



A Palace's Character: The Use of Setting to Amplify Themes in Zhang Yimou's

Curse of the Golden Flower

Zhang Yimou's 2006 film *Curse of the Golden Flower* is a melodrama exploring the toxic dynamics of an imperial family in the (fictionalized) Tang dynasty. The film depicts an emperor slowly poisoning his wife, who is having an affair with her stepson while plotting a rebellion with one of her own sons. The vast majority of the film takes place within the royal palace, whose elaborate sets helped to make it the most expensive film produced in China up till that time.¹ As Zhang stated in a short documentary about the making of the movie, "The key element of the sets is opulence."² Everything about their look feels almost over the top in terms of grandiosity, with a deluge of eye-popping colors and lights in nearly every scene. The beauty of the imperial palace masks the underlying darkness of the royal family trapped within its walls.

On one level, the lavish design of the palace is meant to convey to the viewer just how economically powerful this dynasty was. The imperial family cements their authority over their subjects by inhabiting this elite space where servants treat them like deities. In one scene, the emperor enters a room with such dazzling lighting behind him and reflecting off his metallic armor that he appears almost angelic or otherworldly. The

¹ "Curse of the Golden Flower." Movies ala Mark, October 12, 2021.

<https://moviesalamark.com/2016/04/24/curse-of-the-golden-flower/>.

² Stanley J. Orzel. "Secrets Within: Inside Look at *Curse of the Golden Flower*." 2006.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7TGYga_kw0.

distinction between royals and servants is heightened by the arrangement of teeming masses of the latter in beautiful forms throughout the film that suggest they are mere extensions of the architecture of the palace—objects to be swapped out at will as the empress proceeds step by step through the ritual of taking her poisoned medicine.

In reality, though, these characters are painfully human, acting in horribly cruel ways to each other throughout the story. Zhang aimed to draw a clear contrast between the beautiful palace and its wicked inhabitants, summarizing this distinction with a reference to a Chinese saying about something that is “gold and jade on the outside, rot and decay on the inside.” This is driven home in the final shot of the film, where the empress knocks away her ‘medicine’ that has been tainted with her son’s blood and it



burns a lasting mark into the family table at the heart of the empire (seen here in Image #1³). The emperor lectured his family about this table—a

square set into a circle—earlier in the film, describing how it represented orderly human rule modeled after the heavens to which the royals trace their power. It is located at the highest point within the palace, creating a contrast wherein the family members at the closest architectural point to heaven descend most deeply into their own personal hells.

The grandeur and scale of the Imperial Palace reflect the hierarchical structure and power dynamics of the royal court. The vastness of the palace emphasizes the

³ <https://basilmarinerchase.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/curse-of-the-golden-flower-076.jpg>

distance and isolation between the various characters, highlighting their lack of real connection and trust. Meanwhile, the physical layout of the palace, with separate chambers and corridors

as seen here in Image

#2⁴, reinforces the

division and secrecy of

the royal family. For a

film that takes place in

an expansive and



gorgeous palace, it is remarkable how claustrophobic many of the shots feel as royals

and their throngs of faceless servants are crammed into tight spaces together. The

sheer curtains that separate rooms turn everyone into a spy on everyone else; in one

fascinating moment, the crown prince stumbles in a daze out of a room past one of the

curtains usually opened and closed by servants, and he seems almost shocked to

realize this can be done. These characters learn to operate or express themselves

differently in those rare moments they get alone, as we see in a rare moment where the

empress allows herself to cry at the seeming impossibility of escaping her plight.

Production designer Huo Tingxiao, in his third collaboration with Zhang, aims to stun viewers with a flood of colors that become sickly sweet as the evils of the palace are revealed. This initial pleasure for the audience is a key aspect of the opulence of the set: “Aesthetic sensibility—whether for gemstones, architecture, fashion, or music—begins with absolute pleasure.”⁵ The exterior of the palace was filmed in a

⁴ <https://basilmarinerchase.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/curse-of-the-golden-flower-026.jpg>

⁵ Natalie Wynn. “Opulence,” 1:46. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD-PbF3ywGo>.

