From Thunderstorm to Golden Flower: Politico-Economic Conditions of Adaptive Appropriation

Feng Lan
Department of Modern Languages & Linguistics, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

ABSTRACT
Zhang Yimou’s Curse of the Golden Flower is a product of his adaptive appropriation of Cao Yu’s Thunderstorm. While Zhang persistently asserts the relationship of his work with Cao’s play, in the film he unhesitatingly erases the primary theme of class conflict that sustains the play’s ideological articulation, thus drastically reconfiguring the social relations of the characters and reconﬁguring the temporal–spatial settings of the narrative. Such a seemingly self-contradictory performance of adaptation on Zhang’s part is in fact dictated by the politico-economic conditions of post-socialist cinema in China. By reversing the ideological pursuit of the source work, Zhang has transformed a play resisting the newly emerging capitalist system in the China of the 1920s–1930s into a commercial movie courting the capitalist system that has been revitalized in post-Mao China. Moreover, the differences in terms of content between Cao’s play and Zhang’s film reﬂect profound changes in time regarding each age’s understanding of not only the nature and function of artistic works but also the social obligations of the creative artist.

KEYWORDS
Cao Yu; Zhang Yimou; adaptation; commercial cinema in China

1. Adaptation and/or appropriation
There is little doubt that much of Zhang Yimou’s success as a ﬁlm director has resulted from his successful ﬁlmic adaptations, as conﬁrmed by a long list of his major works starting from the 1987 Red Sorghum, his debut movie based on Mo Yan’s novel, to the
2014 *Coming Home* rendered from Geling Yan’s novel. Notably, almost all of Zhang’s source texts are prose fictions by Chinese-language writers who are not just his contemporaries but more importantly, as Deppman has observed (34–38), also share with him similar socio-historical experiences and ideological visions. The only exception is Zhang’s 2006 costume blockbuster *Curse of the Golden Flower* (hereafter referred to as *Curse*). This film is adapted from the play *Thunderstorm* authored in 1933 by Cao Yu (1910–1996), the most canonized Chinese playwright of Zhang’s parental generation. More interestingly, Zhang himself has repeatedly, and intentionally too, acknowledged his source in Cao’s play (Y. Zhang, “Xinlang yule”; Weintraub), even though the film is such an unapologetically radical revision of the original that it should be deemed an entirely new product in its own right. Such a singularity of the film as an adaptation is certainly noteworthy. In North America and Western Europe, so far *Curse* has received little attention from adaptation studies scholars.1 Whereas in China, there have been a number of journal articles examining Cao’s play and Zhang’s film from various comparative perspectives (Li; G. Wang; Gao; Y. Zhang; M. Zhang). However, what is strikingly missing from all these Chinese articles, notwithstanding their contributions to our evaluation of Zhang’s film, is a due notice of the director’s deletion of the theme of class conflict in the adaptive process. In fact, such a silence about, or insensitivity to, the issue of class on the part of these Chinese scholars is itself symptomatic of the overall sociopolitical milieu in post-socialist China, which is precisely what informed Zhang’s making of this film.

In her study on cross-genre intertextuality, Julie Sanders distinguishes two types of adaptive practice based on different relationships between the new creation and its source material: one is adaptation that still maintains connection with the informing source, the other is appropriation that “affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain” (26). In his inquiry into the role transmedial adaptation plays in value re-formation, Timothy Corrigan pushes Sanders’ distinction further by shifting primary attention from the genre to the agency of adaptation; he then perceives in appropriation a much “more oppositional and even antagonistic relationship” with the original and thus an intrinsic tendency “to usurp those sources to celebrate the power of performative agency itself” (54). In light of the two scholars’ formulations, I would like to call Zhang’s dealing with Cao’s play an act of “adaptive appropriation,” for it reveals combined characteristics captured in both Sander’s notion of adaptation and Corrigan’s notion of appropriation. What is unique about adaptive appropriation is that it is eager to assert, rather than to disguise, its relationship with the informing source, while it relentlessly undermines, even reverses, the ideological value of the source work as well as changes its teleological function. Such an adaptive practice is determined not only by the nature of the adopted media and the subjective intent of the adapting agent, but also, I should add to Corrigan’s point, by the historical and politico-economic conditions on which the production of the specific media and the performance of the adaptive agent are predicated.

In this essay, I will examine Zhang’s adaptive appropriation of *Thunderstorm* by organizing my analysis around the following argument. First, class conflict constitutes the major theme of *Thunderstorm*. Such a theme reflects the overarching concern preoccupying the minds of China’s cultural elites during the early 1930s, for whom literature and arts served as a tool of social criticism. Second, in his filmic adaptation
Zhang erases such a class consciousness, replacing Cao’s fierce attack on the capitalist system with a facile criticism of feudal patriarchal polity, a change that entails his reconstruction of the narrative in its temporal–spatial dimensions as well as the presentation of characters. Third, although Zhang’s desire to retell Cao’s story springs from a personal need at a critical juncture of his directorial career, the transmedial strategies whereby he recounts the story are overdetermined by both the politico-economic nature of the media and the sociohistorical conditions under the dominant regime of power and knowledge in post-socialist China.

