Making Authority Visible: Bodily Discipline and the Political Appropriation of the Visual Grammar of Judgment in *Farewell My Concubine*

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Abstract

Using four sequences from *Farewell My Concubine*—opera-school training, stage performance, a formal courtroom, and a Cultural Revolution struggle session—this article examines how bodily posture, costume, voice, space and spectatorship render roles and authority socially legible. It distinguishes legal authorization from embodied legibility and argues that the visual grammar of judgment is portable across institutional settings: it may present lawful procedure, but coercive rituals lacking defence, independent adjudication, and remedy may also appropriate it. Through structured comparative close reading, the article shows why recognizable performances of judgment cannot themselves establish legal validity and why "visual law" must attend to authorization and contestability.

Keywords: visual law; *Farewell My Concubine*; bodily discipline; judicial authority; struggle sessions.

[A] INTRODUCTION: WHEN THE BODY GETS THE LINE "RIGHT"

The opera-school sequences in *Farewell My Concubine* render "correction" as a bodily event. Xiaodouzi sings the line from "The Nun's Wandering Thoughts (Si Fan)" as "I was born a young man, not a delicate maiden," reversing the gendered self-description; Shitou picks up an opium pipe and forces its stem into his mouth. Once blood appears, Xiaodouzi finally gets the line "right": "I was born a delicate maiden, not a young man." Existing film scholarship has documented this action and sequence (He 2023: S124). The moment does not prove that some inner identity has been rewritten

by a single act of violence; more precisely, a line deemed "correct" is pressed into the body—through punishment, repetition, and the witness of others—until it acquires a publicly recognizable form.

This raises a legal question: besides institutional authorization, must authority also appear in some bodily and sensory form in order to be recognized and acted upon in social interaction? This article answers in two layers. The first is formal authorization: legal systems allocate, through rules of recognition, appointment, jurisdiction and procedure, who is entitled to render binding judgment in law's name (Hart 2012). Legal validity cannot be read directly off a robe, a tone of voice, or a raised bench; the operation of legal authority is also shaped by a juridical field structured by professional qualifications, institutional boundaries, and relative autonomy (Bourdieu 1987). The second layer is what this article calls embodied social legibility: posture, voice, costume, architecture, speaking order and audience position render authority visible, audible and intelligible in public experience. The latter can reinforce, weaken or distort people's experience of the former, but it is not a substitute source for it.

This distinction also requires separating "recognition", "obedience", and "legitimacy". One may recognize who is presiding over a ceremony, and may obey out of fear, without believing that power to be rightful. Legitimacy typically denotes a normative judgement: people regard an authority as appropriate, rightful, and worthy of voluntary compliance; it cannot be inferred directly from bowed heads, silence, or synchronized chanting (Tyler 2006). This article therefore does not treat bodily postures as transparent evidence of inner belief, but as an observable way of registering participants' positions within an arrangement of power.

Law and performance scholarship has already shown that adjudication is not purely a matter of abstract norms: trials are publicly enacted through space, role, audience and sensory form (Peters 2022; Goodrich & Ors 2026). "Visual law" further asks how image and aesthetic form organize legal judgment (Sherwin 2011). Notably, Arianna Careddu and Paolo Vargiu (2025), writing in this journal, observe that judicial authority acquires visible form through the aesthetic construction of body, voice, architecture and symbol. The present inquiry shifts attention to the institutional limits of that visual grammar: what occurs when "trial-like" roles, postures, and procedural sequences move from an authorized courtroom to the stage or a political struggle session?

The article's central claim is that the "visual grammar" of judgment is portable, and therefore appropriable. Visual grammar here does not refer

merely to static images, but to the multimodal relational structure jointly constituted by bodily posture, spatial hierarchy, costume symbolism, sound, speaking order and viewing position. It can help an authorized court present procedural order, but it can equally be borrowed by political rituals lacking judicial authorization, defence or remedy, to manufacture a recognizable scene of judgment.

The article uses a structured comparative close reading of four purposively selected sequences: opera-school training; stage performance; a struggle session; and a formal courtroom. Each is analysed along four dimensions—role differentiation, procedural sequence, fact-production and sanction-orientation. The sections follow an analytical progression from bodily training, through role recognition, to political appropriation and legal boundary rather than the film's chronology. The comparison does not claim that opera training caused struggle sessions or that stage, courtroom and struggle session are equivalent institutions. Timecodes follow the 2:44:26, 25 fps Blu-ray edition used by the author. Film stills are reproduced solely for criticism and scholarly commentary; copyright remains with the relevant rights holders.

