

ZHANG YIMOU **INTERVIEWS**

EDITED BY FRANCES GATEWARD



Discussing

Red Sorghum

JIAO XIONGPING/1988 Winning

Winning Credit for My Grandpa

Could you discuss how you chose the novel for Red Sorghum?

I didn't know Mo Yan; I first read his novel, *Red Sorghum*, really liked it, and then gave him a phone call. Mo Yan suggested that we meet once. It was April and I was still filming *Old Well*, but I rushed to Shandong-I was tanned very dark then and went just wearing tattered clothes. I entered the courtyard early in the morning and shouted at the top of my voice, "Mo Yan! Mo Yan!" A door on the second floor suddenly opened and a head peered out: "Zhang Yimou?" I was dark then, having just come back from living in the countryside; Mo Yan took one look at me and immediately liked me-people have told me that he said

Yimou wasn't too bad, that I was just like the work unit leader in his village. I later found out that this is his highest standard for judging people-when he says someone isn't too bad, that someone is just like this village work unit leader. Mo Yan's fiction exudes a supernatural quality "cobblestones are ice-cold, the air reeks of blood, and my grandma's voice reverberates over the sorghum fields." How was I to film this? There was no way I could shoot empty scenes of the sorghum fields, right? I said to Mo Yan, we can't skip any steps, so why don't you and Chen Jianyu first write a literary script. At that time, I was busy filming *Old Well* and didn't have the time to worry about it; I also hoped Mo Yan could make a little profit for his writing. Later on would come the film script, and after that he wouldn't have to worry about it. Film, you know, must always be made filmic.

Later on, Mo Yan wrote a letter to someone else, who passed it on to me to read. I was really touched. He said he didn't care how the director shot the film at all. Some writers are no good; they'll hold up their books and question how you could have neglected to film this sentence-this sentence is so profound, so important! I really applauded Mo Yan when I read his letter. He really understands that film is film. After he'd seen it, he even told me that the film was a bit better and also said that from then on I only had to say the word, and he'd let me film his fiction.

The overall form of Red Sorghum seems to have avoided the detachment of Fifth Generation directors and also preserved characteristics of traditional popular drama.

I think this is true. I've been conscious of this throughout my creation of the film. I myself thought of it in terms of form and didn't actually consider the box office too much. But I do feel that every director hopes that more people will enjoy seeing a film. Regardless of whether you make an argument, talk of an idea, or communicate a thought, you hope more people will accept it, yet be imperceptibly influenced by it-you don't want to put everything on the surface.

Red Sorghum really hopes to link these two aspects of film. On the whole, I think that *Yellow Earth*, *Horse Thief*, and *King of the Children* have already displayed this kind of film, with a reduced sense of theatricality, a striking expression of ideas and feelings-their plots are rather "thin"-and of antitraditionalist construction. I think that over the past three to five years, there's been no lack of this kind of work domestically and I didn't want to repeat this pattern.

But the other, theatrical kinds of films don't take notice of film's means of expression. They don't fully utilize the creativity of sight and sound and just continuously knead things like dramatic conflict, theatrical principles, and the climax. There are many films like this; they have flooded the market. So I considered this in terms of form, blending and synthesizing the two together. It has a good story framework that's easy to follow, yet we were also able to maintain our strengths as young filmmakers, bringing the characteristics of film language into full play and using our own methods to tell a story.

Also, we wanted to reveal our thoughts and ideas in a natural and relaxed manner. There are many truths in this world. And actually, film is an artistic process. I've always felt that there's no need to use the screen to display profound truths-let philosophers deal with that. The most profound truths of the world are perhaps the simplest-finished in a sentence. *Red Sorghum* of course wants to discuss some truths and ideas but hopes that they'll be accepted easily and be more appealing. What the audience comes to understand in this process is

their own business. I rather admire works into which ideas and philosophies blend and seep naturally-these are good films. What they say is very succinct and not so complicated. It's tiring to watch a film that isn't clear about what it says.

Mo Yan's fiction really has literary charm. His language manipulates ambiguities of contrast and juxtapositions of myth and reality; his structure is also complicated, continuously interweaving different points of view. The methods of your film seem to simplify it into a prototype of the book.

