Farewell My Concubine Study Guide

Farewell My Concubine by Lilian Lee

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Introduction

It should be noted that names in China are arranged in reverse order from Western styling. In other words, the first name listed is the family name, or surname, while the second name is the personal name, or first name as Western audiences understand it. In addition, many of the younger characters in the book are referred to by the term "Xiao," which means small and is an indication of childhood status.

Author Biography

Very little is known about the personal and professional life of Lilian Lee□at least in the Western world□including her birthdate. The few sources available still list Lee as alive in 2003. One possible reason for the lack of biographical information is Lee's many names. Lilian Lee is the English pen name for this Chinese author; some sources spell her name "Lillian" Lee. Her actual Chinese name is Li Pi-Hua, although she is also known as Li Pik-Wah.

Lee is a bestselling author in her native Hong Kong and has written more than thirty books. With the exception of *Farewell My Concubine* (1992) and *The Last Princess of Manchuria* (1992), Lee's books have not been translated into English, or at least are not widely available. Lee has co-written a number of screenplays, including one for the film version of *Farewell My Concubine*. The film was released in 1993 and became a worldwide sensation. Lee also co-wrote screenplays for *Rouge* (1988) and *Green Snake* (1993). In addition, Lee has acted in minor roles in some of these films.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1

Farewell My Concubine starts out with a brief discussion about prostitution and theater, and how both of these vocations are removed from reality. The reader is then introduced to the stage characters of the woman Yu Ji and the man General Xiang Yu, and learns that both roles are played by men and that one man is in love with the other. Following this short introduction, the narrative jumps back in time to winter 1929 to a marketplace in Peking, China.

Yanhong asks Master Guan, a noted Peking opera instructor, to take on her little boy, Xiao Douzi, as an apprentice. Guan refuses, until Yanhong chops off Douzi's extra finger□a birth defect□with a cleaver. Yanhong and Douzi sign a contract with Guan for a period of ten years, during which time Douzi's life and earnings belong to Guan in exchange for opera training. Douzi finds it hard to fit in at first, but he soon befriends Xiao Shitou, the informal leader of the apprentices. The boys spend long days practicing their craft and Douzi and Shitou distinguish themselves as the ones with the most talent. When they are given their roles, which they will play for their entire lives, Douzi is chosen to be a *dan*, or female lead, and Shitou is chosen to be a *sheng*, or male lead.

Chapter 2

The apprentices stage a successful first performance at the Spring Blossom teahouse, which leads to many other performances. They give a birthday performance for Master Ni, a rich eunuch, who fondles Douzi after the show. During New Year's, Shitou spends his money on sweets, while Douzi spends his on handkerchiefs□the first pieces for his collection of opera clothes. They both see a magnificent sword and Douzi says he will buy it for Shitou someday. The apprentices and Guan take part in a group photo shoot. Ten years later, in 1939, the boys, who are now as close as brothers, graduate from Guan's school and enter professional careers.

Chapter 3

Douzi and Shitou join an opera company and are given new, adult names by the company's manager. Douzi becomes Cheng Dieyi and Shitou becomes Duan Xiaolou. Dieyi and Xiaolou gain fame for their performance of the opera *Farewell My Concubine*. During one show, Master Yuan Siye, a wealthy patron of the theater, notices Cheng Dieyi and is enraptured by him.

Chapter 4

After the show, Dieyi and Xiaolou get into an argument about the importance of opera, but they are interrupted by a backstage visit from Siye. While Dieyi is respectful, Xiaolou is not, and excuses himself to go see Miss Juxian, a prostitute at the House of Flowers, a local brothel. Xiaolou rescues her from a customer who is trying to force her to drink from his mouth. On the spur of the moment, Juxian asks Xiaolou to marry her, and he agrees. He quickly performs the engagement wine ceremony. The next day, Dieyi goes to a letter writer and dictates a letter to his mother, but then tears it up and throws it away. Juxian buys her freedom from prostitution.

Chapter 5

Juxian visits backstage with Xiaolou and Dieyi, and announces that she has bought her freedom from the House of Flowers to marry Xiaolou, who is dumbstruck since he was not serious about the marriage. He decides to go through with the wedding. Dieyi is shattered that he is losing Xiaolou to Juxian, and accepts Yuan Siye's invitation to come to his house, where Siye gets Dieyi drunk and rapes him. Dieyi leaves early that morning with the sword that he and Shitou saw in the marketplace ten years ago□a gift from Siye for Dieyi's sexual favors. Dieyi gives Xiaolou the sword as a wedding present. The Japanese cavalry arrives in Peking.

Dieyi becomes a famous *dan* without Xiaolou, who, after his marriage, no longer plays Dieyi's counterpart. Dieyi deals with his jealousy of Juxian by smoking opium. At the request of the Japanese military police, Dieyi and Xiaolou perform the opera *Farewell My Concubine* again, but Xiaolou refuses to continue after Japanese soldiers beat up Chinese patrons. Xiaolou is arrested and Juxian pleads with Dieyi to save him. Dieyi agrees if Juxian will leave Xiaolou. Dieyi performs opera for the Japanese official, winning Xiaolou's freedom, but Juxian breaks her promise and stays with Xiaolou.

Chapter 6

It is summer 1945 and Dieyi is deep in an opium addiction, while Xiaolou has given up opera to sell watermelons. Master Guan scolds them for fighting with each other and giving up opera, and sets a penance of putting on a show for him in one month. Guan dies before the month is through, and the two actors give a benefit concert at which they raise enough money to give Guan a proper funeral. The Japanese surrender, and the Chinese economy is thrown into turmoil as different factions vie for control. Xiaolou gets in a fight to protect Dieyi, and Juxian intervenes to protect Xiaolou. She is hit in the stomach, causing the miscarriage of their baby. Dieyi is arrested for treason, but earns his pardon by performing for a Chinese official. Dieyi and Xiaolou take their operas on the road, seeking an audience. Along the way, every part of China slowly falls under the control of the communist People's Liberation Army.

Chapter 7

It is 1949, and opera is in vogue once again. As time passes in the new People's Republic of China, however, the theaters are used for revolutionary activities. Xiaolou and Dieyi witness the trial of Dieyi's old lover, Yuan Siye, who is accused of being a counterrevolutionary and is sentenced to death. Xiao Si, Dieyi's old assistant, who Dieyi treated horribly, is elevated in the new Communist Party. As part of the party's directive, Dieyi and Xiaolou take literacy classes. By the mid-1960s, art is looked at as a tool to corrupt people by manipulating their emotions. Dieyi's and Xiaolou's social status is greatly reduced. In 1965 the party puts Dieyi and Xiaolou to work acting in formulaic propaganda plays. Xiaolou and Dieyi both destroy their old costumes before they can be used against them.

Chapter 8

Teenagers are assigned to be communist Red Guards, and are let out of school so that they can loot people's houses, searching for evidence of Western or traditional Chinese culture. One night, Red Guards make their nightly raid of Xiaolou's and Juxian's home, where they spot the sword from Dieyi, which Juxian had hung on the wall so that it is pointed toward the portrait of Chairman Mao□a potential sign that they want Mao dead. In an attempt to save both Juxian and Dieyi, Xiaolou takes credit for the sword.

