

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

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

34

35 II. Narrative Themes and Musical Descriptions in the Novel

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

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

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

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

74

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

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

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

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

131 IV. Use of Film Scores

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

Reference

- Chen, Ru-Shou. "The Images of China in *The Story of Qiu Ju*: Orientalism and the Symbolic Meaning of 'China.'" *Cultural Criticism and Chinese Cinema*. Ed. William Tay. Taipei: Rye Field, 1995.
- Dai, Jin-Hua. "A Poignant Cultural Journey on the Loess Land: Multiple Identities in Post-1989 Art Films in Mainland China." *Cultural Criticism and Chinese Cinema*. Ed. William Tay. Taipei: Rye Field, 1995. 69–86.
- Mo, Yan. *Red Sorghum*. Ed. Xi Xi. Taipei: Hong Fan, 1988.
- Zhang, Yi-Mo. *Red Sorghum* (Film). 1987.
- Zhang, Yi-Wu. "Yi-Mou Zhang in a Global Postcolonial Context." *Postcolonial Criticism and Cultural Identity*. Ed. Jing-Yuan Zhang. Taipei: Rye Field, 1995.