

# Nationalism and Identity Crisis: Analyzing “Farewell to My Concubine” Through Historical Contexts

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## Abstract:

Derived from the traditional Peking Opera “Farewell to My Concubine,” Li Bihua’s adaptation depicts the characters navigating through China’s most tumultuous 20<sup>th</sup>-century period, marked by multiple ideological shifts and wars. Against this backdrop of societal upheaval, the characters grapple with profound identity crisis and uncertainty. This paper contends that Li’s novel reflects the challenges posed by nationalism and the ensuing crisis of self-identity. The study explores the characters’ responses across various transitional phases: from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republican Era, from Japanese colonial rule to Communist Party governance, and the period preceding Hong Kong’s return. Additionally, the paper analyzes how the complex relationship between protagonists Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi borrows thematic elements from the original Peking Opera play. Furthermore, it examines the fluctuations in the evolution of traditional Peking Opera plays amidst the rise of anti-feudalism. By exploring the anxiety and uncertainty prevalent among the populace leading up to Hong Kong’s return, the novel’s adaptation amplifies the theme of self-identity ambiguity. It heightens the sense of historical significance compared to its truncated film version. The study selects Li’s text as its primary source due to its comprehensive exploration of the themes of identity crisis and belongingness, which can be triggered by ideological shifts enforced by colonial powers or domestic politics. Despite being set in 20<sup>th</sup>-century China, individuals with analogous experiences may still find domestic and international resonance in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, nationalism, transformation, Farewell to My Concubine.

## 1. Introduction

Li Bihua’s novel „Farewell to My Concubine“ is an adaptation of the renowned traditional Peking Opera play of the same name. Duan Xiaolou plays the role of Xiang Yu and Cheng Dieyi portrays Yu Ji. The narrative delves into the intricate emotional relationships among Peking Opera actors Duan Xiaolou, Cheng Dieyi, and the prostitute Ju Xian, setting against a tumultuous era characterized by shifting regimes and national fortunes. The story unveils the destinies of ordinary people amidst turbulent times and significant historical events.

The text encapsulates the most tumultuous and pivotal transitional periods in Chinese history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first of these transitions occurs from the late Qing to the Republican era, marking the nascent stage of modern Chinese nationalism and the inception of the concept of the “Chinese nation” [1]. During this time, particularly narrated in the story, remnants of the Qing dynasty grappled with a sense of displacement and uncertainty about their identity. This theme is vividly portrayed in Eunuch

Ni’s birthday celebration in the text. Their absence of the traditional long braid symbolizes a loss of old customs, yet the lingering invisible braid metaphorically binds the bewildered attendees, hesitant to embrace change.

Subsequently, modern Chinese nationalism began to take shape around the time of the May 4th Movement [1]. However, the oppressive rule of Japanese colonialism instilled a sense of apprehension and insecurity regarding national identity. The subsequent Chinese Civil War saw the gradual ascendancy of the Communist Party, which emerged victorious and reshaped the political discourse. The apex of nationalism combined with communism and Mao Zedong’s ideology during the Cultural Revolution aimed at anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. This wrought significant upheaval and inflicted profound wounds, particularly on intellectuals and artists. The pervasive sense of dislocation and the confusion wrought by frequent societal upheavals led to a mass illegal exodus of Chinese citizens to Hong Kong, including the protagonist, Duan Xiaolou. In the text, the depictions of Hong Kong subtly underscore the complex theme of identity crisis and

uncertainty about the future preceding Hong Kong's handover. It suggests the text intends to explore the profound existential dilemmas individuals face on the eve of Hong Kong's reunification, encapsulating the intricate interplay between personal identity and geopolitical transformation. This paper argues that the text reflects the evolution and challenges of nationalism, the crisis of self-identity, and the tragic consequences that arise during periods of transition marked by nationalist resurgence. The study analyzes the characters' reactions during various transitioning periods: from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republican Era, from the Japanese colonial rule to the Communist Party's governance, and during the period before Hong Kong's return. Also, the paper delves into how the chaos of the nation and the relationship between the protagonists, Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, borrow the thematic elements of the original Peking Opera play. In addition, it analyzes the fluctuation of traditional Peking Opera development under the rise of anti-feudalism.

