyi finally realizes that he is by nature a man. He commits suicide in front of Duan Xiaolou, ending his tragic life.

2. Oedipus Complex and Castration Complex

According to Freud, the castration complex is developed based on castration fantasies. Children believe that biological differences between men and women are a result of the castration of women's penises [1]. The Oedipus complex is closely associated with the castration complex. Appearing in the Oedipal stage of child development, the Oedipus complex and castration complex arise after children realize the differences between the two sexes and are bound by the law of paternity.

The Oedipus complex and castration complex manifest themselves differently in boys and girls. In the case of boys, the castration complex marks boys' exit from the Oedipus complex. Boys naturally feel attached to their mothers and fearful of being castrated by their fathers. Due to their fear of castration, boys give up their sexual desire for their mothers. When a boy overcomes his fear for his father and identifies with his father, realizing that he and his father share the same gender, he overcomes his Oedipal complex and builds a complete gender identity.

In the case of girls, the emergence of the castration complex marks girls' entry into the Oedipus complex. Girls are jealous of boys' penises. They are resentful of their mothers because they believe that their mothers have deprived them of their penises, which leads girls to redirect their libido from their mothers onto their fathers [2]. Overall, the identification of boys and girls with their fathers enables them to abide by the law of paternity and

develop sexual desires that conform to social norms.

Based on Freud's theory of biological castration, Lacan proposes the theory of symbolic castration. According to Lacan, Castration refers to not only the loss of a real organ but also a lack of imagery or symbolic phallus [3]. Lacan points out that symbolic castration occurs when one's boy is threatened, body parts are lost, or a physical injury is caused [4].

3. Douzi's Reverse "Castration" Experience

According to Freud, due to his fear of being castrated by his father, a boy ultimately builds a gender identity consistent with his father. A girl hates her mother for depriving her of her penis and thus redirects her sexual impulses towards her father. Douzi does not overcome the Oedipus complex through the castration complex. On the contrary, the castration complex marks Douzi's entry into the Oedipus complex, a process typically experienced by a girl. Douzi was born to a prostitute in a brothel. He does not know his biological father is. Growing up in a brothel, he does not have a father figure with whom he can identify, so he fails to complete a key step to build his male identity. At the same time, his hatred of his mother becomes stronger and stronger day by day. Douzi, who has lived with his mother since childhood, must have a deep attachment to her mother. However, his mother ruthlessly abandons him to a Peking opera troupe, where he is forced to admit he is a girl through cruel training and harsh punishment. In the beginning, Douzi is unwilling to admit that he is a girl. After being severely beaten, he runs away from the troupe. He must be resentful of his mother at this time. He believes that his mother has caused his tragic experience. It is worth noting that Douzi's mother plays a part in castrating Douzi. To let the opera troupe accept Douzi, she cuts off his sixth finger. Douzi's loss of the sixth finger symbolizes the physical harm his mother causes to him, which can be seen as "symbolic castration." For Douzi, his mother has deprived him of his "symbolic" penis, so he has a deep fear and resentment towards his mother. Douzi's experience of reverse "castration" causes him to be unable to establish a stable and complete identity. He has no fixed self, becoming a "floating signifier" so-called by Lacan, a signifier without a referent [5].

4. Douzi's Second "Castration" Experience

If Douzi's mother is his first "castration" practitioner, then the opera troupe is his second "castration" practitioner. Douzi's first "castration" experience destroys his male

