

Chinese Culture on the Global Stage: Zhang Yimou and *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*

Wendy Larson

Abstract: As opposed to Zhang Yimou's 张艺谋 much-criticized film *Hero* 《英雄》 (2002), which addresses the relationship between culture and political power, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* 《千里走单骑》 (2005) asks the question of whether, under the conditions of globalization, any performance between cultures can contain truth value, be authentic, or represent something real. Although a key scene acted by Japanese star Ken Takakura effectively expresses his true despair and thus seems to indicate a positive response, Zhang Yimou persistently inserts into the film queries about the validity of performance across cultural and linguistic borders, and the complex trail of conflicting desires that motivate it. *Riding Alone* is one example of Zhang's complex filmic investigation into the relationship between culture and political power under the developing conditions of a border-crossing global world.

Keywords China; film; Zhang Yimou; nationalism

In his early career, Zhang Yimou's films—*Red Sorghum* 《红高粱》 (1987), *Judou* 《菊豆》 (1990), and *Raise High the Red Lantern* 《大红灯笼高高挂》 (1991) — positioned him as an influential interlocutor, launching Chinese cinema onto the global screen and capturing the attention of a world audience, especially those watching from the West. Yet it did not take long for Zhang to become suspicious about the value of identifying and displaying Chinese aesthetic, ideological, philosophical, and thematic elements in his films, and to question his previous strategy's efficacy in gaining space for Chinese culture on the global stage. Soon he moved away from his early assumptions and their colorful expressions of a troubled (and thus potentially modern) Chinese heritage, instead incorporating the question of cultural representation and its relationship to political power directly into the substance of his films.

Thus moving from adherent to skeptic, Zhang fashioned his later projects as theoretical inquiries regarding the demand—built into the nation-state political structure—that native culture in the broad sense be identified and “performed” (Penrose 1995). Zhang's later films suggest that relationships which determine who performs for whom, and the realities of who influences versus who is influenced, establish a hidden hierarchy. Despite ongoing globalization, Zhang implies, this pecking order is nationally based and ultimately allows the cultures and languages of politically stronger nations to flourish. Thus, although hope for recognition as equals among the world's great cultures sustains a tremendous investment of funds and energy in China, parity seems impossible to reach, even with modifications designed to make China's cultural products more approachable to foreigners. Also, when performed on the global stage, national, regional, or local culture is inevitably mediated and reworked, and therefore sacrifices immediacy, directness, and authenticity, losing reality for

Wendy Larson is Professor of Modern Chinese Literature and Film at the University Oregon and Vice Provost of Portland Programs. She completed her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Literary Authority and the Chinese Writer: Ambivalence and Autobiography* (Duke University Press, 1991), *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford University Press, 1998), and *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China* (Stanford University Press 2009). She is currently working on a new monograph titled, *Zhang Yimou: Globalization and the Subject of Culture* (in progress). She was the Keynote Speaker at the 2012 ASIANetwork Conference in Portland, Oregon.

Figure 1: Zhang Yimou



the native viewer while simultaneously failing in its task of representing something real for the world audience.

While Zhang's films are strong indictments of the cultural promise built into the nation-state political form, his work also makes other implications relevant to the global/national debate. First, he affirms the contemporary significance of national over ethnic culture in the global struggle for representation, connecting "Chineseness" with its political body. In other words, Zhang's films suggest that without an organized form of governing power through which it can work, any culture stands little chance of gaining breathing room on the global stage. Second, he implies that should the cosmopolitan peace or post-national rational world society imagined by proponents of globalization ever be realized, only the most powerful nations will have the resources to establish and manage global governance and culture. In this regard, Zhang becomes a skeptic of pro-globalization theories or, minimally, a transformationalist who recognizes that the nation-state—with its marked boundaries, identifiable culture, and relative wealth or poverty—plays a crucial role in what will survive as globalizing forces intensify (Hay & Marsh 2000; Martell 2007). Zhang argues against those who imagine that liberatory subjectivities and collective experiences based on equality and democracy will be expressed in and through media, film, and other exchanged cultural forms in a globalized world (Appadurai 1999; Bhabba 2003; Beck 2006). Zhang's films throw a wrench into this utopian dream by implying that should the nation-state undergo radical change, whatever form the new model of globalization takes, politically strong nations will be most able to ensure the continuation of their cultures and languages.

