Perspectives in Flux

Red Sorghum and Ju Dou's Reception as a Reflection of the Times

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Abstract

With historical and critical approach, this thesis examined how the general Chinese reception of director Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* is reflective of the social conditions at the time of these films’ release. Both films hold very similar diegeses and as such, each generated similar forms of filmic interpretation within the academic world. Film scholars such as Rey Chow and Sheldon Lu have critiqued these films as especially critical of female marginalization and the Oedipus complex present within Chinese society. Additionally, the national allegorical framing of both films, a common pattern within Chinese literary and filmic traditions, has thoroughly been explored within the Chinese film discipline. Furthermore, both films have been subjected to accusations of Self-Orientalization and Occidentalism. The similarity between both films is undeniable and therefore comparable in reference to the social conditions present in China and the changing structures within the Chinese film industry during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are analogous, each received almost opposite reception from the general Chinese public. China's social and economic reform, film censorship, as well as the government’s intervention and regulation of the Chinese film industry had a heavy impact upon each film’s reception. Equally important is the incidence of specific events such as the implementation of the Open Door policy in the 1980s and 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. The films themselves did not prompt their reception, however the conditions of their released times did strongly determine their receptions.
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Introduction

Contemporary Chinese Cinema – Earliest Films of Zhang Yimou

The ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1977 signaled the birth of a pseudo-Renaissance in China. After 1978, Deng Xiaoping’s reforms gradually relaxed governmental thought-control measures; this shift in political direction proved conducive to artistic development after 1978 up to the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. These changes had a heavy impact on the development of the Chinese film industry. This loosening period gave birth to China’s most acclaimed group of filmmakers, the Fifth Generation.\(^1\) It can be said that this group was destined to be great not only in the Chinese film world, but also in the international film scene. When Deng Xiaoping’s open-door policy came into full effect in 1984 and 1985, this young group of filmmakers experienced previously unheard of exposure to Western film theories and cinema. At the same time, their shared backgrounds also profoundly contributed to their film success; during the Cultural Revolution, many of them had been sent to labor in rural areas.

Zhang Yimou (Zhāng Yímóu 张艺谋) is considered the most prominent member of this generation of film directors. Since his debut in 1984 as *Yellow Earth*’s (*Huáng Tūdì* 黄土地) cinematographer, Zhang has remained a central figure in contemporary Chinese cinema. He was born into a family labeled traitorous by the Chinese Communist government because his father was an officer in the National Revolutionary Army under Chiang Kai-shek during the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950). Before enrolling in the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, from the age of 16 to 26 he labored in the West Xi’an countryside. Zhang’s filmography includes *Red Sorghum*

\(^1\) The term Fifth Generation refers almost exclusively to the Beijing Film Academy’s 1982 graduating class, which includes Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chen Kaige, Zhang Junzhao, etc. They are the first class to graduate from the Academy since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1977.

*Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are respectfully filmic adaptations of Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum Clan* (Hóng Gāoliang Jiāzú 红高粱家族) and Liu Heng’s *The Obsessed* (Fúxī Fúxī 伏羲伏羲). *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are both movies set in the 1920 and 1930s Chinese countryside starring Gong Li (Gǒnglì 巩俐) as the oppressed heroine. *Red Sorghum* focuses on the romance between the off-screen narrator’s grandmother Jiu’er (Jiǔ ěr 九儿) and his grandfather. Her father forces her into a marriage with the leprous owner of a sorghum wine distillery. On the way to her new husband’s home, however, she and one of the sedan chair carriers become attracted to one another. The day after the wedding, the sedan carrier accosts Jiu’er and the film alludes to their copulation in the red sorghum fields. As the movie progresses, Jiu’er and the narrator’s grandfather end up living and operating the winery together. They live in a simple world free from the depressing realities outside of the winery, i.e. the Japanese invasion. In the end, however, the Japanese enter their naïve world, resulting in the death of Jiu’er.

*Ju Dou* is a story about two doomed lovers in 1920s rural China. A young woman, Ju Dou, is purchased by and married to a cruel old man named Yang Jinshan, who desperately wants an heir. Jinshan’s nephew, Tianqing, works like a slave in his uncle’s dye factory. Ju Dou
and Tianqing fall in love and have a son named Tianbai. Jinshan believes Tianbai to be his biological son; that is, until Jinshan becomes partially paralyzed by a stroke. His handicapped state allows Ju Dou and Tianqing to expose their secret affair, which also informs Jinshan that Tianbai is not his son. He attempts to kill all three of them, but fails. He dies later on by accidently drowning in the dye vat. The years before Jinshan dies, Tianbai recognizes Jinshan as his father. As he grows up, he turns against his supposedly adulterous parents and kills Tianqing. This results in Ju Dou burning down the dye factory. The movie ends with an image of her seemingly going up in flames.

This thesis studies what kind of impact the films *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* have had on the film world and China. I argue that the differing impacts each film had on the Chinese public were prominently influenced by the intervention of governmental controls and regulations. Understanding the impact of each film will give insight into the cultural implications of each film, as well as into the inner workings of the Chinese film industry, particularly the process of censorship. Adam Yung suggests that the purpose of these films is to generate a discourse between the viewer and the film (22-23). This discourse can be divided between the academic sphere, scholars and critics, and the popular sphere, or the Chinese public. Zhang himself believes that the opinions of scholars and critics do not comprehensively represent or understand the true meanings of the films. He states, “Which kind of films are good films depends on the judgment of the mass audience” (Pan 1992). I disagree with Zhang Yimou. It is the collective response of the academics and general Chinese public that reflects the significance and impact of a film.
Film invites many foci of analysis, including character development, narration style, sound, set design, costumes, and lighting. Similarly, one may want to focus on the director’s message, plotline, historical or political implications or any one of a variety of film theories. Within the past 20 years scholarship dedicated to the interpretation Chinese cinema has significantly increased in the international film world. Parallel to this increase of scholarship, the solidification of Chinese cinemas as an academic discipline has raised one particular question seemingly unique to this field of study. Many recently published Chinese cinema books (Hu 2003; Lim 2006; Zhang 2004) all begin their introductions with the problematic definition of Chinese cinema. For example, Yingjin Zhang in his recent publication *Chinese National Cinema*, reminds his readers to “keep in mind all problematics or messiness – theoretical as well as geopolitical – surrounding ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’” (2004 5). This ubiquitous debate on the notion of ‘Chinese’ as a cultural and national identity, where outwardly absent from discussion of films made in the majority of Western countries, remains a fundamental problem in Chinese cinema studies.

While the majority of academic criticisms of *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* contend that both films are different in themes and problems explores, I argue that both films are actually very similar. I further argue that given the similarity between both films, the opposing public responses to the film are attributed to the social and political events and issues that transpired during that time. The disparate reception of *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* by the general Chinese public is significant. The narratives and themes between these two films are remarkably similar, yet each received almost diametrically opposite receptions from the general Chinese public.
According to the *Popular Cinema Journal* (大众电影), in 1988 *Red Sorghum* created an intense emotional response in China, which the press called the “Red Sorghum phenomena （红高粱现象）.” Supportive viewers mimicked the drunken sedan carriers and exited the theatres singing indecent songs. *Ju Dou*, on the other hand, received a lukewarm response from its initial audience in Hong Kong (Lau 2). Moreover, when Mainland viewers had the opportunity to view the film after the ban was lifted, the response was still less than desirable.

