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# Ancient Reflections

Without applicability, even the most striking art can seem lifeless and pointless. To distinguish an extraordinary work, one might perhaps assess its relevancy—not solely to the society in which it was born, but to the human experience itself—before evaluating other variables. An audience must be able to connect with the author of a Renaissance-era love poem, the scene within a painting, and the actors of a science fiction movie. Director Zhang Yimou's film *Curse of the Golden Flower*, although set during the Tang Dynasty in 928 AD, accomplishes just this; within the opulent halls of the ancient Forbidden City, the Emperor's family descends into a chaos that is at once both fascinating in its uniqueness and instantly recognizable. Beneath their luxurious robes and construction of the illusion of family perfection, the Emperor, Empress, and Princes are scandalous leaders who find counterparts in many of the unseemly officials of contemporary China, whose vices are exposed by literature by Charlie Campbell, Tom Phillips, and Adam Taylor. The Emperor's efforts to shape public opinion share similarities with China's President Xi Jinping in Campbell's article "Propaganda and Censorship are Reaching Fever Pitch," and Phillips and Taylor's work illuminates the adulterous Chinese governmental community, which shares characteristics with Zhang Yimou's portrayal of the imperial family. In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, Zhang's elegant, vibrant portrayal of an ancient adultery-riddled, deceptively flawless Chinese political landscape serves as a parallel universe to China's modern government.

The feigned perfection of the Emperor's family, accentuated by the Forbidden City's lavish ornamentation, works as a deception that mirrors Xi Jinping's propaganda in his efforts to appear impeccable. Beneath the palace's utopian façade, the imperial family is slowly poisoning itself; after the Empress becomes increasingly colder towards the Emperor, the Emperor directs the imperial doctor to sneak black Persian fungus into her 'medicine,' which will make her lose all mental faculties within months. The Empress's personal spy discovers the fungus, and upon her refusal to drink the poisoned medicine in front of a myriad of officials, the Emperor quietly admonishes her that she "had better understand that as long as I am the Emperor, and you the Empress, we shall play our parts to perfection" (Zhang 26:50). He suggests that without tranquility in his family, he will lose legitimacy as dictator; the nation will recognize his inability to maintain order in the home, and his capacity to control domestic and foreign affairs will be more harshly criticized. The Emperor asserts that "the imperial family has to set an example for the entire country" (27:00), indicating that no matter the intensity of the strife within the family, it must be concealed from the public. He believes that his political stature grants him the right to both poison his Empress, ending his unhappy marriage, and withhold from her the right to speak out against the homicide of which she is fully aware. Further, the Emperor conceals his evil by playing the victim in his statement that "for the sake of this family, there is much I am prepared to tolerate, because my concern is to maintain law and order in the home" (27:07). In his emotional performance before servants and court officials, the Emperor assumes the part of the caring husband as he 'forgives' her for not drinking the medicine, disguising his malicious intentions as passion for the welfare of the imperial family, which extends to the state. The Empress carefully drinks the poison in the imperial fashion, and the Emperor dries her lips with a silk napkin, cloaking his ambitions with a regal elegance that seals both the Empress's fate and

the fate of China. While there is a millennium between them, China's President Xi Jinping and the Emperor are alike in many regards. President Xi spent his first term ensuring that "dissent has been ruthlessly quashed" (Campbell) and political opponents "purged" (Campbell); his actions seem to have made him more equivalent to Vladimir Putin than to Barack Obama or President Trump. Yet, President Xi has devised a plan that has solidified his image as a benevolent leader whose every action serves the best interests of the state (Campbell). He has been enveloped by a "burgeoning cult of personality" (Campbell) that portrays endearingly as China's "'Uncle Xi'" (Campbell), similar to the Emperor's efforts to portray himself as the perfect, caring husband (Zhang). The Chinese government has propagated photos of President Xi "sharing peanuts with ethnic minority villagers, caressing the trunk of a baby elephant, and hobnobbing world leaders" (Campbell). From the outside, the Emperor and the President are full of warm smiles and well-meaning, which only furthers their malicious intentions, distracting their people from "polluted reality" (Campbell). Just as the Emperor attempts to mask the gradual murder of his wife with his claim that he is devoted to "the sake of this family" (Zhang 27:07), President Xi has publically encouraged Communist officials to fly from sin "as [they] would from thrusting a hand into boiling water" (Phillips) and retain their moral purity, even though President Xi's treatment of those with whom he disagrees must be more malicious than most Chinese officials' most despicable actions. The President continued by saying that the officials' immoral behavior will "build an invisible wall between [the] Party and the people" (Phillips), even though Xi has already created a deep abyss between himself and everyone else in China; he has consolidated authority and is now the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong (Ringen). The two leaders' passion for disguising greedy, malevolent ambitions as patriotic actions in the state's interests demonstrates that over the many centuries, the masses

