

Asian Alchemy

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The road home (Wo de fun qin mu qin, 1999), from Zhang Yimou

In 1982 Marco Muller organised a major retrospective of cinema from the People's Republic of China since the twenties in Turin. In that context Xie Jin's films seemed the most interesting and innovative. However, three years later the Hong Kong Festival programmed Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, which marked a break with all previous production. *Yellow Earth* was the standard-bearer of the cinema of the so-called *fifth* generation of Chinese film-makers: they were Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige himself.

Since the early eighties the "three Chinas" had undergone transformations of all kinds. In Hong Kong the new wave of Ann Hui, Tsui Hark and Patrick Tam had given way to the choreographic Baroque of John Woo and the unusual films of Wong Kar-wai. Taiwan had spawned a new generation of film-makers such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-liang, who had an enthusiastic reception from European critics. And in mainland China the academicism of the fifth generation had been disputed by the films of Jia Zhangke or Zhang Yuan, with urban concerns and a more documentary tone.

Recently Zhang Yimou has made two films, *The Road Home* and *Not One Less (Yi ge dou bu neng shuo, 1999)*. His idea was to react against the Americanisation of the more commercial Chinese cinema and the academicism of his own last films. He was also trying to rescue the imaginary of mainland China from the cinema of Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yuan, who portray the Beijing that emerged from the Tian'anmen massacre. In *Not One Less* he took the films of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami as a model. *The Road Home* adapts a desire for simplicity to the Chinese tradition of the poetic story.

In *The Road Home* Luo Changyu (Hao Zheng) finds out about the death of his father and travels from the city to his home village. Zhao Di (Yuelin Zhao), his old mother, wants to have a funeral with a large and expensive procession. Changyu refuses, but

the three days he spends with her overcome his resistance. Moreover they revive the memory of an almost legendary story, the love that bloomed between the young Zhao Di (Ziyi Zhang) and the late Luo Yusheng, then a young schoolteacher who has come from the city and disagrees with the reigning political ideas.

Both the prologue and the epilogue of the film are shot in an opaque, cold black and white. Almost at the end, before the long procession, the voices of mother and son conjure up the father's devotion to his task as teacher, whilst a sustained shot of the old school blackboard takes on the rank of an abstract, stripped, empty landscape. As in Taoist painting or *The Book of Changes (I Ching)*, emptiness is the condition for transformation, mutation, the activity that springs from the tension between opposites. Past and present, the opinions of mother and son are the extremes that in this case are resolved in the denouement that provides the procession, the road home.

The poetics that inspire the love story between the two young people are apparently something else, the poetics of sensibility and a range of colours which is gradually reduced to a red stain on white. Nevertheless the guidelines of the story are also transformation and the reconciliation of opposites. The bright shades of spring pervade Zhao Di and Yusheng's first meetings. Autumn falls on the village when Yusheng is forced to return to the city, and the hues dissolve into ochres, browns and whites. Zhao Di goes out to await his return on the set date, braving the winter storms and wrapped up in her best coat, hardly a crimson trace on the unending white of the steppe.

The colour red, symbol of happiness in Chinese folklore, is one of the centrepieces of Zhang Yimou's cinematography, from *Red Sorghum (Hong gao liang, 1987)* to *Keep Cool (You hua hao hao shuo, 1997)*. In *Raise the Red Lantern (Da hong deng long gao gao gua, 1991)* it is associated with duty, prohibition and the sensual world of the concubines. In almost all civilisations red is the colour of war and passion, fire and blood. In the Bible Ezekiel speaks of the sisters Ohola and Oholiba who committed impure acts with the Chaldean warriors, painted red. Red is the background for the paintings in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii and the most precious cloths reserved for the hierarchs were purple.

But red is also the colour of Ulysses' oars, the armour that takes Parsifal on a search for divine grace and the trace of the little bird wounded by Lancelot's dart on the snow. Like that bird, Zhao Di falls ill and like Parsifal she sets off on the final quest, for Yusheng. It is the cinnabar red that makes the transformation possible. In the language of alchemy matter suffers until the shadow, the *nigredo*, disappears. That state is followed by the new day, *leukosis*, *albedo*. But that state of absolute whiteness is ideal, abstract and does not make true life possible. To enliven it blood is necessary, Zhao Di's body beaten down by the snow.

That blood, red, corresponds to *rubedo*, Life. The incorporation of blood allows the definitive conciliation of the opposites, so that the soul is integrated and the work is done, the *opus magnum* of alchemy. That description of the alchemical process with

Western terms is not just a metaphor to explain the relation between the red and white in Yimou's film; alchemy is of crucial importance in Chinese thought (1), which identifies two essential elements, *yin* —the female principle— and *yang* —the male—, which are to be found in all substances and beings.

The practice of alchemy in Chinese tradition is far from any wish to become wealthy with gold. Nor is it a mythological or pre-logical phase of chemistry. On the contrary, it is much closer to the Taoist principle of integration. And that is the process which, in this case, reconciles the lovers and the opposition between past and present, which corresponds to the abstraction of the blackboard. The old mother Zhao Di, in whom all contradictions have been eliminated, is also the one who brings about the change in Luo Changyu.

The difference between the two times, past and present, which eventually resolve their opposition, is at the beginning of totality. The story of the present is elliptical, discursive. The story of Yusheng and Zhao Di's past, on the other hand, is a mythical story, without incidents or identifications, which conveys the impression of the original "Once upon a time", of having been told a thousand and one times by the fireside. That is why we can tolerate and even admire resources in *The Road Home* which, in another context, would be despised: Bao Shan's pounding music, the revelling in the beauty of the actress Ziyi Zhang or the lack of participation by the audience which heightens the immediacy of the tale.

With this film and *Not One Less*, whose plot line recalls Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home?* (Khaneh-ye doust kodjast?, 1987), it seems we can say that Zhang Yimou has managed to portray popular rural tradition in mainland China. The question, as many French critics have pointed out, is still whether we can add Zhang Yimou to that group of directors who have constructed an imaginary of their places of origin: Nanni Moretti of Rome, Aki Kaurismäki of Finland or Hou Hsiao-hsien and Wong Kar-wai of Taiwan and Hong Kong respectively. The only thing we can be sure of is that in *The Road Home* the poetry of transformation, of red on white, of the eternal wounds of love and time, imposes itself on the present imaginary of the Republic of China.

Notes:

(1) In *Alquimia asiática* (Paidós, Barcelona, 1992) Mircea Eliade points out that the first Chinese alchemical text is found in Han Shu XXV, 12 recto, line 8. She also mentions one of the most important books in the Chinese alchemical tradition, *Ts'an T'ung-ch'i* by Wei Po-yang.

