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Original Research Article

From Extolling History to Celebrating Folk Customs: Narrative Transformation and the Use of Film Scores in the Third World Film Red Sorghum

Abstract

"From Extolling History to Celebrating Folk Customs: Narrative Transformation and the Use of Film Scores in the Third World Film Red Sorghum," adopts a Third World feminist perspective to investigate changes in the narrative patterns used in the original novel and the film with the same title adapted from the novel. In addition, this chapter explores the purpose of such changes and how film scores are used in the film to enhance desired effects. By introducing the historical context of the novel, this chapter intends to explain how the features of these film scores influence the film. Furthermore, how film scores are employed to present the characters' personalities and increase the weight and affect of crucial events in the film is investigated.

Key words: film scores, historical context, Third World Feminisms, narrative pattern, Red Sorghum, Chinese movie

I. Introduction

In recent years, films directed by Yi-Mou Zhang from China have won multiple international film awards. Among those films, *Red Sorghum* was the first that brought fame to Zhang, thus attracting wide attention from film critics and scholars to his films. *Red Sorghum* was adapted from a novel of the same name written by Yan Mo, later a Nobel Prize winner in Literature, from China. However, the many changes made to the film have made it differ considerably from the original novel. Current studies have mostly examined the

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reasons behind Zhang's abundant use of Chinese characteristics in his films, investigated this cultural phenomenon, and analyzed his takes and narrative techniques in the films. However, this chapter aims to investigate the differences between the narrative patterns of the novel and the film, examine the purposes of such differences, and explore the use of film scores and how they heighten the effects of the film. By introducing the context of the novel, this chapter elaborates on the influence of film scores on the film, as well as examines how the film scores are used to present the characters' personalities and increase the weight and effects of crucial events in the film. Finally, this chapter concludes by comprehensively reviewing whether the film scores have functioned properly and achieved the desired effects.

II. Narrative Themes and Musical Descriptions in the Novel

In the novel, Yan Mo uses the story of his grandparents (i.e., Zhan-Ao Yu and Feng-Lian Dai) to tell a heroic and tragic tale of how ordinary people living in the countryside also became national heroes in the history of the Second Sino–Japanese War. Through this novel, Mo combines the lives of ordinary people with the great history of the era, using this work as a biography for his grandparents and their fellow villagers to replace the overarching historical narratives with personal biographies. As Mo clearly notes in the novel, "To glorify my family and write a biography for it, I went back to the Northeast Township of Gaomi County to conduct various surveys. The surveys focused on the famous battle that my father joined and had killed a Japanese major general by the side of Moshui River" (155). Mo intends to extol the patriotic sentiments in the ordinary folks during the days of the Sino–Japanese war, highlighting the Chinese people's unyielding spirit and particularly glorifying his family and ancestors (157). Specifically, Mo is proud of his own grandmother, praising her as "not only a war hero but also a pioneer of individual liberation and a model of female independence" (157). A substantial proportion of the novel is spent on

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recounting family history and exalting the patriotic spirit. Mo places family biography and national history at an equal height and equates personal family history with national history, attempting to incorporate his family history into the nation's great history to glorify his family.

Few musical descriptions exist in the novel. One of them appears in the scene when Mo's grandmother is going to marry. The scene briefly describes how the walking rhythm of the sedan carriers accompanied the poignant music blown by the trumpeters (196), which unexpectedly resembled the wailing tune from a woman lamenting for her dead husband in a funeral procession that passed by at the same time (197). In this comparison, Mo reveals that his grandmother's marrying a man with leprosy was no less than marrying a dead man, from which a tragedy unfolded. Afterwards, Mo describes his grandmother's sobs and then a wailing sound from the suona. In the elegant wailing sound from the suona that stops her from crying, his grandmother "heard the sound of death, and smelled the smell of death" (200). This scene depicts that the marriage to a man with leprosy arranged by her family was a sorrowful road to death for Mo's grandmother. Another description of music appears in the scene of love making between Mo's grandparents. In this moment of pleasure, the grandmother seemed to "hear solemn and heavenly music played by an ensemble consisting of the suona, large trumpet, and small trumpet." This passage reflects the heavenly joy of consummation felt by Mo's grandparents, approving their courage in breaking social taboos and extolling their efforts in pursuing personal happiness.

In short, the few musical descriptions in the novel are only used to highlight and contrast the changes in the characters' moods. In other words, these music-related passages merely function as general narration and description in a biography, contrasting sharply with the influences and functions Yi-Mou Zhang assigned to the film scores in his film.

