

## *Unveiling Red Culture in Zhang Yimou's Films Through a Semiotic Perspective*

Fang Xie, Jiangsu Ocean University, China  
Hao Zhang, Xihua University, China

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

From "Red Sorghum" (1987) to "Full River Red" (2023), Zhang Yimou's illustrious career spanning over four decades has been marked by a distinct emphasis on color, particularly the vibrant shade of red. In Zhang Yimou's films, red transcends its role as a mere color, birthing a visual language that masterfully conveys his creative concepts. This study aims to redefine the signified of red within Zhang Yimou's cinematic repertoire, considering it as a pivotal element embedded within the traditional Chinese cultural and spiritual system. Employing case studies, historical analysis, and textual analysis, this research offers a nuanced interpretation of this aspect of Zhang Yimou's films by integrating the theories of film semiotics, psychoanalysis, visual culture, and feminism. By comparing and analyzing the utilization of red imagery across different countries' films, we highlight the paramount role of red in Zhang Yimou's works in the shaping of national and ethnic imagery and cultural identity. Ultimately, as a carrier of ideological texts, Zhang's use of red must be understood within the socio-cultural fabric of the depicted periods, taking into account its meaning in the context of national propaganda. Engaging in a discourse with the intertextual relationship between the film's narrative and the socio-historical context, this study illuminates the gradual emergence of the cultural significance associated with the color red. By unraveling the rich tapestry of red culture in Zhang Yimou's films, we gain deeper insights into the profound implications and evocative power that this color exerts within the realm of cinematic storytelling.

Keywords: Zhang Yimou, Red, Chinese Cultural, Signified

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## 1. Introduction

China, with its distinctive history, politics, societal structure, and culture in Asia, holds a unique position in the realm of world cinema. The trajectory of Chinese cinema's development reveals the pivotal role played by the fifth generation of directors, with Zhang Yimou, a prominent figure in this cohort, emerging as a renowned film director in China, garnering numerous accolades at international film festivals. All these factors are the reasons why we did this study.

Throughout Zhang Yimou's cinematic oeuvre, the color red has consistently held a central position. Whether manifesting as an artistic expression or embedded in narrative content, red encapsulates unique emotions within Zhang Yimou's works. Red, originally a color word, however, the signified of red in Zhang Yimou's movie has broken through the traditional original definition of color, and its signified has been transformed, but turned to become an image style, forming a unique narrative style of *red film*, from the movie narrative shows a Chinese culture, has evolved into a sign of revolution, communism, and socialism in the context of Chinese history.

As a kind of movie, *red film* has an important position in the development process of Chinese movies. As far as the status of *red film* research academic, the historiographical research is the main focus, and therefore, this kind of research literature is mostly found in the works of movie's history. Works such as Cheng Jihua's *History of Chinese Film Development* (1981), *Chinese Film History* of Yu Ji (2017). In addition to historiography, Chinese film scholars have delved into various aspects of film ontology. For example, *Red Film, Television Drama and the Creation and Dissemination of Red Culture in the New Century* of Guo Yingmin (2012), the doctoral thesis *Research on the Art of Metaphor in Red Films* of Zhang Yanxiao (2022). Those studies of *red films* are more focused, with more in-depth and specific discussions on characterization, narrative strategy, audiovisual language, and so on.

Zhang Yimou's *red films*, however, depart significantly from the conventional understanding of *red films*. As for Zhang Yimou, his films emphasize humanistic concern in content and the spirit of artistic innovation in form. Thus, a comprehensive study of Zhang Yimou's films holds immense significance in the realms of film creation, film history and film theory. Nevertheless, at present, the study of Zhang Yimou's films mainly focuses on the narrative style. Sutton (1994) discussed about the background of the creation of Zhang Yimou's movie from the perspective of China's history. Zhang Xudong (2005) and Ellsworth (2013) analyze the narrative features from a specific film. Besides that, there are a number of scholars have analyzed the color art in Zhang Yimou's films, and some scholars have analyzed the red elements of one of Zhang Yimou's films, such as *Colourful caparison, Lovely beauties and national emotions – The research of body in Zhang Yimou's Films* of Li Qiang (2015), but a systematic examination of the overarching red motif in Zhang Yimou's cinema is notably absent.