The next night, Xiaolou and Dieyi are put on trial and told to confess their knowledge of each other's past wrongdoings. At first, the two tell harmless facts about each other's past, but as the guards threaten them, the actors get vicious, revealing incriminating aspects of each other's life. Worried that Juxian will be harmed, Xiaolou tells the guards that he wants to divorce her. She is mortified. Xiao Si breaks in and talks about Dieyi's homosexual activities, and Dieyi is arrested too. Dieyi tries and fails to kill himself while in custody. Xiaolou is sentenced to be reeducated through labor, and when he goes to his apartment to gather his things, he sees that Juxian has hanged herself. The next day Xiaolou and Dieyi are put on separate trucks and taken to different work camps in remote areas of the country.

Chapter 9

Xiaolou works in a labor camp in Fuzhou for many years, thinking often of Dieyi, whom he has forgiven for his comments. Ten years pass, and in 1976 Chairman Mao dies. The Gang of Four□the nickname of Mao's political sect□is soon overthrown and put on trial for its crimes against the Chinese people. By this time, the 1980s, Xiaolou has escaped from his work camp and has fled to the island of Hong Kong. One day, while riding a tram, he notices an opera house that has Cheng Dieyi's name written on the marquee.

Chapter 10

Xiaolou meets with Dieyi, who is serving as the opera company's senior art advisor. Dieyi and Xiaolou spend a day together catching up. Dieyi pulls out the photograph from when they were apprentices at Master Guan's opera school. They talk about what happened to each of the boys in the photo, most of whom have died as a result of the various political campaigns in China. They go to a bathhouse, where they relax and talk about their current lives, including the fact that Dieyi now has a spouse. They apologize to each other for the harmful things they said and did to each other. Xiaolou and Dieyi get dressed up in their old makeup and costumes and perform the opera *Farewell My Concubine* again. During the performance, Dieyi imagines he actually kills himself as the heroine does, but it is just a daydream. Dieyi returns to mainland China, and Xiaolou stays in Hong Kong, where he loses his apartment.

Characters

Marshall Aoki

Marshall Aoki of the Kwantung Army is a Japanese official and opera aficionado from whom Dieyi win's Xiaolou's freedom by staging a private performance.

Cheng Dieyi

Cheng Dieyi is an opera singer who performs with his partner and childhood friend Duan Xiaolou, a man whom Dieyi loves. At the beginning of the book, Dieyi is known by the nickname of Xiao Douzi, or Little Bean. His mother Yanhong is an unlicensed prostitute who cannot afford to raise him, so she enrolls him as an apprentice at Master Guan's opera school. Douzi and Xiao Shitou become friends shortly after Douzi arrives at the school, and Shitou often steps in to save his friend from teasing or punishment. Due in part to his delicate, girlish features, Douzi is assigned to the lifelong role of *dan*, or female lead, while Shitou is assigned to be his *sheng*, or male lead. This professional pairing makes the two grow even closer. When they graduate, Douzi is given the adult name of Cheng Dieyi by his opera company manager, while Shitou becomes Duan Xiaolou. Early in his career, as he is gaining fame for his singing□most notably in the role of Yu Ji in the opera *Farewell My Concubine*□Dieyi's life is changed when Xiaolou agrees to marry a prostitute, Juxian. Jealous that Juxian has taken Xiaolou away from him both professionally and personally, and hoping to get even with his friend, Dieyi allows himself to be seduced by a wealthy patron of the opera, Yuan Siye, who gets Dieyi drunk and rapes him. In exchange for sexual favors, Dieyi gets a sword from Siye□which he gives to Xiaolou as a wedding present.

Xiaolou's marriage affects Dieyi's theater career by forcing him to perform solo. Dieyi and Xiaolou grow apart, but reunite on stage at the request of the Japanese military. When Xiaolou is arrested by the military for offending them, Juxian comes to Dieyi, who agrees to intervene on Xiaolou's behalf if Juxian will divorce him. Dieyi sings for a Japanese official, who releases Xiaolou, but Juxian breaks her divorce promise. Worse, Xiaolou is upset that Dieyi groveled for the Japanese on his behalf. Dieyi is heartbroken, and retreats into an opium addiction to cope. Dieyi and Xiaolou eventually reunite and begin performing together again, and Dieyi is secretly pleased when Juxian has a miscarriage during an audience fight in the theater. Dieyi is arrested as a traitor□for the performance that he gave to the Japanese official to save Xiaolou. Dieyi wins his freedom through another performance, and he and Xiaolou perform together off and on for decades, as the political climate changes constantly and theater becomes a propaganda tool for the Communist Party. When Dieyi and Xiaolou are targeted as counterrevolutionaries, Dieyi tries to protect Xiaolou during their trial, but ends up revealing incriminating evidence about his friend. Dieyi is sent to a labor camp in Jiuquan. After the Gang of Four is overthrown, the new Chinese government rehabilitates him to remove the brainwashing of Chairman Mao's regime, and Dieyi

resumes his stage career by acting as a senior art advisor. During a show in Hong Kong, Xiaolou comes to see him, and the two catch up on old times, apologize to each other, and put on their makeup and costumes one last time to perform the opera *Farewell My Concubine*.

Uncle Ding

Uncle Ding is an old violin player from the Peking opera who works with Master Guan and Master Shi to inspect Cheng Dieyi, Duan Xiaolou, and the other apprentices and help assign them their lifelong opera roles.

Duan Xiaolou

Duan Xiaolou is an opera singer who marries Juxian and who performs with his partner and childhood friend Cheng Dieyi. At the beginning of the book, when Xiaolou is an apprentice at Master Guan's school, he is known by the nickname of Xiao Shitou, or Little Rock, because he has such a hard head. Shitou and Xiao Douzi become friends shortly after the latter arrives at the school, and Shitou often steps in to save his friend from teasing or punishment. Shitou is assigned to the lifelong role of *sheng*, or male lead, while Dieyi is assigned to be his *dan*, or female lead. This professional pairing makes the two grow even closer. When they graduate, Shitou is given the adult name of Duan Xiaolou by his opera company manager, while Douzi becomes Cheng Dieyi. Early in his career, as Xiaolou is gaining fame for his singing□most notably the role of General Xiang Yu in the opera *Farewell My Concubine*□he steps in to save a prostitute, Juxian, from having to perform a distasteful act for a customer. When Juxian asks him to marry her, Xiaolou believes that she is just staging a performance so that she can deter the customer, and he agrees. He also defends her honor by fighting the customer. When Xiaolou realizes that Juxian is serious, he decides to keep his promise and marry her.

The marriage impacts Xiaolou's theater career, as he takes on less-demanding work so that he can spend more time with Juxian, which forces Dieyi to perform solo. Xiaolou's marriage also affects his friendship with Dieyi, who is extremely jealous of Juxian for taking Xiaolou away from him. Xiaolou and Dieyi reunite at the request of the Japanese military, but Xiaolou stops the performance when soldiers beat up some Chinese patrons. The military is offended and arrests Xiaolou. When Dieyi stages a private performance for a Japanese official, he wins Xiaolou's freedom, but Xiaolou is upset that Dieyi has groveled for the Japanese, so he spits on Dieyi. The two meet up again much later, when Xiaolou has given up singing to become a watermelon vendor, and Xiaolou apologizes. Eventually, they begin acting together again. During one performance, the now-pregnant Juxian steps in to protect Xiaolou in an audience fight and gets hit in her stomach, which causes a miscarriage. Xiaolou and Dieyi perform together off and on for decades, as the political climate changes constantly and theater becomes a propaganda tool for the Communist Party. When Xiaolou and Dieyi are targeted as counterrevolutionaries, Xiaolou tries to protect Dieyi during their trial, but

ends up revealing incriminating evidence about his friend. Xiaolou is sent to a labor camp in Fuzhou. He escapes and flees to Hong Kong, where he eventually runs into Dieyi. The two catch up on old times, apologize to each other, and put on their makeup and costumes one last time to perform the opera *Farewell My Concubine*.

