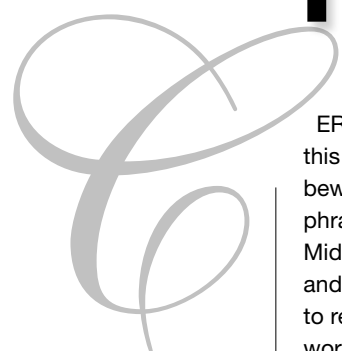




Women Beware Women: Zhang Yimou's 'Raise The Red Lantern'



ERTAINLY in the world of this film, women need to beware women, to paraphrase the title of Thomas Middleton's 1657 tragedy, and it is not altogether inapt to reference this Jacobean work in which women behave treacherously towards each other with tragic results. However, the title of this essay really should have gone on to read (clumsily): 'Women Beware Women, but watch out for men too', for the precarious situations faced by women in this film and the society it depicts are the result of a traditional patriarchal dominance.

For nearly two decades there have been good reasons for considering Zhang Yimou one of the world's great film directors. The word 'masterpiece' is often tossed around lightly, but when it has been applied to a body of work in-

cluding such films as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), *Qiu Ju* (1992), *Shanghai Triad* (1995), *Hero* (2002), and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) it does not seem extravagant. Certainly this achievement across a wide generic range (e.g., realist drama, comedy, martial arts adventure, *film noir* thriller), has few equals in modern cinema, and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), a tragic drama, is one of its most eloquent triumphs.

Zhang Yimou's observation of human affairs in *Raise the Red Lantern* combines passion and detachment, precision and sympathy, and his filmmaking techniques remind us that we are a long way from the multiplex fare dominated by Hollywood, with its current obsessions with frantic action and special effects. Zhang has shown, in films such as *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*,

that he is more than equal to his Hollywood counterparts in these matters, and is able to bring an unusual grace to their execution. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, though, he ensures that the main events are kept at a distance: whenever sexual or other violent action is at issue, the camera refuses to come closer, as if to say that this is not the film's chief business. The chief business lies in what the characters, especially the protagonist Songlian (Gong Li), will make of these events.

A woman's fate

IT is hard to pin down the period of the film exactly (though several commentators have named it as the 1920s¹) as it offers almost no sense of the world outside the confined setting of the wealthy Master's house.



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The events of the plot are not played out against larger social movements. Once Songlian arrives at Chen Zuoquan's home, a 'compound' of several courtyards, colonnades and rooftop walkways, the camera never moves outside its walls. This sense of confinement is important but time is not. Custom matters and infringement will be punished.

Since Songlian has been forced to leave university, we may assume that the period is twentieth century, though this ceases to matter when she enters Chen's walls. Her father has died and, because the family is then impoverished, her stepmother has arranged the marriage. The film opens on the following exchange between Songlian, beautiful and resentful in close-up, and her stepmother off-screen:

'Mother, stop! You've been talking for three days. I've thought it over. Alright, I'll get married.'

'Good. To what sort of man?'

'What sort of man? Is it up to me? You always speak of money. Why not marry a rich man?'

'Marry a rich man and you'll only be a concubine.'

'Let me be a concubine. Isn't that a woman's fate?'

In this dialogue, Songlian's future is sealed, and the film's minimal plot will act out the ensuing melodrama and – ultimately – tragedy.

She is seen briefly on the road with her suitcase, having resisted taking the 'sedan' that has been sent for her, and refuses an offer to carry her case. These will be virtually her last acts of self-determination. Once installed as Chen's 'fourth mistress' (the term 'mistress' is used in subtitles throughout to refer to the four wives), her life will be regulated by the customs of many generations, customs devised by men. The first wife, Yuru (Jin Shuyuan), is elderly and has a son, Feipu (Chu Xiao), who later shows interest in Songlian; the second, Zhuoyun (Cao

Cuifeng), has a daughter the same age as the son of the third wife, Meishan (He Cai-fei), a former opera singer. Whereas Meishan appears bitterly to resent Songlian as having directly supplanted her, Zhuoyun seems sweet-natured and conciliatory, but as the film unfolds Songlian's perceptions of these two will undergo some modification. The fifth woman who matters to the plot is Yan'er (Kong Lin), the ill-tempered and mischievous servant assigned to Songlian. One of the film's strengths is its clear differentiation among these women.