In the academic realm, most scholarly articles analyze the film adaptation of „Farewell to My Concubine,“ directed by Chen Kaige. However, scant attention has been paid to scholarly papers centered explicitly on the literary work. Departing from the prevalent film-centric analyses, this study draws from the novel version as its primary reference. Its preference for the novel over the film is due to the significant omissions in the latter, notably the segment where Duan Xiaolou settles in Hong Kong, portraying the anxiety and uncertainty among the people before Hong Kong's return to China. Such deletions diminish the depth of the theme of self-identity uncertainty, lacking the weight of historical context. Furthermore, the study posits that Cheng Dieyi's survival rather than demise accentuates the tragedy in the novel version. Cheng Dieyi marries a woman he does not love, while Duan Xiaolou is compelled to clandestinely cross into Hong Kong and later grapple with an unfamiliar life in the South. They both endure existence with resignation, a fate deemed more tragic than death itself.

## 2. Identity crisis in societal transitional periods

Li's text „Farewell to My Concubine“ unfolds against several significant social transformations. Spanning distinct historical periods, from the late Qing dynasty to the Republican era, through the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, and into the era preceding Hong Kong's handover, the author aims to analyze the emergence of nationalism and the characters' experiences of identity crisis and uncertainty throughout each epoch. Through an analysis of the evolution of nationalism, it becomes evident

that national identities are historically mutable, mirroring societal transformations [2]. By providing historical context for the protagonists in the story, Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, who are Peking Opera performers, and Ju Xian, initially a prostitute in a brothel before marrying Duan Xiaolou, embody the societal categorization of “entertainers” prevalent in ancient China, relegating them to the status of “mean people” [3]. Under the feudal system in China, previous to the 1911 Revolution, the scholars' class dominated, while the theatrical people were placed on the lowest rung of the social ladder, along with the barber, prostitute, worker in the bathhouse, and cook [4]. Therefore, the study's analysis of characters mainly focuses on lower social class people and prominent individuals during the Qing dynasty, such as Eunuch Ni.

### 2.1 The Rise of Modern Chinese Nationalism and Remnants of the Qing Dynasty

Before the late Qing period, the concepts of ethnicity and nation were not that clear. However, since the invasion of foreign powers, people's sense of crisis and awareness of the ethnic community as a unity has risen. Following the Opium War in 1840, particularly after the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, the Chinese nation's crisis deepened, leading to the emergence, development, and surge of modern Chinese nationalism [1]. According to Sun Yat-sen and other Chinese nationalists, during the tumultuous wartime, it was in the self-interest of Chinese minorities to align with the Han majority against the imperialists, as there was strength in unity [2]. Externally, the treaties signed with Europe, the United States, and Japan made people who had long been isolated from the outside world realize the concept of nationhood of Western countries. The intrusion of foreign powers and the infiltration of Western ideologies compelled China to passively embrace modern nationalism, the globalized world system of nation-states that has gained prominence over the past century, legitimizing the nation-state as the sole rightful embodiment of sovereignty [2]. As Michael Freedman has pointed out, nationalism becomes exceptionally significant during specific periods, such as when a nation is being constructed, conquered, threatened externally, embroiled in territorial disputes, or internally dominated by hostile ethnic or cultural groups [5]. Particularly after the September 18th Incident, the establishment of the Anti-Japanese National United Front and the widespread participation of the entire nation significantly enhanced the sense of identity with the Chinese nation as a whole among people of all ethnic backgrounds [1].

