Zhang Yimou: Dramas of Desire and the Power of the Image

Zhang Yimou is now the Chinese film-maker whose work is most widely known in the West, and he has clone more than any other director to give modern Chinese cinema an international profile. His films have won many of the most prestigious awards at the international film festivals, while achieving wide popularity domestically as well. The first film Zhang directed, Red Sorghum (Hong gaoliang), not only won for its director the Golden Bear award at the 1988 Berlin Film Festival, the highest international honor a Chinese film had earned up to that point, but it also found a wide audience in China. It became a kind of cult film, and songs and sequences from it became prominent elements of new folk performances.

Zhang is a multitalented artist, who first displayed his gifts as a cameraman for such films as Zhang Junzhao's One and Eight (Yige he bage, 1984) and Chen Kaige's Yellow Earth. Later, Zhang showed his talents as an actor by playing the lead role in Wu Tiannning's Old Well (Lao jing), made in 1987, for which he won the best actor award at the Tokyo Film Festival. The film itself won the top award at the same festival. Since making his directorial debut with Red Sorghum, Zhang has made a number of films that have been both critical and commercial successes. His 1997 work, Keen Cool (You hua haohao shuo)(Plate 5), is a comic exploration of contemporary urban life in Beijing, which the director promises will make the audience laugh, while pressing them to entertain deep thoughts about the meaning of life. This latest film from Zhang signifies his shift in interest from historical and ethnic themes to a depiction of urban life in contemporary China.

Zhang was born in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, in 1950. When the Cultural Revolution broke out, he was sent to the countryside for three years to work on a production team. Subsequently, he was employed for seven years as a textile worker in the town of Xianyang. From his younger days he was interested in drawing, photography, and the art of cinema, and so he decided to apply for a place in the department of photography at Beijing Film Academy. His request was turned down initially, but later he was admitted to the program. After graduation he was affiliated with the Guangxi Film studio where he was the cinematographer for three films, One and Eight, Yellow earth, and the Big Parade. In 1987, he made his appearance as a highly gifted director with Red Sorghum, the first film by a Fifth Generation film-maker to win a broad-based appeal in China.

In this film, as indeed in all his films to follow, Zhang makes effective use of colour symbolism. The colour red occurs throughout the film-in images of the bridal sedan, in the liquor distilled in the winery from red sorghum, in the blood shell during the war, in bright fires throughout creating a dominant leitmotif. After seeing the film, one is left with the sensation of having partaken of an aesthetic ritual that celebrates life, love, and rebellion. There is a raw energy, a physical absorption in the world, and a yearning for a primal consciousness that have the effect of enlarging the circumference of our emotional topography.
Zhang made his second film, *Judou* (Fig. 3.3), in 1990; it received an American academy award nomination in 1991. The film is set in a small village in the 1920s and recounts the story of a tragic love relationship between Judou and Tianqing. Yang Jinshan is an old and wealthy dye-mill owner. He is also very miserly, and in order to run his business productively he exploits the labours of his forty-year-old nephew, Tianqing. Jinshan buys himself a beautiful and young bride, Judou, so as to make sure that his patriarchal lineage continues. His sexual impotence and sadistic practices, however, result in Judou starting a relationship with Tianqing. The desired male heir is produced from this union.

From the beginning of the film, the viewer senses a certain tragic inevitability about the story. Ultimately, Jinshan and Tianqing come to a tragic ending at the hands of the boy, Tianbai. Judou becomes insane, and she destroys the dye factory as well as herself. The film clearly highlights the nature of feudal exploitation, the dynamics of a patriarchal society, and the tragedy of the victimization of women. The film is based on a story, 'Fuxi, Fuxi', by Liu Heng, but Zhang effects changes in the original story so as to make the film more interesting and visually appealing. In the film, for example, the story unfolds against the backdrop of the dye mill, while this setting is not so apparent in the original story. The change allows the director to make use of colour symbolism to great effect.

*Raise the Red Lantern* (Da hong denglong gaogao gua), made in 1991, was Zhang's third full-length film. Once again the victimization of women and the injustices and indignities to which they are subject form the core of the work. *Raise the Red Lantern* is based on *Wives and Concubines*, a novel by Su Tong. Set in the 1920s, the film recounts the passions, intrigues, and iii justices associated with a polygamous household. A nineteen-year-old university student named Songlian arrives in a feudal manor house presided over by a wealthy and powerful patriarch. She is to become his fourth wife. The title of the movie refers to the practice of lighting a red lantern in the courtyard outside the apartment of the wife who is selected for the night.