2. Staging social criticism in class-conscious drama

Cao Yu wrote in the vein of his contemporary Chinese playwrights, who launched the wave of “realist drama” in the 1930s and demanded that drama reflect social life and serve as an instrument of social criticism. It is true that Cao Yu was never able to fully clarify what exactly he wanted to convey in Thunderstorm when he composed it, but he was consistent in claiming that the play was his response to the unsettling realities of Chinese society at his time. In the 1936 preface to the play, he observed that he wrote the play to “attack the Chinese family and society” because he felt he had to “give vent to suppressed rages” (Cao 6). Many years later, in a long interview, Cao not only maintained the same observation but also described what his “rages” were at the time of penning Thunderstorm. He recalled that he then found himself in a society full of injustice, wherein the wealthy and powerful enjoyed a luxurious and immoral life by oppressing and exploiting the poor. Terribly disturbed by such a social injustice, he developed a strong hatred toward this society and its ruling class, so strong that, in his own words, “I wish it would perish even if I had to die with it” (Yusheng 40, 46). In fact, Cao Yu’s feeling of abhorrence is voiced in the play through the liberal-minded character Zhou Chong, who is heard to announce: “I hate this unjust society, and I hate those people who live only by brute force” (Cao 87). It is such feeling that compelled Cao Yu to create Thunderstorm.

Thus, the play was intended to envision the inevitable perish of a corrupted Chinese bourgeois society in the 1920s. The fate of this society is allegorically invoked in the play by what tragically happens to the Zhou family. In the play, class contradiction constitutes a major theme by which the playwright organizes dramatic events and defines the relations of his characters. The play also exposes the male-dominated marriage structure as exemplified by the relationship between the protagonist Zhou Puyuan and his wife. But this sub-theme does not stand alone; it is integrated with the major theme to reinforce the playwright’s conviction that the newly emerging bourgeois society in China was one that had evolved from a no less depraved sociopolitical formation of feudalism and therefore was guilty of the sins of both systems. Accordingly, as a typical Chinese “national capitalist,” Zhou Puyuan is seen to take pains to build what is doomed to collapse, for it is founded on disruptive social relations characterized by class division and class antagonism.

In the play, the irreconcilable class division is illustrated by, among other things, Zhou Puyuan’s relationship with Shiping, which is what planted the seed of death in the first place. Thirty years ago, young master Puyuan had a love affair with Shiping, a servant’s daughter. They had two sons out of wedlock. Because of her low social
status, Shiping could not get accepted by Puyuan’s parents and was expelled from the Zhou’s house together with her sick baby boy. Her elder son, Zhou Ping, was taken from her and stayed with his father. However, Zhou Ping, an illegitimate son who embodies the forbidden fruit of an original sin, grows up only to become something that approximates the destructive force of retribution, first by seducing his stepmother and, later, by unknowingly forming an incestuous relationship with his half-sister. Zhou Ping’s deeds accelerate the downfall of the Zhou family.

Cao Yu also inserts the motif of class conflict into the life of the Zhou’s, thus placing the family tragedy against a broader historical background and endowing it with a greater social significance. Dahai, the second illegitimate son abandoned by Zhou Puyuan, grows up in a working-class stepfamily. He comes to work in the coal mine without knowing that its owner is his biological father. There, he witnesses in many instances how cruel and wicked Zhou Puyuan is, such as denying injured miners any compensation and ordering the police at the mine to open fire at protesting miners. When the miners launch a strike, Dahai stands out as their representative in negotiating with the company. This role brings Dahai to the Zhou mansion, where he comes into direct clash with Zhou Puyuan. At the end of the play, after seeing the wretched death of his half-siblings Sifeng and Zhou Chong, Dahai runs away even though Zhou Puyuan now wants to bring him back into the family. Shiping tells Zhou Puyuan why Dahai leaves: “He hates you. He will not come back” (Cao 126). Later, in an interview, Cao Yu explicitly spelt out what he meant by such a “hate”: “It is not an individual’s familial hatred. It is rather a class hatred” (Yusheng 41; emphasis mine). Conceivably, it can be inferred that instead of coming back to inherit the enterprise of the Zhou family, Dahai would remain its enemy on behalf of his fellow miners. Like his elder brother, Dahai seems predestined to represent what comes to destroy the very family that produced him. In that sense, Zhou Puyuan, who is presented as a personification of China’s capitalist class, can be seen to personify the kind of social contradictions through which, from an orthodox Marxist perspective, the capitalist class begets the force of its own alienation and destruction.

Despite his apparent subscription to the notion of class struggle in his theatrical representation of Chinese society, Cao Yu was never a follower of Marxism, nor did he ever regard himself as one. That is part of the reason why his real ideological position underlying the play has always been a topic of controversy among critics (Tong 1–6). According to Sima (298–300), one of the most critical of Cao Yu, the playwright’s intent to dramatize class relations and even “class hatred” in Thunderstorm was merely an opportunistic strategy to please China’s left-wing writers who were dominating China’s literary arena in the early 1930s. Whereas Lan (39), who defended Cao Yu’s utilization of the theme of class conflict, argued that it was not an intentional posturing, but rather an act of “political unconsciousness,” a passive reaction of a creative writer to the overwhelming influence of China’s leftist culture. What Sima and Lan agreed on is that Cao’s adoption of a class-oriented perspective in the play was influenced by a prevalent social outlook espoused by many Chinese intellectuals at that time. Cao Yu himself also confirmed such an unconscious influence. He said that when composing the play, he just felt he had to articulate something that resonated with the “vibration and spirit of the time” (Yusheng 46). What Cao Yu referred to was the impact of Marx’s theory of
class society, which was shaping the mind of Chinese intellectuals and their perception of Chinese society.