Based on this, in this paper, starting from the movie *Red Sorghum* (1987) to *Full River Red* (2023), we summarize the red elements that appeared in Zhang Yimou's movies during his forty years of movie making, and try to analyze these red images, and dig deep into the cultural signified behind the red signs with the help of the theories of semiotics. From red images to red narratives, red shows the refraction of history, society, and culture. The research and discussion of the visual theme of *red film* should be based on the visual

language itself. In the face of the red phenomenon of Zhang Yimou's movie, it is of great significance to make theoretical responses and academic reflections.

## **2. Analysis of the Concept and the Development of *Red Film***

Red has a unique significance in Chinese culture, emerging as a crucial s woven into the fabric of Chinese identity. However, throughout the extensive course of history, the connotations of red have evolved dynamically, reflecting the changing tides of time.

For the art of film, the red culture derived from the meaning of red has also become a unique phenomenon of Chinese cinema. This section aims to delve into the concept of red film and untangle its developmental trajectory.

### **2.1. Concept of *Red Film***

The Chinese people have maintained a profound affinity for red since ancient times, employing it as a decorative hue for ornaments. The significance of the red sign has garnered attention across diverse fields such as history, literature, culture, and art, giving rise to concepts like red history, red literature, red culture, and red art. Within the realm of cinema, filmmakers found inspiration in the multifaceted meanings of red, leading to the emergence of the term *red film*.

Regarding the concept of *red film*, Chinese academic circles have different opinions on its definition. The Chinese scholar Dong Yifen defines a *red film* as a New China's film that promotes the spirit of revolution (Dong Yifen, 2013); this point is also mentioned by Li Jiechao that red films are movie and television works created with revolutionary discourse as the main form (Li Jiechao, 2010). In addition, Zhang Xianxi (2020) and Liu Dingyu (2015) started from the perspective of time range and argued that *red films* appeared after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

In the realm of film art, the *red culture* stemming from the symbolic meaning of red has evolved into a distinctive phenomenon within Chinese cinema. After sorting out the concept of *red film* from different eras of scholars, we found that, generally, the *red wave* of Chinese films began after the founding of China in 1949. For the Chinese people who had just escaped the oppression of feudalism and imperialism, the red reflected a process that a people who overcame difficulties and achieved victory. At this moment, the *red film* has revolutionary and emancipated significance. Although a definitive conceptualization of *red films* is yet to emerge within the academic community, the content and temporal scope of *red films* remain discernible.

### **2.2. Development and Communication of *Red Film***

Every cinematic creation is a product influenced by specific societal, political, and cultural dynamics, bearing a distinct epochal character. Consequently, the genesis of red films is intricately intertwined with the zeitgeist, with different historical periods offering diverse contexts for the evolution of *red films*. From today's point of view, the formation of such movies as *red films* has gone through a long development process.

The first is the twenty-seven-year period between 1949 and 1976. Due to the period affected by the war, the *red films* of this period had a clear tendency of revolutionary ideology. The

period between the 1980s and the beginning of the 21st century is considered the second period of *red films*. Compared with the previous period, *red films* have seen innovations in theme, style, and character image. The *red films* of this period highlighted the characteristic of poetic creative style. The period between the beginning of this century and the present can be called the third stage. The presentation of *red film* narrative has been entirely created in the context of the commercial era, so the presentation of visual discourse in the film text is richer.

