

Camera Movements and Color Toning as Plot Elements in *House of Flying Daggers*

House of Flying Daggers (HoFD) is a romance/martial arts film by renowned 5th Generation Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, released in 2004. *HoFD* occupies an interesting spot in the spectrum of Chinese films, given its director's storied background during the late 1980's with such successes as *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, but its release in the mid 2000's – long after the golden age of 5th Generation filmmakers. Therefore, we choose to analyze the aesthetics of *HoFD* from the perspective of a 5th Generation filmmaker, but ignore the majority of the content due to its late release, intended more for box-office success than typical 5th Generation filmmaker themes. In particular, we will analyze the use of color toning as a recurring method to set a scene's mood as well as the use of camera angles and character movement in the scene following Mei's departure from Jin (approximately 1:00:00 in).

House of Flying Daggers is set in the late 9th century, near the end of the Tang Dynasty, and highlights a particular rebel group, the Flying Daggers. Liu and Jin are two police captains charged with killing the Flying Daggers' new leader. Mei, the new leader's apparent daughter, is the focus of their search. Liu arrests Mei and Jin poses as a lone warrior that saves her in order to gain her trust. He eventually gains her trust and they develop feelings for each other. Throughout the journey to the Flying Daggers, they are repeatedly attacked, and though the attacks are initially staged by Liu, he hands over primary control to the general and the attacks become more dangerous. At one of the turning points of the film and the focus of one of our analyses, Jin decides that his feelings for Mei are stronger than his commitment to the government. Mei and Jin eventually make it to the Flying Daggers, where it is revealed Mei and

Liu have been working for the Flying Daggers the whole time in an elaborate plot to move the general's troops out into the open. Furthermore, it is revealed that Liu has been harboring feelings for Mei over the past 3 years, but that Mei now loves Jin instead. The film's climax is a battle between Jin and Liu over Mei, as the weather turns to a snowstorm.

The first aspect that we will analyze is the use of color toning to set the mood of the scenes – green and blue are used to indicate scenes of betrayal or danger, while yellow and orange are used to indicate scenes of love and loyalty. Use of color tones to dictate mood is a very common filmographic technique, and choice of cool colors to represent negative scenes and warm colors to represent positive scenes is the standard, though Zhang Yimou employs it in a more direct way than most. For examples of its usage, the sequence from 43:30 through 1:00:00 showcases this wonderfully. At the start of the scene, Mei and Jin have just escaped from an attack and have arrived in a flower field. The mood is very light, and there is a strong orange filter, complementing the gold of the field and approaching sunset as Jin rides around picking flowers for Mei. Soldiers appear and attack, and the heavy orange filter is lessened significantly. It appears that some mild split-toning was applied during the battle, with the shadows taking on a slightly greenish tinge and the power of the orange filter being lessened, though the effect is subtle. Liu (concealed) saves them as the sun is setting (which is noticeable by the sharp angle of the shadows). As the battle ends, the light from the sunset dominates the scene, painting it yellow again as Mei states that she now believes in Jin's sincerity entirely, since he has saved her from a potentially deadly attack twice, and has even shed blood for her. The scene then cuts to Jin running through the forest towards Liu, and instantly the color tone turns to a deep blue, to reflect his continued betrayal. When Jin returns to Mei after hearing

that the general considers him expendable, the scene by the fire is left in neutral light – though it is dark and blue outside, the fire's warmth and light balances it to a neutral tone. This neutral tone leaves ambiguity as to whether Jin has fully committed to Mei or not.

In addition to color toning, Zhang Yimou employs many similarly simple yet elegant filmographic techniques to indicate relationships and feelings throughout the film. One other such example is the use of space in the scene following Mei's departure (at 1:00:00). In this scene, Mei is abandoning Jin after he essentially says that he cannot commit to her, and rides on to the Flying Daggers. Jin, conflicted, begins riding back towards Liu and the soldiers, but then changes his mind and chases after Mei. In this scene, there are two important dimensions to indicate relationships – the x-axis of the frame and the z-axis of the frame. Beyond the right side of the frame is implied to be the Flying Daggers, while Liu and the soldiers is implied to be beyond the left side of the frame. Furthermore, Mei is depicted as leaving – moving away from the camera, towards the back of the frame, while Jin is depicted as coming – moving towards the camera, to the front of the frame. This indicates how Jin is losing Mei – not that Jin is being left behind as Mei continues ahead, but that Mei is vanishing into the distance as Jin remains, conflicted, in the foreground. The use of the z-axis in this segment is very effective at highlighting subtleties in the relationships and in calling attention to Jin's conflict. The scene switches back and forth between Mei's departure and Jin's return to Liu and the soldiers, until the pivotal moment when Jin decides he will pursue Mei.

When Jin decides he will pursue Mei, the z-axis is switched, and Jin comes toward the camera while moving to the right of the frame, as Liu and his soldiers chase him with the same movement of back left to front right. This z-axis switch indicates a switch in perspective from

Mei leaving Jin to Jin returning to Mei – and note the key difference that Jin is returning to Mei, rather than chasing after her. This subtle difference is made clear by the z-axis shift, and reaffirms Mei's importance as the protagonist, rather than Jin, since she is now in the foreground rather than him, since his conflict has been decided. This masterful use of perspective and implied distances and angles is characteristic of a 5th generation filmmaker, letting the camera tell the story rather than the characters – and indeed, this entire 3-minute scene is performed without any dialogue whatsoever, yet it contains a trove of content and represents a defining moment in the film.

Returning briefly to the discussion on color toning, the particular frame where Mei crosses through a clearing prior to Jin's change in mind to return to her (1:01:40) is another example of masterful use of color. This frame shows Mei on a red-brown horse on a red-brown path (both very warm colors), traveling through a deep green-blue forest, indicating her new loneliness as she appears to be surrounded by enemies. After Jin turns around and is pursued by Liu and the soldiers, he too passes through this gap, indicating that he too is now alone and surrounded by enemies after his change in heart.

Between color toning of scenes and masterful use of camera angles and framing, Zhang Yimou employs a bevy of simple yet powerful filmographic techniques to highlight subtleties in relationships and plot lines that would be near-impossible to communicate with dialogue alone. This is what characterizes him as a 5th generation filmmaker, and what characterizes *House of Flying Daggers* as a 5th generation-styled film, despite its release in 2004 – long after the golden age of 5th generation films.