

黃土地

"Yellow Earth" (Huang Tudi) -- 1984

Beginning with the 1985 Hong Kong Film Festival, this became the first Chinese film to be hailed internationally by Western film critics. Directed by Chen Kaige with cinematography by Zhang Yimou (who later became famous in his own right as the director of Red Sorghum, Ju Dou, Raise the Red Lantern, To Live, etc.), the film is set in northwestern China in 1939, two years into the Japanese invasion of China. At the time, the Nationalist Government under Chiang Kai-shek had withdrawn into Sichuan (far off in mountainous southwestern China) where it was sustained in Chongqing, largely by an American airlift and allied support (British political commentators jokingly referred to the Generalissimo as "Cash My Check"). In the power vacuum created, the Communists expanded rapidly throughout rural portions of Northern China which were not closely controlled by the Japanese forces.

Gu Qing is a soldier-intellectual from the Propaganda team of the Communist-led Eighth Route Army sent out among the peasants in Northern Shaanxi to collect folksongs, to which the Communists intend to write new lyrics to inspire their soldiers and peasant followers to fight the Japanese and work for the revolution. Walking through villages on the loess plateau along the Yellow River, he meets with a wedding procession and is invited to the reception by peasants, who treat him as a government official. He is surprised to see wooden fish served (as a token for good luck - the word yu for fish is a homonym of yu meaning surplus or abundance) instead of the real thing.

That night he stays at a peasant's home. The father says he is 47, but looks 77 (prematurely aged by poverty and the harsh climate). He lives with his fourteen year-old daughter Cuiqiao and her younger brother Hanhan. She will be married off in the Fourth Lunar Month to an older man, who gave half of the bridal price beforehand (it was used to pay for her mother's funeral) and will give the other half later, which will be used to pay for her brother's wedding.

The father is suspicious of Gu Qing's notebook and will not sing for him, but Gu Qing stays on and helps out in the fields. We get the impression he has not had much experience ploughing, another indication that he is an intellectual. One morning Cuiqiao notices he can sew, which she thinks a quite remarkable accomplishment for a man. Gu Qing tells her that women in Yan'an (the capital of the Communist base area) crop their hair and fight the Japanese invaders just like the men do. She seems impressed. Later he tells her father that "in the south" (i.e. Yan'an) they do not look favorably on the custom of marrying off young girls. The father objects, saying that 13 or 14 is not young and how should they get married without arranged marriages. When Gu Qing asks him why certain women have to suffer so much in life, the father replies: Ming! (Fate). Gu Qing talks about freedom of marriage and the other things Chairman Mao wants to see brought about in China -- like everyone having shoes and decent grain to eat. The father declines

to comment, but Cuiqiao seems impressed. He makes friends with the younger brother Hanhan and Hanhan sings a folksong about a bedwetting child bridegroom and the Dragon King (the water god). Gu Qing then teaches him one with what sounds like an old melody but beginning with the words: "Liandao, Langtou..." (Sickle and hammer...) -- the symbols of Communism.

When Gu Qing eventually announces his imminent departure, Cuiqiao seems shocked and distraught. He tells her he will leave her money to buy food and red cloth. She replies: "I have some." She then keeps asking more questions about Yan'an. Her father, worried that Gu Qing may be demoted for failing in his mission to collect folksongs, so he sings for him. The next day Hanhan sees him off and Cuiqiao meets him on the road, asking him to take her with him to Yan'an. He replies that he is a public servant and public servants must obey their rules. She protests: "Then you should change the rules!" He says he will have to go back first and ask permission of the leadership in Yan'an in order to take her, but tells her: "I'll definitely be back" (Wo yiding huilai). She replies: "I believe you" (Wo xin le). She exhorts him to be careful enroute and advises him on how to travel, as an elder sister or a wife might. As he leaves, she sings a moving song about how "a free man came here from the Communists" and that she has made a choice of her horse from among many, adding "I'll never be able to forget you my whole life... but how can we poor people turn our fate around?"

The Fourth Month comes and Gu Qing has not returned. We see brief scenes of Cuiqiao's wedding and a longer scene of her dressed in red, with her head completely covered, then unveiled by an old, dark hand. We witness the fear on her face when she first meets her new husband this way. This is contrasted with the next scene, which Gu Qing sees: an energetic waist-drum dance performed by peasant recruits in Yan'an.

One day by the river Cuiqiao tells Hanhan she has decided to flee to Yan'an to join the army. She gives him a pair of hand-sewn shoe soles for Gu Qing when he returns. She then sets out in a little row boat to cross the mighty Yellow River, which ends up inundating her as she sings a Communist song (she doesn't get the dang or "Party" out in Gongchandang or Communist Party).

When Gu Qing finally arrives he finds no one at home. The local peasants, led by Cuiqiao's father, are clad in leaves and performing a rather primitive-looking shamanic rite in the hope of bringing rain to their drought-stricken land. They are singing: "Dragon King, come save us all." Hanhan spots Gu Qing at a distance and tries to run toward him, but is blocked by the surge of humanity madly running in the opposite direction as part of the ritual. As the camera pans the scene and Hanhan gets submerged in the crowd, we again see the yellow earth and hear Cuiqiao's voice singing: "The Communist Party shall save us all."

Questions:

1. Are there elements of Orientalism in the film, if so where? What function might these play both in terms of the message of the film and in terms of its appeal to Western audiences? Is there a political dimension to both?
2. Broadly speaking, what is the mission of the Communists and how successful has it been, according to this film?
3. Can the film be interpreted as an allegory for the entire Communist cause in China? If so, what does it say about the success or failure of that cause?