That's exactly right. I feel that film has to find its own means of expression; it can't duplicate literature. Even an adaptation of a good literary work must first become a film; it can't be a copy of literature. An adaptation doesn't have to be like the original work, and it should be filmic. The first thing I do is simplify its events-simplify and popularize them. Film goes by only once, and its form of viewing is compelling. There's no time to go back, or turn back and reflect. You have no choice but to go along with the screen. Sometimes in literary language one or two sentences are very refined and charming. You can repeatedly try to figure them out, and once you've reached the last chapter, you could even rummage back to reflect on earlier points in the book. A film goes by only once, and not many ordinary people will see it two or three times. The rest of the viewing space is black and silent-the only thing with light and sound is the screen. The audience has no choice but to move along with the film's time, and because of this, films shouldn't be too complicated. In adapting *Red Sorghum* to the screen, we had to select the events that went on without any interruption, were simple and succinct, and went by in one breath in the hopes of creating one overall kind of feelings very different from literature.

I noticed that the film consciously utilizes the visual language of Fifth Generation directors.

It basically continues this kind of language. We've rather emphasized narrative methods; we're comparatively filmic. The early period of Chinese film was influenced by the modern dramatic stage, and older generations of filmmakers stressed plot and events. We filmed it very differently, continuing the methods of a younger generation of directors.

Did you have any particular designs in terms of visuality and language?

Many. I feel that the visual impact created by *Red Sorghum's* screen is very intense, and cinematography plays the most prominent role in controlling this. I myself am a cinematographer, and Gu Changwei is a first-rate one-there's no doubt about this. We're both excellent cinematographers-I'd say I'm one too, I won't be modest, but I really feel that I can't compare with Gu Changwei-and the movie definitely has intense visuality because of this. We stressed color-gave full reign to the use of it-and largely utilized red to the point where the whole last frame was all red. This sense of color is very striking. The symbolic meaning of red in China is implicitly understood by everyone; it's recently been used to represent revolution, but how long has this revolution been in China? In China's five thousand years of cultural tradition, the color red has simply represented hot passion, the approach of the sun, burning fire, warm blood. I think that for all humankind, it has a kind

of intense feeling. You could never say that it was cool, could you?

To say it simply, through the strange events of a man and a woman in a sorghum field, it conveys a passionate attitude toward living, an unrestricted vitality of life, an enthusiasm, and an emotionally spirited attitude toward human life. Red was definitely the most appropriate color and could be used in great quantity to maintain a visual impact.

Is this experimentation with color inherited from Yellow Earth?

Yellow Earth was an attempt at this, but its premises were different. It was more a critique and reflection-through historical introspection and the slow, steady, and immutable rhythms of life-on the nation and history. You see, the use of color in *Yellow Earth* is controlled. In this vast piece of yellow earth, one lone girl wears red. In this vast and boundless frame, all this heavy yellow encircles this red; it's a kind of restraining of human passion and illustrates that many things are immutable and frozen, that the individual is powerless. *Red Sorghum* is different; the color red is displayed to the fullest extent here. Simply speaking, its theme is just the praising of life. As long as the plot, events, and characters all made sense together, we utilized red to the fullest, allowing it to really penetrate these points.

Did you handle the sound in any particular way?

We intentionally made several sections of music very loud. The *suona* horn is inherently very loud, and we had thirty *suona* all play clamorously together. This is how we wanted to display the sound. The singing of these songs was actually influenced by traditional northern opera. Opera has a longer tradition than popular songs; its national culture runs much deeper. From my experiences living in the countryside, peasants have spent more time with opera than with popular song. Northern opera has a fundamental roughness, an openness. It's bold and unrestrained and is often sung over the empty countryside. Peasants all over the world sing loudly and don't use that kind of refined, controlled, or low voice; rather, they shout, wail, and sing to entertain themselves. So we integrated the particular qualities of opera in composing the music, but we didn't reveal its concrete time or place-as long as it was the northern countryside, it was OK. It wasn't like *Yellow Earth's* concrete explanation of northern Shaanxi province.

We blended together operas from the provinces of Shaanxi, Henan, Shandong, and Shanxi, remolded them, spoke with a mixed accent, both resembling and not resembling them. We did all this intentionally. As far as I was concerned, as long as they opened their throats like peasants and yelled as loud as possible when singing, aggressive and disorderly shouting was just fine with me.

