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UNVEILING IDENTITIES: A CULTURAL STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF  
LEADING WOMEN IN ZHANG YIMOU FILMS

by

Patrick Dean McGuire

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
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and the School of Communication  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

It is imperative to recognize the ongoing collaborations of filmmakers from different countries. Film director Zhang Yimou, cited in this work, has reached out beyond his Chinese borders in recruiting both cast and crew on many of his latest features. But the field of film studies appears to have limited their investigations of such cross-cultural analyses, in particular the subjective analysis of the female lead character in film. Subjective and culturally wired as such, researchers bring forth conscious observations from their socialized unconscious minds.

This textual analysis begins with a comparison of two Chinese films, particularly observing their similar female lead characters. This study illustrates how the ingrained cultural visions of film director Zhang Yimou are at his disposal to construct the appropriate cultural elements of the *mise-en-scene* in the making of the two films. The next chapter analyzes one film using a mode of gender representation known as “gazing” that strongly suggests a power dynamic in the female lead character’s non-verbal behavior. The last group of films crosses the cross-cultural line. By comparing a Western text to the “other” Eastern version of the same story, the task is to observe the changes involved in the unveiling and subsequent transparency of the female lead character. These observations look for the motives and emotions that define the female lead character, and contribute to the advancement to the plot. All of the films chosen for this study possess the characteristic style and form of the melodramatic.

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I also would like to acknowledge my family and friends for their encouragement in my diligent commitment in obtaining a PhD degree. Especially Providence Grillo for providing a conducive environment for the writing. But above all, I thank God for all of His blessings bestowed upon me during this arduous task.

This work is dedicated to the late Mary Ellen McGuire, my mom.

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## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

For many years, entertainment for Chinese audiences was the stage play, with elaborate costumes, hand-held props, and stereotyped characters and narratives. Even with the birth of film, the medium was simply used to record such performances. But for a group of Chinese filmmakers known as the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation, their creativity laid outside the theater realm. One such filmmaker Zhang Yimou not only used his cinematic skills to create amazing colorful scenes, but also elevated the leading female character as autonomous, “an agent within the text of the film whereby the male’s hidden secret can be brought to light” (Johnson, 1974, p.45).

The purpose of this study is to examine such character development of the female in the leading role by using three modes of representation that illustrate a resistance to the outside force of oppression, and maintains a formidable and proud force until the end. Beginning with the first model that examines the elements placed with the environment (ie. set dressing, lighting), each subsequent mode of representation builds upon the previous one, which molds a sharper image of the leading female. Thus, the focus of this analysis is to decode the choices film director Zhang Yimou makes to empower the female lead character. Ultimately, these modes of representation will expose a more detailed understanding of what it means to survive as a female given the circumstances in each of the different films. For example, the wine made from the red sorghum could signify the bloodshed by the Chinese people, and for the female lead as she’s brutally murdered in the climax of *Red Sorghum* (1987). The subsequent films analyzed in this study share this bloodshed, as a cultural code. As Stuart Hall (1997) argues, “Fixed by cultural codes that sustain representation, these models are designed to unveil the

relationship between the actual visual image and the concept that it signified” (Hall, 1997, p.31), ultimately giving the viewing audiences a better understanding of the female character, her knowledge and moral truth, which instills a sense of power in the leading role of the films selected.

As methods of investigation, these models selected are from a diverse field of inquiry (e.g. psychology, ethnography), or as David Bordwell (1989) would say, “theoretical insights that can guide our interpretation” (Bordwell, 1989, p.6). As a visual cinematographer, film director Zhang Yimou insists on striking images on the screen. The elements within the frame, better known as the *mise-en-scene*, reflect the emotional tone of the story that revolves around the female character.

#### *Mise-en-Scene*

The first mode of representation I will address uses two films by Zhang Yimou that have similar narratives, *Red Sorghum*, made in 1988, and *Raise the Red Lantern*, made in 1991. The first tells the story of a woman who takes over a winery after her newly wed husband dies. She meets her fate when the Japanese invade China, and her winery is over-run by soldiers. The second film’s narrative is a young student who decides to become one of many wives of a master. Though living under his roof, her persistence challenges the protocol of being a wife. Despite learning of the murderous ways of the master, she remains one of the prominent wives of the master’s household.

The model used in observing these two films is David Bordwell’s (1989) “Bull’s-Eye Schema” that informs us on the concept referred to as the *mise-en-scene*. Defined as the visual and aural elements presented in narrative, *mise-en-scene* is not only the selection of the elements in the frame, but also how they are placed and arranged in

relation to other elements (Bordwell, 1989), p.173). This pattern of thought that organizes categories and the relationships among them is referred to as a schema (p.136). As author Timothy Corrigan (2001) states, “*Mise-en-scene* is about the theatrics of space as that space is constructed to the camera. This use of spacing, how it is arranged, and the actors and objects relate within it” (Corrigan, 2001, p.63). According to Bordwell (1989), one way to ascribe coherence to film is,

To imagine that, at any given moment, discriminable elements serve as vehicles for the same semantic field. A semantic field is a set of relations of meaning between conceptual and linguistic units; it organizes potential meanings in relation to one another. By putting the character at the center of the bull’s-eye, this schema makes their traits, actions, and relationships the most important interpretive cues (p.170).

Surrounding the bull’s-eye center are the elements of the diegetic world in which the characters exist. Further out lays the application of technical choices made by the director that accentuate this mode of representation. An example could be the choices of camera placement and what type of lens is used for a particular shot. Bordwell and his Bulls-Eye analogy suggest direct correlations between character and setting, and between setting and technique.

Film scholar John Gibbs (2002) clarifies *Mise-en-scene*, “ It is worth remembering from the outset that these elements are most productively thought of in terms of their interaction rather than individually. In practice, it is the interplay of elements that is significant. Also, we need to consider the significance acquired by the

individual element by virtue of ‘context’ and all the other accumulating strategies that the filmmaker adopts” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 26).

The concept of schema can be traced back to Kant, who seems to have applied the term to both the knowledge conceived primarily as a mental image, and secondly to the procedure by which the mind produces and uses such structures. Schemata are “retrieved, applied, adjusted, and rejected in the course of all perception and cognition” (Bordwell, 1989, p.137). This model investigates this differential decoding that the viewer makes when applying the *mise-en-scene* elements to obtain a fuller depiction of the female lead character’s persona. This, in turn, satisfies and fulfills an audience’s desire to understand and sympathize with the woman. This mode of representation takes into account all the principal scenes that include the female lead character, and highlights the elements of the *mise-en-scene* that connote her psychological temperament in moments throughout the diegesis.

### The Male Gaze

In this second chapter, our attention is focused on the concept of the “gaze” as defined originally by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. She explains,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure that is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey, 1992, p.19).

Where the first chapter's mode of representation focuses on the choices seen and heard on the screen by an audience, this second chapter's model is specifying the agency's manipulation of such a gaze, whether inside or outside the diegesis. For there are, according to Mulvey (2009), pre-existing patterns at work that support social formations outside the film itself. This chapter uses the film *Ju Dou* (1990) as an example of how film reflects, reveals, and plays on the established interpretation of sexual difference, which consist of a structured film form, a coded film language, and erotic ways of looking (Mulvey, 1992, p.16).

Zhang Yimou presents in the film *Ju Dou* (1990), a dark, sensual, and visually sumptuous drama that centers on the title character, the wife of a wealthy silk dyer in 1920s China. Forced into marriage, Ju Dou is repeatedly mistreated and tortured by her husband for failing to bear him an heir, even though he is infertile. Her suffering attracts the sympathy of her husband's younger, kinder nephew, and the two begin a secret affair that lead to tragic consequences.

According to Mulvey (2009) pleasure in watching a film such as *Ju Dou* (1990) is created through the inherently voyeuristic mechanism that comes to play. A Freudian psychoanalytic term, "voyeurism", refers to the erotic gratification of watching someone without oneself being seen. Taking the act of gazing a step further, "scopophilia" is the sexual pleasure in looking (p.17). According to E. Ann Kaplan (2000),

The act of gazing is played upon in dominant cinema, creating the pleasure that has ultimately erotic origins. The gaze is built upon culturally defined notions of sexual difference. There are three looks: (a) within the film text itself, men gaze at women, who become objects of the gaze, (b)

the camera's original 'gaze' comes into play in the very act of filming, (c) and the spectator is made to identify with the male gaze, and to objectify the women on the screen. This cinematic analysis keeps in mind the construction and talks about distance of subject from camera, point of view, function of a character in the narrative (Kaplan, 2000, p. 15).

When a culture takes the myth of sexual demarcation, the difference called "masculine" and "feminine," and have it, according to Kaplan (2000) in her work *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, "revolve first on the complex gaze apparatus and second on domination-submission patterns, it clearly privileges the male through the mechanisms of 'voyeurism' and 'fetishism.' Through the control of the visual image, the man's desire carries power/action where the woman's usually does not" (p. 25). This includes Zhang Yimou, a male film director of the Chinese cinema.

Oscar Wilde (1890) once penned these words: "Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter. The sitter is merely an accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter: it is rather the painter, who, on the coloured canvas, reveal himself canvas, reveals himself" (Canda, 2015, p. 102). Do film directors reveal themselves when arranging the elements of the *mise-en-scene*, including the female character in the shot? Laura Mulvey (1989) considers "the place of the look defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different from, say, strip tease, theater, shows, and so on. Going far beyond highlighting a female's to-be-look-at-ness, the cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (p.127). This model documents the arrangement and action of elements in shots that manipulate our vision, the gaze that directs the viewing audience to

observe a portion of the frame over another, or a character's gaze within the diegesis that favors and propels the narrative forward in the storyline, or simply one's recognition of an emotional state by simply looking at another's gaze. Such gazing can promulgate intended feelings of the character and ensuing actions by the character. This nonverbal communication can establish if not confirm a viewer's interpretation of the female lead character. The viewer may negotiate these interpretations to solidify pre-existing mindsets that disassociate the persona of the female lead character as culturally different, as part of "them," and not "us." Much research has been focused on this concept of the "other" and its peripheral belief systems. Thus, it is imperative to explore its validity in this analysis of Zhang Yimou's female lead character.

#### The Other

Edward Said (1978) proposed the question,

Can one divide human reality into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences of hostility expressed by the division of men into 'us' Westerners and 'they'

Oriental? When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and end points of analysis, the result is usually to polarize the distinction. The Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western. And limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions (Said, 1978, pp.45-6).

This chapter presents two films; *Blood Simple*, made and released in the United States in 1985, and the second *A Woman, A Gun, And a Noodle Shop*, made and released in China in 2011. Chinese film director Zhang Yimou uses the story of a man who hires a

hit man to murder his unfaithful wife. Using *Blood Simple*'s (1984) script as a blueprint, Zhang Yimou changes many areas of the film's "look", to include costume, weaponry, and set design.

This model of "otherness" draws upon man-made concepts from disciplines of history and geographical location. Said (1978) addresses the concept of *Orientalism* as a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and most of the time 'the Occident'" (p.2). Edward Said (1978) is emphatic about this creation of otherness by man, strongly due to cultural geography through a certain time period of that society. He states,

We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography; as both geographical and cultural entities- to say nothing of historical entities. Such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other (Said, 1978, p. 4).

In *Screening China: National Allegories and International Receptions*, (Cui, 2003), the view of a "cooperative" Orientalism occurs when the elements of the diegetic Chinese film satisfies the Occidental Westerner's expectation. Western scholarship, as Mark Freeman (2000) explains, rather than truly explore the orient, inevitably reduces it to an idea, a concept. The orient is made oriental by the occident, thus posing the

question of what “Orient” does Yimou create in his films? Rey Chow (1995) sees Zhang Yimou’s productions as “‘Oriental’s orientalism,’ which exhibits a self-display for the voyeuristic gaze” (p. 87). As a Westerner, one asks what is truly authentic, or is such a portrayal created for the audience’s fascination?

With the *mise-en-scene* and its characters as its focus, this reformulation of ethnography destroys the operational premises of a world divided in the form of them, of viewing a subject and a viewed object, of classical anthropology. According to Chow (2010), “‘Us’ and ‘them’ are no longer safely distinguishable; ‘viewed object’ is now looking at ‘viewing subject’ looking”(p.153). This third model used in this study considers how Chinese director Zhang Yimou made specific cultural changes in the *mise-en-scene*. Zhang Yimou obtained the rights to a Coen brothers’ film, and took the Western text and made his Chinese version. Influenced by Zhang Yimou’s history and culture, these diegetic changes are not only replacements that resonate China, but tend to be melodramatic. This “China,” according to Rey Chow (1995), “which is signified mythically, is the China constructed by modernity. It is the modernity of anthropology, ethnography, and feminism. It is also a ‘China’ exaggerated and caricatured, in which the past is melodramatized in the form of excessive and absurd rituals and customs” (p. 145).

#### Conclusion: Zhang Yimou’s Modus Operandi

If the viewer were to ask film director Zhang Yimou of his method of operation, research would answer the sadness of the lower class of people, especially in rural situations that echo the powerless lives under Chinese rule. Chow (1995) reminds us that,

Zhang is showing a ‘China’ that is at once subalternized and exoticized by the West. The ‘ethnicity’ amounts to an exhibitionism that returns the

gaze of orientalist surveillance, a gaze that demands of non-Western peoples mythical stories to which convenient labels of otherness such as 'China' can be affixed (p. 170).

According to Ben Singer (2001) in his work *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*, "If modernity represents an epoch in which all traditional belief systems 'melt into the air,' then certainly one of the most prominent examples of modern ideological vaporization involved the destabilization of traditional ideologies of gender" (Singer, 2001, p. 221). The most intriguing and emphasized female character is the serial-queen, whose portrayal of heroic acts is also accompanied by the "sadistic spectacle" of victimization. Singer (2001) continues,

My explanation of the paradox, female empowerment and imperilment, focuses on the genre's function not only as an index of female emancipation, how tentative and incomplete that actually was, but also as an index of the anxieties created in a society experiencing the sociological and ideological upheavals of modernity. The serial-queen melodrama is an exemplary expression of the perennial instability and flux in modern society's most basic norms (p.222).

The introduction of Wimal Dissanayake's (1996) *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, claims that there has been a reexamination of melodrama; in particular, in the nature of representation and the role of ideology and female subjectivity. He argues, "In Asian melodramas, there is a confluence of tradition and modernity" (Dissanayake, 1996, p. 5).

The culmination of this study's models has addressed the geographical aspect of Eastern and Western sensibilities, and also of our pre-existing historical perception

through past and present voices. As this study's main focus is on the female in a leading role, one may conclude that melodrama may be a "means for the patriarchal order to sustain itself through a temporary and fictionalized acknowledgement of its repressive effects upon women" (Mercer, Schingler, 2004, p. 26). All the films presented in this study contain such repressiveness in females, but all along, the female lead character resisting to comply until the very end.

Leo B. Levy (1957) embraces the importance of resistance in that "the real subject matter has become the intensification of oppositions for its own sake." (Levy, 1957, p.3). In *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and The Mode of Excess*, Peter Brooks (1976) claims that it "might be more accurate to say oppositions are intensified for the sake of the choice between them, so that the adventure of consciousness can be fully melodramatic. Such greater inwardness matched with external action and gesture" (Brooks, 1976, pp.157-58). This can be evident in the pioneering work by American film director Douglas Sirk. Christine Gledhill (1987) explains the revelation of Sirk's work,

The work of directors, whose exploitation of color, widescreen, camera movement, were now seen as overwrought examples of the bourgeois.

It became a positive value, passing from an authorial to a generic trademark and under this rubric the films of Minnelli and Kazan came to stand alongside Sirk to mark the parameters of a new critical field. (Mercer and Shingler, 2004, p.39).

Additionally, this study reveals the melodramatic matrix, examined in Watts' (2016) *Roland Barthes Cinema*, between hero/good and villainy/evil. It reveals the

generation of emotion located in the clash that is often characterized by their secret nature, their hidden form.

Common in a melodrama are scenes that vary from conflict to calm periods that set the stage for the next emotional scene. And at certain moments, Mercer (2004) states, “a break-down of ‘reality’ appears, the hysterical moment of the text. At this point, the *mise-en-scene* has a tendency to become explicitly symbolic or coded” (p. 13). Also applied within the narrative are psychological and Freudian overtones that play well throughout the storyline; revelations of forbidden familial relationships are of major concern with the leading female character, all centered on the queen.

As sympathetic participants in the story, the audience is drawn to the moral truth that she possesses. Peter Brooks (1995) explains, “The ritual of melodrama involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and seeks to expel them. There is a social order to be purged, a set of ethical imperatives to be made clear” (Brooks, 1995, p.17). Linda Williams (1998) in her essay *Melodrama Revised* asserts that a “quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to melodrama” (Williams, 1998, p. 52). This often results in big sensational scenes that present moral truths.

Film director Zhang Yimou takes full advantage of the sensationalism within the melodramatic style. Melodramatic good and evil, according to Peter Brooks (1995), are highly personalized; they are assigned to, they inhabit persona who indeed have no psychological complexity but who are strongly characterized. Such narratives are illustrated by heightened emotions that dramatically culminate in stylized revelations.

This introductory chapter aimed to illuminate the major points of the three modes of representation employed in this study. The insistence for striking visuals of the *mise-*

*en-scene*, and the importance of their relationship amidst each other and the female lead character is a trademark of Zhang Yimou. The audience's involvement and the information brought forth by the different "gazes" within the context of the diegetic action on the screen and the nondiegetic reaction from it. How the concept of "otherness" plays a cultural role in its relative stance between East and West versions of the same storyline and main female lead character. And finally culminating with the overall presentation in a melodramatic form, and incorporating all the key elements in prior modes, Zhang Yimou constructs a visual experience successful in its distinct presentation of the female lead character.

## CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This dissertation examines four films by Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, which feature females in leading roles. Challenging the representation of stereotypical characters of Chinese females in film storylines, this analysis explores how this filmmaker instills courage and perseverance through his portrayal of the female character in a leading role. For much of Chinese cinema, most female characters were insignificant and one-dimensional in the storyline. Using his film experience as both a director and cinematographer, Zhang Yimou presents the female that comes to life on the screen.

This study uses three of the many underlining models that address such intentions and their subsequent reception by a viewer. Using critical and cultural studies of gender and ethnicity, such concepts included how the overall presentation or *mise-en-scene* is constructed, and secondly how this interaction of elements direct the “gaze” of both diegetic (characters on the screen) and non-diegetic (audience members) perceptions. This study also examines the notion of “otherness,” brought to the forefront by Edward Said. Zhang Yimou adopted a Western text *Blood Simple* (1984), a film made by American filmmakers the Coen brothers, and created his own version of the leading female.

All the films used in this study have one element in common, the style and form of the melodramatic. The study concludes its research by examining the predominant characteristics of the melodrama, as it applies to the female lead character. Whether it is a Zhang’s customary portrayal of a rural peasant female or a high energy-driven noodle shop employee, evaluation of these works demonstrates how this film director uses the characterization of the female in a leading role in attempts to portray through different

storylines, a similar outcome whose strength and determination, one that counters the typical notion of a Chinese female's fate and desire.

#### A True Auteur: Zhang Yimou's Style of Filmmaking

Film directors have total control over all phases of movie production, finalizing all filmmaking decisions. So having that autonomy, Yimou wanted his films to be completely different from the traditional Chinese film. He once said, "I tried to kept the compositions uncluttered and direct, with as little camera movement as possible, so as to provoke powerful, deep emotion. At the same time trying to create a new style" (Cardullo, 2008, p. 103). And after making just a handful of films, Zhang's style of shooting would be considered his footprint by his fellow filmmakers. Some illustrations of his approach in production are his placement and movement of the camera, and his tactic in lighting a shot. All such liberties and choices made by Yimou are deliberate attempts to stir the audience's involvement in the emotional message.

Using the camera as his visual tool, Zhang Yimou composes a cinematic symphony, striking harmony between his leading female's story and her framed environments. As Hoyveda (1960) states, "In short, the intellectual operation that has set to work an initial emotion and general idea. He uses the creative possibilities that cinema as an art form affords, and by the same token it becomes a marker of his individuality. The auteur works in a manner that is specific to him." (Hoyveda, 1960, p.142). Some may label Zhang's style and approach as a distinct cinematic signature. This has been referred to as the auteur principle. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2010), "during the 1950's, the French used the word auteur or author to describe Hollywood directors whom they felt had created a distinctive approach to filmmaking. This has remained a

central idea for film academics and students” (Bordwell and Thompson, 2010, p. 33). Whether considered by some as an aesthetic phenomenon, or as the representations of meanings, emotions and ideas, film continues to convey messages. This process of message creation and reception has been thoroughly studied by Stuart Hall. Hall (1980) breaks down these meanings created by the film director, better known as “preferred meanings”, and received by a viewer, better known as “negotiated or oppositional meanings” by their approach in explaining how or why they exist (Hall, 1980, pp.197-200).

Zhang Yimou, as the creator of his work, is fully aware of his intended meanings throughout all the elements within the frame. The intention is to communicate these emotions outward, off the screen, to the viewing public who has brought with them an ideological framework that may oppose such representations that was chosen by Yimou. Film scholar Timothy Corrigan (2001) writes,

In critical writing attuned to ideology, any cultural product or creation carries, implicitly or explicitly, ideas about how the world is or should be seen, and how men and women should see each other in it. Whether we agree or disagree with the values expressed in a particular movie, the ideological critic maintains that these movies are never innocent visions of the world and that the social and personal values that seem so natural in them need to be analyzed (p.106).

Zhang Yimou insists there is a binding relationship between himself and the Chinese soil. He was born and grew up in China. He claims that he can never sever ties with China, and will always remain “a son of the land.” Proud of the fact that he is a film

director from China, he'd "like to come up with the best possible works to give back to my land and my people" (Cardullo, 2008, p.128). Yimou once said, "Western film probably only influenced me with regard to cinematic form and technical matters, but the influence of Chinese culture, the Chinese spirit and Chinese emotions, is absolutely basic to me. That's because I'm one hundred percent Chinese, and so are my films" (p.137). It would appear that his country plays a huge role in his filmmaking.

The representation of meaning through his language works in a reflective manner. According to Stuart Hall (2002), in the reflective approach, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea, or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning, as it already exists in the world. Yimou says that it's hard to tell where inspiration comes from. Sometimes it's when you least expect it. Or, sometimes, "inspiration comes from another person: something that another person says or does moves you. You find yourself touched and your feelings give you an idea that you can use and develop" (Cardullo, 2008, p.132).

During the emergence of the Fifth Generation films, the interest in historical motifs or peasant issues were undeniable for Zhang Yimou. He thinks it had to do with the general political environment at the time that eventually influenced the creative mood. Zhang Yimou graduated in 1982 from the Central Film Academy in Beijing. He was one of the first groups of students to graduate from the academy after a long interruption during the Cultural Revolution. Other filmmakers in the group are Chen Kaige, Huan Jianxin, Peng Xiaolian, and Tian Zhuangzhuang (Gateward, 2001, p.35). Two of the most important developments, according to Zhang Yimou, were nativist and reflective literature. He claims that there was a "surge of solidarity that compelled

everyone to reflect on our culture tradition, and our historical past” (Gateward, 2001, p.108). “Although Zhang may think that he is making films about China,” author Rey Chow (1995) states,

What he is doing is representing a timeless China of the past, which is given to us in an imagined mode. This ‘China,’ which is signified mythically, is the China constructed by modernity- the modernity of anthropology, ethnography, and feminism. It is exaggerated, in which the past is melodramatized in the form of excessive and absurd rituals. In his mythical construct, what Zhang accomplishes is not a reflection of a China ‘that was really like that’ but rather arranged in a special kind of order (p.145).

Another kind of approach to how representation of meaning through language works argues the opposite from a reflective one. According to Hall (2002), it holds that it is the “speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends they should mean.” This the intentional approach (Hall, 2002, p.25).

Zhang insists that “when you make a film, especially about a tragic story, you have to put characters under a certain amount of pressure from society, and then you have to show that the characters fight their fate and resist their social as well as personal tragedy” (Cardullo, 2008, p.142). When asked why his films were mostly about women, he replied, “that in the past five thousand years, women’s life in China is definitely the most difficult and unfortunate in spiritual or material terms.” As he explains, “When the

crisis of characters opens up the meaning of life, that is the essence of art” (Gateward, 2001, p.155).

A third approach to explain how representation of meaning works acknowledges “neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. It is not the material world that conveys meaning, it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts.” This is known as the constructionist approach (Hall, 2002, p.25). Zhang sees film searching for its own expression. He states, “An adaptation needs not to copy the original, but to remain filmic” (Gateward, 2001, p.5).

Whether it be deconstructing a historical past, or constructing a postcolonial one, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou, and their other Fifth Generation contemporaries find their meeting ground in the images of landscape, rural life, and oppressed women. These filmmakers become their “culture’s anthropologists and ethnographers,” capturing the remnants of a history that has undergone major disasters (Chow, 1995, p.38). “While someone’s critique of traditional Chinese culture stems from a belief in the invisible inward depths that have been veiled and distorted by culture’s untrustworthy surfaces,” Chow (1995) writes, “Zhang’s critique stems, instead, from the material force of such surfaces- from their vulgar womanly focus, their seductive accessibility, their irreversible time, their illusion of transparency” (p. 163).

If we were to compare Zhang Yimou’s work with other Fifth Generation filmmakers, one may agree with scholar Rey Chow’s (1995) observation,

Zhang’s pragmatic and disciplined approach is one of the major differences between him and his contemporaries. While they demand a

kind of attentiveness and interpretation from the audience, Zhang doesn't rely on an audience's philosophical perceptiveness. Zhang operates at an obvious and crude level, 'seducing' audiences away from whoever that happen to be and whatever they happen to be doing (p.161).

When asked about females possessing a spirit of resistance, Yimou replies, "It's about a woman who comes to recognize her own self-worth, a woman who realizes that she controls her own fate" (Gateward, 2001, p.40). This reoccurring storyline of the strength and endurance of the leading female can be seen throughout Yimou's work. Immersing her in desolate, isolated rural areas just adds to her unyielding struggle to persevere and yet still victorious in the end. In addition to such motifs as her low status in society and the environment upon which Zhang places her, there is yet another masterful touch upon which Yimou elevates this leading character off the screen. It's his use of color.

"Ever since I made my first movie, I have tended to use very rich colors and visuals. And this hasn't changed" remarks Yimou. "Maybe it's because I'm Northern Chinese. I was born and grew up in the northern part of China, and I was heavily influenced by the local folk art and the regional environment there" (Cardullo, 2008, p.131). When asked about the color red, Zhang Yimou replies,

The red color of the sorghum, red-dyed cloth of *Judou*, the red lanterns of *Raise the Red Lantern*, are related to the fact that I'm from Shaanxi Province. Shaanxi's soil is rather red, and its people are fond of the color. All kind of affairs held in the provinces of Shaanxi and Shanxi are likely

to make use of the color red. Such customs have influenced me and have caused me to be fond of red (Gateward, 2001, p.76).