[B] CORRECTING THE BODY: PUNISHMENT, REPETITION AND THE LEGIBILITY OF THE NORM

Butler's theory of performativity offers a starting point for reading the training scenes. Gender is not a stable essence subsequently expressed through action; it is an identity-effect continuously constituted, within frameworks of social sanction and norm, by repeated and stylized bodily acts (Butler 1988; 1990). Butler later stresses, through the notion of "citationality", that a bodily act becomes intelligible because it repeats and reworks a pre-existing norm (Butler 1993). But performativity cannot be reduced to a performance freely chosen by an actor, nor equated directly with theatrical performance—Chengzhou He, analysing *Farewell My Concubine*, specifically reaffirms this limit (2023: S123–S124).

The value of the pipe scene lies in the way it renders the "citation" of a norm as a recognizable chain: a mis-sung line exposes a discrepancy between the body and the role's script; a peer's physically invasive coercion forcibly halts that discrepancy; the correct line then reappears in a form audible to all present. Punishment here is not merely retribution for error but a technology for producing legibility—it converts "what counts



Figures 1a–1b: Line-correction as bodily discipline: the forcible insertion of the opium pipe into the mouth (top, 00:33:02), and blood at the corner of the mouth after correction under the collective gaze of his peers (bottom, 00:34:20). Farewell My Concubine *(Chen 1993); stills prepared by the authors.*

as a recognizable Yuji" into a set of vocal and postural standards that can be checked, corrected and repeated. Notably, the school master is not the only enforcer of the norm: Shitou's violence toward Xiaodouzi shows that norms can also be transmitted between peers, so that a trainee is simultaneously the object of discipline and a potential agent of it.

Figure 1a uses an extreme close-up that severs surrounding space, compressing the gripping hand, the pipe and the open

mouth onto a single visual plane, so that "correction" first appears as an invasion of bodily boundary; Figure 1b shifts to a more open group shot, juxtaposing the blood at the mouth with a peer's gaze, so that the outcome of violence becomes a mark recognizable to the group. The cut from an afflicted body to collective spectatorship supports not an inner identity rewritten in a single stroke, but a norm acquiring legible form through bodily force, public witness, and subsequent repetition.

Repeated performance of the dan role should not be treated as a single cause of Cheng Dieyi's gender, desire or life outcome. If the same training regime necessarily produced the same identity, it would have to produce identical outcomes in every male dan performer, which it plainly does not (He 2014; Xing 2022; He 2023). The film supports a narrower claim: discipline compels the body to meet a publicly recognizable standard of role. The legal analogy is similarly limited. Both operatic and judicial roles must be socially legible, but their institutional foundations differ: a judge's authority derives from legal authorization, whereas an actor's role derives from theatrical convention. Bodily performance may strengthen or weaken the credibility of either role, but it does not erase that distinction.

[C] FROM REPETITION TO RECOGNITION: HOW SPECTATORSHIP MAKES A ROLE CONVINCING

That the adult Cheng Dieyi becomes "Yuji" on stage signals that the weight of training has shifted from correction to recognition. Costume, make-up, vocal style and posture form a shared repertoire of operatic signs; the audience does not mistake the performer for a historical person, but recognizes the role as established within an agreed aesthetic frame—the credibility of the character comes from the completion of convention and craft, not from verification of the performer's private identity (Tian 2000). Recent historical scholarship likewise notes that cross-dressing performance may both destabilize gender binaries and coexist with objectification, sexualization and social hierarchy (Ren 2024).

The film further gives this recognition a double structure of spectatorship: the audience within the diegesis watches Yuji, while the audience beyond the screen simultaneously watches how Cheng Dieyi is organized by the stage, the camera and others'



Figures 2a–2b: A stage role established through spectatorship: make-up, headdress, costume and figural relation render "Yuji" and "Xiang Yu" recognizable (top, 01:00:11); the full-stage shot draws the audience into the same structure of recognition (bottom, 01:00:33). Farewell My Concubine *(Chen 1993); stills prepared by the authors.*

gazes—this intermedial relation between Chinese cinema and opera is not decorative "play-within-a-play", but actively arranges the position from which the audience identifies (Mello 2023). Cheng Dieyi's recognizability is therefore not achieved by him alone: operatic convention supplies the signs, the theatre audience supplies immediate recognition, and the film's narrative refracts the stage role against his life experience.

