

# TRANSGRESSION-OBSESSED: A CROSS-CULTURAL READING OF *JUDOU* AND *CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER*

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When asked about the leitmotif of his latest film *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), Zhang Yimou, the internationally renowned Chinese film director, clearly answered that the film is mainly about the courtly corruption beneath the palace extravagance (“Secrets within”). This claimed theme of the film, to be more specific, is one that centers on transgression of the imperial family members: the Empress, unwanted and slowly poisoned by the Emperor, has a forbidden love relation with her stepson, the Crown Prince, who abandons her after a three-year intimacy with her and courts a palace maid named Jiang Chan without knowing she is his half-sister. It is common knowledge that in most of his films, Zhang Yimou fetishizes femininity. And along with that fetishism, he is strongly fascinated with depicting taboo sexuality, such as adultery and incest, as in one of his most famous early films *Judou* (1990). Both his fetishism of femininity and fascination with sexual transgression are once again dominant in *Curse of the Golden Flower*. It is my interest in this essay to focus on the thematic transgression in *Judou* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* intratextually and intertextually. In other words, the films’ incestuous sexuality will be examined in relation with each other, and, more importantly, in a large context of cross-cultural theatrical adaptation and aesthetic appropriation.

## Transgression in *Judou* and Its Possible Cross-cultural Relationship

My interest in Zhang Yimou’s filmic transgression initially began with *Judou*. Right after its release in 1990, *Judou* was officially shown in Hong Kong. In 1992 when a ban was lifted and the film was shown in Mainland China, most Chinese audiences, like earlier Hong Kong viewers, responded either unfavorably or lukewarmly—uneasiness was reportedly caused by the incestuous sexuality in the film (Jenny Lau 154; Lin 120). Contrastingly, when it was widely shown abroad right after it was released in 1990, the film was immediately received into Western audience’s favor. Moreover, it won Zhang Yimou several international film festival awards, among which was the Luis Bunuel Award of the 1990 Cannes Film Festival, and became the first Chinese feature film to be nominated for an Oscar in 1991.

An internationally acclaimed work, *Judou* has fascinated not only many audiences abroad, but also a large number of film critics and scholars over the past decade or so. Some critics and scholars think of the film as highly Chinese and explore such Chinese notions expressed in the film as *yin* (excessive eroticism) and *xiao* (filial piety)—even though these notions are read as the very things the film consciously criticizes (Jenny Lau 157-162). Others claim to see in it an “Oriental’s orientalism;” that is, “in its self-subalternizing, self-exoticizing visual gestures,” the film puts on “an exhibitionist self-display” which “turns the remnants of orientalism into elements of a new ethnography” (Chow 171). Still others theorize a Chinese oedipal complex in this film (Lin 119-123). The disagreed, diverse interpretations of the film not only point out the non-monolithic characteristic of contemporary Chinese cinema, but also suggest the complexity of cultural relations underlying *Judou*. I have been interested in exploring the illicit relationships in *Judou* in comparative perspectives and, as a result, a central question in my study of this film and Zhang Yimou’s filmic transgression in general has been raised: Is *Judou* essentially modeled on a Chinese or Western source? Although this critical question was challenged by the fact that Zhang Yimou’s film was adapted from Liu Heng’s *Fuxi Fuxi* (translated as *The Obsessed*), a novella which is

named after the Chinese mythical figure Fuxi, I would propose that the incestuous liaison in *Judou* bears similarities to the American playwright Eugene O'Neill's play *Desire under the Elms*, first produced in 1924.