Different from the Qing dynasty, which centered on a relationship between one emperor and officials but lacked a concept of a nation, the emergence of nationalism marked

a significant ideological transformation in the Republican era. This identity crisis was vividly portrayed in the scene of Eunuch Ni's birthday banquet. In Chapter 2 of the story, set in 1930, Peking Opera performers Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou were invited to Ni's residence to entertain him on his birthday. After the performance, Cheng Dieyi was tasked with expressing gratitude to Ni for the numerous gifts bestowed upon them. Ni's chamber was adorned with remnants of the former dynasty: opium in his hand, the „Twenty-Four Histories“ stored in a dark purple cabinet, and a spittoon embellished with gold and red peonies. These luxurious items testified to the nobility of his status and the luxury he once enjoyed before the downfall of the Qing dynasty. However, with the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the absence of an emperor, his entrenched concept of the ruler-subject relationship also dissipated. Disappointed with the Qing dynasty's demise and uncertain about the future, his demeanor and speech revealed his helplessness and desolation as a Qing loyalist: “Even Yu Ji, as delicate as water, a mere woman, understood righteousness and remained loyal, willing to sacrifice herself. Yet all the officials and warriors of the entire Qing dynasty combined could not match the virtue of a single woman? ... I chose this play today to humiliate them!” Furthermore, he continued to adhere to the old methods, insisting on referring to the year as the 22nd year of the Xuantong reign of the Qing Dynasty rather than acknowledging the name of the Republic of China. This indicates his reluctance to accept the transformation and his longing for the return of the Qing Dynasty.

Unlike Eunuch Ni, who enjoyed endless glory and status due to his proximity to the emperor, the transformative impact did not initially greatly affect the lower classes. Regardless of who was in power, they remained impoverished, struggling to survive. In the story, faced with the Japanese invasion conveyed by shouts of newspaper boys, the attitudes of the common people remained indifferent, focused solely on making a living. Tea houses, eateries, and Peking Opera troupes continued to operate as usual in the bustling marketplace. Take the protagonists, for example; they still focused on learning skills from Peking Opera, their living method. While nationalism did rise during this period, its influence on the common people, who were preoccupied with survival, was relatively limited. Nevertheless, the subtle influence of nationalism gradually seeped into the public sphere. Over time, some were influenced by the ideological pull of nationalism, while others steadfastly clung to their original beliefs. This dynamic underscores the divergent interpretations of nationalism and self-identity, often sparking ideological conflicts. Focusing on Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou's contrasting attitudes towards performing Peking Opera for Japanese

audiences during the Japanese invasion of China, they exemplify different perspectives on nationalism and personal identity. Cheng Dieyi sees himself as someone dedicated to the art of Peking Opera and deeply in love with Duan Xiaolou. His decision to perform for Japanese spectators stems from two motives. Firstly, Cheng Dieyi believes that art transcends national boundaries. In his view, any performance demands his full commitment, regardless of the audience's nationality. This suggests that his nationalism is not particularly strong; rather, he is primarily devoted to the art of Peking Opera. Secondly, he performs for the Japanese to save Duan Xiaolou, whom he loves deeply and cannot bear to see him die. In contrast, Duan Xiaolou's nationalism is fervent. He outright refuses to perform for the Japanese, leading to his capture and subsequent torture by Japanese forces. Despite the ordeal, he refuses to yield or compromise. When he learns that Cheng Dieyi performed for the Japanese to save him, instead of gratitude, he feels immense anger towards Cheng Dieyi's actions. This point of contention effectively illustrates their divergent definitions of nationalism and self-identity. Against the backdrop of a rising tide of nationalism, Duan Xiaolou is deeply influenced, possessing a strong sense of national and patriotic consciousness. Meanwhile, Cheng Dieyi remains steadfast in his dedication to Peking Opera, with a blurred conception of nationalism.