continue their legacy of gullibility; they often fail to scrutinize their governments closely and allow themselves to ignore state affairs, blindly following leaders whose only concern is their own interests. China's leader may no longer be considered divine, but he certainly considers himself more deserving of power than any other department or person in China, and he is willing to deceive the people with whatever means necessary to preserve his extraordinary power.

The Empress and Crown Prince Wan's adultery is a reflection of the recently-exposed influx of contemporary Chinese officials' infidelity. Crown Prince Wan is the Emperor's son, yet he has been "intimate for three years" (Zhang 4:17) with his father's wife, and the relationship has continued successfully even though, as the Emperor discloses to Crown Prince Wan, the secret has been "known to [him] for some time" (Zhang 1:08:37). Zhang Yimou presents the audience with a conundrum: Why would the Emperor allow this affair to progress over the years, filling the most important, powerful man with embarrassment and sexual insecurity? For the Emperor, adultery is a political tool that benefits him whether or not he employs it; by exposing the Empress's adultery, he would be able to delegitimize her position and choose a novel Empress, which he certainly wishes to do, and by failing to disclose the affair, he is able to subconsciously justify her poisoning so that he can marry again. Likewise, President Xi has discovered the value of manipulating adultery within the government. The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection conducted a "major assault" (Phillips) on Chinese officials' adultery specifically "at the instruction of President Xi" (Phillips). Married Chinese politicians have been having affairs for many years—infidelity of which President Xi was certainly fully aware—yet he decided to launch a campaign against it at the perfect moment to perfectly complement his political aims (Taylor). Indeed, the 'adultery map' that the CCDI published is a component of a "carefully choreographed propaganda campaign" (Phillips) intended to persuade the Chinese

populace that President Xi is “serious about driving badly behaved officials from power” (Phillips), which consequently strips Xi of suspicion and instills in his people a deep sense of respect and gratitude for their leader’s extraordinary moral purity. Yet, Taylor emphasizes that adulterous behavior in the Chinese government is incredibly “widespread” (Taylor), indicating that people should be suspicious of everyone, including President Xi; the ‘adultery map’ excludes the provinces where Xi and Prime Minister Li rose to political power, which hints that the Chinese government could be hiding something. President Xi and the Emperor, in their quests for ultimate power and control over their people, devise ways to transform the most personal, intimate issues into potential weapons they can wield to destroy political enemies and turn the tide of political opinion.

In multiple regards, *Curse of the Golden Flower* is a mirror image of China’s contemporary political climate. The film’s focus on humanity itself rather than the politics and wars of the time period grants it the ability to be relevant to people around the world, portraying the struggle to retain power in such a way as to serve as—partially, at least—a reflection of leaders around the world. When love and its complications fail to galvanize emotion and only serve as ammunition against those both inside and outside one’s family, that person is certainly psychopathic. He or she might have eunuchs or Communist Party officials on whom to rely, but ultimately, he or she is mentally isolated from everything and everyone except himself. In a study by Westerlaken and Woods, the two authors assert that “emerging research suggests psychopathic traits and leadership behaviors may be linked” (Westerlaken and Woods). If a leader can detach from even those he or she loves, the family loses its emotional value and serves only the world of politics, and wife, husband, and son become connected not by love but by their entanglement in a web of deception.

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