*Red films*, over different historical epochs, have fulfilled their role as conveyors of Chinese culture, signifying that the sign of red is in a perpetual state of dynamism, evolving alongside shifting historical contexts. The distinct status of *red films* distinguishes their function from that of other commercial movies. In essence, *red films* employ both verbal and non-verbal sign systems, communicating messages to the audience through metaphorical means. They represent the mainstream values of Chinese society, endowing red films with a unique and artistic characteristic.

### **3. The Composition and Application of Red Elements in Zhang Yimou's Films**

Zhang Yimou exhibits a pronounced penchant for incorporating red elements into his films, evident in costume design, props, lighting, and various other facets. His works concentrate on the second and third period of *red film*, so, the significance of the red is shown diversely in his films.

In this section, our focus is directed towards a comprehensive analysis of the red elements in Zhang Yimou's films, examining both form and content levels to unveil the characteristics of his *red films*.

#### **3.1. Red Images From The Form Level**

Color in cinema operates as a distinctive language system, wielding a unique charm in its expression. Zhang Yimou, starting with his inaugural film *Red Sorghum* (1987), adeptly deploys the impact of vibrant colors to etch a lasting visual imprint on the audience.

The film *Red Sorghum* (1987) immerses viewers in a world saturated with red, conveying diverse implications. The red sorghum field at the beginning of the film shows the most primitive desires of humanity, reflecting respect for life and the desire for freedom, however, at the end of the film red returns to be the main color of the entire screen, here, it became a sign of blood. The red background runs throughout the film, its meaning also shows a praise of liberated life, while, which is also a means to reveal the tragic destiny of its characters.

This expressive technique recurs notably in the film *Hero* (2002). Red is the dominant color palette in the part of this movie where Wuming looks for the Canjian. Here, red does not symbolize warmth and joy, but contains the emotion of resentment. The red color is a metaphor for the hatred of the Qin king and symbolizes human strength, will and revenge. Simultaneously, a love duel between two women unfolds in this segment. The red of the whole picture is an imitation of the subjective visual image seen by the blood seeping from the eyes of the characters and is exaggerated, and this kind of color discourse with a strong sense of form is precisely Zhang Yimou's pursuit of beauty.

From *Red Sorghum* (1987) to *Hero* (2002) red evolves into an external manifestation of the movie's thematic context. Zhang Yimou utilizes red to construct various contextual layers, delivering visual impact, stimulating public imagination, and prompting thoughtful reflection. In Zhang Yimou's films, the incorporation of red enhances the aesthetic tension of the film while concurrently conveying his distinctive aesthetic consciousness.

According to Metz, cinema is a system of language, the transmission of signified in movies is figured out in the same way as the mechanism of communication in human language (Metz, 2011). As a special vocabulary in the composition of language cinematographic, the red things in the movie it also becomes a way to express the signified in Zhang Yimou's *red film*.

Across Zhang Yimou's films, red elements have a lot in common. For instance, in *Red Sorghum* (1987) features red sedan and red headwear; in *Ju Dou* (1990) showcases red dyed cloths; in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) incorporates red lantern and clothes, in *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) include red peppers and the red cotton clothes in *Not One Less* (1999) and *My Father and Mother* (1999). These red things bring people immediately into the background of the Northwest of China, enriching the characterizations of the different characters. These things participate in the narrative of the movie as a visual language, and the emotions that the movie wants to express participate in the narrative in a non-verbal way with the help of these things.

The use of these *reds* not only fits the background of the story's development, but also plays a key role in shaping the characters. The use of specific red things in the movie can reveal the national culture behind the red. Specific red elements in films divulge the national culture embedded in red, offering a genuine reflection of rural life in Northwest China. Zhang Yimou infuses his national culture into his films through red symbolism, preserving the films' distinct national characteristics. Consequently, red, as a unique cultural sign, creates a distinctive visual ambiance in Zhang Yimou's films. The extensive incorporation of red backgrounds and imagery has contributed to categorizing his films as *red films* in form.