In *Red Sorghum* (1987), the visual impact is very intense, and the cinematography plays a dominant role in controlling this. Zhang contends that they utilized the color red extensively. He states that “in China’s five thousand years of cultural tradition, the color red has simply represented hot passion, the approach of the sun, burning fire, warm blood” (Gateward, 2001, p.6). No contemporary Chinese film is totally free of political messages. For those who are interested in this kind of message, Gateward (2001) claims that Zhang’s color red does carry one. But contrary to what many critics say, Gateward (2001) writes, “It may not be purely political. Sick of chairman Mao’s theory and practice of ‘class struggle,’ all the Fifth Generation directors try not to be obtrusively political. Zhang Yimou’s red is rather a commemoration of freedom, exuberance, and the most primal desires and aspirations, which have been denied by both Confucianism and Communism” (p. 152).

Most of Zhang Yimou’s films speak from the downtrodden and the rebellious. *Red Sorghum* (1987) accepts the arrangement of a winery owner’s wife with a worker, *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) puts four wives owned by a master against each other, and *Judou* (1990) centers on Ju Dou and the boss’s nephew. What Zhang Yimou “attempts to glorify is not orthodox history, and certainly not official paragons, but humanity caught in history” (Gateward, 2001, p.153). Zhang’s strength lies in his assemblage of all the elements in his visual display. It’s what sets him apart from most filmmakers-an impact that emanates from the *mise-en-scene*.

Yimou has quite consciously sought to make his films look good. That itself seems to indicate a special concern for the audience. Yimou relates,

I always insist on visually striking films. A film must look good, and you have to work out what 'looking good' means. You cannot afford to get self-indulgent or too isolated and self-involved. But I must emphasize that the 'looking good' I'm talking about is not at all the same as the kind you find in Hollywood commercial filmmaking. What I make are still works of art, of visual art (Cardullo, 2008, p.140).

There is every indication that whatever Zhang Yimou does, he does it in order to emphasize not the thematic concerns or even characterization but the filmic or visual nature of his films. Before Zhang Yimou started directing films, he was a cinematographer for many of the "fifth generation" films produced at the academy. Therefore, Zhang Yimou was well versed in the use of light. After watching a rehearsal of a scene, it was his job to select the type and position of the lighting instruments. He knew the artistry of cinematography and its potential impact on the viewer. As a director, he forwarded that knowledge into each of the films he has directed. One of the best models that illustrate this important factor is David Bordwell's (1989) "Bull's-Eye Schema."

#### *Mise-en-Scene* and Bordwell's (1989) "Bull's Eye" Schema

The Belgian critic Dirk Lauwaert celebrated a term as the most beautiful word about film, the *mise-en-scene*. Eloquent as it may seem, this term may be used in different ways. Simply put, *mise-en-scene* means two things, "one is the directing process, and the other is the result of that process. One gets confused when speaking of

the *mise-en-scene* of a film. It's a matter of terminology between what is seen on the screen, i.e. a result, and what is deemed to have produced the result, i.e. a set of means, a series of acts" (Kessler, 2014, p.30).

The word *mise-en-scene* is from the French, literally translated as "to put on stage." But a more useful definition encompasses both the contents in the frame and the way that they are organized. Author John Gibbs (2002) states, "When we say that the specificity of the cinematographic work lies in its technique and not in its content, in its *mise-en-scene* and not in the screenplay and the dialogue, we raise a storm of protest" (Gibbs, 2002, p.81). Seen in this way, Frank Kessler (2014) argues,

*Mise-en-scene* appears to cover much more than simply the staging of an event for the camera. It also includes the way shots are edited to create a whole, the composition within the frame and the composition of the sequence, the movements of the actors as well as the movements of the camera. Thus *mise-en-scene* is no longer seen in relation to the theatrical stage, but has become a genuinely cinematic concept referring to the interaction of all the instruments (p.23).

Therefore, the medium of filmmaking has not only certain advantages (e.g. editing of time and space) compared to a live performance, but also creates a unique experience for the viewer. The concept behind filmmaking is to offer a story that will be fully accepted by the viewer, to feel as a participant there on the screen. In John Gibb's (2002) *Mise-en-Scene: Film Style and Interpretation*, he discusses space and camera as to "include the personal space between performers and our sense of when it is impinged

upon, but also blocking, that is, the relationship expressed and patterns created in the positioning of the actors.” (p.17).

When one refers to space and the *mise-en-scene*, we have moved our focus away from the elements or objects within the frame, to the organization of such contents. Whether directly or indirectly, this makes us think of camera placement, height, movement, and size of lens used for the shot. And as we decide upon these camera choices, so too have we profoundly affected the nature of our view, or the framed elements that will engage an audience member. Gibbs (2002) continues to explain how critical,

The position of the camera is going to determine our understanding of the scene. It will, for example, profoundly affect the way we experience an actor’s performance. It is one of the most important means by which the nature of our relationship to the characters is defined. Even decisions such as whether we follow a character who ‘leads’ the camera, or whether the camera has anticipated his or her arrival can subtly shape the relationship the audience has with character and story (p. 19).

The camera is a recording device, a simple machine. But when a director wants to capture more than an actor’s movement, the camera has that capability. Filmmaking is a translation from what’s on a script to what’s on the screen. The camera, and its all-important lens, when properly placed (i.e. low on the ground, high above their heads, placed on a moving dolly, on a crane looking down two-hundred feet, etc.) can mysteriously evoke human emotion, feelings for a character.

What's essential in the array of elements in the *mise-en-scene* are their interactions and the importance for harmony. Gibbs (2002) states that both describing an element and its potential for expression is important, "But what is worth remembering from the outset is that these elements are most productively thought of in terms of their interaction rather than individuality" (p.26). As Gibbs (2002) continues, "For the filmmaker trying to achieve expressive significance, or for the critic making a convincing interpretation, the extent to which a coherent pattern can be established is of vital importance" (p. 41).

This study examines such interactions between the female in the leading role and the camera placement and lighting, the set elements, and any action by her towards such elements and any other characters that may be in the scene. Another way of describing such relationships can be taken from scholar David Bordwell (1989). He states, "One way to ascribe coherence to the film is to imagine that, at any given moment, discriminable elements serve as vehicles for the same sematic field" (p.106). To clarify the concept of a semantic field, Bordwell (1989) states that a semantic field is not a "governing idea" as with a theme. In contrast, a semantic field is a "conceptual structure that organizes potential meanings in relation to one another" (p. 106). One could construct a target or bull's eye to illustrate such relationships and their meanings.

If one places the female in the leading role of film at the center of the bull's eye, this structure's interpretive cues gravitate towards the center, her traits and actions. The closest area to her and the bull's eye's center is her surroundings. The setting, the lighting, all the framed elements, in short "the diegetic world she inhabits" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 170). This bull's eye structure suggests correlations between the character and

the setting, and between the setting and the camera. Most importantly, these correlations aid in creating and reflecting the female's narrative. As Lightfoot (1997) agrees, "The dimensions of context that appear in the film are carefully chosen, using only those elements that provide a physical framework, a feeling of embeddedness in the setting, and a forecasting of values and themes that will shape the narrative" (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.45). Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) adds that by context, "I mean the setting, the physical, geographical, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic within which the action takes place" (p.41).

Though the *mise-en-scene* encompasses elements in the outer, non-diegetic circle in Bordwell's (1989) "Bull's-Eye Schema" model, lighting a particular shot requires hours of preparation. It's not just a manner of positioning certain lighting instruments, but a certain quality or tone of the overall look is required for each shot. A director doesn't stage the action of a scene, and then later contemplate where the camera will be positioned. This is true with lighting. "To discuss lighting of a shot without knowing where the camera will be placed is to misunderstand how films are made" (Gibbs, 2002, p.54). One example is the choice of lighting ratios.

As Gloman and Letourneau (2005) describe in their book *Placing Shadows*, this ratio is directly associated with either "high-key" or "low-key" looks. As they state, "generally, only a small area of the scene, such as an actor's face or body, is involved in computing a lighting ratio" (Gloman and Letoureau, 2005, p.122). This involves the main or "key" light and any additional "fill" lights to accommodate the desired shadows that mold the actor. "High-Key" lighting has a small ratio with minimal shadows, giving a pleasant or normal feeling of the actor and the setting. "Low-Key" lighting is just the

opposite, giving off a shadowy effect for dramatic effect (p. 123). The latter was used in both films, *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), for both females in a leading role.

The diegetic world of the female exists in the inner circle of Bordwell's (1989) "Bull's Eye Schema" model. Elements such as the set pieces, known as set dressing, are carefully chosen to reflect the mood of that particular scene. Style and tone of the furnishings are paramount. The overall appearance and color of the actor's clothing should also reflect the psychological predicament that he or she faces at this point in the story. All these elements combined in the *mise-en-scene* will define the center bull's eye as the female in the leading role.

#### Critique of Zhang Yimou: A New Ethnography

The first two narratives, *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), presented in this study place the female lead character in a similar context. Their characteristics have become the "trademarks" of Zhang style and approach to ethnicity. According to Rey Chow (1995) in her book *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, one of Zhang's imprints is the "oppressiveness of feudal China, usually personified by an unreasonable, domineering older male figure, such as Jiu'er's leper husband in *Red Sorghum*, and Chen Zuopian, the landlord who owns several wives in *Raise the Red Lantern*" (Chow, 1995, p.143). But despite the recurrence of themes in Zhang's films, such as the isolated rural settings, far away from humanity, some claim that investigations of such work should be made through a different perspective. Chow (1995) sees that Zhang's films can be described as constituting a "new kind of ethnicity," one that gravitates towards his obsession with

visual display. “Whatever Zhang does, he does in order to emphasize not the thematic concerns but the filmic or visual nature of his films. This practice is a conscious and tactical mobilization of every kind of event toward visual display, a display that is most effectively achieved through woman” (p. 147).

In Yuejin Wang’s (1991) interpretation, *Red Sorghum: Mixing Memory and Desire*, he finds the narrative blatantly addressing issues of desire, sexuality, in a lifestyle resisting traditional Chinese virtues. He states, “Surprisingly, the central antithesis around which sound and fury erupt simply implicates a sexual difference: favoring femininity over masculinity” (Wang, 1991, p. 81). According to Wang (1991), *Red Sorghum* (1987) “transgresses the Chinese melodramatic narrative of the helpless woman as the film maps out an autonomous space to foreground the world of her subjective consciousness. One example is the slightly raised curtain of the sedan offering the female heroine a glimpse of the male body is almost a reversal of the classical formula for a male voyeuristic experience” (p 94- 96).

It follows that the reconstruction of the past, including the masculine past, has been mediated through the female lead character. In the climax of *Red Sorghum* (1987), the female in the leading role tragically dies. And with her, the male gaze perishes as well. The second film, *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), is also mediated through the female lead character. And as such, film director Zhang Yimou had to make some changes.

Providing a more visual palet than the original novel on which *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) was based, Zhang takes full liberty in changing storylines in order to visually spot light his leading female character. Some examples are the wives waiting outside their front door during the lighting of the red lanterns, signifying the chosen wife

for the night didn't exist in the original story. Also, Zhang replaced the well where cheating wives were tossed, with a more visual death house on top of the roof where such concubines who committed adultery were hanged. In the new storyline, the leading female gets to gaze at the deceased bones inside the death house and at a prominent character's capture and execution during the film's climax (Chow, 1995, p.148).

Though the visuality of Zhang's films depicts the treatment of females, good or bad, Chow (1995) sees it as "the blurriness of historical background matched by an obliviousness to class differences. For Zhang, the female is very much a typical sexual body that is bound by social chains and that needs to be liberated. These tales of gothic and often morbid oppression are marked by their contrast with the sensuous screen design of the films" (p. 143). This sensuous side of Zhang's portrayal of the leading female in his films runs counter to many theories concerning the characterization of women and the symbolic representation they have within film narratives. Laura Mulvey (2009) sees that "the representation of the woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man can signify castration, and the two means to circumvent this threat is active voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms" (Mulvey, 2009, p.26).

#### *Ju Dou* and Laura Mulvey's Psychoanalytic "Gaze"

In his *Le Plaisir du Texte*, the French semiologist Roland Barthes (1973) described how the very process of story telling itself, the construction of the narrative, is rooted in the myth of Oedipus. The classic text is a heavily closed discourse, characterized by its "linearity, transparency, the necessity for coherence of action and character and the drive towards closure and resolution in terms of a final, full truth augmented and affirmed by a process of identification between reader/ viewer and

character” (Barthes, 1973). Rey Chow (1995) explains the implications of Zhang Yimou’s use of Oedipalization, as he rewrites the plot to connect the dramatization of femininity with patricide. An example is the text’s version of Ju Dou dying of old age, whereas the film has her burning down the dye mill, with her in it. Also, the repeated patricide shown as “physical impotence, symbolic castration, ultimate deaths of fathers, constitutes a China deprived of power” (p.147). Though caught in this milieu of tragedy and death, Ju Dou continues to hold control and power- remaining a striking visual on the screen, constructed for the “gaze.”

“Using ideology and other related psychoanalytic concepts,” Chow (2010) in her essay *Film and Cultural Identity* claims that,

Feminist critics concerned with identitarian politics have, since Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking work in 1975, been steadily exposing the masculinism of mainstream cinema. As a means of countering the repressive effects of dominant modes of visuality and identification, some go on to analyze in detail the ambiguities of the visual representations of women (p. 87).

Author Anne Friedberg (1990) states that the cinema plays upon “introjective identification” while at the same time providing the illusion of “projective identification.” Although the relation might not be immediately apparent, “fetishism, a term that is most commonly called upon in its metaphoric capacity, has certain structural similarities to the process of identification. The fetishist object-relation is that of acknowledgement and disavowal in constant oscillation” (Friedberg, 1990, p.39). Rey Chow (1995) explains this duality in Zhang Yimou’s films, “We see on one hand, the sadness of powerless lives

under Chinese rule. On the other hand, the ‘ethnicity’ or ‘Chineseness’ is also a sign of cross-cultural commodity fetishism, a production of value between cultures. What Zhang is producing is rather an exhibitionist self-display that contains a critique of the voyeurism of orientalism itself, what we may call the Oriental’s orientalism” (p.171).

Mulvey’s (1975) essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, employs psychoanalysis to identify society’s pre-existing patterns within the spectator of sexual relationships and their fascination. Mulvey (1975) explains, “Cinematic codes, visuals that trigger thoughts in our minds, create a gaze. Film is an illusion, create a world and an object. And in some cases, centered on producing a situation for the viewer to gain a measure of desire. There are three different looks or gazes associated with cinema: that of the camera, that of the audience, and that of the characters within the created illusion” (p.26).

E. Ann Kaplan (1983) agrees, “Using psychoanalysis to deconstruct films enables us to see clearly the patriarchal myths through which we have been positioned as Other (enigma, mystery), and as eternal and unchanging” (Kaplan, 1983, p.25). Laura Mulvey (2009) claims that,

Psychoanalysis can be used to extract from the unconscious the patriarchal bias of film form. The theory here is considered, in her words, a ‘political weapon.’ This concept is a contradiction of phallogentrism and the castrated woman. The function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic (p.14).

The key to this extraction from the unconscious is confronting it on the same level as a language, a patriarchal language that speaks of the status quo. In fact, it is through linguistics that the female “stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by an order in which man lives out his fantasies” (p.15).

Privileged for male spectatorship exclusively, according to Mulvey (1975), one first focuses on the narrative and character developments, then on the psychological impetus for the dream-like state. Mulvey (1975) sees this outside focus on the female works counter to the flow of the plot. Realizing that he has full control of how he shoots a film, Zhang Yimou displays his female lead character to give emphasis, not for spectacle. Mulvey (1975) argues, “Mainstream film combines both spectacle and narrative to support such gazing systems. The male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female, while her presence, as a character in the exposition of the narrative is indispensable” (Mulvey, 1975, p.19).

E. Ann Kaplan (1983) in *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* adds, “The difference between the male voyeurism and the female form is striking. Even when she watches, the woman does not own the desire; it is to distance herself from sex. The man owns the desire and the woman. In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (p.27). Therefore, the male gets the best of both worlds, his reality in watching the female perform in the film, while at the same time, can fantasize “gazing” at her body.

Mary Ann Doane (1981) notes that, “In the major classical genres, the female body is sexuality, providing the erotic object for the male spectator. As Mulvey has shown, the imaginary identification repeats for men the experience of the mirror phase.

The idealized male screen heroes give back to the male spectator his more perfect mirror self, together with a sense of mastery and control” (Kaplan, 1983, p.28).

#### An Exhibition: Visual Display by Ju Dou

“We must go a step further than ethnographic inequality,” Rey Chow states, “The state of being looked at not only is built into the way non-Western cultures are viewed by Western ones; more significantly it is part of the active manner in which such cultures represent themselves” (p.180). In comparison to other Chinese film directors whose transcendental “goddess” cannot be seen or represented, Zhang’s woman becomes, according to Chow (1995),

The living ethnographic museum that, while putting Chinese culture on display, is at the same time the witness to the origin of human sexuality, which should be free. Not veiled in the metaphysical and utopic tones, Yimou’s woman is localized ‘barbaric’ cultural institution, from which she seeks to be set free (p. 47).

An example of this new ethnography, one that accepts the history of Orientalism and performs or demonstrates by “self-alternizing” visual gestures, is in the film *Ju Dou* (1990). All knowing of her voyeur’s presence, the staged and feticide Judou makes her scars noticeable to him by turning her back towards his direction. The premise of the spectator’s gaze is that of gender, male gender. Rey Chow (1995) explains, “But what begins as an episode of voyeuristic eroticism takes on entirely different implications. *Ju Dou* exposes abuse. The suggestive attention now takes on the signification of empathy between them as fellow casualties of the same feudal system” (p.167).

This concept of representation indicates the “constructed” nature of the image, which is taken as reality, and perpetuates the illusion of the natural. Spectators of film believe the lies on the screen, while the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism flow freely. It also carries the implication of ideology and belief systems. Given the notion of constructivism and its image, ideology can no longer refer to a belief but now to the myths that a society live by, as if these myths were natural. This leaves us now with a reality in filmmaking, and the process of characterization. Zhang Yimou’s comfortable with this reality. As Chow (2007) explains, “In an academic climate in which iconophobia, the distrust and rebuke of the image, seems to have become a predominant way of reading cross-culturally. Zhang’s work challenges us in how one might approach any representation of the non-West as such without attacking orientalism” (Chow, 2007, p. 148).

In her collection of essays *Psychoanalysis & Cinema*, E. Ann Kaplan (1990) recognizes that,

It is not so easy for the fiction reader to believe that he or she is creating the text as it is for the cinema-spectator to believe that he/she is producing the images on the screen. The larger than life figures on the screen are projected from behind the spectator’s head, and the methods of classical editing that ‘suture’ or connect the spectator into the filmic narrative (p.10).

Therefore, it seems only logical that if he/she attends a viewing of a film, in a typical dark theater, the experience stimulates one emotionally. And if he/she has a desire to be emotionally moved, the distance from the viewer and the desired is short. And the

desired appears obtainable through the cinematic experience. Also included is the desire for an object or person.

In this study, the focus is on the female lead character and her emotional journey throughout the film's plot. If a viewer from the West becomes involved in the presentation or *mise-en-scene* of the East, that he/she believes that they understand the female lead character's intentions through her facial expressions (non-verbal communication) including her eye gazing within the diegesis, that the female lead character's very existence as a female, as a Chinese female, is both intriguing and obtainable, then he/she feels assured that they can answer the female lead character's melodramatic appeal for life and freedom. Just the fact that one is culturally different has positive values as much as negative ones.

#### A Man's Desire for the "Other" according to Jacques Lacan

According to Jacques Lacan (1982),

Man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other. To clarify, a 'need' is for sensations that can be given. A 'demand' is for an object that cannot be given. And a 'desire' is for an object that can sometimes be reached. And if an object is reached, then it no longer remains the object of desire; another object will become substituted in its place (Hill, 1997, p.65-7).

Desire is another word for lack, for an object that is missing. As Lacan argues, "It's expressed symbolically, as a type of language and so is a property of signifiers. Signifiers are public property, not belonging to any one individual. Therefore, an

individual's desire is always connected to what other people desire, because it is something that belongs to signifiers, which belong to all language users" (p.73).

Lacan (1982) contends that it's not feasible to share someone else's experiences, but only to have one's own. So the "other" can never truly know someone else like me, but only as an object of sorts. Further in his explanation of desire for the other, Lacan sees this object as the cause of desire. The distinction is in that a voice and gaze from the Other may "first be the cause" of your desire, and "later be the object" of desire (p.79). But, as Roland Barthes stresses, desire, and our curiosity about a female should lead investigations beyond the sexuality features on the surface.

Barthes (1973) stresses, "To construct a narrative is indeed to search for one's cultural origins. A female as a social/ sexual being is repressed in the classic text, and if the male does not dominate the film at the narrative level, the woman can only become the pseudo-center of the filmic discourse, thus both marginalization and a desire to 'gaze' is created" (p.65). In this state, the female is labeled and a binary pairing is established. She is considered the "other." In this quest to find answers to the confrontations surrounding the problems of "otherness," studies have focused on the possibilities of its origin in discourse, colonial discourse, and how that history has carved a deep wound into a lasting misunderstanding. Later, investigations in film studies have linked such concepts to originality in translations or adaptations from text to film or from film to film.

#### Translations of Ethnicity, Stereotype and the Creation of the "Other"

Such "otherness" which is at once an object of desire or at least curiosity, is an articulation of difference contained within what Bhabha (1994) calls the "fantasy of origin and identity. What such a reading reveals are the parameters of colonial discourse

that are needed to marginalize otherness. And in constructing this spatial place for racial or cultural difference, we can design the limits for the West” (Bhabha, 1994, p.96).

Zhang Yimou in his work *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) visually displays an example of such fantasy-like settings in film. Accomplished through the use of an anamorphic or fish-eye camera lens, the isolated, dust-bowl noodle shop’s “ole west look” is very odd in visual presentation, giving the image on the screen president over the narrative. Zhang may be accused of “giving in” to a Western audience with such common American techniques. To discuss this mode of representation of ethnic otherness, one founder in this field is Edward Said, a Palestinian author and theorist, known for his work *Orientalism* and the concepts of Western or colonial discourse as it has groomed notions of the East and its considerations of “otherness.”

Said (1979) states that he has found it “beneficial to employ Michel Foucault’s notion of a discourse” (p.2), in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism. Said (1979) goes on to say “It was amazing how power evoked such an occurrence in producing the Orient. Capturing all the needed fields of the military, science, and the politics, the East managed both Asian and its discourse to the world” (Said, 1979, p.3).

What go hand-to-hand with concepts such as colonial discourse producing this solid demarcation between cultures of strength and weakness are the attached and prescribed attributes of the other, referred to as the stereotype. Bhabha (1994) in his book *Location of Culture* notes the stereotype, “as a form of knowledge and identification, wavers between what is already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (p.94). Interestingly, a trait of colonial discourse is the notion of “fixity.” Fixity connotes

an “unchanging order as well as disorder. It is this manner of ambivalence, central to the stereotype” (p.95).

In this study, the dilemma lies in the subject’s cultural perspective. A film made by Chinese film director Zhang Yimou takes a Western text, with all the essential trimmings of a dark murder mystery, and overtly turns this “Western fixity” into glorified high-key settings with characters, including the leading woman, wearing brightly colored wardrobe. Scholars must question the ownership of such fixity, or the possibility of Chinese pandering to a Western audience.

The leading female, The Wife, in the Chinese version *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) is arrogant, courageous, and confident in her decision, versus the Western version that follows both cinematic look and character behavior known to most from the past era of film noir. *Blood Simple*’s (1984) leading female character Abby is stereotyped as nervous, ambivalent to her surroundings, and doubtful of her fate with Ray, her stereotyped lover.

Bhabha (1994) contends that, “despite the ‘play’ in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (p.101). The players of this discourse are created by, as Bhabha (1994) puts it, “an apparatus of power which contains an ‘other’ knowledge- a knowledge that is arrested and fetishistic and circulates through colonial discourse as that limited form of otherness that is called the stereotype” (p.111). The question still remains of, in the twenty-first century, the entity yielding such power, and how “relative” the labeling of the “other” truly is.

Edward Said (1979) spoke of an Asia that “speaks through and by virtue of the European imagination, which is depicted as victorious over Asia, that hostile ‘other’ world beyond the seas. To Asia are given the feelings of emptiness and loss that seem thereafter to reward Oriental challenges to the West” (p.56). This emptiness and loss may refer back to Freud and the circulation of fetishism and its disavowal within the discourse of colonial power. Therefore, a connection is now made between the colonized, and the weak lacking fetishized female, through the “gaze.”

In E. Ann Kaplan’s (1997) *Looking For The Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, she sees the simple reason that the term “gaze” can be differentiated from a “look” stems from the establishment of power, and who feels comfortable with it. The male and the white feel comfortable. But when a threat occurs, “this discomfort leads to their construction of the primitive/civilized binary categorization so as to defend against difference. It is precisely for these reasons that the ‘gaze’ may be distinguished from ‘looking’” (Kaplan, 1997, p.62).

An example of the voyeuristic-fetishistic mechanism found in gazing is a scene in the dark murder mystery *Blood Simple* (1984), the American film that Zhang Yimou adapted for his Chinese version. After the private investigator shows the husband, Marty, photographs of his wife in bed with her lover Ray, Marty questions why take the photos?, and why so many? The reply by the investigator is that he stayed all night long, “gazing” at the lovers in bed.

There appears evidence for the functional link between the fetish and the stereotype. For fetishism is always, as Bhabha (1994) writes, a “play between archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity in Freud’s terms: ‘All men have penises’; in ours:

‘All men have the same skin/race/culture’- and the anxiety associated with lack and difference. Again, for Freud ‘Some do not have penises’; for us: ‘Some do not have the same skin/race/culture’” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 107).

But in translation, or renditions of the “other’s” film by the “other,” the focus shifts from being the signifier to being the signified, the East taking from the West. “In the classical thinking about translation,” author Barbara Johnson (1985) contends, “it is the signified, not the signifier, that is given priority: Faithfulness to the text has meant faithfulness to the semantic tenor with as little interferences as possible from the constraints of the vehicle. Translation has always been the translation of meaning” (Johnson, 1985, p. 145). Rey Chow (2010) explains,

The common assumption about translation is that it is the rendering of one language into another language. We prioritizing one language over the other, by pretending that the traffic goes in one direction only. We call one language the ‘original’ and the other the ‘translation’. This terminology suppresses the fact that the ‘unoriginal’ language may well be the ‘native’ tongue, that is, the original language (p.155).