Within the enclosed world of the manor house, each wife has her own ways of making the master happy. Very quickly, Songlian catches on to how the game is played. She pretends to be pregnant, and her lanterns are lit all night and all day. The intrigues among the wives, the feudal and patriarchal practices exemplified by the polygamous relations, are captured in a series of memorable images. The story of the film takes place in the feudal manor house, where the four wives plot against each other to obtain the favours of the master each night. The women internalize this oppressive system completely, ultimately leading to madness and death. The master is never shown clearly, but his weighty presence is felt from the beginning to the end of the film.

In 1992, Zhang completed *The Story of Qiu fu* (*Qiu Ju daguansi*) (Plate 7), which went on to win the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival. A film that depicts a quest for social justice, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, unlike Zhang's earlier films, is set in modern times, where economic liberalism and political repression are interwoven. In terms of style, as well as setting, this film differs from Zhang's earlier works. Within it there is a
pronounced element of the documentary and the aesthetics of neo-realism. Much of the film was shot with a hidden camera in the streets of towns in northern Shaanxi. There are only four professional actors in the film; the remainder of the cast comes from the community itself. Some of these play minor roles, while others, unaware of the fact that they are being filmed, simply play themselves. Unlike Zhang's earlier films, here there are no visually striking landscapes or sets—one sees only the milling crowds. *The Story of Qiu Ju* is, in short, a very different kind of film from the director's earlier ones, avoiding the exuberant and distended visual rhetoric that characterized those works.

*The Story of Qiu Ju* is based on a novel by Chen Yuanbin. The title character, Qiu Ju, is an illiterate farmer's wife who simply wants to see justice done; she is seeking official help to obtain an apology from the local government official, Wang Shantang, for kicking her husband in the groin. She first takes the matter up with a local policeman, Li Shunlin, who regards the matter as settled after Wang has agreed to pay the Qius' medical bills. What Qiu Ju wants, however, is an apology. The court upholds the settlement, but Qiu Ju does not give up her struggle to obtain justice, and she appeals to a higher court.

Contrary to expectations, as Qiu Ju meets people on the higher rungs of the bureaucratic ladder, they are unfailingly courteous and helpful to her. By the time Qiu Ju has followed her appeals to the higher court, her husband has recovered from the injury, and as far as he is concerned the matter of the insult is behind him. His more pressing concern is that Qiu Ju is spending the farm's product chillies—for court expenses. An interesting point to this story, as Zhang seems to be implying, is that it takes a strong-willed woman's efforts to maintain a man's honour. It is evident from the film's reception that Chinese officialdom liked the way the bureaucracy was portrayed within it, and this good reception resulted in a more favourable response to his earlier films as well. Discussing this film, Zhang has said, 'In terms of film language or film style, it's totally different from my previous work. Of course, there are inner connections among all my films; the mentality remains consistent. But if you look at *The Story of Qiu III* by its "look", you might not recognize it as my work.'

In 1994, Zhang released *To Live* (Huozhe), that year's winner of the jury award at the Cannes festival. *To Live* is an epic love story that charts the fortunes of a number of generations in a Chinese family. Fugui, the eldest son of a prominent household, makes a living by performing shadow puppetry. He has been performing from early in his life with his wife, Jiazhen, in a small village, and he has been doing so through the years he spent as a soldier in the Nationalist (Guomindang) army, upon his return to his village after it was put under Communist administration, during the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, and in the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution. At the time the film is set, Fugui and Jiazhen find joy in the raising of their grandson. In making *To Live*, Zhang sought to capture in human terms the joys and sorrows, triumphs and defeats, seen as a society moves forward, making right and wrong turns. As Zhang has remarked, there are tears and there is laughter, one following the other in gentle rhythm like the breath of a bellows. How the forces of the wider society influence and shape the lives of
individuals, however remote they may be from the well-springs of those forces, is vividly brought out in this film.

