

Gender Alienation: A Comparative Analysis of Language Between Cheng Dieyi and Conventional Genders

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ABSTRACT

"Farewell My Concubine" is a full-length novel written by Lilian Lee. Set in Beijing from the 1920s to the 1980s, the story centres on a narrative of the Peking Opera circle in the Republic of China era, revolving around three core characters: Cheng Dieyi, Duan Xiaolou and Ju Xian. It explores the themes of betrayal, idealism and complex emotional attachment. Unlike conventional male protagonists in traditional novels, Cheng Dieyi's unique upbringing shapes his self-perception, which deviates from normative gender identities of men and women. Such deviation renders his behaviours, language and thinking patterns distinct from those of ordinary people. Taking linguistic differences as its core focus, this paper explores the subtle disparities between Cheng Dieyi's language shaped by his "misassigned physical gender" and that of normative males and females, and analyses the underlying causes, so as to enrich the research and interpretation of this character.

Keywords: Linguistics; *"Farewell My Concubine"*; Cheng Dieyi; Gender Alienation.

1. LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHENG DIEYI AND NORMATIVE MALE AND FEMALE LANGUAGE PATTERNS

There are generally prominent distinctions between male and female language in expression and pragmatic use due to social influences, personality traits, thinking patterns and other factors. Males tend to dispute or ignore others' utterances, whereas females are more inclined to acknowledge conversational content and further develop the topic^[1]. Accordingly, Cheng Dieyi's ambiguous gender cognition shapes his unique linguistic conventions that differ greatly from those of conventional males and females. His speech features neither the imperative decisiveness of men nor the mild and implicit manner of women. Instead, it carries absolutist implications while possessing the melodic intonation and emotional richness typical of female discourse. As illustrated in his classic line: "A lifetime is a lifetime. Not one year, one month, one day, or even one moment less will count as a lifetime"^[2]. Though presented as Cheng Dieyi's internal monologue in the novel, this remark reveals his lifelong dramatic emotional obsession and his persistent attitude toward life.

Phonetics and Intonation. As a renowned Peking Opera performer, Cheng Dieyi received long-term targeted vocal training for opera singing. On the basis of his inherent male vocal timbre, he internalized the cadenced and undulating opera tune, and his daily speech is marked by prolonged vowels and circuitous intonation patterns. Meanwhile, *xiaosang* (falsetto for male *dan*) serves as another crucial factor exerting a profound influence on his vocal range. Yang Lixin, the voice actor of Cheng Dieyi in the film *Farewell My Concubine*, once stated: "Male *dan* performers usually sing with falsetto... once they stop using falsetto, their natural voice sounds rather husky." As a conventional artistic technique adopted by male *dan* roles in Peking Opera, falsetto enables them to reach a much higher vocal range than their chest voice^[3]. By elevating the laryngeal position and constricting the throat, the voice becomes delicate, ethereal, soft and high-pitched, achieving an imitation of the female vocal tone. Conventional male speech is high-pitched and bright, while female speech tends to be gentle and natural. By contrast, Cheng Dieyi's voice is depicted as "sharp and tender, lingering and melancholy, plaintive and blurred. Like an embroidered needle threaded with floss, pulling upward endlessly all the way to the remotest firmament." It is also portrayed that "Dieyi spoke in a low voice... his tone husky, tinged with the acrid astringency of opium smoke, yet still retaining a soft mellow quality." His voice integrates delicacy, mellowness, huskiness, brightness and resonance. Such slender, soft and lingering vocal timbre earned him great renown in the opera circle. Furthermore, his inherent temperament of melancholy, lingering sorrow and confusion constitutes one of the essential reasons why he is inherently identified with the role of Yu Ji.