Through his filmic work, Zhang reaches two conclusions that have to do with China. First, that the only way to guarantee the survival of Chinese culture—that is, both readily identifiable forms such as language, aesthetic expression, and other traditions, as well as the more subtle habits and patterns of daily life—is to make sure that a strong political entity is actively defending it. And second, that the implicit promise of the nation-state political form—the "family of nations" model, which implies that performance of a distinct culture will gain recognition from the powerful—will do nothing to prevent the erosion of Chinese

ways of life and their gradual replacement with a universalized model based primarily on Western ideals, customs, and languages. While his work brings him to the position that in the present world, the nation-state is the only entity capable of organizing and supporting Chinese cultural representation in a comprehensive way, his perspective is not simply one of cultural nationalism or the promotion of unthinking patriotism, although he is often accused of both of these attitudes. Rather, it is the result of Zhang's extensive creative investigation that he ends up believing that without a powerful nation-state, Chinese culture will have no way to guarantee its survival; and like so many cultures, languages, and societies in the so-called global world, will slowly be eroded by more powerful entities.

Since the late Qing dynasty, the position of China vis-à-vis the militarily, economically, politically, and culturally powerful West has been a key debate. Zhang Zhidong's 张之洞 (1837-1908) formula, "Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as application," 中学为体, 西学为用 promoted in his 1898 book, *Exhortation to Study* 《劝学篇》, was an early and influential theory that imagined the crystallization of a Chinese cultural core. The Constant Learning School 学恒派 argued in favor of national essence and a later neo-Confucian movement promoted a return to Confucian social values and structures as the basis of Chinese society. Even though globalization progresses unabated, filmmakers and writers have continued to grapple with the meaning and position of Chinese culture within the global nation-state system. Zhang started his career promoting "Chineseness" to the world audience, but his recent work instead takes the position that the future belongs to nations that successfully engage in a struggle for political strength, resources, and alliances which will solidify their global position. Should a utopian global world ever emerge, those nations will be able to determine its shape, content, and cultural foundation. Contemporary nations must be prepared for the time when globalization begins to eliminate even relatively powerful languages and cultures. Although only political, economic, and military strength will push the nation forward when globalization reaches its zenith, the nation must have a strong culture that it can present as one option for the world.

The local-national-global quandary of culture is not limited to China, Asia, or the Third World. As early as the 1820s, Dmitry Venevitinov argued that Russian national culture could not be built with external forms imported from the West, and Ivan Kireesky claimed that only expression of local thought and life could attract the rest of the world to Russian literature. The dispute between Slavophiles and Westerners that structured Dostoyevsky's fiction in the mid 19th century continues into the 21st (Rabow-Edling 2006). In 2003, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida proposed that Europe unite around a set of fundamental European values, beliefs, tendencies, and qualities that would distinguish it from other nations, in particular the United States (Kumar 2008). This manifesto was viewed by many as an attempt to erase the small nations of Europe by a powerful cohort made up of Germany and France, a forced unification and the creation of a new intellectual and cultural nation-state called "Europe." Habermas and Derrida may have imagined this strategy to be the only possibility for gaining a cultural influence as strong as that of America, and their methodology implicitly recognizes that so-called national culture must pick and choose among hundreds of possibilities, excluding most. Such a strong proclamation on behalf of cultural similitude for the European Union indicates that despite increasing interest in the 'de-nationalization' that popular terms such as global, cosmopolitanization/cosmopol, hybrid, border-crossing, transnational, global multicultural, and the third space indicate, the value of conceptualizing unique group-based cultural approaches and a fundamental essence with territorial boundaries has not disappeared (Larson 2008, 194).

