

Film critique of zhang yimou's house of flying daggers assignment

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Report on Zhang Yimou's House of Flying Daggers R. S. Film 100 Zhang

Yimou's House of Flying Daggers is a Wuxia film that unarguable stays true to the general conventions of Wuxia yet, at times, deviate from them to give way to Yimou's own signature style. Much emphasis is given to pay tribute to Wuxia and Yimou's auteristic reliance on mise-en-scene and cinematography. The use of certain elements of mise-en-scene and cinematography contribute to characterization and story development.

However, it should be mentioned that though there are indicators of characterization and storyline progress, they fall short of expectation, as Yimou relies heavily on sensory stimulation above all else. House of Flying Daggers is set in 859 AD when the Tang Dynasty's power is declining, and rebel factions have begun to grow in number and strength. The most powerful of these factions is the House of Flying Daggers. Two police officers, Leo and Jin, are ordered to weaken the House of Flying Daggers by killing its new leader within ten days.

What succeeds is a deceiving plan by these officers to infiltrate the House. The plan is that Jin, under an alias (Wind), must befriend Mei, the blind dancer who works at the brothel and is suspected to be the daughter of the old leader of the House. To accomplish this, Jin rescues Mei from prison and slowly gains her trust, as she finally leads him to the headquarters of the House of Flying Daggers. When Jin successfully infiltrates the House, it is revealed that Mei has been deceiving him all along, as she is not the blind daughter and has known that Jin is a police officer.

Moreover, Leo, Jin's partner, reveals himself as to actually being part of the House of Flying Daggers. So, all along, while Jin thinks that he is doing the deception, it has been Mei and Leo. The real conflict though does not center so much on the twists and turns as much as it focuses on the love triangle that forms between Mei, Jin, and Leo. Leo is in love with Mei, but Mei falls for Jin, who in turn falls for her as well (despite the fact that they are supposed to be enemies). Mei is ordered to kill Jin but is not able to, and instead chases after Jin. Enraged by jealousy, Leo harms Mei.

The story concludes by the final climactic battle between Leo and Jin. In the end, Mei sacrifices her life for Jin's welfare. The film is of the particularly distinct Chinese Wuxia (literal translation from Mandarin is " martial arts chivalry") genre. Wuxia is a combination of Wushu fighting style (especially swordfights) and the Xia philosophy (martial arts philosophy that emphasizes the act of chivalry and heroism), ergo the term Wuxia. [i] Wuxia stories are often rooted in adventure and mystery set in ancient China, such as that of House of Flying Daggers.

These stories highlight the heroism and chivalry of characters through superhuman martial arts abilities, such as flying, scaling walls, and using everyday objects as weapons. Obviously, there is a " suspension of disbelief", where it becomes hard to differentiate between reality and fantasy, feasibility and improbability. [ii] The central characters are Jin, Leo, and Mei. Jin is a police officer ordered to infiltrate the House of Flying Daggers by befriending and gaining the trust of Mei, who is suspected of being the daughter of the old rebel leader.

Mei, on the other hand, is (or rather appears to be) a blind dancer at the brothel. She reveals later on that she is not a blind dancer and has known of Jin's plan all along. Meanwhile, Leo works as a police officer, but later reveals that he is part of the House and has been orchestrating the capture of Jin. The three main characters form a love triangle, which ensues in the final battle that ends with Mei's sacrificing her life for Jin. Jin is played by actor Takeshi Kaneshiro, while Leo is played by Andy Lau, and finally, Mei is played by Zhang Ziyi.

