



# Historical Memories in Chen Kaige's Films and their Cultural Reflections

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## Abstract

*Chen Kaige is a leading figure of the Fifth Generation and one of the country's most internationally influential directors. The uniqueness of his films lies in their allegorical expression of national concerns, using specific historical or contemporary settings for personal lyricism. While his films vary in theme and style, they consistently reflect on national spirit and cultural traditions, explore life and fate of the people, question trust and betrayal, and showcase a distinctive artistic perspective and profound humanistic thinking. His works have deepened the artistic exploration of Chinese cinema. The cultural and philosophical depth embodied in his films has not only elevated the quality of Chinese cinema but also promoted dialogue and exchange between Chinese cinema and the world.*

**Keywords:** *Chen Kaige; The Era; Legend; Cultural Reflection*

## INTRODUCTION

Chen Kaige, a leading figure among China's Fifth Generation of filmmakers, exemplifies the "intellectual director" archetype. (Liu, 2016) His humanistic spirit is manifested in both the content and form of his cinematic works. Content-wise, his films employ allegorical historical narratives. Through legendary storytelling, he indirectly expresses reflections and critiques of history. In terms of form, his works extensively utilize avant-garde cinematic language, imbuing the films with a sense of modernity. He possesses a profound understanding of China's unique traditional ideologies and cultural symbols, consistently integrating them as key elements in his cinematic expression. His aim is to "cultivate thoughts from the wounds that can invigorate the entire national spirit." (Chen, 1985) His films are characterized by deliberate cultural introspection, as he explores the historical origins of the issues he addresses. His work demonstrates a profound sense of historical responsibility and an unwavering commitment to cinematic excellence. Chen Kaige constructs his personal expression of Chinese history and social reality through cultural introspection. He employs abstract narratives and symbolic characters to engage in profound humanistic reflections on history and culture. This approach is intellectually elite, often challenging for the general audience to fully grasp, which perhaps defines the unique path of his cinematic expression.

## IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS AND RECOGNITION

From his debut film "Yellow Earth" (1984) to his recent work "Legend of the Demon Cat" (2017), Chen Kaige consistently showcases his deep insights into Chinese history and culture. He skillfully uses "era" as a significant element in constructing his film narratives, often intensifying situations to achieve a lyrical effect. Even in extreme situations such as war, heavoids direct reference to historical events, he

transforms them into dramatic scenarios instead. The sense of absurdity highlighted beneath exaggerated plotlines serves as a manifestation of historical trauma's residual effects. The introduction of "era" as a narrative element enables the emergence of diverse historical perspectives. Chen Kaige's Palme d'Or-winning film "Farewell My Concubine" (1993), co-written with screenwriter Lu Wei (芦苇), was adapted from Lilian Lee (李碧华)'s novel. The most valuable aspect of this adaptation was the incorporation of reflections on identity issues. The original novel presents a clear-cut tragic love story between two homosexual men. The main characters - Cheng Dieyi, Duan Xiaolou, Juxian, and Master Yuan - form a cohesive tragic ensemble. The fundamental cause of their tragedy lies in the erosion of their inner selves, resulting from the cultural rupture caused by war and revolution. The collision of two eras is akin to the compression of tectonic plates during an earthquake. In this massive cultural conflict, individuals find no refuge, causing even ordinary emotions to become distorted and untenable. The film explores the universal theme that people of all identities are unable to escape the tragic fate shaped by their times.