**Typology Of Interpretations: Red Sorghum And Ju Dou**

Ever since Zhang Yimou’s debut into the film world as director of *Red Sorghum*, international and Chinese scholars and film critics have attempted to dissect and critically examine the essence of and audience for his films. Scholars such as Chris Berry, Rey Chow, Yingjin Zhang, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, Stephen Teo, Shuqin Cui, Yuejing Wang, etc., specifically use Zhang Yimou’s films *Red Sorghum, Ju Dou, and Raise the Red Lantern*² as a focus of their Chinese cinematic discourses. The following section presents a typology of interpretations prompted by *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* followed by an analysis of filmic cues; what exactly prompts the different interpretations of both films. While presenting this typology I will argue that while there exists a vast amount of different interpretation, both films are actually quite similar in the issues presented. Finally, I will argue how state intervention and the process of censorship within the Chinese film industry affected each film’s impact upon the general Chinese public.

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² Zhang’s movie *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *Red Sorghum*, and *Ju Dou* are known unofficially as the Red Trilogy.
Gender analyses, particularly the use of the female body as a canvas for national historical allegories and female marginalization have a high profile in Chinese cinema analysis. *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are not exceptions to this tendency. Female marginalization is the most noted analysis due to the story of each film. Both movies are set in a gender-oppressive feudal China. This oppressiveness is personified in each movie by an overbearing older male character: Ju Dou’s husband Yang Jinshan and Jiu’er’s leper husband in *Red Sorghum*. The power granted to them by their class and China’s traditional patriarchal social structure allowed these men to treat these women as a subclass of humans. Women could be traded for animals and sexually abused without qualm. Furthermore, if disobedient they could be killed without question.\(^3\) The idea of women as a subaltern\(^4\) is strengthened by Zhang’s blindness to class. Songlian, the female lead in *Raise the Red Lantern*, attended university for a short time, while Jiu’er is an illiterate peasant; both still experienced tremendous suffering despite their class backgrounds. The parallels between the narratives, characters, and issues of these films are frequent and explicit; therefore, although the presentation is different, the fundamental characteristics of each film are the extremely similar.

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3 In *Raise the Red Lantern*, one of the husband’s wives is hanged for having an extramarital affair.

4 In Marxist theory the term subaltern first appears in the cultural hegemony work of Antonio Gramsci, which identifies genders or social groups who are considered to be outside of the hegemonic power structures in a society. Essentially, since these people are excluded from the structure, they have no voice in their society. After Gramsci, subaltern was picked up in the 1980s in a series of journal articles published by the Oxford University Press in India. This group of Indian scholars wanted to reclaim their history. They wanted to breakaway from elitist and Eurocentric imperial history; they focused on the class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture. Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Charkvorty Spivak are leading scholars of subaltern studies. Spivak was highly critical of current Indian histories that were told from the perspective of colonizers. Rey Chow contributes to subaltern studies by arguing “our [scholars] attempt to retrieve the native from its absence in our imperial histories can easily become a kind of co-optation or appropriation, that becomes more about our own visibility than that of the native” (“What is Subaltern?”).
The pivotal scene in *Ju Dou* (See Fig. 1 and 2), where Tianqing peeps at Ju Dou through a hole in the wall while she is bathing – an act he has done many times before – after she was beaten by her husband, is popularly used to illustrate female marginalization and rebellion to the oppressive patriarchal forces. In the instances before, Ju Dou was “either an unconscious voyeuristic object or at once aware, an unwilling victim who could do nothing more than keep patching up the hole with hay” (Ng 64). Consequently, in addition to being physically abused by her husband, she is also subjected to sexualization by the younger Tianqing. Moreover, throughout the film Tianqing takes no action to change Ju Dou’s situation. Although Tianqing has the opportunity to rid Jinshan from his and Ju Dou’s life by leaving him to die on the side of the road, Tianqing abides to the codes of filial piety. This obedience locks in Ju Dou’s fate as a sexual object and reinforces her victimization. Her status as an erotic figure by her husband and Tianqing solidified her subaltern place in the dye mill and society.

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5 Daisy Ng, Jenny Lau, Rey Chow, etc. all cite this scene to illustrate to some extent female oppression and marginalization.
Still, in contrast with the previous peeping occurrences, this time Ju Dou anticipates Tianqing’s arrival. She splashes the water to signal Tianqing that she is bathing, and keenly listens for the creak of the gate that signals his arrival before she begins to undress. Aware that Tianqing is behind the wall, she turns around and exposes her battered body to him (See Fig. 3). Jenny Lau and W.A. Callahan interpret this scene as a decisive political move in resistance to the oppressive patriarchal forces embedded in Chinese society. Ju Dou embraces her sexuality and, unafraid, she turns Tianqing into a lover, no longer a voyeur (Ng 65).

Using the scene above, scholars Rey Chow and Jenny Lau posit that women represent a symbolic duality: they represent sociocultural oppression and the sensuality of an erotic figure. This perspective is integral in understanding how the female form is used to allegorize political realities in both films. Nonetheless, it is first necessary to understand that Zhang Yimou’s interest is not inherently women’s problems. He states,

All my films come from novels. It just so happens that these novels say things through women…What I want to express is the Chinese people’s oppression and confinement, which has been going on for thousands of years. Women express
this more clearly on their bodies because they bear a heavier burden than men (Yang 2001 38).

Without a doubt, in Zhang’s perspective women are the most obvious means to depict the violence and chaos of China’s past. “They are the bearers of the barbaric nature of a patriarchal system that has outlived its time and place; their abuse is a sign of China’s backwardness; through them we come to understand the fundamental horrors about a culture” (Chow 146).

On the other hand, this negative depiction is coupled with positive progression. In Ju Dou, Ju Dou takes the initiative to pursue a relationship with Tianqing: she asserted her female sexuality despite the patriarchal restrictions chained onto her. In similar fashion to Ju Dou, Yuejin Wang asserts that Jiu’er in Red Sorghum transgresses the “conventional Chinese melodramatic pattern” of weak willed women intimidated by savage men (94). Female sexuality is placed on the forefront of the film through the bold actions of Jiu’er. Instead of cowering away from male desire, Jiu’er consistently assumes the dominant position throughout the film. In the beginning of the film when she encounters a masked kidnapper, for example, the shot reverse-shot sequence established her defiant attitude towards her kidnapper. Furthermore, the subsequent tilted angle, shot in her perspective, allows the audience to clearly see that she is examining the man’s body instead of looking away from it. Smirking and giggling towards her supposed captor, Jiu’er ascends to the position of conqueror in this situation, no longer the conquered (Wang 94). Unafraid, she steps out of the sedan and looks down toward the narrator’s grandfather, her gaze challenging him to save her. Her gaze creates another instance where Jiu’er creates an autonomous space to freely express her own sexuality. Jiu’er initiates contact with the narrator’s grandfather, transgressing Chinese moral codes on female representation of sexuality. The female is active, while the male remains passive and obedient towards her directions.
Wang also posits, as Jiu’er breaks free of her restraints and paves her own path to walk on, so should China. Essentially, the female body is a means to an end. Female marginalization is simply the point of departure into the national allegorical implications of both films. This use of women as a point of departure is unique to neither Zhang’s films nor Chinese 20th century films. Before filmmaking was introduced to China in the late 1800s, Chinese literary tradition was fairly continuous in appropriating female imagery and situations as an allegory for how the weak nation should rally. An account of traditional female appropriation can begin with the tales of Lady Cai Wenji.6 Lady Cai’s story is exemplary of the countless other stories across Chinese history that use female narratives to reassert nationalism; therefore the national allegorical critiques apportioned to Zhang’s films though useful are not unique.

