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21H.560 Smashing the Iron Rice Bowl

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### Chinese Cinema in the 1980s and 1990s

Chinese history, particularly after the fall of the Qing dynasty, has been wrought with turmoil and instability, especially in the structure of the government. The Qing dynasty was overthrown in 1911 and the Nationalists took over under the leadership of Yuan Shikai, who was named president. Eventually he made the mistake of declaring himself emperor, which made him wildly unpopular among the general population. Following his death in 1916 was the “warlord period.” China was basically divided into separate regions with individual leaders or “warlords.” No one was really able to unify the country until 1926, when Chiang Kai-shek formed the National Revolutionary Army to fight against the warlords. However, the fighting wasn’t over after the defeat of the warlords; the Communist party was formed in 1921, and in 1927, Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists began their crack down on the opposition party. With the exception of a few years spanning World War II (the two parties formed a united front against Japan), the two parties constantly fought each other up until 1949, when the Communists took over China and Chiang Kai-Shek was forced to flee to Taiwan. Even after the Communist takeover, when things looked like they were going to stabilize, indecisiveness and paranoia (mostly of rebellion

among the people) within party leadership led to several failed campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. With the entire country as “drama-ridden” as it was, it is only natural to see that drama reflected in Chinese cinema. The two films, *Yellow Earth* and *To Live*, both reflect life in twentieth century China, but in very different ways; *Yellow Earth*, being a product of the so-called “Fifth Generation Film” era of the 1980s, leans more toward the non-dramatic side, whereas *To Live* errs on the dramatic, though not so overly dramatic as to stray from reality.

*Yellow Earth* takes place in the early spring of 1939 in a small village in the northern part of the Shaanxi province. It opens with the wedding of a young girl to a middle-aged man. During the wedding feast, a Communist soldier, Gu Qing arrives from Yan’an. He has been sent to the village to collect folk songs, which he will bring back to the Eighth Route Army to sing as they travel. He requests to be housed with a poor family, so he stays with a family (comprised of a father, Cuiqiao, the thirteen year-old daughter, and Hanhan, the younger son) in their cave home. Cuiqiao walks three miles everyday to fetch water from the Yellow River (Huang He). Throughout the film, Gu Qing helps the family with household chores as he tries to gather songs. But his search seems so futile because all of the songs that are sung seem so bitter. When asked about this, the father responds that there is no point in singing. People only sing if they’re really happy or bitter, and it’s usually because of the latter.

Gu Qing also develops friendships with both Cuiqiao and Hanhan. He explains to Cuiqiao that in the south, women are starting to choose their own spouses. They're also allowed to join the Communist party. Cuiqiao's father scoffs at this, saying that if girls were allowed to choose their own partners, then that must mean they are worthless. He believes in arranged marriages. His elder daughter is married, but she suffers; she is starving and her husband beats her. The father knows this, but he won't allow her to come back because she can't "go back on her word." The father says that, "Marriage for a man is happiness. Marriage for a woman is sadness." Even though he believes this, he still holds onto tradition and even arranges a marriage for Cuiqiao. When the betrothal is finalized, Cuiqiao goes to Gu Qing and asks him to take her with him back to Yan'an; she wants to join the army. Gu Qing refuses, stating that one of the conditions of army membership is that you have to apply first. He promises to apply for Cuiqiao, and to come back in the spring to get her.

In the meantime, Cuiqiao's father pushes for the marriage to take place, and in early spring another wedding occurs. Sometime after the wedding, Gu Qing still has not returned; Cuiqiao can no longer wait for him. She decides to go to Yan'an herself and try to find Gu Qing. As she is crossing Huang He, she sings a song of being free and suddenly her singing is interrupted and she disappears. One can only assume that she drowns.

The closing scene of the film shows the village in a drought. Huang He is completely dried up and all of the male villagers pray to the Dragon God for rain. Gu Qing finally returns, but the only person to notice is Hanhan.