The word 'unfolds' in relation to the plot seems apt. It suggests the measured display of the narrative, so at odds with our notions of the forward thrust of Hollywood melodrama. It is not that nothing happens but that Zhang's approach is to make us aware of what is seething beneath the surface while the latter maintains a stately composure. The confinement in which the women live

breeds jealousy, tittle-tattle, duplicity and a sense of conspiracy. They have too little to do and, despite the relative luxury of their surroundings, their situation remains ignominious. Songlian, intelligent enough to have wanted a university education, is bored, lonely and jealous. She finds it hard to accept the rigidities of the customs that fence her about at every turn in the wealthy man's house. To assert herself she spits out orders to her servant, Yan'er (who aspires to being a wife), humiliating her by insisting her hair be checked for lice. Yan'er privately repays her by spitting on Songlian's clothes which she has been sent to wash. In turn, it is easy to see Songlian's treatment of her servant as her response to being humiliated by the third mistress, Meishan, whose nose is out of joint when Songlian arrives.

The customs that govern the running of the compound are essentially male-orientated, though they bear



so heavily on the women who live there – and though the Master is barely seen. Though ‘barely seen’ he nevertheless ensures that the customs work in his favour, and the film’s *mise-en-scène* registers this by placing his shadowy shape between, say, Songlian and the camera, while she in such scenes is characteristically seen at the rear of her apartment. His despotic power over the entire household is symbolized by the eponymous red lanterns. These are hung in the courtyard of whichever wife is to be favoured by a visit from the Master that night and it is announced for the whole compound, gathered in doorways, to hear the pronouncement. The chagrin of the women *not* singled out can only be guessed at behind their impassive faces.

When Songlian is new to the household she is shown to her apartment and servants deck her courtyard with the red lanterns that signify her current ascendancy. The lanterns are at once an

image of beauty and a symbol of the patriarchal oppressiveness of the system. The women’s position is entirely dependent on the Master’s whim and everyone in the compound knows who is in favour at any given moment. A servant comes to give her a foot-massage, using a tinkling little gong-like instrument. This is another family custom, and when the Master appears, after receiving off-screen congratulations on his latest marriage, he tells her that having her feet in good shape conduces to her overall well-being and that she is then better placed to ‘serve her man’. ‘Pick up that lantern’, he orders her, and she obeys impassively. ‘Higher,’ he continues, ‘look up. Educated girls are different. Undress.’ She wants the lights out but he refuses, and the discretion of the filmmaking is seen in the way the camera stays on an overhead shot of Songlian’s courtyard, and then the love-making takes place behind a translucent curtain at the



'back' of the screen.

The whole film is punctuated by lantern orders, and by images of the courtyards either bare or, in the case of the chosen wife, adorned with the lanterns, giving a look of serene beauty to a cruel and demeaning system. 'I'm just one of the Master's robes. He can wear it or tear it off,' says Songlian bitterly, resentment at her position flaring. By this stage she has come to understand the third wife's interruption of her wedding night by her singing and by insisting she is unwell and that the Master must come to her. In a moving scene, Meishan explains how jealous Zhuoyun had been when they were both pregnant, how she had tried desperately to give birth first. Now Meishan, who has warned her that Zhuoyun 'has the face of a Buddha but a scorpion's heart', warns Songlian not to be complacent about her ascendancy: 'You're new here ... but if you don't give him a son ...' The unfinished sentence carries the threat of Songlian's being ultimately superseded, as, in the last moments of the film, she is.