As we know, *Judou*, set in a village of a mountainous area in China in the 1920s, is basically about a love triangle among a dye-house master Yang Jinshan, his young wife Judou, and his nephew apprentice Yang Tianqing. The triangle relationship of *Judou*, to a large extent, is the Ephraim-Abbie-Eben plot of the *Desire under the Elms*. If we juxtapose O'Neill's play with Zhang Yimou's film in a comparison, we see striking resemblances between the two works. *Desire under the Elms* is set on a farm in New England in 1850. Like Yang Jinshan in Zhang Yimou's film, the old farmer Ephraim Cabot brings home a young and beautiful bride. Like Judou, Abbie Putnam, Ephraim's newly-married wife, finds herself having passion for Eben Cabot, her husband's son from a previous marriage, but conceals her passion before making advances. Like Yang Tianqing, Eben resists at first his stepmother's advances but eventually succumbs to Abbie's seduction. As in the Judou-Tianqing affair, Abbie and Eben have a son of their transgressions whom the old Ephraim, just like the old Yang Jinshan, initially believes to be his own. On the surface, the endings of the two triangle relationships are different. In *Judou*, the young lovers' son Yang Tianbai, while growing up, becomes angry and frustrated in confusion as to who his father is; by accident, Yang Tianbai drowns his acknowledged father and eventually willfully kills his actual father; in the end, Judou sets a fire onto the Yang dye-house and vanishes in the blaze of her futile defiance (*Judou*). Whereas towards the end of *Desire under the Elms*, Abbie smothers her baby son in an effort to prove her love for Eben and testify to the strength of her own passion (O'Neill 317-378). In the deep structure of both works, however, by sacrificing either the life of an infant or two adults' lives, the relationship among the mother, two fathers, and the (baby) son ends with the same unresolved questioning of the interplay between human desire and ethical prohibition.

The validity of my reading of *Judou* in connection with O'Neill's play stemmed from some intertextual experiences. First, when I walked out of a screening of *Judou* in a Canadian cinema in 1991, I couldn't help recalling the American playwright's *Desire under the Elms* which I had read years before. Secondly, compared to Liu Heng's *Fuxi Fuxi (The Obsessed)*, Zhang Yimou was found to have shifted the narrative center from the male protagonist Yang Tianqing in the original novella to the female persona Judou in the film. Published in 1988, Liu Heng's novella, in my reading, is first and foremost a passionate, yet ironical celebration of masculinity. The title of the novella, *Fuxi Fuxi*, draws our attention to the Chinese mythology about Fuxi and Nuwa, two human-headed and snake-tailed siblings becoming spouses when there were no other people in the world.<sup>1</sup> If Fuxi and Nuwa in the ancient mythology had to sacrifice themselves in order to create humankind, the love affair between Judou (as aunt) and Yang Tianqing (as nephew) in the novella is an incestuous one which is nothing but a taboo after Fuxi and Nuwa brought civilization to mankind. Nevertheless, I believe what Liu Heng was enthusiastic about in writing this novella was not so much about this transgression, but about man's spontaneous, persistent sexual desire—the illicit relationship and its interaction with the patrilinear morality mainly provide a context for this representation of androcentrism.<sup>2</sup> The shifted focus in the film, as most obviously

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1. The mythical story, as recorded in a Tang Dynasty (618-907) text, goes like this in Andrew H. Plaks' translation: "Long ago, when the universe had first come into being, there were no people in the world, only Nu-kua [Nuwa] and her brother on Mount Kun-lun. They considered becoming man and wife but were stricken with shame. And so (Fuxi) and his sister went up on Kun-lun and (performed a sacrifice), vowing: 'If it is Heaven's wish that my sister and I become man and wife, let this smoke be intertwined. If not, let the smoke scatter,' whereupon the smoke was intertwined, and his sister did cleave unto him" (Plaks 35-36).

2. This is first indicated by the fact that the novella *Fuxi Fuxi* was originally entitled *Benr Benr*—the Chinese slang referring to the male genitals (Chang Qie 1), and secondly suggested by the author's replacing Nuwa with Fuxi in the Fuxi-Nuwa mythical pairing (Huot 86), and thirdly manifested in the dramatic depiction of Tianqing's self-displayed, upside-down naked body at his suicide scene, in the talks about Tianqing's legendary penis size by young

illustrated by its title and strong female lead, might have allowed the audience to see what Zhang Yimou believed, that is, Chinese “women express this [oppression and confinement] more clearly on their bodies . . . because they bear a heavier burden than men” (qtd. in Lu: 110). But, more significantly, it erased the trace of the Chinese mythical male figure Fuxi and permitted new perceptions and readings centering on the new female protagonist.

My intertextual reading of *Judou* further invited me to look for a possible cross-cultural influence of O’Neill’s play upon Zhang Yimou’s cinematic structure and vision. Like other Fifth-Generation filmmakers, Zhang Yimou participated in a nationwide intellectual movement in the mid- and late 1980s called “cultural self-reflection.” At that time, being rapidly exposed to recently-introduced Western literary trends and recently-translated works of Western and other foreign literatures, young Chinese writers and artists sensed the obviously inferior position of contemporary Chinese literature and art in comparison. They then embarked on a broad discussion about reassessment of the value of traditional Chinese culture, aiming at criticizing the existing structural character of the nation by relocating the nation’s cultural experiences and memories that had been estranged by modern radical ideologies and politics (Yeh 230-236). In doing so, however, as witnessed by critics of Chinese film culture, these writers and artists, on the one hand, established a basic thematic continuity of the legacy of modern Chinese literature—e.g., “the emancipation of individual” (Lu 110)—which had wholeheartedly embraced Western modernist literature. On the other hand, as one of the then “searching-for-roots” writers Li Tuo argued, they realized that the “searching-for-roots” literature “first had to learn from the Western modernists and then try, on that basis, to absorb Chinese traditional culture” (qtd. in Yeh: 250).