This film took place in 1939, shortly after the Communists and Nationalists agreed to form a unified front against the Japanese. The Nationalists consolidated their army towards the south in Chongqing while the Communists settled farther north in Yan'an.<sup>1</sup> The Red Army was renamed the Eighth Route Army and nominally under the command of the Nationalists, per their agreement. During the period from 1937 to 1940, the CCP saw an increase in their membership from 40,000 to around 800,000 people.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese cinema tends to fall under the category of “melodrama.” Melodrama is a “representation of historical victimization as a social catastrophe [that is] registered by narrativizing the subjective and ethical aspect of the drama within an economic interpretation of class relations and by viewing the story’s individual protagonist as an overdetermined ideological figure.”<sup>3</sup> The story is always highlighted by a so-called “fate of suffering” and an ultimate acceptance by the protagonist of the oppressive social order he must endure.<sup>4</sup> In more contemporary cinema, the melodrama focuses on sexual difference, in particular, feminine sexuality and its constrictions in society.<sup>5</sup> A third type of melodrama described by Browne is Chinese political melodrama. In this genre, the political process is portrayed through a trial that takes over the theme of the film. In the contemporary period, the political perspective is also contrasted with

an ethical one.<sup>6</sup> This usually then leads to a “definition of the self and of the relation of the individual to [society].”<sup>7</sup>

Although the film was set during World War II when the Red Army was based in Yan’an, its main focus was around a small farm village that was located near the Yellow River. The melodrama was hardly political with the exception of the irony of the soldier’s presence. He fails to bring any change, be it material or ideological to the village. In the end, they still rely more heavily on superstition and praying to the gods for help than themselves.<sup>8</sup> But even this irony is balanced out by the portrayal of the soldiers in Yan’an. Gu Qing returns to Yan’an to see liberated peasants dancing and singing optimistic war songs. Furthermore, Cuiqiao and Hanhan were very receptive and positive about the revolution when Gu Qing told them about it. The film as a whole carried very few political messages. The Chinese government found nothing so politically offensive in the film that gave it grounds for banning.<sup>9</sup>

If there was any melodrama at all, it would probably be of the gender differences variety. The protagonist, Cuiqiao struggles with dealing with an arranged marriage in a time when, if she had lived in a different part of the country, she could have had the freedom to choose her own husband. But even that plot is subdued and emotionless. The whole film is lacking in dialogue. Most messages are conveyed through the folk songs that Cuiqiao sings. Two opportune moments for the aspects of a typical Chinese melodrama to emerge would have been the scene where Cuiqiao is forced to marry, and when she

attempts to cross the Yellow River in her little boat.<sup>10</sup> In the wedding scene, all that is seen of her husband is a dark hand extending from off-screen to take off her veil. The only significant indication of emotion is Cuiqiao's heavy frightened breathing. In the second scene, Cuiqiao's drowning is shown through the sudden interruption of her singing by silence, and empty shots of the river. Her death seemed almost ambiguous.

*Yellow Earth* is considered a "Fifth Generation" film. It was directed by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who were fresh out of Beijing Film Academy. They were among the first class to graduate "post-Cultural Revolution." The reason why the term "Fifth Generation" was even coined was that the films produced by these filmmakers were considerably different from the typical Chinese films of the previous generation. The topics of these films weren't "officially sanctioned" or ubiquitous throughout mass media. Moreover, the cinematography changed completely. "Darkness and asymmetry replaced centeredness and full lighting."<sup>11</sup> In *Yellow Earth*, there are a lot of night time scenes with dim lighting. Inside Cuiqiao's home, the only things used for lighting were a couple of oil lamps.

The makers of *Yellow Earth* were probably some of the first Chinese filmmakers to see cinema solely as art, rather than falling second to literature, like their predecessors.<sup>12</sup> Having graduated from film school after the Cultural Revolution, they were exposed to international cinema as well. The visual style of the film looks international, but still maintains its Chinese roots, though it definitely steers away from the drama of previous Chinese films, which tended to

be fast-paced in an effort to fend off criticism that Chinese film lacked excitement.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the landscape shots are reminiscent of Chinese painting. The majority of the screen is filled with landscape: earth, mountain, and rock. The sky fills only the top one-fifth of the screen or so. The landscape dwarfs human figures throughout most of the film. Much of the cinematography consists of a series of static landscape shots. Overall, *Yellow Earth* is not overly dramatic. In fact, it is more “undramatic” with the lack of activity and dialogue. Though it does convey some points related to social issues in China, it doesn’t use traditional means.