### **2.2 Anti-Feudalism in Mao Zedong's Nationalism and Identity Crisis in Peking Opera Performers**

During the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, a shift occurred from nationalism aimed at uniting a nation to resist Western and Japanese imperialism to nationalism centered on Mao Zedong's ideology. With the victory over the Nationalist Party, the Communist Party, led by Mao, gradually asserted dominance in the political arena. They exerted their political influence over the nation, purging or disenfranchising undesirable classes and endeavoring to mold the nation by an idealized vision of the proletariat [2]. This new form of nationalism, characterized by anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution [6]. Peking Opera, as a symbol of feudal cultural production, became a primary target for suppression during this tumultuous period. To dismantle all feudal remnants, Mao's supporters, notably his wife Jiang Qing, embarked on a campaign to replace traditional Peking opera themes with more contemporary and revolutionary ones [7]. These new productions, known as „model plays,“ were powerful tools for advancing the revolution and reinforcing Mao's nationalist ideology. The radical reform of Peking Opera had a profound im-

pact on traditional performers, as it ushered in a significant shift in thematic content. The traditional portrayal of emperors, princes, and ministers was supplanted by contemporary narratives featuring heroes and exemplary figures infused with socialist ideals [7]. As depicted in Li Bihua's story, traditional Peking Opera plays were perceived as tools the old ruling class used to instill superstition and propagate feudal consciousness, prompting numerous performers to seek refuge in film or drama to avoid political persecution. Some found themselves unemployed due to these changes, while others were selected to participate in the production of model plays, such as Duan Xiaolou. However, this transformation of performance style and characters in traditional Peking Opera plays confused him about his occupation and identity, to which he had dedicated decades. When Duan was forced to recite the lyrics of the model play, he could not help but feel conflicted and hesitant towards this new form of performance. In traditional Peking Opera plays the lyrics are typically written in a semi-classical style, imbuing them with poetic and aesthetic qualities. However, the heavy incorporation of vernacular language into the lyrics of the model plays left him feeling alienated, and he lamented that it diminished the lyrical charm and aesthetic appeal of Peking Opera, likening it to "plain boiled water" [7].

More severely, both characters in traditional Peking Opera and the performers were perceived as feudal authority, with the latter additionally regarded as enemies of communism. This perception, along with severe tortures, plunged them into a profound identity crisis as their portrayals were misinterpreted by society. Take Duan Xiaolou's most frequently played role, "霸王 (Ba Wang)," as an example. The understanding of "Ba Wang" by people evolved twice with the development of nationalism. At the same time, the deviation from the original meaning of "Ba Wang" made Duan doubt the identification of the role that he had dedicated to in his Peking Opera career. Originally, "Ba Wang" was meant to represent the historical tragic hero, Xiang Yu, who is the central heroic figure in the traditional Peking Opera piece "Farewell to My Concubine." His romantic tragedy with Yu Ji captivated ancient audiences. However, Mao Zedong held a contrasting view of Xiang Yu, branding him as a narrow-minded hero. He believed that Xiang Yu should have returned to Jiangdong, biding his time to launch another attack on Liu Bang [8]. Mao Zedong did not approve of Xiang Yu's pursuit of fame and glory. During the Chinese Civil War, Mao's use of Xiang Yu as a negative example had political intentions aimed at inspiring the People's Liberation Army to continue advancing, cross the Yangtze River, and liberate the whole of China [8]. He aimed to boost the confidence of the Liberation Army, urging them not to emulate Xiang

Yu's act of suicide but rather to return to Jiangdong and rise again to fight and survive. During this period, "Ba Wang" had yet to emerge as a target of scrutiny, as the populace remained engrossed in the tumult of the civil war.

However, during the Cultural Revolution, anti-feudalism in Mao Zedong's nationalism reached its zenith and was distorted and exaggerated by some. As a result, the meaning of "Ba Wang" transformed from a tragic hero into a feudal monster imbued with anti-communism. Rather than representing Xiang Yu, "Ba Wang" was morphed into an emblem of the feudal power and the feudal ruling class, opposed to socialist ideals. This societal class was fiercely targeted during the revolution, leaving no room for survival for individuals like Duan, who frequently performed this societal class on the stage. People unconsciously associated him with "Ba Wang." As a result, he was subjected to harsh interrogation and forced confessions under torture, where he was coerced into admitting to crimes of anti-socialism and anti-communism. Struggling with profound confusion and fear, he found himself grappling with an existential crisis, unsure of his own identity, as the character of "Ba Wang" he had devoted himself to portraying for decades crumbled before him. Under severe physical and mental torture, Duan lost his initial connection with the character he once embodied and identified with, leading to his collapse.

