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“As long as there shall be stones,  
the seeds of fire will not die.”

*Lu Xun, December 1935  
(from the original manuscript)*

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# SEEDS OF FIRE

*CHINESE VOICES  
OF CONSCIENCE*

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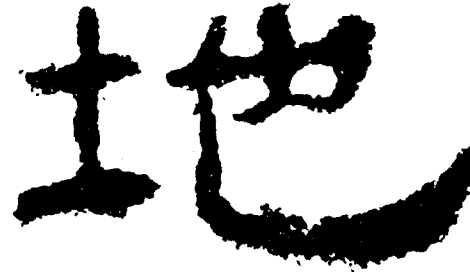
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To Lu Xun,  
on the fiftieth anniversary of his death,  
October 19, 1936.

... the voices of China's conscience and hope, repeatedly gagged  
and always rising again in endless relay, verify the words of Lu Xun,  
China's most illustrious rebel: "As long as there shall be stones, the  
seeds of fire will not die."

—Simon Leys, *The Burning Forest*

## VIII: YELLOW EARTH



The makers of this film have thought deeply and seriously about society and life; and even if their feelings are vague and obtuse at times, they have gone far beyond the social analyses and statistics of our philosophers and sociologists.

*Huang Zongying*

... cinematic innovation must keep pace with what the masses can accept and enjoy.... If we let things go, there will be an unconscious drift towards "art for art's sake" and "innovation for the sake of innovation".

*Xia Yan*

## Yellow Earth

### —an Unwelcome Guest

WHEN THE FILM "Yellow Earth" was screened at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in March 1985, it was immediately hailed by local and international film critics as representing the long-awaited breakthrough in Chinese cinema. It was subsequently invited to festivals in Europe and America, and bought for commercial release in many countries, making it internationally the most popular Chinese film made since 1949.

"Yellow Earth" was completed in late 1984, and initially refused international release by China's film censors amidst considerable controversy. Many critics found the perspective of the director, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Yimou, his cinematographer, to be politically suspect, condemning the film for using mass art as a vehicle to "display the backward and ignorant aspect of the Chinese peasantry." Chen was regarded as being too young to understand what Yan'an was all about, and he was accused of distorting the Communist spirit. The striking *simplicity of the plot* and *stunning cinematography*—both rare achievements for a film culture that has if anything become more theatrical and contrived since 1949—were roundly decried for being "arty" and "naturalistic". In fact, "Yellow Earth" was only one of a number of controversial films made by new directors—the so-called "fifth-generation" of film-makers trained in Peking since the Cultural Revolution. However, it was the popularity of Chen's work with young urban audiences and the international attention that brought the debate surrounding the new cinema into the open.

On a deeper and, for orthodox Communist viewers, more disturbing level, "Yellow Earth" reflected the vision of the Urbling generation of the Cultural Revolution, the dispossessed young people sent to be "re-educated" by the peasants. The director as well as most of his film-crew belong to this group, and the understanding of Chinese realities that their exile afforded them is in striking contrast to the distorted and blinkered vision of the older Party and cultural leaders.

Although critics made much of the tragic fate of the heroine, Cuiqiao, it is perhaps in the character of her younger brother, Hanhan, and the deceptive silence with which he preserves his individuality, that we can find the most striking message of the film.

The dispassionate yet pessimistic picture presented by the makers of "Yellow Earth" and its relevance to China today struck the film's supporters as well as its opponents. Huang Zongying, one of the most open-minded members of China's film establishment, demonstrated her understanding of the real significance of "Yellow Earth" when she said: "I am convinced that the next generation of film-makers will leave us all far behind. But what worries me is that the conservative stodginess of our veteran film-makers is making the young despise them."

In the following we offer a short synopsis of the film and a pictorial introduction to highlights of the work, along with a selection of contrasting comments from a discussion of "Yellow Earth" by the committee which chose the Golden Rooster Awards (China's Oscars), in 1985.

