

The Value Turn in Zhang Jiarui's Yunnan Trilogy

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Abstract

Zhang Jiarui's three films: *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* (2003), *Huoyao Bride in Shangrila* (2005) and *Red River* (2009), are often referred as the 'Yunnan Trilogy'. Because they are based on the Yunnan minority and all three films were directed by Zhang Jiarui and written by Meng Jiazong. All these three films were produced in the first decade of the 21st century. To a certain extent they have a more stable pattern of change in terms of the director's personal artistic experience. Reflects the value turn in the creator's creative philosophy, I consider the three films as a system, examining their changes over from the perspectives of ethnicity and commerciality. This individual phenomenon of the creators may serve as a symptom of the changes in minority films in the new century of China.

Keywords: Yunnan trilogy, ethnicity, commerciality, value turn

1. Introduction

Zhang Jiarui, formerly known as Zhang Shuxiang, graduated from the Philosophy Department of Sichuan University in 1983. After graduation, he enrolled in the directing refresher course at the Beijing Film Academy and was later assigned to the Beijing Youth Film Studio, where he began his directing career and worked on television series for nearly ten years. He then stopped working on TV series after 2001. In 2003 he made his feature film debut, *When Ruoma Was Seventeen*, which together with his two later works, *Huoyao Bride in Shangrila* and *Red River*, which three films known as the Yunnan Trilogy. These three films focus on Yunnan's ethnic minorities: the Hani, the Yi and the Yao. The three films show certain changes, reflecting the author's shift in creative values and, to a certain extent, the development of minority films over the past decade.

2. The Reduction of Ethnic Subjectivity

Minority characters appear in all three films, and the unique lifestyles of ethnic minorities participate in the narrative in varying degrees. However, the way in these three films represent the lives of ethnic minorities are very different.

Ruoma, the main character of *When Ruoma Was Seventeen*, is a young Hani girl who has lived in the Ailao Mountains since she was a child and she has never been to any city. After learning from her fellow villagers that people in the city don't carry things on their backs or hand, but by elevator, Ruoma develops a longing for elevator, and for the city. The director has personally experienced and accumulated material about the Hani town, the terraces and the life of the Hani people. In addition, the scriptwriter Meng Jiazong works for the Cultural Bureau of Honghe Prefecture, and he has a lot of experience in local life and have a good

understanding of folklore. The details of the Hani people's life shown in the film, such as carrying stones to build a cattle shed, spinning clay cloth, taking a tractor to the town, selling roasted corn on the street, etc., come from local, and with the natural performance of non-professional actor Li Min, she can give the audience a strong sense of reality. At the same time, the rhythm of the film is not too fast, which could give ample opportunities to reveal Hani customs such as "opening the rice gate", "mud wrestling", "lover's wine" and "soul calling". The film *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* had a utilitarian purpose at the beginning of production, which was to coincide with the declaration of the Hani Terraces as a UN World Heritage Site, the local government directors and publicity department gave Zhang Jiarui a documents and requirements for the design of the plot. Zhang Jiarui as director, on the other hand, resisted the pressure, blocked out the news and still shot the film according to his ideas. Fortunately, the final production, the director was able to impress the local government directors and touch the local people with his sincerity. Zhang Jiarui mentioned in an interview that he wanted to create a personal narrative perspective in this film, and that by making it he wanted to reflect on the historical memory of the nation in the pavement of modernisation and civilisation, and to melt into the film his thoughts and worries about preserving nature and protecting the ancient civilisation of the Hani culture. It can be said that there was no pressure at the box office at the beginning of the project, and the director's insistence on the artistic of the film and his efforts to exclude other distractions have contributed to the film's purity.