It is this sort of advice and the pressure it enjoins that leads to the crucial plot manoeuvre: Songlian's pretended pregnancy. In response to this news, the lanterns are to be lit by day and night, 'as a symbol of longevity'. This doomed lie propels the rest of the film. The malicious maid Yan'er and the duplicitous second wife Zhuoyun are responsible for exposing Songlian's situation, causing the doctor, Gao (Cui Zhigang), to be sent for. When he tells the Master the truth, Chen's rage is heard by all as he orders the covering of the lanterns

in Songlian's quarters. At this point the film's melodramatic interests surface. Songlian exposes Yan'er's illicit cache of lanterns in revenge for Yan'er's having told Zhuoyun about the false pregnancy.

More than melodrama

EVENTS follow swiftly here, as distinct from the earlier sense of slow-moving build-up of conspiracy and jealousy. The servant is made to kneel in the snow until she apologises: she refuses, then collapses and dies. Songlian takes too much to drink and inadvertently reveals Meishan's infidelity with Dr Gao, and, in a bitter irony since the Master, unlike his wives, may visit whichever sexual partner he chooses, her behaviour is punished by death. Look how Zhang renders this moment in the narrative: a woman's body in white is seen kicking and screaming as she is removed at night to a sort of rooftop turret, in which, we have been told, women have been hanged. There is an off-screen scream of 'Murderers' and the remorseful Songlian, hidden from their view, follows at a distance as Meishan is dragged to her death. From this moment, Songlian's fate is sealed: she arranges, with the help of gramophone records and lanterns, a 'haunting' of Meishan's quarters, before herself declining into madness as the lanterns are lit for the coming of the fifth wife. By this stage the melodrama of sexual rivalry and internecine conflict has given way to something more: to tragedy in fact.

While such events could easily be the stuff of an ac-

complished Hollywood melodrama, in fact Zhang's treatment of his material works towards different ends. A Hollywood film such as Douglas Sirk's *All I Desire* (1953) or *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) might deal in variations on themes relating to the oppression of women in a patriarchally ordered society, but the effect would be different: it would involve a kind of closure which stops short of tragedy, which would find a livable way out of the conflicts deriving from women's subjection to the mores of their society. Another contrast would have been with the intense melodramatic highlighting of the events leading up to this point, whereas Zhang, as noted, tends to keep us at a remove from them.

This latter point is made abundantly clear in the elegance of the film's composition in which the spatial confinement is elaborately stated in the long shots of courtyards and apartments. The absence of placement in any specific region of China forces our attention on the compound itself and on the possible effects of this kind of narrowly constricted world on the occupants. One of the most seductive aspects of the film is the sheer classical elegance of its style. The faces of the women are given their due in close-ups at key moments, but the characteristic shots are those which take in the courtyards, sometimes strung with red lanterns, sometimes drably gray, either from above, which seems to suggest a narratorial eye on the lives below, or from the entrance to take in the full space of the courtyard. When the action moves inside, the most usual shots are those which render the

length of the apartments, in which the wives seem almost incidental to the composition, and this too is a way of underlining the subservience of their situations.

Style is attitude

IF these lives are spatially constricted, they are presented here in temporally circular terms. After the very brief prologue quoted above, the rest of the film moves from one summer to the next, with seasonal intertitles. Actually the latter are scarcely needed, except perhaps to stress the remorselessness of the seasons in this luxurious prison, because cinematographer Zhao Fei² registers the changes in lighting so precisely. The yellow glare of summer gives way to the rain-drenched autumn and the snow of winter in which the servant Yan'er meets her death, and Zhao, with a masterly eye for composition, makes his longshots of the courtyards and of the snaggle of rooftops into barometers for recording times of day and of year. Since confinement is so central a concept in this film, it is important to note two further aspects of Zhao's composition – or at least his way of articulating Zhang's concepts. First, notice how sparingly the sky is glimpsed: vast skylines might hint too much at the world outside, thus reducing the smell of claustrophobia in the compound. Second, the interiors are so exquisitely composed as almost to look ready for framing. Zhao holds his camera at a remove from such vistas, and the formal beauty of the shots accentuates the bitchy jockeying for plac-

es that is going on at, for instance, the lunch table where tradition requires the ladies to meet.