Otherness, and its power-yielding signifier is a relative concept. If the focus were to flip the binary setup, the signified Eastern representation could in fact act as the signifier- power originating in Zhang’s own story. Otherwise, *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noddle Shop* (2009) would have emulated the Coen brothers dark shadowed “look” in their *Blood Simple* (1984) film. Obviously, the Coen brothers had no involvement in the making of Zhang Yimou’s film.

“It is often assumed,” writes author Walter Benjamin (1979), “that the point of translation is to impart information or convey the meaning of the original. That is not the case. A translation must incorporate the original’s mode of signification. What needs to be translated is the intention in the ‘original’, not a kind of truth or meaning but the way in which the ‘original’ is put together in the basic elements of human language” (Benjamin, 1979, pp.78-79). This has been the mantra of filmmaker Zhang Yimou. What is required in translation is feelings, emotions, and truth.

One path of inquiry claims that all versions are translations, that there has never been an “original” that the so call claimed “original” is really a translation already. Another path would be a harsh review of the translator, in that, whether it is the West translating the East, or the East translating the West, that the translated version is unfaithful to the Western version of the story. To be faithful is to be obligated. And to auteurs such as Zhang Yimou, such responsibility doesn’t exist. After all, originality in his films’ striking visual presentations or *mise-en-scene* is his trademark, sometimes pushing to extremes, evident in his melodramatic works.

#### Melodrama: More than a Genre, Modes of Distinction

In the films selected for this analysis, Zhang Yimou provides a spectacular presentation of the *mise-en-scene*. Spectators are also privileged by their “gaze” into the diegetic’s many secrecies, while Yimou deeply roots a moral compass that guides us through its many corridors of truth and deceit in this epic, dramatic staged performance. As Peter Brooks (1976) writes,

Melodrama does not simply represent a ‘fall’ from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the

traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question. We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe (Brooks, 1976, p. 15).

And it all centers on the female in the leading role. She is indeed the tragic victim, where the hidden truths, and the ethics that revolve around them, are finally placed in view. As the central victim of societal constraints, the female lead character not only lacks love, but also lacks life. Her meek compliance and inability to rebel or escape provokes extreme audience sympathy and anger. Peter Brooks (1976) sees this melodrama as an “unveiling of sorts: The separation of good and evil works toward revealing them as real forces in the world. The spectacular enactments of melodrama seek constantly to express these forces and imperatives, to bring them to striking revelation, to impose their evidence” (p.13).

As these melodramatic films in this study present their stories, the question of morality seeks answers within the family. In addition to invoking human emotions already in the hearts of the viewer through pathos, Zhang Yimou’s intentions are to touch a nerve, to make an appeal to the viewer. For there may be a good side, as Tianqing from the film *JuDou* (1990), and Li from the film *Red Sorghum* (1987), as archetypical examples of Douglas Sirk’s, “immovable” character. Just as Zhang Yimou was making his unique style in the film industry in China, so too was Douglas Sirk in America. One of the most profound elements that both filmmakers brought to the table was the use of color and its contribution to the *mise-en-scene*, which in turn reflects upon the characterization of the female lead character.

Just like Zhang Yimou's reputation, Thomas Schatz (1981) observes, "Douglas Sirk's films were known to be outside the common formula of filmmaking during the early days. For example, his 'color-coding' of wardrobe indicating how material objects become laden with thematic significance amongst other distinct elements recognized as a Douglas Sirk film" (Schatz, 1981, p.250). So too was the distinction of a Zhang Yimou compared to his fellow filmmakers in China. After all, Zhang Yimou was the chief cinematographer in the early days of the "Fifth Generation." Both filmmakers were able to continue this type or genre using certain vibrant elements. But the term melodrama was to be placed solely in the lap of filmmaker Douglas Sirk. Mercer (2004) maintains that Douglas Sirk's "early history is widely misrepresented. He directed German state-run films, working along side many famous directors including Hitchcock and Wilder" (Mercer and Schingler, 2004, p.40).

Mercer (2004) notes that "the *Cahiers du cinema* critics, especially Francois Truffaut, had argued for Sirk's status as an auteur during the late 1950s and several articles during this period point to Sirk's cinematic style. Some examples would be his use of complex and symbolic *mise-en-scene*, irony and pathos and alienation devices borrowed from Brecht" (p.41). Melodramatic markers of Sirk's were his use of the long lens, which lost the intimate closeness with the viewer, actually putting the actors and the set as if on a stage. Mercer (2004) adds that the "widescreen, deep-focus photography by Sirk in almost all of his celebrated melodramas makes it possible to illustrate the emotional distance between characters in physical terms" (p.53). Such spatial technique works in favor for the alienation of both diegetic characters and audiences.

A common feature used by Zhang Yimou, unconsciously borrowed from Sirk, is the use of frames within the film frame. In *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), Zhang Yimou sets his camera to record numerous architectural archways, gigantic-sized doors, which lead the viewer through many corridors. Another significant feature of the *mise-en-scene* is the use of mirrors. According to Sirk, “it appeared to represent the person, but in fact is their opposite” (Elsaesser, 1987, p.54). The wedding night scene of Songlian in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) is a great example. These devices suggest confinement and isolation of the characters, as author Elsaesser (1987) states, “confined in their lonely worlds and oppressed by their environments” (p.59).

In 1986, inspired by Brooks’ *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Christine Gledhill began an investigation of this “pathos.” Her input with author E. Ann Kaplan (1986) in *Stella Dallas and Feminist Film Theory*, established a new understanding of melodrama,

Primarily as a mode, distinct from realism, having different purposes, and deploying different strategies, melodrama is an aesthetic and epistemological mode distinct from realism. Melodrama insists on the realities of life in bourgeois democracy and, at the same time, implicitly recognizes the inadequacies of conventional representation. In this way, the ‘beneath’ or ‘behind’ (the unthinkable or repressed) is evoked as metaphor through gesture, music, and *mise-en-scene* (Gledhill, 1986, p.45).

In Wimal Dissanayake’s (1993) introduction to his book *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, he states, “In works of art subscribing to a credo of realism, whether they be literature or film, realism represents one stylistic antithesis of melodrama, the ubiquitous

working of ideology is concealed and ‘naturalized.’ But melodramas, with their strong action, emotional intensities, and rhetorical excesses, assume an antirealistic orientation” (Dissanayake, 1993, p.2).

Yimou’s visual pallet of the *mise-en-scene* within the walls that entomb the female lead character is beyond cinematic perfection. Some examples are how Zhang Yimou’s plays out the aftermath of the murder of Tianqing in *Ju Dou* (1990) by his biological son. The ramification after his horrific murder is massive death. Another example is how Jiu’er is murdered in *Red Sorghum*’s (1987) finale scene. But to accord to melodrama, the story is quick to stifle moralistic statutes.

Secondly, the problematic nature of the female lead character’s quality of life, in addition to her impaired physicality, is clearly shown by Gong Li’s performance through her body language and gesture. There is no question why Zhang shoots her in tight close-ups at the appropriate times. As Peter Brooks (1976) adds, “Gestures as metaphors most often create an expanded moral context for the narrative. Gesture is read as containing such meanings because it is postulated to what cannot be said” (p.11).

Thirdly, the repetitive scenes of “gazing” and the restricted, unrestricted narration of secrecy plays a crucial role in the narrative’s flow. As Brooks (1976) states, “The site of this drama, the ontology of the true subject, is not easily established: the narrative must push towards it, the pressure of the prose must uncover it” (p. 5). To gain a better understanding of the ontology or nature of a female in China, research unfolds some of the trials and tribulations of their history during the early feudal times, slowly gaining some status towards an emancipation era.

## Brief History of Chinese Females (Feudal System to Modern Times)

As reflected in this study's critical analysis of the female lead character in Chinese director Zhang Yimou's films, this section provides a brief temporal overview of the status that those females depicted in those, early distant periods in China's history. From documenting the early days of multiple wife ownership under the feudal dynasty system, to the sporadic land acquisitions by warlords and the decline of the feudalistic dynasties, then concluding with today's cultural changes due to different movements and reforms. Study of the historical research strongly suggests a correlation between these major political/ ideological belief systems and the emancipatory opportunities for females.

### Dynasties

According to Li (2003), the timeline of Chinese dynasties were erratic, due to unclear territories and ruler ships. He continues,

It was rare for one dynasty to transition smoothly into the next, as is depicted in history timelines, since dynasties were often established before the overthrow of an existing reign, or continued for a time after they had been defeated. With different regions being ruled by different groups, neither dynasties nor warlords typically ruled a large portion of the country. In the Chinese historiographical tradition, each new dynasty would write the history of the dynasty that preceded it. This cycle was disrupted, however, when the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 overthrew the Qing dynasty in favor of a republic (Li, 2007, pp.13, 26-27).

Even an attempt to draft the history of the Qing was disrupted by the Chinese civil war that resulted in the division of China into the People's Republic of China in mainland China and the Republic of China on Taiwan.

The most apparent means for ensuring the acquiescence of females in their own subordination was the dominant use of ideological mechanisms that accompanied these different political platforms. According to Adler (2006),

The primal foundations for this ostentatious code of the subservient role for women were to be found in ancient Chinese beliefs, dating back to an ethical and philosophical system, also described as a religion, developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC). Confucianism originated as an 'ethical-sociopolitical teaching,' largely defined the mainstream discourse on gender in China from the golden-age of the Han Dynasty onward (Adler, 2006, vol. XIV, no.2).

The often strict, obligatory gender roles based on Confucian teachings became a cornerstone of the family, a societal norm accepted as essential for the culture's stability. Starting from the Han period onward, Confucians in general began to gradually teach that a virtuous female was to serve the wishes of the head in her family, especially the father before her marriage and the husband after she marries. Ames (2002) states, "The virtue held that creation was composed of two necessary elements, the 'yin' or female and the 'yang' or male. The 'yin' elements revealed the weak and passive qualities in contrast to the 'yang' elements that depicted everything that was strong and active, thus balancing nature's innate elements (Ames, 2002, p.847).

## Confucianism: Weak and Passive Females

In *A Frog in a Well': Mechanisms of Subordination*, Elizabeth Croll (1978) states that these elements “originally conceived as interacting and complementary, were soon arranged in a hierarchical relationship juxtaposing superiority to inferiority and goodness to evil. In time, ‘Yin’ elements came to stand for all that was negative and inferior to the universe” (Croll, 1978, p.12). Confucius is believed to have said,

Women are as different from men as earth is from heaven. Women indeed are human beings, but they are of a lower state than men and can never attain full equality with them. According to the *Book of Rites*, compiled in the second century AD and later to become one of the venerated Confucian Classics containing rules of correct conduct, ‘to be a woman meant to submit’ (Burton, 1911, p.19).

As Confucianism was gradually institutionalized, certain ideal standards were used as textbooks in the education of girls throughout succeeding generations. From the first centuries AD onward, an endless succession of Confucian writers extended these texts and perpetuated the belief that females were subservient, a lower being in nature, only necessary for nature’s harmony. Legge (1870) revealed, “The compilers of one of the Classics thought the contemporary lack of order in the state was caused by the interference of women, particularly in public affairs. ‘A woman with a long tongue is like a stepping-stone to disorder. Disorder does not come down from heaven; it is produced by the women’” (Legge, 1871, p.561). According to Croll (1978), “The Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Sung dynasty further elaborated the segregation code of females by re-emphasizing the necessity to practice such acts of gender inequality” (p.14).

Even with the Neo-Confucians, a revival during the Tang dynasty (618-907), which had the reputation of harshly mandating this discrimination against women, the actual situation was in fact quite complicated. This new ideological form of Confucianism incorporated additional qualities of Buddhism and Taoism. As Wolfgang Frank (1968) describes,

When the Tang dynasty transitioned into the Song dynasty, one aspect of this new reinvigorated form was the adaptation of imperial exams and the philosophy of a scholar class. The imperial examination was a systematic means to select bureaucratic officials for the state. Institutionalized, the examination system created a new cultural and political life for many men, for the content was narrowed and fixed on text of existing orthodoxy (Frank, 1968, pp. 70-71).

There had been a difference between textual teaching and the actual social practice by the Neo-Confucians in daily living throughout the different dynasty eras. Roughly in the beginning of the tenth century, the eradication of this bureaucratic system could be associated with the ideological dismantlement of many practiced aspects of Confucianism, as women preferred Buddhism.

In Western scholarship, Confucianism was usually characterized as a patriarchal system that was harsh to females in Pre-modern China. But some research discloses a positive swing for the female gender. Zhou (2003) claims that, “During the Golden Age of the Han dynasty period (206BC-220AD), a female author Ban Zhao wrote *Lessons for Women*, instructing them on how to live proper Confucian live as wives and mothers.

Although this is a relatively rare instance of a female Confucian voice, Ban Zhao almost entirely accepts the prevailing views concerning women's proper roles; they should be silent, hard working, and compliant” (Zhou, 2003, p.34).

In an except from *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond*, Zhao (1970) stresses the “complementarity and equal importance of the male and female roles according to yin-yang theory” (p.121), but she clearly accepts the dominance of the yang-male. Her only departure, according to Zhao (1970), from the standard male versions of this orthodoxy is that “she insists on the necessity of educating girls and women. We should not underestimate the significance of this point, as education was the bottom line qualification for being a ‘junzi’ or ‘noble person’” (Zhao, 1970, pp.137-38). Her example suggests that the Confucian prescription for a meaningful life as a woman was apparently not stifling for all women. Even some women of the literate elite, for whom Confucianism was quite explicitly the norm, were able to flourish by living their lives according to that model.

During both the dynasty eras of Confucianism and later the land skirmishes of the feudal warlord system, Chinese women remained excessively suppressed with no sign of any possible improvement in their lives. They were considered “sexual objects, personal possessions, commodities for trade, and were even evaluated as pieces of art” (Yao, 1983, p.105). The only brief period during these early times that gave some females a chance to reevaluate their role and abilities was during the Taiping Rebellion and the Western influence of Christianity that already had already begun years earlier by missionaries in Beijing (Osterhammel, 2015, p.547).

A notable American missionary, Young J. Allen, used cultural comparisons between China and Western nations to illustrate the ignorance in depriving a woman of an education. In response to Allen's advocacy for women's rights, many Western educated scholars and journalists began campaigning for women's equality. They also urged men to abandon other feudalistic ideologies. According to Li and Chang (1975), "Many authors tried to cite the experiences of women in such places as Japan, Europe, and the United States, to stimulate a movement in China. Quite a few comparative studies were conducted to prove that China was the weakest among these nations and liberating her female population was the answer to alter the fate of the nation" (Li and Chang, 1975, p.9).

Though females in some provinces of China were encouraged to actively participate in the challenge of discriminatory laws concerning their roles in society, others were decapitated for such treason against the recognized dogmatic system, as was in the case of young Qiu Jin. "On July 12, 1907 the authorities arrested the 31 year-old later acclaimed heroine and martyr Qiu Jin, an out-spoken feminist and the principal at a school for girls. After days of torture, the governmental officials found incriminating documents and publicly beheaded her in Shanyin, her home village" (Cui, 2004, pp.95-6). Qiu became a symbol of the female's emancipation in China.

As the feudal system of woman ownership began to decline by the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), government officials became more tolerant to such challenges against traditional models for females. Cui (2004) claims "popular texts like the *Chunqiu Fanlu* contained passages that suggested a more egalitarian relationship between a husband and his wife. This outdated Confucian alignment of women and the

institution of marriage did remain in some wealthier lineage, maintained strictly for the sole purpose of family name procreation” (Cui, 2004, p.95-6).

Marriages of this type were typically arranged between families of different surnames and usually of a similar social standing by “matching a bamboo door with a bamboo door, and a wooden door with a wooden door” to procure the services of a woman’s reproductive powers and domestic labor (p.26). As Croll (1978) explains,

Negotiations regarding the choice of the marriage partner, a go-between conducted the bride price and dowry or broker and the young people were strangers to one another upon marriage. Romantic courtship played no part. Although custom and law allowed only one principal wife, husbands could take secondary wives or concubines ostensibly for the purpose of providing them with sons. Concubines were often attractive girls purchased from poorer families or were courtesans who had attracted the husband on one of his visits to teahouses (p.30).

The latter were honored and complimented for their skills in music and dance, as were the famous women of the Qin Huai River. These women were featured in the Zhang Yimou film, *The Flowers of War* (Bejing New Pictures Film Co., 2012). Foreign merchants and local scholars frequented the houses of courtesans for such feminine conversation and poetry recitals. But for others, the prestige lied in the honor of being a wife of a lordship owner.

Bondage did not solely exist in a woman’s heart, but also in the traditional practices that circumscribed them into a class distinction, to exonerate them from a past of poverty, into a wealthy lineage. According to Croll (1978), “the custom, footbinding,

was first practiced among the upper classes, but because bound feet were then associated with wealth and status they eventually became an essential prerequisite to an advantageous marriage and any form of social mobility. Girls of seven and eight years of age had their feet tightly wrapped and bent until the arch was broken and the toes permanently bent under” (Croll, 1978, p.18).

Lin Yutang, the writer, considered the bound foot the highest sophistication of the Chinese sensual imagination. “The small feet, measured steps, and the gentle swaying gait were thought to be reminiscent of the willow or poplar in the wind” (Levy, 1996, p.19). The popularity of the “golden lotus” was appeared throughout both poetry and song. Su Dongbo (1036-1101) wrote one of the earliest verses in praise of footbinding: “Anointed with fragrance, she takes lotus steps; though often sad, she steps with swift lightness. She dances like the wind, leaving no physical trace. Look at them in the palm of your hand, so wondrously small that they defy description” (p.41).

While some females were tortured, other female infants faced the grim reaper. Newly born females were victims of infanticide, especially during times of famine. According to Croll (1978), “In a nineteenth-century survey conducted in several different provincial villages throughout China, the 160 women over fifty years of age who were interviewed, and who between them had born a total of 631 sons and 538 daughters, admitted to killing 158 of their daughters” (Croll, 1978, p.24). If the parents decided to keep the female child, a fairly common practice among the poorest peasants was to sell them as child-brides. One anthropologist described the fate of the daughters of the poor in the villages in south China,

Poor families need money and have too many daughters. The daughters consume rice and need clothes; when they are grown up they leave the home and furnish additional service to the productivity of the economic family of the group into which the girl is married. The parents in poor families consider it better therefore to get rid of the girl at the first opportunity and thus free themselves of her expenses and at the same time get some cash (Kulp, 1925, p.164).

By the end of the nineteenth century, and the establishment of the republic, females as a respectable gender, began to be heard. This new movement began to grow through organizing groups. A revolutionary spirit spread throughout the countryside and in the urban centers. This later came to be known as the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921).

According to Lee Yao's (1983) *Chinese Women: Past & Present*, "The May Fourth Movement, an intellectual, cultural, and political crusade was so named because on May 4, 1919, students of the National Peking University led a demonstration against the current unstable government. It was a reaction against foreign powers, particularly Japan and Great Britain" (Yao, 1983, p.124). P'i (1973) adds, "Since this movement stressed group effort and propaganda, women were involved in numerous collective tasks such as fund raising and producing plays that dramatized their role in such matters. Women took advantage of the receptive social climate and urged local governments to grant legal rights with respect to political activities, educational opportunities, marital freedom, property and monogamy to women" (P'i, 1973, p.36).

In Christina K. Gilmartin's (1994) essay *Gender, Political Culture, and Women's Mobilization in the Chinese Nationalist Revolution 1924-1927*, she cites "that although gender issues came to the forefront in every revolutionary movement in China during the twentieth century, the National Revolution constituted the most radical political effort to overcome women's subordination and transformed gender relations in the family, society, and the economy as well" (p.196).

This period during and after the May Fourth Movement was the turning point, according to Lee Yao, for the imminent movements by women, and for women in China. Interestingly, this movement encountered a politically turbulent period in China as people sought to resist the traditional imperialistic norms of societal collectivity and embraced Western science and the belief in individualism (Yao, 1983, p.130).

This endeavor was intrinsically based on the statutes of the new political infrastructure during the infancy of Chinese Communist Party (CCP). According to Croll (1978),

The Chinese Communist Party made the emancipation of women one of its policy platforms. Its First Manifesto on the 'Current Situation in China' issued in 1922 made 'equality in the rights of men and women' one of its immediate aims. In 1923 the Women's Section of the CCP was established to recruit women to work in their own and in the wider revolutionary movement. This marked the first attempt by a political party in China to arouse and organize women as a separate social category.

But as author Li Xiaojiang (1984) cautions us, "The idea of 'equality' is the product of class relations in a class-stratified society, mainly embodied in the

bourgeoisie's demand for self-interested political power. Women's liberation is not just a demand for power. Women's liberation means giving a good name to the 'incurably' petty qualities of femininity" (Xiaojiang, 1984, p.379). And femininity is not the easiest concept to grasp in China.

Croll's (1978) analysis sees femininity in China during the initial phases of this implementation of women in politics as an "exclusive advocacy of women's rights." Later it propelled the inner workings of its political members to focus on "altering the basic structure of society" (p.3). Croll (1978) emphasizes in China today,

Indeed in China it has been these same issues which have divided the women's movement itself around the question: which should come first, political or class struggle and the establishment of socialism, or the struggle between the sexes, or feminism. The balance of these dual demands has directly affected the history of the women's movement (p.3).

In Margery Wolf's (1985) *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*, she recalls, "It is almost impossible to get a Chinese woman to describe for you the attributes of a proper woman. Women might describe with shining eyes and amused shakes of the head the brash, naughty, imaginative exploits of a young son, but of a daughter they observe simply (although no less fondly) that she is a good girl" (Wolf, 1985, pp.112-13).

### Summary

Zhang Yimou is a master filmmaker. His blurring of the distinction between history and fiction, of past realities and film, results in the melodramatic embellishments of the female lead characters' stories. The suppressed nature of these semibiographical

narratives is the springboard for the storyteller, the female lead character. For her life is the story of endurance, courage, and leadership. According to Sheldon Li (197) in his work *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, “The end result of Zhang’s film art may seem to be his ability to tell the Western audience enchanting, exotic stories about the other country ‘China’ through stunning visual images. He has presented a dazzling array of icons and symbols of his ‘China.’ He has offered the Western viewer a ‘museum’ of precious Chinese objects, costumes, and artifacts” (Li, 1997, p. 126).

For the purpose of this study, this array of artifacts is part and parcel of the female lead character’s arsenal. It is the aim of this study to show how important the collection of objects is to the characterization of her role. Secondly, Zhang Yimou as film director takes on the task of choosing an actress to play the part. She not only must “own” the *mise-en-scenes* that surround her, but also talented to take direction from Zhang Yimou and the use of “gazing” to promote her own character, as well as to propel the narratives forward. This female lead character is often played by Gong Li. As a “Chinese actress” among Western viewers, Berenice Reynaud (1993) writes, “For what is remarkable about Gong is not so much her poise and versatility, but her ability to signify Chineseness, femininity and mystery outside her own culture” (Reynaud, 1993, p.15). This places the persona of the female lead character in a realm of her own destiny.

### Research Methodology

The primary tools used in this textual analysis originate from models of critical cultural communication studies that yield connotative readings that suggest the nature of a character, and for this study, the female lead character in the four selected films created

by Chinese film director Zhang Yimou. This chapter is divided into four sections: Models Used in Textual Analysis, Initial Research Activity, Analysis, and Research Questions.

### Models Used In Textual Analysis

Derived from applications such as David Bordwell's (1989) Bull's Eye Schema's construction of a character, the gendered characterization defined by Laura Mulvey's "gazing," and the distinction of Edward Said's "otherness" concept within film characterization, this textual analysis permits the researcher to explore meaningful personality traits that define the female lead character's self-esteem and determination that ultimately prove true in the selected melodramatic storylines.

This study focuses on conscious decisions made by film director Zhang Yimou that contribute to the molding and consistent transformation of the female lead character in the different plot examples. The films used in this research also aim to demonstrate how the trends and motifs signify a relationship with the female lead character. Highlighted by the different models, these connotations that correspond with Zhang Yimou's intentions, provide a guide in presenting the viewer his "preferred" meanings.

### Initial Research Activity

It was common practice to view the films for familiarity of story's time and place, characters and relationships, and the female lead character, prior to any type of analysis. Many films were viewed before choosing the selected ones for analysis. The first model of David Bordwell's (1989) Bull's Eye Schema and its relationship with the *mise-en-scene* was matched with two of Zhang Yimou's films *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). The two films were chosen together because of their familiarity in overall presentation and characterization of the female lead character. The second model

of Laura Mulvey's gaze theory was matched with the film *Ju Dou* (1990). Due to first the camera choice and composition of the female lead character or director's gazing and secondly Zhang Yimou's direction of the female lead character's gazing within the diegesis led to the match with *Ju Dou* (1990). The third model that utilizes the concept of otherness, originally conceived by Edward Said, was matched with the only adaptation film by Zhang Yimou, *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009). The original story and film, *Blood Simple* (1984), is a Western text by filmmakers The Coen Brothers. These two films follow the same plot, but differ in cultural settings and circumstances.

### Analysis

After the initial choices of which films were to be analyzed, the models were then applied and the analysis began. The three different models applied in the study had been originally suggested by the researcher, then agreed upon by the chair of the dissertation committee. The reason for the chosen models was due to their significant contribution to the study of the characterization and its changes in the portrayal of the female lead character in the selected films by Zhang Yimou. As stated earlier, the Chinese film director Zhang Yimou was chosen for his earnest compulsion to select stories that centered on the female lead character, giving the woman her voice in the story.

The first analysis was to focus on the elements selected by Zhang Yimou to compose a *mise-en-scene* that correlated with the female lead character's emotional disposition. Using David Bordwell's (1989) Bull's Eye model, which consists of both technical aspects and internal, diegetic attributes, the researcher was then able to determine specifically what visual elements were chosen. These elements of the *mise-en-scene* were noted by its denotative appearance, then prescribed a probable connotative,

preferred meaning that was applied to the female lead character's situation per scene throughout the plot sequence. Barthes finds that this second process is a, "more elaborate and ideologically framed message or meaning" (Hall, 2002, p.39). After establishing this initial analysis using the Bordwell model and the relationship that the *mise-en-scene* has with the characterization of the female lead character, the researcher can narrow the focus on the body features of the female lead character, mainly her head and eye movements.

The second analysis was to observe the importance of the director's guidance in how the female lead character uses her eyes as an instrument of "gazing". Also taken into account was the camera or director's gaze. These were the choices made by Zhang Yimou to place the female lead character within the *mise-en-scene*. A lot of information and power, according to its concept's creator Laura Mulvey, is contained in this simple yet effective tool that steers the viewer's attention, and provides an added element to the construction of the female lead character. Denis McQuail (2010) states that, "visual images have certain advantages over words. One is their greater denotative power when used deliberately and effectively" (McQuail, 2010, p. 348). As in the first analysis, each scene was carefully screened numerous times, documenting the moments of "gazing" by the female lead character that appeared significant to the specific plot moment in the sequence of events throughout the film, and more importantly to the characterization of the female lead character. Also considered was how effective her placement within the *mise-en-scene* was to the motivation behind the gaze.