The actor's lines were the same. They all shouted what could be shouted, yelling from beginning to end in very loud voices. Only the asides took on a contrasting method, utilizing the most common and calm of voices to tell us-almost without any feeling-about my grandpa and grandma. When you hear his voice, it's completely numb. Jiang Wen dubbed it himself.

With this calm intonation of a modern person, it seems as if he's already told the story a thousand times. There's no feeling of liveliness. We also consciously utilized this kind of calm and ordinary intonation to form a contrast against the film. Here lies the so-called modern consciousness. The film is a story of long ago, and the characters of the

story are all full of a vitality of life; the sound, action, and events are all intense. The modern narrator simply doesn't have this much passion. When this performer dubbed the film, we didn't show him the picture, had him read in a dark room, and didn't let him memorize his lines. If he'd said it from memory, then it would have carried the smell of performance. We wanted it to be like reading a book aloud.

Is this to illustrate that modern people don't have as much vitality of life as those before?

It's to suggest that Chinese people today have lost some of this passion for life. Living and spiritual conditions no longer have that earlier kind of rich vitality. To take it a step further, if a nation wants to develop toward the future, if it wants to be powerful and prosperous or influential, it simply has to have a vitality and burning passion toward life. No matter how much you suffer and no matter how tragic your fate, you need courage to live. This courage can't be worn away; otherwise, humanity would have no way of moving forward or developing toward the future. I think that several thousand years of humanity have also relied upon this kind of courage—an unceasing desire and vitality toward controlling one's own destiny. Every person hopes that his or her life will get better and better; this idea underlies everything. This is a critique of the modern mentality of Chinese people. Even though a country may be poor—its people poverty-stricken with all kinds of problems and much suffering—if people want to live, they should live to their hearts' content, and they should have spiritual passion. So we used the counterpoint of the aside to convey a veiled meaning. We didn't want to be too obvious. It was enough if we conveyed this meaning.

Also, I feel it's really quite interesting when the grandson talks about his grandpa. On the mainland, when someone is called "grandson," it means that he's a coward or weak in character. The grandson talks about his grandpa, but doesn't do it well. If you live like this then you're the grandson, and you'll never be the grandpa. It's pretty interesting.

In Mo Yan's novel, the measure of the female protagonist's morality ...

That she didn't sleep with only one person?

You changed it so that she only has one lover. Does this have anything to do with the issue of morality?

No. Whether the novel reads that "my grandpa" did or didn't "enter into my grandma's kang [bed]," I'm not sure even if he did, what would be the difference? My grandma dared to do anything, as long as she willed it. Mo Yan describes my grandma as sexually unconventional, yet there's no incident of this in the novel. But he always writes.... Once we'd pulled together the structure, we'd already decided how the characters had to be, and the events were already simplified. Other than the fighting of nine years later, the section about nine years earlier occupies two thirds of the film's length, which was concentrated into events completed in six or seven days—the time around the marriage ceremony, returning home after three days, being kidnapped by bandits, after which they made wine, and it was finished! The original novel depicts many events over a certain number of years, and it's very easy to fall in love with many different men over this time. It was hard for us to imagine that over the length of several days, a woman would be

able to sleep with other men after ardently loving one man this much. I don't think this is a question of unconventionality; rather, her falling in love with several men would cause her passionate love to become suspect. Over these few days, her love with this man should be the top priority. It would definitely be interesting if I were to revise the time structure and depict the events of three years in the sorghum fields. While this woman is loose-and this looseness is great-I feel that there's no need to think of this in terms of traditional morality. Characters have to go along with the structure of the film. You can't force an unsuitable structure just to depict how anti-traditional, unconventional, and unrestrained she might be. Otherwise, your ideas will be too obvious and could cause people to feel uncomfortable. You can imagine the flaming passion of a man and woman over five or six days; they'd probably have no time to even think about the possibility of sleeping with someone else!

The structure of the novel is extremely complicated, with juxtapositions of time and space. The film also simplified them.

The flashbacks in the film don't follow the events of the novel that closely. I felt that this method wouldn't be new and worried that it would be too formalistic. I wasn't very interested in this. If the methodology is too strong, the imagery too distinctive, or ideas laid bare too obviously, then you've produced nothing more than counterpoint and contrast, which will cause your film and what you've said to seem artificial and affected. We told it in a simple, straightforward way, with the overall structure maintaining a kind of naturalness and easy sense of narration.

According to Tian Zhuangzhuang, you all were influenced by Neo-Realism and the French New Wave in the course of your studies.

