

Wan-Ting Yu

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Wan-Ting Yu

Painting the Modernization of China: The Symbolic Uses of the Color Red in Chinese Cinema of the 1980s

Abstract: This article focuses on the symbolic uses of the color red in Chinese cinema of the 1980s, and on how it represents cultural identities and social ideologies in the context of four perspectives on modernization: the rural-urban relationship; social surveillance vs. individualization; suppression by regulation vs. enlightenment of the human mind; and gender identities. The approach is both phenomenological and intertextual. The main examples are the films *REN SHENG* (RC 1984), *HONG YI SHAO NU* (RC 1985), and *DA HONG DENG LONG GAO GAO GUA* (RC 1991). My research aims at exploring the role of color in cinematic signifying practice, embedded in a specific social-historical context.

* * *

Because of its centrality to the *mise-en-scène*, color is widely recognized as an important representational vehicle in cinema, and therefore, an unavoidable theme in film studies. However, as Brian Price states, because of the larger philosophical and physiological problems involved, like the naming or translation of color's culturally specific meanings and the fluid changes in trans-cultural visual contexts, color is not a frequent subject in film studies, «a source more of fleeting observation than of rigorous conceptualization»¹, and the area is full of contradictions. Yet from another perspective, these interdisciplinary difficulties can be viewed as possibilities and made productive. As C.A. Riley claims, the interdisciplinary approach is the only satisfactory way of dealing with the role of color in modern aesthetics and social sciences.² My research

1 Price, Brian: «Intro». In: Price, Brian; Dalle Vacche, Angela (eds): *Color: The Film Reader*. New York, London: Routledge 2006, p. 1.

2 Cf. Riley, C.A.: *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology*. Hanover: University Press of New England 1996, p. 1.

focuses on the symbolic uses of the color red in Chinese cinema of the 1980s. The aim is to explore the role of color in cinematic signifying practice, embedded in a social-historical context.

Previous research points out the functions of color in cinema at both a micro and macro level. At the micro level, color marks depth of room and change of time, contributes to organizing the mise-en-scène for the reception of dramaturgy,³ and connects images through similarity and contrast.⁴ At a macro level, color has the potential to be an autonomous means of expression and tell a story of its own.⁵

Since Christian Metz and Peter Wollen applied semiotic theories to cinema, color has received increasing attention in semiotic film studies, which intends to study the signs and symbols in film logically, based upon a linguistic model. According to Christian Metz, color in film belongs to the «suprasegmental» units, which attach themselves to segmental units, while structurally existing «above» them on another plane.⁶ Hans J. Wulff (1988) describes color schemes as structures or models of expression in film, which can be synchronic or diachronic, comprehensible or incomprehensible.⁷ Gorham Anders Kindem adopts color signs to the semiotic study of visual communication in case studies. His theoretical approach, which combines Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of «objects» and «object motivation» with Eco's and Metz's concept of cultural codes and conventions,⁸ is adopted in my work. On the one hand, the symbolic usage of color in film is motivated by the similarity, contiguity or contrast with its objects, on the other hand, the design and perception of colors as symbols in cinema is both socially and culturally coded. Both of these dimensions underpin the structure or model of using color in cinema. Colors used in symbolic structures have longer and stronger implications in wider ranges than ordinary colors. They can mediate different notions, hint at

3 Cf. Egner, Silke: *Bilder der Farbe*. Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaft 2003, p. 22.

4 Cf. Balázs, Bela: «Farbenfilm und andere Möglichkeiten». In: Diederichs, Helmut H.; Gersch, Wolfgang (eds.): *Schriften zum Film*. Vol. 2. München: Carl Hanser Verlag 1984, pp. 144–150. [1930]

5 Cf. Egner: *Bilder der Farbe*, pp. 9–10.

6 Cf. Metz, Christian: *Language and Cinema*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton & Co. N.V. 1974, pp. 202–204.

7 Cf. Wulff, Hans J.: *Darstellen und Mitteilen: Elemente der Pragmasemiotik des Films*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag 1999, p. 162.

8 Cf. Kindem, Gorham Anders: *Towards a Semiotic Theory of Visual Communication in the Cinema: A Reappraisal of Semiotic Theories from a Cinematic Perspective and a Semiotic Analysis of Color Signs and Communication in the Color Films of Alfred Hitchcock*. New York: Arno Press 1980, p. 3.

ideological meanings, and represent social identities and psychological states inside or between film texts.