Laura Mulvey would contend that each of us have pre-disposed cultural beliefs, thus filmic intentions or messages emanating from the mind of the film director appear on the silver screen. Therefore, the researcher found it imperative to incorporate Edward

Said's notion of otherness. As the third analysis aims to speculate, the notion of one's "other" is a relative cultural concept in comparing the two films. But it also took on many other perspectives. Some of which were the "otherness" from a Western researcher's perspective viewing an Eastern adaptation, and from the viewpoint of Zhang Yimou creating his own interpretation as "otherness" compared to the film *Blood Simple* (1984) and to other Chinese films. In comparing the similarities and contrasting the cultural differences, the two films were excellent examples of how each culture's viewer would receive the needed visual information to support their negotiated interpretation of the sequence of events that followed a very similar storyline. "These signifieds have a very close communication with culture, knowledge, and history" (Barthes, 1967, p.91). In fact, it is remarkable how similar the plots are in each of the films. It would not surprise the researcher that a conversation about the films, between an Eastern viewer and a Western viewer, would be fluid and understandable.

The third analysis was to demonstrate how critical cultural studies plays a huge role in the communication process. Despite the changes due to cultural differences, the influences of the *mise-en-scene*, and the contributions of gazing that add to the character development remain the same in both theory and practice. As in previous observations, the researcher viewed each of the films several times. Noting both the similarity in plot sequence and contrasting the differences in the *mise-en-scene*, the researcher was able to apply these elements to the construction and development in the female lead character. Though the two lead characters follow the same sequence of events, their "character" is quite different. In addition, their overt actions that propel the similar sequence of events

are dissimilar as well. In fact, that dichotomy of “alike” yet different or considered the “other” was one of the most interesting relationships that came out of this study.

Each analysis was intended to build upon each other, concluding in the analysis of the infrastructure of the melodrama by Chinese film director Zhang Yimou. Though the viewer can negotiate elements throughout a film’s sequence of events, all the films analyzed by different models yield the same result, the preferred melodramatic event. The methodology of this study follows a series of different articulations, all vital contributions to the portrayal of the female lead character. The study’s sequence beginning with the broader view of all the elements known as the *mise-en-scene*, then secondly focusing on one of those elements within the *mise-en-scene*, the female lead character, to then further defining that character through a critical cultural perspective, gives the reader a comprehensive view of how cultures can share common ground in the construction and development of a female in the leading role in feature films.

While this qualitative research neither approaches the topics discussed with preconceived theoretical concepts, nor underlines the objectivity in its methodology and results, all observations in these films are inherently subjective and open for interpretation. It is believed that some research questions inherently lend themselves to one research method over another (Patton, 2007, p. 21). In researching film, the researcher found little on certain topics, or that new topics or interpretations seem to collide with each other. Thus, qualitative research was chosen as the preferred methodology.

## Research Questions

RQ1: Does the viewer become interested in the female lead character by means of the film director's input, OR are there pre-destined emotions inside the viewer that is triggered by something in the visual?

RQ2: Is the female viewer totally isolated, shut-out from such voyeurism, OR does she have certain emotional responses that are different?

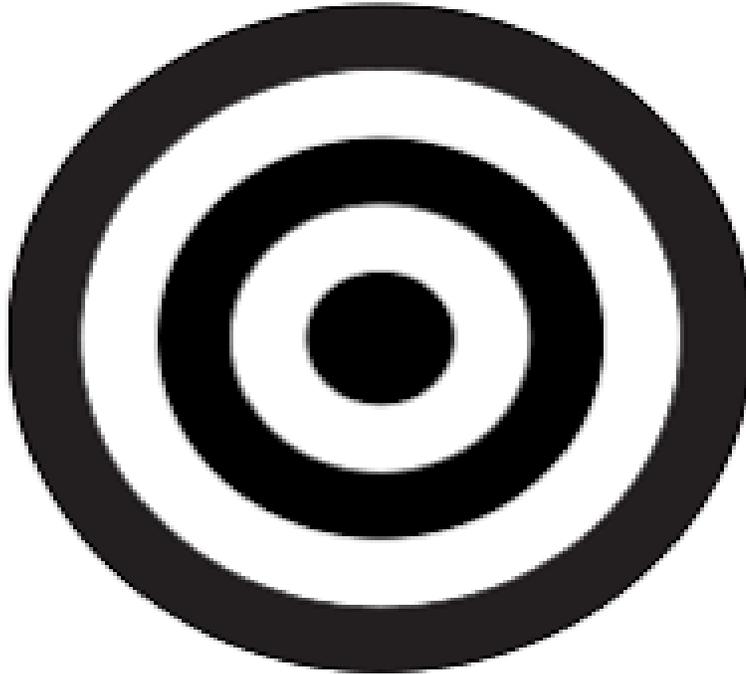
RQ3: Is the manner in which Zhang Yimou presents the female lead character to exploit the female body?

RQ4: Is the "Western" viewer attracted to the films solely because of its "Eastern" content?

RQ5: Can the viewer watch a Zhang Yimou film for its aesthetic value versus its voyeuristic opportunity?

RQ6: Do the historical accounts add to the viewer's interest in the female lead character?

### CHAPTER III - HITTING THE BULL’S EYE: *MISE-EN-SCENE* USAGE



The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the *mise-en-scene* using Bordwell’s (1989) “Bull’s-Eye Schema” portrays the transformation of the female lead character. This schema places the character in the center, then two circles surround her, denoting the outside forces that will mold and create her. The diegetic features of the world she lives in is the closet circle, whereas the technique used by the filmmakers rests outside in the outer circle (Bordwell, 1991, p.171). Each circle plays a huge role in the transformation of the female in the leading role. This chapter attempts to decode all the dominant elements together known as the *mise-en-scene* that reflects the character traits and aids the viewer in their understanding of the female in the leading role in two of Chinese film director Zhang Yimou’s films, *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991).

*Red Sorghum* (1987)

As outlined by an unseen, anonymous narrator, *Red Sorghum* tells of the life between a woman, and the narrator's "Grandfather." The woman, Jiu'er, is a bride-to-be en-route to an arranged wedding with an aging leprous winemaker, when she is saved from a bandit attack by one of the bearers of her sedan. After the untimely death of the winemaker, she is re-united with the bearer. They endure continuous travails with banditry, pestilence and war with the Japanese. *Red Sorghum* is a sweeping and yet intensely personal historical epic (Drakes Avenue Pictures Limited, 2008).

*Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)

In 1920's China, women had few options. So following the death of her father, Songlian, a beautiful nineteen-year-old college student, agrees to marry a wealthy nobleman. She is to be wife number four at his estate, where daily life revolves around an ancient family custom: the master raises a red lantern outside the house of the wife with whom he desires to spend the night. On the surface, there is harmony between the wives, but as the plot unravels, Songlian soon learns how treacherous and "back stabbing" they truly can be. Trapped in the midst of this turmoil, Songlian must fight for her place, despite the tragedy that soon awaits her (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayers Studios Inc., 2007).

This chapter is the linear documentation, starting with the introductory scenes and ending with their anti-climatic scenes, that best illustrate how film director Zhang Yimou uses the *mise-en-scene* to reflect the changes in the characterization of the female in their respective leading roles. Using Bordwell's model (1991), this chapter analyzes the two films, *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), because of their similarities in how the portrayal of the female lead character changes from a meek

peasant to a bold independent woman. This chapter begins with introductions of both the female lead character, and of the major set.

#### Testimonies: Introduction to the Female Character

In Scene 1A, both *Red Sorghum* (1987) and in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), is a close-up of a woman's face, a blatant "face-to-face" with the main character, the leading lady in the story. As she looks in our direction, we are led to believe that the story will be revealed through her. The diegetic spatial dimension plays a huge role in the emotional affect felt by the viewer. Though her visual presence on the screen attracts our immediate attention, the importance lies in her intimate, personal testimonial that we are privileged to hear. This is skillfully accomplished by frame composition and cinematography (Gibbs, 2002).

In *Red Sorghum* (1987), the story is told as an ancient tale. Using the non-diegetic device of voice-over, the grandson of the female lead in this flashback opens the storyline to the audience. Zhang Yimou has the female's, Jiu'er's, face appear out of total black, off-centered to frame right, as in a shadowed portrait from the past. Jiu'er is motionless, as if a mannequin, being meticulously prepared and adorned with the most precious of jewelry for the promising husband. Yimou uses a montage of five extreme close-ups to attract the audience's curiosity. Through unrestricted narration, the audience is informed that a wine distillery owner has purchased Jiu'er, and this is her wedding night. But Jiu'er is expressionless, empty of the basic emotions one would expect on this occasion. As this scene ends with a shot of a red wedding veil draped over Jiu'er's head, Yimou holds on this shot for effect. Jiu'er is now ready for the traditional bridal procession to her new owner.

In *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), the story takes place in their present day. Zhang Yimou introduces the woman, Songlian, in a static shot, medium close-up, filling the entire frame. This continuous shot uses a long lens to compress the space of the *mise-en-scene*, leaving the background that has the same design as the exterior windows in the stone palace out of focus. Songlian's testimonial with her off-screen stepmother concerns her decision to marry rich and become a concubine. Much like in *Red Sorghum* (1987), Songlian is motionless, without expression. Zhang Yimou decides to have Songlian look towards the camera. This gaze attracts the viewer's involvement in Songlian's predicament. Zhang Yimou visually emphasizes the depth of Songlian's decision by having her slowly shed tears as the frame fades to black.

These two films are very unique in their respective openings. Though simplistic in frame composition, the impact is that much stronger. The viewer is caught by surprise. Where most films usually begin with a wide, establishing shot of a location, Zhang Yimou's devotion to the female lead character is profound from the very beginning. Thus the strength in the *mise-en-scene* need not have a cluttered frame composition, or intricate camera techniques, for the scene to work.

#### Arrival: Introduction to the Main Set

In these two films, the main sets are quite different. In *Red Sorghum* (1987), the spatial dimension in the diegetic world, the elements closest to the character's bull's eye traits and relationships is the wide-open desert surrounding the huge fields of sorghum. The winery and the living quarters have small stonewalls and doorways to separate the two. Zhang Yimou spends little time in the living area, for it is the fields of sorghum that he wishes to establish as the main *mise-en-scene*. After Jiu'er's arrival by sedan in *Red*

*Sorghum* (1987), there are only two interior shots. One is a small room that is lit by low-keyed blue tinting. Jiu'er is on the floor clutching a pair of scissors in anticipation of the husband's arrival. The other interior shot is a slow pan of the workers in their living quarters.

But in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), the diegetic world, which feeds the character's traits and behaviors in the Bull's Eye Schema, is the small living area. There are no visual shots of the land outside the mansion that is enclosed by over-powering stonewalls. To emphasize the claustrophobic diegetic world, there are numerous opportunities for nondiegetic use of camera and lens in Songlian's point-of-view shots of the massive stonewalls that surround her. The head housekeeper gives Songlian a tour using the tiny passageways connecting the four houses and their courtyards. The roof has tiny staircases that connect the living quarters of the four mistresses. Thus, the mansion and its spatial diegetic dimension in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) is the main *mise-en-scene*. This is where all the action takes place. The huge spatial presence on the screen gives the mansion strength, as do the fields of sorghum in *Red Sorghum* (1987). Because both have a lot of screen time, the mansion and the sorghum fields could be seen as having character traits of themselves.

Significant in forwarding the plot sequence, the following scenes have been selected as relevant examples of how Zhang Yimou uses David Bordwell's (1989) "Bull's Eye Schema" to sculpture the *mise-en-scene* as it reflects the transformation of the female lead character. The first two plot sequences investigate the outer-circle that uses the nondiegetic representation of how the camera plays in the changes that occur in the portrayal of the female lead character. The second pair looks at the inner-circle of the

Bull's Eye Schema that uses the diegetic space as an essential tool in the *mise-en-scene* and its purpose in the various portrayals of the female lead character. The third and last pair of plot sequences observes the outer-circle's use of the nondiegetic lighting technique and the diegetic colors used to reflect the emotional fluctuations of the female lead character in the *mise-en-scene*.

#### Zhang Yimou's Use of the Camera in the *Mise-En-Scene*: Bordwell's Non-Diegetic

The desired function of the visually framed image, which is the sum of the diegetic elements' placement, and movement within the frame, together with Zhang Yimou's choice of camera placement, movement, and choice of lens, is to emotionally impact the viewer, giving he/she the information desired by Zhang Yimou. The two general areas of concentration, that of the diegetic world and that of Zhang Yimou's camera technique, work in tandem in creating the desired mood for the particular *mise-en-scene*, and for purposes of this study, the female lead character. Using the camera's placement, movement, and lens choice, as one of David Bordwell's non-diegetic elements of the outside ring of components, this section recognizes those reasons why the camera choices were applied. Together, they are to reflect the preferred connotative meanings that are intended by the film director. Together, this study focuses on those preferred intentions, and the part they play in the whole "schema" of things.

#### The Haunted Fields of Sorghum: *Red Sorghum* Scenes 2A-4D

Scene 2A opens as Jiu'er and the wedding sedan travel through huge rock formations on their way towards the winery. In this nondiegetic wide-shot, the diegetic spatial dimension makes the wedding sedan and the men carrying it appear quite small. Zhang Yimou purposely makes the wedding sedan small, with the desert and the

mountains overpowering her on the screen. The connotative impact the viewer gets is that Jiu'er is insignificant, non-important. When Zhang Yimou cuts to close-up shots of Jiu'er, together with point-of-view shots revealing the cramped spatial area inside the sedan itself, the viewer feels as if they are inside the sedan with no place to sit. Close-ups of Jiu'er's face emanate her deep emotions towards us, almost pleading with the viewer for help, while the men jolt her uncontrollably. These diegetic interior shots are dark red, versus the bright natural light of the exterior shots of the sedan in the desert. In the non-diegetic narration, it is told that jolting the wedding sedan is customary. After a short while, Jiu'er begins to get sick and clutches a pair scissors close to her chest. The camera is hand-held to give the viewer some sense of movement. As the men begin to mock her and her marriage to the leper wine maker, Jiu'er begins to cry. The lead carrier of the wedding sedan men realizes her sorrow, and orders the men to stop the jolting.

Scene 3A shows the wedding sedan and the men crossing a massive stone bridge. The camera shoots low in a medium shot making the tremendous stones filling the entire frame. Once in the field of sorghum, the camera placement changes to a high aerial shot, revealing the enormous field of sorghum and the small wedding sedan passing through it. Both camera placements give the viewer the enormous magnitude and strength that lies with the stones and the fields. Scene 3B has an ominous soundtrack to set the mood, for the wedding sedan is about to be stopped by a robber. The camera placement is set very high, looking down on the sedan. Ordered to set the sedan down on the ground, the robber demands their money. After the men are told to squat behind the wedding sedan, the robber takes Jiu'er out of the sedan and into the fields of sorghum. Zhang Yimou inserts reaction shots of Li, the head carrier of the men, and of Jiu'er looking back

towards him. The camera placement moves to eye-level. As the nondiegetic camera shots get tighter, these close-ups reveal the character's fear in both Jiu'er and Li.

Gibbs (2002) states, "The position of the camera is going to determine our understanding of the scene. It will profoundly affect the way we experience a performance. It is one of the most important means by which the nature of our relationship to the characters is defined" (Gibbs, 2002, p.19). The quick editing from Li and Jiu'er heightens the anticipation of something happening between the two. Li makes a bold attack on the robber. The men join him in killing the thief. Jiu'er returns to the wedding sedan and the men gather their money to resume the journey to the winery. Scene 3C has the sedan out of the fields of sorghum and back into the desert. With the camera placement on the ground shooting up, the sedan must pass through another rock formation that becomes an important visual in the film. With a giant diegetic circular opening that enables them to pass through, this formation acts as the gateway to the winery. Scene 4A has the sedan arriving at the winery. Once again, the camera shoots wide so as to have the wedding sedan appearing quite small on the screen.

A close-up reveals that Jiu'er's face is covered by the red veil, and escorted by her woman servant and head master Louhan to her living quarters. Now with the camera at bird's eye view, Jiu'er stops and appears to look back at the iconic rock formation. Li is walking away from the winery, passing through the circular opening. Under a red glow from the setting sun, a nondiegetic horn plays as Jiu'er enters her new living quarters. Scene 4B begins with a wide interior shot of Jiu'er sitting on the floor, in a corner of the room, still clutching the pair of scissors. The camera is very high, shooting down at

Jiu'er, as a flicking candle occupies the top left frame line. Zhang Yimou cuts to a close-up of Jiu'er in low-key red tint lighting.

He then cuts to an exterior shot of the iconic rock formation in blue tint. The brightly lit moon is low in the sky, next to the rock formation. This usage of the diegetic colors red and blue in the frame adds fear and separation for Jiu'er. Scene 4C has Louhan lighting a pipe in the worker's living quarters. A static medium-shot reveals the men sleeping on the other side of the room. As Louhan smokes his pipe, a scream is heard from the leper's living quarters. Zhang Yimou immediately cuts back to a wide exterior shot of the swaying fields of sorghum under a brightly lit moon. Again, Zhang Yimou attempts to develop relationships between the elements of one frame to the other, as in the strength and power of the fields of sorghum.

Scene 4D has Jiu'er riding a donkey in the open desert with her father accompanying her. In the nondiegetic narration, it is learned that a visit to the father after three days is customary. The shot is wide, so the diegetic spatial dimension of Jiu'er and her father appear small. In her travels, under a red setting sun, Jiu'er must cross over a bridge, then select a path at a crossroad. The crossroads where many roads emanate is a motif commonly used in Zhang Yimou's films. The connotative meaning is the decisions one must take in life. As she enters the swaying sorghum fields, Zhang Yimou eliminates any diegetic sound. Suddenly, Jiu'er is pulled off the donkey. Abducted, Jiu'er is carried into the field. As she escapes, a moving camera shot shows her running through the field. The stalks of sorghum pass quickly through the frame, with Jiu'er running behind it. With the nondiegetic soundtrack of blaring horns, Jiu'er is finally subdued travelling through the fields. In sum, there are two areas that work together visually. The first is the

presentation of the set, and secondly the camera technique used to record the scene. They both have the same connotative agenda, to give the viewer an emotional reading of the female lead character, and the part she is playing at that time in the storyline.

#### Wedding Night Interrupted: *Raise the Red Lantern* Scenes 4A-4D

Scene 4A begins on her wedding night. The camera sets up an interior, wide-shot of Songlian's living quarters. The image reveals a long room with the large bed on one end. Sitting on the bed, Songlian's image appears very small, centered in the frame. The lighting is low-keyed, except for the bed area, which appears as the only significant space in the room. There are numerous red lanterns that surround the bed area. Zhang Yimou uses a very short lens, which distorts items both close and far away. If the object is close to the lens, it makes it appear larger. If the object is far away, then the lens makes it appear even further away. With the two sides of the frame converging together at the far end, the bed seems even further away from the camera position.

The left side of the frame belongs to the master of the house, cluttered with fine furnishings. The right side of the frame is quite different. There are no furnishings, except for a small chair and a mirror on the wall. A beautiful piece of wood with a carved design, much like the design at the testimonial background scene, stretches from one wall to the other. It's mounted against the ceiling, and hangs down several feet. This is strictly a decorative piece that divides the important bed area from the rest of the house. In the foreground is an old brown rug that covers the stone floor. Centered in the frame lays the beautiful red rug, which is next to the bed. The four-post bed has lace curtains and a light grid of five lanterns above the bed.

When the master enters the room, he crosses from frame right to left. Zhang cuts to a medium-shot of Songlian. High-keyed lighting provides a red saturated image. Songlian sits motionless, until the master asks her to hold up one of the lanterns near her face. In a medium-shot, the camera pans right to follow Songlian as she walks slowly to the lantern. Due to the hand-held camera moving, the viewer's anticipation is slowly increased by time. The master then asks her to hold the lantern higher, and for her to look up. With one lantern right of frame in the foreground, and another lantern left of frame in the background, Songlian is centered in the camera frame. Her facial expression appears bewildered and nervous. It is hard to imagine any viewer negotiating their interpretation of Songlian's emotions. This slow walk with the lantern, then to stop and raise it towards her face is quite humiliating. Songlian is then asked to look upwards, as if one were examining a farm animal. She passes the master's test, and is asked to undress and get into bed.

With the camera focused on the hanging lanterns above the bed, the camera zooms out revealing the panels of lace curtains, much like the wedding veil. Songlian is silhouetted behind the lace getting undressed. The camera stops the zoom-out when the lanterns beside each of the bedposts touch the edge of the camera frame. As darkness falls outside, the diegetic red glow from the placement of the lighting instruments outside the red-tinted window gives the bed area a sense womanhood and virginity. The camera's slow zoom emphasizes to the viewer that some action involving Songlian is about to happen. This camera technique and the staged objects within the camera frame, together connotes a preferred moment of anxiety and willingness on the part of the female lead character.

A high angle camera wide-shot shows the dimly lit exterior red lanterns, hanging equally apart, converging on Songlian's entrance way. The swerving noodle-shaped roof tiles also appear to be pointing towards Songlian's front door. Zhang Yimou holds on this shot for a while. Until the diegetic sound of a woman singing is heard in the distance. There's a knock at Songlian's door. It is the servant of mistress number three, urging the master to look in on her mistress. The master finally decides to go, leaving Songlian alone on her wedding night. The housekeeper shouts, "light the lanterns at the third house." A wide-shot reveals the empty courtyard outside Songlian's house. The beautiful red lanterns, that once illuminated the area so well, have been removed. This downward camera angle gives the impression of a tremendous loss, of emptiness. "Whether the camera movement is taken as male or female, active or passive, a sign of activity or of domination, it is made to mean by being connected with traits, desires, beliefs, and actions of characters, both alive and dead" (Bordwell, 1991, p.177). With the use of different light and different camera angles, this scene supports the connotation that Songlian is emotionally empty, deserted even on her wedding night. The master consummated the marriage, but soon left her alone. This is the first time Songlian has experienced the system that delegates, with the master's choice, a night with one of the mistresses.

The camera returns to the initial setup inside the house, with the bed at the far end. Songlian sits on the bed, outside the lace curtains. As she rises, the camera, in medium-shot shooting long lens to compress the space, follows her to the lantern the master told her to use earlier. Taking the lantern she turns towards the mirror on the wall. From the bottom of the mirror, the camera now starts a slow tilt upwards. It reveals a

reflection of a sobbing, rejected woman. “Mirrors in *Rules of the Game* are a privileged locus for understanding the way characters choose to think of themselves” (Brown, 1982, p.254). With the diegetic sound of a woman singing in the background, a melancholy atmosphere fills the room. As Bordwell (1991) puts it, “The character before the mirror may be self-aware, or may have a split or layered identity” (Bordwell, 1991, p.174). This tilt camera action is in tune with the timing or revealing of the sorrow Songlian feels. A quick static shot would not have offered the same emotional response from the viewer. As Douglas Sirk would have it, the reflection of Songlian is of another woman, a fallen, broken woman that is branded as just another numbered mistress.

#### Zhang Yimou’s Usage of Space in the Mise-En-Scene: Bordwell’s Diegetic

The desired function of the visually framed image, which is the sum of the diegetic elements’ placement and movement within the frame, together with Zhang Yimou’s choice of camera placement, movement, and choice of lens, is to emotionally impact the viewer, giving he/she the information desired by Zhang Yimou. This section looks at the placement of objects and people within the frame, and the space or distance that’s relative to their movement or not. Also involved is the camera position and particularly important, the lens used for that shot. Long lenses tend to compact space, while short lenses tend to do the opposite, stretch space to the point of distorting images within the frame. Space is part of the female lead character’s world, therefore is seen as diegetic with preferred meanings to support her present predicament. This study selects dynamic scenes that reflect such technique and forethought by film director Zhang Yimou.

### Jiu'er's Transition to Authority: *Red Sorghum* Scenes 6A-6D

Scene 6A begins when the housekeeper maid informs Louhan, the head foreman, that the Jiu'er has arrived. Jiu'er doesn't go inside her home, but lies on the ground in fear of disease from her deceased leper husband. The left side of the frame has many workers looking over a four-foot high stone fence that surrounds the living quarters from the winery. The right side only shows Jiu'er on the ground with no other elements near her in the frame. The fence acts as a demarcation in the frame separating the workers from Jiu'er. With the use of space, Jiu'er is the outsider, the "other." The scene is blanketed in a bluish tint light, low-keyed, with many shadows. Using the diegetic fence and the non-diegetic blue light, Jiu'er is alone, separated from the others, in despair over the sudden death of her husband.

Louhan enters the frame walking through a fence doorway that is situated frame left. The shot is initially framed with the doorway on the left frame line, and the fence that stretches across the frame to the right frame line. This establishing shot uses a wide-angle lens to enhance the distance between the newly arrived Jiu'er and the seasoned workers. As Louhan enters the yard, the camera pans right, losing the stone fence line, to capture the front of the house in the background and Jiu'er laying on the ground in the foreground. After cleansing the ground around her with sorghum wine, Louhan walks left out of frame. Zhang Yimou cuts to a close-up reaction shot of Jiu'er with a wide-angle lens stretching space in the frame. This has her larger-than-life, versus the background as smaller than it actually is in real life. Jiu'er's reaction is solely based on the spatial distance Louhan had with her. For the short lens gives a tremendous stretch, a sizable distance that Jiu'er has from the other elements of the *mise-en-scene*. It was only when

Louhan walked around her, spitting the wine on the ground, is there a spatial relationship between the two.

“Space is a vital expressive element at a filmmaker’s disposal. In thinking about space we might include the personal space between the performers and our sense of when it is impinged upon, but also ‘blocking’, that is, the relationships expressed and patterns created in the positioning of the actors” (Gibbs, 2002, p.17). This denotative act connotes a foreshadowing of the closeness that the female lead character will have with Louhan, the head housekeeper.

Scene 6B begins with the next day. With a wide-shot using a short lens widening the area in the frame, the early morning sunlight casts long shadows of the men in the yard. They are preparing to leave the winery, until Jiu’er abruptly opens her home’s doorway and asks the workers to stay. With the iconic rock formation in the background, Louhan rises to meet Jiu’er. The two-shot of Louhan and Jiu’er has them positioned on the two vertical frame lines, left and right. This composition stretches the distance between them. Jiu’er is in shadow, while Louhan is in bright sunlight. The decorative tapestry on the door in the background, centered in the frame, aids in the separation between the two even further. All the elements in the frame connote this separation between the two characters.

Scene 6C begins with Zhang Yimou changing the composition to close-ups of Jiu’er and Louhan. Now Jiu’er’s face is illuminated in the sunlight, and the distance between the two is lessened. The camera lens has been changed to spatially push the characters together. With the same light, the two characters now support a positive future, a happier time in their lives. Jiu’er orders the men to disinfect the winery with the red

wine. While the men run around the camp, spreading the wine, an eye-level medium shot shows that a jubilant Jiu'er is inside cutting ornamental paper designs for the brightly, overexposed high-keyed window that expands most of the background. In a close-up, Jiu'er's facial expressions tell us of her pleasure and satisfaction at this moment. Jiu'er turns away from the camera, as if to listen to this utterance from someone who is apparently drunk and making bold, sexual accusations about her.

