

Berenice Reynaud watches as the story of a new film by the director of 'Ju Dou' unfolds within the quiet of a feudal mansion

# China on the set with Zhang Yimou



December 1990. At an hour and a half's flight from Beijing, Taiyuan, capital of Shanxi province, is a large industrial city in the centre of a flat, arid plain, where coal mines are the main source of wealth. With sub-zero temperatures outside, people in the hotel dining-room keep their coats on; only the 'luxury rooms' are provided with heat.

Witnesses of a film co-production between Taiwan and mainland China – Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* – we are the guests of Chiu Fu-sheng, president of ERA International, a young millionaire who made his fortune in video distribution. I had met him in 1989 in Taipei, on the crest of the success of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness*, which he had produced. Awarded the Golden Lion in Venice, the film was doing extremely well in Taiwan, where the lifting of martial law in 1987 had made it possible for the first time to show previously taboo aspects of the island's history on screen.

At the time, Chiu's goal was to revitalise Taiwanese cinema through more efficient methods of production and aggressive marketing techniques. "I knew that *A City of Sadness* would get a better box office in Taiwan than abroad. If I spent so much money on its international publicity, it was simply to build Hou's reputation abroad". Now Chiu is thinking in even more international terms, in a way which could have a tremendous impact on the future of Chinese cinema.

Like many Taiwanese businessmen, Chiu has made several trips to mainland China since 1987. Once the first reactions of horror had subsided, Taiwanese investments in mainland China didn't significantly decrease following the events of Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989. Economically, the two countries have become increasingly interdependent: Taiwan needs a market for the manufactured products of its 'economic miracle'; the People's Republic needs Taiwanese imports.

But legally, the Taiwanese are prohibited from doing business in the mainland. Fortunately there is a convenient third party: Hong Kong, a place of transit for everything that can be sold. Hong Kong cinema, a mixture of aggressive entrepreneurship, crass commercialism and brilliant creativity, is widely exported throughout South-East Asia. 'Leftist' companies such as Sil-Metropole channel the money between the colony and the mainland and organise co-productions. Founded in 1977, the Hong Kong film festival has programmed many films by a group known as the 'Fifth Generation', which have attracted the attention of the West. After the long, quasi-fatal slumber of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese cinema has been revived and has become exportable.

In 1988 Chen Kaige's *King of the Children*, produced, like many Fifth Generation films, by Wu Tianming at the Xi'an Film Studio, was awarded the Golden Alarm-Clock Award at Cannes – as a joke. Lacking a sense of humour, China's Film Bureau started an 'anti-bourgeois campaign' and imposed financial restrictions on the studio. Yet even after the events of June 1989, the bureau continued to encourage for-



eign investment and co-productions, sometimes with paradoxical results. For example, Zhang Yimou's second film, *Ju Dou* (1990), co-produced by a Japanese company, is still banned in China, as now is *Raise the Red Lantern*. So another component of China's current cultural dilemma is that the Fifth Generation films – acutely, even painfully, Chinese – are eventually financed, produced and screened in a distant space: in Japan or Western countries.

## Perfect location

But there is more than economic convenience behind the links between Taiwan and the mainland. A sizeable part of the island's population came from the mainland in 1949 – not just Kuomintang cadres, but minor bank and government officials who followed orders, city dwellers afraid of communism, peasants enlisted in the Nationalist army. They left behind families, homes, memories and regrets. Their children – the generation of Chiu, Hou and Edward Yang – grew up confused between the vindictive nationalism of the 50s, the American pop culture of the 60s and the diplomatic blows of the 70s as the attitude of the West towards mainland China softened.

Mainland films are still banned in Taiwan, but can be found on video in every street market. Chiu soon discovered the Fifth Generation film-makers, in particular Zhang Yimou, whose directorial debut, *Red Sorghum*, won the Golden Bear at Berlin in 1988. Chiu Fu-sheng, Zhang Yimou and Hou Hsiao-hsien had met at film festivals over the years and had become friends. In



**Enclosure: sensuous light and a red lantern bathe Gong Li, left, who plays the central figure, a woman who suffers and revolts, in 'Raise the Red Lantern', a new film by Zhang Yimou, far left**

February 1990, in Tokyo, Zhang gave Chiu 'Wives and Concubines', a short story by a contemporary young writer, Su Tong. Chiu then asked Hou to work as a script consultant on the project. A Hong Kong branch of ERA International was created to channel money; the co-production department of the Film Bureau in Beijing was contacted; equipment was rented from Hong Kong; post-production facilities were booked in Tokyo. Meanwhile, Zhang scouted China, looking for the perfect location.