Gang of Four

The Gang of Four is the nickname for Chairman Mao's communist political sect. Their policies caused massive strife in the lives of most Chinese people, including Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou. The Gang of Four is overthrown shortly after Mao's death, and the remaining members of the Gang of Four are put on trial for their crimes against the Chinese people.

Master Guan Jinfa

Master Guan Jinfa is an esteemed Peking opera instructor who accepts Xiao Douzi as an apprentice at his school for ten years. Master Guan is harsh on his apprentices, beating them often when they falter and rarely giving praise. This is the same way that he was educated in opera, and he knows from his own opera experience that the professional theater world demands this kind of perfectionist training. Master Guan notices Douzi's delicate features right away, and as he trains the boy in the basic techniques of opera, he realizes that the boy has a great singing voice too. With the help of Master Shi and Uncle Ding, Guan assigns Douzi to a lifelong role of *dan*, or female lead, while he assigns Xiao Shitou to be the *sheng*, or male lead. After Douzi and Shitou have graduated and become Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, respectively, Guan agrees to let one of his new apprentices, Xiao Si, help the two actors during their shows. When Guan hears that Dieyi and Xiaolou have allowed their differences to separate them, and that Xiaolou has given up opera to sell watermelons, he is furious with both of them, and sets a penance of performing a special opera for him. Unfortunately Guan dies before they can perform, and his school is closed, forcing all of the current apprentices in his care to become orphans.

Miss Juxian

Miss Juxian is a prostitute at the House of Flowers brothel, who tricks Duan Xiaolou into marrying her, a relationship that drives a wedge between Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi. Juxian meets Xiaolou when he and Dieyi are just making a name for themselves by performing the opera *Farewell My Concubine*. Juxian, whose name means "chrysanthemum," gives Xiaolou a teapot with chrysanthemums, which makes Dieyi jealous. When Xiaolou comes to visit Juxian at the brothel one night, he ends up rescuing her from a customer who wants her to drink something from his mouth. She recognizes her chance, and asks Xiaolou if he wants to marry her. Thinking that they are just acting out a scene to save her from the insistent customer, Xiaolou readily agrees, and they perform an engagement wine ceremony. The next day, Juxian buys

her freedom from the House of Flowers—and from prostitution—and goes to see Xiaolou, who is shocked when he realizes that Juxian was seriously asking him to marry her.

When Xiaolou decides to go through with it, Dieyi—who wants Xiaolou all to himself—becomes very spiteful toward Juxian. This animosity increases as Xiaolou gives up performing his duets with Dieyi. After Xiaolou's brash attitude offends the Japanese military and leads to his imprisonment, Juxian comes to Dieyi to ask him to intervene on her husband's behalf. Dieyi agrees, but only if Juxian will divorce Xiaolou, a promise that she breaks. Juxian becomes pregnant with the couple's first child, but the child miscarries when Juxian tries to protect Xiaolou in a fight—which starts when Xiaolou tries to protect Dieyi. This love triangle continues to create animosity between Juxian and Dieyi, although they both attend to the other when they are sick. Juxian's unfortunate placement of Xiaolou's sword—a wedding present from Dieyi—leads to the trial of Xiaolou, which in turn leads to the trial of the other two. Juxian refuses to follow the Communist Party's wishes by divorcing her husband, and is forced to get a yin-and-yang haircut—half of her head shaved—as a result. When Xiaolou tells the Red Guards he will divorce Juxian—his attempt to save her from any more punishment—she is heartbroken and commits suicide shortly thereafter.

Little Bean

See Cheng Dieyi

Little Rock

See Duan Xiaolou

Master Ni

Master Ni is a rich eunuch who wielded great power during the imperial days of the Qing dynasty, and who indulges in opera to try to remember those days. After Master Guan's apprentices perform for Ni's birthday, the old eunuch arranges a private meeting with Xiao Douzi, during which he first makes the boy urinate into a priceless jade bowl, then molests him. Later, when Douzi has become the adult Dieyi, he runs into Master Ni, who has lost his fortune and is reduced to selling tobacco and matches from a cart.

Red Guards

The Red Guards are teenagers enlisted by the Communist Party to seek out and punish suspected adult counterrevolutionaries. Although they wield power for a little while, in the end they are reduced to toiling in poverty like many other Chinese people. Duan Xiaolou realizes this when he catches one of the Red Guards—his former oppressors—trying to steal some yams out of his labor camp.

Master Shi

Master Shi is a representative from the Spring Blossom teahouse, where Master Guan's apprentices stage their first public opera. Shi works with Guan and Uncle Ding to inspect Cheng Dieyi, Duan Xiaolou, and the other apprentices and help assign them their lifelong opera roles.

Xiao Douzi

See Cheng Dieyi

Xiao Laizi

Xiao Laizi is a fellow apprentice with Xiao Douzi and Xiao Shitou; he constantly tries to run away from Master Guan's opera school and ultimately commits suicide.

Xiao Sanzi

Xiao Sanzi is a fellow apprentice with Xiao Douzi and Xiao Shitou, and tries to bully some of the other boys. When he picks on Douzi, Shitou comes to his friend's rescue. When Dieyi and Xiaolou review the old photo of their classmates at the end of the novel and discuss their various fates, Dieyi notes that Sanzi had both of his legs broken while being tortured, became an alcoholic, and died of hepatitis.

Xiao Shitou

See Duan Xiaolou

Xiao Si

Xiao Si is one of Master Guan's new apprentices after Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou graduate. Xiao Si is fascinated by the two actors, and makes an arrangement with Guan to help them out on the nights of their show. Xiao Si eventually becomes Dieyi's personal assistant and grows to hate Dieyi. Dieyi spends much of his time addicted to opium, and tells Xiao Si that the boy does not have the talent to sing opera. Xiao Si harbors a grudge for this treatment. As the communist revolution picks up speed and he gains some power, he acts on this grudge. He tells a group of Red Guards about Dieyi's illicit activities, which helps lead to Dieyi's sentencing to a labor camp. At the end of the novel, when Dieyi and Xiaolou discuss the various fates of people they have known, Dieyi notes that Xiao Si's suspected affiliation with the Gang of Four led to his being tortured in a water cell□a cell filled up with water to a person's shoulders□and that he heard Xiao Si went crazy as a result.

Yanhong

Yanhong is Cheng Dieyi's mother and an unlicensed prostitute. When Dieyi is nine years old and known by the childhood nickname of Xiao Douzi, his mother enrolls him as an apprentice in Master Guan's opera school, hoping that he can make a better life for himself than she can provide. Dieyi never sees Yanhong again.

Yuan Shiqing

See Yuan Siye

Yuan Siye

Yuan Siye is a wealthy opera patron who becomes infatuated with Cheng Dieyi after seeing the actor in his feminine Yu Ji costume and makeup. Siye invites Dieyi to his wealthy home, where he seduces and rapes Dieyi. In exchange for his sexual favors, Siye gives Dieyi a sword□which happens to be the same one that Dieyi and Xiaolou admired as children. After their first sexual encounter, Siye uses his power and influence to help nurture Dieyi's career. As the communist revolution gains speed, however, Dieyi and Xiaolou watch the trial of Siye, who is sentenced to death for using his power to take advantage of people in the theater. The sword that Siye gives to Dieyi ultimately leads to the downfall of Dieyi, Xiaolou, and Juxian, after Juxian places it on a wall so that it is pointed in a disrespectful way at a portrait of Chairman Mao.