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III. Narrative Transformation in the Film

Yi-Mou Zhang tends to emphasize Chinese characteristics in his films. He adapted Yan Mo's novel *Red Sorghum* into a well-known film by the same name. Instead of underscoring the Sino-Japanese War, Zhang expanded the stories of ordinary people and rewrote them into Chinese-style tales that exist independently from any historical timeline. In the film, China is substantially used as a code to elaborate the story and characters. For example, Zhang selected and extensively used red, a color preferred by Chinese people. Moreover, the story and scenes are set in the backdrop of sorghum fields on a loess plateau, filling the film with Chinese local characteristics that appeal to Western film critics. In Zhang's films, the historical time does not matter. What counts are the folk customs and stories presented through the characters that actually existed in China. This aspect has been argued repeatedly in various reviews on Zhang's films. For example, Jin-Hua Dai described film *Red Sorghum* as "a fiction of national culture, in which a group of people live jolly and heartily in a 'pre-historic' wilderness" (72). Accordingly, history is insignificant in the world of the film characters. Yi-Wu Zhang also stated that

> Since *Red Sorghum*, Yi-Mou Zhang has focused on telling the untold stories in the Chinese society. In doing so, Zhang usually erased temporal codes in his films, creating an eternal China that transcends time, thus mythical and allegorical. The romance-like experience of "my grandfather" and "my grandmother" in *Red Sorghum* can happen in any time frame of the traditional Chinese society. . . . These stories describe not a specific space in a specific time, but a thoroughly allegorized tale of the East and an emphasis and demonstration of nationality. (408)

In addition, Ru-Shou Chen has summarized several commonalities among Zhang's films. First, "Every film is a national allegory; in other words, the plot of each film refers to an

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object that usually represents a state or nation's past, present, and future, as well as its historical fate." Second, "Every of Zhang's films contain political metaphors." Third, "All the female protagonists have subjectivity and know what they want, which foreshadows Chinese new women's breach with tradition." Fourth, "Every film directly points to the traditional patriarchal society in China and the androcentric mentality that brings misfortune to women." Fifth, "Every film involves a spirit of protest" (90–91). All these characteristics can be found in *Red Sorghum*; however, they are less conspicuous compared with the Chinese folk customs featured in the film. Therefore, Yi-Wu Zhang indicated that "the national-state consciousness of fighting Japan in *Red Sorghum*" is only a "transient and useless existence in the text of the film" (408). Accordingly, this film provides the general audience, particularly Western critics, with "a consumption of 'Otherness' in an unknown and savage East as well as an imagined exotic society and nation" that differ completely from the West (410).

In addition, Yi-Mou Zhang is adept in using music to guide the audience's emotional response, strengthen characters' personalities, and intensify the effects of incidents presented in his films. The use of folk music in film *Red Sorghum* even more closely embodies Zhang's emphasis on Chinese styles in his narration, transforming the novelist's efforts in integrating family biography and national history into ordinary people's life stories that transcend history. Yi-Wu Zhang indicated that "in folk customs, Yi-Mou Zhang peeps into a secret world constituting sex and violence." What he peeks at is "the China outside of public life." "He uses folk customs and aesthetic spaces to separate China from the world history . . ., however, this is nonetheless a strange force that is fragmented and unclassifiable in history" (412). Therefore, what he does is rewrite the suppressed subhistory, or, "the unstated memory of a nation." Yi-Mou Zhang's focus on folk customs is reflected in his replacement of history with ordinary people's stories (416). "In the texts of his films, Zhang replaces the conventional themes and expressions of Chinese films to liberate the suppressed aspects of

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the original historical narratives. For example, the overwhelming existence of desire and life in *Red Sorghum* surpasses the conventional discourse in Chinese film history" (417). "The China that Zhang presents is set in the contexts of the stories he is telling rather than their historical contexts." Therefore, these films are "interpreted by an international community and rewritten through watching," (416) and thus naturally differ conspicuously from the original literary works.

IV. Use of Film Scores

To respond to the changed narrative themes of his films and to strengthen the effects accordingly, Yi-Mou Zhang substantially increases the use and importance of music in contrast to the original works to realize his consistent emphasis on Chineseness and roles in the films. For example, Jin-Hua Dai noted that the nursery rhymes in *Ju Dou* "repeat again and again to manifest the final victory of patriarchy and order" (77). In *Raise the Red Lantern*, "the ironic Beijing opera percussion accompanied by Children's singing, the a cappella theme of lament, female chanting without lyrics, lively nursery rhymes for the theme of bloodless or bloody slaughter, and resounding rhythms that are heard at nightfall—all work together to constitute and present Death's circle dance and empty rituals performed in ancient China" (80). Similarly, Zhang adeptly employs music to support and rewrite the original novelistic text in the film *Red Sorghum*.