Scholars such as Sheldon Lu and Shuqin Cui also appropriate political commentary through gender roles in Red Sorghum and Ju Dou. Their analyses regarding the emasculation of masculinity and female marginalization act as a national allegory of China’s international position. Likewise, Zhang’s use of Oedipalization is frequently cited as a national allegorical theme. The Oedipus complex in the relationships between fathers, mothers, and sons are fundamental for drama in Zhang’s early film works. The narrative of both Red Sorghum and Ju Dou reveal gruesome acts of patricide: “my grandpa” killed Big Head Li in Red Sorghum and nephew Tianqing contemplated killing Uncle Yang Jinshan, but in the end Tianbai killed both of

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6 Lady Cai was a well-educated only child of the famous scholar and musician Cai Yong. Northern nomads kidnapped and forced her to marry a Xiongnu chief, “an event that came to symbolize all of China in her moment of weakness: women as the weakened nation, in need of rescue”. Her story has experienced regular use during times of Chinese military inadequacy, appearing in paintings from the mid-twelfth century on as well as being reused on stage as recently as 1979 when China was not prepared to go to war with Vietnam (Silbergeld 134-35).
his “fathers” in *Ju Dou*. Lu and Cui identify incidences of patricide, physical male impotence, and castration in Zhang’s films as readings of China’s modernity being self-subalternized.⁷

Within the narratives of both films, “these tales of ‘fathers,’ ‘mothers,’ and ‘sons’ reveal a perpetual fascination with origins, beginnings, rebirths, and endings” (Lu 112). Beyond the narrative, Dai Jinhua suggests that the Oedipus complex within these movies articulates the 5th Generation’s relationship to its past. Dai argues that members of this generation spent their youth during the Cultural Revolution and grew up in the symbolic order of the Father, Mao Zedong. The time after the Mao era demystified their ideology, morphing them into a generation of “fatherless” children. Hence, Zhang’s films fulfill his need to find his origins or in other words, father. Dai further asserts that it was necessary that all the fathers in the films had to be slain, in order for the new generation to make an appearance (2002 15-44). The search for and killing of the fathers is therefore an allegorical analysis of China’s unclear yet violent relationship to tradition, culture, and itself in terms of international standing. In his interview with Bert Cardullo (2007) Zhang states,

> To create art, one must always remember that the subject of people in misery has the deepest meaning, the deepest resonance. Human beings in misery constitute the most important subject of art, be it film art or any other kind. That’s because

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⁷ As a side note, Zhang Yimou’s choice to make filmic adaptations of Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum Clan* (Hóng gāoliàng jiāzú 红高粱家族) and Liu Heng’s *The Obsessed* (Fúxī fúxī 伏羲伏羲) was purposeful, because each novella emphasized different themes and perspectives that he wanted to present to his viewers. In an interview with Michel Ciment in 1992, Zhang states that all the writers of the novellas he adopted are “of the new generation…They abandoned the propaganda to adopt a new human point of view that observes society from inside” (22). Zhang then further explains in a 1996 interview with Li Erwei, “Red Sorghum’s unrestrained force of life and wild attitude toward living…was actually full of an ideal flavor rarely found in Chinese people, even contemporary Chinese people. But Liu Heng’s *The Obsessed* is different—what he depicts is the actual mindset of real Chinese” (75). Zhang felt extreme, but contrasting expressions emitting from both novellas. This in turn convinced him to adapt them into films.
strength is born from such suffering – like the strength of the Chinese people (148-49).

The Cultural Revolution through its harsh methods of attaining ideological control over the population resulted in the majority of the population experiencing great suffering and misery. This experience acted as a driver and resource for Zhang Yimou and his fellow 5th Generation directors to perspicuously construct and communicate the meanings within their films. Nevertheless, although their films can be perceived as a retort to the Cultural Revolution, they are also a keen insight into what effects the Cultural Revolution imparted to their directors.

Female marginalization, national allegory, Oedipalization, and other forms of gender analyses are parallel between Red Sorghum and Ju Dou, but one difference between these films noted by scholars such as Sheldon Lu are their tones. The tone emitted from Red Sorghum seems to be jovial and vivacious, while the tone in Ju Dou and Raise the Red Lantern is somber and tragic. Scholars suggest that the freedom and autonomy of the female sexuality in Red Sorghum is stifled and repressed in Ju Dou and Raise the Red Lantern. Furthermore, the tone of each movie also indicated an implicit displaced political allegory. On the one hand, Red Sorghum gears towards the “nurturing, regenerative origins” of China, while Ju Dou exposes and criticizes the backward and degenerating origins of China (Lu 113). While these interpretations are valid, they are complicated by the bleak ending of Red Sorghum: the Japanese soldiers gun down Jiu’er. The vibrant Jiu’er dies in the end, crushing the relatively merry narrative of the film. The tragic ending of Jiu’er is analogous to Ju Dou’s dreadful death in flames. In the end, both females are dead, with their sexuality cut off or suppressed.
Essentially, gender analyses and national allegorical interpretations reveal that *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are analogous in narrative as well as diegesis.\(^8\) Both films use the female body as a point of departure for projection of oppressed national experiences in addition to depicting the negative elements of the patriarchy. Additionally, both of these films exhibit the same thematic preoccupations and the same recurring motifs, as well as the same visual style.\(^9\) These parallel elements solidify the rather great similarity between both of these films.

### Self-Orientalization and Occidentalism

The term Orientalism is most explicitly explored in Edward Said’s 1978 publication *Orientalism*. Said posits that during European colonization, the Europeans contact with underdeveloped countries in the East led to the establishment of Orientalism. They divided the world between themselves and the colonies, the civilized and the uncivilized.\(^10\) The term Orientalism is defined by Said to mean a pattern of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the Middle East. In *Orientalism*, Said discusses how this term has evolved to also encompass European attitudes toward not just the Middle East, but also toward anything not

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\(^8\) Diegesis is a style of fiction storytelling, which presents an interior view of a world and is: 1. The world itself experienced by the characters in situations and events of the narrative. Diegesis may concern elements, such as characters, events and things within the main or *primary* narrative. However, the author may include elements which are not intended for the primary narrative, such as stories within stories; characters and events that may be referred to elsewhere or in historical contexts and that are therefore outside the main story and are thus presented in an *extradiegetic* situation.

\(^9\) Zhang’s rich use of colors and grand depiction of landscapes serve as his aesthetic signature in both *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*.