*For Chinese film audiences and critics alike, the arrival of "Yellow Earth" was quite unexpected. It was like a pleasant social gathering where people are awaiting the arrival of a friend: the doorbell rings, the door opens, but the person who steps in is a stranger that no one recognizes. The interloper and the guests gape at each other, a lively conversation that has been in progress gradually dies out and there is an awkward silence. If the unbidden stranger apologizes, says he has come to the wrong place, then turns and leaves, the matter could end there. However, if he is stubborn, and declares that he is going to join the party anyway, there could be some trouble. Two things could happen: he might be rudely ejected, or he may be grudgingly accepted and become a friend.*

—Li Tuo, film critic and novelist

## Synopsis

SPRING 1939, North Shaanxi. As part of a mass effort to mobilize the peasants against the Japanese invasion, the Communist-led Eighth Route Army propaganda teams are engaged in collecting and disseminating folksongs in the north-west.

Gu Qing, a soldier in the Eighth Route army, is walking to each of the villages on the loess plateau by the Yellow River, when he sees a wedding procession and follows it into a village, where he is invited to join the feast. The peasants are so poor, however, that wooden fish are offered instead of live ones to the guests.



*The Village Wedding Feast*

A young girl, Cuiqiao, has come to watch the wedding, anxious to learn something of her own fate. Afterwards she goes to the Yellow River to fetch water, and sings to the tune of a local folksong:

In the sixth month the ice in the River hasn't thawed,  
It's my own father who is dragging me to the wedding board.

Of all the five grains, the bean is the roundest,  
Of all the people, daughters are the saddest.

Up in the sky pigeons fly, one with the other,  
The only dear one that I long for is my mother.

That night Gu Qing stays at a peasant's cave home. The father is in his late forties but looks much older, and he lives with his two children: fourteen year-old Cuiqiao, and her brother Hanhan, who is about ten. Gu Qing explains that he has come to collect folksongs, and asks them if they can sing, but they are non-committal. He learns that the bride he saw earlier was only fourteen. He tells the family that the Communist Party opposes child marriages, but the father is not impressed.

The next morning Cuiqiao brings water for Gu Qing. He starts mending his clothes, explaining that in the Eighth Route Army the women are soldiers just like the men, and the men mend their own clothes. On the doorframe outside, Cuiqiao sticks up the New Year couplets. Gu Qing is surprised to see that instead of Chinese characters there are only black circles. Cuiqiao tells him that there is no one in the area who is literate. She also explains that her father is suspicious of Gu Qing's notebook.

Gu Qing climbs up the ridge to the family's field, desolate in the spring drought, where he finds the father and son. He lends a hand, and the family is surprised at his skill. The father reveals that his wife is dead; his eldest daughter married into a family that he thought could support her, but since her marriage she has often gone hungry.

Cuiqiao comes with the midday meal: millet gruel. Before eating the father says a short prayer. Gu Qing laughs, and is rebuked. Gu Qing asks the father if he can sing. He answers that he only feels like singing when he is happy or sad. Gu Qing asks how people can learn all the



*Gu Qing with Cuiqiao's Family*

local songs. The father replies: "When you have had a hard life it's easy to remember and understand." Gu Qing explains that folksongs help to raise the soldiers' morale. He also explains that in the Eighth Route Army, all soldiers are taught to read and write, including women.

Later that day, Hanhan sings for Gu Qing:

When the pomegranate flowers, the leaves start showing,  
My mother sold me off to him, without me knowing.

All I ever asked for, was a good man to wed,  
But what I ended up with was a little wetabed.\*

\* A child bridegroom.

When you pee, I'll also pee,  
Curse you, you can pee with me.

In spring next year, when flowers blossom red,  
Frogs will start croaking, under the bed.

Right to the East Ocean, flows a river of pee,  
To the Dragon King's palace, under the sea.

The Dragon King laughs, as he hears the pee:  
"This little wetabed's in the same line as me."\*\*\*

\*\* The Dragon King produces rain.