With the success of his maiden work, the director's resources were greatly increased for his coming works, *Haoyao Bride in Shangrila*. As a result of the increased investment, the director's pursuit of pure artistry began to suffer and he began to pursue commercial success instead. This inevitably led to a weakening of the ethnicity of the film compared to *When Ruoma Was Seventeen*. *Haoyao Bride in Shangrila* is a film based on a love story between a young man and woman of the Huayao Yi ethnic group. The main dramatic conflict of the film is based on the Yi custom "returning husband's home in three years". Unlike *When Ruoma Was Seventeen*, however, the perspective of *Huayao Bride in*

Shangrila is not based on the individual life experiences of the minority, but rather on the "other perspective", structuring the story from the perspective of the minority, with the discourse of the subject almost lost. (Li Wenzhe, 2013) In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey argues that the image of the woman being viewed on screen is an important factor in the visual pleasure of cinema. The characterisation of the female protagonist in *The Huayao Bride in Shangrila* seeks to satisfy the visual pleasure of the audience. At the same time, due to the popularity of the 2001 Korean film *My Sassy Girl* in Asia, female characters similar to the heroine played by Jun Ji-hyun, who is spirited, wild, daring, active and brave, with this character have emerged, it causing a boom in the popularity of various sassy girlfriends. Previously, the common oriental women on the screen tended to be gentle, intellectual and submissive. In the past, the female characters in ethnic minority films, such as Jin Hua in *Five Golden Flowers* and Ashima in *Ashima*, were all hard-working, simple peasant women. When the Korean 'sassy girlfriend' character first time appeared, it was a breath of fresh air that caught the eye of the audience. However, the character of the sassy girlfriend can only be considered a production of the modern city, where such characters are born in a highly developed and materially society and a high level of education society. In contrast, the appearance of such a typecast character in a minority village in the southwest of China seems somewhat out of place in the historical and cultural social environment. The characterisation is not based on an appreciation of ethnicity or some acknowledge of the social situation, but more on commercial considerations. Apart from the two main characters, most of the other supporting characters, such as the other members of the women's dragon dance team, are also professionally actress. These professional actors and actress are polished and have pretty faces, but apart from their costumes and looks, they do not have the language habits and special ethnic temperament of the ethnic minorities, and their representation of ethnicity is superficial.

Comes to *Red River*, it is hard to find much room for discussion about ethnicity. *Red River* is a film that is even more different from *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* and *Huayao Bride in Shangrila*, both of these two films, the feature ethnic

minority characters are living in ethnic minority areas. *Red River*, on the other hand, the background is set in a Sino-Vietnamese border area. Although the Hong Kong actor Cheung kafei as the leader character A Xia is one of Yao ethnicity, there are also a brief appearances of Yao wedding folklore and the unique Yao wedding custom of “finger biting” is an important element in driving the narrative. However, the Hong Kong accent of Zhang kafei is so different from the accents of the other Yao characters in the film. that somehow will drive the audience find it abrupt and incongruous. The commercial aspirations of the film can also be seen in the choice of actors for *Red River*. The three Hong Kong actors, Cheung KaFai, Lee SauYin and Lee LaiChun, have certain box office appeal. The plot also tries to enrich the viewing experience by using commercial elements such as mentally handicapped girls, gangsters, legendary coincidences, fights and shootings. These elements distance themselves from real life. The tagline on the official poster for the film says: “The Chinese Lover’s Lament of Life and Death”. From this tagline, we can see the ideas of the production team.

At this point, it can be seen that the cost of the three films, from *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* to *Huayao Bride in Shangrila* and *Red River*, creators have increased in scale and the cognition of the creators have changed. Although there is a constant exploration of the ethnic minorities of Yunnan, the ethnicity of the films is constantly diminished due to the cast and the production. Commercialism, on the other hand, has been on the rise.

3. The Enhancement of Commercial

When Ruoma Was Seventeen began with the thought of Meng Jiazong, the chairman of the Honghe Prefecture Literary Federation in Yunnan province, he is also the screenwriter, approached the director through a referral to make a television movie. At the same time the local government directors also suggested that the filming should coincide with the declaration of Honghe Prefecture as a UN World Heritage Site. These local government directors suggested that the subject should be made into the film. Everyone objected, assuming that no one would like to watch the film and that it would not be a good idea to make a TV series or a TV movie to be broadcast on TV. Zhang Jiarui said that the film should be made international and go to some international film festivals to presents the