\(^10\) As time passed, what was Oriental become generalized across cultures and geographies: these generalized artificial characteristics over time imprinted a certain image about the Orientals in the European mind, and in doing that infused a bias in the European attitude towards Orientals (Khalid). Said argues that the establishment of Orientalism is fundamental to the Europeans being able to define themselves. Said suggests this bias has in turn affected all scientific research, reports, literary work, and other media sources done on the Orientals.
of the West, which includes China. Given the controversial attitude held by the West towards
the not West as defined by Orientalism, the term itself is generally viewed negatively by people
classified as Oriental.

Since Zhang Yimou’s directorial debut through *Red Sorghum*, his films have been
consistently criticized as being created for foreign/Western appeal through an Orientalist lens.
“One director at the Xian Film Studio contends that Zhang ‘feeds his Western audience’s image
of exotic, primitive, timeless China’” (Pan 38). This criticism is frequently voiced when
discussing 5th generation directors such as Zhang, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang. The
epic diegesis and visuals of their film works are read as extensive delineations of Chinese
traditions catering to the Western perspective of the exoticness of China.

Rey Chow states, “the ‘Chineseness’ of Zhang’s films are a sign of cross-cultural commodity
fetishism, a production value between cultures” (170). In *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* Chinese
practices, such as the naming rite and funeral procession in *Ju Dou* and the bridal sedan
ritualistic singing in the beginning of *Red Sorghum*, are depicted as arcane and antiquated.
Through the aforementioned scenes, critics believe Zhang has simultaneously depicted a sub-
alternized and exotic China to the West. Zhang is frequently criticized for Orientalizing his films
for Western audiences.

Zhang Yimou’s reinterpretation of Orientalism is what many scholars have dubbed to be a
Self-Orientalism. Zhang, among other Chinese directors, are denounced for creating their own

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11 *Orientalism* has launched a movement of sorts on Middle East centered Western scholarship in addition to
receiving a number of different criticisms by other scholars. Robert Irwin, Daniel Martin Varisco, George P.
Landow, and others have all criticized Said’s work for concentrating only on the Middle East, making Europeans a
monolithic entity, and holding too narrow a focus on European colonization. Though these dissensions exist it does
not erase the fact that Said’s publication has left its definite mark on post-colonial studies.
form of Orientalism, the Orient’s Oriental. Sheldon Lu comments that Zhang’s sincere attempt to survey a cultural critique of the Chinese nation, coupled with his international success, inevitably led his films to be viewed by the government (Beijing Film Bureau) and Chinese scholars as cultural sellouts of the Chinese nation to the international film market. Critics Dai Qing and Yang Zhao assert that this exoticization, rather than portraying genuine complexities within Chinese society, chiefly propelled Zhang’s international success. However, scholars such as Xiaomei Chen rebut the identification of Self-Orientalism by classifying Zhang’s films as Occidental.

Occidentalism refers to images of the West created by non-Western cultures. Chen identifies two tracks of Occidentalism within after 1976 China. On the one hand, in Maoist or official Occidentalism the West is negatively portrayed by the government, while on the other hand, anti-official Occidentalism propounded by various intelligentsia groups uses the West as critique of domestic oppression.12 Zhang’s films fall into the latter track. Culminating in the 1940s and 1950s, as the Communists rose to power and founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Maoist Occidentalism incited nationalist sentiment among the Chinese and prompted their aversion for the West. It enabled the Communist government to use the West as a means for supporting nationalism that effects the internal suppression of its own people. In this process, the Western Other is construed by a Chinese imagination, not for the purpose of dominating the West, but in order to discipline, and ultimately to dominate, the Chinese self at home. (Chen 5)

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12 Anti-official Occidentalism and national allegorical interpretations are different in terms of representation. Anti-official Occidentalism uses images of the West to assert Chinese national identity on the international scene, whereas national allegories use China’s own past and present to critique itself.
In contrast, anti-official Occidentalist promoted "a powerful anti-official discourse using the Western Other as a metaphor for a political liberation against ideological oppression within a totalitarian society" (Chen 8).

Unlike critics such as Dai Qing, Chen’s interpretation of Zhang’s filmography and its Western reception is very positive. *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* both feature oppressed women whose stories end in death. Both protagonists are relatively ordinary and tragic women, but their abilities to endure and struggle for survival render them extraordinary. Jiu’er and Ju Dou can perhaps be called heroes who are rebellious and resistant: they consistently challenge the status quo. These films should be considered beacons for the rebellion against Chinese cultural repression by the government, instead of being labeled as films catering to foreigners. Moreover, the excessive depiction of different Chinese traditions, genuine and fake, allows Zhang to illustrate the excessive degradation and backward elements of Chinese society. In a nutshell, Zhang’s early films, including *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, were all subject to being accused of Orientalizing themselves for foreign tastes under the assumption that Zhang pursued success abroad.

What are cues in Chinese cinema?

Gender analyses, national allegorical implications, self-Orientalization, and Occidentalist form the dominant academic critiques given to *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*. This set of defined categories encompasses the multitude of interpretations written by different scholars and critics. The sub-plots within *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are multilayered and therefore encouraged this enormous amount of interpretations from various political, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Film scholar Ying Zhu posits in her publication *Chinese Cinema during the Era of*
that multiple interpretations of a film can be attributed to “cinematic multiplicity” (116). This Multiplicity consists of what she calls the opaque. “Opaque elements are those firmly rooted within a particular cultural imagination that might not be understood by the cultural outsider, translatable elements that are understood by the outsider, and international elements that are shared transculturally ” (116). Zhu’s proposed opaque elements seem to capture the function of film theorist and historian David Bordwell’s filmic cues. An important component to understanding these films and the abovementioned analyses is the function of the filmic cue.

David Bordwell posits that cues – clear signals in the film – are the main forces shaping interpretations. Cues signal viewers that what is being shown requires some interpretive work to be fully understood. Cues can be anything from costumes, lighting, character portrayals, or the story itself; however, Bordwell suggests that not just any variation of technical filmic characteristics can form a cue. There are boundaries, even though these boundaries can only be drawn based on each individual film.

A cue is formed partially in the filmmaking process. In David Bordwell’s description of the filmmaking process, particular decisions are made during the making of a film to stress the unity of the narrative and the film itself in order to guide the viewer into assigning appropriate interpretations to the devices employed. Bateman and Schmidt suggest the use of semiotics to connect elements of the film in order to give rise to interpretive analysis. The dominant definition of semiotics is the general study of “the life of signs within society” (Saussure 16). Bateman and Schmidt treat films as complex signs in their own right, in addition to the further signs found within the film. These signs are what allow the creation of meaning to occur. Furthermore, “any semiotic system is subject to societally-driven determining forces in a similar manner and because of this may be expected to exhibit broad similarities in their organization”
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(Bateman and Schmidt 30). Semiotic signs in this sense are cues. Therefore, the director and the viewers produce matching interpretations of the cues within a film due to the similar culture between the director and viewers.

