

Nature and the Healing of Trauma: Early Films by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige

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The way in which the nation-wide trauma of the Cultural Revolution (CR) has found expression in Chinese cinema is inextricably linked to the personal background and difficult life-experiences of the filmmakers of the so-called “Fifth Generation”: those who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1982. Born in the early 1950s to parents with positions in the world of art, letters, and academia, these men and women were adolescents during the CR when the Chinese Communist Party turned against them and their families for having a “wrong” class background. Even those who, as Red Guards, took a stand against their own parents in order to prove their loyalty to the Party remained marginalized within the Communist social hierarchy and suffered acute identity crises.¹

In addition to their traumatic experiences of the CR, when many of them were sent-down by Mao to the countryside to do manual work under Spartan conditions, the Fifth Generation filmmakers also became gravely disillusioned with the politics of Deng Xiaoping’s reform regime: the dissidents of the 1979-1980 Beijing Spring were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, and in June 1989, army tanks ruthlessly suppressed the Beijing student movement. These events greatly aggravated their already deep anxiety over China’s future. Although Fifth-Generation films seldom deal with the CR explicitly, the problematic they address is in a way always connected to the trauma of the CR.²

However, some film critics, especially in China, have voiced the suspicion that directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, ever since they achieved international fame in the 1980s, now merely want to cater to the foreign market by portraying China as an exotic universe dotted with picturesque villages engaged in quaint and repressive “feudal” customs and traditional arts and crafts. Especially the work of Zhang Yimou is for this reason often regarded as out of touch with China’s post-1978 modernization drive. Many of his films portray the vitality and strength of people living close to nature, while by contrast, the ethos of reform China is squarely centered on the big city as the locus of progress and modernization. Trying to rebuild the country from the economic ruins caused by the CR, China has turned sharply away from the idealization of egalitarianism and rural simplicity associated with CR propaganda. Nothing could be more outmoded in the eyes of modernization-oriented film critics than the rural focus of Zhang Yimou’s films, and therefore many draw the conclusion that his films must cater to “foreign taste”.

The criticism that Zhang Yimou’s persistent focus on the Chinese countryside is motivated by a desire to “orientalize” China for commercial reasons is, however, based on a misunderstanding of the role of nature and rural life in his films. Rather, his work can be much more fruitfully interpreted as the revitalization of an ancient motif in traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics—the experience that the human being does not stand over and against nature (the basic assumption of modernization ideology), but is an integral part of the

¹ Kramer, 311.

² The only Fifth Generation films that portray actual events during the CR, Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* and Zhang Yimou’s *To Live*, have been banned in China. For analyses see Nielsen 1999 and Chow 1996.

cosmic triad of heaven, earth and humankind. When people live in close contact to nature, they can be healed from the fears and vexations associated with life in conventional human society. Conversely, when they are isolated from nature, they become obsessed with the desire for power and unable to establish genuine relationships of love and friendship. As urban youth who lived in the remote countryside during the CR, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige discovered that nature provides comfort for the traumas inflicted by other human beings and a source for a new self-identity. In the words of Chen Kaige:

Whenever I washed myself in a small stream near my village and fish stroked my aching legs, I felt comforted. And only when, as I observed in the mountains, mimosa flowers contracted at my touch, did I understand what the concept “worth” that we humans so often talk about actually means. A leaf floating in the stream trying desperately and unsuccessfully to swim against the current made me understand what “fate” is. Inasfar as there can be a place of regret and comfort for human beings at all, the mountains at that time became such a place for me. [...] Nature took pity on my feelings, calm returned to my heart and answered the question: “Who am I? Am I content with my existence?” Slowly I came to understand its gravity and descended again from the mountain.³

This deep and overwhelming experience of being upheld and embraced by the vastness of heaven and earth, comforted and strengthened in times of loneliness and dejection, has been well attested in Chinese literature and philosophy, notably in Taoism. Nature has the power to heal the wounds of the soul and restore us to the source of life which dwells both in the cosmos at large and our own innermost being. This experience, rediscovered by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige when they went through the most painful and desolate period in their lives, set the tone and atmosphere of their works, which forever changed the face of Chinese cinema.