*To Live*, though made in 1994, 10 years after *Yellow Earth* was released, seems to fit the more traditional mold of Chinese cinema. The film focuses on a Chinese family and takes viewers through their lives over a span of three decades, the 1940s through the 1960s. It opens in a Chinese village in the 1940s. The protagonist, Xu Fugui loses his family’s home to a man named Long’er because of his gambling addiction. His father has a heart attack and dies upon hearing this, and his pregnant wife, Jiazhen, leaves him and takes their daughter with them. Fugui is left alone to start his life over and take care of his sick mother. Within the first ten minutes, the film is already filled with drama. Fugui moves out of his home and becomes a street peddler. Upon hearing that her husband had changed, Jiazhen returns to make their family whole again. Fugui forms a puppet troupe and travels the country performing puppet shows to

make a living. The puppets he uses are present throughout most of the movie, almost as a symbol of all the hardships the family endures.

The film starts out during the 1940s, probably just after the end of World War II, when the Communists and Nationalists resume fighting against each other. It takes viewers through the Great Leap Forward and ends in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. This film is very obviously a political film because it focuses on these campaigns.

One night while Fugui is performing a puppet show, he is interrupted by some Nationalist soldiers and recruited as a soldier. He served for a few months with the KMT, but one day his entire army base is abandoned. He is captured by Communists and serves in the Red Army for a few months by entertaining the soldiers with his puppet shows. This abandonment by the KMT was typical during this period. The CCP had gradually been gaining power since the beginning of World War II, and leadership within the KMT was weak. Having once been the dominant party, they weren't used to being the hunted instead of the hunters, and therefore became more likely to run away from confrontation rather than face it.

Fugui returns home to find the entire village has transformed into a Communist town; the Communists have defeated the KMT. Long'er is about to be put on trial for being a landlord. Fugui realizes that if he hadn't lost his property to Long'er, he would have been the one put on trial. The village leader that breaks this news to Fugui tells him that Long'er burned down the house because

he wouldn't turn it over to the government. He told Fugui that his family's house burned for so long, and said the wood must have been very good quality. But Fugui immediately turned around and said that it wasn't his wood, it was "counter-revolutionary" wood. People were very careful about what they said; they didn't want to get on the CCP's bad side or ear-marked as counter-revolutionary. In the early 50s, the CCP started a campaign to "suppress counterrevolutionaries", or people who were supporters of the KMT or had any sympathy for them.<sup>14</sup> Jung Chang describes in *Wild Swans* the execution of a KMT officer, Hui-ge, whom her grandmother was fond of and had hoped would marry her mother. Chang's grandmother went by herself to the execution ground to collect his body only to be denounced by her own sister-in-law for being a counterrevolutionary.<sup>15</sup> As a result, her grandmother had to attend a meeting where her neighbors attempted to help her understand her "faults." Later, Chang's mother also came under investigation for having KMT ties in the past.

The film fast forwards into the 1950s, during the beginning of the Great Leap Forward. One of the most memorable markers of this campaign was the "backyard steel" production. Mao proclaimed that they would surpass England and catch up to the United States in industrialization within the next 10 years. In order to achieve this, he appealed to the small towns and villages to contribute their share by melting any scrap metal into steel. All villages had a quota they had to meet. In *To Live*, the village leader goes to Fugui's house to collect his

contribution of scrap metal. After the start of the Great Leap Forward, people had to give up their cooking wares for the steel-producing cause because they no longer needed them. All of the cooking and eating was done for the entire village in the canteens.

The village leader even tries to take the pins that hold together Fugui's puppets, saying that it would be enough to make two bullets. Fugui pleads with him to spare the puppets. He says he can use them to perform revolutionary shows for the village to boost morale, and the leader agrees. Making steel seems to occupy everyone's time. Furnaces are constantly burning to melt what little scrap metal is collected to make sure quota is met.

Chang was six years old when the Great Leap Forward started. She talks about how everyday while she walked to school, she and her classmates would scour the pathway for any metal objects that could be melted down. The schools had installed large vats on the giant stoves in the kitchen. The stoves were constantly lit, melting down all the metal that the children collected. Teachers would take turns feeding firewood to the stoves and stirring the vats until the metal melted down.<sup>16</sup> The teachers were so busy with the vats that there was hardly any time to give lessons. The backyard steel industry even went so far as to have furnaces outside hospitals. Doctors and nurses had to constantly feed the furnaces, even in the middle of operations and through the night. Chang rarely saw her parents because they had furnaces in their offices and they had to make sure the temperature was always high enough to melt metal.<sup>17</sup>

Tragedy struck during this part of *To Live*. Like Jung Chang, Fugui's son, Youqing had to go to his school to help make steel with his schoolmates. Even though he hasn't had a good night's rest in several days, Fugui forces him to go, because he doesn't want to look counterrevolutionary, especially since the district leader was coming to judge the village's progress. Youqing falls asleep behind a wall and when the district leader arrives, he accidentally backs his jeep into the wall, knocking it over and killing Youqing.

