

The Housing of Meaning: The “Performance” of Houses in *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*

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“I was so excited when I discovered the walled gentry mansion [where Red Lantern was filmed], which is hundreds of years old in Shanxi Province. Its high walls formed a rigid square grid pattern that perfectly expresses the age-old obsession with strict order. The Chinese people have for a long time confined themselves within a restricted walled space...”

Zhang Yimou, in an interview¹

Architecture has been one of the underlying motifs of many filmmakers. Before considering architecture and film’s involvement with montage and movement, the inevitable question is how to film a building. That is, to transform architecture “from a passive setting of the action, into a major agent of the plot.”² Zhang Yimou’s films *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* are both acknowledged for their symbolic film language. Both are stories of tragic women’s love in houses and were shot in real buildings. At a fundamental level, the “performance” of the real buildings questions the relationship between meaning and space. The real buildings are meaningful in their own histories, but the films detach their original meanings and attach “new” meanings to them, thereby challenging the idea that meaning is fixed in architecture. Meanwhile, the relationship between meaning and architecture is not an any-to-any relationship; certain narratives make more sense in certain buildings than others. This paper will compare the real buildings with the performance of the buildings in the films, in order to understand the meaning of space in two aspects: the symbolism of structure and the atmosphere of space. The former is the logic by which the space is put together, which leads to intellectual concepts. The latter is the appearance of the space, which leads to intuitive feelings.

THE BUILDINGS IN REALITY

On-site observations of the two buildings in question, both of which have been made into museums, were made by the author in the winter of 2001. The author has documented their current states and then, based on written materials and well preserved buildings of the same period, restored their original states through floor plan drawings. In the case of *Ju Dou*, the building was measured on-site, and for *Raise the Red Lantern*, the plan was reproduced from existing drawings in an exhibition.

The “House” of *Ju Dou*

The house of *Ju Dou* was not a house, but rather an ancestral temple in the small village of Nanping. This village originated roughly in the 11th century in Anhui province, in the southeast part of China. Villages in this area were built by well-off merchants and, at the same time, intellectuals. A nearby village was awarded seven times by the emperor for the villagers’ outstandingly obedience of the social rules, which gave the same prestige to the whole area including Nanping.

The village resides at the bottom of a mountain, facing a river and surrounded by growing fields. It has been at its current size for about 300 years, with approximately 1,000 residents, and 300 houses. Houses in this area are densely positioned along narrow lanes. In most cases adjacent houses are separated by double walls, called “horse head walls,” with narrow gaps in between. These double walls are built taller than any ridge of the house, for the purpose of fireproofing, but these tall walls are also visual symbols of families.