As Wulff states, the symbolic functions of color exist either outside of film, or they become conventionalized in certain genres or media, or they are first established in a certain film text.⁹ With regard to the specificity of the color red as a symbol in Chinese cinema, its usage can be divided into the following types: designed uses, created according to film aesthetics in a certain film or genre; conventional uses, which are formed in social custom and have cultural emotional effects; and imposed uses, which are determined by political authorities and used in the whole society. The latter two types can also be used conversely for ironic effect, and then be combined with the first type.

The symbolic function of color can only be understood in a close analysis of a concrete cultural and social context, as Brian Price argues: «a better conception of how color works in film, an account of its vicissitudes instead of its regularity, would appear to be not only an aesthetic imperative, but a social and political one as well».¹⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff determines that the discipline established by the panoptical system, in which «who could be observed could be controlled»¹¹, extends into visual culture to include color. In his case study of the color white, he analyzes how the white color of Greek and Roman sculpture conveys notions of racial supremacy and homosexuality in western culture.¹² In Chinese society, the color red has been endowed with multiple meanings in the areas of revolution, nationality, and gender identity since the proletarian revolution (1921–76). As a color symbol, red has been closely connected with notions of nation, culture, class, political progress and so forth.

In what follows, the symbolic functions of color will not only be investigated in the logic of cinematic narration, but closely combined with the social-historical context of modernization around the 1980s, using four thematic fields as the points of departure: the rural-urban relationship; social surveillance vs. individualization; suppression by regulation vs. enlightenment of the human mind; and gender identities. The key question is how color contributes to the signifying practice relating to cultural identities and social ideologies in these four perspectives.

9 Cf. Wulff: *Darstellen und Mitteilen*, p. 152.

10 Price: «Intro», p. 7.

11 Mirzoeff, Nicholas: *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London, New York: Routledge 1999, pp. 51–58.

12 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 60.

The 1980s were a period marked by intellectual idealism and they were of special importance to Chinese modernization. After the political unrest of the 1970s, the 1980s were a decade of social and intellectual excitement, including intensive reflection on history as well as the development of individualism. Later, under the impact of commercialization in the 1990s, the period became an object of nostalgia for Chinese literati. In the project of social modernization, the literati's interpretation and imagination of modernity have played an important role. To quote Zhang Xudong, «the discourse of Modernism is both an articulation of the Chinese situation and an ideological fantasy about subject-positions in the complex of social relations».¹³ Zhang analyzed the subject-positions of the fifth generation¹⁴, but film directors of the third and fourth generations are also indebted to the conception of modernism as they lived under the same socio-economic and ideological circumstances in the 1980s. However, my emphasis is not on the political and social problems in Chinese modernization, but on how those problems are represented by color as an expressive vehicle in cinema, and on the intellectual subjectivity behind its usage.

A further question is: as the color red has clearly become the dominant color in representing China and Chinese-ness in most trans-cultural situations, is there a connection between the influence of cinema and this phenomenon? In other words, how are the visual symbols produced in globally consumed cinema engaged in signifying Chinese-ness in trans-cultural communication?

Methodology

Firstly, aesthetic conceptions of color in cinema around the 1980s and its relationship with other art forms, like painting, will be examined from an art historical perspective. Then the research will be divided into four parallel sections focusing on the following themes: the rural-urban relationship, social surveillance vs. individualization, suppression by regulation vs. enlightenment of the human mind, and gender identities. For each subsection, a careful selection of films, which exemplify the key points in the argument, will be analyzed, with one film as the main example, and others as complementary ones. The inter-

13 Zhang, Xudong: *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*. Durham, London: Duke University Press 1997, p. 2.

14 The fifth generation is the group of directors who studied in the first class at Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution and graduated in 1982; The fourth generation are those who graduated from the same Academy in the 1960s; and the third generation are those who began to make films after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

play of filmic expression and social context should be clarified through the exemplary analysis of color.