Lexicon and Syntax. In daily communication, driven by the pragmatic purpose of information transmission, both men and women tend to use plain colloquial language. Males adopt direct and casual expressions, while females employ implicit and folksy tones, yet both take daily language merely as a tool for exchanging practical information. As an obsessive opera enthusiast, however, Cheng Dieyi's diction is inclined to opera-style wording and classical literary expression. His sorrow-laden utterances imbued with the elegant charm of the opera circle distinctly set him apart from ordinary people. He frequently utters expressions rarely used in daily life, such as karmic fate, parting, worldly ups and downs, and wandering vicissitudes. These terms are frequently adopted in specific dramatic contexts but seldom appear in daily conversation, which serves as evidence of Cheng Dieyi's aloof temperament and inner nobility. Different from daily discourse, opera lyrics prioritize fluency and progressive rhythm, featuring complete sentences, lengthy structures, neatly balanced antithetical paragraphs and a highly formal, literary syntactic style. A typical example lies in his classic line amid distorted gender cognition: "I was born a delicate maiden, not a male lad." The aesthetician Zhu Guangqian remarked: "Mere uniformity, like the swing of a pendulum, inevitably results in monotony; Mere variation, like the hubbub of a marketplace, also ends in monotony" [4]. Hence, Cheng Dieyi's expressions are completely detached from mundane daily discourse. Immersed in the dramatic world, he also confines himself to the expressive norms of opera. Unlike ordinary people who possess rough worldly boldness or trivial civic triviality, his speech habits fully reflect his heterogeneity and particularity against the social mainstream.

From the perspective of pragmatic logic, communication generally conforms to Grice's Cooperative Principle, which consists of four maxims: quantity, quality, relevance and manner. In ordinary interpersonal interactions, people tend to respond compatibly with the Cooperative Principle based on the informational connotation of others' preceding utterances. By contrast, Cheng Dieyi constantly violates such conversational norms. When Duan Xiaolou talks about daily life, Cheng Dieyi responds with operatic themes; when Duan Xiaolou refers to social reality, he replies with theatrical plots. His utterances are highly theatrical and obscure, tinged with utopian sentiments, and he invariably responds to real-life affairs with opera lines. For instance, his remark "If the Overlord kneels, what point is there for the Concubine Yu to live?" adopts obscure and literary expressions that hinder the audience's rapid comprehension of intended meaning. Such redundant and obsessive discourses breach both the maxim of perspicuity and the maxim of succinctness. While the outside world is engulfed in revolutionary upheavals, Cheng Dieyi dwells on the aesthetics of stage ornaments and seeks to retrieve the sword promised in his childhood. He isolates himself from the secular world and evades real-world conflicts in seclusion. Such violations against conversational manner precisely manifest his rejection of reality, ambiguity in gender identity and linguistic expression, as well as his persistent adherence to self-identity, opera art and traditional conventions.

Another prominent linguistic feature lies in the absolutism and extremism embedded in his discourse, which is frequently laden with emotionally intense words and categorical expressions such as "a lifetime" and "remain faithful till death". In his cognitive system, the theatrical stage equals real life, opera lyrics embody genuine sentiments, and stage roles constitute his true self. His inability to distinguish between theatrical contexts and real-life circumstances becomes the root cause of his inner torment. He once insisted to Duan Xiaolou that they perform operas together for an entire lifetime, claiming "You are my Overlord, and you shall sing operas with me for all eternity". He even grooms and adorns Duan Xiaolou just as a spouse would, aspiring to become the genuine Concubine Yu belonging exclusively to the Overlord. Hence, when he hears Ju Xian declare herself Duan Xiaolou's legitimate wife, he suffers severe emotional trauma, which further drives him to expose and confront Ju Xian.

2. THE CAUSES OF CHENG DIEYI'S GENDER ALIENATION

Cheng Dieyi was brought up by his mother. The original text does not mention why he grew up without his father's company. It only records that his mother Yanhong was a brothel woman. Having reached a dead end, she had no choice but to sell herself to make a living: "If there had been even a slightest way out, Yanhong would never have become a prostitute; she sold herself in order to raise her child." Growing up in the low-class living environment from an early age, Cheng Dieyi was exposed to all kinds of people. In the film, young Xiaodouzi kept a little girl's hairstyle, "his face looked like an unsolved riddle, with his neck covered tightly by a scarf. The neck cover was brand new, and so were his neat clothes." It can be seen from these details that his mother Yanhong raised him as a girl all the time, dressing him in neat and beautiful clothes and hiding his sixth finger. In such a mixed and complicated social environment, this was the only way for a lonely single mother at the bottom to protect herself and keep her young child safe. Bearing the pain of parting with her son, she sent the young Xiaodouzi to Master Guan to learn Peking Opera. Though opera was still regarded as an inferior occupation by the upper class, it was the best way out for a boy who could not be kept in the brothel. Having spent his childhood staying among women and being raised like a little girl, he gradually developed many feminine dispositions from an early age, which foreshadowed his personality and behavioral characteristics in later life.