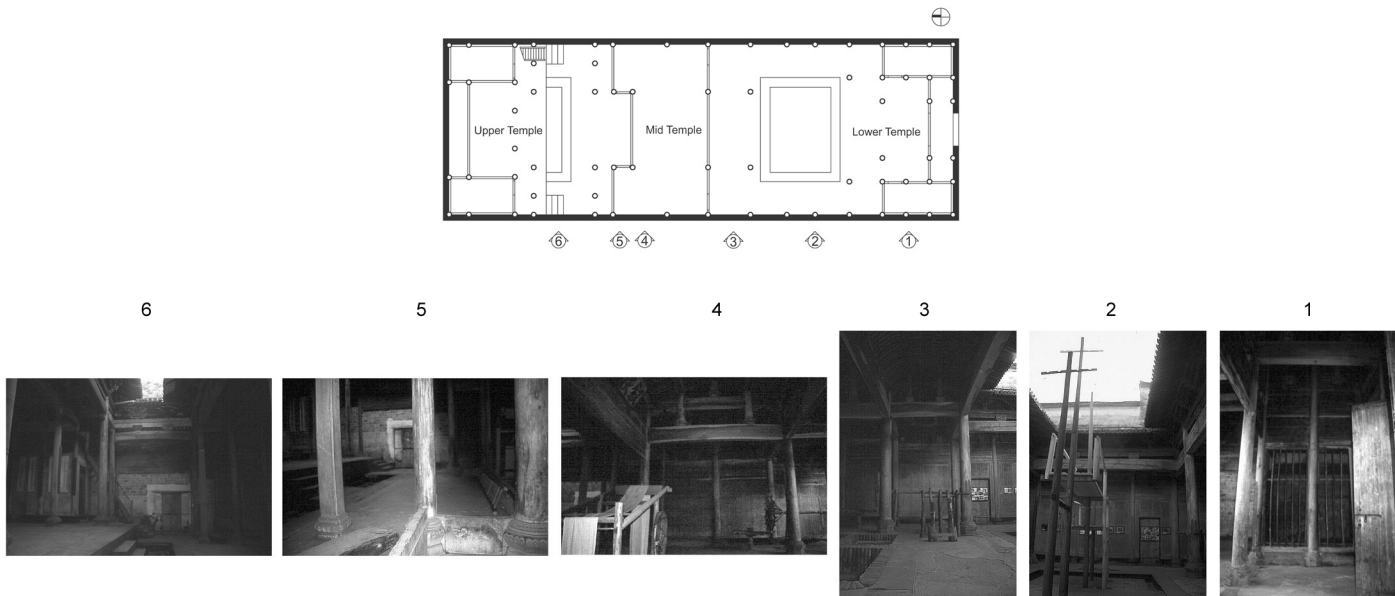


Fig. 1. On-site observation of the "house" of Ju Dou.

The Ye family is the dominant clan in this village and the ancestral temple belongs to them. The Ye temple was built at the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD). Wood columns and beams with self-supported brick walls compose the structure of the building. Like other buildings in this period, Dou Gong is still used as the true supporting structure, connecting the columns with the roof frame. The building is lightly decorated compared to bigger ancestral temples in other villages. Simple decorations can only be found at beam heads, on Dou Gong and on column bases. Other surfaces of the buildings are of plain materials: the floor in stone blocks, the wall in bricks and the ceilings of exposed roof frames.

Following the clan rules, the ancestral temple is the tallest building in the village. The space of the building is symmetrically arranged along a central axis of three major roofed parts: the lower temple, the middle temple and the upper temple. The deeper the space is located, the more important it is. In between the three temples two courtyards are set. (Fig.1) Instead of being open areas, the courtyards have a strong sense of "inwardness" because of the proportion between open space and height. In fact, the courtyard is regarded as a special space since it connects to the outside while being inside. Such an inward space symbolizes the absorption of fortune from the outside. The ancestral temple supported public activities of the clan, such as ceremonies, important decisions, judgment and punishment. At the time of a ritual, people approached from the gate in the south. The lower temple was the entrance space for music playing, the middle temple was for ritual ceremony, and the upper temple was where the shrines of ancestors were placed.

The House of *Raise the Red Lantern*

Raise the Red Lantern was shot in the mansion of the Qiao family in Qixian, Shanxi province, in the northeast part of China. The mansion was started in 1755, by an early merchant, Qiao, and continued for three generations of the clan. Surrounded by much smaller houses in the rural area, the brick and wood structured mansion distinguishes itself in its enormous size and imposing appearance. In fact, the mansion was built within a 10 meter thick brick shell wall for safety reasons. The mansion started to be built from the northeast corner and continued westwards. Two smaller parts were added in 1898 across a gateway in the south. After the addition of the southwest new part as well as the northwest garden, the mansion was approximately 87,000 square feet in area. The composition of the rooms and courtyards resembles the Chinese character "double happiness," something which was discovered in the process of addition and kept as a feature of the design. Originally each group of courtyards was occupied by a family of the clan. Interestingly enough, each son in the family only had one wife, which is the opposite of the film.

The meaning code of this mansion has two major aspects: the hierarchical structure of the space and the iconic decorations. The space of the mansion is a strongly controlled tree structure. Not only does one have to go through the spaces of shallower depth in order to get to the deeper space, but also there is only one route that can be taken (Fig.2). The hierarchy of the space is illustrated in the hierarchy of gates. The gate of the mansion controls six gates that lead to six groups of

courtyards. Each gate leads to more layers of gates that are the only entrances leading to the deepest space, the master's bedroom. In the vertical dimension, the ground floor is for daily activity while the roof terrace is for night watch of the guards, which is another layer of control. The house is also well-decorated with calligraphy boards and figurative brick sculptures, which show either the good will of the family or the rules of meaningful life. At the entrance of the mansion there is a 1.9 meter by 1.9 meter square brick, on which 100 variations of the Chinese character "longevity" are carved. Below the roof of the oldest building in the mansion, the top board says "make the ancestors and the descendants proud." Almost every gate has its top board and side boards with couplets, which are more about power than aesthetics. Important places are devoted to calligraphies by people with power. For example, the couplet written by Zuo Zhong Tang, the Defense Minister of the Qing Dynasty, is hung at the front gate. The figurative decoration always uses animals or plants as icons of "blessing, money and longevity". For instance, "eight horses" means successful descendants, "turtle shells" means longevity, and "bats" means blessing.