Zhang Yimou’s Red Sorghum and Ju Dou, for example, both use the color red in their spectacular visuality to convey different meanings throughout both films. Since the color red is such an integral part of the cinematography in each movie, as well as being a significant color in relation to Chinese history, the vast majority of Chinese scholars and critics have commented on Zhang’s use of red in both films as well as in Raise the Red Lantern. The color red in Red Sorghum and Ju Dou has been said to represent an array of symbolic meanings. Zhang Yimou states in reference to Red Sorghum,

The symbolic meaning of red in China is implicitly understood by everyone…In China’s five thousand years of cultural tradition, the color red has simply represented hot passion, the approach of the sun, burning fire, warm blood…the strange events of a man and a woman in a [Red] sorghum field, it conveys a passionate attitude toward living, an unrestricted vitality of life. (Jiao 6)

Besides the color red, Chinese tradition also holds certain numbers in an auspicious regard.

The main protagonist of Red Sorghum is named Jiu’er (九儿). Jiu is the number nine, while er phonetically sounds very similar to 二, the number two in Chinese. On the one hand, the numbers nine and three are commonly associated with yang (阳), while the numbers two and four are associated with yin (阴) in China. Yang is associated with the hard, active, primal, and masculine aspects of humanity, while Yin is illustrated the soft, passive, feminine side of

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13 Haili Kong, Rey Chow, Chris Berry, etc. use the color red as one of their central foci in analyzing Zhang’s movies
humanity. Jiu’er was born on the ninth day of the ninth month, and the winery she resides at is located on 18 Mile Slope.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, the film is set in a nine-year period. Clearly, the masculine nine is the stronger and more prominent force to be recognized in \textit{Red Sorghum}; therefore, Jiu’er’s name is another momentous cue for filmic interpretation.\textsuperscript{15} The characteristics ascribed by Chinese tradition in numerology strengthen the release of repressed masculinity by the narrator’s grandfather and the masculine sexual behavior of Jiu’er as prominent themes in \textit{Red Sorghum}.

Specific technical filmic elements and association of culture, such as color and numerology, are key forms of cues; however, whole scenes can also act as comprehensive cues. The bath scene in \textit{Ju Dou} is an exemplary scene cue. It is no surprise that numerous different critics frequently use this particular scene as an example to illustrate different interpretations of female marginalization and rebellion.\textsuperscript{16} This entire scene is loaded with different cues ripe to be used by scholars and critics for their individual interpretations. The architecture of the dye mill that contains the animal stable with the camera-like peephole through which the voyeuristic Tianqing views the then dehumanized Ju Dou taking a bath illustrates one aspect of patriarchal abuse towards her. Then, the pivotal moment where Ju Dou reverses the dehumanizing process by consciously exposing her battered body to Tianqing allows her to be released from the status

\textsuperscript{14} Nine multiplied by two is eighteen.

\textsuperscript{15} Zhang Yimou’s take on the role of numerology within the film is a bit different from its role within Mo Yan’s novella. Unlike the nine year period of the film, the novella’s spans across 40 years through flashbacks and foreshadowing. Furthermore the film focuses on Jiu’er, which only emphasizes the importance of the number nine. In the novella the story continues long after Jiu’er is dead, dissipating all hope, whereas in the film her rebellious spirit supposedly lives on. Zhang’s filmic changes allowed the number nine to have greater importance in the film.

\textsuperscript{16} See Jenny Lau’s \textit{“Ju Dou” A Hermeneutical Reading of Cross Cultural Cinema}, Daisy Ng’s \textit{When the woman looks; female desire in three Chinese films directed by Zhang Yimou}, and Jerome Silbergeld’s \textit{China into Film Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema}. 
of subaltern object to being recognized by the viewers of the film and Tianqing as a human being. Yet, the exposure of her body was just the beginning of her release. Her purposeful stare at Tianqing, and then Tianqing’s lack of courage to look Ju Dou back in the eye, act overall as a key cue to understanding the film’s perspective towards Chinese sexuality and the patriarchy. Furthermore, these cues also open doors into understanding how Chinese culture has dealt with the negative aspects of the patriarchy. Ng interprets Tianqing’s inability to look away as the failure of Chinese culture to correct the patriarchal elements as well as its inability and fear to deal with this problem (65-66). I agree with Ng’s interpretation because apart from this particular scene, Tianqing consistently throughout the film fails to save Jiu’er from Yang Jinshan’s abuse and fails to eliminate Yang from his own life due to his own enforcement of filial ties with Yang Jinshan.

Ju Dou’s gaze toward Tianqing is similar to when Jiu’er intently looked upon her future husband the sedan carrier when the thief accosted her in the beginning of Red Sorghum. Like Ju Dou, Jiu’er challenges her future husband to take action with merely a look. The female gaze is an essential cue in both Red Sorghum and Ju Dou to triggering rebellious tendencies within the male characters. Besides the female gaze, Zhang Yimou’s creative use of the color red in both films lends to the understanding that both films have similar intentions in the expression of their meanings. Filmic cues allow viewers to understand and connect to the deeper meanings within a film. The similar cues present within Red Sorghum and Ju Dou suggests that the cultural implications wrought by these filmic cues are significant and that the overall message both films are attempting to communicate are analogous.

Within the academic sphere, Red Sorghum and Ju Dou both have made a significant impact. The cultural and global implications of each film have been and are still being examined from all
angles of film scholarship. Each film transgresses and contradicts traditional Chinese moral
codes and practices through its narrative and visual features. Equally important is that these
transgressions and clear rebellion against the desires of the Film Bureau reflect the importance of
the messages conveyed with each film and the need for them to be understood.

**Popular Response**

Although the overall diegeses of *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are very similar, the general
Chinese public responded differently to each film. *Red Sorghum* was widely praised when
released in 1988, while *Ju Dou* experienced heavy censorship and was banned by the
government in Mainland China until two years after its initial release date in 1990. The overall
popular response to *Ju Dou* was unenthusiastic.

“Film criticism among the masses,” (Qúnzhòng yǐngpíng 群众影评) refers to a system of
loosely state-organized film discussion groups which have emerged since the open-door policy
of the 1980s in China (Yang 1994 112). According to Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, popular response
for film criticism peaked after the Cultural Revolution up to the Tiananmen Massacre. People
were starving for cinema outside of state didactic propaganda and would willingly line up for
long periods of time to see a film. Holding an admission figure of 75,682,000, *Red Sorghum* was
the highest selling movie throughout 1988-89 (Yang 1994 117). A popular sentiment towards
*Red Sorghum* was that it presented a set of people who “dared to love and dared to hate” (Gǎn ài
gàn hèn 敢爱敢恨) (Yang 1994 117). Completely opposite to life during the Cultural Revolution,
*Red Sorghum’s* appeal derives from the passionate and unrestrained way of living the characters
pursued.
Additionally, in conjunction with the 1980s “Cultural Fever,” Red Sorghum triggered a “Red Sorghum Phenomena” (Hóng gāoliang xiànxiàng 红高粱现象) (Lau 1). As the first Reform period (after the Cultural Revolution) film to win an international film festival award, Red Sorghum was simultaneously praised and condemned in the Chinese media. Aside from provoking this discourse, even more significant was the fact that discussion was even allowed to take place. The People’s Daily (Rénmín rìbào 人民日报) encouraged free discussion of the film, even going so far as to condemn state intervention into film discussions: “‘letting leaders make a ruling’ will never be successful in dealing with theoretical and academic debates” (Rosen 216).