Nature as a Portal to Authentic Personhood

Of all the Fifth Generation directors, this essay focuses only on Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, partly because of space limitations, but primarily because their films are the best examples of how nature is portrayed as providing a cosmic identity to individuals who are socially and politically marginalized. As stated above, this is immediately linked to their own experiences as youths during the CR.

Zhang Yimou (1950, Xi'an) was deprived of the possibility to acquire social recognition during puberty, due to the fact that his father and two of his uncles had been officers in Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist army. Like his entire family, Zhang suffered long years of social and political discrimination and punishments. Barred from entering the Red Guards, he worked in an agricultural production brigade during the Cultural Revolution.⁴

Chen Kaige (1952, Beijing) was also the victim of his “bad class background”, as his father, a well-known film director, had been labelled a “Rightist” in 1957 and was the victim of renewed attacks during the CR. In order to prove himself to the Communist establishment, his son actively participated in Red Guard activity, even to the point of disavowing his father during a “criticism” session, and he followed Mao's call to undertake “revolutionary work” in the countryside. He worked on a rubber plantation in Yunnan Province for three years, finally joining the army in order to escape from this hard and miserable work.⁵ Instead of earning

³ Kramer, 316.

⁴ Kramer, 360-361.

⁵ Kramer, 339-340.

him political recognition, all these experiences left Chen with great doubts about the political regime.

A constant motif in the films of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige is the opposition between collective dogma which acts as a barrier to the achievement of authentic personhood, and the discovery of the latter by returning to nature. The main protagonist in Chen's celebrated film *Yellow Earth* is an example of the former. He is a Communist soldier who, by staunchly adhering to dogma, is unable to make this transition to genuine individuality. Sent out on a mission to a poverty-stricken area on the Loess Plateau, he befriends two peasant children, the girl Cuiqiao and the boy Hanhan, to whom he depicts his Communist base as an ideal place of brother-hood and equality. However, when Cuiqiao wants to accompany him back to his base he refuses, saying that doing so would go against "the regulations". His answer typifies the reality of Communism in China, which started out as a utopian ideal and ended up as a bureau-cratc dicta-torship oppressing the peasants.⁶ After the soldier has left the village, Cuiqiao tries to cross the Yellow River to join the revolutionaries, but she is tragically drowned.

In the final scene, the soldier returns to the village during a severe draught. Hanhan tries to make his way uphill toward him, pushing through a crowd of peasants performing a rain dance for the Dragon King. The scene seems to suggest that the boy, who symbolizes China's future, has broken away from the superstition of his village, and is heading towards a modern consciousness. But in view of the soldier's previous attitude toward Cuiqiao, we realize that Hanhan is making a mistake: Communism is not an alternative for peasant superstition—in fact, it is subtly suggested that in China, it has merely become one of the latter's many forms.

Eros and the Cosmic Triad

Zhang Yimou started his rise to fame as cameraman for the pathbreaking movie *One and Eight* of 1984. The cinematic idiom which Zhang and his colleagues developed for this film was to be formative for Fifth Generation esthetics,⁷ particularly the epic treatment of the landscape, the vast Loess Plateau near the Yellow River. As Kramer points out, the human characters are not placed at center stage, but often at the very edge of the frame, or depicted as diminutive figures enveloped by the vastness of the landscape. It is only in the wilderness, where the hold of political dogmas and oppressive social conventions is minimal, that the nine outlaws in the story have a chance of forging personal ties on a new and genuine basis.⁸ Only thus do they retrieve their humanity and self-respect.

Another innovation in *One and Eight* was Zhang Yimou's depiction of the male peasant body. The main characters, nine escaped convicts dressed in rags, are all strongly individualized, with dramatic close-ups of their rugged faces and slow-paced shots of their bodies.⁹ In accordance with ancient Chinese thought, Zhang depicts the human body as a vibrant micro-cosm animated by the same life force or *pneuma* which pervades the macrocosm. Once someone liberates himself from dogma and the artificiality of collectively organized life, his own true nature, which is perfectly in tune with nature all around, breaks through the surface with exhilarating force.

In Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* a young peasant, headstrong and full of vitality, defies village mores and conquers the heart of a beautiful young widow. In his strong body, uncouth and hardened by toil, a power is awakened which, by connecting him with the cosmos, gives him the courage and energy to break with social conventions. This tremendous

6 Chong and Keijser, 1999, 107.

7 Kramer, 321.

8 Kramer, 324.

9 Kramer, 323.

power is eros—the power of sensual love. In the words of Sheldon Lu, the film is “a cinematic reenactment of libidinal and psychic liberation, an allegory of an empowered masculinity freed from age-old repression.”¹⁰ However, the view that the film thus engages mainly in “body politics” obscures the larger spiritual and cosmic context in which Zhang Yimou employs the eroticized body. The main character’s discovery of erotic love is at the same time a self-discovery, a sudden awareness of his innermost spiritual and emotional being as an individual, as well as a discovery of the unity of self and cosmos—the overwhelming experience that the power unleashed by eros is the same life-giving force that pervades the whole of nature. By resisting society’s condemnation and following the call of their heart the characters do not only come to possess their own individuality—they are also welcomed into the joyful embrace of the universe. Going against oppressive society does not lead to an atomized kind of individuality, but to an awakening to the heartbeat of the cosmos itself.

When the couple make love for the first time they are not indoors, but in the middle of the millet field. The man tramples flat a big circle in the field to serve as a marriage bed. Nothing of the love-making is actually shown—we only see the woman lying flat on her back, fully dressed in her thick padded clothes. She is not filmed from her lover’s perspective, but from far above, as if the camera looks down upon her from the perspective of all-embracing heaven. Lying on the intersection between heaven and earth, she spreads her arms and legs as if to absorb their vital energy into her body. The erotic passion which envelops these lovers is shown to be the same vital power which pervades the cosmos as a whole; it not only draws these two people to each other but also links them to nature all around them. The lovers are smiled upon by heaven and beckoned by the millet field which opens up a space to welcome them. The landscape as a whole is eroticized.¹¹

Exile from Nature

If roaming free in nature brings out the best in us, then being isolated from nature, living in secluded compounds subjected to strict social hierarchy brings out the worst. This is shown in a number of Fifth Generation masterpieces, such as *The Big Parade* and *Temptress Moon* by Chen Kaige, and *Raise The Red Lantern*, *Ju Dou*, and *Shanghai Triad* by Zhang Yimou.

The Big Parade is about young army recruits who have been selected for an important parade at Tian’anmen and who have to endure an extremely harsh training regime. The recruits start out as individuals, but end up as a disciplined collective entity in which every sign of individuality has disappeared.¹² Chen Kaige shows that force and punishment play almost no role in this transformation process—since the families of all the boys expect them to succeed in their prestigious and patriotic task, each of them wants to pull his friends through in order to spare them the shame of quitting. Thus, tragically, the boys’ most humane emotions such as friendship and loyalty do not increase their individuality, as erotic love does in *Red Sorghum*, but cause them to become part of an inhumane apparatus.¹³

In Zhang Yimou’s celebrated movie *Raise the Red Lantern*, the victims are a group of concubines confined to a traditional compound. Although living a life of luxury, the women are in fact prisoners subjected to the whims of an all-powerful master who meets out arbitrary awards and punishments in order to create competition and envy among them. While set in the pre-revolution era, the story may be read as a parable about the mechanisms of social repression in Communist China. As in much of 1980s cultural criticism, the film suggests that

¹⁰ Lu, 108.

¹¹ Chong, 2000, 204.

¹² Ironically, this effect is even stronger in the new ending than in the original ending rejected by the censor.

¹³ Chong and Keijser 1999, 107.

far from liberating the Chinese people from oppressive social political structures, Mao's regime in fact made this kind of oppression worse.¹⁴ While the eros associated with true love is spiritually liberating and a path to union with heaven and earth, the sexual relationship between the master and his concubines is a mere caricature of love which is utterly dehumanizing. The figure of the concubine—living a life full of fear and restrictions and permanently involved in infighting—personifies the ghostlike existence of people living in a social hierarchy under a leader with arbitrary power.