### **2.3 Anxiety before the return of Hong Kong and the increasing identification with Hong Kong**

Before the handover of Hong Kong, Li Bihua subtly portrays people's anxiety and identity uncertainty in her narrative. By referencing the September 26th, 1984 report on the Sino-British Joint Declaration and considering the story's original publication date in June 1985, the study assumes that Li Bihua subtly highlights the complex theme of identity crisis and uncertainty about the future preceding Hong Kong's handover. This sentiment is further elucidated by scholar Tai-Lok Lui, who notes that many in Hong Kong, particularly the working class, felt they had no alternatives—"there is no place to go, and we can only stay" was a common response when asked about their perception of Hong Kong's political future. Despite this resignation, there was a palpable fear of communist-style social and political control [9]. The apprehension about losing freedom mirrors Li Bihua's narrative: "September 26, 1984, Report on the Sino-British Agreement Draft. What concerned the people of Hong Kong most was how much 'freedom' would remain after 1997." Therefore, it can be inferred that Li intends to implicitly convey this anxiety and the uncertainty about the future that under-

pinned their ambivalence regarding the termination of British colonial administration and the return to the motherland.

Duan Xiaolou's escape to Hong Kong during his reform-through-labor in Fujian province underscores his ambivalence towards the notion of nation. Forced into a desperate situation where his life was threatened during his labor reform, he chose to flee to Hong Kong. As the text depicts, it was the nation that rejected him. Ironically, despite promoting and establishing nationalism ideology since the late Qing Dynasty, the outcome of Duan Xiaolou's escape to Hong Kong highlights a decline in the common people's living conditions and a gradual loss of nationalism. This may explain the significant influx of immigrants from mainland China since 1945 [10]. Concurrently, a sense of identification with Hong Kong gradually emerged, driven largely by the colony's increasing prosperity and abundant opportunities for career development [10]. Individuals like Duan Xiaolou, fleeing from mainland China, found solace and freedom in Hong Kong, where they could earn a livelihood. Those with a Hong Kong identity were seen as culturally Chinese without necessarily endorsing the mainland Chinese regime [10].

### 3. Adaptations of the Peking Opera elements in the fictional world

The Peking Opera version recounts the tumultuous tale of Xiang Yu, the King of Chu, who clashed with Liu Bang, the eventual Emperor of Han, in the waning days of the Qin dynasty to seize control of the empire. On the stage, the narrative unfolds with Xiang Yu already reeling from a pivotal defeat, his encampments besieged by adversaries. Amidst this dire situation, his loyal concubine, Yu Ji, offers him solace through wine before captivating him with a mesmerizing sword dance. She implores him to flee with unwavering resolve, ultimately sacrificing herself to ease his escape [11].

Li Bihua's "Farewell to My Concubine" can be viewed as an adaptation of the Peking Opera play, evident in its incorporation of Peking Opera lyrics as chapter titles and the vivid portrayal of Xiang Yu and Yu Ji as the central protagonists. Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, renowned Peking Opera performers, epitomized these roles, with Duan embodying Xiang Yu and Cheng portraying Yu Ji. Through countless renditions of "Farewell to My Concubine," as Cheng Dieyi reminisces, delivered 238 performances, gradually blurring the lines between themselves and their characters until Cheng Dieyi and Yu Ji, Duan Xiaolou and Xiang Yu became indistinguishably intertwined. This blurred distinction between the Peking Opera play and the fictional world renders Cheng Dieyi as Yu Ji

and Duan Xiaolou as Xiang Yu.