Hani Terraces. As Zhang Jiarui was still a young director who was not known at that time, so everyone did not believe the director at that time. Luckily, the scriptwriter Meng JiaZong was very supportive of the director and he helps the Zhang Jiarui with the conditions in place to prepare the film for production. The original film had a lot of scenery and folklore propaganda, and the local propaganda minister and county party secretary gave the director a classified document that also required the two main characters have to founding a tourist agency at the end, with the leading man as chairman and Ruoma as manager. Once director Zhang Jiarui took a look, he thought the film was ruined. So the director kept the document under wraps and didn’t let anyone else in the crew know about it, except the scriptwriter. The film was actually made according to the director’s own ideas (Zhang Jiarui, Li Ke & Fang Ying, 2004). When the director took on the project, he was basically did not thinking about recovering box office costs. At the same time, the director persisted in his own ideas and principles, and also sincerely studied the films of Shunji Iwai, so that the film showed the characteristics of Hani life in its original form while at the same time having a fresh breeze of youth. It is this pure cinematic pursuit that gives this film, despite its slight youthfulness, a rare sincerity and personal reflection of the filmmakers.

Comparing with the *When Ruoma Was Seventeen*, *Huayao Bride in Shangrila* emphasizes the spectacle of ethnic minorities more. The construction of the image of the minority is closer to “spectacle creation”. The colourful and beautiful costumes of the Huayao Yi tribe have a lots of beautiful contrast and they have accompanied by the beautiful landscape of the Yunnan province. The costumes are a source of visual pleasure with their unique style, whether it is the beautiful and sexy bibs that Feng Mei the female lead wears when she wrestles with the men or the beautiful clothes that the beautiful Yima wears with her make-up. In the film, the repetition of the custom “returning husband’s home in three years” is not only a unique custom of the Huayao Yi people but also a construction of the spectacle of this ‘strange custom’. These erotic cultural spectacle constructions are spatialised, presenting the viewer with a patterned and flat visual consumption of one scene after another. (Li

Wenzhe, 2013) For commercial films, the majority of audiences come to cinemas wanting to see and consume films that are highly entertaining, and in this regard Hollywood has a well-developed and mature film production system. Hollywood's strength lies in its ability to use a variety of emotionally stimulating techniques in a natural and fluid way. The classic Hollywood narrative model is a tried and tested 'golden rule' where the creator simply fills in the material in a step-by-step manner. From the conflicts to the plot points, *Huayao Bride in Shangrila* certainly fits the typical Hollywood narrative, with a smooth and brisk pace that is certainly more acceptable and agreeable to those who are looking for a screwball comedy style film.

The director said in an interview that he had the ambition to make a blockbuster. This is also appeared in *Red River*. Compared to *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* and *Huayao Bride in Shangrila*, the film *Red River* is clearly more mature in terms of marketing and is closer to the mass consumer market. On the one hand the creative team has been upgraded from the previous two films by bringing together filmmakers from China, the United States, Korea and Vietnam. On the other hand, the film has planned a rich promotional and marketing campaign during the propagate stage. As a result, the marketing response and return on investment for *Red River* has also come a long way from *When Ruoma Was Seventeen* and *The Huayao Bride in Shangrila*. Of the Yunnan Trilogy, *Red River* is arguably the most commercially successful.

4. Summary

After the artistic success of his debut film *When Ruoma Was Seventeen*, director Zhang Jiarui's cinematic pursuits took a shift in value, with his focus gradually moving closer to commercialism. Directors who made their debut films during the same period, such as Lu Chuan and Guan Hu, have since gone on to lead and direct films with large investments. During this period, starting with Zhang Yimou's film *Hero*, Chinese cinema entered the era of blockbusters, and the film market expanded dramatically, bringing with a boom in the film industry and a change in the mindset of film creators. The ability to direct "blockbusters" has become an important criterion for a director. Even the awards winner Jia Zhangke have still failed miserably at the box office in China. The first decade of the new

century could be described as a golden decade for Chinese cinema, with new directors emerging and box office records being replaced. It was also a decade of rapid economic development in China, with economic value becoming the dominant value criterion in society. Economic success overshadowed all other problems. But today, as economic development enters a phase of slow growth and the whole population enters the era of moderate prosperity, other issues besides the economy gradually come out. Then cinema, as the most important component of contemporary culture, carries so much and is bound to be re-examined. Zhang Jiarui's Yunnan Trilogy not only reflects the shift in values in the development of Chinese minority-themed films in this decade, but is also symptomatic of the transformation of Chinese cinema as a whole.

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