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From the Fifth to the Sixth Generation

An Interview with Zhang Yimou

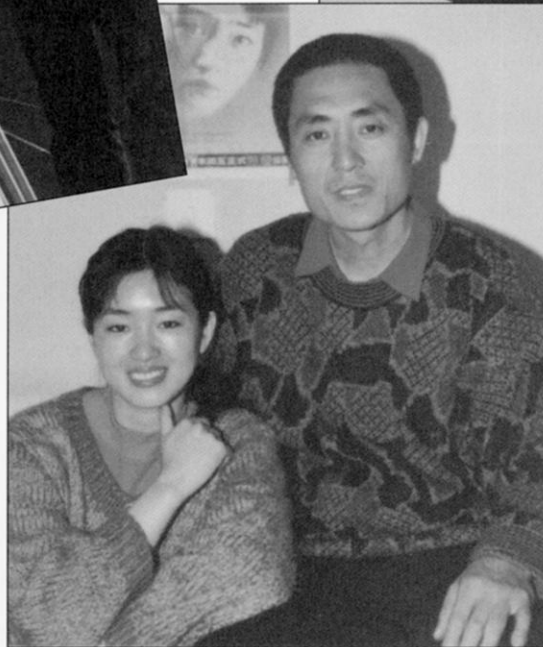
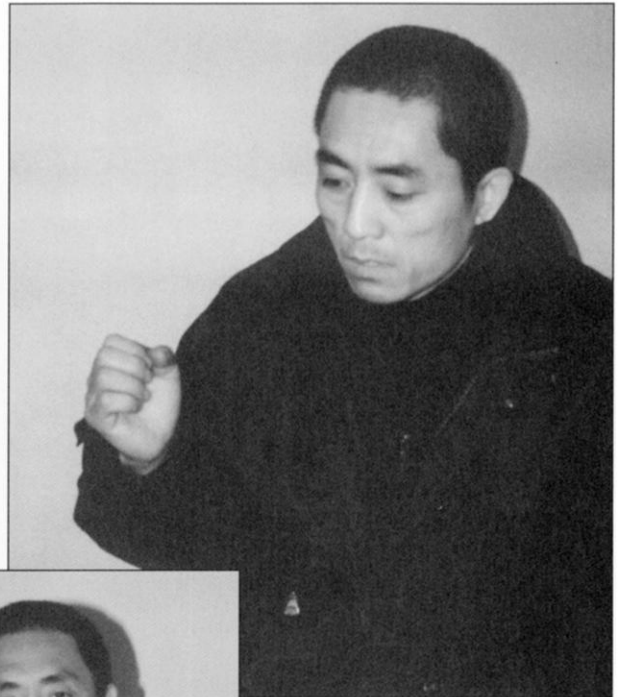
The color red is the signature for most of Zhang Yimou's films: red sorghum (*Red Sorghum*), red silk (*Judou*), red lantern (*Raise the Red Lantern*), red dress (*The Story of Qiuju*), and so on. All sensuous, all symbolic. Classical Chinese theater is full of color symbols: a red face suggests loyalty; a black face, bravery; and a white face, evil. New China inherited some old color symbolism and created some new color symbols, among which red is by far the most important. It is the color of revolution: red flags, little red books, Red Guards, and of course the red sun, which is the symbol of Chairman Mao. But what does Zhang Yimou's red suggest?

Some commentators liken the red setting sun at the end of *Red Sorghum* to a Japanese national flag; some think the red lanterns in *Raise the Red Lantern* reveal the sexual dominance of the patriarchal despot—but the setting sun would also have been used to elegize the perished heroine and the red lanterns may also connote the fulfillment of the concubines' desire. Zhang Yimou's red color, like his other symbols, defies narrow interpretation, because it is at once an inheritance from and a rebellion against tradition. Red is no longer simply a color of celebration as in old China or a color of revolution as in modern China; nor is it a color of malice. Perhaps it should be treated as a mood. As Zhang Yimou once said, "We Chinese have been too moderate, too reserved . . . the boundless red of sorghum fields arouses sensory excitement . . . it encourages unrestrained lust for life."

Lust for life was restrained in China, a fact that Zhang Yimou knows all too well. He had a miserable childhood: his father was a Nationalist officer, hence a "bad element"; his mother was a medical doctor, not

a good element either. When the Cultural Revolution broke out, he was sent to the country to be "re-educated" by peasants. Then he became a porter. Red to him is the primary color of life—symbolically, realistically, and artistically. While still unable to earn enough food, Zhang Yimou sold his blood to buy his first camera. It was the pictures he took with that camera that won him the opportunity to study cinematography at Beijing Film Academy in 1978.

