

Adapted in part from Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero_\(2002_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero_(2002_film))

HERO (2002)

Directed by Zhang Yimou Cinematography by Christopher Doyle

Wuming "Nameless"	Jet LI	Can Jian "Broken Sword"	Tony LEUNG	King of Qin/ Ying Zhen, the future Qin Shi Huangdi	CHEN Daoming
Fei Xue "Flying Snow"	Maggie CHEUNG	Chang Kong "Long Sky"	Donnie YEN	Ru Yue "Moon"	ZHANG Ziyi.

THE FILM

The action is set during the Warring States Period (circa 225 BC), shortly before the unification of the empire. It tells the story of assassination attempts on the king of Qin by legendary warriors who seek revenge for his subjugation of their kingdoms. The king justifies his actions as necessary for the unification of *tianxia*, pointing to the convoluted Chinese written language as illustration. Ying Zheng in 221 BC did indeed defeat the local kingdoms and become the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (lived 259-210 BC; reigned 221-210 BC).

This was Zhang's first attempt at the *wuxia* (martial arts) genre, and he uses a highly unusual structure. Conflicting versions of the events are recounted by different characters, reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950). Each section uses a different color scheme depending on the narrator's point of view.

As more versions of the same story are presented, the characters of the narration grow more intelligent, insightful, and thoughtful. At the start of the film, during the first story told by the Nameless, Broken Sword is portrayed as a mere brawler and Flying Snow seems ruled by her thoughts of the past and her hatred/love of Broken Sword; at the conclusion of the film, in the final story and the scenes after the death of Nameless, Broken Sword is presented as a deeply contemplative and forward-thinking warrior and Flying Snow is a woman who feels the weight of their entire civilization resting upon her shoulders in addition to her own feelings. They grapple with complex issues that force them to think rather than fight, and they must weigh their own lives against their entire nation.

The film has a tragic structure; its six main characters come to realize that unity depends on their own decisions and actions. Their patriotic responsibility conflicts with their personal desires for revenge, and with their relationships to each other.

POLITICAL OVERTONES

The film was inspired in part by a desire to match Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* with a film made in the People's Republic. The film failed to be as successful as its makers hoped, in part because some overseas perceived it as

pro-totalitarian and pro-Chinese reunification. Critics cited the approval given to the film by the government. These critics argue that the ulterior meaning of the film is the triumph of security and stability over liberty and human rights and that the concept of "all under heaven" (translated in the American release as "Our Land") is used anachronistically to mean "China" even though the Qin Empire was different in structure and extent. At least in the eyes of some critics this might justify the incorporation of areas such Tibet and Xinjiang and promote the reunification of Taiwan with China. Zhang Yimou maintained he had no political intentions and that he could have chosen a different time in history.

The future first Emperor of China is portrayed in a sympathetic light. For centuries Confucians castigated Qin Shi Huang as a tyrant who buried scholars and burned books (ironically, historians now agree that these particular charges were brought by Han dynasty Confucians who found it safer to criticize brutality in a dead emperor than a live one). A more traditional portrait of Qin Shi Huang is found in Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999), while Zhou Xiaowen's 1996 *QinSong* (The Emperor's Shadow), portrays the conflict between the Emperor and his childhood companion who refuses to perform his music in service of the empire. Mao Zedong compared himself with Qin Shi Huang as a unifying founder of a state which replaced an older political system. Qin Shi Huang's reign, while brutal, effectively unified the writing system, weights and measures, currency, and national transport.

CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSLATIONS

Some criticized the translation in the American-release of one of the central ideas in the film, *tiānxià*, which literally means "all under heaven," that is, "the empire," or "all that is Chinese." It is also used in the Neo-Confucian proverb "To suffer when all under heaven suffer, to enjoy only when all under heaven enjoy." Miramax chose to translate it as "our land," probably to avoid a cultural tangle. In addition, cries from the soldiers were changed from "Hail!" to "storm," in order to avoid a Nazi/fascist connotation.

ZHANG YIMOU AND STATE AESTHETICS (Excerpts)

1) "Zhang Yimou and Fascist Aesthetics" By Cui Weiping, Professor of Beijing Academy of Film:

Some people use the term "violence aesthetics" to describe the visual effects of the film *Hero* directed by Zhang Yimou. However, I think it is more exact to categorize it as fascist aesthetics. Just to beautify violence is not fascist aesthetics. The effect of fascist aesthetics is to make an individual succumb to some mysterious, heavenly and invincible power. An individual feels awed and humbled in the face of power. ...

The impression of supremacy comes also from the high level of uniformity emphasized by the director. He got rid of all noises in order to exhibit the existence of an overwhelming power. The film didn't show a single face of the common people. We could not see any old men, women, children, or craftsmen in it. Besides the Emperor of Qin and the assassins, there were not any other characters in between. It seemed that the director regarded secular lives as dross, whose existence could only foul the lofty ambitions of the heroes.