### **3.2. Red Images From the Content Level**

Cinema, as an art form, revolves around narrative, with the content plot serving as the linchpin of storytelling. Mitry posited that the plot is the rationale behind weaving together events that may hold significance (Mitry, 1997). In Zhang Yimou's films, red serves not only as a formal compositional element but, more crucially, assumes a leading role in narrative, with Zhang Yimou utilizing red to depict history, extol women, and eulogize life.

Zhang Yimou's early films captivated audiences through the strong visual impact of red elements on objects or scenes, thereby crystallizing into a distinctive visual symbol. However, in the 21st century, a transformation occurs in Zhang Yimou's films: red ceases to be a mere representation; instead, it evolves into a narrative method. In essence, red transitions from form to content, from code to logic, and from denotation to connotation.

From a narrative perspective, red of *red films* of Zhang Yimou shouldn't be limited to color alone in his middle and late films. Instead, it serves as a sign representation of China's national ideology conveyed through the color red. Consequently, Zhang Yimou's red films during this period reflect the system and conceptual trajectory of social and historical development.

As the influence of *red film* continues to expand, Zhang Yimou's films include not only historic revolutionary events, but also the dissemination and promotion of advanced ideas. Throughout Zhang Yimou's film career, his central narrative always takes the Chinese historical event as its cinematic background. In his films such as *Full River Red* (2023), *Cliff Walkers* (2021), *Sniper* (2022) and *The Flowers of War* (2011), they all show a specific period in China's history. Zhang Yimou narrates that period of history during the war with his unique artistic perspective. All these films transmit strong feelings of patriotism through their representation of war, while telling the heroic stories of their characters' victories.

In addition to the historical background, Zhang Yimou's films showcase the translation of stories imbued with Chinese characteristics onto the screen, shaping his unique cinematic style of Chinese storytelling. In the films like *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *Ju Dou* (1990), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), Zhang Yimou draws on his personal experiences of growing up to depict the evolution of an entire nation. In these films, there is no explanation of a clear period setting, nor is there any extensive use of red elements. At this point, red has been internalized as a kind of spiritual support for the characters.

In Chinese culture red has perennially been associated with revolution. Thus, in Zhang Yimou's films, the description of love is sometimes given a strong political connotation. In *Lifetimes Living* (1994), *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (2010), *Coming Home* (2014), the films are not about the traditional myth of love, but rather moves closer to the politics of mainstream discourse. These films intricately intertwine revolution and love, dissolving the politicized expression of ideology into the narrative logic of love, thereby crafting a distinctive narrative style with Chinese characteristics.

Whether chronicling individual growth experience or love journey, Zhang Yimou is able to perfectly combine the revolutionary theme with it, which also forms a film narrative with Chinese characteristics, and this form of narrative style with revolutionary significance has also become Zhang Yimou-style *red film*. At this time, the meaning of red is no longer the color on the surface but transformed into a deeper red spirit.

#### **4. The Cultural Signified of *Red* in Zhang Yimou's Films**

The cultural significance of red is a crucial element in the construction of what is commonly referred to as *red culture*, a thematic thread that Zhang Yimou skillfully weaves through his distinct cinematic language. However, the cultural connotations encapsulated by red find meaningful interpretation primarily within the realm of specific Chinese films. The decoding of these cultural signifiers necessitates an understanding of specific codes, highlighting that the comprehension of the signified is contingent upon contextual and culturally specific elements. The evolution of the signified is not an instantaneous occurrence; rather, it unfolds across different levels of understanding.

In Zhang Yimou's films, red emerges as a significant facet of the audiovisual language, both in its formal and thematic dimensions. *Red culture*, positioned as the ultimate signified within the context of red films, serves as a vehicle to portray Chinese reality and propagate mainstream culture. This analysis delves into the nuanced exploration of the cultural signified within Zhang Yimou's *red films*, employing semiotics as a lens for examination.