After graduation, Zhang Yimou became known as the best cameraman in China: *Yellow Earth* (1984), a film he made with another Fifth Generation director, Chen Kaige, won eleven international awards. In 1986 he played a peasant in Wu Tianming's *Old Well*, which brought him the title of best actor at the 1987 Tokyo International Film Festival and the opportunity to make his own film. His directing debut, *Red Sorghum*, was awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1988. Two years later, his *Judou* received the Luis Buñuel Award at the Cannes Film Festival. At the 1992 Venice Film Festival, with *The Story of Qiuju*, Zhang Yimou received the Golden Lion. Since *Yellow Earth*, Zhang Yimou's films have won more than 40 awards. His most recent work, *Not One Less* (*Yige ye buneng shao*), which is about a young teacher's efforts to keep students from cutting class in a poor village school, took the top prize at the 1999 Venice Film Festival. This was the same film that was so misunderstood by the committee of the Cannes Film Festival that Zhang Yimou withdrew it from the festival. If we realize that post-Tiananmen Square censorship is still hanging over Chinese filmmakers' heads, we will come to appreciate not only Zhang's artistic talent but also his talent as a political strategist.



Clockwise from top left: Zhang Yimou (right), *Yellow Earth's* cinematographer, with Chen Kaige; Zhang during this interview; with Gong Li during the making of *The Story of Qiuju*.

No contemporary Chinese film is totally free of political messages. They are either imposed by the authorities or implied by the artist. For those who are interested in this kind of message, Zhang's color red does carry one. But, contrary to what many critics say, it may not be purely political. Sick of Chairman Mao's theory and practice of "class struggle," all the Fifth Generation directors try not to be obtrusively political. Zhang Yimou's red is rather a commemoration of freedom, exuberance, and the most primal desires and aspirations, which have been denied by both Confucianism and Communism.

Most of Zhang Yimou's films speak for the down-trodden and the rebellious. *Red Sorghum* glorifies the elopement of a winery owner's wife with a sedan carrier; *Judou* supports an affair between a worker and his

boss's wife; *Raise the Red Lantern* sides with four concubines and treats their husband as a villain; *The Story of Qiuju* praises an ordinary peasant woman for her courage to sue the village chief; *To Live* attributes the misery of a meek family to the power struggle between Communists and Nationalists; *Shanghai Triad* sympathizes with a singer whose life is owned by an underworld magnate in pre-revolutionary Shanghai. And *Keep Cool* (*Youhua haohao shuo*) (1996) empathizes with losers in love and career in the commercialized Beijing of the 1990s.

It is no surprise that some of Zhang's films are still banned in China. Equipped with the theory of socialist realism, some Chinese critics denounced his work for being "untrue to history." Although their real criticisms were leveled at Zhang's unorthodox treatment

of humanity rather than his untruthful reflections of history, those critics' historical observations were quite accurate: no matter how many concubines a feudal lord possessed, he would never put up red lanterns to announce which one he favored on any particular night. Red lanterns were raised only when he was honored by the emperor as a moral paragon. What Zhang Yimou attempts to glorify is not orthodox history, and certainly not official paragons, but humanity caught in history. If his films are historically untrue, they are nevertheless universally true, because in them we find the same pathos as in, say, *Oedipus Rex*, *Ghosts*, and *Desire Under the Elms*. In the following interview, Zhang Yimou refuses to be categorized into any school, but he does admit that his style is characteristic of the Northern Chinese. "I love the strong and the trenchant," he explains. The strong and the trenchant, meaning the color red in his films.

TAN YE: *Your early films rebelled in both form and content; is it true that your rebellion was mainly against three things: hypocritical political preaching, the mediocrity of the contemporary films, and traditional culture?*

ZHANG YIMOU: This was not very clear. To be honest with you, we artists do not contemplate that many theoretical issues. When we started making films more than ten years ago, we definitely wanted to rebel. Defiance against the older generation is born with the younger generation. The same youthful defiance exists in other walks of life too. This is also true with the Sixth Generation's rebellion.¹ It is not clear whether the rebellion is against politics, or art forms, or art content, or older generations, or traditional aesthetics. In art, creative impulse plays a bigger role than theory. As for rebellion, frankly, I did not have a theoretical target.

Among all the Fifth Generation directors, you are the least didactic. Chen Kaige² and Tian Zhuangzhuang³ are relatively more philosophical.

This is because I have my own understanding of the nature of film. I think film originated from various folk performances. It should be very common and popular. I don't think a film should carry too much theory. After all, it is not philosophy or a concept to be taught in a classroom.

Although, when making *Yellow Earth* as a cameraman, I had to help Kaige realise his subject, when making *Red Sorghum* by myself, I preferred to make it more appealing to the senses. I tend to believe that films are about emotions. An artist's ideas should be understood naturally through emotions. I think the subject

matter of a film should be simple. Only after it is simplified, after the thoughts are simplified, can the capacity and power of emotions [of a film] be strengthened. If the subject matter and thoughts are too complicated, emotions will definitely be weakened. It would be like writing an essay with abstract symbols. It is a different kind of film. There are films like that, but I do not like them. Kaige prefers more thoughtful themes. I prefer common folks' tastes, emotional themes. This difference may have something to do with our personalities.

Your cinematography contributed a great deal to the achievement of Yellow Earth. . . .

In making a film, none of the crew can be left out. I understand Chen Kaige's style. We are friends and know each other well. I know that he wants to reveal his heartfelt philosophy. You can treat *Yellow Earth* as a non-realistic film, an auteur film. If I know that the director wants to make an auteur film, I will surely express his ideas accordingly with my camera.

