THE COMMODIFICATION AND GLOBALIZATION OF CHINESE CINEMA:
A STUDY OF ZHANG YIMOU’S HERO
AND OTHER FILMS

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China in the 21st century has become an economic powerhouse, replacing European nations like France and Italy as one of the highest-grossing economies in the world. Not coincidentally, it has also become one of the largest importers of movies in the world, not yet surpassing India or the United States, but enough to make an impact on American markets and Hollywood specifically. Action movie directors like John Woo and stars like Jackie Chan have become household names in the U.S., while Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* has grossed over $177 million internationally since its release in 2004. These successes have made it “safe” for Hollywood to back films by other non-traditional Asian directors like Ang Lee, the recent recipient of an Oscar for best director. China has “arrived” in American cinema.

Some critics like Christina Klein have hailed this moment as the birth of a hybrid cinema, neither purely American nor Chinese, and point to popular collaborations like Jackie Chan’s series of American-produced films like *Shanghai Knights* (2003) and *Rush Hour* (1998) (1). Others however, like the Marxist feminist critic Dai Jinhua have deplored what they see as a threat to indigenous Chinese cinema, particularly with the increasing growth in foreign investment in big-budget Chinese films like *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* (2005) (2). As Chinese cinema and the globalization of the Chinese economy continue to rapidly develop, no one side can say conclusively what will come of these cultural and economic transactions. What both sides seem to agree on is that Chinese cinema has become a commodity for international trade, as much as home electronics, clothing, and precious metals. With the collusion of the Chinese government, which sees the opening of the indigenous entertainment market as a way of saving it from collapse as well as a means of bringing in foreign capital, even Chinese art house movies
are being sold to American distributors like Miramax, Sony Classics, and Columbia Pictures, to be shown in shopping-mall cineplexes to American mainstream audiences; and, while scholars and critics had already scourged filmmakers like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou back in the 90s for making movies tailored to Euroamerican audiences on the film festival circuit, current films from the People’s Republic of China are beginning to possess the cachet of Hollywood blockbusters, with slick, sophisticated production values, internationally-known casts and technical staff, and big-budget special effects. Whether these films and their directors will also lose their original commitment to a cinematic stance that examines Chinese traditions, history, and social and political problems in a critical light is the topic I will attempt to explore today, examining as a test subject the recent and past work of the now internationally-famous director Zhang Yimou.

Zhang Yimou is perhaps the best known of the Fifth Generation directors, those graduates of the Beijing Central Film Academy who grew up during the Cultural Revolution of the 60s. Like most of his classmates, Zhang was taken out of school as a teenager and forced into a “ruralization” program, first working in an agricultural collective and later in a spinning mill, part of a textile factory that resembled the one portrayed in his film *Ju Dou*. As a young adult he took up photography, and after establishing a modest career as a photojournalist, applied to the film academy in 1979, where he studied cinematography. After graduation he took a job with the state-run Guanxi Film Studios, which at the time was run by Wu Tianming, who supported experimental art cinema and encouraged Zhang and his classmates to produce films that broke from the socialist realism of the 60s and 70s. Zhang worked as a cameraman on Zhang Junzhao’s *The One and the Eight* (1984) one of the earliest of the Fifth Generation
films; later that year, he was cinematographer for Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth*, which became the first Fifth Generation film to catch the attention of international critics. It wasn’t until 1987, however, when he moved with Wu Tianming to Xian Studios, that Zhang was finally able to direct his own film, *Red Sorghum*, which won the Berlin Film Festival’s Golden Bear Award the following year, and became the first movie of the Fifth Generation to become popular with Chinese audiences. (3)

It was fortunate that Zhang received international attention at that point, as in 1989 came the June 4 Incident, the mass arrest and execution of demonstrators at Tiananmen Square. His boss and supporter, Wu Tianmeng, was abroad at the time and denounced the Chinese government for its actions, but as a result he was forced into exile in the United States. Xian Studios was taken over by the central Film Bureau, whose director denounced the Fifth Generation filmmakers for “national nihilism” and blind worship of Western film theory (which ironically, Zhang says he has never studied) (4).