Themes

Survival

Survival is a key theme in *Farewell My Concubine*. In the beginning of the novel, many Chinese people have a hard time just trying to acquire the basic necessities of food and shelter. The marketplace scene in which Yanhong and Douzi are introduced is a good example of this harsh life. For example, one street urchin weaves his way through crowds, collecting cigarette butts before they can be trampled. "When he had gathered up enough discarded butts, he would take them all apart and salvage the tobacco. Then he would roll new cigarettes to sell on the street." This boy is most likely an orphan, and collecting the cigarettes is his only way to make money to try to pay for food and shelter. Yet, even those with adult caregivers are not much better off. When Douzi is introduced, his mother Yanhong is working in the only types of odd jobs she can find, "like rolling wax-coated pills in the back of some pharmacy during the influenza season, or washing other people's filthy clothes and fetid socks." And these types of activities do not earn enough money to provide adequate shelter for her and Douzi, especially during cold winter months when they have to huddle together "on a makeshift bed made out of a wooden board set up in the loft of a down-at-the-heel courtyard."

Faced with this grim reality, Yanhong signs Douzi's care over to Master Guan, hoping that her son will be able to have a better life. But Douzi must also struggle to survive at the school. He sleeps on a communal bed with several other boys, his clothes are rags, and his days are long and hard, filled with endless hours of physical training. They rarely wash, and they almost never have enough to eat. As Lee notes, "Their faces were never entirely clean, and their bellies were never completely full as they set out every morning behind Master Guan."

While basic survival necessities such as food and shelter remain a concern for most Chinese people throughout the novel, when the Communist Party takes over the Chinese government, people's physical survival is increasingly influenced by politics. People begin to exert extreme caution over the things they say and do, for fear they may be singled out to be tortured or killed. As Lee notes about a time shortly after the Communist Party takeover: "But fear had become contagious, like a lingering flu nobody could shake. Politics was a matter of life and death, and people learned not to discuss certain subjects if they could help it." In this climate of extreme paranoia, nobody feels safe, even those who have power in the Communist Party. For example, during one scene, the party secretary in Peking is reciting a speech over a loudspeaker, and it is so loud it causes him to pause and think about the attention he is drawing to himself. "He looked up, a wary expression flickering across his eyes. He had only just begun to exercise some power himself, and already it seemed precarious. Anyone could become a victim, even he." In the end nobody is safe from the effects of communist politics. Those who are too traditional are labeled counterrevolutionaries and tortured, killed, or sent to work camps, as Dieyi and Xiaolou are. And those who embrace party politics often meet grisly fates after the Communist Party is overthrown. For example, at the

end of the novel when the aged Dieyi and Xiaolou are discussing what happened to Xiao Si, a young man who wielded some power in the Communist Party and who helped determine the sentence for the two actors, Dieyi notes that Xiao Si was accused of following the Gang of Four, was tortured until he went crazy, and is most likely dead. "It frightens me to think about it," Dieyi says. "You can't escape from politics□and it's always life or death, kill or be killed."

Sex and Love

Lee also explores the themes of sex and love in the novel. For some characters, sex becomes another tool for survival. In the beginning of the novel, Lee notes that Yanhong, Douzi's mother, worked as a prostitute for a while, because "it was the only way she could make enough money to support her child." For Yanhong, as with many other women in China at the time, her body was the only guaranteed means to make a living. The consequence of this is that prostitutes find it hard to love. As the author notes about Juxian, another prostitute, "Love at first sight and true love were things that existed for ordinary women, but not for women like her, not for prostitutes." For Juxian, selling sex and ignoring love has led to a comfortable life. By choosing to follow her heart and try to marry Xiaolou, she is taking a big leap. Even if he says yes, being his wife means living in the real world. As the author notes when Juxian is walking out of the House of Flowers, "Life outside the indolent precincts of the house of pleasure was harsh and grimy. She had lived a soft life, relying on her gentle charms. Now she was taking a big gamble."

Fortunately for Juxian, Xiaolou goes through with his promise to marry her. But their happiness is ultimately shattered by the Communist Party. Near the end of the novel, when they have been married for decades, the communist officials in Peking tell Juxian that she will be in serious trouble if she does not divorce her husband. Juxian refuses. "I won't divorce him, and I'm willing to accept the consequences. I am his true wife," Juxian says. When she holds by her decision at her trial, Juxian receives a crude yin and yang haircut. Xiaolou tries to prevent any further abuse of his wife by saying he will divorce her. Once a prostitute who thought that "If a girl allowed herself to be genuinely touched, she would only end up getting hurt," Juxian has since devoted herself completely to her husband, to the point where she is willing to be tortured or killed instead of divorcing him. When Xiaolou does not reciprocate this attitude, however, she is heartbroken and kills herself.

Dieyi also loves Xiaolou, a love that develops from the time when they are boys. As Lee notes in the beginning, "their story is not that simple. When one man loves another, it can't be simple." Dieyi's love begins with his fascination of the older boy, when he first sees him perform a play. "He had never seen anything like this before, nor had he ever seen a boy as brave as Xiao Shitou." As the boys get to know each other, they become good friends, and eventually get paired as stage partners. Throughout all of this, Shitou often comes to Douzi's rescue, "like a knight-errant saving a traveler from bandits." But while Shitou views their relationship as brothers, Douzi increasingly falls in love with Shitou in a romantic sense. Later, as adults, Dieyi still holds out hope that he can make

Xiaolou love him in a romantic sense. When Xiaolou agrees to marry Juxian, however, Dieyi is shattered. "He knew how it felt to be an abandoned woman and remembered an old saying: A woman without a man is a vine with no stakes to support her."

In place of love, Dieyi turns to sex. Dieyi is introduced to sex as a little boy, when he sees his mother, the prostitute Yanhong, having sex with a customer. As the author notes, "she had seen him staring coldly at her and her customer through the door curtains." Dieyi's own initial experiences with sex are also negative. After the birthday performance for Master Ni, the old eunuch, enraptured by the little boy's penis□which, unlike Ni's, is still intact□performs oral sex on the boy. The experience leaves the boy feeling "bewildered and afraid." His next experience with sexual intercourse is also with a man, Yuan Siye, who gets Dieyi drunk and rapes him. Dieyi thinks of the experience in symbolically violent terms, associating Siye with the bat that Siye had killed and drained into their soup. "Dieyi had stumbled into a savage realm of purple, carmine, and black, where a bat darker than the depths of hell beat its wings and attacked." The experience leaves him "[f]illed with shame." At the same time, he notes, "It could not be undone; but he had no regrets. He had got back at Xiaolou."

In this way, Dieyi tries to use sex as a weapon, to make Xiaolou jealous. While this does not work, since Xiaolou is not interested in Dieyi in a romantic sense, Dieyi does learn a lesson about the power of sex. Given that his sexual experiences have all been negative, and the fact that the one person with whom he wants to have sex, Xiaolou, does not think of him in this way, Dieyi instead begins engaging in joyless sex to further his career, much as prostitutes like Yanhong and Juxian sold their bodies to try to make a better life for themselves.