one-to-one replica of the imperial palace at the heart of the Forbidden City (even though that structure did not exist at the time this story takes place). Located in the center of Beijing, the Forbidden City is a sizable palace complex that encompasses 180 acres.⁶ It is enclosed by high walls and a moat, which provided the emperor and his court with a



private and exclusive area. The Forbidden City's architecture was created in the traditional Chinese manner and includes elaborate structures (like that seen here in Image #3⁷), expansive courtyards, and immaculately kept gardens. It now functions primarily as a site of

aesthetic pleasure for tourists, with its set replica bringing this delight to the masses through film. Zhang stated in an interview that when it was finished, this massive set “was too immense”: “nobody used it. The scale was too awesome and nobody knew what to do with such a huge place.”⁸ By juxtaposing scenes of intimate and high drama in corridors and courtyards, Zhang found a way to wield palace architecture to convey his story.

The film does have one major other setting and set of characters, both often cast in darkness to contrast them with the gold of the royal family: the official inn and the imperial doctor's family. For the bulk of the movie, the viewer is like the crown prince

⁶ “Forbidden City Architecture.” Forbidden City Architecture, Layout, Style, Design, Decoration. <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/beijing/forbidden-city/architecture-character.htm>.

⁷ https://static.nationalgeographic.co.uk/files/styles/image_3200/public/forbidden15.webp

⁸ Steve Weintraub. “Zhang Yimou Interviewed – ‘Curse of the Golden Flower.’” Collider, December 20, 2006. <https://collider.com/zhang-yimou-interviewed-curse-of-the-golden-flower/>.

who bemoans he has never seen the world outside the palace, but the inn is an exception to this. It is always shown at or near night and set in a valley (seen here in Image #4⁹) cast in shadow that amplifies the dark, relatively unadorned surfaces of its wooden materials. This is where the imperial



doctor and his family find themselves ambushed by the emperor's assassins, sent to murder the doctor's wife who is the believed-to-be-dead mother of the crown prince. When these secrets spill out into the walls of the inn, the only response can be black-clad killers. The viewer is then quickly returned to the palace to witness the empress's gold-clad army launch their failed coup.

The doctor's wife is the antithesis of the empress, and her earlier absurd disguise (dressing in all black) makes her stand out immediately amidst the colors of the palace. In contrast to her bleak reality of suffering after being discarded by the emperor, a painting of her lives on in beauty for ancestral worship in the palace. When she sees this painting, she is appalled by the lies it presents and the opulence of its surroundings: "For the marginalized and impoverished, opulence is a simulacrum of the wealth and power they've been denied."¹⁰ Unfortunately, the palace's maze-like corridors make it impossible for her to escape, literalizing the idea of this architecture as a trap.

One common criticism of this film is that its setting perhaps overwhelms its characters. As one Chinese reviewer wrote, "Ominous meanings emerge in rather murky terms, and the constant barrage of ploys, counterploys and revelations are as

⁹ https://unboxup.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/curse-golden_ninja.jpg

¹⁰ Wynn, 13:30.

weighty and elaborate as the lavish, glistening interior decor of the palace”¹¹. Even a talented filmmaker like Zhang struggles at times to make key characters discernible to



our eyes against the obscenely glamorous backdrops, as in Image #5¹², though it could be argued that this drives home his point that the weight of power

overwhelms even those who wield it. It might be true that “the immensity of Zhang Yimou’s visual world and his lavish use of colour and light gallantly intrude into his narration from time to time.”¹³ But if “the narration thus collapses under the weight of colours,” it is a stunning collapse to witness that mirrors the destruction of its central family.¹⁴ By paralleling and overlapping the story’s central themes with the architecture of the palace, the production team behind this incredible film proves that setting truly can function as another character on screen.

¹¹ Robert Koehler. 2006. “CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER (MAN CHENG JIN DAI HUANG JIN JIA).” *Variety*, Nov, 49.
<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/curse-golden-flower-man-cheng-jin-dai-huang-jia/docview/236398730/se-2>.

¹² <https://basilmarinerchase.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/curse-of-the-golden-flower-403.jpg>

¹³ Huang Yiju. 2008. “Weaving a Dark Parody: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Zhang Yimou’s *Curse of the Golden Flower*.” *Film International* (16516826) 6 (2): 41–51. doi:10.1386/fiin.6.2.41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

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