Bereft of state support, Zhang made his next film, *Ju Dou*, with funding from a Japanese production company. The film, though not popular in China, was submitted by the Chinese government in 1991 for an Oscar in the foreign film category, then was quickly withdrawn and censored because its two central characters, the wife of an abusive textile factory owner and his nephew, have an affair, which to Chinese audiences was considered incestuous. By this point, Zhang had already started production of *Raise the Red Lantern* with funding from a Taiwanese distributor. Again his film was banned, since the Chinese government considered any transaction with Taiwan illegal, even though the money was sent to Zhang through the distributor’s Hong Kong subsidiary. Abroad, however, *Raise the Red Lantern* garnered so many international awards from critics and
the Venice Film Festival that Zhang was regarded as an embarrassment by the Chinese Film Bureau and its government cohorts.

A pattern might seem evident at this juncture: government support for experimental film directors is withdrawn after 1989, forcing them to seek funding for their productions from commercial venues in other nations. Zhang, after winning a film festival award in Germany, finds his best options for funding in Japan and Taiwan, and is rewarded for his efforts in Europe and the United States. He is also criticized at this time by Chinese journalists and critics, as well as film scholars in other countries, for creating movies “for the casual pleasure of foreigners” (5), that are “self-Orientalizing” or allow Westerners to revel in the films’ exoticism and brutality towards women (6).

This seems to lock Zhang in a Catch-22 position: he is denied the opportunity to make films with Chinese government support, but under the new open-market rules of the 90s, he is allowed to seek financing from foreign companies, which opens him to the charge of commercialism. He is also encouraged to show his films at festivals abroad, but any approval by Euroamerican critics and audiences is seen as evidence that he has sold out to an Orientalist/masculinist gaze.

Zhang does have his critical supporters, most notably in Rey Chow and Jerome Silbergeld, who regard his films as critiques of Orientalism and of Chinese historical traditions and current problems, particularly in regards to the status of women (7). He also has been redeemed in the eyes of the Chinese government, who in its fickleness has presented Zhang’s other films, such as *The Story of Qiu Jiu* (1992), with state-sponsored awards, then unbanned his previously censored films, then banned his 1994 film *To Live* and his 1997 film *Keep Cool. To Live*, which is about a family whose fortunes rise and
fall with the history of China from the 1920s to the late 60s, was made again with Taiwanese money, which would explain its ban; however, it was briefly released in the United States and shown commercially through an American distributor. *Keep Cool* however is still nearly impossible to find in video and few people outside of China have seen it since it was withdrawn from the Cannes Film Festival in 1997. One of his few films set in contemporary China, one of the core scenes is where the protagonist is beaten up by the co-workers of a woman he has fallen in love with. Chen Kaige, speaking from exile in New York, speculated the film was banned because of the then-upcoming handover of Hong Kong by the British to China: the Chinese government didn’t want any image released that might suggest that the Chinese were irrational, barbaric, violent, etc., causing the British to back out of the deal (8).

Zhang’s true redemption in the eyes of the Chinese government however, came with the release of *Hero* in 2002. Co-produced by the Beijing New Picture Film Company and Hong Kong’s Elite Group Enterprises, both state-run companies, *Hero* had its Chinese premiere at The Great Hall of the People in Beijing, and was said to be the most coveted invitation in town (9). The film cost US$31 million to produce, making it the most expensive film to date in Chinese history, and some 18,000 members of the People’s Liberation Army were used as extras. *Hero* also became China’s highest grossing film, taking in almost $54 million in the United States alone, over $26 million in Hong Kong, and $20 million in China (10).

The movie is stunningly gorgeous: a martial arts epic combined with historical drama, characters float through color-themed sets, fight on water, pursue one another over trees bathed in autumn gold, ride through yellow deserts with blue mountains in the
background. The lead character is played by Hong Kong action film hero Jet Li, with Maggie Cheung, Tony Leung and Donnie Yen, all familiar names in Hong Kong cinema, starring as his fellow assassins. (One thing Zhang Yimou learned from directing *Hero* was that northern audiences were put off by the Cantonese accents of the Hong Kong actors. In *House of Flying Daggers*, the Hong Kong actors’ voices are dubbed.) Zhang Ziyi, fresh from her star turn in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is largely wasted as the servant and sometimes lover of the assassin Broken Sword (Tony Leung). There is no doubt however, that the $31 million in production costs were well spent.