Within the music industry, Red Sorghum’s folk songs helped strengthen the Northeast wind in popular music and “added impetus to the cheeky experiments with turning Maoist anthems into rock songs by musicians such as Cui Jian” (Clark 97). Apart from the music industry, Red Sorghum also stimulated interest in the hooligan fiction of Wang Shuo and even interest in deep breathing exercises (Qìgōng 气功) and other folk traditions. The 1980s open door policy not only aided in the popularity of Red Sorghum, but it also contributed to the diverse culture

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17 “‘Cultural Fever’ was a nationwide discussion of notions such as culture, tradition, modernity, and particularly the meaning and implications of Western theories, emerged in China in early 1985” (Chang 12).

18 This is a style of music which emerged on the popular music scene in Mainland China from the northwestern portion of China specifically from the Shanxi, Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. The style is a western-style fast tempo, strong beat and extremely aggressive bass lines that is distinctly different than cantopop or mandopop from Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively. It later evolved into Chinese Rock in the late 1980s.

19 According to Andrew F. Jones’ publication Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Musi, Cui Jian is a Beijing-based influential rock musician in China. Cui Jian is considered to be the pioneer of Chinese rock as is often revered as the Father of Chinese Rock.

20 Wang Shuo is described by some traditional Chinese critics as a 'spiritual pollutant' for his hooligan style of writing. His work describes the culturally confused generation after the Cultural Revolution, marked by rebellious behavior. During the 90's Wang Shuo was the most popular and famous writer in China. Despite his hooligan style, his collected works were never banned and only one film based on his novels was not allowed to be shown in China until 2004, not because of his political stance, but rather due to his style. Wang Shuo is a national bestseller in China and has influenced generations of Chinese readers.
scene present in the late 1980s. The reception of *Red Sorghum* is reflective of its popularity and this period’s experimentation with ideas and culture (Clark 97).

After the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, the government enforced a tightening of ideology (*Yíshí xíngtài 意识形态*). In fact, three political films—*Jiao Yulu, Zhou Enlai, and Mao Zedong & His Sons*—which celebrated the Party and its history, were the top selling films during 1990-91 (Yang 1994 114). The simultaneous introduction of at home television sets and governmental intervention within the film industry—the state issued free tickets to urban residents through local work units—saw the decline of cinema attendance. People were forced to go see these political propaganda movies (Yang 1993 299). Ironically, although the script of *Ju Dou* was published in a film magazine in 1990, the film was banned from public release until 1992; however, during an interview, Zhang Yimou revealed that some people in the Mainland were able to see *Ju Dou* before the ban was lifted in 1992 through videotapes smuggled in from Hong Kong. Still, the small number of Mainland viewers who were able to see the film did not react enthusiastically to *Ju Dou*.

As aforementioned, cinema attendance was affected by the introduction of entertainment options such as “television, video compact discs, and discotheques. [These forms of entertainment] have been detrimental to Chinese spectators’ moviegoing impulse” (Zhu 1). When television was first introduced to China in the 1950s the film studios looked down on television studios, “similar to that of Hollywood’s major studios and U.S. network television in the 1950s” (Zhu 84). After the Tiananmen Square Massacre, although the CCP wanted to revert the economy back to a planned economy, the road to a market based economy was inevitable. Government focus on economic prosperity in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the expansion of televisions and other modes of entertainment. During this period of structural
change, although the Chinese film industry vertically integrated, there was almost no horizontal integration. This lack prevented film studios from expanding into both television and home video markets for multiple distribution channels. The studios lack of insight into making inroads into these distribution channels was instrumental in the impact *Ju Dou* made on the Chinese public (Zhu 84). In fact, both *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* suffered in levels of exposure because of the film studios failure to integrate with other forms of visual entertainment such as television and VHS.

The different popular responses to *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* reflect the different historical and political situations at the time. *Red Sorghum* clearly had a lasting impact on the general Chinese public due to its optimal time of release and appealing content. *Ju Dou*, on the other hand, did not have either of those good fortunes. The next section will explore how the shifting governmental power structures and the process of censorship after the Tiananmen Square massacre partially reflected *Ju Dou’s* lack of impact on the general Chinese audience.

PRC State Filmmaking in the Reform Era

The popular response to *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* is largely indicative of the changing structures within the film industry at each film’s planned time of release. This section explores the degree of change experienced within the film industry from the beginning of the Reform period up to Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour\(^1\) early in 1992. From the beginning of the thirty-year Reform period (1978 onward), the Chinese film industry has undertaken a series of

\(^1\) The Tiananmen Massacre and a growing formalist faction significantly decreased Deng Xiaoping’s power. To reassert his economic agenda, in the spring of 1992, Deng made his famous southern tour of China by visiting Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai and spending the New Year in Shanghai. This Tour was his method of reasserting his economic policy after his retirement from office in 1989.
decentralizing and privatizing reforms in the form of non-state investors and the promotion of a Chinese national cinema to compete with Hollywood at the domestic and international level. Now, although *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* do capture to an extent the ideological and political tendencies of the mid-1980s and early-1990s, there did exist internal conflicts, contradictions, and complexities. These subtleties are beyond the scope of this paper and therefore shall not be addressed (Zhu 5).

The Four Modernizations launched in 1977 included the modernization of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense (Zhu 41). Although the Four Modernizations involved restructuring and modernizing the Chinese film industry, the degree to which the 1980’s reforms in the film industry were significant is very easy to overestimate. Despite the Chinese industry’s successive waves of financial crisis since the 1980s, the government still requires all major studios, which are all essentially under huge state owned conglomerates such as China Film, Shanghai Film and Television, etc., to produce propaganda films. During the Reform period the China Film Corporation (CFC), or after 1999 the China Film Group Corporation (CFGC) remained the most financially powerful state institution involved in film production. The CFGC appears to work closely with the Film Bureau under the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) as the primary producer of state approved, internationally distributed features. Almost every film produced in China must comply with censorship under these two state institutions before, during, and after the writing, filming, production, editing, and distribution process (Johnson 172-74). During the second half of the 1980’s, attempts to overhaul the film industry’s hierarchy of power only reflected the state’s apprehension toward market-driven policies. Loosening controls over film production and distribution would mean loosening of the Party’s power within this industry.
“The economic reforms that took hold in the late 1980s played a significant role in determining the possibilities of Chinese cinema as both an economically viable and culturally motivated institution” (Nakajima and Zhu 25). After the Reform period hit its peak film attendance at 29.3 billion in 1979, the number of filmgoers steadily declined. The state took almost no action to remedy this problem; after all, the film studios continued to make movies that accomplished state expectations: “the socialization of the Chinese public, particularly its youth, into a proper system of values” (Rosen et al. 204).