In the narrative, the strategic use of Peking Opera lyrics as chapter titles strongly indicates a parallel between the main storyline and the Peking Opera play. The introduction of lyrics in Chapter Three, titled "力拔山兮气盖世 (I could pull mountains down with might)," offers a glimpse into Xiang Yu's grandeur during his prime, mirroring the ascent of Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi in the novel. The chapter opens with their emergence onto the grass stage, the primitive outdoor stage where they honed their craft [12]. Their mastery of the renowned play "Farewell to My Concubine" swiftly elevates them to fame, akin to the youthful Xiang Yu's charismatic leadership during the rebellion in Jiangdong. Chapters Four, "见碧落月色清明 (I see the clear moonlight in the sky)," and Five, "胜负乃兵家常事 (victories and defeats in warfare are commonplace)," offer insights from Yu Ji's perspective. These lyrics primarily symbolize Cheng Dieyi's solitude and desolation due to the interference of Ju Xian. In Peking Opera, as Yu Ji sings these lines, Liu Bang's soldiers encroach, encircling them. The moon's serene glow intensifies Yu Ji's melancholy, yet she reassures Xiang Yu, attributing war's outcomes to destiny and urging him not to dwell excessively. However, her inner turmoil remains palpable. The author suggests that Li Bihua employs Yu Ji's emotional state here to depict Cheng Dieyi's internal struggles. Amidst Juxian's intrusion, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou's relationship fractures, leading Cheng Dieyi to seek solace from Mr. Yuan in despair.

Chapters Seven and Eight, "君王意气尽, 贱妾何聊生 (When the king's spirit is exhausted, what will remain for a concubine to live)," feature some of the most renowned lines in the play. Sung by Yu Ji before her self-sacrifice, they foreshadow the imminent separation between her and Xiang Yu. The author contends that Li Bihua's use of these lines reflects the story's climax, symbolizing the rupture between the protagonists during the Cultural Revolution, both in their divergence from Peking Opera and their relationship. The final chapter, "虞兮虞兮奈若何 (Alas, Yu Ji, what is to become of us)," further underscores the irreversible nature of their bond's dissolution. In these verses, Xiang Yu's despair at his impending demise at Gaixia and his concern for Yu Ji's fate are palpable. Although Cheng Dieyi did not experience a physical death like the character Yu Ji in traditional Peking Opera, on a spiritual level, the Cheng Dieyi of the past has perished, leaving behind a mere "walking corpse" who has chosen survival. He has become a puppet of performance, completing a transformation of his role in the novel's adaptation. Once dedicated to art, the former Cheng Dieyi, after enduring several crackdowns on traditional Peking Opera artistry following the emergence of nationalism,

now serves as a political tool for survival. He holds the title of “artistic director,” but due to physical mutilation from forced labor, having lost a finger, rendering him disabled and unable to perform on stage, he has degenerated into a mere shell. He is also coerced into marrying a wife arranged by the organization. In essence, Cheng Dieyi, in the novel, opts for a form of spiritual self-immolation. He symbolically sacrifices himself for the traditional art of Peking Opera, as he can no longer perform, and for the emergence of another Cheng Dieyi, who serves politics and exists solely for survival.

#### **4. Declining significance of traditional Peking Opera**

In the narrative, Li Bihua employs tragic elements borrowed from the Peking Opera classic „Farewell to My Concubine“ to depict the lamentable decline of Peking Opera since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. The study primarily illustrates the developmental trajectory of traditional Peking Opera, both in history and the narrative, and its relationship with domestic politics, particularly anti-feudalism in public space. Indeed, before the establishment of the People of Republic China, the emergence of nationalism had little impact on traditional Peking Opera. In reality, Peking Opera was affected in its later stages. This statement will be elaborated further in the subsequent analysis. However, following the nation’s establishment, nationalist ideologies starkly contrasted with the ideological framework of ancient feudal dynasties. Traditional Peking Opera, a product of these feudal dynasties, inevitably collided with the new ideological paradigm and consequently declined alongside the feudal era.