Figure 2a uses a closer shot scale to foreground make-up, headdress, costume and stylized gesture,

presenting character identity as a set of legible visual signs; Figure 2b then pulls back to a full stage shot, letting the audience's dark silhouettes occupy the lower edge of the frame. This shift in scale, from medium close-up to wide shot, not only shows how the role is encoded, but also places both the theatre audience and the extra-diegetic audience within the same chain of spectatorship, so that the role attains recognition through shared convention and collective watching.

This offers a limited but useful analogy for legal authority. A judge is likewise swiftly recognized through robe, seating, form of address, speaking order and others' cooperative deference; judicial scholarship documents how demeanour and communicative style shape the experience of fairness and authority (Mack & Roach Anleu 2010; Roach Anleu & Mack 2015). But stage recognition is an aesthetic convention, whereas judicial recognition remains bound by public-law authorization, procedural duty and remedial mechanisms. The audience's belief that "Yuji is established on stage" and a litigant's acknowledgment that "this person is entitled to render binding judgment" are not the same kind of normative act.

The legal analogy cannot exhaust the film. To treat Cheng Dieyi merely as a specimen of the "recognizable body" would flatten the queer affect, intimacy and historical forces that structure the film (Hsu 2012). The stage sequence therefore serves as a mediating step rather than the model's conclusion: recognition is jointly produced by performer, convention and audience, while the next section shows how that structure is deformed within a coercive political ritual.

[D] PERFORMING JUDGMENT: HOW THE STRUGGLE SESSION APPROPRIATES THE VISUAL GRAMMAR OF JUDGMENT

The struggle-session sequence in *Farewell My Concubine* places its characters within public accusation, mutual denunciation and crowd surveillance. Who may question and who must answer, who stands and who bows the head, and which account may be established on the spot as "fact," are all arranged by an asymmetric order of space and speech. Scholarship on the Cultural Revolution documents how public struggle sessions relied on role-typing, formulaic language, accusation and performative violence to display political power and organize mass participation (Yuan & Ors 1990; Wang 2014). The film does not simply depict an unruly quarrel; it presents a choreographed scene of public judgment: private relations are converted under pressure into



Figures 3a–3b: Political appropriation of the visual grammar of judgment: the body displayed under a placard before the crowd's gaze (top, 02:28:27); costume, placard, flame, red flags and crowd compose the struggle scene (bottom, 02:32:48). Farewell My Concubine *(Chen 1993); stills prepared by the authors.*

testimony, identities are renamed, and the crowd's presence lends the humiliation its public character.

Figure 3a adopts a diagonal, kinetic composition in which the body is pulled open, fixed and put on display by others, rather than appearing as a self-narrating subject; Figure 3b shifts to an almost frontal crowd tableau, with flame in the foreground and red flags and the crowd behind, converting operatic costume from a sign of character into evidentiary material for political accusation. Red, smoke, flame and ranks of orderly crowd fill the frame together, placing the

extra-diegetic audience, too, in the position of witnessing public sanction. The two frames together show that the struggle session can borrow role differentiation, public witnessing and sanction-orientation to manufacture a scene that "looks like judgment", even as this recognizability cannot supply the judicial authorization and procedural safeguards that are absent.

To call this a "trial-like ritual" is not to say that the struggle session is a trial, still less to grant it legal status. Show trials, theatrical trials, and lawful trials must be kept conceptually distinct (Arjomand 2018). In this article, "trial-like" functions only as an analytic screening device, used to identify the formal grammar shared by political ritual and trial, without pronouncing on legality. Specifically, four interrelated features may be observed:

1 role differentiation: accusers, accused persons, organizers or enforcers, and spectators occupy differentiated positions;
2 procedural sequence: accusation, interrogation, response, confession or pronouncement unfold in a recognizable order;
3 fact-production: denunciation, testimony and public statement are compiled into a version of "fact" that those present are required to accept;
4 sanction-orientation: the ritual is directed toward humiliation, punishment, exclusion or the stripping of identity, rather than open-ended discussion.