Some people have questioned whether the gigantic soldier formations in *Hero* looked more like those in ancient Rome than in China. Actually it was not in the Roman style either. It just came from an imagined image of something invincible. The soldiers in the formations were in the same uniform, wore the same rigid expressions and executed the same actions. They surged up from a vast and unpeopled background as if they were controlled by the will of a mysterious power. They gathered and scattered swiftly and disappeared within a second. The huge number of ant-like people was not used to exhibit any military strategy. The accumulation of them was merely to showcase the magnitude of the power controlling them...

2) Zhu Dake (*China News Week*)

Zhang Yimou is a master at directing totalitarian group calisthenics. The visual impact of his art is built on it. Images of uniform soldiers, forests of arms and flags, and huge waves of dust are all used by him to show off the great power of an empire and the strength of unified will. The aesthetics of mass games is a form of fascist aesthetics, which existed during the Nazi movement. The unity it advocates seems lovely: all people are subject to a supreme will and they break into deafening cheers for it.

I DISAPPROVE OF MAKING UNDERGROUND FILMS ¹

ZHANG YIMOU

In 1999, Zhang Yimou faced a number of challenges. US-China tension heated when the US bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. The breakup of the state supported studio system also meant that Chinese filmmakers had to find international funding and new markets. The state continued to control what could be shown and restricted imports. Younger directors of the so-called "Sixth Generation" turned to "underground" films, which used new lightweight and cheap digital technology and could circulate in pirated versions. Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke became favorites of the international art house crowd and won many prizes in the West.

Hollywood movies are infiltrating the whole world, together with American culture, and China may be holding the last defensible position. The situation with Chinese-made films is quite parlous and in a state of overall decline. Times are hard for everybody, and I do not have any special prescription. Only remember one thing: Our personal destinies are bound up together with the interests of the state.

As far as directors are concerned, we should take the lead in conscientiously and responsibly doing a good job of making every film. If everyone did this, the situation would be much better. However, the good and the bad are mixed together in the ranks of our cinema professionals. Many of them fail to reach any standard of quality, and many impostors have become directors or film stars, so there is no way to conduct any unified assessment of them. Consequently, a great many fake and defective products have been turned out, ruining the reputation of films made in China. The fact is that the percentage of trash among American films may be much higher than that among our films, but the majority of their films that are chosen for import are of high quality. It is therefore not surprising that people feel that films made in China are of a comparatively low standard. In the interests of protecting Chinese-made cinema, I very much approve of the state using administrative means to place restrictions on imports of major films.

As far as young directors are concerned, they should face up to the market more than ever, instead of letting themselves be carried away by despair. I disapprove of making underground films. Everyone has the ability to survive. If there are difficulties, we should devise ways and means of extricating ourselves from them. It is obviously unwise to opt for underground films-which is simply a way of giving up on movie theaters and abandoning moviegoers. Such an attitude is one of escaping from reality and in three or five years you will probably have lost even the basic ability to adapt to circumstances.

A director should, of course, maintain his own personality, but it is impossible not to compromise. Realities are powerful and cannot be changed by the individual alone. I myself have been compromising constantly, starting from the time I made *Red Sorghum* right up to the present. There is nothing shameful in doing so. Do you think American directors do not have to compromise? They too must yield to the exigencies of economic profit and audience preferences. American producers frequently force directors to change the endings of their films to conform with moviegoers' comments. It is my impression that only Steven Spielberg has little use for compromise: he has just about reached the stage where he can do anything he pleases. However, I have not yet had a chance to talk with him face-to-face. Quite possibly, he too has a bellyful of grievances!

¹Translation from Zhang Yimou, "Wo bu zancheng pai dixia dianying," *Qingnian bao* (Youth daily) (Saturday, May 8, 1999): 11.

IS *HERO* A PAEAN TO AUTHORITARIANISM? (Excerpts)

ROBERT Y. ENG, UNIVERSITY OF REDLANDS

... I have felt that not only is it not a paean to authoritarianism, it is a sharp rejection of it. One should not accept at face value what the protagonists say in the film as representative of the intentions of the auteur (or for that matter, even Zhang Yimou's public utterances about *Hero*). I first saw the Qin army in *Hero* as a faceless fascist war machine, ruthless in its discipline, its mandated unanimity, and its disregard for human life. The Qin army's unison cry of "Feng! Feng!" is chillingly similar to the Nazi salute "Sieg Heil!" The aerial assault of arrows at the beginning of the Qin invasion of the kingdom of Zhao is reminiscent of modern bombardments raining death at a distance.