Scene 6D has the camera setup in the same place when she was lying on the ground when Louhan first came to help her. Li, her soon-to-be father of her child, pushes through the men in the doorway into the yard of the house. While the outspoken drunkard Li boasts about his victorious capture of Jiu'er in the sorghum fields, the shot tightens to frame only the men and Li. In the direction towards the house, Li points directly to the camera. He demands that Jiu'er is his wife and wishes to go inside the house. It is at this moment that Jiu'er quickly opens the door to the home. Shot wide, which accentuates the distance from the two, Jiu'er is standing in complete shadow. Centered in the frame, Jiu'er quickly decides to close the doors, denying Li access. Zhang cuts to a reversal wide shot of the men's backs looking towards the house. Using a long-lens compressing the space, Li appears very close to the doors, and grabs his bedroll to enter. After successfully getting inside the house, Li is quickly thrown out. Jiu'er exits the home and demands that he is drunk and the men should take him away. To show the opposition against Li using non-diegetic lighting, the men, including Li, are in shadow, but the house is brightly lit where Jiu'er resides. The spatial quality of light and dark connotes closeness, rejection, or life and acceptance. Thus, the viewer is guided towards the more

visible elements in the frame, to life and its promising future for the female lead character.

Manipulate System: Songlian in Control: *Raise the Red Lantern* Scenes 17A-18E

Scene 17A opens with the rattle sound of the foot massage sticks that Aunt Cao uses on the privileged woman for that night. In a medium-shot, Songlian is sitting in her home, as if she were indeed receiving such treatment. It is in natural light, with no color tint. No lanterns are seen within the frame. Songlian calls for her servant girl Yan'er, who is in her room, tinted red by the glow of lanterns, imagining the same treatment. Though Yan'er seems to be in a trance, Songlian is not and wishes for her assistance. Yan'er arrives at Songlian's room, and abides by Songlian's wishes for her to massage her feet.

The camera set up is a wide-shot, with no special emphasis on composition or lighting on Songlian. With this small lens, the elements including the back wall of the *mise-en-scene* seem far in the distance from Songlian. But with Yan'er, the spatial dimension of her small room, and the long lens makes everything in the *mise-en-scene* on top of her. Another example of how the camera lens contributes to the spatial dimension of the elements within the frame. With the continued sound of the rattle massage sticks, Songlian is aggravated and asks Yan'er to stop. "If I can, wait and see what I can do!" says Songlian to Yan'er. The sound of the sticks act as the female lead character's nemesis, not only physically outside of her room, but emotionally distant as the lens stretches the *mise-en-scene* in the frame, far away from her. The connotation here echoes previous shots of loneliness and frustration.

Scene 17B cuts to an exterior shot of the master briskly walking towards Songlian's door. The camera placement begins at ground level but quickly changes to a

rooftop set up looking down at the courtyard as the four rooftops converge over Songlian's entrance. The master's small figure is shot in natural light. In scene 17C, matching action shows the doors opening from an interior wide-shot. As the master enters screen right, Songlian in bed is centered in the red-tinted frame. The women servants tell the master that Songlian has been ill due to her pregnancy. The master is overjoyed and asks for the lanterns to be lit night and day, and for Songlian to get anything she desires.

Scene 17D opens with a non-diegetic melodic choir sound in the distance, as an exterior aerial shot from the ornamental roof reveals all the red lanterns lit and converging at the door of Songlian. This spatial dimension guides the viewer's eye line towards the female lead character. From this wide shot, Zhang Yimou quickly cuts to a medium-shot of Songlian in bed, smiling in the red glow from the lanterns lit above her bed. This cut connotes the power and courage Songlian has in claiming she is pregnant. This medium shot has the viewer inside her room, next to her bed. It seems to beg for applause from the viewer. "In many respects, a film shot resembles a painting. It presents a flat array of colors and shapes. Before we even start to read the image as a three-dimensional space, *mise-en-scene* offers many cues for guiding our attention and emphasizing elements in the frame" (Bordwell and Thompson, 2010, p.148).

Scene 18A uses a dissolve to show time has passed, for it is now winter and the aerial shot from the roof shows the tiles covered with ice and snow. The diegetic rattle sound from the massage sticks is heard. A cut to an interior medium-shot of Songlian sitting in the same spot as before, but this time with the red glow from the numerous lanterns in the frame. The camera has a long lens compressing the space, versus earlier when the initial wide shot promoted distance between the characters. The servant girl

Yan'er serves Songlian her meal, while Aunt Cao massages her feet. "Someone said I couldn't get you to serve me," says Songlian to Aunt Cao. She replies, "Call me anytime and I will come. You are now very special here." This frame composition has three characters tightly together, connoting a sense of family and womanhood.

Scene 18C is an exterior shot outside the main dining room where the other three mistresses eat their meal. The three mistresses are grouped together in the distant dining area, while Songlian is not to be seen. The camera reveals a few men servants carrying Songlian's meal in the foreground, moving right to left and out of frame, passing the traditional dining area in the background. The staging of movement and character placement further distances Songlian from the other mistresses. This entitlement infuriates the other mistresses. At the table, number two mistress is told that if number four mistress were to have a son, "someone would be very unhappy." At that precise moment, the head servant tells number two mistress that she is to give number four mistress a back massage. Quickly, Zhang Yimou cuts to a close-up at another location.

The tight shot of Songlian answers the question of when the massage will take place. With the camera setup in Songlian's room, scene 18D has the camera lens pull back from a tight shot of Songlian's face to a wide-shot, revealing number two sister massaging Songlian's back. The camera starts on Songlian's face because, after all, this scene is about female lead character's power and courage, despite the lies and deceit. Numerous red lanterns cast a diegetic warm glow over them that connote warmth and comfort.

Scene 18E is a wide exterior shot of Yan'er, carrying a basket of laundry. As she notices a red spot on a pair of Songlian's white pants, Yan'er goes directly to number two

mistress with the news. Cutting back to an interior shot of Songlian laying in bed, she appears to be looking for something. Songlian is alone in the room, with the camera shot from a far distance. The lens on the camera gives ample spatial dimension to her loneliness. She yells for Yan'er to come into the room, and asks her if she has seen the white pants. Shot with a short lens, the distance between Yan'er and Songlian appears long. While the camera holds on a tight shot of Songlian's face, Yan'er answers that she has washed them. The tight shot gives Songlian no wiggle room out of the truth.

#### Zhang Yimou's Use of Light in the *Mise-En-Scene*: Bordwell's Non-Diegetic

The desired function of the visually framed image, which is the sum of the diegetic elements' placement and movement within the frame, together with Zhang Yimou's choice of camera placement, movement, and choice of lens, is to emotionally impact the viewer, giving he/she the information desired by Zhang Yimou. The two general areas of concentration, that of the diegetic world and that of Zhang Yimou's camera technique, work in tandem in creating the desired mood for the particular mise-en-scene, and for purposes of this study, the female lead character. Using specific lighting instruments, their placement and color tints and gels as one of David Bordwell's non-diegetic elements, this section recognizes those reasons why the lighting choices were applied.

#### Jiu'er Takes Control: *Red Sorghum* Scenes 13A-15A

As scene 13A unfolds, it is Jiu'er who ushers in the action against the Japanese that have murdered Luohan. A dark exterior wide-shot of the winery reveals that it is nighttime. A large table, bordered on each side with flaming red candles, fills the frame. With Jiu'er centered behind the table, we see large fires in the background. The lighting

of this scene is a golden, warm light from the fires. On the table in front of Jiu'er is a medium size clay jar used to house the wine. After she fills a bowl with the wine, she moves around to the front of the table. A reversal shot shows Jiu'er in front of all the men, all warmly lit by the fires seen in the background. As she kneels and kowtows, the camera tilts down revealing only the bowl in the frame. Then, the camera pulls focus, making only the bowl in focus, leaving the background blurred. It is the center of attention.

As she stands, the camera tilts up, and returns everything in focus. When Jiu'er turns around, Zhang Yimou cuts to an extreme close-up of her stern face, as the fires continue to burn in the background. To achieve such a wonderful shot, Zhang Yimou had to position his lighting equipment in such a way to illuminate the actors in the *mise-en-scene*. The diegetic fires alone cannot produce enough foot-candle power, therefore the type of lighting instrument, its placement and direction is able to produce the eerie glow in the frame. Once again, the tandem team of nondiegetic lighting technique and the placement and movement of the female lead character connote a feeling of anger and revenge.

Jiu'er instructs her son to kowtow and sip some of the wine. In retaliation for the murder of their friend Louhan, Jiu'er orders the men to attack the Japanese in the morning. Her husband Li quickly gathers more bowls and fills them with wine. The camera set up is the same as earlier when the men, holding the bowls of wine, chanted to the wine god. But now they chant to avenge the killing of Louhan. Instead of standing, they kneel. This enables Zhang Yimou to shoot them at high-angle. A high angle shot connotes a weakness, an inability to perform. This foreshadows the men's fate in the

upcoming altercation. As they chant, a close-up of Jiu'er's warmly lit face shows tears running down her face. She is proud and honored of her husband and the rest of the men. Throughout this scene, Zhang Yimou accurately positions his lighting setup to give the impression that the glow casted on Jiu'er and the men is from the diegetic fires in the scene. This glow gives off a haunting feeling, an eerie sense of a future event.

Scene 13B gives the viewers a feeling that some time has past. Zhang cuts to the nighttime blue tones, as the men carry the needed armament to attack a Japanese truck travelling down the road in the morning. With a wide-shot at a low-angle, the men are silhouetted against the blue sky. They find an appropriate place in the road to plant the explosives. The camera position changes to a high angle, revealing the nighttime fog and mist of the fields, while the men dig holes for the explosives. The nondiegetic positioning of the camera at a very high angle, coupled with the action of the characters in the shot digging a hole, may signify the men digging their own graves. This shot is very disturbing to the viewer.

Zhang Yimou's special effects team uses enough fog machines to give such an effect, while the lighting team consistently uses the blue filters on their lighting instruments to give such an isolated feeling of the night. An insert shot reveals the iconic rock formation watching over them. Under the blue foggy night, the men sweep the road, disguising any signs of their explosives. Scene 14A starts with a close-up of the over-exposed sun, fully encompassing the frame. This tremendous change from dark blue to over-exposed bright light instills a sense of urgency, a tempo or timing technique by the use of light and color. The camera then shows the men resting, waiting for the Japanese truck to arrive. There are a few close-ups of the men. Their faces brightly lit with

shadows from the swaying sorghum blocking the sunlight. The men's nonchalant positioning adds to the suspense. High angle camera positioning, blue-tones, the characters positioning in the frame, all lead to a very uncomfortable emotion. What stems from these elements is not just urgency, but a chance to face death head on.

Scene 14B has Jiu'er back home preparing a meal for the men. Zhang Yimou inserts a few wide-shots of the swaying sorghum fields in the early morning sun. He also elects to shoot Jiu'er with a long-lens that only has her face in foreground focus, and the background blurred. This gives more emphasis on her than the surrounding elements in the *mise-en-scene*. Like the fog in the sorghum where the men wait, Jiu'er is cooking over fires producing smoke and mist. When finished, she sits at the table with all the elements for a meal, waiting for the men to return. Zhang Yimou backlights her, which provides a light aura shaping her head, reiterating the emphasis on the main character, Jiu'er, and the fate that she is about to encounter. "Light and color are some of the most powerful tools in the cinematographer's arsenal. This is the very definition of cinematic language as we use the term here; visual tools that add additional layers of meaning to the content of the story" (Brown, 2012, p.8).

Scene 14C is a wide-shot that reveals Jiu'er's son Doughun running through the shadowed iconic rock formation towards the winery. Douguan tells Jiu'er that nothing has happened in the fields, but that the men need food to eat. Zhang Yimou cuts to a joyful smiling Jiu'er and her woman servant walking down a road in the swaying sorghum fields with food for the men. The lighting is natural sunlight. This normal playful setting in the *mise-en-scene* is in contrast to what tragedy is about to occur. This is a common narrative device of surprising the viewer with tragedy. The screen yields a

calming aura for the viewer's relaxation and reflection of the story. And as quick as a cut in editing, the positive quickly becomes a negative. As her son plays in the fields in front of them, he hears the Japanese truck and yells to Jiu'er who is in its path. A close-up of a machine gun mounted on the truck opens fire, killing Jiu'er and the servant. As Jiu'er is falling, the camera setup is the same as when Jiu'er and Li were first in the fields, years ago. This camera positioning is a close-up shot of Jiu'er's head blocking the sunlight. Then in slow motion, Jiu'er begins to fall backwards, exposing the bright sunlight, until she is out of frame completely.

“The look of a shot is centrally controlled by light quality, direction, source, and color. The filmmaker can manipulate and combine these factors to shape the viewer's experience in a great many ways. No component of *mise-en-scene* is more important than ‘the drama and adventure of light’” (Bordwell, 2008, p.167). Obviously, this is a match with another earlier time of happiness and a new beginning for the female lead character. Zhang Yimou may have used this shot as bookends for the life of Jiu'er. With the explosives failing, the men, also in slow motion, charge the truck from out of the fields. Lighting the jugs of wine on fire, they throw them onto the truck, hoping a fire will erupt. In this smoke-filled scene, the explosives finally work.

In scene 15A, the lighting provided is low-keyed, with plenty of smoke and a heavy red hue that blurs the sun in the sky. Douguan leads his father through the dead bodies to Jiu'er, lying on the ground, motionless. In a close-up of Li, the nondiegetic voice-over sings the *9990 Roads to Heaven* song that he sang to her that first day in the fields. Yimou cuts to a wide-shot of the table prepared for the men's return home. It is shot high above, in natural light with no smoke or color tinting. The denotative emptiness

of a table setting connotes the absence and defeat of the men who worked the fields for Jiu'er. All is gone except the ones who tell the story of Jiu'er and her joy in the red sorghum fields.

Desperation for Songlian: *Raise the Red Lantern* Scenes 23A-26A

Scene 23A opens with a wide-shot of Songlian's courtyard. The once beautiful red lanterns now covered in black. We hear someone singing loudly from inside. Number two mistress and some of the servant girls enter the room. A dimly lit interior shot reveals an intoxicated Songlian, hardly able to stand. "What is there to laugh at, the master likes you" Songlian says to number two mistress. "Meishan went to meet her good-looking doctor," she adds. As a high angle exterior shot shows some of the servants gathering outside, number one mistress arrives with the medicine they have been calling for. As the sound of glass breaking is heard, all the mistresses and servants leave through the door. The entire scene is shot with low-keyed lighting and heavy shadows.

To give a sense of time passing, scene 24A cuts to a high aerial shot of the blue snow-covered rooftops. As a flute sound is heard, the camera changes position to the courtyard and the black covered lanterns. Cut to an interior medium shot of Songlian waking up on her bed. The blue light shines through a window onto Songlian. Zhang Yimou cuts to a wider shot revealing the entire room, both left and right walls converging towards the center of the frame and Songlian's bed. It is by no accident that this shot is similar to one previously in the plot. Zhang Yimou desires to rekindle the emotions of loneliness and rejection for Songlian. This shot placement strips the female lead character of her strength. Not only has Songlian been demoted, but finds that she was the cause for someone's ultimate death.

Songlian hears something outside, and begins to get up. There's a cut to an exterior shot showing Songlian walking outside into the courtyard. In the framed pathways in front of her, a reversal shot reveals what appear to be red lanterns moving around in the darkness. A tighter shot, exposing the framed elements, shows the servant men carrying mistress number three, tied and bound. Zhang Yimou cuts back and forth from close-ups of Songlian's face in despair to wide-shots of the men carrying mistress number three to the roof. In this gloomy night, mistress number two appears in the pathway, thanking Songlian for telling her of number three's affair with the family doctor.

In scene 25A, Songlian begins to follow the men from a safe distance. Weaving through narrow passageways, Zhang Yimou lights the cascade of snow-covered roof tiles beautifully. Songlian waits until the men leave and begins walking to the death house. Though Zhang Yimou seldom uses it, a hand-held camera becomes Songlian's eyes, her point-of-view. The soundtrack gets louder as she gets closer to the death house. Increasing the suspense, the hand-held images have gotten tighter and tighter, until she reaches the doors of the death house. Zhang Yimou now changes the perspective by placing the camera a good distance away from Songlian and the death house. The camera has framed the death house to the right and background, and the different curving roof tiles to the left and foreground. The camera shows her in the far distance, pushing the doors partially open, as she did earlier. The change in camera position establishes that the viewer is now part of the scene but hiding in the far distance. The viewer is a far distance away from the death house and the murder, and also away from Songlian. Her investigation of the death house is a solo act on her part.

Seconds later, the nondiegetic music stops and the viewer hears the screams, “murderers.” Quickly, the camera position changes to a high angle shot of the roof. It slowly pans right to reveal the beautiful ornate curvatures of the roof tiles, covered in snow. Everything is in tact. It’s just another normal day. To cut from a horrific shot to a calm one is very effective. It is as if nothing had happen, and everyone is going about their daily chores. A technique used by Zhang Yimou to stoke the fire of anger and frustration of the viewer. The connotation here is a simple cover-up of the acquisition and subsequent murder of one of the mistresses.

In scene 25B, the camera moves inside for an interior shot of Songlian, sitting on her bed amongst the servants. Her face, in tight close-up, reveals the unbelievable nightmare she has just witnessed. As she whispers “murderers,” Zhang Yimou cuts to a wide shot. With Songlian centered in the frame, the master enters the room, frame right, and asks her what she has seen. She continues whispering the words, “murderers.” The master claims that she has gone mad. Zhang Yimou cuts back to the same camera setup on the rooftop when Songlian pushed open the death house doors. He pauses with this shot, showcasing the death house in the background. Visually, Zhang Yimou is showing the viewer the available evidence of the murder. It is as if Songlian is telling everyone to go see for themselves.

Scene 26A begins with an exterior shot of a courtyard, in blue light. A servant begs for the head housekeeper to come quickly, yelling that the lanterns are lit in number three’s house. An aerial shot from the rooftop looking down towards the courtyard and the front of the house reveals the red glow shining through the doorway and through the two adjacent windows on either side. An interior wide shot reveals the entire room filled

with stage artifacts from number three's singing career. As the men start to hear number three sister singing, Zhang Yimou cuts to the aerial shot from the roof showing the men running out of the house into the courtyard, screaming that it's haunted. A cut to an interior medium-shot shows Songlian blowing out a lighting wick used to light all the lanterns. A wider shot shows Songlian walking across the room to wind-up the active record player. The entire room is brightly lit with red, while outside is nighttime, dark blue. To end the scene, Zhang Yimou moves his camera to the courtyard, some distance away from the house entrance. In the courtyard at eye-level facing the house, a slow hand-held camera moves towards the doorway. In blue light with shadows, the camera frame starts with the entire front of the house, and slowly moves until the frame consists only of an extreme close-up of Songlian, brightly lit in red, sitting in the doorway. The screen fades to black.

### Conclusion

Through the observations in this study, the usage of David Bordwell's (1989) "Bull's Eye Schema" and its correlation with the framed elements on the screen or *mise-en-scene*, proves positive in its contribution to the portrayal of film director Zhang Yimou's female lead character's story. As a viewer, he/she patiently waits for her story to unfold. It's not just a matter of time and disclosure of the narrative, but of a skilled and knowledgeable director to put the pieces into action.

In this chapter, the researcher uncovers the dual efforts of the *mise-en-scene* elements and the craftsmanship of Zhang Yimou to fittingly record their stories. This tandem act produces emotional punches that are aimed at the viewer. For purposes of this study, only a few of the nondiegetic factors were applied to the framed elements on the

screen. This coupling is a manipulative technique used by Zhang Yimou to exemplify a composite rendering of each of the events. With his choices as a director and a cinematographer, together with the choices made with the diegetic features in the scene, the end product is to portray a true, distinct depiction of what Jiu'er in *Red Sorghum* (1987), and Songlian in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) were truly like. And more importantly, to show through this comradely of cinematic forces, the strength and courage both female lead characters made in changing their lives under such oppressive conditions. It is not an easy task for the film director to show this on the silver screen.

Some of the choices are conventional in the film world. Examples could be the connotations of the different camera angles. High-angle connoting weakness, and low-angle connoting power are two simple illustrations. But the entire shot sequence that forms the scene sequence is a bit more challenging. When mapping out the plot, which is the visuals the viewer sees on the screen, film director Zhang Yimou must be artfully crafted to present the story through the plot. Some viewers find the meaning of the film's significance in relation to personal experiences. Such experiences can lead to either pleasant or un-pleasantries.

David Bordwell states that binaries started when, "In 1953, R.S. Crane listed a set of pairings that remain characteristic of the humanistic frame of semantic significance, some to include truth and falsity, certainty and doubt, and order and disorder" (Bordwell, 1989, p.108). One could think of these pairings as binary opposites or semantic fields organized as polarities. For purposes of this study, the focus is on the female lead character, whose plot is centered around one or more of these polarities. If that is the case, Zhang Yimou must exorcize the potential that lies in the *mise-en-scene*, and match

that with a technique that will produce and accentuate the polarities needed for each shot, propelled through each scene, and culminating as one of the parts to the film puzzle. One of the vital elements of the *mise-en-scene* is the actor that fully understands whom the character is, and the binary fields by which she is immersed in.

In the two films selected for this chapter, the same actress played the two different roles. Gong Li had been an accomplished actress for many years, and had worked with Zhang Yimou on other film projects. She was to become these fictional characters, involved in fictional stories, but convincing a viewer that they were real, and so too were their stories. Gong Li accomplished such a feat by close attention to Zhang Yimou's direction. This direction was to include not only "blocking" the physical movement of the characters, but also creating the character's emotional state through non-verbal actions such as "gazing."

## CHAPTER IV – POWER IN GAZING: DIEGETIC AND NON-DIEGETIC



(Internet Movie Data Base. *Ju Dou*. 1990. A China Film Group)

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how the “gaze” using Laura Mulvey’s (1989) theory portrays the transformation of the female lead character. According to Mulvey, there are three different looks associated with cinema. One is how the camera records each shot, another considers the direction by Zhang Yimou of a character’s gaze within the scene, and lastly of the audience as it watches the final product (p.26). The first two are directly related to the film director, Zhang Yimou. Scene after scene, the gaze asserts its power in guiding the narrative, just as any other cinematic device that Zhang Yimou uses throughout the film making process. This chapter analyzes the director’s choice in the timing, direction, and the duration of the gazing, both by Zhang Yimou’s camera, and of his female lead character. This study investigates the female lead

character's gaze as a window revealing her feelings and intentions that instigate her motivation for the next sequence of events.

It's worth mentioning that in all filmmaking, both the director's gaze and the character's gaze should remain invisible and seamless. The ultimate goal is the highly sought after viewer's desire for the screen. For in cinema, there tends to be a built-in mechanism for an emotional exchange between the screen and the viewer. Jean-Louis Baudry (1976) contends that there is a longing for desire itself. A need has been satisfied through the "transfer of a perception to a formation resembling hallucinations which seem to be activated by the cinematic apparatus" (Baudry, 1976, p. 121). Through the use of psychoanalysis, Mulvey (1973) seeks to uncover this desire in "reinforcement by pre-existing patterns of fascination" already at work within the viewer. Nevertheless, it is the scope of this study and this chapter to focus primarily on the female lead character and any tool or device that contributes to her evolution as a character in the story.

#### *Ju Dou* (1990)

A dark, sensual, and visually sumptuous drama, *Ju Dou* (1990) centers on the title character, the wife of a wealthy silk dyer in 1920s China. Forced into marriage, Ju Dou is repeatedly mistreated and tortured by her husband for failing to bear him an heir, even though he is infertile. Her suffering attracts the sympathy of her husband's younger, kinder nephew, and the two begin a secret affair that could lead to tragic consequences. This tale of romantic and familial love in the face of unbearable tradition is universal no matter where the setting (Magicplay Entertainment, 2005).

This chapter is the linear documentation of the "gaze," starting from significant scenes in the beginning of the film and ending with the final scene that best illustrates

how film director Zhang Yimou uses the gaze as a tool to reveal to the viewer the transformation of the female lead character. Using Laura Mulvey's (1989) "gaze" theory, this chapter analyzes the film, *Ju Dou* (1990), and how the female lead character changes from slavery to emancipation. Scenes using Ju Dou's "personal gazing" from within the diegesis itself were selected on the basis of its contribution to her character's transformation. Through Ju Dou's gazing, scenes connote the inner qualities of Ju Dou, pinnacle points in the storyline that challenge her, prompting her to make life changing decisions. The second collection of scenes reflects the "camera's gaze," the denotative *mise-en-scene* selected by the film director Zhang Yimou. These scenes, visually manipulated by camera placement and lens usage, were chosen on the basis of its reflective portraiture of the female lead character's disposition. Ju Dou's diegetic surroundings or *mise-en-scene*, which connotes the atmosphere of her quandary, aids the viewer in their understanding of Ju Dou's actions within the plot. Predicated by the meticulous camera gazing, at any moment in the film, the viewer should be able to understand Ju Dou on the personal level within the diegesis. This chapter begins with introductions of both the female lead character, and of the major set.

#### Introduction to the Female Character

In *Ju Dou* (1990), Zhang Yimou delays introducing the female lead character by the same name until the third scene. Unlike *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) that had the female lead character introduce themselves in the very first scene by close-up shots of their testimonials, the audience first hears about Ju Dou through dialogue between her soon-to-be lover and another worker in the dye mill. In

scene 2A, it is nighttime, and Tianqing, the soon-to-be lover and nephew of the husband who owns Ju Dou, is sleeping in his room, when awoken by screams from Ju Dou. Cut to the next scene, when Zhang Yimou uses a morning aerial shot of the roof's opening, while the sun dries the dyed fabric, as a transition from night to day.

In scene 3B, while Tianqing is feeding a donkey used to transport the fabric, he notices a woman in the distance who must be Ju Dou, walking towards the washroom. Tianqing quickly moves towards a peephole in a wall that allows him to watch. Zhang Yimou uses the camera in a point-of-view shot as the gaze apparatus. In this blurred voyeuristic shot, the viewer sees as Tianqing sees, only the back of Ju Dou, while she washes her body. It is not until scene 4B that Zhang Yimou displays Ju Dou in her entirety, connoting a different response from both Tianqing and the viewer.