What is profoundly troubling, however, and what Zhang’s usual critics are surprisingly silent about, is the message intoned by the film, that a strong, central authority is good, and all means are justified if it done for the good of “our country.” The Emperor Qin, known to every Chinese schoolchild as being a brutal tyrant who unified China and created a centralized government, language, and rule of law, is portrayed in the film as being a wise, even sympathetic character with a “grand vision” for his future nation. He is a brilliant warrior himself, able to match the skills of Jet Li’s nameless assassin. He is also able to persuade Broken Sword and Nameless into believing that his vision is the correct one, that the individual should sacrifice his own selfish desires for the good of the whole. Interestingly, the female assassin, Flying Snow, will have none of this, and attacks her co-conspirators rather than give up her desire to avenge her father’s death at the hands of the Qin emperor. In the tradition of Zhang Yimou’s strong female protagonists, she refuses to submit to the status quo, and becomes the unruly, destructive force within the film. Like her sisters Ju Dou and Jiu’er from *Red Sorghum*, she pays with
her life for defying the patriarchy, though in this case, Zhang seems to infer that Flying Snow is in the wrong, and this time it is the men who do know better.

Zhang in subsequent interviews refused to address his colleagues’ complaints about the inherent message of his film, though he acknowledged he toned down the blood and gore for sake of his audience, whom he saw as the average Chinese citizen (11). He insisted, as he always has, that his intended audience was Chinese, not waiguoren, foreigners. However, Hero seems to follow a pattern that Zhang has kept to since the government banning of Keep Cool, when he was ordered to make movies only in China using Chinese production companies (read state-run, state-funded). The movies that followed were uncontroversial by Zhang’s previous standards: The Road Home, made in 1999, is a sweet tale about the romance between a peasant girl and the young schoolteacher sent to her village. Not One Less, also made in 1999, is about a 13-year-old girl who is left in charge of the impoverished village school and who goes to the city to find one of her students, who has quit school in order to support his ailing mother. Happy Times, the film preceding Hero, is an oddball comedy about an unemployed steelworker who claims to own a hotel in order to impress a greedy divorcee, and ends up caring for her blind stepdaughter. These films, while not bad, lack the bite and fury of Zhang’s earlier films. They are easier to watch and harder to criticize---for they are well-made movies, if oddly saccharine for Zhang---and perhaps this is the point. Zhang, following the strictures of the Chinese government, has stuck to movies made in China and funded by the state. They do not offend, they do not shock, and they do not criticize, not anyone directly, at any rate. And as a reward for these and a promotional film made to sell
Beijing to the International Olympics Committee, the strictures were lifted by the Chinese government and Zhang was allowed to make *Hero*.

At this point it is difficult to say where Chinese cinema is going, with the appearance of a new Sixth and even Seventh Generation whose attitudes are urban, postmodernist and ironic. The films of this new generation have not been as well received by critics in the West as the Fifth Generation’s were, perhaps because they are not unlike urban, postmodern Euroamerican filmmakers---they are not “exotic,” as Zhang Yimou’s critics would put it, there is no “difference.” It is interesting to note, however, that Zhang Yimou’s most recent completed project, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*, is set in contemporary Japan, using Japanese actors and is distributed by corporate media giant Sony Pictures Classics and the recently revived Toho Studios. The budget is tiny by *Hero*’s standards, using a small cast and focusing on the attempted reconciliation of a semi-literate fisherman and his dying filmmaker son. The focus however is on an actor from Chinese opera whom the son is obsessed with and wants to interview before the son dies. One senses that Zhang is exploring a familiar subject in a new venue, albeit with no strong female protagonist to disturb and rile the status quo. That seems to be reserved for Zhang’s work in process, *The City of Golden Armor*, which will star his old muse, Gong Li, and which is another historical drama featuring martial arts choreography. It is being produced by Beijing New Pictures, *Hero*’s production company, and doubtless will be spectacular.
WORKS CITED

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