Style

Setting

The setting, both in time and place, is very important to *Farewell My Concubine*. The story takes place during the twentieth century, from 1929 to the 1980s. While many nations underwent drastic changes during this time period, in China this period was marked by continuous change. As various political regimes gained or lost power in China, people's lives changed drastically. Throughout the novel, Lee chronicles this political change as Dieyi and Xiaolou grow older. When the narrative begins and Dieyi and Xiaolou are still boys, Lee notes, "Winter, 1929. The eighteenth year of the Republic of China." Shortly after this time period is introduced, the political situation is addressed. "A newspaper boy was calling out, 'Northeastern Army surrounded□Japs about to attack!' " The Japanese invasion of China is the first major political event that the Chinese people have to face in the story. Yet, since the two main characters spend much of their time in training at Master Guan's school, they do not see many signs of this threat.

Everything changes when the boys graduate from the school after completing ten years of training. Dieyi and Xiaolou go to a photographer to get professional publicity shots taken, but they are interrupted. "A group of student protesters had broken the plate-glass windows of the photo studio and were now zealously tearing up pictures of geishas and scattering them in the air." This attack, and another one that takes place shortly thereafter in the same scene, illustrate the animosity toward Japanese culture that existed in China at this time. Again, Lee includes a specific historical reference to the year that gives her readers a context for these events: "It was 1939, the twenty-eighth year of the Republic of China□the second year of the Japanese occupation."

As Dieyi and Xiaolou grow older and become public figures in the theater, they lose the shelter of anonymity that they had as young boys at the school, and the political climate increasingly impacts their lives. For example, Xiaolou is depicted as a brash, tough male from the time he is a child. From breaking bricks over his head as a boy to defending the honor of Juxian as a young adult, Xiaolou is depicted as a person who does what he wants and who rarely faces any drastic consequences for his behavior. But this changes when he exhibits his trademark stubbornness during a performance for the Japanese army, after they beat up some Chinese patrons. "I'm one man who won't sing for devils!' Xiaolou said adamantly." As a result, the Japanese army officers, offended at Xiaolou's disobedience, beat him unconscious, then lock him in prison until Dieyi saves Xiaolou by staging a private performance for a Japanese military official.

Though Dieyi saves his friend with this act, when the political tide turns again in 1945 after the Japanese surrender, the act comes back to haunt Dieyi. In a theater fight with some Chinese military veterans, Xiaolou attempts to protect Dieyi, but it is Dieyi who gets arrested when the police come. "The detainee was Dieyi. Cheng Dieyi, the actor who had sold his services to the Japanese, was being accused of treason." The police

do not care about who started the theater fight, they are looking to punish those who collaborated with the Japanese oppressors during the occupation.

This attitude of condemnation increases as the Chinese nationalist government that accuses Dieyi of treason is in turn overthrown by a communist government. In this new political situation, art is once again in vogue, at least at first. "It was 1949, and theaters and opera houses all over Peking were thriving once more." But while this new government allows actors like Dieyi and Xiaolou to perform the old, pre-liberation operas, audiences are "discouraged from cheering and shouting." This attitude of separating emotion from art increasingly takes control in China, until, "By the mid-1960s, ideologues were saying that art was decadent and corrupt, and that it only existed to manipulate people's feelings." In this new political climate, in which Communist Party officials are searching for somebody to blame for China's troubles, paranoia becomes rampant, and those who represent anything traditional, such as art, are often accused of being counterrevolutionaries. These accusations lead many people, including Dieyi and Xiaolou, to be tortured or sent to work camps and contribute to the general paranoia of the times.

Imagery

In addition to the setting, Lee also makes use of many vivid images of violence, pain, and suffering to underscore the starkness of life in China during this time period. One of the most shocking images is of Yanhong chopping off Douzi's extra finger. Although Lee does not actually describe the act itself, she offers several vivid images that follow the act, which leave a strong visual impression in the reader's mind: "Drops of blood in the snow traced Xiao Douzi's path. He now crouched in a lonely corner of the compound, whimpering like a maimed animal." Without actually telling the reader that Douzi's finger has been cut off□something that Lee specifically notes later in the paragraph□the images of blood in the snow and Douzi whimpering in a corner let the reader know what has happened, and provide a powerful visual image.

Lee uses this type of vivid imagery throughout the novel to discuss the harsh training the boys undergo at the school; to describe the many beatings of Dieyi, Xiaolou, and the other characters; and to describe the various ways that characters meet horrible ends. For example, one of the most graphic deaths in the novel takes place when a woman jumps out of a window, trying to escape from a group of Red Guards:

The impact had broken off one of her legs and sent it bouncing over to the base of a wall. Her head had cracked open, spreading brains across the pavement like bean curd. Blood and flesh were splattered everywhere. Something tiny had landed near Dieyi's foot, either a tooth or a finger; but he was too exhausted and numb to care.

Historical Context

When Lee wrote *Farewell My Concubine*, massive political changes were taking place in the world, many of which stemmed from events that took place after the end of World War II, in 1945. The dropping of atomic bombs on Japan ended the war, but it also ushered in the atomic age. After these demonstrations, several countries, including the Soviet Union, rushed to create and test their own atomic bombs. As tensions between the communist Soviet Union and the democratic United States increased, the American government began a policy of backing smaller foreign countries that were in danger of being overthrown by communism. The resulting tension between the Soviet Union and the United States□and between communism and democracy in general□was labeled the Cold War. Although much of the period was technically spent in peacetime, the pervasive feeling of suspicion and paranoia that was generated by this clash of superpowers made many feel that they were fighting a war. Although the peak years of the Cold War were over by the 1960s, America's fight against communism in foreign countries continued late into the twentieth century, and China, as a communist-ruled country, was viewed as one of the largest threats to democracy.

Yet, while China's communist policies during Chairman Mao's rule were destructive to many citizens, China's associations with the Soviet Union steadily degraded in the second half of the twentieth century, a split that weakened the strength of the communist bloc nations. In the late 1980s, a few years before Lee's book was published, the pro-democracy movement gained speed and a number of Eastern European nations such as Poland and Czechoslovakia established democratic governments. These developments took place with Soviet approval, largely due to the efforts of Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev, who worked throughout his rule to convert the Soviet political system to a democracy, a bold move for a leader who was part of the Soviet Union's Communist Party.

One of the most dramatic and symbolic events that signaled the weakening of communism and the rise of democracy was the fall of the Berlin Wall. The massive wall was first built to prevent East Germans from escaping to West Germany, an increasing trend that had threatened to weaken the East German state. By the 1980s this barrier, which had been hastily constructed in the beginning, had become a massive structure and a symbol of the divide between democracy and communism, West and East. In October 1989 East Germany's communist leadership was overthrown. The next month, the new East German leaders opened the barrier. The decline of communism quickly gained speed in the next few years, and in late 1991 the communist Soviet Union collapsed and was reformed into fifteen independent nations, including a democratic Russia.

While Russia had turned to democracy, however, China was still a communist country. As the book details, life under Chairman Mao's communist rule was harsh and unpredictable. Following his death and the subsequent overthrow of the Gang of Four in the late 1970s, the Communist Party in China resolved to clarify the political situation. While Mao was condemned for his dictator-like rule, the new party leaders still believed

that Mao's social philosophies, known collectively as Mao Zedong Thought, should be followed. Under the rule of Deng Xiaoping, a leader who had been exiled during the Cultural Revolution, various aspects of communism and capitalism were combined in an effort to build China into a global economic power. Some of these steps, on the surface at least, gave hope to some that Deng Xiaoping was a new kind of leader and that China could eventually be a true democracy. Pro-democracy protests by students and others gained momentum, but were often quashed when the government arrested the activists. In 1989 these tensions came to a head in Tiananmen Square in Beijing (Peking). Following the death of Hu Yaobang, a party secretary whose sympathetic views of student protests had led to his dismissal, students renewed their protest efforts. After several weeks of demonstrations, during which the communist government debated how to handle the students, the military□as ordered by Deng Xiaoping□attacked the students with tanks and gunfire on June 4, killing several hundred students and instantly crushing the rebellion. The government, under criticism from the rest of the world□which had witnessed this highly publicized event□claimed that the students were not demonstrating, but were instead a highly organized and foreign-backed counterrevolutionary movement trying to overthrow the government.