Since House of Flying Daggers is very much rooted in Wuxia genre, its storyline prescribes to the Xia philosophy and Confucian ideologies. Xia philosophy, as having been briefly aforementioned, is a school of thought that advocates heroism through a strict code of conduct involving righteousness and honor. According to Xia, righteousness is the selfless sacrifice of oneself for the greater good (but not necessarily obeying authority), while honor is dying for a cause, as well as seeking just revenge. Xia philosophy is very much apparent in the film. [iii] Mei shows righteousness and honor through sacrificing her life for Jin, while Jin seeks revenge by attempting to kill Leo. At a larger scale, the creation of the rebel group House of Flying Daggers is founded on Xia philosophy, as they try to topple an ineffective and corrupt regime. Furthermore, Confucian virtues of propriety and harmony are also present in the storyline. [iv] In the beginning, Mei and Jin struggle with the idea of propriety, as they have feelings for one another but must retain their duties (Mei as part of the House while Jin as a police officer).

Because they eventually deviate from their duties, the Confucian concept of harmony fuels the consequences of their deviant actions, which is highlighted in the final battle scene. Moreover, the central conflict of the film is the love triangle. Since much of the conflict is brought about by Mei's existences (as the two men vie for her), harmony overcomes chaos by having Mei die. Zhang Yimou is part of the Fifth Generation, a group of Chinese filmmakers whose films burst onto the international scene in the mid-1980s.

It was the first generation of filmmakers after the Cultural Revolution, which allowed them to experiment with unorthodox and freer storytelling, ranging from black comedy (Huang Jianxin's *The Black Cannon Incident*, 1985) to the quirky and absurd (Chen Kaige's *Life on a String*, 1991). What unified all these diverse films though was that they abandoned the socialist-realist conventions popularized during the Communist period. [v] On that note, Yimou experimented with different film genres, as attested by his prolific work. But Yimou remains to be best known for his Wuxia films such as *House of Flying Daggers*.

It might be surmised that if Yimou did not live in the post-Cultural Revolution generation, he may not have been able to experiment with his auteristic style of experimenting with abundant mise-en-scene and cinematography. When asked about the Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers*, critic Mark Pollard comments, " It possesses elements of traditional martial arts films and at its best, gives the genre a much needed facelift. " [vi] The film was shot in two main locations: China and Ukraine. The final battle scene was shot in

Ukraine, where it snowed earlier than expected. The script was then changed to accommodate to the sudden seasonal change.

In the final version of the movie, Yimou lets his audience believe that the story begins in autumn and ends in winter. This proved to be a blessing in disguise, as Yimou was pleased with how the whiteness of the snow set the dramatic tone and highlighted the color of blood. [vii] Yimou is known for deviating from filmic conventions, but there are a few scenes in the movie that show that he nevertheless appreciates tradition. The bamboo forest fight scene is a predominant motif in Chinese martial arts movies. In keeping with that tradition, he suddenly decided to insert an additional bamboo scene.

The film is in color, which would have been an obvious and convenient choice, since Yimou's signature Wuxia style is the heavy emphasis on mise-en-scene, and particularly, on color and landscape scenes. The mise-en-scene in this film is very auteristic and distinct. The three main driving forces of mise-en-scene in this film are color, lighting, and setting (which includes decor and props). All three unite and interconnect to help fuel the character and narrative development. Color is used opulently in this film, employing many different color schemes in various scenes.

There are in fact seven different color schemes: color contrast between important scenes, contrast within one scene, repetition in one scene, motif throughout the plot, analogous to monochromatic colors, movement of color, and finally, use of near to total whiteness. Color contrast, whether in one scene or between scenes, is used to show profound characterization or

important changes in the storyline. For example, the first scene of the movie, the police headquarters scene, emulates an atmosphere contradictory to the next scene, which is the Peony Pavilion scene.

The first scene includes neutral-colored walls with forest greens and deep reds while the second scene has a seemingly endless variety of palette of light watercolors, ranging from peach to aquamarine. The stark deep colors of the police headquarters indicate the seriousness of the atmosphere as well as of the police officers Jin and Leo (as they discuss plans on how to destroy the House), while on the other hand, the airy feminine pastels of the brothel show a sense of whimsy and frivolity. Color repetition and motif are yet another filmic device to indicate either characterization or story development.