The film opens with a wedding procession. In addition to the description of the trumpeters in the novel, Zhang arranges the sedan carriers to sing folk songs together to tease the bride Jiu-Er in the sedan (i.e., Yan Mo's grandmother in the novel, starred by Chinese actress Li Gong in the film). The musical descriptions in the novel, which are used only to depict the bride's sorrow, are heightened in the film to present the characteristics of local wedding customs. Moreover, the sonorous voice of men underscores the straightforward and fearless personalities of people in North China. The masculine singing voices render the

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muscular male physiques intentionally foregrounded by the camera more appealing. Furthermore, the singing highlights the contrast between healthy men and the sick, frail husband with leprosy. Therefore, the audience can identify with Jiu-Er's decision to choose a sedan carrier as her lover, making the process of pursuing personal happiness more reasonable and convincing.

The most popular song among the film scores is the theme song "Sister, You Go Forward Bravely." This song appears in the scene of love making in the sorghum field, underlining the female protagonist Jiu-Er's bravery in challenging moral codes and her unyielding personality in changing her own fate. Jiu-Er is the core character throughout the film. Her parents married her to a husband with leprosy. Jiu-Er was reluctant to comply with this arrangement, and eventually entered into a secret marriage with a sedan carrier and consummated with him in a sorghum field. Accompanied by this theme song, this scene not only highlights Jiu-Er's personality, emphasizing her free will unrestricted by ethical codes, her courage in facing her own sexual desire and directing her own fate, and her independent personality, but also illustrates her importance in the film. Afterwards, the theme song frequently appears in the scenes when Jiu-Er encounters difficulties, giving more dynamics to these renditions. Toward the end of the film, the theme song reappears in the death scene of the battle between a group of Chinese people and Japanese troops. The song repeats continually to create solemn and stirring effects in the film, as if singing in praise of Jiu-Er's life. Similarly, female protagonists in Zhang's other films are highlighted and praised for their remarkable personalities, thus becoming one of the leitmotifs that occur repeatedly in his film scores.

In addition to the aforementioned scenes, the film presents a scene in which Jiu-Er acts as a hostess beginning to direct the brewing process of new batch of wine, and everyone toasts and drinks the blood-red sorghum liquor after the wine was brewed. However, this

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scene is not mentioned in the novel. The scene is particularly long and accompanied with majestic songs, indicating that the director has devoted close attention and effort to it. To thank Heaven for the gift, the characters drink their first glass of liquor as a toast to Heaven, recite a verse of gratitude to Heaven, and sing a brewing song together. These presentations are specifically added to foreground Chinese customs, highlighting the northerners' unrestrained style of drinking wine from big bowls and eating big mouthfuls of meat as well as Chinese people's national characteristics of contentment and submission to the will of Heaven. Later, in the bloody scene depicting how the long-term worker Luo-Han Liu is flayed because he refuses to yield to the Japanese, the theme song repeatedly echoes in the background to demonstrate the northerners' unyielding spirit and determination. Moreover, the praise of blood-red sorghum liquor in the lyrics echoes the bright red blood gushing out from the brave men on the screen, making the flaying incident more shocking and the bravery of Luo-Han Liu more admirable.

Aside from the folk song film scores, the sound of gushing wind is frequently used to present the vastness and desolation of the sorghum fields. The shrill sound of the suona marks the difficult fates of ordinary people, and the use of silence also aptly presents the desolate landscapes and dismal characters in the film.

V. Conclusion

Overall, Yi-Mou Zhang's ingenious and appropriate use of film scores in his films has enabled him to successfully adapt Yan Mo's novel *Red Sorghum* into a film. Furthermore, he reduced the importance of historical elements and highlighted Chinese local characteristics in the film. Regardless of whether this practice truthfully reflected China or merely presented an image of Chinese/Third World women imagined by Westerners, Zhang has successfully introduced Chinese cinema to the Western audience and made Li Gong an international

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superstar rarely witnessed among Chinese film actresses. Concerning the goal of promoting Chinese cinema, Zhang has successfully increased its visibility. Moreover, we can argue that without the appropriate use of music, the film *Red Sorghum* would not have attained such a high level of attention and praise in international film festivals. The Western audience is generally less informed about Chinese history and lack the motive for further exploring it. Therefore, what attracts universal attention from film critics of various nationalities as well as of historical and cultural backgrounds are the film's portrayal of human nature, the shaping of the characters, and its appealing plot. These characteristics can be commonly appreciated worldwide. In particular, the Chinese music used in the film contributed substantially to evoking sympathy and exotic sentiments among the audience. Through the music, Westerners find a mysterious China they desire, which explains the film's worldwide popularity. Undoubtedly, the effects created by music and story-telling in this film work satisfactorily in the public entertainment of cinema.

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