The film revolves around the joys and sorrows of two renowned opera performers over half a century, presenting a profound reflection on traditional Chinese culture and achieving a fusion of historical depth and contemporary critique. Cheng Dieyi, as the film's archetypal character, struggles and loses his way amid changing historical eras. The film interprets his unwavering devotion as a manifestation of anxiety about and obsession with identity. This is not merely a matter of gender identity confusion, but rather a reflection of his inability to reconcile with his own identity. The love triangle subplot serves primarily to highlight his inner turmoil. The intense warfare and political movements create a legendary impression for the audience, echoing the exaggerated imagination people have about the lives of Peking

Opera artists. Several scenes of on-stage performances, presented as plays within the play, allow the dazzling "life as theater" theme to transcend reality, further highlighting and exposing the cruel undercurrent of Cheng Dieyi's life. After experiencing all manner of extreme physical and spiritual traumas and betrayals, what ultimately triggers Cheng Dieyi's breakdown is the gender-swapped scene reenactment at the film's conclusion. This reminds him that his ideal world has long since shattered, and that the stage is not a true refuge. This also conveys to the audience that Cheng Dieyi finally realizes the distinction between theater and life, discovering the reality that he has never found his true identity in real life. When interpreting this film, it's unnecessary to overly fixate on the specific symbolism of roles and character relationships, nor is it essential to establish a one-to-one correspondence between historical events and emotional turning points on a historical timeline. Some critics argue that the historical scenes in "Farewell My Concubine" (1993) are merely "empty signifiers". (Dai, 2004)

Compared to "Farewell My Concubine" (1993), Chen Kaige's exploration of the artist's identity in "Forever Enthralled" (2008) goes a step further. Although both Mei Lanfang and Cheng Dieyi are performers who play female roles in Peking Opera, their social statuses are vastly different. Cheng Dieyi is an ordinary "actor", while Mei Lanfang is a master of Peking Opera, an artist with special historical significance. This difference determines the distinct creative perspective in "Forever Enthralled." Cheng Dieyi's metaphysical pain and the dialectic of beauty are realized in "Forever Enthralled" (2008) as the "paper shackles", representing the irreconcilable conflict between externally imposed identity demands and the pursuit of personal happiness. The film seems to lack genuine interpersonal conflict; Qiu Rubai, who shadows Mei Lanfang, is merely a mirror image, symbolizing the "mad obsession" with opera that Mei Lanfang wishes to avoid. Mei Lanfang's actions are primarily for others, not because he is selfless, but because the responsibilities he bears force him to abandon his own desires. However, from giving up Meng Xiaodong to refusing to perform for the Japanese, and even during his trip to the United States, he is never far from Qiu Rubai. The affection Qiu has for Mei in "Forever Enthralled" (2008) bears similarities to the emotional relationship between Cheng and Duan in "Farewell My Concubine" (1993). However, Qiu's love for Mei does not involve any homoerotic elements. What Qiu is infatuated with is "elevating the female image portrayed by Mei Lanfang to an artistic realm". (Zhou, 2011) Qiu Rubai is an idealist coming back from overseas. He merely hopes to realize his own ideals through Mei Lanfang. The film's final shot focuses on Qiu Rubai's face in the audience, which can be interpreted as symbolizing him as the embodiment of the spectator. For Mei Lanfang, his identity as an undeniably talented artist meant that art became a life he could not choose to abandon. This also led to the loss of much of his personal identity behind his success.

Comparing "Farewell My Concubine" (1993) and "Forever

Enthralled" (2008), we can see that the former emphasizes the "historical drama" aspect while the latter downplays it. However, this difference does not affect the expression of their themes. Although "Forever Enthralled" is a sentimental story, it fails to achieve the depth of a tragedy. The film's critical focus also deviates somewhat. It portrays Mei Lanfang's choice of art as driven by life's necessities rather than conscious decision. Perhaps out of love for art itself, Chen Kaige chose famous artists with dramatic life trajectories as prototypes in his films. He blends the aesthetic of their personal lives with the beauty of the stage, shaping his vision of "beauty". The cruelty of the era serves as a stark contrast, highlighting the preciousness and fragility of this "beauty"<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, audiences should not focus their emotional attention on the protagonists' unfortunate experiences. Instead, they should observe the characters' social circumstances and the class issues that arise from these, as well as appreciate the beauty of sacrifice that the film celebrates.

