

Authenticity rarely matched by contemporary filmmakers

The Road Home by Zhang Yimou

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11 November 2000

The Road Home, the latest feature by Zhang Yimou, one of China's leading filmmakers, is a well-crafted film about a village romance in the late 1950s between a young girl and a schoolteacher. Like other movies set in rural China by this accomplished director— *Red Sorghum* (1988), *Du Jou* (1989) and *Not One Less* (1999)—it is characterised by superb cinematography and an acute sensitivity to the pace and rhythm of village life.

The film begins in present day China with Luo Yusheng (Sun Honglei), a city businessman, returning to his family village in Northern China for the funeral of his father, Luo Changyu (Zheng Hao). Zhao Di (Zhao Yuelin), Luo Changyu's distraught mother, is afraid that her husband's spirit will not find its way home and insists that the villagers carry the body back from the remote location where he died.

As Luo Yusheng reminisces about his father's life with the mayor and another local, the film flashes back to the beginning of his parents' romance, regarded by the villagers as the most beautiful courtship in the community. The cold, sombre mood of the present, which is filmed in black and white, gives way to lavish colour cinematography.

The shy and awkward 17-year-old Zhao Di (Ziyi Zhang) is infatuated with Luo Changyu, a young teacher at the local school, and quietly throws herself into unashamed plotting to win his heart. Her simple day-to-day routine is dominated by a clear objective—to secure his affection.

At home, under the eyes of her disapproving mother, Zhao Di spends hours preparing and cooking for this new love she has not met but seen only in the distance. Each day Zhao and other village women carry their

dishes to the schoolhouse being constructed by the village men. She dreams that Luo Changyu will choose her food. One can almost taste and smell the food she lovingly cooks for the teacher.

As well as food preparation, Zhao Di's daily routine also involves fetching water from the well. There are two village wells, but she walks to the one near the school so that she can see, and be seen, by the teacher. For Zhao Di, the presence of the young teacher in the village invests these previously mundane chores with a new content.

Each afternoon she hides in the hills along the roadside watching Luo Changyu walk students home from school. She spends days following him, listening to his conversation with the children. Luo Changyu senses that someone is following him and glimpses her in the hills. He has seen her before and admired her also, from afar.

The road into the village, where some of the film's most moving scenes take place, has immense significance to the villagers and the film's protagonists. It is where Luo Changyu and Zhao Di first formed their love and, in the present, it is the path along which Luo Changyu's funeral procession travels.

Although the film has a poetic folk tale quality, the young girl's stubborn and inspiring determination to win her love gives the movie an epic quality. At times, particularly during the most romantic moments, however, Zhang allows the larger-than-life music score to overload the film with orchestrations more appropriate to an opera climax, rather than a portrayal of rural life. Apart from these weaknesses, Zhang's eye for detail gives the film an authenticity and emotional intensity rarely matched by contemporary filmmakers.

Rural life is rather peaceful and worry-free, with little, if any, social disturbances. The only harshness, by distant and faceless authorities, takes place when Luo Changyu is forced to leave the village and work in the city for a period. When Luo Changyu decides to make a short return visit to see Zhao Di, the authorities punish him by banning him from seeing her for two years. Zhao Di is devastated, but she stubbornly waits on the road longing for his return and their eventual reunion.

By contrast, the modern day village is bleak, cold and almost barren of young people who have moved to the cities in search of work and a better life. It is so denuded that the mayor is forced to try and organise men from elsewhere to carry the teacher's coffin back to the village. On the day of the funeral, however, hundreds of Luo Changyu's former pupils from all over the region arrive to assist. When Luo Yusheng attempts to pay them for carrying the coffin, they refuse out of respect for their teacher.

According to Zhang, *Not One Less* (his previous film) and *The Road Home* were “a reaction against the current tendencies in Chinese cinema” and “against the logic of the market”. In *The Road Home* he presents the conflict between emerging capitalist China and the traditions and pace of the old community through the discussions between mother and son.

Despite Luo Yusheng's apparent wealth, he is discontent, torn by the nostalgic stories about his parents and village life, and the harsh but financially rewarding obligations of his city existence. He repeatedly asks his grieving mother to join him in the city. She refuses, happy in her home, concerned only about the loss of her husband and that her son is still not married.

On his mother's request, Luo Yusheng agrees to honour his father's spirit by spending the last day of his stay teaching in the village school. But even this symbolic gesture, a reference to the bygone period, highlights the new era of economic uncertainty confronting the community. The village has not yet secured another teacher, nor is it certain that there will be enough children to guarantee the school's future.

Like most of his colleagues, Zhang works in an extremely difficult political and artistic atmosphere. Many of his films have been banned, the government nervous about public reaction to his shrewd

observations of the institutionalised oppression in early twentieth century China and the more recent past. No doubt government officials saw themselves reflected in some of Zhang's characters.

Although Zhang could find a producer for his work in most countries outside China, he is determined to make serious films in his own country. But to produce the large-scale movies in China that he desires, rather than underground videos, places him under close government scrutiny. Thus far *Not One Less* and *The Road Home* have avoided government censorship and won large domestic audiences.

Prior to the release of *The Road Home* Zhang said that he wanted the film to be “simple, immediate and anchored in reality”. Despite some limitations, including a tendency to avoid some of the more complex psychological issues explored in earlier films such as *Raise the Red Lantern*, the film fulfills this important aim. One wonders what Zhang's next step will be. Whatever it is, he remains a director genuinely passionate about the plight of ordinary people in China.



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