Marxism arrived in China around the turn of the twentieth century. During the 1910s, Chinese engagement with Marxism began to gain momentum as more and more leading intellectuals, including Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, enthusiastically embraced Marxist thought and made efforts to popularize its main premises by publishing introductory articles in influential magazines such as the New Youth. From the early 1920s to the early 1930s, China witnessed a thriving enterprise of disseminating Marxism in this country: during this time, Chinese translations of representative works by Marx and other major Marxist thinkers were published, including The Communist Manifesto (1920) and the first volume of Das Kapital (1930). By the mid-1930s, Marxism had already firmly established itself in China as the predominant ideology of revolution, to which many Chinese turned in order to seek remedies for the crisis the nation was confronted with. For instance, during the time from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, there was a nationwide public debate on the nature of Chinese society and solutions to its ongoing problems, involving many leading political and cultural figures of the nation. What is interesting is that whether from the left camp or the right camp, the participants mostly used analytical tools derived from Marxism, with the only difference in putting emphasis on different concepts and aspects of Marxian thought. But they all, as Dirlik (61) discovered, “agreed on these basic problems and believed in the efficacy of Marxism in explaining their nature.”

Among Marxist doctrines, what seemed to appeal most to China’s cultural elites was historical materialism. According to this theory, human society is a socioeconomic organization based on the union of its productive force and production relations; in this society, individuals are divided into classes in line with their relationships with the means of production, and the evolution of the society is propelled by the struggle between warring classes that represent different interests in the process of material production. In 1921, Marx’s “Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in which he systematically formulated this theory, was translated into Chinese and published in Shanghai. In May of the same year, a Chinese translation of Herman Gorter’s Der historische Materialismus was also published. Gorter’s book was intended to be an easy reader; in it he explicated Marx’s theory by using an accessible language. The translated book became so popular across the country that it had 11 reprints by May 1930 (G. Zhang 82). Historical materialism exerted a huge impact on China’s left-wing writers in the early 1930s. It provided them with a powerful tool of class analysis with which they were able to renegotiate and remold Chinese society. Even more importantly, it convinced them that as part of the superstructure, arts and literature were not only overdetermined by the reality of social relations, but should also serve the agenda of the progressive class in its historical pursuits. It is in such a milieu that Cao Yu started his creative life. Although Cao Yu was not directly associated with the left-wing writers, his ideological proclivity was doubtless left-leaning, and that is why Lu Xun praised him as “a rising leftist playwright” (Nimu 237). The keen class consciousness that permeated the works of Chinese artists and writers in the 1930s, Cao Yu included, would form a striking contrast with its absence
from the works by Chinese artists and writers, such as Zhang Yimou, during the first decade of the new millennium.

3. Capital, politics, and commercial cinema

Zhang Yimou was not the first filmmaker to adapt Thunderstorm: before him there had been five movies adapted from the play (Fang 1938; Wu 1957; S. Zhu 1961; Sun 1984; Huang 1996). Unlike Zhang’s Curse, all these earlier adaptations adopted the original title of Thunderstorm. Besides, although not without varying degrees of revisions due to respective directors’ esthetic and ideological propensities, these adaptations were all intended to recreate the play on the silver screen in order to disseminate Cao’s theatrical vision. The directors of the most recent two adaptations, Sun Daolin and Huang Haoyi, even respectively received Cao Yu’s personal endorsement for their transmedial efforts (Sun, “Tan Leiyu de gaibian”; P. Wang). But that did not guarantee the success of their adaptive projects. It turned out that Sun’s film left no impact on Chinese cinema nor memorable box-office record, whereas Huang’s film was simply a financial disaster (P. Wang). These were not the kind of films that Zhang Yimou wanted to produce when he undertook to adapt Thunderstorm.

Zhang’s directorial preference at the turn of the new millennium, despite his already established position as the leading auteur in China, was nonetheless shaped by the politico-economic conditions of Chinese cinema. During the 1990s, Chinese film industry went through a crisis in the face of unprecedented challenges that largely arose from the CCP-guided economic reform. The rise of alternative entertainment media, such as TV, home video, and VCD, lured the audience away from movie theaters. Besides, starting from 1994, the state-endorsed import of Hollywood blockbusters increasingly marginalized Chinese films’ domestic market share. For China’s film directors, the most challenging reality then was perhaps the rapid privatization of the Chinese film industry, which virtually ended their hope of reliance on financial support from state studios and pushed them into the market for their own survival. Such changes brought about what has been called “the transition of Chinese cinema from art wave to entertainment wave” throughout the 1990s (Y. Zhu 2), a market-bound process that witnessed the alliance in China of capital, state, and cinema, to redefine the value of film and reshape its form as a mass media.