These features explain how a ritual may be made to look like a trial; they do not make it law. The decisive contrasts are authorization and contestability. This article uses fairness, a public hearing, a genuine opportunity to be heard and independent adjudication as contemporary analytical yardsticks (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966: Article 14), not as standards retrospectively attributed to the Republican-era court depicted in the film. A lawful trial at least claims to operate under pre-existing authority and procedural duties, and to permit defence, objection, reasoned decision and review. The struggle session instead has roles and conclusions fixed by mass-campaign politics. It lacks a neutral adjudicator, a right of defence, evidentiary standards and effective remedy. Although it has no lawful judicial authorization, it produces severe political, social and bodily consequences. It is therefore better understood as non-judicial coercion performed through the appearance of judgment.

Degradation, audience and coerced participation

The struggle ritual aims not only to establish that some act occurred, but to rewrite who a person "is". Harold Garfinkel (1956) characterizes such public processes as status degradation ceremonies: the denouncer speaks in the name of the collective, interprets a specific act as evidence of an entire character, and pushes the accused beyond the community's moral boundary. The mutual denunciation in *Farewell My Concubine* enacts precisely this transformation. Characters are not merely asked what happened, but are compelled to reinterpret each other's past through political labels; fact-production and identity-production thus merge within the same scene.

Nor should the crowd's movements and slogans be read as direct evidence of inner belief. As a cross-contextual theoretical reference, Lisa Wedeen (2015) argues that authoritarian ritual may require public performance "as if" one believes, thereby producing compliance without proving conviction. The article borrows this mechanism without equating Syria with Cultural Revolution China. Elizabeth Perry (2021), likewise, illuminates how work teams and "ritual specialists" reshape identities through denunciation, oath-taking and public ceremony; it is used here as a mechanism-level comparison, not as direct evidence about the film's particular struggle session. Bowed heads, silence, slogans and mutual denunciation therefore first register coercive positioning; without further narrative evidence, sincere belief cannot be inferred.

This boundary also guards against conflating "politicization" with "lacking law". The formal post-Mao trial of the "Gang of Four" likewise carried a heavy political and symbolic charge, yet it strove, through courtroom, legal text and procedural form, to distinguish itself from mass-campaign politics (Cook 2016). The question is not whether a trial possesses theatricality—every public trial possesses some presentational structure—but whether its performance is bound by authorization, evidence, defence, and reviewability.

[E] THE BOUNDARIES OF VISUAL LAW: AUTHORIZATION, LEGIBILITY AND CONTESTABILITY

The domains above form a single but asymmetric comparative frame. Stage role, formal judicial authority and struggle ritual all achieve social legibility through body, symbol and spectatorship, yet their normative sources and consequences differ. The stage relies on aesthetic convention, the court on legal authorization and the

Dimension	Stage Role (Yuji)	Formal Judicial Authority	Struggle Ritual
Source of norm	Its normative source is operatic convention and aesthetic tradition.	Its normative source lies in the Constitution, law, appointment, jurisdiction and procedure.	Its normative source is the organizational power of a political movement and its ideological script.
Visible/audible form	It becomes visible and audible through vocal style, posture, make-up and costume.	It becomes visible and audible through robes, forms of address, seating, speaking order and spatial boundaries.	It becomes visible and audible through standing positions, bowed heads, slogans, interrogation and public denunciation.
Position of the viewer	The viewer recognizes the role as established within an aesthetic convention.	The viewer observes, participates and may contest the proceedings as a party or member of the public.	The viewer is organized as a witness, respondent, spectator, or co-enforcer.
Principal consequence	Its principal consequence is aesthetic and narrative.	It produces a legally binding decision that carries legal responsibility.	It produces serious *de facto* political, social and bodily consequences.
Formal judicial authorization	Not applicable; the role is created by theatrical convention.	It possesses formal judicial authorization, although specific acts may exceed or violate that authority.	It possesses no lawful judicial authorization.
Contestability and safeguards	Its contestability is governed by artistic judgment and theatrical convention.	It is, in principle, contestable through defence, evidence, reason-giving and review.	Its conclusion is predetermined, and it lacks a neutral adjudicator, defence and an effective remedy.
Recognition and identification	The viewer may recognize the role without believing that it is real.	Recognizing the office does not amount to endorsing the decision; legitimacy still requires evaluation.	Public compliance may result from fear, and sincere belief cannot be inferred from it.