Since studying opera under Master Guan, Cheng Dieyi was regarded as a natural candidate for the Dan role. At their first meeting, “his mother quickly took off his neck cover, revealing a delicate and thin little face with exquisite facial features. Master Guan could not conceal his joy and praised: ‘Truly exceptional, what a fine look!’” His “a pair of delicate and beautiful eyes” also highlighted his extraordinary appearance. The text contains many descriptions of his looks, and his feminine and exquisite appearance made him easily cultivated as a female role performer. The vocal production of Peking Opera Dan role emphasizes a bright timbre^[5]. Endowed with an outstanding voice, Dieyi was assigned to the Dan role after role division. He once resisted inwardly; his repeated mistakes in singing the opera lines reflected that little Xiaodouzi originally identified himself as a boy. However, Master Guan’s violent discipline and Xiaolaizi’s death made him realize that failing to become a famous opera performer would lead nowhere but death. Since then, he broke away from the conventional binary gender definition, indulged himself in opera art, and embarked on the road of being an opera fan. The text also mentions that during the student movements and the later political struggle period, he was criticized as “effeminate, neither male nor female, one of the ghosts and monsters!” Such external disapproval, together with inner loneliness and spiritual loss, made it difficult for him to gain a sense of social belonging. The label of being an outcast, his soft and delicate appearance, the artistic influence of Peking Opera, and his special sexual orientation all prevented him from establishing stable self-identity amid the changing times. Homosexuality in China was basically decriminalized in 1997 and de-pathologized in 2001, yet social prejudice has always been widespread^[6], let alone in the mid-20th century when Cheng Dieyi lived. Unable to be understood and recognized by the public, he sank deeper and deeper into his own spiritual world out of immense loneliness.

The influence of Duan Xiaolou, namely Xiaoshitou, is also an important cause of Cheng Dieyi’s gender alienation. Ever since Dieyi entered the opera troupe, Xiaoshitou had always protected him, which to a certain extent compensated for Dieyi’s lack of paternal and maternal care and his attachment to a powerful guardian figure. From competing for beds and teaching him how to endure punishment at the very beginning, to tacit cooperation after role allocation: “one playing the male role and the other the female role; from then on, their eyes matched perfectly with undivided attention.” Xiaoshitou treated Xiaodouzi with special affection and shelter, and Xiaodouzi trusted and relied on him wholeheartedly. Their relationship as the Overlord and Yu Ji seemed destined to transcend the theatrical boundary from the very start. As apprentices at the bottom of the troupe who both lacked parental care since childhood, they endured hardships and training together, and finally grew into famous opera performers in the capital. Master Guan once told Dieyi that “one has to fulfill one’s own destiny by oneself” and insisted on the principle of “remaining faithful for life”. Therefore, in Dieyi’s spiritual world, he and Xiaolou ought to blur the boundary between opera and reality, perform together for a lifetime, remain loyal forever, and stay together through life and death. “He had only two things in his life: senior brother and opera.” For this reason, when Ju Xian appeared, he believed that Xiaolou had betrayed opera as well as himself. “Ju Xian was an outsider, a third party breaking in between the Overlord and Yu Ji, an existence that should never have appeared.” “As the Overlord, Xiaolou should have no wife and lead no mortal earthly life; the Overlord should only belong to Yu Ji.” His extremely pure inner world made him devote his life, faith, emotion and loyalty entirely to Duan Xiaolou. To a certain extent, his affection for Duan Xiaolou was far more than ordinary romantic love between men and women; it was the reliance in despair, the fate of integrating life and opera, the belief of lifelong loyalty, and the arrangement of destiny. It was not simply that he fell in love with Xiaolou, but that numerous external forces nailed him firmly to Duan Xiaolou’s side.