The color green becomes a symbol for danger as the storyline develops. As the story reaches climax, the use of green becomes more and more frequent as well. A symbiotic relationship between the green motif and scenes nearing the climax therefore develops. Furthermore, the transition from analogous scenes (bamboo forest scene) to monochromatic green scenes (House of the Flying Daggers bamboo scene and approaching soldiers scene) shows the progression of the storyline to its inevitable climax. As aforementioned, green fully assumes symbolic meaning of threat and terror.

Color can also be used for visual movement, as shown in the Peony Pavilion scene when Mei dances and sings. The pink fabric keeps on swaying as she dances and sings. Eventually, the color pink stands out the most in this scene and almost seems to move freely, on its own. The graceful and fluid

movement of the pink makes this scene highly memorable. This is done deliberately to show the significance of the last scene, when the same song that Mei sings at the Peony Pavilion is sung again in the last scene. The use of this same song heightens the dramatic weight of the last scene, when Mei dies.

To further stress the dramatic force of the last scene, Yimou employs the gradual use from near to total white. Since Yimou generously applies many colors to the rest of the film, using only white for the last few shots in the last scene makes it outstanding and memorable. Also, the spill of blood against the white snow becomes more disturbing as it is in its reddest and richest saturation. The fact that Yimou uses extremely long shots to show as much of the backdrop as possible makes this last battle scene stand out and convey the message that the battle has a much greater weight than the two characters, who are shown extremely small.

It sends the message that this fight is a microcosm of the larger struggle between duty (as portrayed by Leo) and free will (as portrayed by Jin) in the diegesis. [pic] Lighting is another device whose function is to either highlight character or story progression. Three-point lighting is the most common lighting technique used in House of Flying Daggers. This is expected because other elements of mise-en-scene and cinematography are already quite extravagant. If lighting were to be experimented even more, then the film would be sacrificing its narrative integrity for purely visual stimulation.

However, there are other techniques present besides the classic three-point lighting system. Among them (but not limited to) are: use of colored filters

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(to highlight on brandished and wielded weapons e. g. swords); soft light versus hard light (e. g. soft illumination on the brothel scene versus hard lighting on police headquarters- again shows the contrasting atmospheres); role of lighting in composition (shadow as weight, thus contributing to many symmetrically balanced scenes- Yimou uses symmetry and balance a lot in this film); and bright illumination (in final battle scene, thus complementing the brightness of white).

Since Yimou is known for shocking audience with sensory overload, it is not much of a surprise that in the jail scene, top light, which is often used for divine or holy overtones (as it could resemble the archetypal angel's halo), is in fact used to create an eerie atmosphere. Top light is used to stress the wooden posts that bind Mei. These compositional lines point out how Mei is imprisoned, both physically and emotionally (as she is desperate to be freed).

Her helplessness and vulnerability in this scene need to be conveyed effectively to the audience, so that Jin's rescue of her looks valiant and heroic, thus adhering to Xia philosophy as well as starting off a predictable love affair between these two characters. Given that this is a Wuxia film, decor and props need to be accurate to the time period but also need to be highly ornate and aesthetically pleasing. They can be used for characterization or narrative development. For example, there is a variety of decor and props present in the brothel, ranging from musical instruments and chimes to beaded curtains and painted wallpapers.