Critical Overview

The novel *Farewell My Concubine* has lived in the shadow of its film adaptation, which earned a number of awards from prestigious institutions such the Cannes Film Festival, the Golden Globes, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, and the New York Film Critics Circle, to name a few. In fact the movie was considered such a revolutionary piece of Chinese filmmaking that its director, Kaige Chen, is more readily associated with *Farewell My Concubine* than Lee, and film reviews only give casual mention of the book, if they even mention it at all. A *Publishers Weekly* review offers some insight as to why the novel has received less attention and praise than the film. The reviewer speculates that the film version of the novel might be more satisfying than the novel as the film has an "irresistible setting" and "smart plot" that overpowers the "wooden reactions" of the characters in the novel. The reviewer concludes: "[Lee] has tailored an intricate brocade gown, but has neglected to put a body inside it." The reader should bear in mind, however, that the critics are reviewing a translation of the original novel, so that some critical comments may in fact apply more to the translator's writing style and interpretation rather than to the original novel in its native language.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay Poquette discusses Lee's contrasting of art and reality in Farewell My Concubine*.*

From the first few paragraphs of the novel, Lee sets up a contrast between art and reality. The novel begins with a discussion of the acting that prostitutes must do to make their living, then moves on to talk about how professional actors also must remove themselves from reality and play a role for their customers. As Lee notes, "The stage is populated by brilliant young scholars and beautiful ladies whose exalted passions are more vivid than the drab colors of our workaday existence." From this overt expression of the contrast between art and reality, Lee goes on to include several other direct addresses to her readers about this contrast. "The actors bask in the admiration of hundreds of strangers, who are transported out of their small lives by the deep emotions enacted before them," Lee notes in another passage. While these heavyhanded ideological statements help to underscore her ideas in a plain fashion, Lee's most powerful tool is her transformation of the character of Cheng Dieyi. It is through this development that Lee makes the impact of the communist revolution seem that much more tragic.

When the story begins and Dieyi is the little boy known by the nickname of Xiao Douzi, Lee starts planting little details, foreshadowing the character's transformation into a man who is more like a woman. When Yanhong, Douzi's mother, takes her son to Master Guan, Lee notes that Douzi's "features were surprisingly delicate. He was almost pretty." But in order to be a performer in the Chinese opera, Douzi must not have any features that make him stand out. He must be as perfect as possible to maintain the willing suspension of disbelief that audiences expect. Unfortunately, Douzi fails this test because he was born with an extra finger. Desperate to have her son accepted by Master Guan's studio, Yanhong uses a cleaver to chop off the extra finger. Satisfied that Douzi will make a good opera student, Guan accepts him. It is at this point that Douzi's naturally effeminate looks and demeanor help to determine the course of his life and relationships. He is chosen as a *dan*, or female lead, while his friend Shitou is chosen to be his *sheng*, or male lead.

In Chinese opera at this time, these roles were meant to be played for life, so each actor received very specific training. In Douzi's case, "His once deformed hand became the embodiment of feminine beauty as his wrists circled elegantly, the posed fingers of his 'orchid hands' weaving through the air." Guan also teaches Douzi how to "play the coquette," flirting with Xiaolou's male characters. As Lee notes later in the novel, "A *dan* has to be even more feminine than a woman." Douzi is taught how to be the ideal woman in a theatrical sense, and he relishes this task, preferring to live in this fantasy world. Later, as he enters his professional career as Dieyi, the lines between himself and Yu Ji□his character from the opera *Farewell My Concubine*□become even more blurred, and Dieyi attempts to live in this fantasy world all of the time. "The theater was

a world of illusion, but it was the only world he knew. The rest of the world seemed to drift by him, no more substantial than a dream."

Others also fail to make the distinction between the actual man and the roles he plays. As the political situation gets darker and people seek comfort in the theater, each person finds what they need in Dieyi. As he notes after a fan tries to break into his dressing room, saying that she is his future wife, "It wasn't him they loved□it was the idea of him. Men loved him as a woman; women loved him as a man. Nobody knew who he really was." In fact, at this point, neither does Dieyi. He has been socialized, through his profession and his own choice, to be more of a woman than a man. One day when he is examining his soft hands, noting how they had never done a day's labor, he has the following thought: "It was as though they had been emasculated the day he cut off his extra finger."

But Dieyi's fingers are not the only thing that has been emasculated. His very essence has been castrated. Lee hints at this in the beginning by including the character of Master Ni, a eunuch who was physically castrated during the time of the old empire, as this was a way to amass power. While Master Ni has been physically castrated, losing his male reproductive organs, through his training and upbringing, Dieyi has been emotionally and mentally castrated, and has all but turned into a woman. His self-identity becomes increasingly associated with the feminine. For example, at one point, the narrative says that Dieyi "practiced flirting in the mirror, too. His expressive eyes seemed to dance□he was beautiful. What man could resist him?" The answer, of course, is the one man he so earnestly desires, Xiaolou. But while Xiaolou enjoys his singing career, he does not base his identity on it as Dieyi does. For this reason, his general will always be just a character that he plays, and he will never love Dieyi, or the Yu Ji character that Dieyi plays, for more than the length of the performance. Dieyi, on the other hand, is so wrapped up in his opera identity that it means more to him than basic survival. When times are tough economically, he refuses to sell his costumes. "No matter how much difficulty he was in, Dieyi would not pawn his costumes. He would rather have gone hungry. He loved the opera with a passion few outsiders could have understood."

In addition to basing his entire identity on his feminine art, Dieyi also trusts in the power of art. As he enters his professional career and makes a name for himself, he thinks that he will always be able to hide behind his feminine charms, and that art will always transcend any situation. For a while, he is proven right. On two separate occasions, he sings first for a Japanese official, then a Chinese official, on both occasions using his talent to get Xiaolou and himself, respectively, out of jail. As the various factions take over control of China through successive political movements, Dieyi hardly notices, focusing only on his art. As a result, when he hears that the communists are going to be taking over, he does not worry about it. "'Let them come!' he whispered to himself. 'The Communists will want to see operas, too, won't they?'"

But Dieyi, like many others who had embraced traditional Chinese culture, gets a rude awakening during the Cultural Revolution. While art had been his way of escaping in the past, and he had used it to gain favor or save himself or his friends as necessary, art

itself is attacked. The revolution is one that advocates extreme reality. In this type of climate, art itself comes under fire for distracting people from reality. Dieyi first begins to understand that communism might be different than all of the other political movements when he sees his former lover Yuan Siye put on trial and sentenced to death. "What strange sort of show was this? And why had he given up the starring role to Xiao Si, who was such a poor actor? He began to wonder what the Party had in store for him." Still blurring the lines between art and reality, Dieyi views the trial, initially at least, as just one other show.

