IS ZHANG YIMOU A SELF-ORIENTALIST?

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Section D

Along with the rise of the Fifth Generation directors,[1] the contemporary Chinese cinema has gained more popularities on the international film festivals since the early 1990s. While these films presenting the local Chinese culture are well received internationally, the Fifth Generation directors, particularly Zhang Yimou, are often denounced for their self-Orientalist filmmaking practice of selling films packaged with exoticized Chineseness to the Western audience. Based on the belief that the interpretations on cinema can result differently according to various ideological reading, the assertion that Zhang deploys Orientalism in his films can be a result of misinterpretation. This article—through reviewing several books and journals about his 1992 film adaptation *Raised the Red Lantern*—will explore how Zhang is perceived by various Chinese and Hong Kong scholars in order to find out whether or not he is a self-Orientalist.

Zhang, the cinematographer-turned-director who began his career after graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1983, has been receiving both extreme acknowledgments and criticisms on his films such as *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) from the Chinese film critics. On the one hand, Zhang is recognized as a successful director of commercial productions; on the other hand, these commercial titles are also criticized for their banalities due to the lack of depth in storytelling.[2] *Hero*, along with his earlier work *Raise the Red Lantern*, are criticized by some Chinese journalist as self-Orientalist exercises catering the West. Despite *Red Lantern* astonishes many Western audience, the film, in

[1] The Fifth Generation refers to the group of Chinese directors began their filmmaking since the 1980s. Some of the notable figures are Zhang Yimou, Zhang Yimou, Feng Xiaogang, and Chen Kaige. Although the Sixth Generation emerged in the mid-1990s, some the Fifth Generation directors like Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang continues their productions and has become more commercial-oriented in Mainland China.

[2] I found a brief comment in the entry page of *Hero* on Douban.com during the research, it goes "Zhang, you should stick back to your cinematography, but not directing."

the eyes of a native Beijinger, as Dai Qing[3] comments, is "really shot for the casual pleasures of foreigners [who] can go on and muddle-headedly satisfy their oriental fetishisms."[4] Dai, from a native perspective, criticizes that *Red Lantern*—though the red lanterns provide stunning visual motif—represents a false image of China in terms of the mise-en-scene.

First, Dai notices the Zhang-ish Chineseness on the walls of the third wife's room are decorated with large Peking opera masks, which is a major symbol of Chineseness that did not come into fashion until the 1980s and even then only among certain "self-styled avant-garde" artists would like to show off their "hipness" through these mask decorations. The third wife "would never have thought of decking her walls with those oversized masks,"[5] hinting that Zhang is the one who is responsible for this historical mistake in his production. Second, Dai points out that Zhang has also made a fundamental—and the foremost—mistake on the portrayal of the Master:

> I have never seen nor heard nor read in any book anything remotely resembling the high-handed and flagrant way in which this "master" flaunts the details of his sex life. Even Ximen Qing, the protagonist of the erotic Chinese classic *Jin Ping Mei* and the archetype of the unabashedly libidinous male, saw fit to maintain a discreet demeanor in negotiating his way among his numerous wives, concubines, and mistresses, and even then he had to resort occasionally to sending a servant to tender his excuses.[6]

The speaking of one's sex life has been treated as a taboo in Chinese society—a topic that is forbidden to be brought up publicly—even in the present. As a result, such a portrayal of the

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[3] Chinese people who do not have an English name, in the English context, would usually have their names sorted in the same order as they are in the Chinese context (family name goes first and given name goes after) In this case, Dai Qing is referred by *Dai* as Zhang Yimou is referred by *Zhang*.

[4] Dai Qing, "Raised Eyebrows for Raise the Red Lantern." Translated by Jeanne Tai. *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 336.

[5] Ibid., 335.

[6] Ibid., 334.