In my examination of imbedded Western modernist aesthetic influences in China’s modern literary legacy that possibly provided Zhang Yimou with inspiring images, characters, fictional structures and artistic techniques in making *Judou*, I have paid special attention to Cao Yu’s spoken-drama play *Thunderstorm* (1934). As modern Chinese literary historians and critics have noted, among attributions of foreign ancestry for Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm*, were O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms* and Antony Chekov’s *Three Sisters* (McDougall and Louie 173, 178, 180). The similarity between *Thunderstorm* and *Desire Under the Elms* was believed to lie not only in plot scenario, but more importantly in dramatic vision and characterization.<sup>3</sup> It seemed that via Cao Yu, the “desire” of *Desire Under the Elms*, a libidinal force yet to symbolize the rebellious spirit for O’Neill’s time in the Nietzschean sense, inspired the Chinese film director who attempted to make *Judou* a critique of the decayed, male-dominated Chinese culture. In his search for motifs and inspirations for the transgression of his *Judou* outside the overdefined social realities, Zhang Yimou was found either directly inherited or aesthetically, philosophically akin to China’s modern literary legacy which had already absorbed thematic and technical elements unknown to the Chinese tradition. And it was these familiar traits of Western culture in *Judou*, I believe, that helped the film as well as its director to have been received into Western audience’s favor.

### **The Reincarnation of a Greek Tragedy in *Curse of the Golden Flower***

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boys later on (un-translated in the English version), and in the fooling-around behavior of Tianqing’s hair (his second son in his adulthood), and more importantly enhanced by a lot of monologues by the male protagonist Tianqing in the novella (*The Obsessed*).

3. In comparing Cao’s *Thunderstorm* to O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms*, for example, Joseph S. M. Lau points out: “Of all the characters in *Thunderstorm*, Chou [Zhou] Fan-yi has perhaps the closest resemblance to the traditional tragic hero, for like Abbie Putnam in O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms*, she is essentially a woman of passion, though the nature of their passion and the manner they react to it are characteristically different. And like Abbie, Fan-yi has her own freedom of will” (Lau 8).

If Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* functions merely as a pathway through which I have traced the possible influence of O'Neill's play on *Judou*, Zhang Yimou, while working out the plot of his film-to-be *Curse of the Golden Flower*, considered directly adapting the same play by Cao Yu ("Interview with Wang Bin" 19). At the Los Angeles Premiere of the film, Zhang Yimou spoke clearly of his borrowing from Cao Yu:

The film is actually adapted from a very famous stage play in the 1920s and 1930s called *Thunderstorm*, which is a very powerful story, very dramatic. And I've always loved it, and the interpersonal tensions that are revealed in that story are something I thought we could really tackle with this film ("Los Angeles Premiere").

Supported with a big budget and later a box-office bonanza, *Curse of the Golden Flower* has been taken by critics as a historical "tragedy replete with martial arts" (Barboza 2: 7+; "Interview of Wang Bin" 19). More controversial than ever before in criticism of Zhang Yimou's works, the film has been criticized for its "crazy pursuit" of "a gargantuan set" and lack of basic concern for humanity (Yi Hong 1); it has also been ridiculed by the media as "eye-popping" for its "gold-laced imperial palace" and costumes, "three million chrysanthemums," and its "special effects" (Barboza 2: 7+). Nevertheless, this so-called "homegrown blockbuster" film is seen again haunted by the incest motif. In other words, in terms of themes, as admitted by the film director himself, *Curse of the Golden Flower* is still obsessed with the sexual transgression represented in *Desire under the Elms*, *Judou*, and, of course, *Thunderstorm*.