During the reign of Emperor Qianlong (A.D. 1751-1795), Peking Opera gradually gained popularity and expanded beyond provincial borders to settle and flourish in Peking [4]. The New Culture Movement of 1915 shattered previous intellectual constraints, leading to significant social liberalization and a notable opening up within the realm of Peking Opera [11]. The emergence of female performers and audiences brought about a fresh impetus for the development of dan (female) roles in Peking Opera performances [13]. During this period, distinct artistic styles began to emerge, with Mei Lanfang being the most prominent figure. In 1922, Mei Lanfang composed the traditional masterpiece “Farewell to My Concubine,” innovating many dances per the conventions of operatic performance, such as the sword dance of 3Yu Ji. Mei Lanfang’s innovations were deeply rooted in tradition and displayed a profound respect for the developmental patterns of Chinese opera [13]. The combination of societal openness towards

cultural arts and his innovative approach grounded in tradition propelled Peking Opera to its pinnacle in the 1920s. However, the aftermath of the Anti-Japanese War marked the onset of Peking Opera’s decline. Following the victory in the war, the Nationalist Party intensified its preparations for the impending civil war. It launched attacks on the liberated areas, exacerbating political oppression and economic exploitation, particularly targeting theatrical people within the Nationalist-controlled territories [13]. This stifled the development of Peking Opera. As vividly portrayed in Li Bihua’s story, during the 1940s theater scene, the Nationalist Party’s soldiers disrupted performances, insulted actors, and even arrested Cheng Dieyi for collaboration due to his performances for the Japanese [14]. The decline of traditional Peking Opera plays during this period was not due to anti-feudalism but rather a result of the harsh policies of the Nationalist Party, which deeply influenced theatrical people. The transition from a feudal to a socialist society, symbolized by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, brought about significant clashes with the values embedded in traditional Peking Opera plays, precipitating its drastic decline. The Cultural Revolution further exacerbated this decline as nationalism focused on anti-feudal sentiments peaked. After the nation’s founding, there was a need for new artistic forms that did not adhere to the content of traditional plays featuring emperors, generals, scholars, and beauties. Instead, there was a demand for content reflecting the new era. In 1949, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China symbolized a complete break from the feudal era. In the narrative, around the 1980s, the Cultural Revolution had subsided. People witness a renewed embrace of traditional cultures. This also signifies the decline of anti-feudalism in public space. As Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi reunite in a Hong Kong theater, the story subtly recounts the staging of the Peking Opera play “Li Huiniang,” previously denounced by Jiang Qing [7] as a “ghostly opera” lacking socialist relevance. In ghost plays, the ghost, portrayed as the protagonist, articulates sentiments that ordinary individuals might hesitate to express openly. This effectively emphasizes that the era of the Cultural Revolution has already passed. However, the landscape had changed dramatically. Cheng Dieyi, now a renowned artistic director at the Beijing Peking Opera Theater, lamented the audience’s and performers’ transformation. As Cheng Dieyi observed, few remained dedicated to the art form; some Peking Opera actors had switched careers to perform era-specific songs in cabarets, while others pursued lucrative opportunities abroad. The vibrant atmosphere of Peking Opera’s heyday had long dissipated. It can be only relegated to artistic appreciation and can no longer reclaim its status as a societal cornerstone.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper posits that Li Bihua's "Farewell to My Concubine" serves as a poignant reflection of the formidable rise of nationalism and the crisis of self-identity against the backdrop of 20th-century China. This study elucidates the characters' responses across pivotal historical periods, from the late Qing Dynasty to the tumultuous Cultural Revolution and the pre-handover anxieties in Hong Kong by elucidating the profound impact of shifting nationalist ideologies on individual identity. This paper delves into how the relationship dynamics between the protagonists, Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, draw upon thematic elements borrowed from the original Peking Opera, providing deeper insights into the fusion of cultural narratives within the storyline. Furthermore, it analyzes the evolution of traditional Peking Opera amidst the rise of anti-feudal sentiments as one of the aspects of nationalism.

This paper contributes to the scholarly discourse's understanding of the intricate interplay between nationalism, self-identity, and cultural heritage within the complex context of 20th-century China. Scrutinizing character reactions in Li Bihua's narrative and tracing the development of traditional Peking Opera in relation to anti-feudalism sentiments offers valuable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of cultural and historical transformation. Nevertheless, acknowledging the significance of anti-feudalism in shaping Peking Opera's trajectory, it is imperative to recognize that additional factors may contribute to its fluctuations, necessitating further exploration.

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