*Hanhan Singing for Gu Qing*

In turn Gu Qing teaches him a Communist ditty.

Cuiqiao returns home to find the matchmaker has come to settle her betrothal. Her father tells her that she is to be married in the fourth month, and she'll be better off than her sister: her husband is older, and therefore more dependable. He explains that the bride-price he gets will pay for a wife for her brother. Cuiqiao doesn't want to let Gu Qing know what has happened. She asks him how far it is to Yan'an, the headquarters of the Eighth Route Army, and how women soldiers there live. Gu Qing tells her that he will be going away the next day but will return in a few months. He leaves some money to cover the cost of his food and for her to buy new clothes.

Cuiqiao's father is concerned that Gu Qing might get into trouble if he fails to collect enough folk songs, so that night he sings for him.

The next morning Hanhan accompanies Gu Qing as far as the ridge. Further along the way, Cuiqiao is waiting for him. She wants to go with him to join the army, but he replies that he must first get permission. He promises to come back to fetch her.

Time passes; it is the fourth month, and the marriage procession arrives to take Cuiqiao to her new home. On her wedding night, she shrinks from her new husband.

Yan'an; Gu Qing arrives back to see a peasants' send-off to new recruits. The recruits perform a waist-drum dance.

Back in the village, it is now Hanhan's task to fetch the water. One evening he sees Cuiqiao by the river bank. She tells him she is going to cross the Yellow River to join the army, and bids him to take care of his father. She hands him a pair of hand-sewn shoe soles to give to Gu Qing on his return. He gives her the sewing kit with a red star on it that Gu Qing had given him.

Cuiqiao rows the small boat into the turbulent Yellow River. The next morning her body is found washed up on the opposite shore.

Gu Qing arrives back at Cuiqiao's old home. Finding no one there he goes down to the village. The peasants, led by Cuiqiao's father, are praying for rain:

Over the fields let the good rains fall,  
Oh Dragon King, come save us all!  
Come save us all!

East Sea Dragon, let the crops grow tall,  
Oh Dragon King, come save us all!  
Come save us all!

Hanhan sees Gu Qing, and runs towards him, but Gu Qing is too far away. The film ends with the sound of Cuiqiao singing as the camera focusses on the yellow earth.

—Bonnie McDougall

## The Debate

We wanted to express a number of things in "Yellow Earth": the boundless magnificence of the heavens; the supporting vastness of the earth. The racing flow of the Yellow River; the sustaining strength and endurance of a nation. The cry of a people from the depths of primitive obscurity, and their strength; the resonant paean that issues forth from the impoverished yellow land. The fate of a people, their feelings, loves and hates, strengths and weaknesses. The longing those people have for a brighter future, a quest hampered by ignorance but rewarded by an earthy goodness. In fact, the actual physical objects we could film were extremely limited: there was the earth, cave-dwellings, the Yellow River itself and the four characters. We wanted to use our "limited artistic tools to paint a vast canvas of life; to use our 'inks' to paint a world of resounding power."

—Zhang Yimou, cinematographer

... in terms of cinematic structure, I want our film to be rich and variable, free to the point of wildness; its ideas should be expressed with great ease, without any limitations or restrictions. However, most of the actual contours of the film must be mild, calm and slow . . . . The quintessence of our style can be summed up in a single word: "concealment".

—Chen Kaige, director, addressing his film crew

If the trickling streams of the upper reaches of the Yellow River can be said to represent the youth of the river, and the thunderous surge of its lower reaches its old age, then Northern Shaanxi sees the river in its prime. For here it is broad, deep and unhurried. It makes its stately progress through the hinterland of Asia, its free spirit and serene depths somehow symbolic of the Chinese people—full of strength, but flowing on so deeply, so ponderously. By its banks an unbounded expanse of hills rises up, land which has not seen rain for many years. The Yellow River flows through here in vain, unable to succour the vast barren wastes which have made way for its passage. This sight impressed on us the desolation of several thousand years of history . . . .

