

Research Topic:

**Conveying narrative through lighting: How does lighting shape
character development in contemporary film?**

Abstract

This report examines how cinematic lighting contributes to the character development of Cheng Dieyi in Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).

Rather than focusing on historical or gender themes alone, it looks at how changes in light direction, contrast and color help to express Dieyi's shifting status, emotional intimacy and psychological vulnerability across the film.

Through close analysis of selected key scenes, the study compares motivated and expressive lighting choices and shows how these visual decisions articulate Dieyi's identity and inner conflict on screen. The aim is to demonstrate that lighting is not just a background element, but an active narrative tool in constructing the tragedy of Cheng Dieyi's life.

Key word

cinematic lighting – character development – Light Design – *Farewell My Concubine* – mise-en-scène

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Introduction

Over the past decades, film scholars have shown that lighting is not only a technical necessity but a key element in shaping how audiences understand characters and stories. *Farewell My Concubine* is often discussed for its historical background and gender performance, yet less attention is paid to how its lighting supports Cheng Dieyi's complex character development. This report explores how changes in light direction, contrast and color trace Dieyi's journey from abused child performer to celebrated but deeply conflicted opera star. Focusing on a selection of key scenes across the film, it examines how lighting marks shifts in his status, emotional intimacy and vulnerability. The aim is to show that lighting plays an active role in constructing Dieyi's identity and the tragedy of his fate.

Literature Review

Research on visual style shows that lighting can be planned as part of a film's visual structure. It can shape visual intensity and guide the viewer's attention. Block states that "the greater the contrast in a visual component, the more the visual intensity of the picture increases," while affinity reduces intensity (Block, 2020, p.20). He also suggests that as "the story conflict intensifies, the visual structure can also intensify" through controlled changes in visual components

(Block, 2020, p.21). Based on this idea, I will mainly analyze Farewell My Concubine for changes in contrast, tone, and color, treating such changes as cues that may be related to character pressure and turning points in drama.

From a practical film-analysis perspective, lighting is one key formal element that helps create meaning. The UNC Writing Center notes that film analysis includes “camera angles, lighting, set design, sound elements, costume choices, editing, etc.” (UNC Writing Center, n.d.). Following these principles, the analysis of the scene considers the role of lighting and other formal elements. It examines the impact these elements create for the audience regarding the relationship and emotion between the characters.

Studies of representation help explain why lighting can function as a meaningful visual code rather than a purely technical choice. Hall defines representation in direct terms: “Representation is the production of meaning through language” (Hall, 1997, p.29). He further explains that we use “signs, organized into languages of different kinds” to communicate meaning (Hall, 1997, p.29). In my study, lighting is treated as part of the film’s sign system—one visual resource among others that can contribute to how Cheng Dieyi’s identity and contradictions are constructed onscreen.

Work on spectatorship and the gaze also clarifies how visual form positions viewers and characters. Mulvey argues that, in mainstream cinema, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female,” and she describes the “male gaze” as projecting fantasy onto the female figure (Mulvey, 1975). While Mulvey’s focus is gendered spectatorship, her argument supports the broader point that visual style can organize how viewers are positioned to look and judge vulnerability or desirability within cinematic representation.

Finally, scholarship on *Farewell My Concubine* supports a semiotic reading of visual elements, including light and shadow, in the construction of identity and conflict. Zhu explicitly refers to “the dreamlike light and shadow of the stage” in relation to Cheng’s final act (Zhu, 2024). This provides a direct scholarly basis for analyzing how lighting in key scenes can be linked to performance, identity symbolism, and the character’s psychological trajectory.

Overall, the literature supports treating lighting as a structured visual resource that can be controlled to support narrative intensity (Block, 2020) and analyzed as part of the film’s meaning-making system (Hall, 1997; UNC Writing Center, n.d.).

Chapter 1. Lighting and narrative in *Farewell My Concubine*

In *Farewell My Concubine*, lighting varies across the film's historical stages and this variation helps organize the viewer's attention and sense of dramatic intensity. In the opera-school sequences, the image often appears high-contrast, with hard top light producing strong shadows. Block argues that higher contrast increases "visual intensity", which is one way visual structure can be controlled in relation to story pressure (Block, 2020, p. 20). When the film moves into Republican Beijing, theatre and nightlife interiors appear warmer and more saturated; color temperature is commonly used to distinguish "warm" and "cool" environments and shift the perceived tone of a scene (University of Exeter, n.d.). Later, in the revolutionary period, the image appears flatter and less saturated. Block also notes that changes in color saturation can support increasing story conflict and intensity, suggesting that color design can be structured alongside narrative development (Block, 2020, p. 28). Zhu's discussion of the film's symbolic construction across eras provides further support for reading visual style as part of meaning-making rather than decoration (Zhu, 2024).

Chapter 2. Lighting and Cheng Dieyi's character development

In the childhood sequences, Dieyi is frequently lit in a similar hard, top-lit manner to the other boys, producing heavy shadows and a comparatively

high-contrast look. Rather than treating this as proof of a specific psychology, it can be described through Block's general principle that contrast increases "visual intensity" and therefore strengthens the visual pressure of a moment (Block, 2020, p. 20). During punishment, the lighting remains bright and harsh, making physical strain and tears clearly visible. In several moments, the master appears in steadier, clearer illumination while Dieyi remains in a harder pool of light; this is an observable lighting contrast that can be discussed as a compositional strategy for emphasis (Block, 2020, p. 20).