Master's sex life, in a traditional sense, is a major flaw of the filmic setting. Dai understands that it is inevitable for Zhang to exoticize and to sell the Chineseness to the Western audience as Zhang is "a serious filmmaker being forced to make a living outside his own country," suggesting that it is worth the Chinese audience's sympathy to some extent.[7]

Dai identifies herself as a person who belongs to the generation of Chinese whose sensibilities have been "ravaged by the Mao-style proletarian culture,"[8] Dai—along with her generation who are not allowed and are unable to interpret films from other philosophical perspective—can only seek extreme authenticities in films. "I know nothing about film theory, cinematic techniques, auteurs, schools," Dai declares in the first paragraph of her journal, "my only criterion is how I respond emotionally to a film."[9] With the Mao-styled materialistic influence, Dai's generation can no longer enjoy any new fashions and trends that she labels as "half-baked" and that the experiencing of new attempts of storytelling and filmic presentation as "sensibility-risking."[10] To Dai's generation, authenticity is the only criteria concerned in judging a film. Whatever reflects the real Chineseness—the Chineseness that is culturally and historically correct—is considered a good film. That is, authenticity provides emotional satisfactions. *Raise the Red Lantern*, unfortunately, fails to accomplish these two tasks, and the lack of understanding on film theory limits Dai's interpretation on *Red Lantern*. She would have been surprised that the red lantern motif that makes her raising eyebrows does far more than that: a basic reading of the lantern, for example, can be viewed as a reinforcement of male authority, while the color of red implies the state of purgatory that the wives suffer in the household—any

[7] Ibid., 337.
[8] Ibid., 336.
[9] Ibid., 333.
[10] Ibid., 336.

of these symbolic implications can easily be identified by the younger generation of Chinese audience. Dai's demand on authenticities leads to a deviation from reading the theme, that what she has observed from the film are only twisted cultural products; the exotic Chineseness contrived by Zhang. Hence, Dai's focus on reading the filmic setting rather than the theme results in a biased comment denouncing Zhang as a self-Orientalist.

Jane Ying Zha, a Chinese writer from Beijing—the same city where Dai is from—adopts a relatively moderate view on *Red Lantern*. In her journal "Lore Segal, Red Lantern, and Exoticism" Zha does not perceives the film as "a work of realism in a strict sense" as "some of the details in the movie seem exaggerated, even false, to any historically informed and realistic-minded audience."[11] That is, *Red Lantern* does not attempt, in any sense, to accurately reflect the history of feudal China, but to present the woman's suffering under the patriarchy in the feudal context. The context functions as a "stage" assisting the director to achieve his expression that is alterable to be set in modern China—while the notion of patriarchal oppression is remain firmly unchanged.

Zha views the film as a formalistic exercise due to Zhang's cinematographic expertise built up earlier in his career, which shares a similar perspective with Rey Chow, who writes in her book *Primitive Passions*, "the symmetrical screen organizations of architectural details, and the refined-looking furniture, utensils, food, and costumes in *Rain the Red Lantern* are all part and parcel of the recognizable cinematographic expertise of Zhang and his collaborators."[12] Zha is impressed by the camera work that deliberately avoid giving close-up to the Master as "[Zhang] thought nothing of shooting the awkwardly melodramatic scenes from the eyes of a

[11] Jane Ying Zha, "Lore Segal, Red Lantern, and Exoticism." *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 331.

[12] Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 143.

male voyeur," which grants almost the entire foreground to the women characters to narrate the story through their eyes.[13] Zha also have an interesting reading on the debate on Zhang's "self-Orientalist" practice:

> The subject of exoticism came up several times in my conversations with Lore Segal. As we were talking about old French movies, Lore said a lot of them were deliberately dubbed into English with a French accent in order to charm an American audience. Why? Of course because the foreign accent gave them a more exotic flavor. Then one evening, some friends were having dinner at Lore's, and the subject turned to movies. When Zhang Yimou's name came up, I mentioned the sharp division of opinions over his movies: all my American friends love Zhang's movies, all my Chinese friends hate them. Lore looked thoughtful: "But they are beautifully shot. Maybe, we are more political when we saw a film about ourselves, especially seeing it among foreigners."
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> I thought of several of my Indian friends' reaction to *Mississippi Masala*—a movie I myself was moved by and yet all my Indian friends found offensive. Lore was pointing to the fact that all of us tend to be very sensitive to our own images in the eyes of others. But we all also share a fascination with exotica.[14]

Through observations on the normal conversation with her novelist friend, Segal, and several of her Indian friends, Zha suggests that everyone—regardless of race—has always fascinated by the unfamiliar cultures, while one tends to be very sensitive on how one is perceived by a different race. This seems to explain the polarized comments on Zhang's *Red Lantern* as some of the Chinese might treat the filmic setting seriously that they want to be ethnically represented not as accurately but as ideally as possible. They want to be depicted

