

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Raise the red lantern</b>
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1992 Mar 24
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	57, 70
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Da hong deng long gao gao gua (Raise the red lantern), Zhang, Yimou, 1991

## Raise the Red Lantern

Directed by Zhang Yimou

Written by Ni Zhen from  
the novel *Wives and  
Concubines*

by Su Tong

Produced by Chiu Fu-Sheng

Released by Orion Classics

At the Lincoln Plaza

Opening March 20

**Zhang Yimou's previous** features, the rural melodrama *Red Sorghum* (1988) and the James M. Cain love triangle *Ju Dou* (1990), were scarcely noted for their convoluted narratives. *Raise the Red Lantern*, too, can be synopsisized in a sentence. A 19-year-old girl leaves school to become the fourth wife of a wealthy middle-aged man and is consequently driven mad. The movie is something like *A Doll's House* in reverse—a tale of failed emancipation. It's set in the 1920s and, if read as political allegory, seems to suggest that China is itself regressing, falling back into primordial patterns.

Like *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* is a vehicle for the chastely glamorous Gong Li—undoubtedly the only Chinese actress in history to have been profiled in *Elle* and interviewed by *Interview*. Here, too, Gong plays a woman at once demure and fierce, exploited and rebellious. Her university dropout Songlian is never less submissive than when bartering away her life and never more diffident than when sealing her doom. The movie opens with a mega-close-up of her generous mouth and proud chin as she informs an unseen stepmother of her decision to become a concubine. "Isn't that a woman's fate?" she asks; impassive face suddenly streaked by tears.

Once Songlian arrives at her husband's home, the movie never leaves—similarly restricted to the rooms, courtyards, and roofs of

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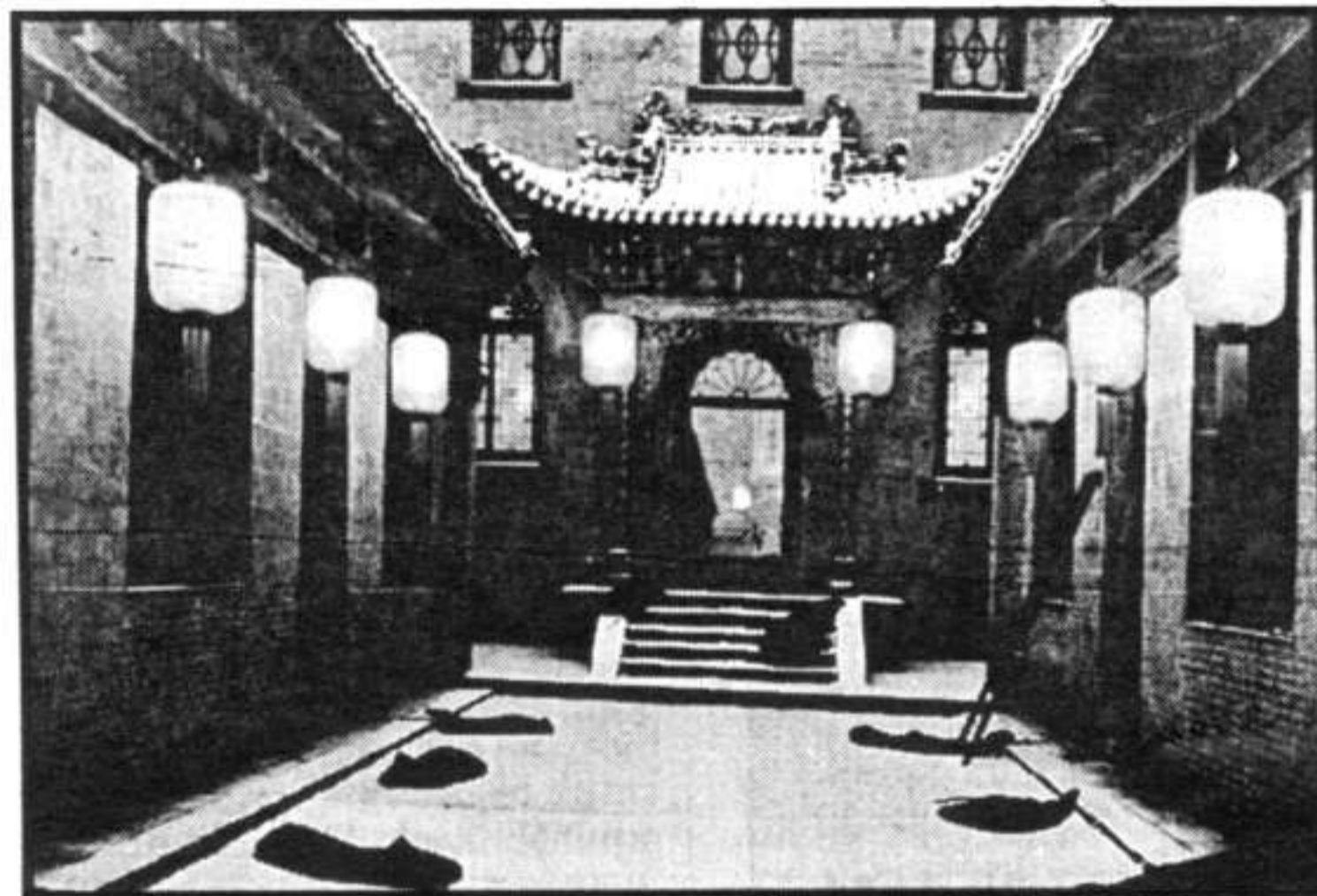
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the women's quarters. And just as Songlian's social role of wife precludes all others, the inner workings of the household seem to revolve entirely around the master's sleeping arrangements. That he himself is barely individuated—less a fearsome tyrant than a nondescript lounge lizard—only magnifies the ceremony of his rule. The film's title comes from the ritual lighting of the lanterns outside and within the residence of the concubine with whom the master decides to spend the night. The favored woman is first stimulated with an elaborate foot massage given by a toothless crone, then rewarded with the power to dictate the next day's menu.

Despite the hothouse atmosphere, *Raise the Red Lantern* is Zhang's most restrained movie—stately and only abstractly lurid. The frontal compositions and the coolly geometric use of empty space suggest the work of Taiwanese filmmaker Ho Hsiao-Hsien, who served as executive producer. (*Raise the Red Lantern* is an all-Chinese international production, shot in the People's Republic, financed by a Taiwanese film and video distributor through its Hong Kong subsidiary.) Were it not so visually elegant, one might call it anti-erotic. The women may dream of auntie's foot massage, but long for power. Caught on the treadmill of planned obsolescence, they compete for the master's attention, intriguing to secure a place in the inherently unstable hierarchy. Once Songlian comes to realize that the only way to protect her future is to present her master with a son, she proclaims herself pregnant—setting

off a chain of events that decimates the family while leaving the institution stronger than ever.

*Raise the Red Lantern* maps a completely self-enclosed world where the choreography of ritual is set to the rhythms of command. Unlike the liquor still and the dye-works where Zhang set his previous films, the master's house conceals its economic sphere. What it actually produces is an ideology. The movie may or may not win the Oscar for which it has been nominated, but it's unlikely to be released in China. The master may be no one, but the power of tradition is ultimately the power of the state.



**Restrained, *Lantern* is nonetheless abstractly lurid.**