#### Introduction to the Main Set

In scene 1A, Zhang Yimou takes advantage of the “camera gaze” during the film’s initial credit roll. Accompanied by the loud sound of a bong, the title of the film is presented in blood red lettering encompassing the entire frame. After which, Zhang Yimou decides to introduce the film’s main set by presenting a series of static shots of the countryside where the dye mill, the main set, is located. As the credits roll, Zhang Yimou starts with a very wide exterior shot of a man walking with a donkey. This commonly used motif of mountains and hillsides by Zhang Yimou has the man and donkey appear very small moving on the bottom of the frame. Encompassing the rest of the frame is the village rooftops that are towered by huge mountains. The “camera gaze” changes to the man and donkey walking on a stone bridge. They appear much larger in size. Finally, the

“camera gaze” takes the viewer to a narrow passageway whereby the man Tianqing finally arrives in front of these massive doors. After opening the doors, he walks inside.

All the visual elements are staple motifs that Zhang uses in most of his work. Here, he quickly informs the viewer from a very wide open, brightly lit landscape, to a very dark and cramped dye mill. For the film isn’t about the world and its people, but centered on familial relationships within the confines of a dye mill’s walls. This informative opening sequence of shots for the viewer is a typical journey for the man and donkey. But for Ju Dou, these doors keep her captive and forgotten.

Through exposition in the dialogue in scene 1C between Tianqing and a co-worker Erlaizi, we learn the nature of the business as a dye mill, and that he has purchased a woman by the name Ju Dou as his wife. The viewer quickly learns that the husband has tortured his former wives to death. Ju Dou is just another victim, both as a wife and as a slave.

Significant in forwarding the plot sequence, the following scenes have been selected as relevant examples of how the “gaze” reflects the transformation of the female lead character. This chapter separates the film into two halves. The first half has Ju Dou’s slavery and torture by her husband as the backdrop in the storyline, while the main action is focused on the relationship between Ju Dou and her co-worker Tianqing. A common technique in plot sequence is for the viewer to desire the two young people to find romance and closure to their flirtatious behavior. In this study, the importance lies in how film director Zhang Yimou instructs Ju Dou’s usage of her “personal gazing” towards other characters within the diegesis. It is the reason behind this gazing action that creates

the “preferred” meaning. Such connotative guidance by Zhang Yimou as a director aids the viewer in understanding Ju Dou’s motivations.

The second half of the observation has a crippled husband and an ill-tempered grown child as the backdrop in the storyline, while the main action is focused on the solidified relationship between Ju Dou and Tianqing. The viewer’s desire for their union has been satisfied. Thus, the second group of scenes looks at Zhang Yimou’s eyes through the camera lens. The orchestrated diegetic features or *mise-en-scene* that the camera records are essential in their connotative meanings. Carefully selected elements serve to not only advancing the plot but also providing both visual and audible information that suggest Ju Dou’s personal nature.

#### Zhang Yimou’s Direction of Ju Dou: Female Lead Character’s Gaze

The first actual exchange of gazes between the two characters is when Tianqing is ordered by the master to go upstairs to get Ju Dou in scene 4B. Climbing a ladder, he reaches the upper deck and is surprised to find her walking towards him. During this first exchange of glances towards each other, the first two shots are point-of-view shots. His POV is watching her walk outside a doorway, turn, and look straight at him. Her POV is a medium shot of him looking straight at the camera. Zhang Yimou then makes both Ju Dou and Tianqing look downwards then towards the other person four times; editing back and forth, each person looks briefly away then in their direction, not a point-of-view. This gazing example provides the viewer a privileged gaze of how each character reacts towards each other for the first time. Tianqing seems nervous, while Ju Dou is calm and collected in her emotions. Therefore the timing of their gazing is quite different. For the calm collected Ju Dou, her gazing becomes longer and longer in duration. For the

nervous Tianqing, his gazing is quick, only lasting for a second or so. All the emotional responses from these individuals only come through the “gazing” at each other. Though she is not intimidated by his presence, it seems that her gazing makes him quite unsettled, to the point where he nearly falls down the ladder.

Other cinematic elements considered part of the camera’s gaze compliment the internal emotions of both Ju Dou and Tianqing. Tianqing is shot from a downward, high angle camera position that usually connotes weakness. Ju Dou, is shot just the opposite- the connotative meaning in an upward, low angle shot promotes strength and power. Tianqing is also shot in low-keyed light, whereas JuDou is shot in a very bright, high-key light. These visuals establish the temperament of their soon-to-be relationship. JuDou has the power, but also carries the burden. Tianqing is dedicated to his uncle and his job. Even after JuDou physically shows the bruises, and begs Tianqing to do something, Tianqing remains loyal to his uncle, reducing the horrid behavior as having a temper.

Whereas before in the peephole shot, the viewer felt a sense of meekness and solitude for Ju Dou, this illuminated shot of her changes the viewer’s impression of her. There’s an air of confidence and control in her glancing towards Tianqing. This composition, Tianjing in a very cramped, dark opening in the floor that descends downward, versus a very bright, sunlight hitting the beautiful fabric hung behind her, is also a foreshadowing of the couples last meeting place; and more importantly, the fatal outcome of both characters.

In scene 6A and 6B, the second exchange of gazing between the female lead character and her male counterpart takes place. Ju Dou is tending to the fabric on the upper level of the building that extends through the roof. As she hangs the dyed fabric,

the sunlight is intense. Zhang Yimou cuts to a close-up of Tianqing peeking through the spokes of a wheel that collects the fabric. The long duration of his gazing only proves true when Ju Dou is looking away. The camera cuts back to a close-up of Ju Dou, her face over-exposed in the blaring sunlight, her gazing over the fabrics. In a medium-shot, she begins to walk until she locks eyes with Tianqing. His point-of-view shot of her gaze is directly at him and the camera. As her intense gazing is too strong for Tianqing, his bravery is short lived. Zhang Yimou accentuates the strength in Ju Dou's gaze with a cut to a medium-shot of Tianqing reluctantly letting go of the wheel, unraveling the fabric.

Zhang Yimou stays longer with the shots of Ju Dou and her gazing at Tianqing. Compared to the first, initial encounter, the shots of Ju Dou have tighter compositions. The mere fact that both Ju Dou's visuals and her gazing durations stay longer on the screen gives her a sense of dominance and control over Tianqing. As Ju Dou feels more comfortable with Tianqing, the viewer feels more comfortable with Ju Dou. This parallel in emotional states, Ju Dou towards Tianqing, and the viewer towards Ju Dou, favors Ju Dou's characterization, strengthening her non-diegetic relationship with the viewer. But this control is about to be challenged when Ju Dou discovers Tianqing's peephole. Waiting patiently for this moment, the viewer will now get to see how Ju Dou reacts to Tianqing's voyeuristic activity.

This important exchange of gazes takes place in scene 9A. As Tianqing attempts to widen the peephole, JuDou enters the donkey's stable unexpectedly. Startled to see each other, Tianqing smiles at JuDou for the first time, though Ju Dou's gazing remains longer in duration. Zhang Yimou exchanges medium-shots, but elects not to use point-of-views. Reaction shots from both Ju Dou and Tianqing only last for a minute, as Tianqing

answers the husband's shouting and leaves the stable. Far from intimate, this is an uncomfortable moment for Ju Dou, as she becomes aware of Tianqing's voyeuristic tendencies. Gazing towards the beam of light shining through the hole in the wall, Ju Dou begins to investigate. Moving some of the hay near the hole, she attempts to see what's on the other side of the wall. After positioning herself low enough, Zhang Yimou now goes to a point-of-view shot that clearly shows the washbasin in view. She swiftly sits back up, facing the camera, clutching her blouse in one hand, and tightly grabbing hay in the other. This connotative moment is beyond embarrassment and humiliation. The viewer is fueled with anger towards Tianqing. This moment changes the viewer's idea of the meek and frail Tianqing. Through Ju Dou's gaze, the viewer can only speculate how vulnerable and shameful she must feel. Confounded by the true reality of this man who stumbles every time she's in his presence, Ju Dou slowly begins to cover the opening as the scene ends. At this point in the narrative, the unrestricted narration of the viewer has shifted to Tianqing's lack of Ju Dou's discovery of the peephole.

In scene 10A, a fourth exchange of glances between the two main characters happens in a brief conversation they have in the countryside. With no vats of dye, or massive machinery to distract them, Ju Dou meets Tianqing as he returns from delivering on order. She is badly bruised over her entire body. For the first time in the plot, the two characters are conversing in dialogue. While gazing at the bruises on Ju Dou's arms and face, Tianqing questions Ju Dou about them. It appears by the direction of their gazes, Ju Dou's towards the ground, and Tianqing directly towards her, he now has control over her and her secrecy. With Ju Dou's subtle admission to the beatings by her husband, Zhang Yimou has Ju Dou gaze momentarily at Tianqing. Tianqing's point-of-view shot

of Ju Dou shows the close-up of a victim, who now gazes at the ground in shame. After twenty minutes into this film, Ju Dou will soon unveil the evidence of such horror to Tianqing, turning his once peep-show fetish into a gut-wrenching anger.

#### Female Lead Character Reveals

In the beginning of scene 12A, Ju Dou descends from the staircase. After noticing a gash in the handrail, her eyes gaze for some type of cutting tool, and notice one on the chopping block nearby. She now gazes towards Tianqing living quarters. An insert shot has Tianqing looking back at her from inside the room. Thinking of Tianqing and his desires, Ju Dou returns to the stable and the peephole. She begins to cover it up but stops. Ju Dou realizes that this is an opportunity to appeal to Tianqing, while gaining back some of her control over him and his actions. Through her gazing towards the floor in heavy thought, she formulates a plan. As she leaves the stable, she places a chain on top of one of the swinging doors. The chain noise will be the signal for her to commence the unveiling. As she slowly enters the washroom, Ju Dou positions herself at the best angle for Tianqing's gaze. With the camera gaze right in front of her and her back towards the peephole, the viewer is privileged to see her face, gazing from side to side, quietly listening for the chain noise. Once convinced that he's watching her, Ju Dou begins the courageous task of exposing her badly bruised naked body. With tears in her eyes, she turns naked in full view for the peeping tom and, to an extent, for the viewer. Zhang Yimou cuts to Tianqing's point-of-view. Ju Dou trembling, she feels vulnerable and has relinquished control over to him. Tianqing's fantasy turns reality. For it is impossible to fetish over a broken body, however naked and inviting. Instead of joining Tianqing in his usual delight, the viewer's gaze is drawn to her pain-stricken face. Laura Mulvey warns

us “The fact that the image of the body is not presented as spectacle makes us uneasy in our position as the voyeur. If we look at this woman’s body then we are aware of our own look, which is not hidden in the folds of the narrative” (Mulvey, 2009, p.54).

In scene 13A, Zhang Yimou replaces Ju Dou with Tianqing on the upper deck. He places the camera on the ground level, looking up. Ju Dou is also on the ground level gazing at Tianqing. Her eyes full of tears, she pleads a reprieve from Tianqing, for him to intercede the harsh beatings she takes every night. Tianqing’s gaze is reserved for the fabrics that he’s hanging, and dismisses his uncle’s actions as having a bad temper. The scene ends with a high angle shot, down towards Ju Dou weeping into her blacken, dye-stained hands.

At this point in the narrative, the viewer’s focus is on the relationship between Ju Dou and Tianqing. And as if granted to the two, the donkey gets sick and the husband must go to a physician out of town. He quickly goes over a few orders with Tianqing, and leaves the dye mill. Little does Tianqing realize, this is the reprieve Ju Dou has been waiting for. This acquittal from the husband’s brutality also yields a time for Ju Dou to express her sensual side. Zhang Yimou holds Ju Dou’s passions for a short moment. That same evening, Ju Dou goes to Tianqing’s living quarters, and gazes towards the light inside. Zhang Yimou doesn’t bring the camera inside Tianqing’s room, so the viewer never sees Tianqing in this scene. As Ju Dou tries to open the door, the viewer hears the sound as the door lock, and sees the light go out.

On the next day, Ju Dou attempts for a second time to seize the moment with Tianqing. In scene 17A, Tianqing is taking a break from work, eating amidst the operating machinery all around him. Gazing at Tianqing as vibrant and dynamic as the

moving parts of the machinery around them, Ju Dou slowly makes her way towards him. Her eyes never blink, constantly gazing at Tianqing, waiting for a response. Scene 17B, Ju Dou, standing next to Tianqing, closes her tear-filled eyes, and wraps her arms around him. Zhang Yimou's preferred connotations from Ju Dou's body language go from her shy-ish schoolgirl demeanor, to her melodramatic final desperate call for compassion and salvation. In an extreme close-up, Ju Dou's head rocks backwards into the frame. With her eyes closed with pleasure, she moves back and forth during this first sexual encounter. The diegetic pounding noise sets the tone for the dyed fabric unravels unto her face. The red color of the fabric and the vat of dye connect with the reddish hue color that always enveloped her bed area. As Chow (1995) admits, "What Zhang is producing is rather an exhibitionist self-display that contains, in its very excessive modes, a critique of the voyeurism of orientalism itself. Misconstrued by many as mere self-display, this exhibitionism- what we may call the Oriental's orientalism- does not make its critique moralistic or resentful" (Chow, 1995, p.171).

Zhang Yimou uses a slow tilt upwards of the hanging dyed fabric to slow the tempo down for the upcoming segue. Dissolve to scene 18A, Ju Dou is laying in bed, with her husband and another man standing next to her. The other man reveals that Ju Dou is pregnant. While the husband walks the doctor to the door, the viewer hears Tianqing's voice from behind the rice paper walls. A very jubilant Ju Dou gazes in his direction. With much delight, both are excited about their soon-to-be son. This is the second time Zhang Yimou elects not to show Tianqing during a passionate moment for Ju Dou. Once again, a dissolve to the next scene is used to signify some time has passed. The viewer first hears a baby's cry, then one of the servant women proclaim it is a "wine

jar, one with a handle.” A few scenes later, the master is leaving the dye mill with the donkey.

In scene 21A, while the master is away, Ju Dou and Tianqing lay in bed, talking of their future. With their faces next to each other, Ju Dou’s gaze is intense on Tianqing’s face. Her facial expression is of joy, versus the agony from the husband’s torture. But Tianqing gazes away from Ju Dou, claiming that they might get caught. A noise comes from the front doors of the mill. As they scamper to get their clothes on, Tianqing runs out of the bedroom. But it is only the donkey that has arrived. So Tianqing journeys, only to find the husband paralyzed in the deep wooded countryside. In scene 23A, a doctor tells Ju Dou that her husband has no use of his legs. As the doctor leaves the room, Zhang Yimou cuts to reaction shots from both Ju Dou and Tianqing. Sheepishly, Ju Dou and Tianqing gaze at each other in delight.

#### Zhang Yimou’s Point-Of-View Through the Lens: Camera Gaze

At this point in the film, two major changes have been made to the dynamics of the familial relationships. The first change is the birth of a son by Ju Dou and her husband’s nephew. This child harshly affects many of the plot sequences and the characters involved. The second change is the crippling of the husband. Though the husband’s contribution to the storyline may have appeared somewhat one-dimensional, it was so harsh and repetitive, the camera need not to show the viewer every time he carries the mule saddle upstairs. Taking away the demented torture aspect of his nature creates a void. In the first part of the film, desire is embedded in the plot. The husband and his wife, separately aspire for a better life. On the one hand, Ju Dou had an intense desire for Tianqing. It was something she could dream about, pursue and possess. On the other

hand, the husband has a desire, however demented and evil, to torment his wife Ju Dou. In the melodramatic world, Zhang Yimou pins the two men against each other, good versus evil. The different scenes put together by Zhang Yimou had Ju Dou's opportunity for freedom with Tianqing, while at the same time, her world was horrifically dominated by the evil doings of her impotent husband. This dynamic puts the viewer on high alert, waiting and anticipating a pinnacle moment that would save Ju Dou.

These two events, the birth of her son and the crippling of her husband, change the narrative, and the way Zhang Yimou shoots the rest of the film. In the first part of *Ju Dou* (1990), much of Ju Dou's psyche that's granted to the viewer is through her gazing. By his skillful direction of Ju Dou's body language to include her gazing, Zhang Yimou draws attention to this self-conscious process that Ju Dou is going through. The viewer becomes consciously aware of the psychological challenges of Ju Dou at the same time that Ju Dou does, thus a relationship of sorts between the viewer and Ju Dou has been established. It is only through her non-verbal communication and gazing that the viewer need not negotiate the connotations that Zhang Yimou prefers. But due to the massive changes in the narrative and the desires that personified each of the different characters, the second part of *Ju Dou* (1990) is a different setting, and requires a different set of signifiers attached to the *mise-en-scene* and to the female lead character. Zhang Yimou creates a new world for Ju Dou. The changes in the narrative have granted her a new set of obligations, mainly to her newly born son, and to his father Tianqing.

In the first half of the story, the viewer obtained her information through decoding things pertaining to her mind, her will to make certain decisions. Now in the second part, the viewer can enter her environment. Thus the emphasis of the gaze turns towards the

camera lens. Whether it is the perception of her emotional state or on the presentation of elements by Zhang Yimou that create her new *mise-en-scene* on the screen, the viewer feels a close-ness to Ju Dou. From the gaze of the female lead character, this study can add the connotation of the setting through the camera lens. “This spatial logic of apparatus theory has restricted the way in which vision has been understood as a psychological process within film theory. The gaze, emanating from a given point in this configuration, is the possession of the camera, and through identification with that camera, the spectating subject” (Kaplan, 1990, p.51). When properly orchestrated around the female lead character, these unique capabilities of the filmmaking process make it possible for the preferred meanings by Zhang Yimou to enter the viewer’s interpretations for he/she to gain a richer understanding of what amounts to Ju Dou’s short-lived emancipation.

In scene 24A, Zhang Yimou has Ju Dou and Tianqing having a traditional Chinese meal. The camera reveals both characters dressed in traditional clothes. Tianqing is dressed all in black, while Ju Dou is adorned in a red blouse with dark pants. Her hair has been neatly pinned up, while Tianqing wears a traditional beanie. As they sit on the ground, legs folded in front of a small table, Ju Dou pours Tianqing some sake. Close-ups of the both characters show for the first time, a relaxed nature of their family. A soft melodic flute can be heard in the background. As they drink, their eyes never leave sight of the others. Unfortunate for the two lovers, this narrative setup has a new set of challenges for the two.

Under the blue light of nighttime, scene 25A opens with an exterior wide shot of the rain. Zhang Yimou cuts to an interior shot of the husband pulling his crippled body

out of bed and onto the floor. The camera cuts back to the exterior shot when Ju Dou exits a building and walks towards her bedroom. The camera gaze picks Ju Dou up in an interior shot that shows her husband pulling her down to the floor. After a brief skirmish, Ju Dou gets up, looks at her newborn baby, and then sits on the bed. She proceeds to brag to her husband about her many sexual encounters she has will have with Tianqing. The scene dissolves into a very cheerful but revengeful moment for Ju Dou. Though he is cripple, his character is about to take on new tactics involving the warm and cozy family.

In scene 26A, Ju Dou is busy operating a wheel that rolls up the newly dyed silk material. In this medium shot, she fills the left side of the frame. Looking screen right, she asks Tianqing why doesn't Tianbai smile. Cut to Tianqing picking up the child and singing him a song. Cut back to Ju Dou who joins in the song. This scene is one of the few that we see Ju Dou smiling, appearing happy with life as it is.

At this point of the film, scenes 25A, 27A, and 28A, Zhang Yimou reverts back to his recurring motifs. These shots of rooftops, mountains, or bridges are part of Zhang Yimou's bag of transitions. Though their origin is Zhang Yimou's approval of the framed elements, the true value or purpose of the shots is two fold. First, they are cinematically used as non-threatening transitions, mere changes in both time and space within the narrative. Secondly, the calm motives are inserted when the husband attempts, which is more than once, to harm the newborn child. Ju Dou's recurring gaze towards her husband turns from revenge and contempt to outwards boasts ordering Tianqing to kill him. The husband contemplates his futile attempts failing, so he elects to kill them all. Up to this point, the focus has been on the husband and the child. Because the relationship between the lovers and their son Tianbai is so limited, Zhang Yimou places the treacherous

husband to prey upon their son Tianbai. Not able to torture Ju Dou anymore, the husband's terror is guided towards Tianbai. With little camera work on the lovers, the viewer waits patiently for the next change of events. In scene 28A, the husband sets the dye mill on fire. With the camera gazing at the flames at the base of the staircase, Ju Dou and Tianqing are summoned by the narrative to save the dye mill and their lives. Unknown to the viewer, this is a foreshadowing of the climax of the film.

With the master paralyzed and the infant born, the dynamics of the narrative have changed. No longer is the viewer anticipating the next move of passion by the seductive wife of a masochist husband. No longer is there any signification in the previous mechanisms of scopophilia and narcissism. Earlier, the sexual instinct in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation occurs through Zhang Yimou's imagery, subjecting them to a controlling gaze. This relationship between the lovers is separated, having little connection with the dynamics of the other characters in the plot. Zhang Yimou purposely exploits Ju Dou, intended just for that reason alone. But now responsibilities are attached to Ju Dou concerning her child, her lover, and her husband. Laura Mulvey (2009) might say that Ju Dou's once visual presence worked outside the development of a story line, having its own voyeuristic agenda, now plays an active role in this heavily dramatized plot.

#### Relationships Deteriorate: Tianbai Gazes at Couple

Tianqing and Ju Dou begin to live out their lives with their son. Surprisingly, it is Ju Dou's relationship with Tianqing and not with her son Tianbai that drives the emotional current of the film. In scene 31A, Ju Dou, Tianqing and their child Tianbai are in the countryside. Ju Dou and Tianqing go off and leave Tianbai by himself. When they

return, he is gone. Having walked back to the dye mill, Tianbai is in danger with the treacherous husband. With no one around, a point-of-view shot from the husband shows his attempt to push Tianbai into the water vat. This camera gaze shows Tianbai moving at the last minute. But what truly saves Tianbai's life is when he calls the husband "da da". This scene dissolves to Tianbai's third birthday party.

In Scene 37, the camera gazes upon Tianbai sitting on a pedestal with the entire family present, congratulating the husband and child. When Tianqing is asked to say a few words, the camera uses point-of-view shots for Ju Dou and Tianqing. As Ju Dou pours him a glass of wine, they interchange gazes towards each other. Uncomfortable at a party celebrating his son's birthday while no one knows but Ju Dou, a drunken Tianqing begins to cry. Later in scene 38, the secrecy of Tianbai begins to tear away at the relationship between Ju Dou and Tianqing.

Zhang Yimou creates a tension between Ju Dou's son Tianbai and the two lovers. During the scenes of intimacy between Ju Dou and Tianqing, Zhang Yimou has Tianbai physically watching them, connoting a dissention and even hatred on the part of their son Tianbai. Scenes 38A-C brings the trouble relationship between the two lovers to the forefront. Tianqing tastes a powder that Ju Dou has been taking to force an abortion of her possible pregnancy. It turns out to be chili powder. With Tianqing angry and Ju Dou in much pain, they begin to argue. Ju Dou asks "Who am I?" and where does she stand in Tianqing's life. When they hear a noise, Ju Dou leaves the room to find Tianbai throwing rocks. The camera gazes down on the infant, who becomes Ju Dou's point-of-view. Completely frustrated with everything, she slaps him hard. Zhang Yimou has the boy, not

part of the family, but a burden like the husband, signifying a nemesis to encounter during their everyday lives.

As Tianbai grows older, the distance between him and his mother Ju Dou and Tianqing increase. To emphasize the anger and resentment Tianbai has for his father Tianqing, the camera gaze is always an extreme close-up shot of the steel bars securing the doors, sealing Tianqing outside the dye mill, outside the family. Zhang Yimou elects never to shoot scenes involving Ju Dou and her son Tianbai, much less scenes of love and devotion between a mother and her son. The viewer must permit Zhang Yimou to center his camera gaze on Ju Dou, and her myriad of challenges. One such challenge has been exonerated, for the husband has died. On accident, the camera gaze reveals Tianbai tripping on the cord connected to the crippled husband's cart. The husband is thrown into a vat of dye. The camera gaze shows the boy, too young to comprehend the ramifications, smiling and giggling as the husband drowns before him. Ju Dou enters the mill, too late to save her husband. It may appear that Zhang Yimou has transferred the demon-like nature from the husband to the young boy. Soon in the narrative, this will be visually confirmed for the viewer.

In scene 42A Ju Dou, dressed in the traditional white, is present at the pre-funeral mourning. Tianqing tells Ju Dou that he should have killed him. Ju Dou denies having anything to do with his drowning. Ju Dou begins mocking Tianqing about his unrealistic devotion to his deceased uncle. Tianqing gets enraged and slaps her. After he strikes her, she says, "revive the old man, and you both can beat me." As mentioned before, Zhang Yimou always puts Tianbai watching the two, building a hatred that is about to light the fuse. Zhang Yimou again puts the viewer on edge, just waiting for Tianbai to explode.

Some film scholars theorize that the male viewer psychologically connects with and wishes to become that male lead character. This confrontational, deceitful anger towards Ju Dou is not the kind of dynamic contribution a narrative's male character has that male viewers would wish to emulate. Nor is both the male or female viewer fascinated with Tianqing's image, losing possession of the female lead character. As stated before, the male viewer could act as the voyeur in the first half of the story, but in the second half sees Ju Dou differently, and shamefully disconnects with Tianqing. "For the male hero the female protagonist becomes an agent within the text of the film whereby his hidden secret can be brought to light, for it is in woman that his lack is located. She represents at one and the same time, the distant memory of the fettered object of his fantasy" (Johnston, 1974, p.45).

At this point in the narrative, the viewer has returned emotionally to the side of Ju Dou. In the beginning of the film, the viewer sees a life of work and torture for Ju Dou. But fortunate for her, there's another man working with her. Closely tied to his uncle and boss, Tianqing wants nothing of her. But as circumstances would have it, he gives in and they start a life together, despite the uncle, cripple or otherwise. But throughout the film, Tianqing never gives up his loyalty to his uncle, even accusing Ju Dou of murdering him. Unfortunately for Ju Dou and Tianqing, the old man drowns in a vat, causing the family to oust Tianqing from the premises.

Zhang Yimou's gaze of the melodramatic funeral is culturally saturated with a procession including musicians, banner carriers, and other followers behind the coffin. Having over ninety percent of the film shot in the low-keyed dye mill interior, scene 44, a brightly lit scene is usually a welcomed change. Zhang Yimou overly emphasizes this

Chinese ritual for the viewer's sake. After noticing Tianbai sitting on top of the coffin, the viewer's eyesight is drawn to the small circular papers. Symbolizing life as the circle of existence, thousands of these paper ornaments are tossed into the wind, covering the path of the deceased. With the exception of the elders, everyone in the procession wears white. Ju Dou and Tianqing take part in a ritual to show loyalty to their master.

According to tradition, they run up to the coffin screaming, "Don't leave us", then lay on the ground as the coffin goes by, forty-nine times.