Contradicting his own claim that his conquests were to end war and bring peace to the Chinese world divided by the Warring States for four and a half centuries, the Qin king Ying Zheng boasts that the six states he sets out to conquer amount to nothing, and that there is a wider world outside for him to conquer. Throughout the film there is not a single concrete indication that Qin unification will bring about peace, justice and benevolent rule. All we have is the word of the Qin king and the hope of the assassin Broken Sword. What we actually see of the Qin state is its relentless war machine and pitiless and faceless bureaucrats. Except for the ominously red plumes on the helmets of the soldiers, both warriors and officials are dressed uniformly in black. The drab blackness of the Qin personnel contrasts starkly with vibrant colors of the costumes of the assassins and their individual scenes. At the end of the film the Qin king himself is helpless to make an independent judgment to save the assassin Nameless despite his own personal feelings and supposed supreme power, since the impersonal and relentless Qin bureaucratic-legal machinery demands the execution of Nameless....

Jet Li, one of the film's stars, perceptively observes: "Zhang Yimou wanted to explore what kind of person can become [a] Hero within the framework of fighting, politics, romance and jealousy. Is it the conquering king? The assassins? The killer of the assassins?" Perhaps all of them can be considered Heroes, if highly misguided.

The vision of "all under heaven" (*tianxia*) is contradicted both by the cinematic representation of the Qin state in *Hero* and by actual historical events. With our historical perspective, can we say that the Qin machine as portrayed in *Hero* is one of national regeneration rather than ruthless expansionism? In the case of the Qin king who went on to become First Emperor of China, his imperial regime (221-207 B.C.E.) proved no more durable than the Third Reich. Instead of bringing peace and prosperity to the Chinese people, the Qin state caused great human suffering through oppressive tax and labor demands and endless public construction projects and military campaigns against border peoples. The dynasty went down in the flames of rebellions provoked by its cruelty, and the Chinese people did not enjoy any measure of economic security and peace until the first emperors of the succeeding Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) instituted Daoist policies of light taxes, minimal interference with lives of the people, and a foreign policy centered on diplomacy and defense rather than offense. This historical outcome, which in my view is presaged by the film's grim and relentless imagery of the Qin, contradicts the statement at the close of *Hero* that the First Emperor is protective of the country and the people.

ABSENCE AS SPECTACLE: ZHANG YIMOU'S HERO ***(Excerpts)***

Shelley Kraicer

Spectacle, rather than storytelling, teaches *Hero's* philosophy. It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of the filmmaker's aesthetic achievement: the set-pieces crafted by Zhang Yimou, Christopher Doyle, and Ching Siu-tung are as ecstatically kinetic and as rapturously beautiful as any I've seen in a wuxia pian. The fight among the leaves; Nameless and Broken Sword's pure crystalline standoff, suspended above a lake; Nameless and Flying Snow versus a blizzard of Qin arrows; Broken Sword and Flying Snow's astonishingly convincing battle against 10,000 Qin soldiers guarding the King's palace: all of these have the power and the beauty to thrill all but the most jaded filmgoer. But they also serve a specific function. They progress, more or less systematically, from closely pictured combat through abstracted jousting to ethereal non-combat, from the ground to the air, from physical conflict to spiritual opposition. As more and more of the material content of the fights/flights is pared away, absence, silence, space, and peace begin to predominate. The film's most insistent visual motif is the empty circle; a zone of complete emptiness that a hero creates around him or herself, a zone whose authority leaves the hero, invulnerable, isolated, and, at least temporarily at peace.

These ideas emerge in the dialogue, as Broken Sword, then Nameless, learn to articulate the power of renunciation explicitly. In this they are apparently accompanied by the King, who justifies his yearning for absolute power, for control of "all under heaven," by explaining that this is the necessary condition for peace, defined as an absence of

fearful chaos. This is where *Hero* gets into serious trouble with almost all Chinese critics, who jump all over Zhang Yimou for purportedly building an ideological justification for absolute power, for tyranny as a necessary means to a peaceful end. This is nothing new: the director's careful balancing act – presenting films that seem to offer enough to win mainstream (and censor board) approval while maintaining their moral autonomy, richness, and provocative ambiguity vis-à-vis power – is always vulnerable to being (sometimes deliberately, by now automatically) misread by all sides.

Viewers who want to align themselves with the world view of the King of Qin will find a paean to Chinese unity and totalitarian brutality, a reading there for the taking (perhaps present for censors looking for an excuse to greenlight *Hero's* ideological approval-worthiness). But such an argument is not only circular, it fails to take into account the film's clear strategy of distributing – hence undermining – the limited authority of any single character, and of the idea of narrative closure itself. *Hero* celebrates absence as spectacle; it glorifies absolute renunciation and perfect non-violence as preconditions for peace. Like *Nameless*, it addresses authority, undermining power's grip on narrativity. As filmed philosophy, it is both historically apt and disquietingly contemporary, challenging any state or empire that strives for total power – both ancient and modern, Chinese and otherwise – with a force and a beauty impossible to ignore.