### SEEKING NEW PATHS FORWARD

If stories like "Farewell My Concubine" (1993) and "Forever Enthralled" (2008), set against the backdrop of grand historical eras, can be seen as Chen Kaige's parody or transcendence of the melodramatic plots of the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" school,<sup>2</sup> then allegorical stories without specific historical settings can be viewed as experiments exploring the extremes of human emotions and nature. In his series of allegorical films, Chen Kaige conducts a more profound analysis of ethnic issues. The themes are no longer about exploring beauty, legend, and possibilities, but rather focus on specific material and spiritual conflicts, using these to analyze the causes of historical national calamities. Through the disillusionment and enlightenment of the protagonists in his films, Chen reveals possible paths to salvation, yet still refrains from directly representing or judging historical events.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a wave of nostalgia for old Shanghai emerged, signifying the social trends of that time. The impact of globalization and the commodity economy brought about spiritual shocks, leading people to "seek a basis for imagining future China from the experiences of old Shanghai." (Ding, 2018) The film "Temptress Moon" (1996) was timely. Based on Ye Zhaoyan's novel "Flower Shadow", Chen Kaige collaborated with cinematographer Christopher Doyle (杜可风) to find an emotional expression for this rational theme. They aimed to reveal the so-called objective laws of history while also allowing the audience to empathize. However, the film encountered commercial failure because "the original work was adapted into a script with Su Tong-style (苏童式) decadent allure and fin-de-siècle style". (Liu, 2009)

"Temptress Moon" (1996) exemplifies Chen Kaige's cultural strategy of deliberately fusing Eastern imagery with Western discourse. It reflects the inevitable madness of an extreme era and sensitive individuals within it. The film's narrative strategy of using an emotional story to metaphorically represent revolutionary history gives it a grand scale. In

childhood, Ruyi and Zhongliang have no class boundaries. Ruyi dreams of escaping, firmly believing in an ideal utopia, while Zhongliang falls from grace from the very beginning, continuously descending into a bottomless abyss. His form of resistance is self-destruction through involvement in the "Chaibaidang" (opium-smoking gang).<sup>3</sup> This plot element perhaps suggests that in radical times, there is no room for innocence and tenderness to exist. In the end, Ruyi is devoured by the era due to her naive ignorance, while Zhongliang is consumed by darkness. Shanghai, as a cultural symbol, perhaps represents the post-revolutionary contemporary society, metaphorically suggesting that this is an era of madness and spiritual degradation.

The film implies the protagonist's indulgence in the past, where this behavior, as a form of Utopian fantasy, becomes paradoxically two sides of the same coin with hell. This lamentation for irrational ideals forms the lyrical foundation of the work. The film depicts both the tragic destruction of civilization and contemplates the path to reconstruction. The purpose of this reflection is to find solutions. On the surface, the plot centers on the romantic entanglement between Yu Zhongliang and Ru Yi, with Duan Wu being used by Ru Yi as a third party. However, after Ru Yi obtains Zhongliang's "love", the plot takes a sharp turn. Tracing back from the climax to the plot's logic, Yu Zhongliang's downfall is explained in the film as purely accidental. This plot arrangement leaves no room to express the process of the characters' psychological changes, and thus fails to resonate with the audience.

"Together" (2002), directed by and co-starring Chen Kaige, is an excellent work reflecting contemporary social issues, demonstrating his efforts to reconcile ideals with reality. In this film, the realization of ideals is still linked to class ascension. The protagonist's final abandonment is not a questioning of the ideal itself, but rather a shift towards examining the specific means of achieving that ideal. He chose a path that was not the easiest but closer to realizing his inner ideals, while also taking on family responsibilities. The film's theme is a celebration of genuine emotions and a rejection of hypocrisy, expressing criticism of contemporary society's prioritization of profit over righteousness. This film maintains a light tone, authentically portraying the emotional confusion of people in modern urban settings, while offering solutions. The addition of Lili's character brings comedic elements to the film, enriching its content to a certain extent. Before meeting Xiaochun, Lili was infatuated with the sweet talk of a boyfriend who was lack of genuine love for her. Xiaochun's appearance made her feel a warmth rarely found in the city. Xiaochun's pure affection awakens her to the shallowness of her previous relationship, prompting her to break up with her boyfriend. The film's visual language further visualized this theme. Lili watches her boyfriend enter the hutong through binoculars from the window. The urban landscape in the binoculars is not of high-rise buildings, but of streets, hutongs, and interconnected gray-tiled roofs. The world seen through the binoculars is more beautiful than the spacious but cold Western-style apartment