Some Chinese filmmakers have accepted the model of national cultural competition,

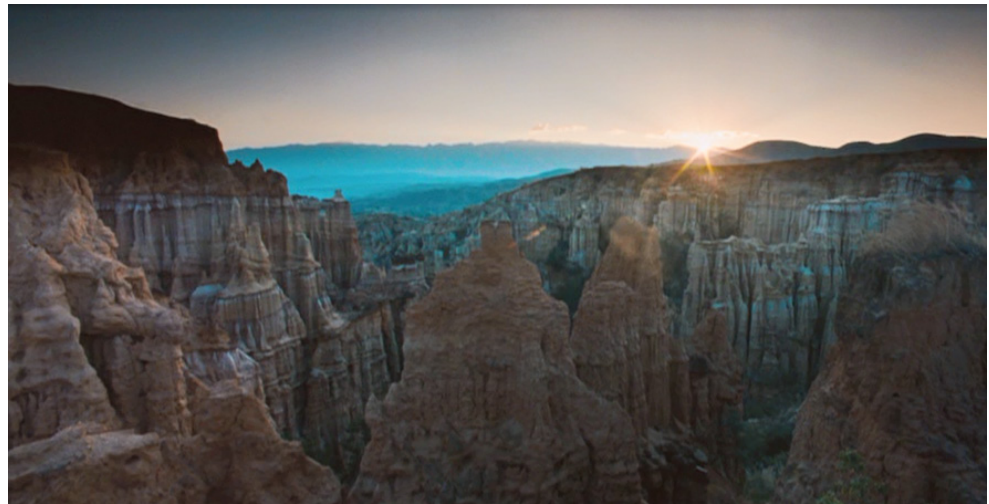
promoting typical Chinese qualities, philosophies, and aesthetic ideas that they believe can stand up to the pressure on the world stage. For example, Tsui Hark 徐克, in his 6-part series *Once Upon a Time in China* 《黄飞鸿》, insistently proclaims the value and richness of Chinese culture in comparison to the West, especially its medical traditions, vibrant social life, philosophical heritage, and morality (Larson, 2012). Zhang Yimou tried this approach in his early films, but his later work testifies to his disappointment with it. Although he is often regarded as a sell-out to commercialism, a self-Orientalizer, and an admirer of totalitarianism, I argue that Zhang's work is best understood as a frank and long-term investigation into the relationship between culture and political power under the conditions of a developing global world or as a theory of culture. Below, I analyze Zhang's film, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* 《千里走单骑》 (2005) as one example of his intense interest in the meaning of cultural performance on the global stage.

RIDING ALONE FOR THOUSANDS OF MILES

Although *Hero* (2002) and the 2008 Olympics opening and closing ceremonies left no doubt about Zhang's position on the pragmatic importance of power, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* is also a significant contribution to his career-long investigation into the performance of culture. Starring Japanese action actor Ken Takakura, who plays an uncharacteristically introverted Japanese fisherman, the film uses contrasting images of China and Japan to contextualize China as a land of immense natural beauty, while Japan remains shrouded in gray.

At first it seems that Zhang may be suggesting that genuine human vitality has been lost

Figure 2: Chinese Lijiang landscape



in Japan, but can be found in China. The plot seems to confirm this perspective, as the fisherman, Gouichi Takata, is alienated from his son Kenichi. After Kenichi comes down with a mortal illness, his father learns that more than anything, his son enjoyed travelling to China to see local opera in Yunnan province. The audience, along with Takata, is led to believe that Kenichi had many friends in China, and was a strong admirer of this form of opera.