As with other realistic situations in the past, Dieyi fights the communist reality for a while too, resorting to dramatic acts to solve his problems. When he is commanded by party leaders to turn in his costumes, he instead chooses to cut them into pieces and burn them in a ritual cremation, a very dramatic act that could get him killed. "He felt he was killing off parts of himself, but this was far better than letting the authorities do it." Dieyi is willing to die for his art, or so he thinks. He wants so badly to be the Yu Ji character from the opera *Farewell My Concubine* that he puts himself in dangerous situations so that he can be the helpless heroine. For example, when Xiaolou rebukes him for rescuing him from prison, Dieyi retreats into an opium addiction. Yet, "There were times when Dieyi wondered if he hadn't started smoking just to arouse his friend's sympathy." Still trying to attract the attention of his general, Xiaolou, and get him to care for him, Dieyi resorts to self-destructive acts such as this.

Dieyi also believes he would never intentionally do anything to hurt Xiaolou. "Not only would a true friend never betray you, he would even accept punishment in your place, Dieyi thought as he gazed fondly at Xiaolou." Again, this idealism is shattered when Dieyi comes face-to-face with the harsh reality of the Cultural Revolution. Although he thought he would face death before giving up his art or compromising the relationship between he and Xiaolou, when he is threatened with death by the Red Guards at the trial, the two of them turn on each other, revealing salacious and incriminating details from each other's past. When they are led away to their respective temporary holding cells, Dieyi turns again to his art for an answer to his despair. "Like Yu Ji, he felt he had lost his mainstay. His General had been brought low□where could he turn? What was the point of living?" Dieyi tries, and fails, to kill himself. "He had failed where his heroine Yu Ji had succeeded. Life in the opera was more fulfilling, indeed."

Following their trial, the two men are sent to work camps in different remote areas of the country. For the next several years, they are both brainwashed with Mao Zedong Thought and are forced to face harsh realities. At the end of the novel, when they meet up again after several years apart, the transformation in Dieyi is complete. He no longer puts his faith in art to rescue him, because he has seen a harsh, communist reality that allows no place for art. Instead, he is faced with the facts. "His beauty had faded. He had no mother, no teacher, no brother. There was nobody left. Xiaolou was still talking, but Dieyi wasn't listening." Faced with the fact that he cannot live in the art world as completely as he has done before, Dieyi gets married□not out of love, but because it seemed the right thing to do for a stable life. As he tells Xiaolou, when he returned to Peking after rehabilitation, the new "Party leaders showed a great deal of concern for

me and introduced me to my spouse. We could hardly refuse the kindness of the organization."

This is a far cry from the passion that Dieyi used to feel for Xiaolou. Still, Dieyi tries one more time to exit the world in a dramatic style, or at least he thinks he does. During one final performance of the opera *Farewell My Concubine* that he and Xiaolou put on for themselves, Dieyi begins daydreaming, thinking he is committing suicide once and for all. But Xiaolou nudges him out of this trance. "Dieyi returned to his senses. The glittering tragedy was over. It had all been a fake. He would not die for love." This is the last tie that Dieyi has to his imagined self, and when it is broken, he returns to Peking, presumably to end his life in a dispassionate relationship. The crushing reality of communism has beaten the artist out of him, and he is, as one student reporter notes, a skinny, dried-up old man.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on *Farewell My Concubine*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Guyette received a bachelor's degree in English writing from the University of Pittsburgh and is a longtime journalist. In this essay, Guyette discusses how Lee is able to combine the story of a nontraditional romance with a sweeping historical backdrop to create a somber assessment of the dark side of love.

By any measure, the novel *Farewell My Concubine* by Lilian Lee is a nontraditional love story. Few mainstream novelists have dared to create a plot that revolves around a romance involving two men. Even today, homosexuality is still considered by many to be taboo subject. As Lee writes, "their story is not that simple. When one man loves another, it can't be simple." But, she could just as well have said the same thing about love in general. As this story shows, it is a complicated emotion no matter who is involved. Certainly, it is much more complicated than the idealized, simplistic version often portrayed in popular culture, a portrayal that frequently seems to consist of little more than valentines and candy kisses. In the hands of a serious artist such as Lee, love is revealed to be something that can be destructive as well as uplifting. Self-sacrifice and jealousy and heartache are often inseparable from love. At the heart of this story is the somber idea that great love can lead to great tragedy.

The emotional hardships that can come from love are demonstrated from the outset of the novel when the mother of Xiao Douzi/Dieyi turns him over to Master Guan to be trained for a career in the opera. Mother and son inhabit a world of desperate poverty, one where their only protection from frigid winter nights is a pitifully thin blanket. Even worse than their deprivation is the fact that this little boy has seen his mother working as a prostitute, a job she performs because it is the only way to support her child. To spare him from the pain of watching his mother lead such a life, she decides to turn him over to Master Guan. It is a torturous decision for any mother to make, but she does it in the hope that "he might be able to make something out of himself" if he learns to be an actor. She cannot bear to look back as she leaves the child, because if she does, she will fail. The pain she experiences is immense, but she is willing to accept it. The message: true love requires self-sacrifice, and the reward is heartache.

That theme is emphasized later on when Dieyi, well into adulthood, is forced to learn to read. When one of Dieyi's classmates is asked to define what love is, the student, an old army general, says he cannot answer the question because he has never known love. "Besides," says the general, "I always get this character mixed up with the character for 'endure,' because they look so much alike." As the teacher turns to Dieyi, he too says he cannot tell the two characters apart. But it's not just the characters that are indistinguishable. His love for his friend and co-star in the opera has always remained unspoken, creating a terrible longing that goes unfulfilled. This is a key passage in the novel because it so concisely sums up a theme that runs through this book. Lee makes certain that her point is not overlooked. The teacher wonders how anyone could confuse the two concepts, because endure means to "suffer hardship." But, that is exactly what Dieyi's love of Xiao Shitou/Xiaolou brings him. It also generates intense jealousy when Dieyi's love for Xiaolou went unrequited, meaning not returned.

The title of this book comes from the name of a Chinese opera that Dieyi and Xiaolou appear in many times over the course of their careers. That opera becomes a sort of parallel world. With Xiaolou repeatedly playing a courageous general and Dieyi his concubine Yu Ji, the two are cast in roles that reflect their true natures. It is an interesting, unusual plot device that Lee uses to help convey her ideas about love, as she compares the fate of the characters in the opera with that experienced by the novel's two protagonists. This device adds a level of psychological complexity to the story. At one point Lee writes:

Onstage, Yu Ji was able to tell her lover that just as a virtuous minister does not serve two princes, so a virtuous woman cannot marry twice; then she asks for his sword so that she can end her life in his presence. This was her way of demonstrating her love for him, and her acceptance of his boundless love for her. But in real life Dieyi's love was unrequited.

Because Dieyi's love is not returned, he becomes insanely jealous when Xiaolou falls in love with a prostitute and marries her. But using the opera as a way to make this tale richer is not the only devise Lee employs to make this a compelling novel. In a sense, the history of China during the twentieth century serves as a kind of character in this novel, because events taking place in the world around them have such significant impact on the relationship between Dieyi and Xiaolou. Other authors have done the same thing. *Gone With the Wind*, *Les Miserables*, and *Dr. Zhivago* are just a few examples of books where periods of tremendous political turmoil help generate unforgettable romances. Having characters thrust into situations where the world around them is undergoing drastic change creates the potential for high drama. *Farewell My Concubine* certainly fits in with that rich tradition. Lee's novel covers a particularly long time span, beginning in 1929 and concluding in the 1990s. The Nationalist revolution that overthrew an ancient feudal system is less than 20 years old when the story begins. As the lives of Dieyi and Xiaolou unfold, the story arcs across a span of history that includes the Japanese invasion of China, the civil war between Chinese Communists and Nationalists, up through the brutal Cultural Revolution conducted under Chairman Mao. As the character Xiaolou observes near the end of his life, "China had known too much suffering in this century." That pain is integral, or key, to the story, not just as a backdrop, but as an influence on the main characters, who have their love for each other tested by the turmoil and difficulty that surrounds them. The climax comes when Dieyi, Xiaolou, and his wife, Juxian, are all accused of committing a very serious crime by mounting a sword with its tip pointed toward a picture of Chairman Mao during a period of terrible political repression in China known as the Cultural Revolution. It is a measure of their love that each attempts to take the blame. Again, true love, Lee is saying, means having the willingness to sacrifice one's self if it means saving a loved one.