[13] Jane Ying Zha, "Lore Segal, Red Lantern, and Exoticism." *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 331.
[14] Ibid., 329-30.

beautifully to the West. Therefore, *Red Lantern*—a film disclosing the corrupt customs through a certain exaggerated theatrical representations—has no doubt to be attacked for deliberately representing the Chinese locals and equating such negative depictions as "Chineseness" to the Western audience. Zha gives a clear assumptions on Zhang's denounced "self-Orientalist" practice that "no matter what were a director's original intentions, the Western audience's reception of these movies inevitably has a smell of 'Orientalism' or 'exoticizing Chinese culture.'"[15] Whether or not Zhang has such intentions, it is always inevitable to have his films labeled as Orientalist. To this, Zha concludes, "perhaps, the most important thing about a work of art is that it creates a world of its own and conveys truth, tension, and complexity in that world. Above all else, it should work on its own terms."[16]

In her book *Primitive Passions*, Rey Chow shares a similar notion with Zha, in which she argues that the "specificities [of Zhang's films] can be fully appreciated only when we abandon certain modes and assumptions of interpretation."[17] By specificities she means more than technical aspect of the film—the director's off-stage intentions and messages. In order to understand these specificities, Chow suggests that the spectators would not be granted the ability to perceive the hidden significance unless the urge to demand authenticities is discarded. As such, the spectators will have more tolerance toward the unauthentic mise-en-scene and blurred historical details. "While many of the ethnic customs and practices in Zhang's films are invented, the import of such details lies not in their authenticity but in their mode of signification."[18] With an elementary knowledge in mind that the events of *Red Lantern* take place in the

[15] Ibid., 332.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 142.
[18] Ibid., 144.

pre-communist period,[19] the spectators are now able to concentrate on the decryption of the significance hidden in those invented ethnic motifs without any interventions.

Although Chow observes the film in a similar way as Zha—that *Red Lanterns* does not aim to reflect any authenticities—the "China" she perceives is a China that is constructed by modernity of anthropology, ethnography, and feminism. She argues that "what Zhang accomplishes is not the reflection of a China 'that was really like that' but rather a new kind of organization that is typical of modernist collecting."[20] In other words, *Red Lanterns* depicts a China from a modern perspective; with a sense of modernity. That is, a China exists with invented customs that the modern audience—regardless of race—would believe to be real. The fact that some of the Chinese audience, like Dai, have strong reaction to the unauthentic settings, while some others, like Zha, do not really care about, proves that the Chineseness deployed by Zhang is convincing to some extent. As a result, Rey Chow concludes that "it is imprecise, though not erroneous, to say that directors such as Zhang are producing a new kind of Orientalism."[21] By "new kind" it means a reconfiguration of Orientalism in the age of global modernity.[22] Chu Yiu-Wai claims in *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* that "Orientalism has become even more difficult to detect"[23] in the context of global modernity because the oriental cultures have been influenced, altered, or even neutralized by the imported universal value in order to be modernized; cultures have been self-Orientalized to fit into the modern world that is heavily influenced by the West. Taking the fact that such a reconfiguration

[19] Ibid., 143.
[20] Ibid., 145.
[21] Chu Yiu-Wai, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 28.
[22] Ibid., 26.
[23] Ibid., 29.

is inevitable, Chu rather perceives the reconfiguration to be a justified transition—deployed to serves as a marketing tactic that packages and sells Chineseness to the world—and should be seen as marking a new operational logic of filmmaking rather than a false representation of Chineseness.[24]

The notion of Orientalism has been viewed drastically different among Chinese and Hong Kong scholars; some hate it, some think it is inevitable. While the rapid globalization and modernization has redefined Orientalism, some advocate that the reconfigured version should be accepted as a marketing tactic for the good of economy. Through analyzing and comparing the above various opinions, Chu's notion, in a sense, seems to be the more rational perception toward Orientalism. As such, Zhang Yimou's constant creation of unique Chineseness establishes him a self-Orientalist—a term that has been granted new meanings and is no longer a denouncement toward his filmmaking practice, because his commercial success and artistic achievements are both well received and strong enough to be respected as one of the most important directors in the history of Chinese cinema.

Total word count: 2155

[24] Ibid., 26, 28.

Reference

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