The trajectory of Chinese cinema’s transformation found a compelling illustration in Zhang’s career change at that time. Starting from the late 1990s, Zhang switched from making art films to commercial films for the continuity of his own directorial career as well as the reinvigoration of Chinese cinema. From the beginning of his commitment to commercial filmmaking, Zhang seemed resolved to explore a path different from that of other major Chinese commercial filmmakers, especially Feng Xiaogang; such directors were mostly interested in urban comedies that were relatively inexpensive to make and catered only to domestic audiences. Instead, Zhang wanted to replicate Hollywood’s production of blockbusters in order to produce his own Chinese blockbusters that could compete with American films in both Chinese and foreign markets. Such a Chinese blockbuster would depend at least on two things. First, it was supported by a big budget. Second, it utilized a popular genre format. With its conventionalized narrative structure and internalized cultural codes (ideas, images, characters, etc.), such
a formulaic genre film was expected to attract the largest possible viewership at home and abroad in order to maximize its box-office returns. The filmic form Zhang developed for his commercial products was a combination of action movie and period drama, a hybrid genre that would allow him to effectively tap the entertainment value inherent in Chinese martial arts literature and cultural memories of a bygone China. The blockbuster *Hero* (2002) was Zhang’s first successful fruit of such commercial filmmaking strategies, followed by *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) in the same vein. *Curse* (2006) was just another of Zhang’s endeavors to reinforce his pursuit of commercial cinema along the same line.

At the time of its making, the $45-million budget made *Curse* the most expensive film in the history of Chinese-language cinemas. All the money came from private investment sources, including its production company, namely the Beijing-based New Picture Co., and some overseas financial institutions, in particular Hong Kong’s Standard Chartered Bank. Conceivably, Zhang would feel that he was obligated to make a film capable of guaranteeing its investment returns, and that its success could only be judged, not at film festivals, but rather at the box office both at home and abroad. Zhang repeatedly underscored such an intention in answering interview questions about *Curse*:

> I made such a costume drama purely for the market, in particular the overseas market. Today, if a big-budget commercial film made by a Chinese company only depends on the market at home, it would surely lose money. But the overseas market only recognizes this genre [of ancient action movie]; it would not buy films of other genres. (Y. Zhang, “Xinlang yule”)

Zhang’s strong desire to produce a profitable blockbuster also accounts for his choice of Cao’s play for adaptation. First, he was fully aware that *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm) was a “household name” and still having a lot of fans in China (Weintraub). It is precisely because of the enormous appeal of the play’s brand name that Zhang always publicly affirmed the relationship of his film with the play, even though the film was so different in both form and content that it should be regarded as his own new creation. This was the same marketing strategy that Feng Xiaogang, Zhang’s competitor in Chinese commercial cinema, also used when Feng and his production team advertised the connection between his blockbuster *Banquet* (2006) and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In addition, Zhang found in Cao’s play a “firmly-grounded story,” with “intense dramatic conflict reminiscent of Greek tragedy.” In other words, the story had a narrative structure that would suit the taste of the audience familiar with Western theatrical conventions. More significantly, what Zhang perceived in the story was not a class issue generated under a capitalist system, but rather a gender issue, the “torture that feudalist culture inflicted on women” (Y. Zhang, “Xinlang yule”). As I will point out in the following discussion, in his filmic revision Zhang conveniently interweaves such a gender issue with the received concept of Oriental despotism in order to relay a story with much wider appeal and easier intelligibility.

Zhang’s disregard of Cao’s concern with class division in the play resonated with the dominant ideological unconscious then in post-Mao China. There, class ideology had been losing its credibility since the late 1970s due to the destructive consequences of class politics during Mao’s reign. It is important to note that several social forces were
responsible for this change. The decisive force was the post-Mao CCP leadership, which shifted its central agenda from preoccupation with class revolution to national economic construction. In order to mobilize the entire population in fulfilling its new objectives, the CCP government now came to advocate a society free from class tension. Such a political desire culminated in the Hu Jintao era (2002–2012) when the Party enthusiastically called for building a “harmonious society.” The Party’s new ideological policy received corroboration from the cultural establishments in post-Mao China. In varying degrees, China’s cultural elites either completely jettisoned class theory, or substituted the combatant Marxist paradigm of class analysis with a peaceable Weberian “stratum analysis,” in their endeavors to reconceptualize Chinese society. This intellectual tendency was best represented by a major research project conducted in the late 1990s by a group of scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Shying away from the class concept, they proposed to re-explain the composition of contemporary Chinese society by dividing it into various social strata based on different professions and their possessions of diverse organizational, economic, and cultural resources (Lu). Another force pushing to abandon class ideology derived from those Chinese individuals who had lived through the terrors of class struggles during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution. On the one hand, Zhang Yimou is among such individuals; his strong abhorrence of that traumatizing event can be ascertained in his best-known film To Live (1994). On the other hand, however, Zhang is not an ordinary individual. As the best-known Chinese film director, he is also part of the contemporary cultural establishments in China; besides, his filmmaking decisions cannot but represent the interests of all those who invest, financially or spiritually, in his films. In that sense, his suppression of the class theme in Cao’s play can be seen as signaling the cultural elites’ succumbing to the political desire of the post-Mao regime of power and knowledge in China.

