

Chinese filmmakers need to see a way out

By David Walsh
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Hero, directed by Zhang Yimou, written by Feng Li, Bin Wang and Zhang

Contemporary Chinese filmmakers confront many difficulties. The Beijing Stalinist regime places enormous pressure on artists, censoring, bullying or bribing them in an effort to restrict criticism and opposition. Certain truths, above all—the manner in which China has been thrown open to penetration by foreign capital, the revival of brutal exploitation for profit and the barbaric social conditions in which tens of millions live—must not be told.

Valerie Jaffee, in an essay posted on the *Senses of Cinema* web site, notes some of the official obstacles: “In order to obtain government recognition and permission to show their films in the nation’s theatres, Chinese filmmakers must fulfill several requirements: they must purchase a quota number from a state-run studio (though it is not necessary that the studio agree to produce or finance the film), they must submit both a plot synopsis (until late 2003, a full script was required) and the completed film to government censors, and they must not make the film public—including submitting it to international festivals—until the censors’ approval is secured. Filmmakers who fail on any of these counts can expect that their film will be banned and they themselves forbidden to make any more films in China until further notice.”

Perhaps more insidious, however, than the overt bureaucratic-police repression that weighs on filmmakers and artists is the great confusion and unclarity that must prevail in their minds as the result of China’s traumatic history in the twentieth century. One should never underestimate the extent of this confusion and the damage done by Chinese Stalinism. This is not to provide anyone excuses in advance or some kind of historical exemption, but the intellectual disorientation remains an undeniable fact.

Thoroughly cut off from a left-wing critique of Maoist Stalinism, it is hardly surprising that Chinese artists should find difficulty in making sense of the Chinese revolution and the current situation. After all, the “Communist” Party still exists and still dominates political life. Aphorisms insisting that “to get rich is glorious” co-exist with continuing exhortations to “follow Marx-Lenin-Mao Zedong thought.”

And from the West, the filmmakers hear all sorts of cheap but alluring talk about pushing China toward “democracy” and human rights, uttered by officials of the same imperialist regimes that ruthlessly oppressed the Chinese people for decades and continue today to pursue neo-colonialist ambitions.

Nonetheless, certain things should be clear to Chinese film artists: that the regime is authoritarian and reactionary, that conditions for vast numbers of people are wretched and that resistance to what exists, including the abysmal conditions of artistic creation, is an elementary duty.

One felt the general presence of those sentiments in the earlier works of Zhang Yimou (b. 1951), the most internationally prominent Chinese film director. In *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992) and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) in particular: The films, each carefully and beautifully made, communicated an intense hostility to authority and repression and a genuine concern for the welfare of wide layers of the population.

On the basis of the determination to resist injustice and tell the truth all ideological and historical questions may be clarified. However, one must be determined not for a year or two, or even five, but for an entire lifetime.

Shanghai Triad (1995), *Keep Cool* (1997), *The Road Home* (2001) and *Happy Times* (2001), none of them without their pleasures, seemed generally lesser works. (*Not One Less* [1999] was perhaps a happy throwback.)

The director increasingly seemed to be arguing for a kind of stoicism and restraint in the face of official cruelty and indifference. Whether the blandishments of the global film industry and the condition of becoming an international film celebrity have had an impact on Zhang Yimou, we will leave to the side. We trust that these latter were not the decisive factors.

In *Hero*, made two years ago but only now released in North America, the unfortunate tendency toward conformism and coming to terms with the status quo has reached new heights.

The story takes place in ancient China. The tyrannical monarch of Qin, the most powerful of six Chinese states, has embarked on a campaign to unite the regions into one empire. An almost ceaseless slaughter prevails. The other kingdoms resist his efforts, and the king of Qin has been the object of various assassination attempts.

News comes to the court of Qin that a local police official has dispatched the three deadliest assassins in China, Sky, Broken Sword and Flying Snow. The individual is summoned by the king and told to tell his story, while remaining—at peril of his life—one hundred paces distant. “Nameless” gives his account of defeating Sky in battle and of using psychological warfare to divide, weaken and ultimately vanquish Broken Sword and Flying Snow, a pair of lovers (all this told in flashback).

With each recounted success, the king permits Nameless to come closer to the throne. However, we soon realize that he is suspicious. In fact, the king has his own theory of what has happened (also told in flashback), theorizing that the supposed deaths are part of a plot to place Nameless, another assassin, close enough to his side to carry out his murder.

A great deal of fighting takes place in the various tellings and retellings, with nearly all the possible permutations of warriors, male and female, taking part. The colors, the choreography, the use of falling leaves and water, in fact, many details stand out. Zhang does beautiful, meticulous work.

But it all leaves one rather cold. The drama and ideas are not sufficiently compelling to sustain the martial arts. Inevitably the fighting becomes a thing in itself, a mere *tour de force* and loses interest. Before it ends, the film has become self-important and a bit tedious. (Although it remains always a step above the smug and

dull *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [2000], directed by Ang Lee.)

And the conclusion of the film is quite reprehensible. Nameless comes to see that the king’s goal, the unification of China, is a greater good to which the suppression of his own state and people must be sacrificed. The project of one language, a unified monetary system and commonly shared values, a “motherland”, all to be protected by a great wall, overrides all other concerns. Less people will die if the tyrant has his way. Nameless allows himself to be massacred and denounced as a traitor to further the king’s purposes.

What validity this has for ancient China one leaves to the scholars. But its implications for the present day are only retrograde. It is difficult not to substitute Mao or the current Chinese regime for the ancient tyrant of Qin.

A peace attained by acquiescence to a bloodthirsty, paranoid tyrant? Peace through self-abnegation and self-annihilation? “Let the dictators have their way, for they know best, in the end.” The film taken at face value leaves a distinctly bad taste in the mouth. And if its themes are not to be taken seriously, then why should we pay attention at all?

Let us assume, “for the ultimate honor of man”, that complacency or worse is not the motivating factor, that the problem may in fact be a severe fatalism, nourished by a deep confusion about the origins of contemporary Chinese conditions. Zhang may well feel that the obstacles to change, including deeply-ingrained national traditions and inertia, are so insurmountable that this sort of making a virtue out of necessity is the population’s, or his, only recourse.

Nonetheless, the conclusion that one has no choice but to let the big-shots have their way and that resistance is futile and only leads to greater violence and bloodshed, is the most demoralized and demoralizing prospect. The director needs to study social life and history more profoundly and change his course.

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