This is a sharp contrast to the barrenness of the headquarters of the House of Flying Daggers, where they only have one wooden table and few chairs. The shameless desire for luxury and pleasure in the brothel is juxtaposed against the pragmatic ideologies of the Flying Daggers. Props also become a motif. Many props, such as the circular posts used in the Echo game between Mei and Leo at the brothel, share the parallelism of having circular forms. (In fact, the circular form can also be seen, not just as props, but also as the form resulting from fight scenes. This shot shows circular relationship between the shields, the logo on the backs of the soldiers' uniforms, and even the fighting arrangement, where the soldiers form a circle to trap Jin and Mei. In addition, some props also use linear form, such as weapons, wooden posts (in the jail scene when Mei is imprisoned), and bamboo poles (in bamboo forest scenes). It should also be mentioned that setting could play an active role in the plot. Yimou proves, in this film, that setting has the ability to overwhelm the actors. viii] Throughout the film, large-scale establishing shots of the beautiful landscapes, such as of tree-lined mountains and sloping valleys, are shown. These shots do not necessarily contribute to the narrative development, but they do stay loyal to Wuxia conventions. In Wuxia, there exists a parallel universe ("Jiang Hu") where fantastical and superhuman actions can be achieved. It is an alternate world where the aesthetic of nature is appreciated. In House of Flying Daggers, there are no montage sequences or long takes at all.

It is no surprise that there are no auteristic montage sequences because of the particular genre of this movie, and because Yimou is not known for montage at all. There are no long takes as well. Again, this is no surprise

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since this movie prides itself on its fast-paced action sequences that require fast editing. The predominant elements of cinematography present in this film are angles and levels of framing, long and medium-long shots (complemented at times with crane shots), and heavy use of pans and tilts in fight sequences. Using these techniques showcase the highly stylized and artistic Wuxia martial arts.

In Wuxia films such as this one, the fight scenes are an integral part of the plot. They are as important, if not even more, than the narration itself. This is an example of a medium-long shot and a high angle of framing. This showcases Mei's martial arts superiority over the foot soldiers. This is a medium-long shot and a low level of framing that shows Mei's temporary defeat from the soldiers. Having her trapped makes her very vulnerable for a while, until Jin is able to rescue her- yet again- showing how it has been feasible that they develop feelings for one another.

This medium-long shot and high level of framing enables the audience to witness Mei's martial arts ability, which is a requisite in Wuxia. Most of the elements of mise-en-scene, namely the setting, costume, and decor take more center stage than the narration. The action scenes definitely take more center stage than the narration as well. This is not a surprise since it is a Wu Xia film. But these elements overpowered the thematic core of the movie. A film, above all things, must retain a sense of humanity. Yimou is not able to do this for this film.

House of Flying Daggers is more directed towards a commercial market that could only be stimulated with too many action scenes and has less regard for

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character or thematic development. Though there are definitely many elements that support characterization and story development, they nevertheless appear insubstantial in relation to the focus on Wuxia aspects. The over-abundance of fight scenes results in sparse dialogue and intimate character-driven scenes, which deprioritize the central themes of sacrifice for love and the universal struggle between duty and free will.

The use of color is excessive as well, having many different color schemes. Though emphasizing on color is not necessarily bad, in this film, it further contributes to the already over-the-top fight scenes. Again, since this is a Wuxia film, fight scenes are integral. But, precisely because fight scenes are so integral, other mise-en-scene elements should have been downplayed to give way to a more down-to-earth, realistic narration this movie lacks.

Particular elements of mise-en-scene and cinematography contribute to characterization and story development, but precisely because Yimou is dependent on appealing to the senses, House of Flying Daggers lacks thematic reinforcement (that could have been done traditionally, with intimate dialogue for example). But Yimou's appreciation to Wuxia, with its sense of fantasy, martial arts, and a refreshing diegesis, easily shows through. Appendix Original (Mandarin) Title: Shi Mian Mai Fu (Ambushed in Ten Directions)

Main Cast: Zhang Ziyi (Mei), Takeshi Kaneshiro (Jin), Andy Lau (Jin), and Dandan Song (Yee) Director: Zhang Yimou Scriptwriters: Feng Li, Bin Wang, and Zhang Yimou Producers: William Kong, Weiping Zhang, Zhang Yimou, and Zhenyan Zhang Production Year: 2004 Production Companies: Beijing

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New Picture Film Company, China Film Co-Production Corporation, EDKO Film Ltd. , Elite Group Enterprises, and Zhang Yimou Studio Endnotes

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