3. THE TEXTUAL VALUE OF LINGUISTIC ALIENATION

Li Bihua is a representative writer of Hong Kong feminism, and the characters in her works are often permeated with a tragic sense of “damp coldness”. Simone de Beauvoir once said: “Woman lives on the margins of this society... and this is an advantageous position for anyone who wants to write.”^{[7][7]} Similarly, Li Bihua focuses on social marginal figures, such as the Green Snake in “*Green Snake*”, who is neither fully male nor female, neither entirely demon nor human, Cheng Dieyi in “*Farewell My Concubine*”, who blurs the boundary between opera and reality and holds an ambiguous gender identity; and Aunt Mei in “*Dumplings*”, who tests the boundaries of the law and wanders in the grey area of society. Generally speaking, marginal figures remain inconspicuous and drift away from the mainstream groups^[8]. She depicts outsiders and “aliens” excluded by the male-dominated mainstream society, revealing the truths of human nature suppressed by the mainstream. Through depicting the life experiences and destruction of such characters, she condemns the cruel living predicament of those neglected and despised groups in mainstream society. This also reflects the reflections of Hong Kong in the late 20th century, a region about to return to China, which differed markedly from the mainland in geography, culture, art, politics and economy. Such marginal yet significant parts also long for a sense of belonging and identity. Her works often integrate Hong Kong with inland cities such as Beijing, expressing a desire to gain equal status and value with the mainland.

The original text writes: “Among the five humble professions, the ‘opera performer’ is deeply despised, yet on stage, they always appear majestic, glamorous and enchanting.” In that era, Peking Opera artists were looked down upon by society. The audience admired them as immortals on stage, but classified them as low-class folk performers off stage. People applauded not Cheng Dieyi himself, but the glamorous role of Yu Ji reborn through him. Elder Ni, Master Yuan Siye, various warlords and Japanese audiences all cheered for his performances. The public regarded him as Yu Ji, the faithful woman who remained devoted till death a thousand years ago, yet no one cared that he was inherently a man with his own emotional choices.

Social discipline in a patriarchal society involves not only the struggle for social status between men and women, but also the internalization and reproduction of power relations. Power is passed down and handed over over time; when the victim becomes the perpetrator, the mechanism of discipline is inherited from generation to generation. Under the long-term high-pressure and violent environment, after Xiaolaizi hanged himself, Master Guan never truly understood the cause. He only followed the traditional training method he had always known. “He thought he had done nothing wrong; he himself had endured harsh beatings and forced training. ‘To shine before others, one must endure hardship in private.’ When he was an apprentice, the beatings had been severe.” This incident subtly influenced the way Dieyi later taught Xiaosi. He beat Xiaosi in the hope of making him abide by the duties of opera performers, preserve the purity of the opera garden, and uphold the principle of lifelong devotion to art. Such rigorous and unquestioning adherence ensured the continuity and professionalism of artistic inheritance, yet to a certain extent destroyed individual development and spiritual freedom.

The novel contains another plot: after young Xiaodouzi is humiliated by Elder Ni, he comes across an abandoned baby girl on his way back. He intends to take her into the opera troupe, but Master Guan stops him with the remark: “What use do we have for a girl?” Although the original text does not specify the baby’s fate, her life was undoubtedly uncertain in that turbulent era. At that moment, Xiaodouzi was still in panic after being violated. Encountering another abandoned child stirred within him a desire to protect her and a maternal sense of compassion. The two wandering souls found temporary comfort as fellow vulnerable individuals, yet their connection vanished instantly under the oppression of the times and the decision of the powerful, denying an innocent life the hope of survival. In that era, women were regarded as valueless and merely appendages of men. Against the patriarchal historical background, women were burdened with numerous obligations but granted extremely few rights^[9]. Society ignored women’s independent consciousness and emotional will, demanding that women obey and absolutely subordinate themselves to men. By controlling women’s bodies and spirits, men manifested their own social power and status. They also constrained women’s emotions and behaviors to maintain their noble and positive images, regarding women merely as medals to demonstrate their own achievements.

4. CONCLUSION

As a representative figure in gender research, Cheng Dieyi has long been the focus of studies on human existence against a specific historical background, for his behaviors, language and gestures are full of controversial implications and distinctive temporal characteristics. His language is delicate yet forthright, while his gender alienation is entirely involuntary. The linguistic differences brought by his alienation lie not merely in expressive style; fundamentally, they reflect the essential divergence in living environment, identity recognition and self-worth. The discussion of language and gender derives from the complexity of human nature and the progress of social tolerance. The incongruous desire for survival, the passive endurance of vulnerable groups, and the intensification of the pragmatic function of language are the essential reasons why Cheng Dieyi is isolated from the secular world, destined to coexist with opera all his life and trapped in the tragic fate of lifelong devotion. This also constitutes the core research value of this paper.

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