. . . In a more sombre mood if we meditate on the fact that this river gives life to all things, but by the same token can destroy all things, then we realise that the fate of Cuiqiao, who lived among the people of old China, had an inevitably tragic cast. The road she chooses is a very hard one. Hard, because she is not simply confronted by the malign forces of society in any narrow sense, but rather by the tranquil, even well-meaning, ignorance of the people who raised her . . . .

—Chen Kaige

The loess plains of Shaanxi are the birthplace of the Chinese people. It is an old liberated area, but even today it is poor and backward . . . . The question is how should we regard such a place? The most important thing is to change the environment, or as the Party Centre has directed “to plant grass and trees” . . . . [In the case of cinema] it is a question of how to get people to see the problem of the loess plains in the proper way. Should the audience come out of the film thinking that Shaanxi is a dreadful place, or should they go away feeling that it deserves their affection?

We're not scared of telling the truth; we're not afraid of revealing the obtuseness and backwardness of that region in the past. But this is not our aim. By revealing these things we are calling on our people to wipe out this ignorance and overcome their backwardness. We do not approve of artists revelling in such things simply for the sake of it. Needless to say, we thoroughly disapprove of an attitude that delights in the ignorance and backwardness of the masses.

Via Yan critic and doyen of Chinese film

All I have to say is that the cinematographic achievements of the film are divorced from its content.

—Ling Zifeng, veteran director

I don't think this is such a faultless film. [The film-makers] have ignored the fact that our audiences, especially people in the countryside, cannot possibly cope with a film like this . . . . They've paid a great deal of attention to the composition of a lot of the shots and visually the result is stunning. But what happens in these scenes has absolutely nothing to do with the inner working or actions of their characters. All in all, it's a bit like a foreign art film. There are a lot of shots in which the camera simply doesn't move, and the characters remain immobile and silent for long periods. You can't really tell what they're supposed to be thinking.

—Yu Yanfu, director



A Scene in Cuiqiao's Cave Home. One of the many quiet and brooding scenes that baffled older critics.





*Cuiqiao Working Outside Her Home*

This film brings to mind the Italian director Antonioni's documentary "China". I'm not going to get involved here with the question of whether the criticisms made of him in the past were justified or not; let me simply say that his film depicted the backwardness of China: women with bound feet, spitting, as well as the insular ignorance of many people. All Antonioni did was present an objective account of the realities of China. He didn't attempt to show China as it should be, and his work revealed no desire or ability to change the realities which confronted him. In comparison it is obvious that "Yellow Earth" is not an objective, dispassionate study of the ignorance and backwardness of its subject. Nor does it take an indulgent stand in regard to these things. Rather it assumes a serious and historical perspective with the aim of awakening people to these realities.

—Deng Baochen, science documentary film-maker.

And that boy seems to be too much of a simpleton. He's always standing around and doesn't say a word for ages. This is completely unrealistic. Everyone knows that the universal characteristic of children is that they are energetic and lovable, regardless of whether they are from rich or poor families. The doltishness of the boy in the film is clearly something imposed on him by the director.

—Han Shangyi, veteran art director



*Cuiqiao's Father*

*Hanhan*

The peasant who sings the folk songs in the film is very ugly. Why did they have to go and choose such an actor? The duty of film is to reflect life as realistically as possible, and to retain its true face. But we must not encourage naturalism, nor let our film-makers waste their energies by indulging in voyeurism and the depiction of the remnants of the primitive past . . . Generally speaking, innovation inevitably involves exploration, and when exploring we must be prepared for both success and failure.

—*Chen Huangmei, critic and cultural bureaucrat*

I think we should encourage the innovations of the young, but surely we should actively discourage “creative endeavours” that no one wants to see.

—*Han Shangyi*

It may not do very well at the box-office, but I can assure you that the classmates of these film-makers would give them a comradely slap on the back and say, “You’ve got a winner there.” “Yellow Earth” has shown me what our young film artists are capable of. This group of young creators have poured their heart’s blood into this film. It sparkles with warmth and enthusiasm, and it reflects their historical sense and aesthetic view. They have thought deeply and seriously about society and life; and even if their feelings are vague and obtuse at times, they have gone far beyond the social analyses and statistics of our philosophers and sociologists.