of the real world where she lives. In this film, "Chen Kaige no longer adheres to solemnity, but instead bends down to converse with the genius boy living in cramped quarters, and befriends the common people wearing tattered caps. A warm violin melody demonstrates his rare tenderness, also signaling Chen Kaige's compromise in returning to the collective."(Zhang, 2006)

### CONNOTATION OF THE LEGENDARY

Chen Kaige's attitude towards history is complex. He believes that a healthy society needs people with a sense of responsibility. Through his films, he continuously raises challenges to social issues and proposes methods for improvement, persistently advocating for the cultural and ideological values he deems worthwhile. Different personal experiences lead to distinct levels of thought and understanding. Chen Kaige's experience of being sent down to the countryside provided him with physical and mental tempering, while his sense of crisis also brought about an impulse for enlightenment. This unique enlightenment was realized in the form of "modernization of film language."(Hao & Li, 2007) From "Yellow Earth" (1984) and "Monk Comes Down the Mountain" (2015), we can see his conscious cultural choices and deep reflections on the national spirit.

"Yellow Earth" (1984) is Chen Kaige's groundbreaking work, considered a representative film of the Fifth Generation directors and a film that received international attention. In "Yellow Earth" (1984), Zhang Yimou served as the cinematographer, and the rough, somber visual tone established the film's emotional foundation. Both the cinematography and music are particularly outstanding. While the music doesn't function to construct an illusion or mark themes, it directly expresses the characters' inner emotions. The song "Daughter's Song", with lyrics written by Chen Kaige himself, is deeply moving. The information conveyed by signifying symbols is transmitted through both artistic content and artistic form, and is expressed through the coordinated presentation of various aspects of the image. (Jameson, 1997)The film also emphasizes the barrenness of the yellow earth, showcasing peculiar details such as dishes made from wooden fish and circles drawn as substitutes for characters, shocking the audience with the extreme poverty of people's lives at that time.

The film tells the story of Gu Qing, a cultural worker from the Eighth Route Army, who travels to northern Shaanxi to collect folk songs. He hopes to find "the true essence of art" through personal experience and labor, creating folk songs to boost the army's morale. Gu Qing's arrival influences Cuiqiao, a young girl living in a rural village in northern Shaanxi. In pursuit of freedom and happiness, she wants to escape her arranged marriage. Because Gu Qing adheres strictly to rules, he doesn't help rescue Cuiqiao from arranged marriage. Cuiqiao attempts to escape by boat at night, but is swallowed by the Yellow River, becoming a martyr in pursuit of enlightenment. The film ends with a sense of helplessness and a lament over the unchangeable



situation. This film embodies "Chen Kaige's strong sense of historical responsibility and humanistic consciousness".<sup>4</sup> He stated, "We need a more objective perspective, a more open-minded attitude, and serious courage to face our creative work, because before us lies a layer of historical and cultural accumulation." (Chen, 1992) The cultural perspective of "Yellow Earth" encompasses not only humanistic themes but also an interpretation of the contradictions between life's ideals and reality.

In the late 1990s, China's socio-cultural market quietly changed. "Temptress Moon" (1996) and "Together" (2002) encountered dual failures in both market and media reception. On one hand, Chen Kaige found it difficult to let go of his attachment to reflecting on Chinese culture; on the other hand, influenced by Hollywood, he incorporated Western discourse into his films. Due to his excessive focus on "self-transcendence" while neglecting the aesthetic mechanism of "resonance", and considering market and box office performance, he had to sacrifice the pursuit of artistic independence and cultural reflection. He struggled amid various constraints and resistances, attempting to seek a new way of expression. As a result, he filmed "Monk Comes Down the Mountain" (2015), a work of sincere effort.