What unfolds, however, is hardly a straightforward description of a native cultural performance appreciated and understood by a foreigner, or of cultural vitality in foreign lands. Although he has not spoken to his son in years, Takata takes off to China to film a performance by one of Kenichi's favorite actors, Li Jiamin. According to his son's wife, Rei, this is something Kenichi regrets not being able to do himself. Thus motivated by his son's deathbed wish, Takata begins a quixotic journey. He soon learns that Li Jiamin is in prison for stabbing a man who called his son a bastard. Takata approaches the officials in charge to



Figure 3: Japanese landscape

request permission to film Li performing in prison, but he is turned down. He finally gains approval, but only through a mediated performance of his own. Takata and his translator, Lingo, have worked together to record an emotional plea, and while Lingo plays it for authorities on a television screen, he adds translation and props. When he finally makes it into the prison, however, Takata is disappointed that instead of performing opera as he agreed to do, Li begins to blubber on stage. A mirror-like situation reflects Takata's broken relationship with Kenichi back to him as he understand that Li has not seen his own son for 7 years and misses him deeply. Thus he is too sad to perform for his foreign visitor.

Takata's second journey, to find Li's son Yangyang, also brings confusing results. Not only is Yangyang so uninterested in seeing his father that he runs off into the picturesque hills to avoid it, but the villagers also protest, claiming that Li Jiamin has never shown any interest in the boy, either before or after he went to prison. Village leaders agree to go along with Takata's plan to take the child to see his father. Their change of heart is not, however, for Li Jiamin's benefit, but in order to further "international friendship." They hold a banquet for Takata with the entire village in attendance. Takata steps aside to take a call from daughter-in-law Rei, who admits that she has told Kenichi about his father's trip to China. She insists that Kenichi, who refused to see his father when Takata came to the hospital, is touched, and called the trip the nicest thing his father had ever done for him. In a voiceover, however, we learn that Takata is not sure whether to believe Rei or not. What he believes is that the villagers, total strangers, have generously held a banquet for him. While that may be



Figure 4: Villagers at banquet

true, Zhang's filming angle highlights a long table with most of the villagers far away from Takata, leading the viewer to wonder if Takata's presence is nothing more than an excuse for revelry.

Meanwhile and to his great surprise, Takata learns from Rei that Kenichi never really cared that much about the local opera, nor did he truly admire Li Jiamin. Rather, too polite to admit his lack of interest, Kenichi also was operating under the dictates of international friendship when he tried to film the opera and insisted that he admired Li Jiamin. If true, this information undercuts the logic of Takata's trip to China, which was to film a performance that his dying son wanted to see. Rei begs Takata to return to Japan, implying that Kenichi has little time left.

None of this information, however, changes Takata's plans. Although Kenichi dies before he does so, Takata succeeds in reuniting Li Jiamin and Yangyang, not with a one-on-one meeting, but via his filming of the child, which he shows to the father. And although Kenichi is now dead, Takata goes ahead and records Li Jiamin's performance in the prison. Takata's success in inspiring fatherly feelings in Li Jiamin appears to substitute for what he can no longer accomplish in Japan, turning the film into a celebration of universal human attachment, as Zhang Weiping 张伟平 describes: "The film narrates an emotional topic common to all people, it transcends national boundaries and politics" (Zhu Jie 朱洁, 151).

Yet although there are warm scenes and human successes in the film, many aspects point to the director's ongoing investigation into the meaning of performed culture in a global environment, and to his harsh judgment about the efficacy or authenticity of cultural performance. As for Kenichi's life in China, Takata learns that it was not what he imagined. Jasmine, one of his translators, informs him that as far as she understands, Kenichi had no friends and spent most of his time staring off into space. Rei, Kenichi's wife, also bursts Takata's bubble about his son's appreciation of the performance by Li Jiamin. Although Rei tells Takata that Kenichi is touched by his efforts, her mission of bringing father and son together one more time, even at the cost of the truth, drives her narration. Takata has good reason to suspect that the change of heart in Kenichi is most likely a fabrication by Rei.

The director's focus on strategic, rather than truthful, communication and performance extends throughout other areas of the film. The villagers regard Li Jiamin's outpouring of emotion as nothing more than performance. They are suspicious of his newfound interest in his son and for that reason, initially refuse to acquiesce to Takata's request. Nor does Yangyang want to see his father. The authorities in charge of deciding whether or not Takata can film in the prison quickly expose the nearly complete lack of Japanese language skills in Lingo, a sympathetic but opportunistic translator who takes over when Jasmine, realizing that the negotiations are a nightmare, takes her leave. Translation problems throughout the film highlight the space between native and outsider understanding of local culture, customs, and behavior.