#### **4.1. The Signified of Feminine**

Zhang Yimou's cinematic oeuvre prominently features female figures, occupying a central role in the narrative across his 24 films, with the exception of *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (2005). Consequently, the majority of Zhang Yimou's films bear the indelible mark of female growth.

The representation of women's individual growth in Yimou's films transcends mere depictions of personal experiences. Instead, it utilizes the female figure as a symbolic signified, elucidating the transformative process in the portrayal of Chinese women. These female images can be categorized into three archetypes: the traditional, the rebellious, and the female image in the new era. These archetypes function as semiotic signs imbued with meaning, demanding interpretation through diverse codes. External elements such as China's historical context, political climate, and social culture, along with internal factors like genre comprehension for Chinese audiences, contribute to this intricate web of codes.

However, the creation of these meanings is a gradual process. In Zhang Yimou's *red films*, these female figures often represent the development and change of traditional Chinese culture. Precisely because they have undergone these social revolutions, they present diversity.

For the image female in Zhang Yimou's films, the female subjects will unfold different behavioral processes in different narrative contexts, and the processes resulting from women's interactions with other things or stories can precisely be seen as processes of symbolic representation. The female figure is produced by the audience attaching meaning to the text of the film narrative, and this symbolic text transmits the signified to the audience, and after receiving the symbolic meaning transmitted by the female figure, the audience obtains interpretive meaning from it.

As a result, the realization of the evolution of the female image in Zhang Yimou's film is that the form traces the growth and transformation of Chinese women under social and historical changes through the narrative of the growth of miniature individuals. From this perspective, the use of red elements in Zhang Yimou's films is not only for dressing up the female figure, but also for serving as a sign to metaphorically represent women's growth experiences. Typically, red costumes are the most common props used by Zhang Yimou. The red clothes are the representative dress of Northwestern women, which appeared frequently in Zhang Yimou's early films as a representation of traditional female identity. When women take off this garment, it is also a sign that women's identity is undergoing a change. The signified of women's red clothing as a vernacular culture disappears here and instead becomes a metaphor for female revolution. In the process, the signified of red has also achieved a change from form to content.

#### **4.2. The National Signified**

In Zhang Yimou's films, alongside the feminine signified, the paramount signification within the red narrative often manifests as the national signified. Any kind of culture is the accumulation of historical development. Cultural development is inherently intertwined with historical evolution, and the red narrative in Zhang Yimou's films serves as both a critique and transcendence of national spiritual culture, undergoing a transformative process into a novel cultural paradigm. The red culture emanating from these films represents an

amalgamation of traditional values from the revolutionary war era, possessing profound national significance.

From the point of view of content, the red narratives in Zhang Yimou's films are more based on the idea of national resistance and salvation in different periods, but Zhang Yimou pays more attention to the representation of common characters rather than the representation of revolutionary fighters or great leaders in traditional *red films*. In between, the cinematic plot gradually derives from the signifier of history to the signified of national spirit. For example, in film *Full River Red* (2023), Zhang Yimou used the red color of cherries to express a specific meaning. This red is both a plot thread and an emotional thread, an expression of the dual emotions of love and patriotism, which consequently articulates the isomorphism between the love of family and country. Through his films, Zhang Yimou demonstrates a sense of national awakening, the spirit of social criticism and resistance awakens the public's vision of the nation, at the same time, it also expresses the beautiful nature of life through love.

From form to content, red has achieved a metamorphosis from the signifier to the signified. Red is no longer a mere cinematic narrative, but more an expression of national spirit. The red in Zhang Yimou's films is artificially imposed to serve a specific ideology. Therefore, Zhang Yimou's film constructs a system of cinematic ideology through this model of red narrative. In this system, the dynamics of the red narrative reconstructs the historical myth and shapes the discourse of the national spiritual narrative.