Moreover, because of the uncertainty of theorizing about the intention of filmmakers, the archival concerns regarding restoration and fading, and the diversification in subjective perception, a phenomenological approach is taken to investigate the vicissitudes of cinematic color. As the philosophical endeavor primarily concerned with perception and conscious experience, the phenomenological approach to film studies emphasizes empirical observation of phenomena, and also entails describing the perceptual act and the relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object.¹⁵ As a variant of the original transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, the existential phenomenological approach emphasizes the embodied subject, which lives the experiences.¹⁶ As a theory of knowledge, phenomenology justifies the practice of the semiotics and hermeneutics of cinema and is a fundamental approach to understanding the ontology of cinema. Due to the lack of systematical studies of color in Chinese cinema and the often observed discrimination of color as vulgarity in the Chinese art tradition, the phenomenological approach, which is a systematic foundation for the attempt to make the phenomenon of signification in cinema explicit, will be useful for investigating color aesthetics and gaining insight into color's symbolic function.

Furthermore, I use an intertextual approach to examine the influences of other art forms on the filmic aesthetic of color within a cultural framework. As Angela Dalle Vacche states in her research on the relationship of film and painting:

Intertextuality [...] includes the borrowing of images from art history to inflect the meaning of a text, [...] the insertion of cinema in broadly shared visual cultures and national traditions [...] Thus intertextuality enables thematic contrasts, iconographic similarities, and historiographic commentaries.¹⁷

With regard to the problematic adoption of western theories to Chinese cinema, the popular debate about whether China is following the path of western modernization validated the importation of western theories on Chinese modernization. However, these western theories are purposely selected, inter-

15 Cf. Casebier, Allan: *Film and Phenomenology: Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 4.

16 Cf. Sobchack, Vivian Carol: *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, p. 6.

17 Dalle Vacche, Angela: *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*. London: The Athlone Press 1997, p. 3.

preted, reworked, or «sinicized», so to speak, by Chinese theoreticians according to their specific requirements. Lydia H. Liu's investigation of translingual practice shows how theories and conceptions change when crossing cultural boundaries, and then become a battlefield of discourse and power in their respective historical context.¹⁸ In Chinese state-sponsored modernization, state power and intellectual quest are always under invisible tension, which the remaking of the imported theories helps to reveal. Moreover, since most studies on color in cinema are done in western languages, these theories and perspectives are not only unavoidable, but necessary for a comparative analysis.

«Misty socialist» film: color aesthetics in cinema from an art historical perspective

The term «misty socialist» is adopted from an interview with Chinese director Wu Tianming. After attending the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1986, he criticized the image quality of Chinese films as «being covered by mist» because of the technical limitations at that time.¹⁹ Of course, it would be inadequate to assume that the only reasons for the color aesthetics of 1980s cinema were technical. The aesthetic conception and its predilection for color in cinema are influenced by other art forms in a cultural framework. I use the borrowed term «misty» to describe the color aesthetics of the films of the 1980s: dominance of primary and low saturated colors of black, dark green, red and yellow; reduced color contrasts; limitation of light sources which results in unclearness and limited details; favoring of monochrome landscapes, etc.

My argument is that these color aesthetics of 1980s cinema are inherited from Northern School Painting, which has a long tradition of using primary colors and limited color contrasts, but has been eliminated from mainstream art historical studies. Especially the frequent images of monochrome landscapes in films evoke the Blue-and-Green Landscape Painting of the Northern School. Film and painting share the same cultural framework, which is based upon Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, and the conceptions about color in these philosophical areas influence film just as much as painting.

18 Cf. Liu, Lydia H.: *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900–1937*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995.

19 «Record: Wu Tianming's Talk about Film». *Sina Entertainment News*, 23.10.2008. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2008-10-23/18372218712.shtml> (19.06.2012). Translation: W.-T. Yu.

Sadness between red land and grey city

The sharp division between cities and the countryside has been marked as the major problem in Chinese modernity. The distinction between ruralism and urbanism is both a social reality and a cultural representation. This part of my research deals with the question of how the problem of rural-urban relationships – interlaced with gender identities – is symbolically represented by the color red, and how color symbols contribute to constructing ruralism and urbanism in cinema.

A short retrospective of the distribution of social power between rural and urban areas is necessary for analyzing this relationship's cinematic representations. The rural-urban relationship used to be one of reciprocity in China.²⁰ A separation took place upon China's modernization at the beginning of the 20th century. The traditional cooperation between small-scale agriculture and handicraft was destroyed under the impact of western commodities. A lot of slums emerged in cities in the 1920s–30s. After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the nation's most important task was to establish the heavy industry, which cannot employ a lot of laborers. Along with this came a reformed household registration system in 1958, according to which all migration required permission from the authorities. As a result, the process of labor moving from the country to the city was stopped. Unlike western modernization, Chinese industrialization took a path of inner colonization in the first 30 years of the new regime. The countryside sacrificed a lot for the industrialization in the cities by paying high taxes and providing products and materials at low prices. A rural-urban dual system was formed both economically and in social thought. State power played an important role in establishing city-centralism in social ideology.