By emphasizing the ambivalent nature of performance, Zhang Yimou shows that although it may be effective in producing and transmitting emotions, its authenticity or truth value is almost always suspect. One key moment in the film comes as Takata, desperate to gain the cooperation of the authorities, concocts a performance of his own, the recorded plea for help to which I earlier referred. In the official's office where he goes to make his case, Takata notices colorful banners on the wall, and learns from Lingo that they are expressions of gratitude. When he fails to interest the authorities in charge of approving a prison visit, he has his own banners made. In an expressive plea that ends in silent tears, he shows his own banners, which thank the authorities for the help he anticipates they will provide. Lingo translates and narrates as the officials watch, holding up banners to comple-

ment those that Takata shows on the screen.

The officials judge the performance to be genuine and grant Takata's request. Yet they



Figure 5: Takata's videotaped plea with Lingo in person

have no knowledge of the complexity of the situation, which has by now become apparent to the viewer through the ongoing phone conversations between Rei and Takata, as well as through Takata's voiceover musings. Ironically, the mediated performance on film has impressed the authorities more than meeting with Takata face-to-face. This suggests that in terms of expressing emotion, performance, especially if mediated through the distancing lens of film or television, may be more effective than communication in person. At the same time, however, an emotionally effective performance does not guarantee that the affected audience will understand the issues behind what is presented on the screen.

Zhang Yimou's interest in performance also is indicated in his choice of title for the film. *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* refers to a story in the *Three Kingdoms*, which describes the history of the century toward the end of and following the Han dynasty, beginning roughly in 180 AD. The story "Riding Alone" relates Guan Yu's attempt to reunite with his sworn brother and leader Liu Bei, in which Guan Yu "traveled through five valleys and killed six generals" (五关斩六将). Scholars recognize that this part of the *Three Kingdoms* is a fabrication, for there is no historical record of Guan Yu actually having traveled through five valleys (impossible considering his destination) or killing five generals (Lu 2007). Nonetheless, the story is a foundational tale of Chinese culture, exhibiting the values of emotional intensity and loyalty. The implication is that a riveting performance—this time, through a textual narrative—can inspire emotions that may drive beliefs, behavior, and ideology. But in terms of the "facts" it presents, it also may be fundamentally wrong.

Issues of performance and authenticity also came to the fore outside the film, when the actors who acted in the opera performance at the jail protested that the film misrepresented local culture.

Whereas Zhang Yimou originally had planned on using Guansuo Opera from the Chengjiang area of Yunnan (Chengjiang guansuo xi 澄江关索戏), the film's music director, Guo Wenjing 郭文景, at the last minute decided Guansuo Opera would not show well on the stage, and instead used Anshun Local Opera, (Anshun dixi 安顺地戏) from Guizhou province. However, promotional materials for the film continued to play up the opera as in the Yunnan Chengjiang Guansuo style, and posters touted the mystery and beauty of Yunnan in the opera, including its costumes and masks. The success of the film, with its Japanese star, Ken Takakura, and its renowned director, Zhang Yimou, brought fans to Yun-

Figure 6: Opera actors on stage with other prisoners



nan to see Chengjiang Guansuo Opera instead of what was actually performed, with credit going to the wealthier and more famous Yunnan province instead of its relatively impoverished neighbor, Guizhou province. To make things more complicated, the actor who plays Li Jiamin in the film is an actual Yunnan Opera performer in real life, but the masked actor performing on stage at the jail in the film is a different person: Zhan Xueyan 詹学彦, an Anshun Local Opera actor. Those acting with him in prison garb are also Anshun Local Opera actors.