"Monk Comes Down the Mountain" (2015) is adapted from Xu Haofeng's (徐浩峰) novel of the same name. Chen Kaige uses his unique artistic techniques and narrative perspective to tell a story about pursuit and enlightenment, interpreting the love, hate, and grudges in the human world and the ultimate meaning of life. The film begins by providing the audience with the realistic environment in which the story takes place: "Due to a food shortage, the old Taoist master is forced to send his disciples who can support themselves down the mountain to make a living through martial arts competitions." (Wang, 2015) The climax of the plot is when Boss Zha seeks revenge for his friend Zhou Xiyu and engages in a decisive battle with Peng Qianwu. Peng Qianwu doesn't abide by the agreed-upon rules of the duel and launches a sneak attack, causing Boss Zha to be injured. Subsequently, Peng Qianwu loses his life while trying to save his son, Peng Qizi. From the climax of the film, we can see that Chen Kaige is eager to have the antagonists pay the price for their deception and make deathbed confessions, in order to complete the moral and ethical expression of the work. As the negative image of Peng Qianwu as a "father" figure disintegrates, Boss Zha's image as a good teacher is established. Boss Zha becomes He An's truly qualified master and "brother", thus achieving an ideal master-disciple/father-brother relationship. The father-son relationship, or more broadly, internal family tensions, is also a common plot element in Chen Kaige's films, used to express reflections on culture. This effort to rebuild and restore traditional order is also an inherent meaning in Xu Haofeng's original novel.

"Monk Comes Down the Mountain" (2015) simultaneously deconstructs and constructs, using the exemplary master-disciple relationship between Boss Zha and He An as a positive

portrayal of a father-son dynamic. This is certainly because "commercial genre films themselves do not challenge the patriarchal system",<sup>5</sup> and due to the narrative conventions of martial arts films regarding apprenticeship. At the same time, it also reflects that Chen Kaige's creative mindset of cultural criticism has gradually become more moderate. The film connects He Anxia and Zhou Xiyu through violent scenes of a sinking ship and the fight between Zhou Xiyu and Peng Qianwu above a furnace. Although the detached Boss Zha helps He Anxia find his true self and willingly become his disciple, He Anxia ultimately becomes Zhou Xiyu's shadow and substitute, living in the past of Boss Zha and Zhou Xiyu. This plot setup causes the film to fall into a certain nostalgic tendency, making "the film itself emotional, losing historical depth." (Jameson, 1997) Therefore, as soon as "Monk Comes Down the Mountain" (2015) was released, it was met with polarized reviews from audiences. On one side, there was high praise for the film's life philosophy, while on the other side, there was criticism of its excessive commercialization. This reflects the dilemma in the Chinese film market of balancing artistic merit with commercial success.

### GENRE HYBRIDIZATION AND THEMATIC PRESENTATION

Although Chen Kaige continues to maintain his inherent humanistic sentiments and spirit of exploratory thinking, he no longer dwells on telling audiences historical truths. Instead, he inspires viewers to reflect through retelling legends. His film "Sacrifice" (2010) aims to reflect on traditional culture from the perspective of contemporary society, but fails to find an appropriate starting point, resulting in numerous thematic contradictions. The film completely abandons the historical background of the aristocratic society and attempts to replace it with a very modern theme of ordinary people opposing power. However, it neither contemplates the nature of power nor acknowledges the strength of familial bonds as a counterforce. The ambiguity in its intended meaning leads to multiple issues in narrative structure and character psychology. The film belongs to the ethical drama genre, with martial arts action added to enhance its commercial appeal. However, the violence represented by martial arts in the film falls into the category of what is being criticized, which clearly does not meet the requirements of the "Wuxia (martial arts)" genre.