Zhang Yimou uses many different camera angles, including a ground shot as the coffin goes by. Shortly into this Scene 44, all diegetic sound goes silent, while the non-diegetic somber musical score fades in. As the procession moves down the road, Ju Dou and Tianqing lay on the ground, gazing at each other, weeping. Though death has come to both the master, he is exalted by ritual, and the little boy is hailed as ruler of the dominion. This demise has also come to the female lead character and to her relationship with Tianqing. It will never be the same.

#### Eight Years Have Passed

Eight years have passed since the death of the master, and we see the two lovers together in the countryside. In Scene 47, her gaze is off into space as she talks of the fear and ridicule from the villagers that know the truth about Tianbai. Zhang Yimou cuts to Scene 50 where Tianbai over-hears a boy telling his friends of Ju Dou having sex "from behind like foxes" with Tianqing. Angered by such talk, he returns to the dye mill, and starts breaking items upstairs. Outraged to hear such noise, Scene 51 has Ju Dou screaming out the truth concerning his true father. Zhang Yimou continues to use the

staircase for extreme low angle shots, illuminating Ju Dou's face to accentuate her anger. Zhang Yimou's direction has her fearful eyes gazing directly towards the camera lens.

In scene 55, Zhang Yimou has Ju Dou and Tianqing together in the cave where they store the dye. Gazing at each other, they talk of the past and the peephole in the stable wall. Ju Dou laughingly says, "Once there was a small hole, now we are in a bigger one." Zhang Yimou's gaze is of a cave that's very claustrophobic and dark. Meanwhile, their son Tainbai, upset, searches for them. Coming upon the cave, he finds them both unconscious. He takes his mom back to her bedroom, and throws her on the bed as she mumbles Tianqing's name. Tainbai returns to the cave and brings Tianqing to the one of the vats of dyed water for the fabrics. Throwing him into the pool, Tianqing begins to struggle in the water. Zhang Yimou's gaze uses a succession of shots to amplify the experience of this scene.

In Zhang Yimou's anti-climactic scene 56, the viewer first sees Ju Dou, who has awakened, crawling down the infamous staircase. As she gazes towards the pool and sees Tianqing struggling, she screams with horror. Zhang Yimou cuts to Tianbai holding a piece of firewood, walking towards the vat. Next we see Tianqing reaching up out of the water, grabbing the fabric spindle to stay afloat. Tianbai then swings the wood, striking Tianqing, causing him to sink into the water, while a roll of fabric breaks loose and covers the surface where he sank. The shot ends on a close-up of the empty wooden spool, slowly spinning, then stopping. Zhang Yimou's use of the fabric refers back to the early days of flirtations and freedom to breath without consequence. Ju Dou has just lost her only friend and companion.

The spool shot dissolves into a very low-angle shot, looking up towards the opening in the roof. There are many pieces of fabrics hanging to dry. In scene 57, we see smoke in the background, and then flames begin to enter the bottom of the frame. This dissolves into a medium shot of Ju Dou holding a flaming piece of wood. As the recurring somber soundtrack begins, the flames engulf the frame and Ju Dou. Zhang Yimou freeze-frames the image, and the song that Tianqing and Ju Dou once sang to Tianbai is heard. Credits roll, end of film. Some critics feel that the film is open-ended, not truly knowing if Ju Dou went down with the flames. No one knows for certain. Zhang Yimou simply uses it for melodramatic effect.

### Conclusion

This chapter's investigation of Laura Mulvey's "gazing theory" in the film *Ju Dou* (1990) has given light to the exceptional capabilities film can possess. Mulvey (2009) maintains "playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time and film as controlling the dimension of space, cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire (Mulvey, 2009, p.26). In this analysis, it was important to document gazing as it reflected the motive of the female lead character, and how those desires propelled the flow of the narrative.

According to Bordwell (1991), "The personification of the film maker follows the same path as the interpretation of character. A person-like agent is posited, and external cues are taken to reveal perceptions, thoughts, feelings, decisions, communicative goals, and so on" (Bordwell, 1991, p.158). Therefore, Zhang Yimou had two goals when assembling all the pieces of the puzzle to reveal Ju Dou's truth to her story.

The first was to give the actress Gong Li the appropriate motivation behind her actions and for purposes of this study, her “gazing.” This communication by Zhang Yimou was paramount for her non-verbal actions to reflect his objectives. The second goal was in the selected framed images or “camera gaze.” The ultimate goal of the “camera gaze” was to constitute environmental elements that were suited for Ju Dou’s character, and subsequently decoded as such by the viewer. The objective was for the viewer to digest these connotative instructions that would provide a psychological schematic of Ju Dou. The ease in this reception allowed the viewer less negotiation time in formulating the female lead character as Zhang Yimou intended. The viewer’s gaze establishes a rich closeness, a relationship that breaks down barriers of spectator/screen, Western/Eastern, film/reality. Rey Chow (1995) explains,

The state of being looked at not only is built into the way non-Western cultures are viewed by Western ones but more significantly it is part of the active manner in which such cultures represent and ethnographize themselves. With visibility as its focus, this reformulation of ethnography destroys the operational premises of a world divided in the form of us and them, and of classical anthropology. ‘Viewed object’ is now looking at ‘viewing subject’ looking (Chow, 1995, p.180).

## CHAPTER V – EAST MEETS WEST: FILM NOIR’S THE OTHER



(Internet Movie Data Base. *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop*. 2009. Beijing New Picture Film Co.)

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the changes in the profile of the female lead character in Zhang Yimou’s *A Woman, a Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) from that of the female lead character in the original Western text, the screenplay and film *Blood Simple* (1984) by American filmmakers Ethan and Joel Coen. This chapter provides a critical cultural example of the relative concept of the “other.”

This is Zhang Yimou’s first attempt in using a non-Asian text as the basis for his cinematic storytelling. Though the basic storyline is very similar, the plot sequences that portray the female lead character are distinctly different. Therefore, it is the intention of this chapter to focus on the “other” Eastern version of the original Western story, in particular how Zhang Yimou presents his female lead character. Consistent in Zhang Yimou’s filmmaking, this film uses many of his common motifs, such as the use of slow

motion, the opposition of the daytime reds and the nighttime blues, stonewalls with narrow passageways, descending staircases, and desolate environments. These tools of Zhang Yimou work aesthetically well for dark stories of suspense and murder mysteries. This chapter reveals the cultural influence in the presentation of the points of emphasis within the diegesis, which include the focus on the infidelity of a marriage, the zeal for money, a gun loaded with three bullets, all that center around the female lead character's feelings and subsequent actions.

*A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009)

It looks like a perfect plan: the affair will come to a cruel but satisfying end when a Chinese noodle shop owner plots to execute his unfaithful wife and her lover. But the lover has a lethal plan of his own in this violent tale of adultery and revenge based on the Coen brothers' debut classic, *Blood Simple* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2011).

*Blood Simple* (1984)

When Marty, the owner of a backwoods bar, hires a man to kill his cheating wife and her boyfriend, he opens the door into the criminal world that he'll never be able to shut. The sleazy hit man decides instead to shoot Marty, thereby collecting his unearned fee and eliminating the only people who could implicate him. Or so he thinks (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 2008).

In the original Western version, the spectator experiences a very dark tale of secrecy and deceit. In the Coen brothers version, most of the typical suspense elements such as scary music score, deep shadows, characters slowly moving, nighttime scenes, etc. are used throughout. In Zhang Yimou's version, it is more colorful in set design and

costumes, and the characters are presented more playful in nature, not nearly as serious as the Coen's version.

Though this type of cinematic presentation is often seen in murder mysteries and anti-societal activities, humor seems to play a significant role, especially in Zhang Yimou's version. One interesting choice centers on how "The Wife" is contrasted with her fellow noodle shop employees. To set her apart from the others, Zhang Yimou uses slapstick comedy. All of the workers' overt behaviors are goofy, clumsy, as if to get a laugh from an audience. Compared to Abby and Ray in *Blood Simple* (1984), the two are passive and calm in their actions. Their performance is casual, if not a beat or two slower than expected. The only comical character is the private investigator and his one-line jokes to antagonize Marty, Abby's husband. But as a whole, Zhang Yimou follows the plot almost identically to the original screenplay. This study shows the cultural differences that reflect the character makeup of the female lead in Zhang Yimou's film.

#### Introduction to Female Lead Characters

In *Blood Simple* (1984), the credit role continues into an interior over-the-shoulder shot from the back seat of a car revealing the driver and a passenger in the front seat. Scene 1A is at night during a rainstorm, the oncoming lights glistening the raindrops that are swept away by the car's worn windshield wipers, the first line of dialogue from the female lead character, "He gave me a pearl handle 38 for our first anniversary, figured I'd better leave or use it on him." A conversation about her husband's sanity, and her uncertainty of leaving him is interrupted by Abby's abrupt dialogue, "Stop the car, Ray!" The Coen brothers then reveal the passengers' faces in deep shadow, Ray as the soon-to-be lover, and Abby as the female lead and wife of Marty, a bar owner. After a car

that has apparently been following them leaves, the question of infidelity arises in their conversation, and we quickly find them at a cheap motel room in bed together. The next morning, the phone ringing awakens Ray. He answers it then hangs up. Abby asks who it was. Ray tells her “it’s your husband.” Infidelity is again brought up in the plot.

In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), scene 1A is an interior shot of the noodle shop, firmly establishes an Asian tone by Zhang Yimou’s slow motion performance of a Persian swordsman. As the four shop employees, including the female lead character look on, their bright, neon-like colored outfits seem out of place for a noodle shop in the middle of nowhere. The wardrobe choice by Zhang Yimou is the first sign of radical difference between the two films.

Unimpressed by his acrobatic maneuvers, our female lead character, known as The Wife, is laughing at the Persian’s display of martial art abilities with the sword. Zhang Yimou quickly demonstrates the strong personality of his version of the female lead character. Versus the quiet, timid Abby in *Blood Simple* (1984), the Wife is bold and non-intimidated by anyone, even a Persian swordsman. The Wife is insistent in purchasing the right weapon. In a tight aerial shot, the Persian lays out an abundance of handguns side-by-side, as if in a western-style hit-man sales pitch. Though The Wife ultimately chooses only the handgun, the Persian salesman performs his finale act by firing off a cannon. It is the cannon ball explosion that brings the police force and the detective to the noodle shop. This scene of The Wife with guns and explosions is vastly different than the sheepish Amy in the car ride in *Blood Simple* (1984).

The emotional roller coaster ride of suspense experienced by the viewer is accomplished through this tale of infidelity by the female lead character. In fact, all the

scene sequences are perpetuated by the thoughts and decisions made by the female lead character. Thus, most of the elements presented in these films should infer some type of connotative notion towards the female lead character. Though the Coen version has her benign and expressionless, while Yimou's version has her expressive and pro-active throughout the plot sequence, scholar E. Ann Kaplan (1978) reminds us, "all 'noir' women are projections of male fears and fantasies who seem merely to be stimulating human action. They often seem to be mocking the men who fall into their net" (Hirsch, 1981, p.157). Early on in both films, the female lead characters question their lovers about their intentions, their commitment in going through with their relationship. Whether meek or outlandish, both females seem dominant over their men.

In Zhang Yimou's adapted version, his female lead character is bold and non-intimidated. Though her emancipation remains consistent within the restricted gendered boundaries of the female lead character in a typical Zhang Yimou film, the female lead character in *A Woman, a Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) takes a pro-active stance in the many circumstances that unfold through the plot sequences, all leading to the finale scene of her misconstrued murdering of the villain. Versus the dark and mysterious visuals typical in a Western murder mystery, Zhang Yimou elects to personify this murder tale using comical characters in bright fluorescent apparel as clumsy-like puppets presented as employees of an isolated desert village noodle shop.

In *A Woman, a Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), the exterior shots of the town are optically distorted by use of an anamorphic lens, as the buildings converging to a center point, very reminiscent of Chinese shadow play sets presented on a presidium-arched stage that were "three-point perspective" in design. Nevertheless, whether dark or bright,

whether talkative or silent, author Foster Hirsch (1981) in his *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen* tells us “the stories of ‘noir’ are like bad dreams, presenting personal apocalypse with deadly impassivity. There are no tears in ‘film noir’” (Hirsch, 1981, p.116). Critic Leo Braudy (1976) adds, “Noir stories are about departures and lapses from the normal world, and the film’s deliberate visual styling enhances the kind of transformation from reality to nightmare that narratives dramatize” (Hirsch, 1981, p.90).

### Introduction to the Settings

In the original Western text’s opening credit role, the Coen brothers indulge the audience with both visual and audible iconic imagery of the American west. These images are bold and connote the blood of a Texan. Laid over static shots of oilrigs in the Texan landscape, the film begins with the narration of the later revealed private investigator. In the true spirit of a Texan accent, we hear

The world’s full of complainers. The fact is, nothing comes with a guarantee. Now I don’t care if you’re the Pope of Rome, President of the United States, or Man of the Year... something can all go wrong...So go ahead, complain...tell your neighbors, ask for help and watch him fly. Now in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else...that’s the theory anyway. But what I know about is Texas. Down here, you’re on your own (*Blood Simple*, 1984).

Dorothy Hughes (1979) writes in her *In a Lonely Place* “The shifting points of view and the maze-like storyline are distancing devices, which enclose the characters within the frame. Cut off in some way from the normal world, ‘noir’ characters inhabit a terrain of bleak and often terminal isolation” (Hirsch, 1981, p.78).

Zhang Yimou's credit role version is of a static shot of a wooden wall that fills the frame, with portions of engraved Asian writings. He fades the credit names on top of this structure, but turns stylistic in cursively writing the title *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) in blood red. Immediately, three gunshots are heard that pierce the wall, creating three fire glistening slashes for the camera to enter through, revealing the desolate wasteland and an isolated small village where the noodle shop exists. Zhang Yimou holds on the establishing shot of the minuscule town surrounded by desert, and then cuts to a wide-shot of Wang's Noodle Shop. This shop is where the female lead character lives and works.

When a viewer watches *Blood Simple* (1984), they feel that this place called "Texas" exists in reality. Possibly never visited by the viewer, it's possible that what's presented on the screen is truly there. When a viewer watches *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), it only exists in their imagination. The introduction to the narrative provides a good example. The title shot dissolves into a Persian swordsman performing as in a circus act. The shop workers could be circus participants as well, for they are also wearing brightly colored outfits. When the viewer later sees the exterior, the camera uses an anamorphic lens that aids in the dream-like presentation. Therefore, it probably does not exist in reality. There lays the connotation, an intentional choice in displaying non-congruent elements in this "neo noir." As an Easterner can easily imagine this place called "Texas," a Westerner is limited to the dream-like images on the screen.

This investigation of the female lead character in Zhang Yimou's films is not to reveal the limits of the Western representationalist discourse, as with the use of stereotypes, etc. An articulation of difference, on the part of film director Zhang Yimou, *A Woman, A*

*Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) is not contained within the fantasy of Western origin and identity, thus an object of desire for the viewer. Zhang Yimou, following the original screenplay, reveals his interpretation through innovative visual design, such as with the brightly colored wardrobe against a dusty, desert setting. This implies that the polysomic text can offer many representations. And in the spirit of Jacques Derrida, as soon as there's meaning, there's difference, both to "differ" and to "defer" (Brunette and Wills, 1989. p.73).

In the two films, *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) and *Blood Simple* (1984) there are many sets. In this murder/detective story, the female lead character is never motionless, always on the move. The decision for multiple sets keeps the camera moving, causing the viewer to commit to an active display of *mise-en-scenes*. But in the first film, the noodle shop is the center of most of the important action, including the murder and the zeal for money. In *Blood Simple* (1984), the bar that Marty owns is the set where the murder is committed.

Also, one must consider the story's location. In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), the shop and their living quarters are in the middle of a desert outpost. All action must take place either in the noodle shop facility or out in the far-reaching desert. In this film of infidelity, there's only a piece of the desert to run to. Plus, this hidden love affair has been going on for seventy-one days. In *Blood Simple* (1984), the female lead character moves from house, to bar, to car, etc. She is never static on a set until the climax of the film. In this film, the female lead character has developed a new relationship, and is on the run.

In order to compare additional characteristics of the female lead characters, the viewer must look for signs of a “back-story.” Both directors disclose the relationships and identities between the female lead characters, their spouses, and their closest friends. From the point of view of a Westerner, this study evaluates the difference or “otherness” between the two environments. As Barbara Johnson (2014) writes in *The Surprise of Otherness*, “The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, their effects on what follows from them, and that the starting point is not a natural but a cultural construct, usually blind to itself” (Johnson, 2014, p. 22).

#### Abby’s Suspicious Cowboy

Further complimenting their version of a true western tale, the Coen brothers reveal the husband immersed in iconic images of the American Texan. Thus their introduction of such a cultural specific is the use of a close-up shots of cowboy boots propped on a desk, Alka-Seltzer pills, a glass of milk, and a ten-gallon cowboy hat. A wider shot reveals it is the hat of our private investigator meeting the husband at his office. The *mise-en-scene* shows an offbeat, seedy nightclub, littered with subdued neon wall signage, a jukebox, and a dance floor. This environment is a meaningful source that connotes the kind of life that the female lead character has endured.

In scene 2A, Marty, the nightclub owner and suspicious husband, anxiously welcomes a hired private investigator a seat, possibly disclosing the anticipated proof concerning his wife’s behavior. The hired private investigator gives Marty a large envelope that contains photographic proof of his wife’s affair with Ray. As a close-up shot of the P.I.’s cigarette lighter, engraved with “Elk’s Man of The Year” is placed on

the desk, the inevitable truth is visually revealed in what the investigator refers to as “fringe benefits” for such an investigation. After Marty tells the P.I. that “In Greece, they would cut off the head of the one bearing bad news,” he walks to a safe, gathers the owed sum and tosses the money on the table, some falling to the floor. Laughingly, the P.I. takes the money and walking out the office, tells Marty to call him when he wants to sever his head, “I can always crawl around without it.”

#### The Wife’s Deranged Noodle Shop Owner

Zhang Yimou chooses to reveal his version of a much older husband having a strange fetish for cutting out the faces of young boys from free-standing painted canvases, and having his wife stick her face in the openings. His desire is for The Wife to perform different plays through the use of the canvases. But with The Wife’s refusals, he tortures her by burning her with a small brass-smoking pipe for “your womb cannot produce a son and is worthless junk.” The living area is dimly lit with a few sparse items scattered around. Just as dimly lit is his business office, which to get to, one must descend down a narrow stone staircase. With a desk centered in the room, most of the furnishings are deep in background. Various items of fabric and bamboo reflect a merchant setting.

In scene 3B, the detective descends down the staircase to meet with Wang. He discloses that The Wife and co-worker Li are having an affair. The detective is suited as a soldier. When he descends down the staircase, the diegetic sound of his footsteps resembles that of a soldier marching into battle. Many of Zhang Yimou’s films have a military or political force that is interwoven into the plot. In the scene, Zhan demands more money before disclosing more information about the affair. Wand complies and

throws money on the desk, some hitting the floor. After picking up all the coins, Zhan tells him of the location. In scene 3C, the viewer sees both the detective and Wang walking in the red desert, coming upon the secret lovers' nest.

In general, the female lead character is basically safe throughout most of the plot, for she doesn't get involved in hiring someone else to do a murder. Abby is given a gun, whereas *The Wife* purchases one from the travelling merchant. And later in the story, *The Wife* claims that she may do the murdering herself. Unfortunately, it is her lover Li who gets the female lead character involved in the misunderstanding of who actually commits the murder of the husband. Li feels that it was the female lead character that committed the murder, and just as important, took something from the husband's true murderer, hence the attempt on their lives. That is the only connection that Abby in *Blood Simple* (1984) and *The Wife* in *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) have with being in danger.

In both versions of the story, the female lead character's behavior is calm and collected. Under any type of adversity, she never breaks down or shows any anxiety towards the oppressor. In *Blood Simple* (1984), scene 4A has Abby and Ray return to her house after staying in the motel the previous night. Going through her personal things, she finds the gun that Marty gave her. Ray wants to go to the bar, but Abby tries to convince him that it's not a good idea. Later in scene 6A at Ray's house, the phone rings and Abby picks it up. No one answering, she asks Ray if there's another girl, and is she screwing up things for him. Telling Ray that she'll stay on the couch ends up in bed with Ray later that night.

In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), The Wife purchases a gun from the travelling swordsman. Li is nervous and curious as to why she bought it. The Wife claims it's for fun. Li's nerves are tested when in scene 2A the police arrive investigating the mysterious explosion caused by the travelling salesman's canon. Calm and relaxed, The Wife invites them in, only to have all four of the noodle shop workers accused of hiding something. A subsequent scene 2E shows Li stretched out with a cool rag on his forehead. The Wife attempts to convince him, "What's the big deal? Everything's fine." Later in the conversation, she exclaims, "It's our life. Let them gossip." Once again, Zhang Yimou continues to show power and commitment on the part of his female lead character.

#### When Husband Meets Wife

In both versions, the husband confronts his wife face-to-face. In the original screenplay, this altercation takes place at Ray's house. After awakening, Abby is in the kitchen and notices Marty's dog. Seconds later, we see Marty grabbing Abby from the back, and in a close-up shot of her feet, drags her out into the front yard. As a defense, Abby is freed easily by subduing Marty with a groin kick. After Marty gets "sick" on the front lawn, Ray enters the scene at the front door, appearing half asleep holding a gun. While Ray hugs Abby in a heart-felt embrace, Marty with his dog drive off.

In Zhang Yimou's version, detective Zhan finds the carriage in the desert for Wang, then leaves. Wang proceeds to surprise his wife in the act of fornication. Similar to Coen brothers' *Blood Simple* (1984), The Wife is dragged from the carriage and is physically beaten. Her lover, Li, enters the scene from a distance, but never intervenes during the altercation. His futile attempt to stop the fighting is pleading with Wang that

he was simply helping her with bad inflicted wounds. Unlike the Coen brothers' version where the wife retaliates with a kick, Zhang Yimou uses the film's centerpiece, the gun. While Wang stops beating The Wife and notices the large needle Li is holding, this gives The Wife time to run to the carriage and get the gun. Screaming, she wastes no time and runs towards her husband, pointing the gun as to shoot him. The importance of this scene is that it is the female lead character that initiates the action, while the weak Li stands back, reluctant to interfere.

Once Wang is gone, the wife scolds Li for his lack of involvement. In bitter tears, The Wife confesses, "all I want in life is to have someone to rely upon, someone to protect me." Disappointed with Li, The Wife demands that they return home. Leaning against the carriage, The Wife tells Li "You're such a coward." She explains to Li that due to Wang's knowing of the secret affair, she can now officially divorce him. Li is shocked by the incident. Not expressing devotion towards The Wife, Li refuses to accompany her back home to the noodle shop. Leaving him in the desert, The Wife takes the carriage and begins the journey back home, possibly to finish the job against her husband. Smiling as she departs, The Wife says to Li, "you're such a wimp. As a woman, all I needed was a shoulder to lean on...thought it was you. You don't deserve my love."

#### The Business of Murder

Both films contain a scene where the business of murder takes place. In the Coen brothers' version, scene 8A takes place inside the private investigator's car during the day. Interestingly, the camera is set up in the back seat of a car, similar to the opening interior shot of *Blood Simple* (1984). The humorous P.I. tells Marty, who has a finder

bandaged from the altercation with Abby, “put your finger up the wrong person’s ass?” Later in the conversation, he agrees on the price of ten thousand dollars, “if it pays right, I’ll do it. You know, in Russia they make only fifty cents a day.” They agree that Marty should go on a fishing trip out of town in Corpus Christi while the P.I. commits the crime.

In scene 4C, Zhang Yimou has Zhan descend down the staircase to Wang’s office to make arrangements for the double murder. They agree on a price, but Zhan wants a down payment for the deal. During the negotiation, Zhang Yimou uses a few cut-away shots of Zhan looking at Wang’s safe. Zhan’s “gaze” gives the viewer a sense that he may come back for more cash. As in the original story, Zhan tells Wang to go out of town for a few days.

#### Not Just a Shooting, But a Costly Murder

Both versions never show the crime being committed. In *Blood Simple* (1984), scene 9B has the private detective enter Ray’s house, and get the gun out of Abby’s purse. In the blue moonlight, the P.I. walks around the house, reaching a large pane glass window exposing the two lovers lying in bed together. In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), scene 4F has Li and The Wife leaving the noodle shop in the carriage. As the blue darkness falls upon the carriage, Zhan approaches them with sword drawn. Only to find them sleeping, he takes the gun from the cart. To reiterate the Western motif, in scene 10A the Coen brothers insert a scene where the private investigator is talking to Marty from a phone booth. Surrounded by oilrigs, the jovial P.I. asks Marty if he caught any fish. In scene 11, an interior shot of Marty’s office shows, instead of a cowboy hat, dead fish strung on a cord. After the pictures are presented to

Marty, showing the blood-covered lovers laying in bed, the money is exchanged. After putting out his cigarette, the P.I. pulls out Abby's gun and shoots Marty. An aerial shot from the atypical ceiling fan, a motif from the noir showcase, shows the P.I. leaving the gun and unfortunate for him, his cigarette lighter as well.

In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), scene 6A has Zhan in Wang's office, lighting his brass pipe, then handing Wang some of his wife's clothing. After looking at the bloodstained fabric, Wang becomes "sick." Regaining his composure, Wang asks Zhan "Did you take care of the bodies?" The scene continues with Wang getting the money from the safe, as Zhan puts out the pipe. As he reaches inside his coat for his wife's gun, Wang says "So thoughtful that you brought back her gun too." Zhan shoots Wang sitting at his desk. Leaving The Wife's gun and cleaning up anything out of order, Zhan exits through a small hole in the exterior wall.

In scene 9, in *Blood Simple* (1984), Abby is portrayed a bit scatterbrained. While in bed at Ray's house, Abby hears a noise and asks Ray about it. She then goes on, rambling about how Marty is so anal, and how she was forced to see a psychiatrist. Abby talks of how similar the two guys are, but that when Marty is quiet, he's usually mean. But when Ray is quiet, he's usually nice. Abby appears a bit aloof and unpredictable in her future intentions. After the murder cover-up on the part of Ray, he calls from a telephone booth to tell Abby that he loves her. Abby has no idea what Ray just did. And when Ray goes to Abby's new apartment, she questions him as to what happened. The phone rings and Abby picks it up, only to hear a dial tone. She tells Ray that it was Marty. Ray simply smiles, and laughs out of dis-belief. Ray knows now that Abby had nothing to do with Marty's death.

In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), scene 7B shows The Wife and Li are in their usual place in the desert. The wife, as did Abby, starts to reflect upon her life to Li. Not just questioning his fear of Wang, but disclosing why she bought the gun. By now, the viewer has a sense of The Wife's determination, and focused on her agenda. The wife will remain with Li, no matter what his intentions are. The wife starts to reflect on her life of ten years with her husband. She gets upset and reveals how hard it has been. As The Wife told him in scene 2E, "Want to leave me? Never!" Afterwards, they return to the noodle shop and The Wife begins to drink sake.

