

Raise the Red Lantern (Da hong denglong gaogao gua) PRC 1991

director: Zhang Yimou

starring: Gong Li

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This film was produced on mainland China in the wake of the suppression of the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. It is set in the early Republic (circa 1920). The female protagonist, Songlian, is 19 and has been a "foreign-style" student (yang xuesheng), i.e. one who studied subjects on the Western model in a "modern school". Her name means "In Praise of the Lotus", which is a reference to the Song neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) essay Ai lian shuo, in which the lotus becomes a symbol of integrity -- something which can live among decay but rise above it.

At the outset of the film the camera focuses on her face as her step-mother tells her that their family's economic straits will force her to drop out of university and marry. She declares: "Let me marry a rich man then," to which her mother replies: "You can only do so as a concubine." She decides to do just that and the next scene witnesses her setting off on foot for her new home in a the outfit of a young university student, instead of a traditional bride's attire (a red dress) and without being carried in the traditional sedan chair. She seems determined and also in the habit of bucking convention. The head of the household servants seems incredulous at her arrival and the lack of ceremony for which she has opted. Her personal handmaid shows resentment toward her immediately, huffing: "Ni jiu shi nei ge si taitai." (So you are that fourth wife." (note that si "four" in Chinese is a homonym of "death" and so is taken to be inauspicious).

On her first night there she is treated to a foot massage (it is later asserted by the master that the feeling of the feet corresponds in a wholistic way to the entire well-being of the woman) and red lanterns are used to designate her quarters as those of the favored wife (she is the youngest of four). But in the middle of the night the master is called out of her boudoir by an unexpected message from the third wife, who says she is ill and it's an emergency. The next night the third wife attempts to repeat the ruse, but Songlian tells her new husband: "If you go to her, don't come back here" and so he refuses to go. When a personal servant of hers talks back to him, saying: "How can I explain that," he snarls: "What do you mean 'explain'?" We seldom see the husband, we mostly hear his voice as the camera constantly studies Songlian's face and somewhat controlled expressions.

Early the next morning they are awakened by the third wife singing opera on the roof. Songlian, who can't sleep, goes out to meet her. #3 wife is clad in red opera costume, sings and gesticulates with an affectation noticeable even through her operatic guise. She snubs Songlian by saying she no longer has any inclination to keep singing when Songlian has expressed an interest in hearing her continue. Songlian is then introduced to #3's seven year old son, which further exasperates her. She finds a friend, or so she thinks, in wife #2,

an older and gentler woman who appears very sympathetic to her. Songlian asks her about a little brick shed she noticed on the roof that morning which appeared to have a pair of metal shackles or a garrote in it. #2 wife says: "Don't bring that place up. It's called the 'House of Death'. A couple of women from previous generations hanged there (the Chinese term used, shangdiao, is ambiguous as it implies that they took their own lives)." Songlian later brings it up with the master, who responds in exactly the same way as #2, but Songlian then asks: "Were they yitaitai (concubines)?" He tries to avoid answering.

At a Mahjongg game organized by #3 while the master is away, Songlian notices her rubbing the leg of Dr. Gao (one of two invited male guests) with her foot. It dawns on her that #3 is having an affair with Dr. Gao, in part out of protest against the fact that the master's attentions have switched to her and, more of late, to the kindly older #2, who totally fawns over the master in private. Songlian tries to start an affair with the master's eldest son by wife #1, a young man in his 20s, but this is thwarted by the master and the household. She discovers her handmaid has been sleeping with the master on any occasion possible and also finds a voodoo doll of herself among the handmaid's things. Because the handmaid has lighted red lanterns in secret in her own room, in violation of the guiju or rules of the household, Songlian insists that she be punished according to the age-old traditions of the house, which demand that she kneel outside over night. That night it snows and the handmaid eventually dies of pneumonia.

Songlian then gets drunk as she celebrates her own lonely birthday and blurts out in the presence of an old woman servant and #2 wife: "#3 has Dr. Gao. What do I have? I have nothing. #3's with him in town now. Who do I have?" When she wakes up the next day, it is to the ruckus created by a large group of male servants returning with #3, bound and gagged. Caught in adultery, she is condemned in a secret hearing before the master, which we do not see, and hanged on a snowy morning by a retinue of older male servants in the little shed on the roof referred to earlier as the House of Death. Songlian looks on from a distance at the group going toward the shed and sees only the legs of a woman kicking to get free. We do not see what happens inside the shed, but we see the men leave very quickly. Songlian then goes to look. We hear only her scream and then her screamed accusation, many times, of: "Sha ren. Nimen sha ren!" (Murder! You have killed a human being! [You are killers]). The master later interviews her, asking: "What did you see?" and then answering for her: "You saw nothing."

In the next scene it is night. The red lanterns are inexplicably burning in #3's quarters. This is reported to the servants, who carry clubs to investigate. When they enter, they hear her singing opera and are scared by the many opera masks she collected while alive, so they flee. A rather satisfied-looking Songlian emerges: having put a record of #3 on the victrola, she cranks the handle to keep it playing. The final scene begins with the sound of firecrackers. It is the next

summer, we are told. A new bride has arrived, clad traditionally in red. She asks: "Who is that woman?" and is told: "That's the former Fourth Wife. There's something wrong with her mentally." A distraught and disheveled-looking Songlian is shown indistinctly, pacing in the courtyard, outside the room with the red lanterns. (End)

Questions:

1. This film and Ju Dou, another well-known and widely-distributed film by Zhang Yimou, have been read by Chinese critics as veiled allegories to Tiananmen and its aftermath. Can you analyze the film according to this interpretation?

2. The film has also been taken as exemplifying certain orientalist stereotypes. What are these?