Indeed, apart from transgression scenario, Zhang Yimou is also partially indebted to Cao Yu in his characterization of his tragic heroes and heroines in his latest film. A "powerful," "very dramatic" story, as Zhang Yimou comments, Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* has become the most performed play in the history of modern Chinese drama ever since its first publication in 1934 and successful stage premiere in 1935, and there were quite a few different film adaptations of the play made in the 1930s, 1980s and 1990s respectively (McDougall and Louie 177); this record was topped by a 2003 reproduction in the popular form of TV series.

*Thunderstorm* is a melodrama that blends incest with generational revolt, political drama of class struggle, predestined fate, and bloody revenge. The major incestuous relationship of it can be summarized as such: Zhou Fanyi, the neurasthenic wife of Zhou Puyuan, a wealthy owner of a coalmine in north China, has a forbidden love relation with her stepson Zhou Ping who abandons her later and courts a house maid Sifeng without knowing she is his half-sister. The play ends with Fanyi's own son Zhou Chong and Sifeng dying by accident, Zhou Ping committing a suicide, and Fanyi and Shiping, Zhou Puyuan's former mistress and mother to Zhou Ping, incarcerated in an asylum; the male protagonist Zhou Puyuan is left surveying his ruined life, that is, he loses his women and most of his children (McDougall and Louie 178). Based upon *Thunderstorm*, but with selection and distortion, *Curse of the Golden Flower* has a very similar transgression scenario: Empress Phoenix, the outwardly obedient yet actually rebellious second wife of Emperor Ping, a man of humble origins but strong ambition, has a forbidden love affair with her stepson, Crown Prince Wan, the son from Emperor Ping's previous marriage. Having engaged in the illicit relation with the Empress for three years, the Crown Prince abandons her and courts, without his knowledge that she is his half-sister, a palace maid named Jiang Chan, daughter of the Imperial Doctor. In the end, except the Emperor and Empress, all involved in the "dark" and illicit relationships are either killed or murdered, including the wife of the Imperial Doctor, Chan's mother who turned out to be the Emperor's first wife and Crown Prince Wan's biological mother; Prince Jie, the second son and symbol for filial piety in the film, commits a suicide. The Empress survives but becomes almost insane, assumably awaiting a complete mental collapse; and the Emperor is left, doomed to reflect what the Chinese believe, "the higher you go, the lonelier you are" (qtd. in "Secrets within," *Curse of the Golden Flower*)

As mentioned earlier, there is a parallel between Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* and O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* in terms of theme and characterization in which, as Joseph Lau exemplifies, "by design, Fan-yi

is modeled upon Abbie Putnam in her defiance of traditional morals” (Lau 25). And this parallel could arouse our curiosity about the possibility of making a comparative study between Zhang Yimou’s latest film and the American play. Interestingly, however, the transgression of *Curse of the Golden Flower* is here intertextualized with another Western discourse, namely, the Greek myth about the Hippolytus-Phaedra-Theseus relationship, by two opportunities: First, my research for the comparative study of *Judou* and *Desire under the Elms* discussed in the preceding part of this essay has consequently heightened my awareness that O’Neill’s play was modeled on the Hippolytus-Phaedra-Theseus myth (Berlin 58-59). Secondly, just as in O’Neill’s situation, Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm* was also found to have traits of Greek mythology; the validity of the claim not only exists in textual evidences but also lies in the fact that Cao Yu was majoring in English literature at Qinghua University in Beijing during 1929-1933 and had read extensively in Western literature, including dramatic masterpieces by Euripides and Sophocles (Joseph Lau 6-27; Wang 90; McDougall and Louie 178).<sup>4</sup>

In the Greek myth, as portrayed in the Greek dramatist Euripides’s *Hippolytus* (429 BC) as well as the Latin dramatist Seneca’s *Phaedra* (50 AD), Phaedra is the second wife of Theseus, the hero and king of Athens. She falls madly in love with her stepson, Hippolytus. After her feelings are rejected by Hippolytus, Phaedra falsely denounces him as her seducer. Theseus calls upon Poseidon, the sea-god, to punish his son; Hippolytus is destroyed. Phaedra eventually confesses and kills herself (Warner 73-126). Ever since Euripides’s tragedy, especially during and after the Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries), Western literature had witnessed a great deal of reappearance of the theme of Phaedra’s “forbidden,” “concealed,” and “unfulfilled” love for Hippolytus (Szondi 78), with the seventeenth-century French writer Jean Racine’s (1639-99) famous *Phaedra* as the culmination. While most works had simply repeated the mythic story following the representation of it in Seneca’s *Phaedra*, some had altered it more. For example, in a 1646 French remaking of it, Hippolytus is depicted in love with Phaedra in that incestuous relationship (James and Jondorf 2).