### Dream Sequences

In both films, the viewer is startled by the dream sequences inserted into the narrative flow. In *Blood Simple* (1984), scene 19 has Abby washing her face in the bathroom when she hears a noise. In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), scene 16A has The Wife passed-out from drinking too much Saki, but awakens to the front door opening. It appears that it is a perfectly normal sequence of shots. In *Blood Simple* (1984), Abby shouts out to Ray through a cracked door, a typical motif of the noir. But the reply is unpredictable, for it's Marty that shouts back. The Coen brothers shoot this scene as if it was part of reality, regular lighting with no special effects in post-production. Marty tells Abby that he loves her. Sitting on her couch, Marty slowly looks up at Abby and tells her never to leave her weapon behind. He then begins to spit up blood, and Abby wakes up from this nightmare.

In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), Zhang Yimou too shoots this scene as if it was real. The Wife is awakened by the noise of her front door opening. What the viewer sees is that it's Wang, raised from the dead, covered in dirt. As he tilts

his head down, dirt falls to the floor. Not knowing that he's been murdered, she is puzzled by his appearance. As he looks towards her, Wang holds paperwork in his hand. He shouts, "Do you think I would sign these divorce papers?" As he throws the papers into the air, they become very small pieces, as if it were snow falling from the sky. Zhang Yimou shoots this in super slow motion for effect.

#### The Final Scene

In *Blood Simple* (1984), the final action takes place in Abby's apartment. Scene 22A has Ray entering her glass-walled, spacious living area, and asks for her to turn off the lights. As she insists it's fine, and turns them back on, the Coen brothers use an over-the-shoulder shot of the private investigator pointing a rifle at Ray from across the street. As Ray enters the point-of-view shot of the cross hairs of the riflescope, we cut to Abby's perspective and the killing shot is fired, blowing a hole through Ray's chest. Crawling on the floor, Abby makes her way to the bathroom leaving the gun in the living room. Though shaken, Abby remains quiet.

In *A Woman, a Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), scene 17A has Li showing The Wife her gun, and that "if anyone finds out, I'll take full responsibility." Zhang Yimou wastes no time in his death. Suddenly an arrow pierces his chest, and The Wife begins to scream. "Hurry, run," whispers Li to The Wife as she begins to crawl across the floor. In Zhang Yimou style, slow motion has a series of arrows piercing objects such as hanging water bags and rope hung dishware, all visually spectacular as they crash to the floor.

In *Blood Simple* (1984), scene 23A has the private investigator entering Abby's apartment, only to find that she's escaped through a small window in the bathroom. Reaching to open the adjacent window, Abby slams it shut on his hand, and stabs his

hand with a knife. Screaming in pain, the private investigator begins to shoot holes in the wall that separates the two apartments. Abby's perspective shows beams of light shining intensely through each occurring blast. After unloading all the bullets, the P.I. begins to punch an opening in that wall to remove the knife from his other hand. While the investigator frees his hand, Abby returns to her apartment, grabs the gun and finds refuge in a dark corner of the living room. After picking up his cowboy hat off the ground, the private investigator begins to walk towards the door. Abby waits for the right moment, then fires the last shot through the door and into the chest of the private investigator. Confident in her assessment, Abby says, "I'm not afraid of you Marty," The Private Investigator starts to laugh, and says, "Well, if I see him, I'll let em know." Positioned under the bathroom sink, the final shot is a special effect shot of a drop of water falling on him. End of film.

After using all his arrows, in *A Woman, a Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), Zhan enters the shop, and searches Li's body for the gun. Not able to open the door of a room where The Wife is huddled with the gun, he begins to punch holes in the ornamental cut-out portion of the door. Zhang Yimou, using a close-up shot, has The Wife impale Zhan's hand with a pair of scissors. As opposed to the gun shot sequence used by the Coen brothers, Zhang uses a sword to make the holes in the wall. Using slow motion, Zhang Yimou has The Wife shoot the soldier through the wall, splintering a hole through the wooden wall, blasting him off the second floor walkway, casting downward to the ground next to Li. "You tell Wang he can't bully me anymore. I'm not afraid." Bleeding to death, Zhan grins and says, "If I see Wang, I'll be sure to tell him." The drop of water falling in

Zhang Yimou's version is a reflection from an extreme close-up of one of Zhan's eyes.  
End of film.

### Conclusion

Though replacing iconic images of Texan style private detectives with expert police investigators, Western style gun battles with Persian sword salesmen, seedy-like strip nightclubs with desolate Asian noodle shops, Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou maintains an ambiance of "noir," a sinister plot sequence that involves deceit, payoffs, murder, and mistaken identity. Zhang Yimou's first attempt in the adaptation from a Western text follows the storyline, while inflating diegetic elements of human ownership and torture, and the appetite for money. While the Coen brothers insist on a true western narrative that includes recurring images of neon, cowboy boots, and ten-gallon hats, Zhang Yimou incorporates his own proven stylistic tools of color, slow motion, and spatial dimension through the lens and set design.

This critical cultural study of the "other" takes into account the director's background influence, how the actors and the female lead character are portrayed, and the viewer's background and perception of the film. Defined by two different directors that draw from their different cultures, the female lead character's personality and attractiveness to the viewer is from two different societal perspectives. The Coen version has the female lead character newly connected to her lover, and is on the run. While Zhang Yimou's female lead character is sedentary in the desert setting, and has been engaged in her love affair for months. The initial thrust of Zhang Yimou's narrative is his female lead character purchasing a gun in the opening scene of the film. The opening scene in *Blood Simple* (1984) has the lovers driving away from the town, on the run.

A common element that one film has with the “other” film is the over accentuation that “noir” tends to bring out in their settings and characterizations. This emphasis is anticipated to go beyond the normal range of production design and the performance of the actors. While “pushing the envelope” seems appropriate in the presentation of the “noir” group, it’s also evident in most of Zhang Yimou’s non-“film noir” films. Thus, a critique, according to Johnson (2014), “not only seeks to establish standards of evaluating differences between texts but also tries to perceive something uniquely different within each text” (Johnson, 2014, p. 4). Zhang Yimou embellishes his narratives by elevating a scene’s action to the point of melodrama. The films presented in this study have this common thread. Incorporating melodramatic elements may or may not make a film better, but the focus on Zhang Yimou making it possible is what counts.

## CHAPTER VI – CONCLUSION

When we attend a stage play, there is an expectation to see and hear actors/actresses performing on a stage. How they perform may determine the worth in production value. But in film, the viewer experiences the visuals magically placed on a wall. Somehow, the viewer accepts the illusion and finds himself or herself “involved” in the presentation. For purposes in this study, the female lead character is analyzed throughout this viewer trance in four of Chinese film director Zhang Yimou’s melodramatic films.

The intention of this study is to demonstrate the complexity of the many variables involved in the creation of a viable, distinguishable character in a motion picture. In this study, the unit of analysis is the female lead character in four of Chinese film director Zhang Yimou melodramatic films. Though each female lead character has different character traits due to the subject matter in each of the “good versus evil” storylines, there are similar “directives” or “avenues” that are utilized for this characterization process to become successful. In this study, certain models or modes of representation are first introduced for their role involved in this characterization development. Secondly, the model is then applied through qualitative analysis in order to reveal the choices or “directives” made by Zhang Yimou in each scene, in each film. In fact, most if not all models used in this study can be applied to any of Zhang Yimou films. But after careful observation, certain models were paired off with specific films due to their apparent cohesiveness, a clear depiction for the reader to understand. In other words, the pairings best fit the objectives of the study, which was to demonstrate the characterization construction of the female lead character.

Not to be confused with two other areas of filmmaking used by Zhang Yimou, motifs and melodrama tend to overlap this area of characterization. Motifs are recurring images that connote underlining themes that are essential to both the storyline and to the female lead character. Melodrama is a form or style in presenting these themes. The melodramatic form is an infrastructure that lays claim to moralistic virtues of good versus evil, a statement of humanity, and the diegetic world that the female lead character lives in.

This concluding section of the study further discusses the intricacies of the melodramatic form, the origins and applications from other filmmakers known to have expanded its notoriety and prevalence in the filmmaking arena. Zhang Yimou is no exception, for his drive to depict the tragic story of a female character in the leading role centers around such malevolent activities, the decadence of a civilization, and the horror inflicted on women as a whole.

According to Brooks (1995), “Melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized, they are assigned to, they inhabit persons who are strongly characterized” (Brooks, 1995, p.16). In this analysis, the selected films are “character-driven” versus a film that heavily weighs its production value on the unraveling of a story. In “character-driven” films, a character’s participation is what propels the plot, and leads the viewer through a series of events that they become a part of. Peter Brooks (1995) argues that “the world is subsumed by an underlying mechanism, and the narrative creates the excitement of its drama by putting the viewer in touch with the conflict of good and evil” (Brooks, 1995, p.4). Thus, the backbone to characterization is emotion, to go beyond the surface.

Author Shen Yanbing (1976) asserts “a character thus portrayed is a wooden, unthinking person, whereas the true task is to depict ‘expressions’ that would lead us into the ‘inner activities’” (Chow, 2003, p. 41). If the planning and executing using all the cinematic tools is successful, the film could still die if not for the emotional relationship a viewer has with the main character, in this study, the female lead character. As American film director Frank Capra (1976) once put it,

You can only involve an audience with people. You can't involve them with gimmicks, with sunsets, with hand-held cameras, zoom shots, or anything else. They couldn't care less about those things. But you give them something to worry about, some person they can worry about, and care about, and you've got them, you've got them involved (Sherman, 1976, pp. 308-309).

Though a talented actor/actress and one that is properly cast for the role helps tremendously, there are cinematic tools not so apparent to the viewer that can manipulate the elements needed for a film's presentation on the screen. In building the female lead character, much emphasis was placed on “layering” her persona using different modes of representation for different “layers.” The uncovering of the “layers” consists of taking a concept and clarifying it through these models. In observing the female lead character, some models appeared more functional and appropriate than others. The models or modes of representation chosen for this study provide an excellent roadmap for the viewer, a perspective that engages the noteworthy concepts affiliated with the female lead character immersed in the melodramatic. This grid reflects the DNA of the female lead character and that of the film director, both desiring to project from the screen. As Brooks

(1995) reiterates, “We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe” (Brooks, 1995, p.15). Thus, this moral compass may have a huge “bearing” on the reception and interpretation of the female lead character by the viewer.

While focused on the storyteller, the female lead character, it was necessary to apply these models in order to gain a better understanding of the psychology behind her motives and intentions, the very make-up of her personality and decision-making process. Therefore, this study required an interdisciplinary approach, using three different models that answered the needs of this study’s quest to reveal the female lead character’s thoughts and inner feelings through observation. For Shen Yanbing (1976), “Real art consists essentially in the analysis of events and in the investigation of psychology. In addition, both functions are based on objective observation” (Chow, 2003, p.41).

*Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)

In the first pairing of films, this study used David Bordwell’s (1989) “Bull’s Eye Schema” as it related to the framed elements known as the *mise-en-scene*. Bordwell (1989) used the center of the Bull’s Eye as the traits and actions of the character. The two circled areas outside were, first the Diegetic World or surroundings, then secondly the Non-Diegetic Representations, as in camerawork, editing, music by the professional crew, to include Zhang Yimou the film director. This coupling of Diegetic and Non-Diegetic representations is a manipulative technique used by Zhang Yimou to exemplify a composite rendering of each of the events. With his non-diegetic choices as the director and the cinematographer, together with the choices made with the diegetic features seen

and heard in the scene, the end product is to portray a true, distinct depiction of what the female lead characters are truly like in the melodramatic arena.

In the first area outside the traits of the character exists the setting or environment. According to Boggs and Petrie (2008),

Because of the complex interrelationships of setting with other story elements, the effects of setting on the story being told should be analyzed carefully. And because of its important visual function, it must also be considered a powerful cinematic element in its own right (Boggs and Petrie, 2008, p.101).

Thus, the complexity of the setting or environment can be manipulated and interpreted in many ways. With Zhang Yimou at the helm, the setting is established, and then the female lead character is introduced and immersed within its confines. Under this perspective, the setting influences and may even purge the inner qualities of the female lead character. For it's only through the appropriate setting, the environmental mirror of her emotions, that the viewer can discover the intended or preferred qualities of the female lead character. The setting creates an emotional atmosphere that the female lead character feeds off of, thus the atmosphere for the melodramatic form. This mode of representation mimics, supports, and solidifies a "believability" of the character as the female lead. And it gives a Zhang Yimou film a sense of credibility in her diegetic world.

Brooks (1995) maintains, "These are modes which insist that reality can be exciting, can be equal to the demands of the imagination, primarily the moral imagination at play with large and basic ethical conflicts" (Brooks, 1995, p.6). In order to visually present such creativity, Zhang Yimou must add to his normal flare for cinematography. A

prime example is in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) with melodramatic staging of different events to include placing an over abundance of red lanterns throughout the sets, giving massages to special mistresses, and for Songlian to go insane after witnessing the men murder one of the mistresses. As David Bordwell (1989) puts it, “Assume that our interpreter has used personification routines to construct characters and has begun to map semantic fields, these characters will stand out against the diegetic world” (Bordwell, 1989, p.171). A semantic field is simply “a structure that reconfigures meanings in relation to one another” (p.106).

The second area outside the traits of the character exists in the expertise of the film director Zhang Yimou and his crew. All the camerawork, lighting, and post-production such as music exist in this area. In analyzing Zhang Yimou’s visual style, each shot takes time to plan and set up. As a cinematographer as well as a director, Zhang Yimou oversees the camerawork and plays a huge role in conceptualizing and then setting up the composition or arrangement of the framed elements, to include the female lead character. As with the first area surrounding the traits of the female lead character, this area produces connotations through the skilled choices by Zhang Yimou. Whether it’s the position and movement of the camera or the types and strengths of the lighting instruments, choices made by the crew are essential in supporting the overall presentation or *mise-en-scene* of a shot. Together, both worlds contribute to the creation of the female lead characters’ heart and soul in the selected films.

The films *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) were chosen together for many reasons. Mainly due to the similarities, these films are excellent examples of how the diegetic world and non-diegetic world together produce the female

lead character's emotional makeup and motivations that push the narrative forward. But there is a major difference, the setting. In the first film *Red Sorghum* (1987), the spatial area is immense. Contrast it to *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), the female lead character is enclosed by stone walls of the master's mansion. This alone plays a huge role in the character and motivations of the female lead. Whether accommodating or not, the female lead characters find a place to exist and flourish amongst adversities presented in their diegetic world. Whether familial or social, their power leads to control, which leads to a heightening of status amongst other characters in the diegesis. This heightening of status is an "open door" for melodramatic intervention. Its exaggerated forms of expression create an atmosphere designed by Zhang Yimou. "The desire to express all," contends Peter Brooks (1995), "seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. To give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatized through their heightened words and gestures" (Brooks, 1995, p.4). In both the films, director Zhang Yimou presents a confident woman to the viewer. Another mode of representation that consistently illustrates this sense of conviction is accomplished through non-verbal behavior, which includes "gazing."

#### *Ju Dou* (1990)

In this chapter, the aim was to narrow the scope of observation to include just the female lead character, Ju Dou, and the power behind another mode of representation, the concept of "gazing" by Laura Mulvey. This chapter is built upon the previous chapter, whereby the reader is familiar with the two different worlds of diegetics, and the concept of the overall presentation or better known as the *mise-en-scene*. This chapter's focus pertained to the power and control that Zhang Yimou's directional talents have in

orchestrating the lead character's non-verbal communication through her eye "gazing." Also included was the power and control that Zhang Yimou had over the camera composition or "camera gaze." Included within the framed elements is the placement of the female lead character. This second area brings to the surface Laura Mulvey's concept of "pre-existing patterns" that we inherit and act out. As Mercer and Shingler (2004) state, "Here melodrama was regarded as a means for the patriarchal order to sustain itself. Mulvey makes a distinction between two types of gazing, one dominated by the female lead character, the other with a male hero falling victim to patriarchal society"(Mercer and Shingler, 2004, p.26). This chapter focuses on the former, the female lead character's actions and her non-verbal communication. Brooks (1995) claims that, "Everything appears to bear the stamp of meaning, which can be expressed, pressed out, from it. Gesture is read as containing such meanings as the metaphorical approach to what cannot be said" (Brooks, 1995, pp.10-11).

The aim is to have these two different looks, character "gazing" and the "camera gaze," subliminal yet so powerful, while preventing a distancing awareness in the viewer's "gazing." The intention of this chapter was to observe the power and control inherent in one's "gazing." Mulvey's "pre-existing" ideology points to the male that needs to be in control, and can become overly disturbed when such power is taken away. Zhang Yimou assumes the leadership role through his "gaze" of both the female lead character and the *mise-en-scene*'s presentation. Thus, Zhang Yimou brings to the table, a culture and its trimmings. According to Fatimah Tobing Rony (1994), "What distinguishes the genre of the ethnographic film is that the viewer is made to see 'anthropology' and not history." (Rony, 1994, p.283).

Much of the research harbored on spectatorship and its voyeuristic tendencies. By maintaining the commitment to the portrayal of the female lead character, Mulvey's (2009) notion of "pre-existing patterns of fascination and the social formations that have molded him" precipitated the melodramatic form in Zhang Yimou's films (Mulvey, 2009, p.14). Obviously, this preconceived notion related to spectatorship was applied to the film director Zhang Yimou. It would be somewhat naïve to speculate that an instrumental craftsman responsible for the construction and subsequent action of the female lead character did not bring personal feelings and intentions based on cultural saturations and Laura Mulvey's contentions. "Melodramas gain in depth and definition," according to Dissanayake (1993), "when examined in relation to the fabric of life and cultural contours of the society from which they emerge" (Dissanayake, 1993, p. 3). It may be true that the film *Ju Dou*'s (1990) creator Zhang Yimou directs the narrative, while his unconscious psychological tendencies require the spectacle of melodrama. Freud showed how,

Psychoanalytically, things can seldom be what they seem. Thus the image of woman in patriarchal representation refers primarily to connotations within the male unconsciousness, to its fears and fantasies (Mulvey, 2009, p.127).

Claire Johnston (1974) agrees, stating, "For the male, the female protagonist becomes an agent within the text of the film whereby his hidden secret can be brought to light, for it is in woman that his lack is located" (Johnston, 1974, p.45). As research revealed for this study, patriarchal ideology laid claim to the truths concerning a woman's place in society. If this concept within patriarchal ideology holds true, then man requires a woman to house such emotions. Convolved as such, there exists a conflict of interest

whereby the male's fears are represented by the female image, which hasn't been exonerated from her societal place of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" (Mulvey, 2009, p.19). In the investigation into the means by which meaning is produced, *Camera Obscura* cautions, "It is important to know where to locate ideology and patriarchy within the mode of representation. An awareness that any theory on how to change consciousness requires a notion of how consciousness is formed" (*Camera Obscura*, 1976, v.1).

Author Chris Berry (1991) states that the cinematic apparatus and its "gazing" leads the viewer not only to consciousness and gender, but also to the prescribed identity of the female character when centered on the social implications of individuality. As he contritely states, "The viewing subject is only led by the cinematic devices to gender identification at negative points in the text, which therefore take on a negative connotations. In a culture in which individual interest is negatively coded, any focus on sexual difference that implies individual interest must be negative" (Kaplan, 1997, p.146). Thus, the individuality status of the female lead character in *Ju Dou* (1990) is condemned. She is outcast as different, non-complying, and devious towards the approved group status within the culture. Though *Ju Dou* is powerful in maintaining her place within the diegesis, she stands out from both her husband and her lover as different. Considered the "other" by means of definition, *Ju Dou* offers the viewer a hope in the search for identity, whether seen as promiscuous or simply reaching out for salvation. In Rousseau's (2008) *Confessions*, there is an insistence on the uniqueness of the inner being, the difference from others, and "the necessity of expressing that being in its totality" (Brooks, 1995, p.16).

*Blood Simple* (1984) versus *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2008)

In this last chapter of textual analysis, research offered a critical-cultural exercise in pairing two films, the original Western text by the Coen brothers and an Eastern version by Zhang Yimou. The Coen brothers wrote and directed the *Blood Simple* (1984) text. Zhang Yimou obtained the rights and permission to use the scripted text, under his direction and leadership. Within this melodrama of secrecy and murder, Zhang Yimou changed many of the elements for cultural sake, while other components remained the same. While alterations were made by simple comparisons of the East and the West, the concept of “otherness” remained within Zhang Yimou’s own revised Chinese text. As Rey Chow (1995) explains,

What Zhang is doing is representing a timeless China of the past, which is given to us in an imagined retrospective mode. This ‘China’ is the China constructed by modernity, of anthropology, ethnography, and feminism. It is also a ‘China’ exaggerated and caricature, in which the past is melodramatized in the form of excessive and absurd rituals and customs (Chow, 1995, p.145).

Research of Zhang Yimou’s films indicated that *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) is unique in its anamorphic presentation, an optical distorted view of the isolated noodle shop landscape. Also quite different is Zhang Yimou’s choice of brightly colored wardrobe. Usually something that is different remains outside the comfort area of “us.” Sue Thornham (1997) cites author Simone de Beauvoir’s (1988) concerns with the usage of the term “otherness” while reiterating the premise that culture constructs the woman. He writes, “The category of the ‘other’ is as primordial as consciousness itself”

(de Beauvoir, 1988, p.16). As a relative concept, “otherness” calls for such a distinction, a separation between elements that “appear” different. But this difference is required for identity of gender, nation, and the individuality status of the female lead character. The term “otherness” resides within the female lead character, her outside difference from the other characters, and her cultural difference from the “other” Western female lead character. As a strong but abused woman, The Wife in *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009) is portrayed as the heart of the noodle shop.

The film’s main interior set is a noodle shop, and housing quarters located in the middle of the desert, which is the main exterior setting. Though civilization arrives from time to time, interrupting the torture of The Wife by the husband, life centers on relationships. In *A Woman, A Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009), these relationships are interrupted by the purchase of a gun by The Wife. She is abused by her husband and now owns a gun. This study questions how The Wife is constructed from this point on. As or from this “other” woman in the original Western text, one thing to remember is that Eastern melodrama connotes differently than the West. For example, the idea of suffering is part of melodrama in Asia. As Dissanayake (1993) explains, “Most Asian cultures valorize human suffering as a pervasive fact of life and that salvation is a liberatory experience emanating from our human suffering” (Dissanayake, 1993, p.4).

Loosely applied throughout history, one may conclude that the “other” in itself has negative connotations. In this chapter, the mode of representation or model was chosen strictly to address this consideration. For Edward Said (1979) and his work *Orientalism* strongly agree with the term’s self-manufacturing a negative following. This began many years ago. Said (1979) theorizes that “its originality spawns from the Western

world” (Said, 1979, pp. 5-6). Whether manufactured for dominance or not, the film directors chosen for this study remained loyal to their own cultural traditions and manifestations. Chinese film director Zhang Yimou made a film as he envisioned, while the Coen brothers wrote and directed a film using their American tools of the trade.

The purpose of this chapter was to observe the cultural choices made by Zhang Yimou in rendering his own Chinese version of the Western script. Although it’s impossible to determine what self-biased choices were strictly his own, the melodramatic changes of the *mise-en-scene* all pointed to the non-verbal construction of the female lead character. As Dissanayake (1993) puts it, “Melodrama tends to give prominence to the experiences, emotions, and activities of women” (Dissanayake, 1993, p.2).

Though Abby is quiet and meek, the Coen brothers move her about the city, using many locations. But for *The Wife*, who is outspoken and aggressive, she remains captive at the shop, no significant locations. Zhang Yimou elects not to have his female lead character simply run away from the husband, but instead, buy a gun and take control where she lives. As Dissanayake (1993) puts it, “To understand the cultural discourse surrounding Asian melodrama, one has to understand the significance of such sedimentations” (p.5).

As part of the script, characters are given instructions as to where to move about the framed environment. But separate from the script, Zhang Yimou asks the actors to heighten the physical actions in front of the camera. Melodrama is characterized by externalization. Thornham (1997) sees this external force as, “The emotional truth is expressed, not through its verbal articulation but through its externalization in an ‘orchestration’ of visual and musical effects, in music, décor and *mise-en-scene*”

(Thornham, 1997, p.47). Zhang Yimou can accentuate this externalization with his common motif usage of slow motion.

In the end, all viewers are emotional beings. With Zhang Yimou pulling the psychological puppet strings, the viewers' feelings are manipulated. Whether we are directing a film, acting in it, or simply watching a film, this psychological process is engaged by the filmic experience. In directing a film, Zhang Yimou is an expert in coaching actors to behave a certain way in front of the camera. But he too waits patiently for the emotional wave to hit him. And it is at that moment he calls "cut and print." The actor/actress is both self-absorbed in listening and understanding what the director calls for, and also in creating that moment from within. This dissertation gives light to the work and craftsmanship of the cast and crew in making motion pictures. Whether a film originates from Hollywood or China, the viewer is captive for two hours of magic.

When asked about making his films appeal to a Western audience and their idea of China, Zhang Yimou responded,

You can't really proceed in that way. One's appreciation of a good film is something universal. It is about feelings, characters, stories, colors, scenery, beauty, all of which are common to every human being, especially feelings. As long as the film appeals to human emotions, all audiences will enjoy it (Carullo, 2008, p.134).

## Limitations

This study is a qualitative study whereby a Western researcher using Western modes of representation made observations of Eastern culture films by Chinese film director Zhang Yimou. These Western models or modes of representation were to illustrate the complexity in the construction and exhibition of the female lead character in the films chosen by the Western researcher. With the researcher not speaking Mandarin, the language spoken in each of the films, the Westerner relied heavily on the accuracy of the translator who created the subtitles for each of the films.

For the type of qualitative observations that were performed, the researcher found the materials useful but outdated. Thus, more current publications are highly needed in the critical cultural area of film studies. Not having the financial backing, the researcher was not able to fly to China and meet the director in person. It would have been ideal for this study to incorporate an interview with Zhang Yimou, the director of all the films chosen for the study, into the body of work as a primary source of research. Though the idea in critical culture is to flush out new theories from different cultural perspectives, this dissertation holds bias in many areas.

For the sake of disclosure, some of the bias centered around the researcher as having come from a Western culture, having selected particular films over others, choosing the specific the modes or models chosen over others, at the mercy of the translator who provided the subtitles that were the only source of dialogue, and the use of English printed research material only.

Despite the noted biases and cultural tendencies of the West in this dissertation, the research obtained provided valuable information that corresponded with the concepts

and theories that met the objectives of this work. After all, the information obtained and the subsequent interpretation of the materials is valuable stepping-stones in a field that will expand just as the cross-cultural production of cast and crew will as well.

For the first time with films like *The Great Wall* (2016), Zhang Yimou invited American and other Western film crew personnel to work on the film, and to use an American actor to play the leading role. Translators were needed on the set, but undoubtedly was an important step in cross-cultural understanding. As more companies such as Sony and Universal seek the opportunity to work with crews overseas, more academic research and publications should be devoted to this field of film studies.

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