Good films have had influence on us. To say that they haven't is to talk nonsense. No one lives in a vacuum. I believe that the world's great masters, geniuses, and super-genius have always been the products of their times, that they've been influenced by the overall creative atmosphere of their times. Regardless of whether they want to be like other people or not, they've all been influenced. But as we conceived *Red Sorghum*, we didn't refer to any other films, but much rather hoped to make it according to our own ideas and not think about other films as much as possible. In this way we could avoid directly making reference to other films. The quality of a film should lie in its internal and inner influences as opposed to its external form, and its structure should unconsciously rely on these internal things. No one is so stupid as to directly imitate a film and directly copy someone else's success. This tells everyone that you have no creative ability, that you're an idiot. Even if you succeed, you're still an idiot. The essence of art is creativity. The influence from foreign films is in terms of thought, in terms of ways of thinking. Directors like Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, and Michelangelo Antonioni have helped us to understand that it doesn't actually matter how a film is filmed, so long as you convey your own ideas. Yet I don't want to be like Chinese films of the past, invariable and frozen, with only one kind of fixed pattern of thinking.

When you were at the film academy did you often discuss film with your classmates?

Public discussions were never very interesting. Everyone spoke extremely politely, and everyone was afraid of making public fools of themselves. Everything said in public was well thought out. It was more interesting in private, since people were a bit more open and would comment a lot. If a film was good, they'd say it was good, and if it was bad, they'd criticize it. We were full of rebelliousness then, wanting to make films in the future that were different from others. When we filmed *One and Eight*, the four of us including Zhang Junzhao and me-made a pact, spelling out what we would do if we didn't make it well. When *Red Sorghum* was filmed, I also gave Wu Tianming three guarantees-no trouble from the government, artistic quality, and commercial box-office success.

So is *Red Sorghum* drawing large audiences?

It is really making money. In the first round of showings in Beijing, Shandong, and Fuzhou, tickets were all completely sold out and scalped tickets were going for five to ten yuan each-normally one ticket costs three mao. I think it's great that this many people like to see it.

How have older film circles regarded Red Sorghum? .

These elders of the film world haven't liked it. *Yellow Earth*, *Old Well*, and *Red Sorghum* have won awards overseas, yet some people ask why we should want to go to capitalist countries to attend film exhibitions. Some people wrote letters criticizing Wu Tianming's *Old Well* as having "sold out our own mothers"-that it exposed our negative aspects, our poverty and ignorance, and that foreigners only liked it for its novelty. So I'm very grateful to Wu Tianming; he's allowed me to film without any apprehensions. When these people criticize us, it's caused us to feel even more rebellious. We simply have to show them. In school in the past we often said that someday when we made a film, we wouldn't be like others. Chinese people are too inhibited; everything in this society is about politics and society. People aren't people; they're stature is already small, and then they shrink back even further. So we definitely wanted to restore human feelings and relationships. China's five thousand years of history and three thousand years of feudalism are a very heavy burden. So I wanted to make *Red Sorghum*. I believe that Chinese people have already changed a lot. The stifling of politics has been around for too long, and they'll surely want to rise up. I'm not interested in politics. Art dies because of freedom and lives because of oppression. So China is now boiling over and is really seething with excitement. Deng Xiaoping opened the door, and people poked their heads out to look-oh, so this is what the world is like. Once you've opened the door, you can't go back. Although there have been political movements-anti-capitalist liberalism, anti-spiritual pollution-they're all transitory. In the future, China will definitely produce even better directors and works.

A Donkey, a PropeRer, and Young Sorghum

At the end of April, while I was still filming *Old Well*, I pooled some money together and first went to Shandong to look and find out where the sorghum might be in Shandong nowadays. Peasants have all switched to growing other, more valuable cash crops-things

like peanuts. I first chose a piece of land according to its terrain-about sixteen acres of land over which hills undulated nicely-and then looked for some peasants with whom I could negotiate. Over thirty households came. Nowadays, peasants can be very troublesome; they just want money. As soon as I saw the worn out land, I immediately knew that nothing had grown on it for many years, but they said it was valuable. Then I told them, you'll make money, but it also has to be acceptable to us-you can't ask for too much. Eventually, I gave them the money and was relieved when I saw the seedlings sprout. I didn't go back to check on it.

