

"Red Sorghum" (Hong gaoliang) 1987

红高粱

director: Zhang Yimou
starring: Gong Li

Based on the novel Red Sorghum by Mo Yan (the novel has been translated into English by Howard Goldblatt), this was the first major film directed by Zhang Yimou, who had already achieved a degree of acclaim as cinematographer for Chen Kaige's film "Yellow Earth" (1985).

The novel was part of the "search for roots" (xungen) genre which emerged in China in the mid-1980s, partly, it is alleged, due to the influence of translations into Chinese from Latin American literature and also due to the example of the American made-for t.v. mini-series "Roots". "Red Sorghum" is also a prime example of the use of "Naturalism" in the films of mainland China's Fifth Generation filmmakers. It is narrated by the voice of the grandson of its female protagonist who prefers to go by her informal nickname Lao Jiu ("Old Ninth" -- a homonym for "old wine" and also "The Ninth Category" -- a truncated form of the term of abuse applied by Mao to intellectuals during the 1966-9 political campaign known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution).

Beginning in the late 1920s with Lao Jiu's marriage to Mr. Li, a leper (you mafeng bing de) who owns an isolated distillery at some unspecified rural location in north China which produces Gaoliang jiu, a type of clear distilled spirit, which the movie claims is red, we are shown her troubled trip via sedan chair to her marriage, in which she is shaken for the fun of it by disrespectful bearers and nearly kidnapped in the mysterious gaoliang fields by someone posing as the notorious bandit San Pao, translated in the subtitled version as "Baldy San". The bandit is then overcome by a bearer whom the narrator identifies as his grandfather and delivered to her intended husband, Leper Li. Soon after sleeping with her in a disturbing wedding-night scene, we are told Leper Li is murdered. The narrator tells us the murderer was never caught, although he suspects his own grandfather, because the two had begun an illicit love relationship.

Lao Jiu convinces the distillery workers and their foreman Luo Han to remain and work for her. They use the spirits they produce to disinfect the entire living quarters and burn the leper's possessions. After a strange rite, which involves much drinking and singing performed before the God of Wine, the narrator's grandfather, deep in his cups, insists on entering his new boss' quarters in front of everyone. When she summarily throws him out, he yells that her attitude has always been different when she takes her pants off. At that point an older woman hands her a huge paddle and the workers hold him down while she spansks him with it, which he insists does not hurt. "It feels good," he yells. They then dump him in an empty vat where we are told he sleeps for three days. In his absence, Lao Jiu is abducted by the real San Pao.

Ransomed back by master distiller Luo Han and her workers, she runs

a successful business, despite the fact that San Pao has urinated in the wort as a gesture of contempt. In fact, it ends up being their best batch in years. They all prosper and a son is born to her (the narrator's father). She recognizes it as his grandfather's offspring and the two seem to take up together again, although with her wearing the pants in the family. This goes on for nine years.

The Japanese invade China and bring an end to everyone's happy times. Forcing the local peasants to trample down the sorghum fields, they plan the grisly execution of a man who killed one of their soldiers by having him flayed (skinned) alive. Their victim turns out to be none other than the bandit San Pao, who probably tried to resist them. The local butcher ruins this for them by stabbing San Pao in the heart. The Japanese then order his assistant to flay the second prisoner, the former master distiller Luo Han, alive, in a gory, horrifying scene. We are told by the narrator that Luo Han (the name means "arhat") was an underground Communist operative who had been organizing resistance to the Japanese in the locale.

Lao Jiu and the locals plan to attack the Japanese convoy using their liquor as an incendiary device, which works, but Lao Jiu and many Chinese are killed in the assault. Her son then appears with his father in the light of a red sun and sings a song about how his mother has gone to the southwest, to live a life of wealth and prosperity among the dead.

questions:

1. Given that Naturalism is a legitimate literary and filmic genre, is there a chance that it nevertheless plays into some orientalist sentiments and fantasies, given the context here? If so, how?

2. How does the female character in this film (Lao Jiu) differ from the girl Cuiqiao in "Yellow Earth" and any other Chinese films you have seen thus far?

3. Chris Berry, a specialist in Chinese film studies, has said that Lao Jiu represents the "younger generation" of Chinese in the 1980s, especially with the lyrics of the song at the outset of the film which urges her to "keep on advancing without turning around to look back." Do you think this is possible?

4. What about the use of music and song in the film? Did you notice anything different? What about the lyrics of some songs such as: Hehe zan di jiu, ah, zui bu chou! ("Drink, drink our wine/ Then your mouth will smell fine...") etc.