In *Shanghai Triad*, Zhang Yimou takes yet another approach to the same theme. The story is about the leader of a criminal gang in Shanghai in the 1930s who goes in hiding from his enemies on a small islet near the coast, taking his mistress Jinbao with him. On the islet, Jinbao finds tranquility and peace: tall plumed reeds gracefully move with the wind, and there is the sound of water softly splashing between the rushes. By and by, we witness how nature transforms Jinbao from a haughty and glamorous nightclub singer into the warm and open woman she once was, as she befriends the local peasants and no longer displays any malice or artificiality. However, the bloody power struggle of the triad leaders is eventually transferred to the islet, resulting in the local peasants being murdered. The references to the Great Leap Forward and the CR are obvious.¹⁵ Unlike *Red Sorghum*, in this film it is not nature but the lust for power that is victorious.

Similarly, in Zhang's celebrated film *Ju Dou*, the attempt of the main characters to escape from an oppressive social situation ends in a catastrophe. The young woman Ju Dou is forced into marrying an elderly and cruel man, but she starts an illicit affair with his young nephew, Tianqing, and gives birth to his son. This boy, who believes the old man is his father, in the end murders Tianqing and accidentally kills the old man. Thus, while in *Red Sorghum*, the celebration of passion leads to liberation and genuine personhood, in *Ju Dou* it leads to death. The contrast between the festive mood of *Red Sorghum* with its sparkling outdoor scenes and the dark and somber atmosphere in the closed compounds of *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Ju Dou* may reflect, as suggested by Sheldon Lu, the pessimism brought about by the 1989 Beijing massacre and the superficiality of reform China.¹⁶

A similar difference is evident between Chen Kaige's early film *King of the Children* of 1987 and his *Temptress Moon* of 1995. In *King of the Children*, a young urban school teacher rusticated by Mao unexpectedly discovers his true humanity in plains and mountains far away from civilization. In *Temptress Moon*, by contrast, a young man is emasculated and destroyed by the violence and cruelty within an oppressive traditional family living in a closed compound.¹⁷

Zhang Yimou, however, has overcome this somber mood. In *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Not One Less*, he returned to the village as the epitome of genuine human relationships, in contrast to the urban preoccupation with status and power in reform China.

Back to the Village

The Story of Qiu Ju features a simple but energetic peasant woman seeking justice in the capital for her husband who has been kicked in the groin by the village head. Zhang explores the contrast between village and city in a new way, using a realistic, almost documentary-like style and a number of non-professional actors. Life in Qiu Ju's village is shown to be based on personal relationships and mutual help, while the capital is dominated by bureaucratic rules

14 For a political interpretation of this film see Keijser, 1992, 24–26.

15 Chong and Keijser, 1995/1996, 29–33.

16 Lu, 113.

17 Chong and Keijser, 1999, 106.

and stifling regulations.¹⁸ Qiu Ju's search for justice causes the impersonal machine of modern urban law enforcement to penetrate the village community. In the final scene, Qiu Ju and the viewer are left wondering whether this is an improvement.¹⁹

But while the village is thus positively portrayed, the documentary-like use of the camera in this film prevents the elevation of the countryside to the epic heights reached in *Red Sorghum*. As a result, while the social criticism of the story is well brought out, nature does not play any significant role. Qiu Ju is very brave in her fight against the power of the social system, but she draws her strength from her own sense of justice, not from being reunited with heaven and earth, as the lovers in *Red Sorghum*. Thus it would seem that an ethical motive such as the search for justice falls short of the capacity of eros to reunite the human being with nature. However, in *Not One Less* (1999), Zhang Yimou proves that this is not necessarily true.

Not One Less is about a thirteen-year-old girl, Wei Minzhi, who has to stand as a substitute for her teacher because the village is too poor to afford a qualified replacement. When a boy from her class, Zhang Huike, runs away to earn money, Minzhi walks all the way to the city through the mountains to find him, because she solemnly promised the old teacher that there were to be no drop-outs during his absence. Once in the city, Minzhi is reduced to begging. When she appeals to the authorities, she is either scolded or ignored. Eventually she succeeds in drawing the attention of the local t.v. station to her plight. When she is reunited with Huike, the t.v. station sends a camera team to their village to publicize with much fanfare the destitution of the local school, with the result that a nationwide fundraising campaign is launched, and the two children become national heroes. In a satirical way, the film thus criticizes the poverty of village schools in contemporary China, the indifference of the urban bureaucracy, and the superficiality of the modern mass media.²⁰

The scene in which Minzhi walks vigorously through the high mountains on a very hot day, sweat pouring down her face, are contrasted with the scenes in the city, when she and Huike are frightened and lost among the crowds. Although Minzhi is alone on the mountain road, she is succoured and protected by nature itself, partaking of the vital power radiating from the sun, the wind and the mountains. She draws her strength both from her own resolve to keep her promise to the old teacher, and nature's silent but loving support. Thus Zhang Yimou shows that not only eros, but also loyalty is a royal road to being united with heaven and earth. In one of his recent films, *The Road Home*, eros and loyalty are even combined in the main character as the two vital forces that elevate her to membership in the cosmic triad.