When the opera actors learned that their performance was advertised as Guansuo Opera instead of Anshun Local Opera, they felt betrayed. They argued that the soul of culture is in transmission, and ethnicities survive only through culture. Demanding an apology, they claimed legal protection under the “Law to Protect the Transmission and Management of National-Level Non-Material Culture” 《国家级非物质文化遗产保护与管理暂行办法》 Line 21, which states: “The use of national level non-material cultural heritage items in order to carry out artistic creation, product development, travel activities, etc, should respect the original form and cultural content, and prevent misuse and misappropriation.” What ensued was a “cultural battle,” online and in print, in Guizhou and Yunnan, about the proper attribution of the film and the way the actors were used (Wang 2007; Zhang 2006). Although they did not succeed in their suit, this real-life debate mimics the query into cultural representation, performance, and authenticity that the film vigorously undertakes.

As his film *Qiuju Goes to Court* 《秋菊打官司》 (1992) indicates, Zhang Yimou believes that culture is not static, but a dynamic process that exists under an overlay of laws and regulations. As opposed to *Hero*, *Riding Alone* investigates not the power of culture to perform, or to accomplish what it should on the global stage, but rather whether or not any performance—especially a performance where the audience and performers are separated by different cultures and languages—can contain truth value, be authentic, or represent something real. Through persistently raising questions and doubts in the narrative and visual presentation of the film, Zhang Yimou forces us to closely examine the validity of the endeavor and the complex trail of conflicting desires that motivate it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beck, U. *The Cosmopolitan Vision* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

- Bhabha, H. 2003. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Hay, C. & D. Marsh 2000. "Introduction: Demystifying Globalisation." *Demystifying Globalisation*, ed. C. Hay and D. Marsh. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1-17.
- Kumar, K. 2008. "The Question of European Identity: Europe in the American Mirror," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 11/1, (Feb), 87-105.
- Larson, W. 2012. "Fighting for Cultural Parity: 徐克 Tsui Hark and 《黄飞鸿》 Huang Feihong (Once Upon a Time in China)," forthcoming in *Beyond Postmodernism: Doubt, Time, Violence, Chinese Cross Currents*, Macau Ricci Institute.
- 2008. "Zhang Yimou's *Hero*: dismantling the myth of cultural power." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, V.2, N.3, 181-96.
- Lu, S. 卢盛江 2007. "Qianli zou danqi shi ge mi," 〈千里走单骑十个谜〉 (Riding alone for thousands of miles is a mystery). *Literary and Historical Knowledge* N.12, 116-17.
- Martell, L. 2007. "The Third Wave in Globalisation Theory." In *International Studies Review* 9.2 (Summer), 173-196.
- Metzger, S. 2003. "Ice Queens, Rice Queens, and Intercultural Investments in Zhang Yimou's *Turandot*." *Asian Theatre Journal* 20:2 (Fall): 109-17.
- Penrose, J. 1995. "Essential constructions? The 'cultural bases' of nationalist movements," *Nations and Nationalism* 1.3: 391-417.
- Rabow-Edling, S. 2006. *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Nationalism*. New York: State University of New York.
- Wang C. 王春兰 2007. "Zhang Yimou ba Tunbao ren 'shuan' le?" 〈张艺谋把屯堡人“涮”了?〉 (Did Zhang Yimou "scald" the Tunbao people?) <http://www.fzshb.cn/News/200707/349.html> (accessed November 9, 2009).
- Zhang D. 张东钢 2006. "Dianying: Minjian de shuochang: Yingpian Qianli zou danqi pinglun" 《电影：民间的说唱：〈千里走单骑〉评论》 (Film: The voice and songs of the people: The film *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*). *Journal of the Beijing Film Academy*, No.4, 73-76.
- Zhu J. 朱洁 2007. "Dianying Qianli zou danqi, He ni zai yiqi de shi tan" 〈电影《千里走单骑》，《和你在一起》得失谈〉 (What you gain and lose from the films *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* and *Together With You*). *Journal of School of Chinese Language and Culture*, Nanjing University. V.12, N.4, 149-53).