TRAGEDIES IN HOUSES

Ju Dou is centered on a beautiful young woman, Ju Dou, and the house she lives in. In a Chinese village in the 1920s, Ju Dou is the purchased wife of an old man.

She, the husband and an adopted nephew live in a house that is also a mill where cloth is dyed. Unable to bear the husband's abuse, Ju Dou falls in love with the nephew who sympathizes with her miserable life. Soon they have a son and the husband is paralyzed by an accident. However, their forbidden love has to be kept secret, even from their own son. The son accidentally kills the old man (his father in name) and he kills his biological father due to a deep long-term resentment. In desperation, Ju Dou burns the house down.

Raise the Red Lantern tells a story also set in 1920s' China. A 19-year old college student, Songlian, arrives at the mansion of a feudal family as the fourth wife. Within the enclosed world of the mansion, the four wives plot against each other in order to be the most favored of the master. After fighting and being hurt, Songlian plays the game riskily by faking pregnancy in order to gain power over the other wives. However, the venture fails and she becomes the least favored. In extreme depression, she punishes her servant for her "evil" dream of becoming a wife of the master and carelessly gives out the fact that the third wife is having an affair, which leads to the death of both women. Songlian is driven mad and abandoned only one year after she first came to the mansion.

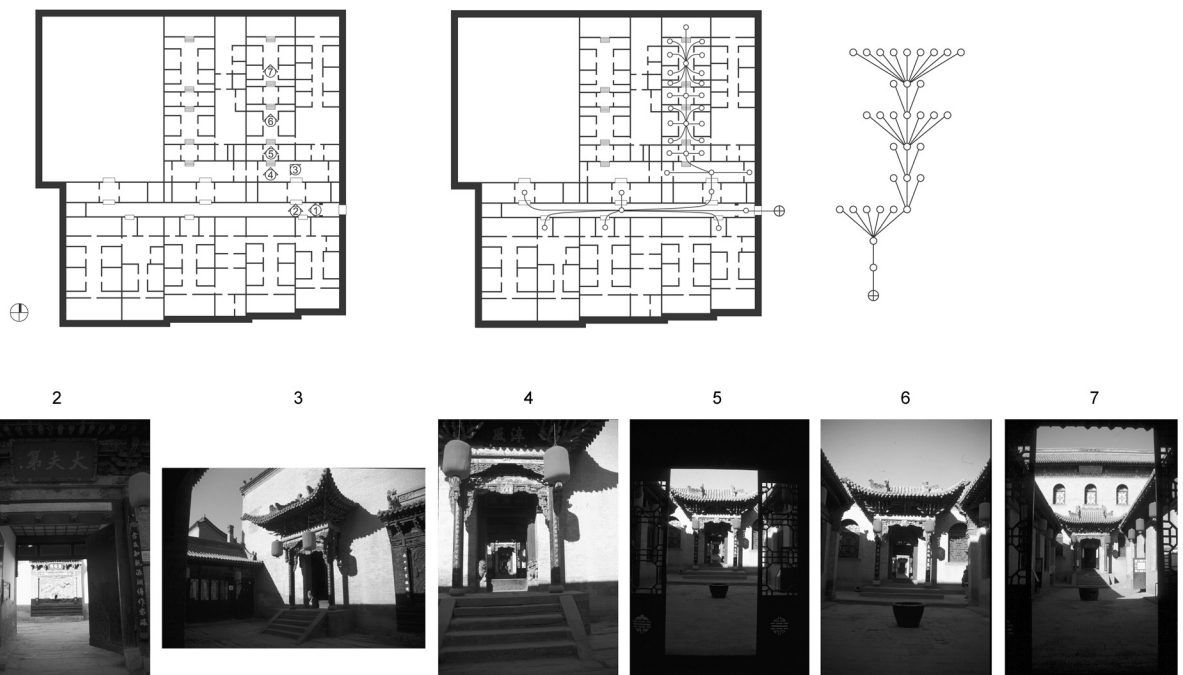


Fig. 2. On-site observation of the house of *Raise the Red Lantern*.