Compared to the complexities of social reality, cultural representation in the media tends to simplify, stress a few significations, build a clear and sharp boundary between the social groupings of villagers vs. city residents or peasants vs. industrial workers, and thus makes the distinction easy to grasp for audiences.²¹ The theoretical insights into the stereotype by Stuart Hall, Walter Lippmann, and Richard Dyer are useful for understanding the signifying

20 Cf. Lu, Xinyu: «Neo-ruralism or Slums in Cities?». In: *Opening Era* vol. 4, 2010, no. 4, p. 117.

21 Cf. Hall, Stuart: *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practice*. London: Sage Publications & Open University 1997, p. 260.

practices employed in the media to represent distinction and characterization.²² The disposition of social/media power underpins this stereotyping process. Certain social groupings with relative power define themselves as the center of a given society and the rest as «others» who remain outcasts. In China, this discourse is determined by the interaction between two powers, the intellectuals and the state. Among Chinese intellectuals, there is a long tradition of imagining the rural as «backward» and in need of development by modern city culture, but at the same time it has been seen as something «beautiful» which can rescue the city from its sinfulness.²³ The state's goal, by contrast, is to establish a model of a rural-urban relationship with the biggest benefit for political and economic goals (a model that has changed over time).

As opposed to the city-centralism established in social commonsense and national ideology, stereotyping in cinema concerns both the rural and the urban. The urban is represented negatively in cinema as a space of consumption, but positively as one of production. It accords with the national politics of transforming the urban from a traditional space of consumption to one of production. But both kinds of the urban are usually represented as culturally and morally «other» compared to the rural. In the models of rural-urban relationships in cinema, youths usually move from rural to urban areas, but they exile themselves when leaving the countryside, whether they come back at the end of the film, or lose themselves forever in the city. While the rural is represented as a «hometown», the absence of the modern urban is usually signified by different signifiers in cinema, for example, the empty image on the television set which can't receive a signal in the mountainous area in *LAO JING* (RC 1986).

The film *REN SHENG* (RC 1984) is another important example to illustrate these hypotheses. The title literally means «Life». Born in a rural area, young protagonist Gao's fate is closely connected with his rural identity. The rural-urban tension is embedded in the love story between Gao and two girls, one from the city, the other from the country. The changes in Gao's identity between country teacher, peasant and city resident result in unequal social statuses among the three, which also leads to problems regarding a possible marriage. Compared to the descriptions in the novel on which the film is based, different colors are used in the film. A triangle relationship consisting of the color red,

22 Cf. *ibid.*; Lippmann, Walter: *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan 1956 [1922]; Dyer, Richard: «Stereotyping». In: Dyer, Richard (ed.): *Gays and Films*. London: British Film Institute 1977.

23 Cf. Ren, Ning: *Cinematic Urban: City in Films of Mainland China from 1949 to 1966*. Unpublished Dissertation, Shanghai Theater Academy 2008, p. 61.

the land, and women is at the centre of the film. The color red mediates the iconographies of woman and land and hints at the long-existing connection between these two notions of fertility. Furthermore, the iconographical and ideological interrelations can be extended to include other related elements: the city and men, which also have their representative colors, grey and blue, belonging to the cold colors of the color palette. The colors red, on the one hand, and grey/blue, on the other, build the basic color contrast in the film. If red is usually connected with the imagination of the Chinese rural tradition, the colors grey and blue are related to elite culture, such as ink-wash painting. When Gao decides to abandon his country girlfriend and leave the country forever, the contrast between the colors red and blue, which represent the illiterate country girl and Gao as a city journalist, respectively, exhibits their psychic and intellectual distance. The country girl and the land are left behind. But when Gao's effort to leave fails, he comes back to the land. Because of the girl's influence, the villagers accept the betrayer silently, as does the unspeaking land.