The other noteworthy impact on Zhang’s eschew of a class-based narrative in adapting Cao’s play stems from the teleological nature of commercial filmmaking. This does not mean that commercial cinema is necessarily hostile to class discourse; commercial cinema could embrace representations of class issues insofar as doing so would first of all translate into market gains. As we know now, for Chinese directors of Zhang’s generation during the 1990s and the following decade, cinematic engagement with class issues was not what the market was interested in. More importantly, commercial cinema by nature recognizes no obligation to serve as a tool for social criticism, a role that Cao Yu’s generation of Chinese artists and writers bestowed upon their creative works. The most fundamental difference between Cao Yu of the 1930s and Zhang Yimou in the first decade of the new millennium is this: the former treated his play as a form of ideological articulations and therefore a way of intervening into class-informed social realities, whereas the latter retreated from realistic concerns and was bent on realizing the maximum economic value of his film at the cost of its ideological and pedagogical values.

4. Consuming feudal China through transmedial appropriation

To produce a commercial blockbuster, Zhang in the adaptive process abandoned the class perspective of Thunderstorm and its critical engagement with the capitalist society,
and thus turned the story into a tragedy of women’s suffering in feudal China. Specifically, Zhang subjected Cao’s story to a drastic reconstruction in three aspects: re-historicizing the narrative, re-socializing the diegetic space, and reframing the ideological concern, all for the purpose of enhancing the film’s entertainment attributes to attract both Chinese and international audiences.

The film *Curse* suggests two temporal settings intended for different groups of audience but serving the same entertainment purpose. Such a design demonstrates Zhang’s skills to utilize place-based patterns of viewing conventions and expectations. In the English-subtitled version distributed to the international market by Sony Pictures, the film states in the opening title sequence that the story happens in “928 A.D. China, Tang Dynasty.” This is a deliberately misleading statement, for the Tang Empire (618–907) had already ended 21 years earlier. One may argue that this could refer to “Hou Tang” (the Later Tang), a much smaller and short-lived warlord state (923–937), but the two dynasties are in fact distinct and separate historical entities. The truth is, by manipulating this purposeful confusion that few Western audiences could detect, Zhang may have hoped that this misnomer would lead them to associate the story with the Tang, the best-known dynasty of imperial China and thus a dazzling icon of its fabulous culture. He did not conceal such an intention at a *Collider* interview right before the film’s premiere in North America: there, he confirmed that by placing the story in “Tang Chao” (Tang Dynasty), he could elaborate on the “splendid backdrop” of the story, that is, employing his typical expressionist montage of opulent colors and lights to invoke a visual fantasy about the legendary life of extravagance and sumptuousness in a powerful empire (*Weintraub*).

In contrast, the Chinese-only version of the film for the domestic market supplies no date or reference to the Tang, not even the Later Tang. The sole temporal hint is that the film mentions twice the King of Liang, the protagonist’s father-in-law, alluding to the Liang Kingdom (907–923) that had replaced the Tang as the ruling power in central China. Based on this cue, the Chinese audience could then relate the story to the post-Tang time, the so-called Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (907–979). Here, the setting as part of the internalized cultural codes functions in a different way. To many Chinese, this is not a familiar period; it is one of the few fragmentary moments in Chinese history that have received the least attention in history books and literary works, for China’s historians and writers have habitually paid heed only to the cyclical patterns of major dynasties that succeeded in bringing a unified China under one government. It appears to be Zhang’s calculated choice to present to the domestic market a story about this obscure age, because, for the Chinese audience who had been bombarded in recent years by the large number of films and TV plays set in a few major dynasties, the Qing for one, a film set in an underexplored historical territory could be attractive simply for its imaginative freshness, besides the esthetic sense of mystery it would stimulate. The film’s temporal setting, however, framed either for invoking a ghostly post-Tang China or for fantasizing about the glorious Tang, is not meant to strengthen the narrative with solid historicity; it instead aims to suppress historical specificities that otherwise would allow the audience to situate the story in authentic historical contexts. For instance, there is no identifiable historical event; the emperor is nameless
throughout the film; his reigning title is never mentioned, nor is the family name of the royal house. It seems what the director really wants is to discourage any attempt to link his costume epic with whatsoever historical realities. In that sense, Zhang’s effort to re-historicize the narrative is nothing short of a de-historicizing strategy, by which he not only just moves Cao’s plot from a bourgeois society to a feudal world, but rather resets the plot in a timeless China fossilized in its phantasmagorical antiquity.

Such a historical setting is accompanied by a refashioned space, wherein what used to be a melodramatic stage of a bourgeois household is transformed into an internal battlefield of an imperial family. For all its ostensible grandeur and spaciousness, the imperial palace in Zhang’s film lacks the social magnitude and depth that the Zhou mansion in Cao’s play signifies. In the play, what brings the characters together, defining their relations and regulating their actions, is informed by a broad social life of opposing forces beyond the household, whereas the palace in the film is a closed world imprisoning all its players in the struggles of the imperial family driven by various personal desires. That is why, in the film, the second son is no longer an abandoned child brought up by a low-class family, but a legitimate prince growing up in the royal house. Yet, this spatial arrangement from such social perspectives is what Zhang needs. The setting features the kind of mise-en-scène that allows him to insert and intensify such elements as sex, incest, court intrigues, and violent fights, elements presumably indispensable for a commercial blockbuster that is catered not only to Chinese fans of costume martial arts movies but also to Western audience familiar with Greek and Shakespearean tragedies.