Like many writers of his generation, Su finds it safer to set his narratives in a pre-revolutionary past. 'Wives and Concubines' is about a young woman, Songlian, who becomes the fourth wife of an old master. The story unravels in the family compound, where each wife has her own pavilion. A red lantern at the door (giving the film its title) means that the master has decided to spend the night with that wife.

#### Private pleasures

In the eighteenth-century mansion, located an hour's drive from Taiyuan, shooting starts early. Everybody wears green: to fight the cold the production office has rented a supply of cotton-padded army coats. Made of a dozen buildings and intricate courtyards surrounded by a wall, the compound has been divided into dwelling units for the local peasants. Pigs, dogs and chickens run in the courtyards, clothes are hanging out to dry. Some buildings have been turned into a small museum.

Courtyard houses, or *sanheyuan*, are a perfect example of classical Chinese architecture.

Their way of outlining and occupying space is an expression of complex social rules and they embody a certain domestic utopia. Everything a human being needs could be found inside the compound, especially for rich families who had live-in servants and the resources to bring in entertainment, such as theatre troupes, from outside. (Beijing's Forbidden City is the ultimate form of *sanheyuan*: awesome, gigantic and imperial.) The enclosing wall, beyond which the women would never venture, protected against the hardships of the outside world. Within its limits, private dreams and pleasures – the writing of poetry, the love of women, the study of Confucian philosophy – could be pursued in celestial peace.

But one person's utopia can be another's nightmare. The *sanheyuan* expressed a highly repressive patriarchal social set-up, in which the master had power of life and death over his household. Centred on the character of Songlian, played by Zhang's 'muse', Gong Li, *Raise the Red Lantern* – like other of Zhang's films in which the Gong Li persona is the central focus – would have been termed a 'women's picture' in 40s Hollywood. But Zhang doesn't define his films in terms of sexual politics. The setting of the story in a feudal mansion in the 20s, the sufferings and revolt of a female character, have a metaphoric value. Here Zhang is markedly vague, saying only that "beyond the relationships among the characters I want to show the deep humanity of Chinese culture and society".

Zhang Yimou's father and two uncles gradu-

ated from the Kuomintang military academy. One uncle was killed by a warlord, the other emigrated to Taiwan after 1949. Zhang's father stayed in the mainland out of filial duty, and was more or less assigned to residence. It was Zhang's mother, a dermatologist, who supported the family.

During the Cultural Revolution Zhang was sent to a textile factory because of his 'background'. Work was not only hard, but dangerous too: you might lose your finger. To escape hardship, he offered to draw hundreds of portraits of Chairman Mao for his cultural unit. At the same time, having sold his blood to buy a camera, he was taking pictures.

In 1978 Zhang read that the Beijing Film Academy was reopening. He sent them a portfolio, but his application was rejected because at twenty-eight he was beyond the age limit. He then wrote to the Minister of Culture, who was impressed by his photographic work and granted his request.

In film school Zhang discovered a new world: Feuillade's *Fantomas*, the French New Wave, Japanese cinema. Among his classmates were Chen Kaige, whose *Yellow Earth* (1983) and *The Big Parade* (1985) he later shot, and Zhao Fei, who having shot Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief* (1987) and *Li Lianying, The Imperial Eunuch* (1990), is now his DP in *Raise the Red Lantern*. But Zhang wanted to direct, and veteran director Wu Tianming promised to give him a chance provided that he shot *Old Well* (1987) for him. Zhang ended up playing the male lead as well, launching a successful side career as an actor.

#### Space and time

The equipment used in *Raise the Red Lantern* is more sophisticated than in a standard mainland production. A gaffer, Johnny, was brought in from Hong Kong, a video control monitor is on the set (occasionally used to watch a football game during a break) and, rare occurrence, the film is shot in sync sound.

Art director Zhao Jiuping has filled the pavilion of Songlian with real antiques from the 20s: vases, a heavy carved mirror, scrolls, tapestries and an authentic gramophone on which, lost in her thoughts, the young woman listens to an opera recording by the third wife, since then suspected of adultery and killed. Zhang and Zhao have bathed the place in a sensuous light, enhancing the effect of the red lanterns that hang everywhere. Rumour has it that Zhang and Gong Li are lovers – and they are, indeed, a glamorous couple. But on the set professionalism reigns. Zhang composes and rehearses his shots in an obsessional way; Gong withdraws into a sex goddess's narcissistic solitude.

A sense of space, of ritual, of utopia has generated religious, political and domestic architecture in China. This helps me understand why the best Chinese films start with the exploration of a specific space, which is simultaneously landscape, culture and metaphysics. The strength of Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (the starting point of the Fifth Generation) was its ►