During the 1980’s open door policy, the authorities did encourage filmmakers to produce films that appealed to the audience. After Red Sorghum received the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1988, in the spirit of the Red Sorghum phenomenon, Teng Jinxian (Director of the Film Bureau of SARFT at the time) told an interviewer that Chinese films will be endorsed under three categories: propaganda film which would be unprofitable, entertainment and commercial films which would constitute the majority of films produced and raise the most profit, and finally artistic films that would win awards at international film festivals as representations of the creativity in Chinese cinema. These classifications were released one month before students marched toward Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. One year after the Tiananmen Massacre, Teng released a summary titled Harmful Trends in Film Creation, detailing specious trends, which were remarkably similar to the classifications he endorsed before the Tiananmen Massacre. Under this newly released summary the likelihood of Ju Dou being shown in theatres was very low because it fell under the categories he presented as being harmful (Rosen 204).

Teng’s summary was in line with the conservative line from the film authorities that led to a huge drop in film attendance in 1990. 1979’s 29.3 billion filmgoers dropped to 1.06 billion
in 1992 (Rosen 204). This conservative line was pushed back after Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour in the winter of 1992. Deng urged film authorities to loosen regulations and promulgate a process that would garner a greater profit margin within the Chinese film industry. Not coincidentally, *Ju Dou* was also released to the public in 1992.

The development of the Chinese industry from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s had a heavy impact on films being created and released to the public. The Cultural Revolution, Open Door Policy, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre all also had equal significance in the restructuring of the Chinese film industry and therefore the films being released to the public. Besides these events, the impact of the development of the Chinese film industry on the relationship of the state to Chinese society and on the relationship of a specific film to Chinese society is intertwined with the economic condition and degree of state intervention within the Chinese film industry. Furthermore, the increasing importance given to box office numbers and the state’s “desire to present China’s best face has had an impact on the kinds of films funded, distributed, and promoted domestically and abroad” (Rosen 215).

Censorship

Equally important to shaping the impact of a film on the public— in addition to the restructuring of the Chinese film industry— is the actual process of censoring a film. Censorship within the Chinese film industry is an unavoidable process, especially considering films led by auspicious directors such as Zhang Yimou. As previously mentioned, in the 1980s the state side of the Chinese film industry underwent drastic changes after the Cultural Revolution. In regards to film censorship, the rigid socialist planned administrative system was confronted with the trend of commercialization and globalization in the Chinese film industry.
Firstly, while Chinese film censorship protects the Party’s ideological security, it also has its distinctive economic and cultural goals. In fact, the economic and cultural goals become almost as important as the political goals in Chinese film censorship after the Cultural Revolution.

The equation of censorship with political examination eclipses other goals in censorship and their complicated interplays. As the Chinese film industry underwent fast paced economic and ideological transformation, the institutional censorship becomes outdated and invalid in regulating the ideologies in Chinese cinema … In the field of culture and aesthetics, the conflicts occur between the monotonous and didactic socialist ideological model and the demands of the market which [became] increasingly diversified and commercialized. (Xie 60)

Although the Chinese Communist Party implemented an open door policy in the 1980s, the party continued to protect the Party’s ideological control within the developing Chinese film industry. In order to maintain this control, the Chinese Film Bureau had to exercise a different kind of censorship.

Films concerning topics like the Party’s history, major historical events, or political issues, receive special attentions from censorship. As those themes are central to the Party’s ideology, the Party still exercises pre-censorship on films concerning such topics. In contrast to the harsh control on those sensitive themes, the censorship on entertainment films shows signs of becoming more lenient. From 1976 to 1993, while the CCP launched repeated campaigns on the ideological front, it did not issue any law or regulation specifically concerning entertainment films. (Xie 44)
Zhang Yimou, as well as other 5th Generation directors, initially directed films set in the 1920s and 1930s so as to avoid directly confronting the Chinese Film Bureau.

Red Sorghum was released in 1987, while the government lifted the ban on Ju Dou in 1992. “With the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP was forced to tune down its emphasis on its socialist nature and abandon the practice of class struggle” (Xie 2012 38). Red Sorghum was released in the 1980s with the beginning of the new CCP open door policy and economic reform. Increased artistic expression and growth in feature productions resulted from the CCP’s break in using film as a means for political and ideological propaganda (Zhang 2008). In order to keep the loyalty of the general public, the government had the ideologies of developmentalism22 and nationalism replace socialism to become the ideological vision in the CCP’s cultural hegemony. Additionally, Red Sorghum had an easier time in passing through the censors in the Film Bureau because of its patriotic overtones.23 In Zhang’s interview with Ben Moger-Williams and Wu Runmei he states,

In 'Red Sorghum,' I added the Anti-Japanese War section in order to get approved by the censors. This is a fact of life for Chinese directors, not just for that film. The Chinese government requires that an artist should not only say something negative about certain issues, that he is against something, but also have a positive, progressive theme that they can recognize easily. (“The Art of Compromise”)

22 Developmentalism means that a government, usually one of the third world countries, regards economic development as the paramount task in its agenda (Xie 46).

23 Furthermore, Wu Tianming, head of the Xi'an Film Studio in the 1980s and early 1990s stated that censorship was not so strict overall on Red Sorghum in an interview on July 18 2008.
Besides gaining a quicker and easier approval from the Film Bureau, Zhang’s focus on the Japanese War also created an easily identifiable enemy within the film. Creating an unambiguous enemy perhaps also allowed the viewers to easily grasp the themes of rebellion and freedom. This suggests that the passionate vitality oozing from the film would also directly appeal to the Chinese public. Furthermore, after the ideologically restrictive time period of the Cultural Revolution, the taste of Open Door freedom experienced in the 1980’s contributed to the amazing response to the film. The ‘Red Sorghum Phenomena’ is proof enough of the joy people experienced from the exhilaration and a life given off by the film.

On another note, I think Red Sorghum and Ju Dou’s feudalistic background is not meant to hide the films’ critique on political, economic, and social conditions of contemporary China. Like the Japanese soldiers in Red Sorghum, Zhang Yimou choose to maintain a rural background to avoid the censoring of the Chinese Film Bureau. This act was readily recognized by the Chinese public, as seen through their response to the films. Although the time period of the films is different from the present, the Chinese public immediately discerned that the themes and problems being presented on screen were not solely about a China long forgotten. The issues presented, and scorned, exist within the present day.

The Tiananmen Square Massacre, also known as the June Fourth Incident, occurred in the Spring of 1989 in Beijing. The economic downfall of China’s economy in the late 1980’s led to extreme inflation.24 “The economic downturn, together with the stalling reforms, the emergence of an unpopular leadership, and pervasive corruption, intensified the grassroots political discontent,” which led to the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the following crackdown

24 In the Summer of 1988, inflation rose up to annual rates approaching 50 percent (Zhu 75).
Yet, while the CCP socially repressed the public, they could not stop the Chinese economy from slowly transforming into a more market-based model. During the late 1980s hardline Communists wanted to take back control of the economy, but that program failed. The failure of this program made it clear that a planned economy could not become the alternative to a market economy given the already existing economic conditions of China. *Ju Dou* was released during this period of opposition by the hardliners. (Zhu 75)

The Chinese Film Bureau banned *Ju Dou* in 1990. In contrast to Zhang Yimou’s later film *To Live* (1994), which was banned in Mainland China because of its direct criticism of the CCP for its role in the Cultural Revolution, *Ju Dou* did not directly address the well-protected CCP ideology. It was only after Deng Xiaoping’s encouragement to bolster the Chinese film industry and Li Ruihuan, a popular high level official in charge of the powerful Propaganda Ministry of the CCP, personally viewed the film and said “I think *Ju Dou* can definitely be screened publicly”, that the Film Bureau began distribution of the film (Yang 1993 299).