Of all the revisions Zhang makes, the most salient is to reframe the ideological concern. Although Curse is a commercial product, Zhang still needs to package it with an ideological theme that could serve to enhance the marketability of the movie in several crucial ways. First, the theme ought to generate as well as sustain the central conflict in order to help organize all events in a coherent and cogent manner. Second, it must recognizably stem from the cultural tradition of China in order to ensure the Chinese-ness of the story. Third, it should also be presented as an ideological formulation intelligible and accessible to international viewers who have no direct knowledge of Chinese history except for that which they have commonly obtained through Western discourses about China. The theme Zhang seeks to explore is a critique of Chinese despotism, which locates the source of social contradictions not in class struggle, but in the dehumanizing operation of a feudal patriarchal polity that gives a tyrannical despot absolute power in his oppressive rule over his subjects, particularly the female and the young.

It should be noted that such a thematic reconstruction again exhibits Zhang’s obsession with feudal China, although this should not be surprising for those familiar with Zhang’s films. What has consistently defined the ideological orientation of Zhang’s films, arthouse or commercial, is a sort of cultural determinism, which believes that certain essential elements in Chinese culture determine the nature and contours of the Chinese tradition and are thus responsible for its historical performances, including all social problems it has engendered. That belief has caused Zhang to focus his camera on the historical manifestations of some undesirable aspects of Chinese culture in his cinematic rethinking of Chinese history and society, such as in Ju Dou (1990) and
Raise the Red Lantern (1991), which mount a harsh criticism of the remnants of the patriarchal values of feudal China. The same critical thrust again finds its way into his reconfigurations of the historical backdrop in Curse.

In this film, the sin of patriarchal China is crystalized in its feudal despotic polity, and this system is embodied by the nameless Emperor. He rules this land by means of two instruments: violent force and ideological doctrine. The film opens with a brief scene of the imperial palace. It then quickly cuts to a sequence of long and medium shots showing a group of horsemen at night with the Emperor’s golden carriage among them. What the camera tries to foreground by using different angles and lightings are the imperial cavaliers’ spectacular speed and magnificent power metonymically signified by their galloping horses and shining armor. This is part of the imperial army returning from a war they have just won under the Emperor’s leadership. Cutting back and forth between scenes of the splendid palace and the mighty troops, these shots not only suggest that the prosperity and authority of the empire depend on its military force, but also caution that the Emperor’s formidable iron-cavalry can swiftly crush any enemy.

For the Emperor, however, ideological indoctrination is even more important as an instrument of rule. The film tries to portray the Emperor as a devoted practitioner of Confucian teachings, for, among other things, he is often seen to reiterate from a Confucian perspective that only by keeping the family in order can one govern the empire orderly. His application of the Confucian doctrine to managing the imperial household reaches a climax in the family festival banquet on the high terrace. There, positioned in the upper center of the scene, the stern and aloof Emperor preaches to his sons:

The terrace is round, and the table is square. What do they represent? They represent the circular heaven and the square earth. Heaven and earth provide us with patterns of law, and so we can rule in an orderly way. Under the circle, within the square, everyone has his proper place. This is called orderly rule. Monarch, subject, father, son, loyalty, filial piety, ritual, and righteousness, all things must be under the orderly rule. (Curse 20:46)

The Emperor deems himself the Heaven-chosen ruler presiding over the hierarchical order. As he tells Prince Jai: “Although there are many things in the world, you can only have what I grant you” (Curse 10:10). The absolute authority of the orderly rule demanded by the Emperor dominates every aspect of life in the diegetic world: the daily operation of the palace is symbolically regulated by the recurrent voice of time watchers; the palace maids get up and put on clothes in unison; even the Empress must obey it by taking her medicine at the exact time prescribed by the Emperor.

However, under this seemingly orderly life lie intense struggles because the Emperor’s cruel and oppressive rule engenders contradiction and opposition. The first sign of this tension surfaces when the Emperor meets Prince Jai in the official inn. From their conversation the audience learns that sometime ago the prince disobeyed his father and was punished by being sent to the frontier. The central conflict that causes the chain of events in the film occurs between the Emperor and the Empress. Years ago, when the Emperor was still a military officer, he deserted his first wife to marry the Princess of Liang (the present Empress), not because he loved the
latter, but rather because he then could make use of her father’s power to achieve his political ambition. Never really loved by her husband, the Empress has been tortured by a life devoid of true affection and happiness. Therefore, her incestuous relationship with her stepson, the Crown Prince, can be viewed as a result of her total disillusionment with her marriage as well as an act of defiant reaction. Unlike the male protagonist in Cao Yu’s play, in the film the Emperor has been aware of the adulterous affair, and plans to murder the Empress by putting poison in her medicine. The Empress’s discovery of this plan further reinforces her determination to launch a coup to overthrow the Emperor. As it turns out, her plot ends up in tragedy, with the bloody deaths of all three princes.