The film is an adaptation of the classic opera "The Orphan of Zhao" in the Yuan Dynasty, with its core focusing on resolving the rationality of Cheng Ying sacrificing his own son to save the Zhao's orphan. In the original opera, this righteous act is rooted in the "loyalty and righteousness" of scholarly elite culture. Cheng Ying is a retainer of the Zhao family, and his act of killing his own son to save the Zhao's orphan is both an act of loyalty to his master and a covert protection of the unjustly persecuted Zhao family. The Zhao orphan's revenge, in turn, represents the upholding of justice. To increase martial arts elements, the film portrays historical civil officials as highly skilled military generals, who personally

train the Zhao orphan to become a warrior. However, the excessive pursuit of commercial appeal has, to some extent, affected the film's form. Some critics point out that Chen Kaige's film adaptation of the play exhibits a confusion of values and a mixture of forms. (Chen, 2011) His rationality seems to have, to a certain extent, limited the film's free-flow and imagination, leading to contradictions in the expression of its themes.

On the surface, the film's theme appears to be resistance against extreme power politics and violence. However, as a palace story, power politics should be indispensable; as a martial arts genre film, violence has an inherent legitimacy, and even embodies certain moral and value systems. In summary, the film attempts to retell a legendary story from a predetermined commoner's perspective, but abandons the heroic values of "loyalty and righteousness". As a result, what remains is a tragedy about the indigestible trauma of losing family, coupled with an empty critique of violence. The film implies that behind this violence lies the power brought by identity and status. The revenge of the Zhao orphan and Cheng Ying can only rely on solidarity among the lower classes, but the Pyrrhic victory at the end shows that the creators do not believe that "love" can overcome a fate determined by power.

The film "Sacrifice" (2010) deconstructs revenge, while "Legend of the Demon Cat" (2017) is an alternative revenge story that blends mystery and fantasy genres, balancing artistic and commercial elements. It achieved both good box office returns and critical acclaim. This time, the metaphor for the concept of "era" is the ancient Tang Dynasty. The fantasy in the film is not based on hypothetical settings, but rather inherits the open attitude of classical Chinese literature towards irrational phenomena, rationalizing them. In "The Peony Pavilion", people can die and be reborn, which reflects an affirmation of the transcendental nature of human spirit. "Love's origin is unknown, but once it starts, it runs deep. The living can die, and the dead can live again."<sup>6</sup>This praise from Tang Xianzu is very fitting to describe the young Dan Long in "Legend of the Demon Cat".

The film maintains an open-ended conclusion regarding life and death. At the end of the film, Dan Long claims he has been away from human form for a long time and is unwilling to return to it. This is because when he appears, he is in the most beautiful form of a graceful young man, wearing a white crane costume and mimicking flight at the banquet. He is unwilling to return to that youthful skin as an old man. The author believes that this ending effectively embodies the film's theme of "mourning for the past" (伤逝). The idea that love can move mountains (情之所至, 金石为开) represents a kind of nostalgic pursuit of beauty. On one hand, Dan Long's story is a rewriting of Yang Yuhuan's "Song of Everlasting Sorrow", highlighting the cruelty of history. On the other hand, it also inherits the literary narrative of "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow",<sup>7</sup> where "sorrow" embodies the aesthetics of regret. In short, the film employs a meta-narrative structural pattern, attempting to interpret the

understanding of both the specific work "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" and filmmaking as a form of "illusory art". The film is not purely deconstructive, but it also constructs a new story, implying the redemptive power of art or beauty itself. Dan Long's "youthful spirit", however, is fueled by anger and injustice, driving him to violent attempts to alter history and human emotions. Monk Kukai's final realization of the dialectic between good and evil serves as a powerful metaphor for historical reflection.

