

Coming Home: A small, sincere film about big, complex times

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Directed by Zhang Yimou; written by Zou Jingzhi; based on the novel by Geling Yan

Of course, the “Chinese question” is a critical one. The attentions of the conscious elements of every social class globally are more and more focused on China, its economic development and unfolding crisis, its role in geopolitics, the awakening of its multi-million-strong working class.

For significant insight into contemporary Chinese social relations and the country’s history ... Zhang Yimou’s *Coming Home* is not the film to see. It has value, but a different value.

Zhang, one of China’s most prominent and prolific directors, has made more than 20 feature films. *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *Not One Less* (1999) are among his most satisfying works.

The filmmaker’s considerable talent and sincerity are not to be doubted. All of his films, even the least important, have intriguing qualities. The cynical and corrupt Chinese regime has alternately repressed and (in recent years) cultivated Zhang, who has also directed stage, opera and ballet productions and the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. He has had to navigate between the needs and demands of China’s authorities on the one hand, and the siren song of the global film industry on the other ... and all of this without much of a historical or social compass. Small wonder that Zhang’s body of work is uneven and full of major artistic and intellectual gaps.

The events of *Coming Home*, based on a novel by Chinese writer Geling Yan, who was born in Shanghai in 1958 and now lives in the US, are spread over a number of decades.

In the late 1960s, during the Cultural Revolution period, a political prisoner, former college professor Lu Yanshi (Chen Daoming), who was jailed during the Maoist regime’s so-called Anti-Rightist campaign a decade earlier, has escaped his “rehabilitation” labor camp in remote northern China. He attempts to visit his wife, Feng Wanyu (Gong Li), and daughter, Dandan (Zhang Huiwen).

Filthy, exhausted, chilled and soaked in the rain, Lu reaches the apartment building where Feng and Dandan reside. He knows the police are watching the front entrance, so he makes his way over the roof of a neighboring house and down the stairs. Lu reaches the door of the family apartment, but it is locked. He meets his daughter in the stairwell and gives her a message that his wife should meet him at the local railway station the following morning.

Feng arrives at the station at the appointed time, and the husband and wife spy each other from a distance, but Dandan, out of political piety and because she aspires to a lead role in her dance troupe, has informed the authorities about her father’s presence. He is seized. During the struggle, Feng falls and injures her head.

Another decade goes by, and with the end of the Cultural Revolution, the former “rightists” are all considered rehabilitated. (In December 1978, 550,000 people were conclusively pardoned by the Beijing regime.) Lu comes home, but his wife suffers from a form of amnesia, both physical and psychological, and fails to recognize him. In fact, she mistakes him at times for a local Communist Party official who blackmailed her into sex in exchange for seeing to it that Lu did not receive a death sentence.

Lu moves into a storefront nearby and develops a relationship with the damaged Feng, as a friend, a piano tuner and, eventually, a letter reader. In a clever, ironic twist, a box of Lu’s letters to Feng arrives, thousands of letters over two decades, scrawled on scraps of paper, which he was never able to send. Lu ends up reading his own correspondence to his wife, who has no idea he is the author. He continues to attempt by various means, including music in particular, to awaken Feng from her amnesia.

Lu also tries to patch up his wife’s relations with their daughter. Since Dandan—who never had the dance career she aspired to and now works in a textile factory—turned in her father, Feng has refused to let her in the house. The daughter exclaims, “She forgets everything, but remembers all my faults!”

Again, if one is seeking insight into the Anti-Rightist

campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution or any other episode in China's post-1949 history, Zhang's *Coming Home* is not the place to go. The director has apparently only made use of the last thirty pages of Geling Yan's lengthy novel.

Zhang is relatively frank about his reasons for excluding the bulk of the book. Trevor Hogg of Live for Films reports that the director told a roundtable at the Toronto film festival in 2014 that the novelist had based her work on the experiences of her grandfather, who "was put into jail [in the 1950s]. ... However, a large part of the novel couldn't be into a film because they [the events] were too sensitive and political so I used the ending part of the novel as the beginning part of the film and created a lot of new stories."

Indeed, in 2007, the Chinese Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department listed the Anti-Rightist movement as a topic to be restricted in the media and in books. This is not surprising. Millions of people, critics of the regime from both the right and the left, and probably many who were not critics of any kind, were caught up in the persecutions. The Chinese Trotskyists, representing the interests of the working class, were jailed in the early 1950s, and either executed at the time or imprisoned until 1978.

The events of the late 1950s are still taboo in part because any discussion of them would inevitably bring up Mao's catastrophic Great Leap Forward, a product of the regime's Stalinist-nationalist autarchic program. The regime forcibly and irrationally collectivized agriculture into self-sufficient communes, and organized farmers and workers into military-style production units. The massive famine and economic crisis that ensued killed tens of millions.

Zhang's film has weight because of its understanding of and sympathy for a trio of human beings swept up in tragic events. *Coming Home* is a less picturesque, colorful and coldly elegant film than early works such as *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*. It is almost self-consciously smaller in scale, more emotional and "warmer" in both look and feel. At times the film verges on the sentimental (its treacly score does not help), but the director's and performers' undoubted honesty and commitment keep it on course for the most part.

The dramatic situation in the film—a husband and father who feels responsible (rightly or wrongly) for the family's protracted tribulations; a wife and mother who has been seriously damaged in the process (and regrets that she could not do more for her persecuted husband); a daughter racked by guilt for her earlier betrayal—is a serious and intriguing one. To his credit, Zhang does what relatively few filmmakers dare to do at present: he aligns himself and his actors to the intense emotional demands of the piece. Most North American and European directors are far too cool,

cautious and calculating for that.

Along these lines, Zhang expresses admiration for Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, whose works criticized Japanese post-war society from a generally left-wing point of view. Kurosawa had his failings, but he never shied away from representing the most towering dramas and confrontations. Zhang told the same Toronto roundtable last year that the Japanese director "is a true film master and my respected hero. ... Kurosawa has always been my role model. Two particular types of his movies are impressive in my opinion. One is action movies that tell Japanese culture in a grand way. The other is the kind of movie that deals with ordinary peoples' lives. These types of movies have influenced me; that's why I myself do these two kinds of movies."

Zhang's attitude toward the history in *Coming Home* is not entirely clear. Presumably he opposes the far-reaching repression of the Anti-Rightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution. One would tend to believe that his outlook is relatively undeveloped and historically uninformed. From the formal point of view, one might categorize it as liberal-individualist. Nothing in his various public comments would contradict that.

But art, as Trotsky once noted, "is basically a function of the nerves and demands complete sincerity." In opposing the national-bureaucratic crudity and cruelty of the Maoist officialdom, which had nothing to do with socialism or the historic interests of the working class, Zhang is perfectly capable within the limits of a sharply focused work of mobilizing considerable humanity and sincerity. *Coming Home* has struck a considerable chord in China, setting records for a domestic art film, probably for a variety of contradictory reasons.



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