The portrayal of the Emperor in the film fits perfectly into the Western imagination about an ancient Chinese despot, a stereotypical image imbedded in the Western discourse of Oriental despotism (Wittfogel). Canonized in Western orientalist discourses with contributions by major Western thinkers, including Hegel and Marx, the theory of Oriental despotism has profoundly shaped the Western perception of pre-modern Chinese society. On the other hand, such ideas concerning Oriental despotism, especially the one posited by Marx in his famous inquiry of “Asiatic Mode of Production,” have had a great influence on Chinese intellectuals since the early decades of the last century. In fact, such a negative assumption about the nature of Eastern, especially Chinese, feudal society is deeply entrenched in various kinds of anti-feudalist campaigns that Chinese intellectuals have engaged in recent Chinese history starting from the May Fourth New Culture Movement; almost without exception, such campaigns have been always mainly directed against the Confucian tradition. And this tradition, perhaps unsurprisingly, appears once again to be the easy target of Zhang’s criticism in Curse. There are several scenes in the film specifically intended to visualize the connection between the despotic Emperor and Confucian politics. For instance, before the imperial dinner at the night of the Double Ninth Festival, the Emperor is seen to guide the Empress to write in Chinese calligraphy “zhong xiao li yi” (loyalty, filial piety, ritual, and righteousness), the four characters that inscribe the supreme sociopolitical virtues cherished by Confucianism. Zhang’s cinematic attack on the Confucian despot clearly resonates with the larger ideological theme that Chinese audiences have been familiar with. Thus, by playing with such a theme, Zhang has found a convenient and appealing way to market his film to audiences both abroad and at home.

5. Conclusion

The relationship of Curse with Thunderstorm represents a case of adaptive appropriation. It is a unique practice of radical transmedial rendition through which Zhang Yimou strove to accomplish the dual task of completely transforming Cao Yu’s play and still maintaining a desirable connection of his film with the play. Such a seemingly self-contradictory performance is dictated by the logic of commercial filmmaking. Similar to Cao’s creative impulse that was driven by the sociopolitical circumstances of his own time, Zhang’s re-creative intention and filmmaking strategies in this case were premised on the politico-economic conditions in post-socialist China during the 1990s and the following decade. As a consequence, the two works not only tell very different stories,
but also exhibit a number of distinctions that reveal profound changes in time regarding the artist’s recognition of the nature and social function of artistic works. First, while Cao treated his play as a form of ideological articulations committed to realistic social engagements, Zhang has openly presented his film as a consumable art commodity for a global audience. Second, keenly concerned with the social problems of his time and under the influence of its dominant intellectual trend, Cao was able to utilize Marx’s concept of class struggle to analyze and represent social relations in his creative work. In contrast, apart from trying to distance his work from historical realities, Zhang has steered away from the discourse of class; for him an ideological posture serves more to package his product for the market than to enable the practice of social intervention. Third, both Cao and Zhang sought in Western-invented theories an empowering tool to reinforce the persuasiveness of their works. What is ironic, though, is that while Cao used Marx’s class theory to resist the newly emerging capitalist system in China, Zhang has employed a partially Marxian concept of Oriental despotism to court a revitalized capitalist system in that country.

Note

1. Of the three hitherto full-length English articles on *Curse* published outside China, none is concerned with the relationship between the film and its source text. The first article dwells on the scenes of banquet in *Curse* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (*Tien*); the second concentrates on the film director’s desire to “challenge the centrality of patriarchal civilization and its alleged progressive nature” (*Yiju* 42); and the third is aimed to investigate the manifestation of “fascist aestheticism” in the film (*Ma*).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Feng Lan received his Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame. He teaches courses in modern Chinese literature, Chinese cinema, and Chinese diasporic literature and culture at Florida State University in the United States.

Works cited

Cao, Yu. *Leiyu* [Thunderstorm]. Xi’an: Shaanxi shida chubanshe, 2011. Print.

Corrigan, Timothy. “Emerging from Converging Cultures: Circulation, Adaptation, and Value.” In *The Politics of Adaptation: Media Convergence and Ideology*. Ed. D. Hassler-Forest and P. Nicklas. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.

Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang. *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Fiction and Film*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010. Print.

Dirlik, Arif. *Marxism in the Chinese Revolution*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. Print.

Fang, Peilin, director. *Leiyu* [Thunderstorm]. Shanghai: Xinhua Film Company, 1938.

Gao, Weihong. “Cong Leiyu dao Mancheng jindai huangjinjia: Jianxi huaju yu dianying de wenti tezhi” [From Thunderstorm to *Curse of the Golden Flower*: Analysing the Nature of Play and Film as Different Genres]. *Neijiang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 25.1 (2010). 75–78. Print.
Huang, Haoyi, (Wong Ho-yi), director. Leiyu [Thunderstorm]. Hong Kong: Guanjia Investment Limited, 1996.

Lan, Dizhi. “Liangge jieji zhijian de aiqing gushi” [The Love Story between Two Classes]. Qinghua daxue xuebao 14.1 (1999). 35–40. Print.

Li, Jianzhong, and Xiaolan Li. “Jie taren zhuanao ‘zou Maicheng’: Dapian Mancheng jindai huangjinjia pipan” [Predicament from Utilizing Other’s Mind: A Critique of Curse of the Golden Flower]. Tansuo yu zhengming no. 1 (2007): 31–34. Print.