«The Group in Red»: social surveillance and individualization

The stereotyping process is also employed in cinema by dividing social groups according to invisible differences such as ideological thoughts. Color helps make these implicit differences explicit, as it makes the invisible networks of social surveillance visible in filmic reality. These networks stand for the power which opposes individualization. The tension between social surveillance and individualization is exemplified through many characters identified by the color red in various films. *HONG YI SHAO NU* (RC 1985) is one of them.

The title means «The Girl in Red». Shortly after the Cultural Revolution, there was intensive reflection about the long-existing totalitarianism and a process of deconstructing master narratives through the pursuit of individuality. The director Lu Xiaoya expressed her painful reflection in this film. As the only bright color in the film, the red of the schoolgirl's shirt symbolizes her pursuit of freedom in personality and thinking, and also reveals her gender consciousness as a girl. She confronts misunderstandings at school and later in her family. The surveillance at school, which manifests itself as control by the teacher and judgment from classmates, is a legacy of the Cultural Revolution and appears to be out-dated in the society depicted in the film. The surveillance and control puzzle the teenager who pursues the development of an

individual personality. The red shirt stays at the center of these conflicts as a symbol.

Suppression of regulation and enlightenment of the human mind

Unlike the previous section, which takes a social perspective, this section deals with a related question from a historical and cultural perspective, asking how the symbolic color red represents the conflict between the suppression of regulation and the enlightenment of the human mind. The film *DA HONG DENG LONG GAO GAO GUA* (RC 1991) whose title means «Raise the Red Lantern», is the main example here.

As the only example in my corpus released after the 1980s, the film is embedded in director Zhang Yimou's reflective thinking about social rules after the 1989 Tiananmen Square event, and can be regarded as the end of the idealism of the 1980s and an allegory indicating the coming challenges of the 1990s. The conflict between human emancipation and the autocratic social regulations is represented symbolically by visual elements in the film. On the day of her marriage, the protagonist Songlian is dressed in black and white and walks to her future husband's big grey houses. Compared to a traditional marriage dominated by the color red, Song's marriage is designed like a funeral in terms of color. The educated girl with her awakened humanity begins her journey to a spiritual death after marriage. The grey houses in a symmetrical square function as a confinement to humanity. The red lanterns represent the will of the dominator – the invisible and anonymous husband – in the totalitarian system, which kills humanity.

The «folk customs» in this film, including the raising of red lanterns, are actually Zhang's own creations, and have led to disputes among Chinese scholars on orientalism and self-orientalism.²⁴ However, the question of how western audiences perceive these red symbols in a trans-cultural context remains to be investigated.

24 Cf. Chow, Rey: *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press 1995, pp. 148–149; Zhang, Yingjin: *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies 2003, pp. 251–266; Chen, Xihe: «Red Theories, Blue Theories and after Blue Theories: Evolution of Chinese Film Studies and Theories' Development in the New Era». In: *Contemporary Film* vol. 5, 2004, pp. 23–27.

In the name of gender: gender identities in color

Gender identities are involved with all the problems mentioned above, or rather, all other issues are made explicit in terms of gender. As Dai Jinhua points out, the female figure and the social issue of women inform the subjective representation of man. Male intellectuals transfer their cultural predicament onto the female figure in cinema.²⁵ Because of the importance and abundance of issues in the arena of gender, it is nevertheless worth discussing separately.

The relationship of red to women's identities went through two conversions in modern history: the first one occurred in the Communist Revolution period, when women were encouraged to wear clothes in dark colors like men. In this way, they were expected to regard themselves – and be regarded – as equal to men. Those who wore red clothes were considered objects of men's gaze, and needed to be rescued. This action both raised women's status and eliminated the particularity of women. Women as a gender group were lost from social sight.²⁶ The second transformation happened in the 1980s, when along with a new individualization, red was once again used to represent and emphasize the beauty of women, but at the same time their status lowered when they were regarded as women again. Meanwhile, the relationship between the color red and men, which concerns the definition of muscularity, underwent a parallel change. These issues are to be analyzed mainly in the films mentioned above.

In this brief overview, I have only been able to give a few examples of the symbolic uses of the color red in Chinese cinema of the 1980s. All of the aspects introduced in this essay will be further developed in my doctoral thesis.

25 Cf. Dai, Jinhua: *Gendering China*. Taipei: Rye Field Press 2006, p. 30.

26 Cf. Dai, Jinhua: *Landscape in Fog: Chinese Film Culture 1878–1998*. Beijing: Beijing University Press 1999, p. 85.