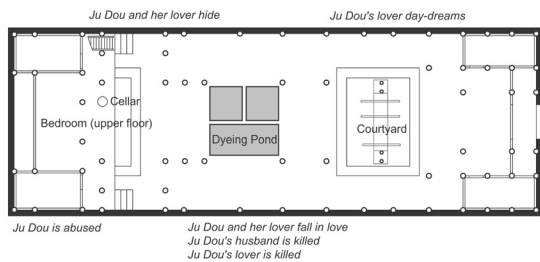


Fig. 3. The house transformed in *Ju Dou*.

HOUSES IN NOVELS

Ju Dou is based on the novel *Fuxi Fuxi*³ by Liu Heng and *Raise the Red Lantern* is based on the novel *Wives and Concubines* by Su Tong. In the original novels the houses are not emphasized. In *Fuxi Fuxi* the only time the house is mentioned in detail is when the nephew secretly watches Ju Dou using the bathroom. The dyeing mill does not exist, nor the bright colors of the cloth, nor the walled courtyard. The setting is only a vague background for the narrative. In *Wives and Concubines* it appears that the four wives live in different rooms facing the same courtyard although there is a foreyard and a garden in the backyard, and is an abandoned well in the garden where “guilty” wives are killed. (This well is transformed into the “ghost room” on the roof in the film.) There are no red lanterns at all in the novel, so the ritual of lighting the lanterns does not exist. Thus, what Zhang Yimou gets from these two novels are narratives.⁴ What he does in the films is to set dramatic stages to play against the narratives.

THE HOUSES TRANSFORMED

In *Ju Dou*, the ancestral temple is transformed into a house. All the interior walls of the middle temple were taken down so that the building is an overwhelming interior space confined by the tall brick walls and the roofs. The space of the middle temple and the two courtyards is transformed into a dyeing mill. Colors, with passion and violence, are mixed in the three ponds under the large roof. Separated by the stairs, the upper floor of the two-story upper temple becomes the bedroom of the master where he abuses Ju Dou. Below the bedroom there is suggested a cellar⁵ where Ju Dou and the nephew secretly enjoy being together; it is an underworld heaven for them. (Fig.3)

Raise the Red Lantern does not change the existing setting as drastically as *Ju Dou* does. The major staging trick is in using two courtyards to create the impression of four; major scenes of the film are shot in the



northeast and mid-north courtyards of the mansion. However, the scene of four wives waiting at the gateway for the lighting of the lantern suggests their each occupying a courtyard. Other than that, the house is shot as it is by assigning different events in different spaces. (Fig.4) The transformation of the houses is not merely a physical change of the space but, more importantly, it is the interweaving between space and narrative. As mentioned earlier, the structure and the atmosphere of space are the two main aspects for discussion. The following four parts will examine how the structure of space is foregrounded and the atmosphere is created in the films.

The Role of Ritual

The introduction of the dyeing of cloth and the lighting of the lantern can be seen as cultural exhibitionism. However, according to Zhang, there are two other purposes in using the rituals. At a superficial level, it is simply to add “visual elements”;⁶ both rituals introduce powerful colors and events to the films, which contributes to the dramatic atmosphere. At a deeper level, Zhang is actually assigning “concrete form to the oppression”⁷ in the strips of cloth and the lanterns. In *Ju Dou* dyeing assigns bright color to cloth, but in the house everybody is buried in the darkness. In *Raise the Red Lantern* the oppression is more obvious, as the lighting of the lantern is the ritual of assigning power to one of the four wives. Where the lantern is lit indicates which wife gets the power of the night, and maybe the power later if she produces a son for the master. The moment of raising the red lantern is when the oppressed strive for power. Thus, rituals are used symbolically in both films.