Of all the pitfalls that can be found along the path of true love, jealousy is perhaps the most destructive. In this story, Dieyi is so jealous of Juxian he will do anything to see her marriage to Xiaolou ruined. Lee describes his state of mind by writing: "If the destructive force of the Cultural Revolution were to break up Xiaolou's marriage to Juxian, then all of the violence and suffering would not have been wasted." He gets his wish when

Xiaolou, in an attempt to save Juxian, announces he will divorce her. But she is unable to bear the thought of such separation and commits suicide. Her death, in turn, rips at Xiaolou's heart. Looking at his dead wife, he feels "like a drowning man watching the last life preserver slipping away from him." But Juxian's death brought no happiness to Dieyi. He and Xiaolou are forced to separate, and they see each other only once more as their lives are drawing to a close. And even then, there was no joy to be found in reuniting. "Seeing Xiaolou again was unbearably painful," explains Lee.

After separating from Dieyi for the final time, Xiaolou is left alone in the world. Throughout the book, he remained much like the character he was cast to play: brave, steadfast, and honorable. The wife he loved is long gone, and the man he loved as a brother leaves as well. Lee's concluding message is that, when it comes to love, even when one acts with the best of intentions, the results can be tragic. She uses thinly veiled symbolism to drive her bleak point home, pointing out that when he attempts to go to a public bath to seek some comfort, it's name has been changed from "BATHING IN VIRTUE POOL" to "FINLAND BATHS." "There wasn't even any refuge in virtue anymore," concludes Lee. The ending is a forlorn one. It reflects the kind of pain untold numbers of broken-hearted lovers have felt throughout the ages. The beauty of this book is that Lee is able to take that sorrow and transform it into a complex and compelling work of art.

Source: Curt Guyette, Critical Essay on *Farewell My Concubine*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Adaptations

Farewell My Concubine was adapted as a feature film in 1993 by Beijing Film Studio. The English-subtitled film, directed by Kaige Chen and co-written by Lilian Lee and Wei Lu, features Leslie Cheung as Cheng Dieyi, Fengyi Zhang as Duan Xiaolou, and Li Gong as Juxian. It is available on DVD and VHS from Miramax Home Entertainment.

Topics for Further Study

Read a first-person account from a Chinese man or woman who lived through the years of Mao's rule in China. Compare this person's experience with the experience of the main characters in *Farewell My Concubine*. Discuss what it must have been like to be alive in China during this time.

Find another modern society from the past 100 years that experienced the same type of oppressive rule that citizens in China faced in the twentieth century. Research the particulars of this oppression, imagine that you are a citizen in this other society, and write a journal entry depicting what life is like during a typical day in your life.

Research other art forms prevalent in China, specifically in Peking (modern day Beijing), during the time period when the book takes place. Choose an art form and a specific artist within this genre. Write a biography about this person, noting any challenges the artist faced due to the social situation in China at the time.

Research the interactions other countries had with China in the last half of the twentieth century. Choose five countries and plot them on a chart, including the country's name, political orientation, interactions with China, and reasons for these interactions. Discuss any common themes you find, and, if possible, pose a reason for these similarities.

Watch the film version of *Farewell My Concubine* and compare it to the novel. Write a magazine-style review that includes your observations, including your opinion on whether the book deserves to receive less attention than the film, as has been the case thus far.

What Do I Read Next?

Lee is a bestselling novelist in modern China. She and her contemporaries draw from a long history of Chinese women's writing. *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (2000), edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, includes a chronological selection of poetry and criticism from 222 to the early twentieth century, as well as helpful notes on the texts and biographical information on the authors.

Richard Gunde's *Culture and Customs of China* (2002) examines what life is like for people in modern-day China. The book includes sections on every major aspect of Chinese life, including thought and religion; literature and art; food and clothing; architecture and housing; and family and gender.

C. T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1999) provides a good introduction to Chinese fiction written from 1917 to the late 1990s. The book also covers many of the historical and political events that took place during this time period.

In Michael David Kwan's *Things That Must Not Be Forgotten: A Childhood in Wartime China* (2000), the author, who is of mixed Chinese-Swiss descent, recalls his life growing up in China during the Japanese occupation, the nationalist-communist conflict, and the effects that these events, as well as his own mixed-race background, had on his life and the life of his family.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is a collection of sixteen interlinked tales about the problems that Chinese-American women face when trying to reconcile their Chinese and American heritages. Set in San Francisco in the 1980s, the majority of the book is told in flashbacks, which include experiences in China during many of the same time periods examined in *Farewell My Concubine*. All the stories are narrated by either a Chinese-born mother or her American-born daughter.

James and Ann Tyson, correspondents for the *Christian Science Monitor*, spent five years in modern China, seeking out life stories and opinions from a wide variety of Chinese people while avoiding government intervention in their project. The result of their research, *Chinese Awakenings: Life Stories from the Unofficial China* (1995), uses personal stories of modern Chinese people to chronicle the massive changes that the country has been undergoing in recent years.

Further Study

Cameron, Nigel, and Brian Brake, *Peking: A Tale of Three Cities*, Harper and Row, 1965.

This invaluable resource on the history of Peking includes a number of photos, illustrations, maps, and charts that increase the reader's understanding of the ancient city. In addition, the book includes a section on Peking opera.

Gudnason, Jessica Tan, *Chinese Opera*, Abbeville Press, 2001.

This coffee-table book explores the colorful world of Chinese opera in more than 100 full-page photographs by Gudnason. The photos, many of which are close-up portraits, offer a thorough examination of the types of costumes and makeup performers wear in Peking, Cantonese, and Yue opera. The book includes an introductory essay by Gong Li□the actress who played Juxian in the film version of *Farewell My Concubine*□which explains the various types of characters, costumes, and makeup involved in Chinese opera.

MacKerras, Colin, *Peking Opera*, Images of Asia series, Oxford University Press, 1997.

This illustrated introduction to Peking opera includes explanations of common character types, descriptions of sample operas, and a brief history of the art form and its cultural effect on modern China.

Roberts, J. A. G., *A Concise History of China*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

While the novel explores events in the twentieth century, reviewing China's history as a whole can offer additional insight into the causes behind the political events in the twentieth century. Roberts's book offers a brief but informative introduction to China, from prehistory to modern times. The book also includes chapter notes and tips for further reading about China's history.

Spence, Jonathan D., and Annping Chin, *The Chinese Opera: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years*, Random House, 1996.

This illustrated book chronicles the years from 1894 to 1996 in China. The narrative essays, which are arranged historically by major political developments such as the war with Japan and the communist Cultural Revolution, include striking photographs and informative captions that give a sense of life in each time period.

Bibliography

Lee, Lilian, *Farewell My Concubine*, translated by Andrea Lingenfelter, HarperPerennial, 1993.

Review of *Farewell My Concubine*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 33, August 16, 1993, p. 88.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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