There is perhaps a school of thought which would hold it a fault in a film for style to be so obvious an element. It is impossible, for me anyway, not to be moved by the elegance and eloquence of the compositions here, by the willingness to hold the camera still on the understanding that we will want simply to watch and listen, and that the custom-constrained formalities of the lives lived here will be better served by such stylistic decisions than they would by, say, the more usual editing rhythms that might be used to render relationships. The contemporary reviewer who wrote the following seems to me to have grasped the film's intentions, or at least its achievements, in this matter:

*Long, lingering, static shots in real time create a rhythm that is quite beguiling and heighten the sense that here is a world which is self-enclosed, which functions according to its own laws and codes, and is not subject to conventional ideas of justice or justification.*³

It is worth looking at that sentence carefully, not just for the particular point it is making about this film (and that point is certainly impor-

tant) but for the more general one about the indivisibility of style and meaning. A style implies an attitude: that Zhang wants his cameraman to achieve the effects he does is a way of drawing the viewer's attention to the social and psychological patterns at the heart of the film.

There has been some criticism of the way this approach drains the melodramatic events of their potential, that the physical distancing of the camera from, say, Meishan's violent removal from her apartment to the tower where she will be killed is too restrained for the material. One reviewer, while admiring Zhang's 'monumental approach' to the traditions of the house, and to the 'symmetry' of the seasons, believes that 'it sits uncomfortably with the increasing flurries of narrative revelation'.⁴ This is a point of view worth considering, though I must say I find the extreme discretion of the visual style heightens, rather than slackens, awareness of the dangerous tensions at work.

The fact that the male characters – the Master, his son by the first wife, the doctor with whom the third wife has, fatally for her, been having a liaison – remain no more than shadowy sketches may be seen as a deficiency,

but there are perhaps other ways of responding to this. These men have no need to assert themselves in a situation in which everything is ordered as they wish. Custom, so strongly insisted on, invariably favours the men; the traditions are in place for their gratification; and a woman who transgresses in such matters will be punished. Meishan is dragged to her death; Yan'er dies from exposure in the snow; and Songlian goes mad. There is no scope in this place for women to do other than conform to the male-orientated traditions.

How 'true' a picture *Raise the Red Lantern* offers of aspects of Chinese society at a certain time I have no way of knowing. One commentator on Zhang's films notes that he 'pays scant attention to the historical specificity of the story' but is in no doubt of the film's indictment of patriarchy as a principle of social organization. This same writer believes that this indictment is 'not delivered mainly with words, but rather through meticulously designed setting, lighting, action and music'.⁵ The opening moments with the great Gong Li in resentful, stoic, intractable close-up foreshadow the rest of the film. 'Isn't that a woman's fate?' she asks, speak-

ing of concubinage. She will find out the true nature of 'woman's fate' in a tradition that generations of men have honed to ensure their comfort and easy dominance. There is more to the film than this, but that idea, articulated with the cool intelligence and passion on display here, is enough to make it memorable – and valuable. •

Endnotes

- ¹ And the jacket of the video version also says 'China 1920s'.
- ² Zhao Fei has since worked in the West and has shot several of Woody Allen's films, including *Small Time Crooks*.
- ³ Raymond Younis, 'Raise the Red Lantern', *Cinema Papers*, No. 90, October 1992, p.51.
- ⁴ Verina Glaessner, 'Raise the Red Lantern', *Sight and Sound*, February 1992, p.42.
- ⁵ Yanmei Wei, 'Music and Femininity in Zhang Yimou's Family Melodrama', *CineAction*, No. 42, p.20 (undated, but roughly 1996).

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