Unfortunately, *Ju Dou* received a lukewarm response from its initial viewers in Hong Kong in 1990 as well as its Mainland viewers in 1992 Mainland China. Chris Berry’s publication *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* proposes that unlike *Red Sorghum* before the June Fourth Incident, *Ju Dou* (and incidentally *Raise the Red Lantern*) projected a very depressing and ominous tone. One year after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, a film containing such somber tones, as expressed by Zhang Yimou, had no chance of being released to the general public. Additionally, it can be argued that since the film was not banned for openly criticizing the CCP

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25 *Ju Dou* was also released in 1992 because of Zhang Yimou’s film *The Story of Qiu Jiu*. This film, according to the Film Bureau, shed a positive light on the Party’s governing system.
the censors were concerned about how the “film’s grim representation is an implied condemnation of the contemporary socio-political formation of China” (Xie 2012 121). The Film Bureau thought that in Red Sorghum the viewer would have a sense of life and vitality, while Ju Dou and Raise the Red Lantern saw the perpetuation of a pertinacious and regressive society. Essentially Ju Dou was banned from the Mainland in 1990 because the Film Bureau viewed it as emitting a negative image of China to the public.

Other critics have contested that the banning of the film was justified in the eyes of the Chinese Film Bureau because it alludes to the Tiananmen Massacre. Dai Jinhua posits, “Ju Dou, after all, provides an allegorical text. In a certain way it relates to heavy and painful emotions associated with the Tiananmen Square crackdown to the China of the nineties” (2002 56). Taking again the bathing scene in Ju Dou, when Ju Dou turns around to expose her naked battered body to Tianqing, this move was viewed as a decisive strike back at the “gerontocratic and patriarchal rule that operates against her” (Lau 3). Gina Marchetti further substantiates Lau’s position by pointing out, “given the events of 1989, Ju Dou’s acerbic treatment of decrepit old men oppressing the younger generation to the point of mutual annihilation seems to allegorize the Party’s treatment of the demonstrators” (3). Although this interpretation is valid, Zhang Yimou had the script approved right before the Tiananmen Massacre took place; therefore, this incident could not have logically affected the direction of the film.

Jenny Lau correctly states that Ju Dou’s use of Chinese symbols, its challenge to basic Chinese beliefs, and even its argument based on Chinese logic are the reasons why “the film is able to criticize Chinese culture harshly enough to cut deeply into the psyche of many Chinese” (5). Lau quotes “The biggest Sin of all sins is Yīn 阴 and the greatest Virtue of all virtues is
Xie\(^2\) (Xiào 孝),” a folk saying she states as being familiar to most Chinese (5). Basically, this folk saying states that in Chinese perspective Yin, or in other words a gesture self-liberation translation, is the lowest notion for human existence while Xie (Xiao), or Confucian filial piety and in temporal context Communist control, is the greatest form of human existence (Lau 5). In this system what is natural – Ju Dou and Tianqing’s love – becomes a sin after the establishment of this perverse human made system. Furthermore, Tianqing’s inability to escape the powerful principle of filial piety, Xie, renders his struggle to have a relationship with Ju Dou as never ending. The unnaturalness of the whole film, built on Confucian building blocks of what it means to be Chinese, left the Film Bureau very pessimistic about the film. The films bitter message was not approved not accepted by the conservative CCP after the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

Aside from the Film Bureau’s power, another factor that could have possibly further strengthened the audience’s negative response to *Ju Dou is the time period it was released.* Following the Tiananmen Massacre, the general public was already feeling utterly disgusted with the acts of suppression by the CCP. The already depressed environment present at the time could partially account for the audience’s instinctive negative response to *Ju Dou.* Perhaps, although the Chinese audience realized change was needed, they were already being heavily hit with terrifying oppressive attacks by the government. This film’s themes could not possibly lead to positive reviews.

\(^2\) Xie is the Cantonese pronunciation of 孝. The Mandarin pronunciation is as stated.
Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* have made significant contributions to progressing the understanding of Chinese cultural and national identity, traditional moral codes, and Chinese cinema. Furthermore the interpretations prompted by both films have inextricably pointed out the direct parallels present between both films. Similar gender, national allegorical, self-Orientalization, and Occidental academic interpretations allow these films to be evaluated on an equal plane. The difference between both of these films lies within their popular reception. In Mainland China the popular response to films is highly contingent upon the level of censorship and ideological control the state is exercising at the moment. *Red Sorghum* was released during a period of loosened ideological and industrial control, while *Ju Dou* was initially released after the Tiananmen Massacre, a period of extreme reactive political tightening. Therefore, the state played a key role in the amount of impact *Ju Dou* was allowed to have among the Mainland Chinese audience.

Zhang Yimou’s cinematographic language is rich and effective in *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*. The symbolism behind each filmic cue contributes to the lasting impact each film had on film scholarship and China. Unlike contemporary movies such as *Hero* and *The House of Flying Daggers*, *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* transgressed traditional Chinese moral codes and helped to label Zhang as a rebellious figure in the eyes of the government. Zhang hates the censorship system and challenges the system “through on screen image and cinematic structure as well as visual rhetoric and reference to convey past the censor and impart to the audience what dared not be spoken or filmed directly” (Silbergeld 54).
The impact *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* have had on the academic world as well as the general Chinese public are representative of who are allowed to view and interpret Chinese cinema at the time of and beyond release. Chinese cinema scholars generally agree that film production in Mainland China has gone through different stylistics phases categorized broadly by China’s modernization and liberalization processes in the 20th century. *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* were part of the art cinema movement germinating in the late 1970s and blossoming in the mid-1980s with the arrival of the 5th Generation and the entertainment wave beginning in the mid-1980s (Zhu 4). *Red Sorghum* was released in a time period hosting an apolitical atmosphere despising pedagogical films concomitant with the discredited Communist propaganda (Zhu 30). On the other hand, *Ju Dou* entered a period of tightened governmental controls on the Chinese public due to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. As aforementioned although both films were a part of the same stylistic phase, in addition to being similar in styling and narrative, the time of their releases had a significant impact on the kind of reception they inevitably received.

In a nutshell, although *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* held analogous diegesis and cultural implications, each film had differing levels of impact upon the Chinese public. Both films international success versus the domestic successes are directly relevant to the CCP’s desire to ideologically control the Mainland Chinese population as well as having the motive of relaying a “cultured” impression of China to the rest of the world. The degree of government interference and the level of censorship forced upon the Chinese film industry and individual films such as *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* are chiefly responsible for shaping the impact each film had on the Chinese public at the time of their individual releases. In other words, although *Red Sorghum* did have a remarkable reception, it may have been greater if released from the chains of the state. Decentralization, privatization, conglomeration, and globalization in all aspects of the film
industry – funding, production, distribution, etc. – played a key role in *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*’s reception; however, the practice of censorship and constant state intervention proves that the film industry’s failure to separate from the state encumbers the ability of Chinese films in general to have a greater impact upon especially the general Chinese public.
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