Of the Western modern works that breathed fresh, modern life into the Greek myth, are O’Neill’s play *Desire under the Elms*, Ingmar Bergman’s film *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1956), Bernardo Bertolucci’s film *La Luna* (1979), just to mention a few. Like some of the earlier remakings of the mythical Hippolytus-Phaedra-Theseus relationship in which Hippolytus is portrayed as the lover of Phaedra, both O’Neill’s tragic play and Bergman’s filmic comedy, for instance, depict a transgression between the husband’s son and his stepmother (Baron 169-178). If classical works established “an archetypal situation of transgression” in the evolution of the mythic story (Gerard 2), these modernist works, while treating the story in relation to their own times’ moral and intellectual climate, represent some subversive trends in the West that have challenged the values of male and female sexuality inherent in the myth. In terms of their relationships with Chinese culture, these works, particularly O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms* and a couple of his other plays, not only cast huge influences on modern Chinese playwrights in the early decades of the twentieth century, but may still be in rapport with contemporary Chinese culture.

By drastically moving the transgression scenario from a feudal-capitalist family of the twentieth century to the court of a Chinese golden dynastic age (the Tang Dynasty 618-907) in his transforming Cao

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4. Although very reluctant to admit his indebtedness, as Joseph Lau points out, Cao Yu was familiar with Euripides’s *Hippolytus* and Racine’s *Phaedra*. He said in the Preface to *Thunderstorm*: “Now that this play [*Thunderstorm*] has been publicly performed many times in this country, it is quite common for people to identify me as a follower of Ibsen, or even go so far as to conjecture that part of the play is a spiritual heir to Euripides’s *Hippolytus* or Racine’s *Phaedra*. This, to me, is more or less a surprise. . . . For while it is true that in the past ten years or so I have read quite a number of plays and even taken part in some performances myself, I cannot, however, recall exactly which part of my play was written in intentional imitation of which master. Possibly, in my subconsciousness, I have stolen threads and threads of golden yarn from the master’s house, used them to mend my ugly and course garments and then denied that these discolored threads (for they now become mine) originally belonged to the master” (qtd. in Joseph Lau: 8).

Yu's theatrical work to his film, Zhang Yimou charged his representation of the central theme with some sort of classic tone and an atmosphere of noble tragedy. As he says: "The story represents a time when men dominated society. Women were oppressed. It was a repression of humanity. . . . As an emperor, you'll have dual personalities. You are the greatest and strongest, but you will always be the loneliest. . . . In a male-dominated society, [the empress] is the central victim" ("Secrets within"). Paralleled with the story of the tragedy of the mythical royal house of ancient Athens, the dark and appalling past and present of the legendary Chinese imperial family are foregrounded. In the large context of cross-cultural aesthetic and theatrical interaction given here, Zhang Yimou's filmic transgression is seen to break all kinds of boundaries and is understood as a situation which, by compounding adultery with incest, "brings into play the fundamental psychological motivations of love and honor, sex and vengeance" (Gerard 2).

## Conclusion

Examining Zhang Yimou's obsession with transgression in *Judou* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* intratextually and from an intertextual, cross-cultural perspective is exciting and meaningful, because this kind of study can not only reveal how certain motifs are recreated but also why writers and artists use certain plots and characters for specific purposes in a particular place and time. If, through a Phaedra torn by love itself in the famous French play *Phaedra*, Racine showed us "there is no greater passion than the desire to suppress passion" (Fry 273), and if in *Desire under the Elms*, by portraying modes of unholy lust and infanticide, O'Neill conveyed a Nietzschean viewpoint that man's desire alone can enable him to transcend himself, then, in *Judou*, Zhang Yimou symbolically probed a cyclic sexual interplay in which his female protagonist, with acute awareness of being wretched, functions as a central agent whereby the sexually-impotent husband restores his patriarchal power and the socially-emasculated lover fulfills his sexual desire, and in *Curse of the Golden Flower*, by indirectly yet powerfully transforming Western age-old adultery and incest motifs into his new audacious and spectacular film, Zhang Yimou sensationally unfolds before the audience the devouring tensions of the Chinese imperial house, or he exemplifies, to borrow Albert Gerard's words, "the utter disruption of natural order and moral hierarchies" in medieval China (Gerard 2).

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