Let me put a question to all of you: why hasn’t the Peking Film Studio which is situated at the “very feet of the emperor”, or Shanghai Film Studio, a studio strategically located in the commercial and cultural centre of China, or any of the other “senior” film studios for that matter, produced a few good films by young directors? Just how many films made by young people have you made to date? Surely, it is within this context that we are forced to recognize the impact and power of “Yellow Earth”. I am convinced that the next generation of film-makers will leave us all far behind. But what worries me is that the, conservative stodginess of our veteran film-makers is making the young despise them.

—*Huang Zongying, writer, film producer  
and actor Zhao Dan’s widow*

All right, if the director likes the peasants as much as you say, then how come he never gave a thought to making a film they really want to see? I’ll go out on a limb here by saying that I don’t think the broad masses of peasants would necessarily like such a film . . . they like light comedies, war films, *kungfu* movies and historical

dramas . . . but they can't accept what some experts call "new cinema" . . . . What are you supposed to do if you've got a mass art form that the masses don't understand? How can the making of such films be an expression of your love for the peasants? Why do you have to give them something they don't understand?

—Yu Min, screen-writer



*One of the old peasant's many pregnant silences*

Our films are made for hundreds of millions of people to see, and it is for this reason that cinematic innovation must conform with what the masses can accept and enjoy . . . . If we let things go, there will be an unconscious drift towards "art for art's sake" and "innovation for the sake of innovation", as well as other types of artistic self-expression.

—Xia Yan

. . . [Surely,] there is a spark that sets light to the young girl's [Cuiqiao] heart, but as for the broad masses—those countless people kneeling on the ground praying for rain—they haven't seen the faintest glimmer of that spark . . . . I simply fail to understand how people so close to Yan'an could remain completely untouched by the new spirit that came from Yan'an . . . .

—Xia Yan

Why can't you tolerate such things in a film? Let me tell you something: it's our own children who can no longer tolerate the unchanging realities of China, the stagnant productive forces of the peasants as well as the dead film language we use. They have the courage to break all the rules and they have rubbed you oldies up the wrong way. But the future is on their side.

—Huang Zongying



*Drum Dance at Yan'an*



*Praying for Rain*

Chen Kaige: These two scenes [the drum dance and the rain dance] were the result of very careful thought and planning . . . The Chinese people can throw themselves enthusiastically into a lively drum dance, or equally give themselves over heart and soul to a blind and superstitious prayer for rain. This is symbolic of the two sides of the Chinese national character.

Reporter: Some comrades are of the opinion that the prayer for rain scene exaggerates the ignorance of the people. One even hears the comment that this sequence is somewhat voyeuristic in tone. What do you think of such comments?

Chen: Praying for rain is one of the most ancient rituals of our people, and it survives even today . . . People often begin praying for rain just as it is about to start raining. Thus it is not simply an expression of superstitious ignorance, for there is also an element of enjoyment in the dance. Our aim in filming this scene was not at all "voyeuristic", or calculated to show up the ignorance of the peasants, but rather to express the formidable energy and force of the peasants—although that energy is still blind and undirected, as long as it exists it has great potential if properly tapped and directed.

—Chen Kaige

On the scales of artistic criticism "Yellow Earth" is a hefty weight; and regardless of whether it achieves official recognition, it is a milestone in the development of youth cinema, and its place in the annals of Chinese film is assured.

—Huang Zongying



*Cuiqiao's last meeting with her brother by the Yellow River*

"Yellow Earth" is an outstanding work. If nothing else it is a controversial film. Its appearance means that we can no longer simply sit back and take things easy. After today's discussion everyone is going to have a hard time getting to sleep . . . It has made us all reflect on many things, most of all on the future of Chinese cinema.

—Zhu Xijuan, actress and producer