In June, I brought the whole production team to Shandong and was dumbfounded when I saw the sorghum. How could it have grown only to the height of chives? It couldn't even hide your knees, and sorghum should be as high as a roof. These peasants thought that since it was only for a film, there was no need to take care of it after the seeds were planted; they didn't even spread fertilizer or water it. Sorghum needs a lot of water. Every time it's watered, it'll grow a bit less than an inch. So our whole production team watered it. We were first peasants for half a month. I was very worried because the location team was spending night and day in the fields and costing me over a thousand *yqan* per day. We got water from wells and bought fertilizer. We had a fire truck come, too. We grabbed the hose like this and sprayed water over the sorghum. We fired guns for rain every day. Heaven really helped us when it began to rain after a while.

These activities lasted twenty days when one big rain caused the stalks of sorghum to grow like children, every joint making crisp sounds. We were really happy about these big stalks, but there was still a problem. Having thoroughly discussed growing a pure breed of sorghum, these peasants had grown half a field of hybrid sorghum for us. I was dumbfounded-of about sixteen acres, eight had only grown this tall. [He brings his hand to his shoulder.] There's no way it could have hidden anyone's head. Moreover, hybrid sorghum isn't very appealing to look at. Its stalks are really sturdy, thick, and short, and its ears are just a lump like this-not very appealing. It's not like pure sorghum, which is so tall, with a soft top and its ears spreading out. It's beautiful when the wind blows. But what could I do? I had no choice but to film only those eight acres. So it seems that I really did all I could to make even this kind of film, and the result wasn't too bad, ha ha ha.... Think about it, if I'd been given a hundred and sixty acres of sorghum to film, I could have displayed it over a wide screen, which would definitely have been more appealing than now.

Also, Mo Yan's description is very supernatural-"Blood-like sorghum," he writes. That sorghum is just this color. [He points to a light brown-colored doll on the floor.] If you looked down from a mountain to a hundred and sixty-acre expanse of land, it could be a sheet of red. I now only had eight acres. What was the use of it? When the ears open, the stalks all dry up as yellow as maize. If a person were to direct a close up shot toward it, the background would be full of dried up leaves, and where would be the ears of sorghum?

We filmed when it was green. It wasn't red sorghum; we couldn't wait until its ears opened because it would look bad. We called that green a sprightly green to indicate young sorghum. You should always film her when she is a young girl and shouldn't wait until she's an old woman, right? So making this film was really interesting. Even up to today no one has noticed that we only filmed the sorghum within a short period of its life. There are only twenty days from green to red, so we had to scramble to film it. If Chen Kaige

had filmed it, he'd want it to be profound and deep and would never be able to finish it in time.

That donkey was also a lot of fun. Our female protagonist is really beautiful, yet whenever the donkey saw her he'd throw her off; he did this to her so many times. When we'd hit him, he'd walk in circles with this female performer pulling at him from above, saying ... [he laughs] ... she said that the property man should take responsibility for the donkey. I then suggested that he find a gentler, smaller one. He said that it wouldn't be right for the film, but I told him that no one would notice the donkey. In the end, he found a donkey this short-you get on his back and your feet touch the ground. At the beginning of the scene, people hid in the sorghum and prodded him with sticks. The donkey just took a few steps and we scrambled to film them. The female performer asked how she was to act. I said why don't you just walk from here to there. This is how we filmed this scene, and the result wasn't too bad. Later, some people even said that it was very artistic.

Ha ha!

We only had a budget of seventy thousand *renminbi*. If we'd had twice the money, we could have used six helicopters. We needed the wind to blow now, so what were we to do? We brought in a propeller, put it on a truck, and had it blow wind. That wind was so strong that the first five rows of sorghum were all blown to the ground. Those tall stalks became so crooked and ugly. The last twenty rows stood over there not moving at all, so we could only choose from the middle section where the sorghum was swaying fairly calmly.

As for making sorghum wine, everything has modernized now, so who knows how they made sorghum wine fifty years ago? Mo Yan didn't know either, so we blindly worked it out. There's also the earlier sedan chair scene. I asked Mo Yan how the sedan bearers jolted the chair, and he said he didn't know either. So I made it up myself. And the song-I wrote all the lines of the song they sang while jolting her chair. After seeing it, many people said that it preserved folk customs very well. What folk customs? I made it all up. Even that battle scene was also filmed in a rush. We didn't know what we were shooting.