In the 1960s, Fugui's daughter, Fengxia has reached the age where she should be getting married. The village leader helps the family by introducing them to a comrade who also has a handicap (Fengxia has been mute since childhood). This man has a bad leg, but he is still able to walk on it and "run when he has to." The two get married and Fengxia leaves home. During the Cultural Revolution, it became common practice for marriages to be arranged by "the Revolution." Women would join the party, thinking that they would be playing a major role, only to be married off to officers who were looking for "good Communist wives." In the book, *The Good Women of China*, Xin Ran tells the story of a woman who left home to join the Communist Party because she wanted to make a difference, and be written about in history books. On the day of this woman's 18th birthday, she was approached by some Communist officials and given a "mission," which she readily accepted. Little did she know, her mission was to marry a Communist officer. She was written about in books, but only mentioned as a wife.<sup>18</sup> This happened frequently. Many Communist officers

had been married before they joined the party, but had to leave their families to serve the Party. During this time, situations were unstable, and the officers didn't know if they would ever see their wives again, so they would remarry members of the Party, even if their wives at home were still alive.

Fengxia's situation was not as bleak. She and her husband grew fond of each other and had a happy marriage. Eventually, Fengxia became pregnant. When her pregnancy came to term, she was able to deliver the baby, but she suffered from excessive bleeding and died from the loss of blood. The hospital had no doctors because they had all been labeled as intellectuals. During the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals were seen as elite and were persecuted and sent to the countryside because of that. The only "doctors" in the hospitals were students in their twenties who had little or no medical experience.

During the Cultural Revolution, the term, "capitalist-roader" was coined. A capitalist-roader was anyone who held any position of power. Mao felt threatened by these people because they had the power to disagree with him if they wanted to. In *To Live* the village leader was accused of being a capitalist-roader, but he had put so much work into making sure the idea of communism thrived. A lot of people who had devoted their lives to the Party and worked hard to gain their positions were turned on and deemed capitalist-roaders. Chang describes this as well. The deputy headmaster of her school, Mr. Kan was accused of being a capitalist-roader. Everything he had done for the school was

considered “capitalist.” Mr. Kan had been devoted to the Party, so as a result he felt he had been wronged and he committed suicide.<sup>19</sup>

At times *To Live* does seem overly dramatic because it is hard to believe that so many terrible tragedies could happen to one single family. However, the film stays true to the history. It is likely that if the events portrayed in the film didn't happen to one family, they probably happened to another. Everyone had to produce steel; everyone lived through the Cultural Revolution and suffered through the effects of losing the “intellectuals” to the countryside. The film emphasizes Mao's large campaigns, and the events that affect the majority of the Chinese population. The film succeeds in sending a message: that during this period in China people suffered, and though they tried to remain optimistic, believing that all the suffering they went through would make up for itself in the long run, it became hard to have faith in the Party.

*To Live* and *Yellow Earth* are two very different films, both in subject and in message. One employs drama to send across a political message, while the other attempts to use cinema as art without being overly concerned with conveying a specific message. *Yellow Earth* is not so much a political story but a story of gender differences in traditional Chinese society. *To Live* serves up a dose of reality; it makes people more aware of what went on in China after the Communist take over and shows that not everything was the utopia that people had envisioned.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990) 460.

<sup>2</sup> Spence, 461.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Browne, "Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama," New Chinese Cinemas, ed. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, Esther Yau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 40.

<sup>4</sup> Browne, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Browne, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Esther Yau, "*Yellow Earth*: Western Analysis and a Non-Western Text," Perspectives on Chinese Cinema, ed. Chris Berry (London: BFI Publishing, 1991) 64.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Berry, "Market Forces: China's 'Fifth Generation' Faces the Bottom Line." Perspectives on Chinese Cinema, ed. Chris Berry (London: BFI Publishing, 1991) 116.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Clark, Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 179.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, 180.

<sup>14</sup> Jung Chang, Wild Swans (New York: Anchor Books, 1991) 173.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Chang, 220.

<sup>17</sup> Chang, 221.

<sup>18</sup> Xin Ran, The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices (New York: Anchor Books, 2002) 117.

<sup>19</sup> Chang, 280.