Lu, Xueyi, ed. Dangdai Zhongguo shehui jiecheng yanjiu [Research Report on the Social Strata of China today]. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2002. Print.

Ma, Lunpeng. “The Cinematic Transformation in Post-Socialist China: A Case Study of Zhang Yimou’s Curse of the Golden Flower.” The International Journal of the Humanities 7.11 (2010): 57–73. Print.

Nimu, Wei’eershi, (Nym Wales), and Jieruo Wen, trans. “Xiaidai Zhongguo wenxue yundong” [Literary Movement of Modern China]. Xinwenxue shiliao no. 1 (1978): 229–43. Print.

Sanders, Julie. Adaptation and Appropriation. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Sima, Changfeng. Zhongguo xinwenxue shi [History of New Chinese Literature]. Vol. 2. Hong Kong: Zhaoming chubanshe, 1978. Print.

Sun, Daolin. director. Leiyu [Thunderstorm]. Shanghai: Shanghai Film Studio, 1984.

Sun, Daolin. “Tan Leiyu de gaibian” [On Adapting Thunderstorm]. Dianying yishu no. 7 (1984): 44–52. Print.

Tien, Yuk Sunny. “The Banquet Scene in Macbeth and Curse of the Golden Flower.” Shakespeare Seminar no. 6 (2008): 55–60. http://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/publikationen/seminar/ausgabe2008/sunny-tien.html

Tong, Weimin. “Leiyu yanjiu liushì nian” [Studies of Thunderstorm Over the Past Sixty Years]. Wuhan jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao 16.1 (1997). 1–10. Print.

Wang, Guilu. “Cong Leiyu dao Mancheng jindai huangjinjia: Gaibian celue yu xushi celue” [From Thunderstorm to Curse of the Golden Flower: Adaptive and Narrative Strategies]. Dianyin wenxue no. 20 (2007): 26–28. Print.

Wang, Peilei. “Hutoushewei de ‘zhongshi’ gaibian” [An Anticlimactic “Faithful” Adaptation]. Zhongguo Caoyu wang 12 Jul. 2016. http://www.cncaoyu.com/show-11-360-1.html

Wei, Miao. “Weimei er beiqing de huangjinqu: Cong yu Leiyu de bijiao xi Mancheng jindai huangjinjia” [A Beautiful but Sad Golden Song: Comparative Analysis of Thunderstorm and Curse of the Golden Flower]. Yuwen xuekan no. 5 (2007): 155–56. Print.

Weintraub, Steve. “ ‘Frosty’: Zhang Yimou Interviewed—‘Curse of the Golden Flower.’” Collider 20 Dec. 2006. http://collider.com/zhang-yimou-interviewed-curse-of-the-golden-flower/

Wittfogel, Karl August. Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957. Print.

Wu, Hui, (Wui Ng), director. Leiyu [Thunderstorm]. Hong Kong: Huaqiao Film Company, 1957.

Yaju, H. "Weaving A Dark Parody: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Zhang Yimou’s Curse of the Golden Flower." Film International 6.2 (2008): 41–51. Print.

Yusheng, Wang, ed. “Cao Yu tan Leiyu” [Cao Yu Talked About Thunderstorm]. Renmin xiju no. 3 (1979): 40–47. Print.

Zhang, Guowei. “Makesi zhuyi zhuzuo zai Zhongguo de chuban yu chuanbo 1899–1945” [Publication and Dissemination of Marxist Works in China 1899–1945]. PhD diss., East China Normal University, 2017. Print.

Zhang, Min. “Cong Mancheng jindai huangjinjia kan Zhang Yimou dui Lieyu renwu xingxiang de gaibian” [Zhang Yimou’s Recreation of Characters: From Thunderstorm to Curse of the Golden Flowers]. Dianying pingjie no. 16 (2015): 58–60. Print.

Zhang, Yimou, director. Mancheng jindai huangjinjia [Curse of the Golden Flower]. China, Beijing New Picture Film, Edko Films, and Film Partner International; Curse of the Golden Flower. DVD, Sony Pictures Classics, 2006.

Zhang, Yimou. Interview. “Xinlang yule duihua Zhang Yimou: Quanmian jiedu Huangjinjia” [Sina Entertainment’s dialogue with Zhang Yimou: fully interpreting Curse of the Golden Flower]. Xinlang yule 21 Sep. 2006. http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2006-09-21/09021256851.html
Zhang, Yimou. Interview. “Laowai zhiren guzhuangpian; fei dongzuopian guowai mai dijia” [Foreigners only Recognize Costume Action Movies; Non-Action Movies Sell Cheap Abroad]. Fazhi wanbao 1 Dec. 2006. http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2006-12-01/10281351896.html

Zhang, Yuxia. “Zhang Yimou dianying gaibian queshi guankui” [Some Problems in Zhang Yimou’s Filmic Adaptation]. Shandong ligong daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban) 27.1 (2011). 53–57. Print.

Zhu, Shilin, director. Leiyu [Thunderstorm]. Hong Kong: Fenghuang Film Company, 1961.

Zhu, Ying. Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System. Westport and London: Praeger, 2003. Print.