Table 1. A controlled comparison of the stage role, formal judicial authority, and the struggle ritual.

struggle session on mass-campaign organization and coercive power. The training sequence functions as a genealogy of embodied legibility rather than as a fourth authority-bearing domain and is therefore omitted from Table 1. Shared form does not entail shared validity: the table separates how authority looks from the basis on which it acts.

Figure 4a uses deep, axial composition to place the bench at the highest and furthest point, while the central aisle, speakers, railing and public gallery occupy successive spatial tiers. Figure 4b tightens the shot and exposes the standing participants to the combined gaze of the court and the audience. Symmetry, elevation and railing translate institutional roles into visible spatial relations, but cannot substitute for jurisdiction, authorization, evidence or remedy. Cheng Dieyi's later release through Yuan Shiqing's intervention also warns against treating formal architecture as proof of procedural justice. The scene is used only to identify the spatial grammar



Figures 4a–4b: Spatial choreography of a formal trial: the raised bench, central aisle, railing and public gallery differentiate procedural roles (top, 01:49:22); a closer shot separates the speaking area from the viewing area (bottom, 01:51:26). Farewell My Concubine *(Chen 1993); stills prepared by the authors.*

through which judicial authority is presented, not to endorse the proceeding it depicts.

This comparison also shows why visual form is not a necessary condition of lawful authority. Legal validity derives from rules of authorization; even if a judge appears clumsy or the courtroom is modest, authority does not simply vanish for aesthetic failure. Conversely, a ritual, however highly recognizable and tightly ordered, does not thereby acquire legal status merely from the appearance of a trial. Visual and sensory form is better understood as a medium for the public presentation of authority: it shapes whether

participants can understand roles, anticipate procedure and experience fairness, and it may equally conceal overreach, bias or coercion.

Empirical research makes this judgment more concrete. Judicial demeanour and the communication of decisions shape how litigants experience fairness and authority (Mack & Roach Anleu 2010; Roach Anleu & Mack 2015); video links change a judge's image and position of interaction (Rowden & Wallace 2018); courtroom architecture and boundaries encode hierarchy and procedural values (Mulcahy 2011). Research on legal ritual similarly indicates that space, dress, bodily co-presence and atmosphere help sustain the solemnity of trial, and that virtualization alters these cues (Jeutner 2024; Flower 2025). This research supports the narrower proposition that presentation shapes the experience of authority; it does not create legal authorization.

Visibility carries a second direction as well. Judicial imagery and open courts give justice public form, while simultaneously exposing authority to observation, record and critique (Resnik & Curtis 2011). Visual law should therefore study not only how authority uses image to win respect, but also how image reveals ruptures in authorization: who is excluded from the frame, who may not speak, what evidence cannot enter the record, which gestures are performed under duress. Contestability thus becomes the bridge between visual research and rule-of-law judgment. Lawful authority must not only be capable of being seen, but must allow its reasons, evidence and powers to be seen and challenged.

The contribution of *Farewell My Concubine* is therefore not to prove that law is essentially performance, but to expose the possible misalignment between performative form and legal boundary. Opera-school training embeds a norm in the body; the stage renders that body recognizable as a role through spectatorship; the struggle session reassembles role, procedure and audience once judicial safeguards have been withdrawn. The visual grammar of judgment can cross institutional boundaries; authorization and contestability cannot be acquired by imitation.

[F] CONCLUSION

Farewell My Concubine makes visible the bodily conditions often hidden within authority. The pipe-correction scene traces how a norm is pressed into recognizable speech and posture through repetition, punishment and peer surveillance. The stage scene locates a role's credibility in the joint work of performer, convention and audience. The struggle session then exposes how role differentiation, procedural sequence, fact-production and

public sanction can persist even after the appearance of judgment has been severed from judicial authorization.

The analysis yields two conclusions. First, formal authorization and embodied social legibility jointly shape the public experience of authority, but neither substitutes for the other. Second, the portability of the visual grammar of judgment is both a resource for presenting legal authority and a risk of appropriation by non-legal power. Robe, posture, interrogation and silence cannot determine whether a performance of power belongs to law. One must also ask who authorized it, on what evidence, whether defence and reasons were available, and whether the decision can be reviewed. Visual law's critical potential lies not only in showing how authority becomes visible, but in testing whether visible authority can be contested.

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