As Dieyi becomes a star, stage scenes are presented with brighter, more saturated color and theatrical lighting, while offstage moments often appear cooler and dimmer with stronger facial shadowing. Zhu explicitly refers to "dreamlike light and shadow" on the stage, which supports connecting stage lighting to the film's construction of identity and inner conflict (Zhu, 2024).

Toward the Cultural Revolution and the final performance, the image appears weaker and less visually dominant around Dieyi; this can be described in terms of reduced visual intensity and diminished emphasis, using Block's contrast-based vocabulary without over-claiming beyond the source (Block, 2020, pp. 20, 28).

Chapter 3. Illuminating Cheng Dieyi: A Case Study of Lighting and Character Development in Three Key Scenes of *Farewell My Concubine*

Scene1



Fig. 1. 'Opera-school group in silhouette under strong backlighting'. From

Farewell My Concubine (Chen, 1993).



Fig. 2. 'Dieyi framed alone under hard top light'. From *Farewell My*

Concubine (Chen, 1993).

In Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, lighting is used to distinguish Dieyi from the collective and to indicate a shift in his character position. In Fig. 1, the boys and masters stand as dark silhouettes against strong backlighting from the windows; individual features are suppressed and the group appears as a single mass while the proverb “Each person is responsible for his or her own fate” is heard. The Fig. 2 redirects the key light so that it falls only on Dieyi’s face and torso, leaving the background and others in shadow. This selective illumination marks him as the figure on whom this idea of fate will later be played out.

Scene 2



Fig. 3. ‘Symmetrical composition with cool blue overhead beams separating two figures’. From *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen, 1993).

Backlighting may also be used with a symmetrical composition. The Fig.3

in the frame represent opposite emotional forces in the film, and they are separated by a gap that cannot be resolved. The cinematography treats them equally. Fig. 3 uses high-angle backlighting to outline their silhouettes, and each figure is given the same visual importance. The whole picture frame is symmetrical, and this gives an impression of balance between both sides. So backlighting can be a key tool to create visual and psychological effects in film shooting.

Scene 3



Fig. 4. 'Wide theatre interior with a narrow shaft of light cutting across empty space'. From *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen, 1993).



Fig. 5. 'Two character outlined in backlighting, creating high-contrast silhouettes'. From *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen, 1993).

The final action of *Farewell My Concubine* occurs at the same point in time and space as the opening segment of this story. The intention of this structure follows an upside-down order of time, which follows the thread of memory. To tell this kind of story effectively, the cinematography of *Farewell My Concubine* continually employs one type of lighting: spotlights that illuminate the characters with powerful direction light. Against this dark environment, this direction of light strongly identifies their figures.

This technique produces a stage-spotlight effect. It directs attention to specific points of focus and obscures peripheral details. The stylized lighting also helps build a cohesive narrative arc and creates a clear visual counterpoint to the unfolding plot.

Conclusion

This report has examined how lighting shapes the character development of Cheng Dieyi in *Farewell My Concubine*. At the level of the whole film, shifts from harsh, cold training-school light to warmer theatrical tones and finally to flat, grey revolutionary light support the movement of the narrative from discipline to fragile success and eventual collapse. Chapter 2 showed how these changes are tied closely to Dieyi's life stages: as a child he is exposed in hard light as one body among many; as a star he is split between the brilliant stage image of "Yu Ji" and the cooler, shadowed spaces offstage; in later scenes the weakening light mirrors his loss of status and self.

The case studies of three key scenes demonstrated in detail how selective illumination, symmetrical backlighting and the final blue spotlight construct Dieyi as a figure marked by fate, conflict and disappearance. Overall, the analysis suggests that lighting functions as a consistent visual code that participates in building Cheng Dieyi's identity and tragedy, rather than remaining a neutral technical background. Future work could extend the approach to animation and game light.

Word count: 1517 words

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Image List

Figure 1. Chen, K. (1993) 'Opera-school group in silhouette under backlighting' (00:30:29). From: *Farewell My Concubine*. Available at: Tencent Video (Accessed: 18 December 2025).

Figure 2. Chen, K. (1993) 'Dieyi framed alone under hard top light' (00:30:41). From: *Farewell My Concubine*. Available at: Tencent Video (Accessed: 18 December 2025).

Figure 3. Chen, K. (1993) 'Symmetrical composition with cool blue overhead beams separating two figures' (01:49:00). From: *Farewell My Concubine*. Available at: Tencent Video (Accessed: 18 December 2025).

Figure 4. Chen, K. (1993) 'Wide theatre interior with a narrow shaft of light cutting across empty space' (00:00:53). From: *Farewell My Concubine*. Available at: Tencent Video (Accessed: 18 December 2025).

Figure 5. Chen, K. (1993) 'Two character outlined in backlighting, creating high-contrast silhouettes' (02:42:19). From: *Farewell My Concubine*. Available at: Tencent Video (Accessed: 18 December 2025).