Drawing on Roland Barthes' perspective, myth is a mode of speech, is "a system of communication, that it is a message cannot be possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (Barthes, 1972: 109). Although the use of the red is not expressed in the same way in Zhang Yimou's different films, it ultimately produces the same cultural signified. This suggests that Saussure's primary semiotic system, comprising the signifier and signified, is not the ultimate semiotic system. Instead, it integrates into a new semiotic framework, contributing to the formation of the mythic sign, as articulated in Barthes' secondary semiotic system. So, myth is a "second-order semiotic system". And in this mythic system, the original signification of the red color in the movie has disappeared and has been given a new signification under the new signified, and the new meaning is the dominant ideology of the current society that the red movie is trying to emphasize.

## 5. Conclusions

*Red films*, as a popular form of art, assume a pivotal role as conveyors of national spirit and propagators of China's fundamental cultural values. These cinematic creations serve as a medium for the reproduction of the revolutionary ethos embedded in the Chinese populace, with the culture of red films intricately woven into the core values of Chinese society.

Zhang Yimou, a renowned Chinese director, has significantly contributed to the realm of *red films*, with many of his works exemplifying this genre. Despite the observable shift in Zhang Yimou's *red films* from an artistic to a more commercial trajectory over their developmental course, the ideological impact of his films has undergone a transformative evolution. Spanning from his debut film, *Red Sorghum* (1987), to his latest production, *Full River Red* (2023), Zhang Yimou's cinematic journey reflects a noteworthy progression from a focus on the visual aesthetics of red to the nuanced development of red narratives. This distinctive



narrative style has not only carved a niche for itself in Chinese cinema but has also steered the overall trajectory of the country's cinematic landscape.

Functioning as a cultural vessel, cinema holds an indispensable role in the transmission of cultural narratives. Whether relying on the visual symbolism of red for storytelling in his early works or delving into the intrinsic meanings of red in his more recent films, Zhang Yimou consistently endeavors to narrate China's history and present nuanced images imbued with oriental connotations to a global audience. Across four decades of creative experience, Zhang Yimou's *red films* have evolved to underscore the significance of women and their national relevance, aligning seamlessly with the distinctive role that red films play in shaping societal values and fostering social and cultural development.

## References

- Barthes, R. (1973). *Mythologies*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Cheng, J.H. (1981). *中国电影发展史*. Beijing: China Film Press.
- Dong, Y.F. (2013). 议程设置理论视阈下的当代红色电影. *Contemporary Cinema*, 4, 198-200.
- Ellsworth, M. (2013). The Hero Fallen: Zhang Yimou and the Question of Unstable Authorship.
- Guo, Y.M. (2012). *新世纪红色影视剧与红色文化的打造及传*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Gongshang University Press.
- Li, J.C. (2010). “红色经典”影视作品的思想政治教育价值. *Movie Review*, 16, 22-23.
- Li, Q. (2015). *Colourful caparison, Lovely beauties and national emotions – The research of body in Zhang Yimou’s Films*. Doctoral Thesis, Shanghai: Shanghai University.
- Liu, D.Y. (2015). 当代中国红色电影的外观转型与内核重构. *Sichuan Drama*, 2, 30-32.
- Metz, C. (2011). *Language and cinema*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Mitry, J. (1997). *The aesthetics and psychology of the cinema*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Sutton, D. S. (1994). Ritual, history, and the films of Zhang Yimou. *East-West Film Journal*, 8(2), 31-46.
- Yu, J. (2017). *中国电影史*. Chongqing: Chongqing University Electronic Audio and Video Press Co.
- Zhang, X.D. (2005). Narrative, Culture and Legitimacy: Repetition and Singularity in Zhang Yimou’s The Story of Qiu Ju. *Understanding Film: Marxist perspectives*, 213-231.
- Zhang, X.X. (2020). 1980年代红色电影的类型创新与美学新变. *Movie Literature*, 15, 33-35.
- Zhang, Y.X. (2022). *Research on the Art of Metaphor in Red Films*. Doctoral Thesis, Shan Xi: Shanxi Normal University.

**Contact email:** fangxie@ucm.es