Spatial Narrative

Each house is used as an extremely confined boundary within which tragedies are hidden. Spatial confinement works as a metaphor of social confinement and, at the same time, creates a claustrophobic ambience. The confinement of the overall space foregrounds the vertical movement and vertical contrast. In *Ju Dou*, the



Fig. 5. Vertical movement and vertical contrast within the confined space.

red strips of cloth fall at the two climaxes of the film, when Ju Dou and her lover fall in love, and when the son kills his own biological father, Ju Dou's lover. The falling of cloths indicates the irreversibility of forbidden love and of death. (Fig.5a) At the horizontal plane defined by the dyeing pool, the confined space has an asymmetrically vertical reflection. Above the pool surface things are seen with clarity and cloths are hung gracefully. When the strips of cloths fall into the pool, they become shapeless. The water in the pool is not even transparent, being like a mixture of blood and pigments, or a seemingly peaceful blue mirror that veils unspeakable danger. Death happens in the pool. Way above the pool, there is a piece of sky where sunshine blurs, like a beautiful fantasy hanging above the darkness of the house.

In *Raise the Red Lantern* vertical oppositions are generated between the courtyard level and the roof level. The roof terrace is an isolated space: both a peaceful refuge and a place of death. A broad view is seen above the roof, contrasting dramatically with the suffocating space in the courtyards where people plot against each other. Scenes on the roof always have a musical background of either a woman performing Peking opera or a solo bamboo flute, accentuating the peaceful atmosphere as opposed to the silent oppression below. At the same time, the roof space is where murder happens without the people in the courtyards knowing. (Fig.5b)

More so than in *Ju Dou*, the space in *Raise the Red Lantern* is strongly hierarchical in plan. The place where the red lantern is ritually lit is actually the location of

the highest spatial tension. The spatial hierarchy of the original building is interpreted as a social hierarchy in the narrative. (Fig.4) In *Ju Dou*, however, the huge space within the wall is a secret stage, as control shifts among the four characters: at one time the old man, at another time Ju Dou and her lover, and at the end the son who has the power to kill.

Within the confined outer boundaries, more inner boundaries are defined. In *Raise the Red Lantern* they are the walls that separate the four courtyards, the territories of the four wives. The master is the center of power, and to fight for the power the wives have to induce the master to their courtyards. The physical boundary is reinforced by the plotting among characters, and power or non-power is clear because of the visible walls in between the courtyards. In *Ju Dou* the insurmountable boundary is always between Ju Dou and her lover. From first sight on, Ju Dou and her lover are kept apart. Explicitly, the idea of boundary is illustrated in the scene when Ju Dou is watched by her lover through the peephole. Implicitly, the boundary is illustrated through the ladder in the house, which is supposed to connect while actually separating the two lovers.⁸

Framing of the Houses

The camera angle defines particular views of the houses, which again contributes to both the symbolism of space and the atmosphere of space. In *Ju Dou* the four major looking-up frames contrast to the four major looking down frames. (Fig.6) When looking up at the



Fig. 4. The house transformed in *Raise the Red Lantern*.

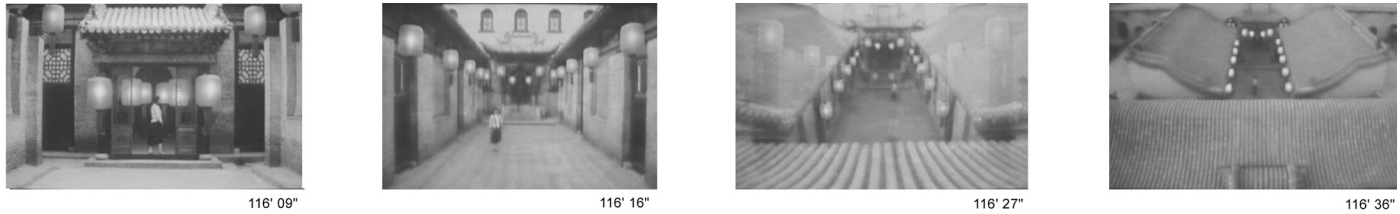


Fig. 7. Zooming-out scene in *Raise the Red Lantern*.

sky above the courtyard the courtyard appears extremely colorful. The first looking-up scene takes place when the nephew is attracted to Ju Dou. He looks up at Ju Dou's figure blurring in the sunshine. The lightness of happiness is surrounded by darkness. The second and the third looking-up scenes take place when Ju Dou and the nephew make love for the first time and for the last time respectively. The colorful strips of cloth hanging in the courtyard blur again. The extreme happiness of love is seen from the angle of extreme confinement. The fourth looking up scene takes place at the very end when Ju Dou sets the house on fire and destroys herself along with it. The last attempt for Ju Dou to escape out of the confined courtyard results in her death. In the looking-down scenes, always between major episodes, the courtyard seems peaceful. At first, an empty courtyard indicates the beginning of the story. Then strips of cloth, in strangely static colors, are hung in the courtyard. It is a silent demonstration to the world outside that dramatic things are happening inside.