Zhang completed *Shanghai Triad* (Yao a yao, yao dao waipo qiao)(Fig. 3.4) in 1995, winning the jury award at the Cannes International Film Festival for a second time. The visual style, the use of colour, and the striking pictorial compositions that characterized his earlier films, such as *Red Sorghum*, *Judou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern*, are in evidence in this film as well. *Shanghai Triad* takes us to the gangster world of the 1930s. The film deals with the life of a popular cabaret singer, Xiao Jingbao, who is the mistress of Tang, reputed to be the 'godfather' of Shanghai's underworld. Jingbao, played by Gong Li, desires autonomy for herself. With the intention of obtaining it, she allies herself with Tang's second in command, a move that produces tragic results. The story is told from the point of view of a young boy entrusted to watch Jingbao. How compassion and understanding are embroiled with a hunger for power and cruelty is portrayed memorably in this work.

Zhang is a different kind of film-maker from his friend and colleague Chen Kaige. If the latter is more philosophically minded and comfortable with abstract concepts, the former likes to convey his thoughts and experiences as directly as possible. Zhang has always desired to combine popular and artistic elements in his work, while Chen's films, with the exception of *Farewell to My Concubine*, display a certain austerity and have little interest in the melodramatic imagination that characterizes Zhang's work.

Women are central to the work of Zhang in a way that they are not in Chen's films, but despite their strong wills and strength of character, women in Zhang's films are victimized and subject to numerous indignities. They are chained to a highly repressive system from which they desire release. As Rey Chow (1995: 47) points out, in Zhang's films the woman's body becomes the 'living ethnographic museum that, while putting "Chinese culture" on display, is at the same time the witness to a different kind of origin. This is the origin of human sexuality, which should be free but is imprisoned in China.' Chow continues, pointing out that the woman becomes a 'way to localise China's "barbaric" cultural institutions, from which she seeks to be set free'.

Ritual figures prominently in many of Zhang's films, often as a way of presenting shared experiences symbolically and with power and beauty. Zhang's vision is itself connected to the idea of ritual in interesting ways. In *Red Sorghum*, *Judou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern*, in particular, this connection becomes clearly evident. It is well to remind ourselves that ritual is at the centre of Chinese culture, and that the idea of *li* is closely connected to social norms and morality in the Confucian tradition. Similarly, in Communist societies ritual plays a central role in many varieties of symbolic communication.

There is a certain contradiction at the heart of Zhang's films. On the one hand, he is deeply interested in illuminating the plight of women, to show how they are victimized by a patriarchal social order. On the other hand, women are presented as objects of male
desire and voyeurism. His concern for the predicaments of women is crossed by a penchant for exuberant specularity. As Rey Chow (1995: 47) again accurately points out, women in Zhang's films 'draw attention to themselves precisely as spectacular, dramatic bodies.' It is this latter aspect of his films that may ensure their mass appeal. The body, both male and female, is central to the meaning of Zhang's films, and the female body is singled out as an object of male desire, a site of display, and the bearer of inscriptions of social power. The masculine body, on the other hand, displays a raw and brutal energy, 'flames of fierce desire', to use William Blake's phrase, a primeval sensuality which seeks to capture the mythic depth of our collective imagination.

Zhang's films might be described as dramas of desire and sensation. The intense visual energy, the pulsing surfaces of erotic desire, the joyous celebrations of life, the luminous images, and the portrayal of cultural worlds dense and rich in texture hold a special appeal to local as well as international audiences. In many of his films, Gong Li, through her sheer force of presence and her remarkable face, with its mobility and subtlety, add to this broad-based appeal. The ways in which Zhang visualizes the flow of sensations through representational strategies of melodrama displays the special shape of his sensibility and merits deeper investigation. For Zhang, it seems, reality is a theatrical spectacle that has to be captured in all its vividness and raw power.

Not all observers, of course, are equally enthusiastic about Zhang Yiniou's films. There are those who lament that he is textualizing a kind of ethnic primitivism, constructing a mythified China, is a willing prey to orientalism, displaying characteristics of misogyny and pandering to the whims of Western audiences, and that lie has deviated from the deepest impulses of the Fifth Generation. How lie responds to these charges and how lie makes use of his immense gifts for the enrichment of Chinese cinema is something that all lovers of cinema will be watching with great eagerness. In an interview conducted in 1996 by the authors of this book, Zhang denied any Western influences on his film-making, and he raised thought-provoking questions about the future direction of the Fifth Generation, now facing the rapid social, economic, and philosophical changes seen in the China of the 1990s. The Fifth Generation directors, he says, are at a crossroads, negotiating how best to transcend the historical and ethnic themes that have distinguished them from Chinese film-makers of earlier periods.