The Road Home to Nature

The English title of *The Road Home* is aptly chosen, as the film constitutes Zhang Yimou's own homecoming, after the somber mood of *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, to the joyful nature mysticism he introduced in *Red Sorghum*. The setting is again a remote village in a breathtakingly beautiful landscape. The main protagonist is a girl who falls in love with the new young village teacher.²¹ Defying her mother's disapproval, the girl runs through the fields every day to catch a glimpse of him walking down the road. The scenes around the country road display the glorious colors of the four seasons, mirroring the love and passion of the girl breathlessly running through the fields to meet her beloved. The landscape is a magnificent mirror of her emotions and a compassionate witness of her destiny.

¹⁸ Hintzen, 1993.

¹⁹ Keijser, 1993, 36.

²⁰ Zhang, 2001; Chong, 2000, 200-202.

²¹ Chong, 2000, 200-206.

When during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the young man has to report to the city for an investigation into his political past, the girl faithfully waits for his return. Love makes her forget the heat in summer and the cold in winter; even a severe fever cannot hold her back from keeping her vigil outside on the country road. Finally, after the end of the campaign he returns, never to leave her again. At the end of the film, when he, after a long life dedicated to village education, finally dies, scores of his former pupils come from all over China to pay their last respects, carrying his coffin through a snowstorm for miles along the same road where his wife waited for him unwaveringly in the snow during the crisis of his life. The fact that the pupils have not forgotten their teacher, and that their donations are more than sufficient to repair the old village school, is a sign that the values she and her husband embody—love for learning, gratitude, and loyalty—are still alive.

The essence of human life, according to Zhang Yimou's films, lies not in making revolution to achieve some collective utopian goal such as Communism, but in nurturing one's individual ideals and caring for the people one loves. He is a master in portraying the seemingly simple things and emotions in life with lyrical grandeur. The message he conveys in this respect is a traditional Chinese one: in essence, life is simple – but when the simple life is lived to the full, it is majestic at the same time.

Both Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige have rediscovered man's place in nature, but they also emphasize, in accordance with ancient Chinese thought, that to dwell in a natural environment is not a sufficient condition for authentic life. The most important thing is to get rid of the conventions, dogma's, and will to power concealed in one's own heart.

Filmography

The Big Parade (Da yuebing), Chen Kaige, PRC 1985
The Blue Kite (Lan fengzhen), Tian Zhuangzhuang, PRC 1993
Ju Dou (Ju Dou), Zhang Yimou, PRC 1989
King of the Children (Haizi wang), Chen Kaige, PRC 1987
To Live (Huozhe), Zhang Yimou, PRC 1994
Not One Less (Yi ge dou buneng shao), Zhang Yimou, PRC 1999
One and Eight (Yige he bage), Zhang Junzhao, PRC 1984
Raise the Red Lantern (Da hong denglong gao gao gua), Zhang Yimou, PRC 1991
Red Sorghum (Hong gaoliang), Zhang Yimou, PRC, 1987
The Road Home (Wo de fuqin muqin), Zhang Yimou, PRC 2000
Shanghai Triad (Yao a yao, yao dao waipo qiao), Zhang Yimou, PRC 1995
The Story of Qiu Ju (Qiu Ju da guansi), Zhang Yimou, PRC 1992
Temptress Moon (Fengyue), Chen Kaige, PRC 1996
Yellow Earth (Huang tudi), Chen Kaige, PRC 1984

This article was first published in French under the title “Le mystique de la nature dans le cinema chinois”, in *Critique Internationale*, Paris: Centre d'études et de recherches internationales (CERI), July 2003, pp. 48-58. (Full-text is available online.)

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