The looking-down camera angle is kept in *Raise the Red Lantern*, but with a different strategy. Looking down into the courtyards always emphasizes the suffocating atmosphere. At the beginning, Songlian arrives at the *Chen* family and is led to her empty courtyard. At the end, she wanders insanely in the same courtyard, lit by the red lanterns all around. The camera's zooming-out leads the audience further and further from Songlian, giving the impression of her sinking helplessly into an abyss. (Fig.7) Moreover, on almost every possible occasion symmetrical composition is used, creating the symbolism of a dominant power in the family, an

unbreakable oppression over every single block of the house.

The Colors

Color is another key in the "performance" of the houses. Zhang has said that he chooses colors deliberately in his early films (including *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*).⁹ The three primary colors, red, yellow and blue, are repeatedly called on in *Ju Dou* and always carry opposing meanings. (Fig.8a) Red appears as a background to passion and violence, yellow appears to represent fantasy and despair, and blue appears as a peaceful veil of hidden danger. Climaxes in the film always happen in the ambience of red. Ju Dou and the nephew fall in love in the midst of blood red cloth falling down uncontrollably. The master and the nephew are killed in the turbid red pond. Yellow brings forth a light feeling that seems too graceful and delightful to be real in the story's heavy theme. Ju Dou is watched by her lover in the vivid yellow sunshine. At the end, yellow dominates the house when a fire is set by Ju Dou in despair. Blue acts as a veil. It renders night as a seemingly peaceful moment; passion and violence are covered, and only the moaning of Ju Dou is heard. When the master tries to attract the son of Ju Dou and the nephew into the pond where he would be drowned, the dyeing pond appear to be an extremely peaceful body of blue water. Blue hides.

The two colors, red and black, are used primarily in *Raise the Red Lantern*. Colors surround the lanterns, the symbols of power, red being the assignment of power



Fig. 6. Looking-up scenes and looking-down scenes in *Ju Dou*.

and black being the elimination of power. (Fig.8b) Songlian and her bedroom are all in red when she first arrives as the new wife and when she announces her pregnancy which indicates her power in the family over the other wives. She is later totally surrounded by black lanterns when the pregnancy is discovered to be faked. In addition, red also carries the meaning of dreamt passion. Songlian dresses in red when she is attracted by the first wife's son. The third wife always dresses in red as she is the most passionate woman among the wives, and Songlian's servant also raises the red lantern while dreaming of becoming a wife in the family. At the end, ironically, red and black are covered by the color white, as the whole house is covered by snow. It seems that the secrets, killings and hatreds are erased with the disappearance of the colors.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this limited study, the performances of real buildings in films are examined as meaningful structures. However, it is undeniable that the two buildings are also used as iconic backgrounds. Both of them are in the styles of feudal era and exist in feudal tragedies. More detailed references are used for this purpose. For example, *Ju Dou's* is set among the villages of outstanding obedience to the social rules while the story of *Ju Dou* is tied to a violation of these rules. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the decorations of the building are heavily meaningful and show the power of the family, which is played in a negative tone in the film, in contrast with the fragility of the wives' fighting against the power.

In the two films, architecture does not tell the story directly; it does not narrate but it exemplifies. Through positioning the characters in space, through relating the events to space deliberately, through looking at archi-

tecture from a meaningful angle and through calling on attributes such as color, the structure of the meaning in the narrative resonates with the spatial structure of the space. This is when architecture starts to speak to us. At the same time, architecture provides a certain atmosphere through its attributes such as confinement of space and the emotional effects of colors, which may exist without referring to the narrative. However, the narrative reinforces this atmosphere. Thus, not only can the space of architecture be read at the conceptual level and the atmospheric level, but also, more importantly, the potential meanings in architecture emerge from the interplay between its structure and atmosphere.