Kukai's role is crucial in expanding the film's themes. As a monk, he lacks worldly "obstacles" and uses his physical body to directly perceive cosmic truths. Without fear or disgust, he willingly lies in a stone coffin, ultimately discovering the truth about Yang Yuhuan being buried alive. His purpose in coming to China is to seek the true path to liberation. In the end, the audience discovers that the high monk he visits is the former court illusionist. The parallel setup of the two illusionists is the film's hidden theme. Through fantastical elements, the film celebrates positive forces like truth, goodness, and beauty. Its realistic narrative style meets commercial film requirements, and through multiple themes, it balances audience appeal with self-expression. "This allows the film to reach a remarkable aesthetic height, becoming a milestone in Chinese fantasy cinema." (Zhao, 2015)

### CONCLUSION

Chen Kaige's films "Farewell My Concubine" (1993) and "Temptress Moon" (1996) echo human choices with historical turning points, aiming to extract and publicly judge behaviors that pursue personal interests under the guise of historical circumstances. "Together" (2002) uses a modern theme to examine the conflict between desire and ideals in contemporary society, pursuing genuine emotions free from deception and oppression. The classic artist story "Forever Enthralled" (2008) contemplates the possibility of a utopia that transcends reality. "Yellow Earth" (1984), "Sacrifice" (2010), "Monk Comes Down the Mountain" (2015), and "Legend of the Demon Cat" (2017) contain profound historical reflections and humanistic concerns. These narrative approaches in Chen Kaige's culturally reflective films are concrete manifestations of the humanistic nature of his cinematic works. His legendary narrative, characterized by elements of the era and the creation of illusory realms, inspires filmmakers to engage in reflections on history and reality through diverse modes of expression, thereby highlighting the unique lyrical aesthetics of Chinese cinema. As the most representative humanist director of the Fifth Generation, his very first work gained international acclaim. In his films, emotive language carries highly rational thoughts and critiques, and he has always been seeking a balance between self-emotional expression and audience reception. Chen Kaige's narrative methods for self-emotional expression and visual presentation in his films, especially the frequent use of imagery with distinctive Eastern characteristics, are not merely about storytelling. Rather, they express profound reflections on culture and history. This approach of using film to write about culture

can be seen as a concentrated manifestation of the aesthetic value and cultural spirit inherent in his cinematic works.

### NOTES

1. DaiJinhua, Nie Weiang others have pointed out that there is a corresponding relationship between stage and life in the narrative structure of "Farewell My Concubine."
2. "Generally speaking, the love affirmed by the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School group is either steadfast in chaos, anecdotes of virtuous women remaining faithful to the end; or stories of joining the revolution and finding true love through shared ideals." See Hu Anding's article "Revolution in 'Unofficial History': Alternative Revolutionary Writing of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School," *Literary Review*, Issue 3, 2018, pp. 154-161.
3. "Chai Bai Dang" (literally "Tearing White Party"), Shanghai slang from the 1920s to 1940s, referring to a group of young people in Shanghai who formed gangs and cheated for money and sex through deception and freeloading.
4. From Chen Kaige's personal experience, he described his tense relationship with his father during the Cultural Revolution. "In that era, I longed to prove my loyalty to everything that was being implemented at the time. I wanted to protect myself, and to protect myself by hurting my father. It was through the 'Cultural Revolution' that I came to know myself, and by knowing myself, I came to know that world. I got the strongest impression. After the perfect childhood was shattered, what shocked me most was the inhuman things. My inferiority complex was elevated in the form of unprecedented high self-esteem." See *Li Erwei: Face to Face with Chen Kaige*, Economic Daily Press, 2002, p. 45.
5. "Feature films are both escapist and positive. On the one hand, they oppose the social landscape and insist on realizing personal happiness... On the other hand, the rules of patriarchal society are mythologized as a kind of destiny..." See Werner Faulstich's book *Basic Course in Film Analysis*, translated by Tang Yuanyuan, World Book Publishing Company, 2016, p. 26.
6. "The Peony Pavilion" is a fictional romance created by Tang Xianzu, a playwright of the Ming Dynasty. It was performed in the 45th year of the Wanli era of the Ming Dynasty (1617). The play marks the peak of the development of Ming Dynasty romance and has milestone significance in the history of Chinese dramatic literature development.
7. "Song of Everlasting Regret" is a long narrative poem by Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi. The whole poem can be divided

into three major parts, praising the undying love between Tang Xuanzong and Yang Guifei, as well as their tragic love story. The poem has high artistic value and has had a far-reaching influence.

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