identity. In his second "castration" experience, his new identity is established. During his initial days in the opera troupe, Douzi, either intentionally or unintentionally, mistakes the line "I am by nature a girl, not a boy" with "I am by nature a boy, not a girl." By this time, Douzi still insists on his male identity and resists the forces that shape him into a girl. Due to male hormones and unique physiological reactions in men, Douzi tries to give the "floating signifier" a specific signifier: "I am by nature a boy." However, because people around him continue to reinforce his belief in his female identity through harsh punishment and cruel training, he finally subconsciously recognizes that he is a girl. As Douzi is unwilling to admit that he is "a girl" several times, he is severely beaten by her master. In addition, her senior fellow trouper Duan Xiaolou also plays an important role in "castrating" Douzi. When he performs for the manager Na Ye, Douzi again reads out "I am by nature a boy, not a girl." This time, Duan Xiaolou severely punishes him to force him to admit that he is a girl. Duan Xiaolou shouts: "I'll teach you a lesson! I'll teach you a lesson!" He picks up Master Guan's pipe, stabs it into Douzi's mouth over and over until Douzi's mouth is full of blood, and then suddenly pulls it out. From then on, Douzi completely identifies with his female identity. In his performance, he sings confidently and calmly, "I am by nature a girl, not a boy." The process of stabbing the pipe into Douzi's mouth and then pulling it out symbolizes a process of castration. At the moment the pipe is finally pulled out from him, Douzi is completely "castrated" at the psychological level and loses his "penis."

5. Douzi's Self-Castration Experience

Cheng Dieyi's gender misperception is a result of not only his forced "castration" experiences but also his own active choice. Many years later, Douzi becomes Cheng Dieyi, a famous Peking opera star actor. When he is young, Douzi has to sing "I am by nature a girl, not a boy" to make a living. After becoming famous, he has the freedom to give himself a male identity. However, he does not do so. To a certain extent, Cheng Dieyi is willing to be "Consort Yu" both in and out of the play. He is attached to his senior fellow trouper Duan Xiaolou, which makes him willing to be "castrated" so that he can stay together with Duan Xiaolou forever. He dreams of "Farewell My Concubine" becoming a reality, in which he and Duan Xiaolou support each other through thick and thin, never being separate. The appearance of Juxian, Duan Xiaolou's wife, shatters the ivory tower built by Cheng Dieyi. This means that he will lose the protection of Duan Xiaolou and has to go through the ups and downs of his life alone. It also

makes him realize that being together with Duan Xiaolou is an unattainable dream. Cheng Dieyi's self-fantasy leads him to become a castrator who castrates himself. Out of the play, he is unable to be assimilated by social symbols, accept gender norms, and deal with the gender relationships between him and others, which results in the tragedy of his gender misperception throughout his life.

6. Contextualizing Gender Misperception

Farewell My Concubine is a film about the helpless struggle of little people in troubled times. To understand Cheng Dieyi's gender misperception, one must understand the historical background of this film. This film spans more than half a century—from the early years of the Republic of China to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Imperial oppression and warlord warfare during the Republic of China made the lives of Chinese people miserable. Eight years of the War Against Japan almost devastated China. During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, supervision, criticism, and persecution were everywhere. It was not until the Chinese economic reform that Chinese people had the freedom to choose their lifestyles. Douzi's experience of being forced to study opera in a troupe and destroy his male identity reflects the helplessness and desolation of little people in turbulent times. Without this forced "castration" experience, Cheng Dieyi would not become a castrator himself and live in the dream of being Consort Yu. After the Cultural Revolution, Cheng Dieyi performs Farewell My Concubine with Duan Xiaolou again. Reminded by Duan Xiaolou, Cheng Dieyi suddenly realizes that he is by nature a boy rather than a girl. Cheng Dieyi wakes up from his dream, takes Duan Xiaolou's sword and kills himself. Like Consort Yu, he falls into a pool of blood. Obviously, Cheng Dieyi's life

symbolizes the helplessness of little people in troubled times.

7. Conclusion

Farewell My Concubine describes the joys and sorrows of Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou for more than half a century. Cheng Dieyi is forced to undergo reverse "castration", which destroys his male identity and establishes his female identity. As a result, he develops a deep affection for her senior fellow trouper Duan Xiaolou, and lives in the dream of Consort Yu throughout his life. Although this film depicts same-sex love, it is not a gay film. Cheng Dieyi's gender misperception shows the tragic helplessness of a Peking opera actor in changing times. Just as Cheng Dieyi cannot choose his own role in the play, he cannot choose his life script in the context of China's transformation. He cannot choose his family or his experience. He has to succumb to reality and become a girl in plays. Farewell My Concubine vividly interprets the helplessness of small characters in changing times. In an oppressive environment, perhaps everyone can become a "Cheng Dieyi."

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