The emergence of meaning in architecture leads to the understanding that meaning is attached to space but is not fixed. This makes it possible to shoot a film in an existing building and make it meaningful in a new sense. This argument has two implications. On the one hand, the transformation of the houses is essentially from the spatial to the symbolic. The positioning of the characters is important, and the positioning is about the conformity between the structure of the narrative and the structure of the space. For example, if in *Raise the Red Lantern* the four wives live in the same courtyard it will not be as powerful. On the other hand, there are bounds that ensure certain meanings are attached to certain spaces. The Ye ancestral temple is shown as a huge interior space enclosed by tall walls in *Ju Dou*. This explains why this temple is chosen rather than an ordinary house. Also, this temple is lightly decorated, which suits the story and provides flexibility for further articulation of the filmic stage. The sacrificed space finally becomes, in the film, a mundane space with implications of sacrifice. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the hierarchical space is extremely under control in the original house. The thick exterior wall is again about the prison-like control. These are later accentuated by

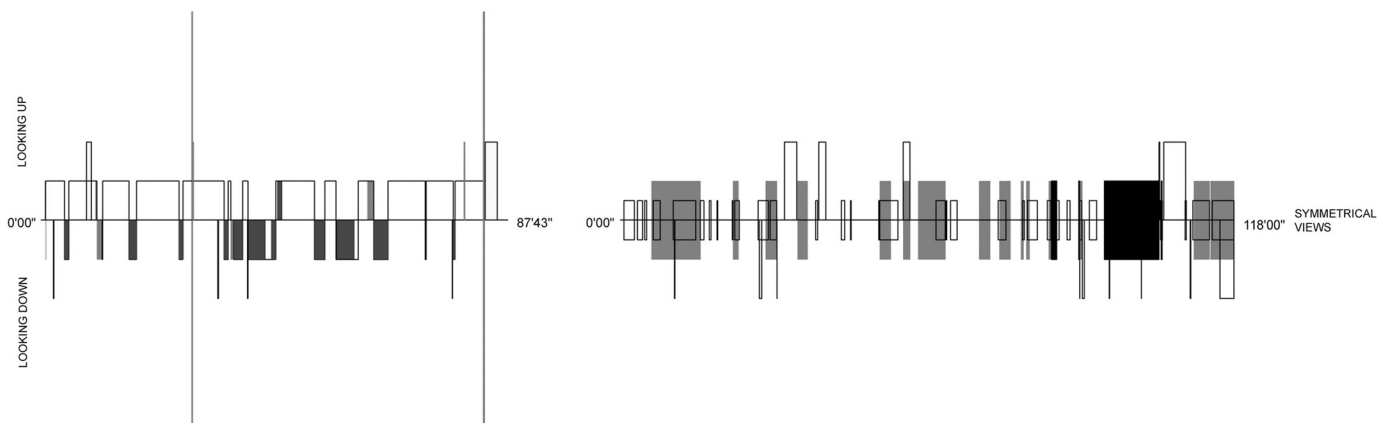


Fig. 8. The "performances" of houses of *Ju Dou* (left) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (right).

interweaving the existing space and the narrative of the four wives' lives. The emergence of meaning always interacts with an autonomous system of embedded meaning. Further studies could explore the interactions between the two.

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NOTES

- ¹ Mayfair Yang, "Of Gender, State Censorship, and Overseas Capital: An Interview with Director Zhang Yimou," *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 302.
- ² Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," *Assemblage*, No. 10, 113.
- ³ Fuxi is the mythic emperor who invented Pa Kua (octogram) and the weaving of nets. The English translation of the novel is *The Obsessed*.
- ⁴ The narrative in *Ju Dou* also changes dramatically. For details please refer to *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, P285-P287.
- ⁵ There is no actual hole in the building but a montage in the film.
- ⁶ Frances Gateward (editor), *Zhang Yimou: Interviews* (University of Press Mississippi / Jackson, 2001).
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ For details please refer to "Path: a narrative of *Ju Dou* in the architectural medium" in *ACSA 2002 West Regional Meeting Proceeding*, p.69.
- ⁹ Frances Gateward (editor), *Zhang Yimou: Interviews* (University of Press Mississippi / Jackson, 2001).