You often use extreme shots. You said, when making One and Eight (Yige he bage)⁴, that you would never repeat shots used previously by other cameramen. You very consciously applied technique to artistic creation. Isn't that also a kind of rebellion?

That kind of rebellion had its contemporary target, but would not last forever. That was when the Gang of Four⁵ was just overthrown. Chinese films were very rigid; they could not escape from the shadow of previous taboos. Therefore, in such simple matters as the form of filmic expression and how to make a film, there were often very doctrinal and rigid ideas, which we thought were outdated and stupid. So *One and Eight* was a rebellion against such stupidity, against affectation, pretense, and artificiality. But that kind of rebellion directed toward a specific phenomenon is rarely seen in China today. Rebellion is no longer a purpose, but a story or a theme.

We look for an appropriate way to tell a story according to its subject matter. In other words, what happens in China now is not a purposeful rebellion targeted to a specific form. Actually, *One and Eight* is not that philosophically profound, its narrative not that original, and its characterization not that outstanding. It was a simple rebellion in filmic form.

When Chen Kaige was adapting Ming ruo qinxian⁶ for his film Life on a String, I felt that his philosophy overshadowed his story. He seemed to realize it afterwards with Farewell My Concubine. But Temptress Moon . . . ?



Red Sorghum (clockwise from top left): Gong Li; the aftermath of battle; bride in sedan chair carried to her wedding



To Live (clockwise from top left):
gambling stresses the marriage
of Fugui (Ge You) and Jiazhen (Gong
Li); Jiazhen returns home with her
children; silent suffering (Gong Li)

We all love *Farewell My Concubine*. When making *Temptress Moon*, Kaige was interviewed by a journalist and he said that *Temptress Moon* would be even better. I, however, feel that *Temptress Moon* went back to his old stubborn way. I am not sure about the quality of his new film, *The First Emperor (Jin Ke ci Qin)*. Maybe this is what makes Kaige; this is his own filmic world.

After all these changes, is the Fifth Generation still a unified group.

No, not anymore.

Historically, what was the achievement of the Fifth Generation? Was it mainly a breakthrough?

I think so. From a pragmatic perspective, this breakthrough attracted the attention of audiences. From an aesthetic or pure filmic perspective, our achievement was also a breakthrough. We can now regard it as the snow of yesteryear—now that we can watch foreign films everywhere (including thousands of pirated tapes). But in those years, in the 1980s, information did not travel as fast; therefore, in general, the Chinese were quite closed-minded then. That presented a historical possibility. If the same thing happened in present-day China, the impact of the breakthrough would not be easily felt. If a good film came out yesterday, by today everybody has seen it. Can you surpass this?

Compared with foreign films, what do you think of Chinese films nowadays?

I think Chinese filmmakers have to work hard, otherwise, we will lag behind. The time of the glorious rise of Chinese films is over. Especially in the 1990s, Asian films are becoming very strong. Films made in Iran, Japan, and Korea are quite good. I like Iranian films particularly. We should also include films made in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the past we looked down on Taiwan films. Now the situation is totally different. Ang Lee and John Woo are making films in Hollywood. Wong Kar Wai's films also have good artistic merits.

No matter what, directors in Mainland China cannot brag anymore; we cannot say with confidence that we are representative of Asian cinema or Oriental cinema. Also, the whole world is moving very fast and making films in China is becoming very difficult. For instance, the Sixth Generation cannot catch up, they do not have any outstanding work. Furthermore, the political and economic conditions in China have worsened. So, all Chinese directors, old and young, have to work hard. If we don't, all the glory will be gone with the past. Our time will be over. Certainly, there will be

occasional good works, but we will not be talked about, we will not be the focus of attention.

Granted that you now have to consider the market as well as art, you still present something original in each new film. Is it true that, after the completion of each film, you always want to revitalize yourself with a new style in the next film?

It is probably true. Among the Fifth Generation my style is the most changeable. My films are totally unrelated. They run in all directions. They lack a consistent style. Kaige is more consistent; he searches for the stately and philosophical; his shots are contrived for enduring strength. Relatively speaking, Zhuang-zhuang's ideas are vague. I myself tend to experiment with all kinds of things. Sometimes the sheer change of style will excite me.

All these changes have made your personal style rather obscure. For this reason, some foreign critics find it hard to trace your style; possibly some domestic critics feel the same?

It is hard to fit me into a standardized pattern indeed. Maybe two of my films will fit a certain pattern, but the third does not. Critics in China feel the same. They said that my *Keep Cool* perplexed them. None of them could figure it out. *Keep Cool* is perhaps the most talked-about film in China, with all kinds of opinions. Actually I love this. I like to stir up the pond. To me, the excitement of stirring up the water is greater than that of receiving the audiences' praises.

*Some people said that you could not film urban life. Is *Keep Cool* an answer to them?*

Not necessarily. There has been talk about my inability to make a film about urban life for years. With this film I only wanted to contradict myself, to extend my flexibility. It is a challenge to change from the country to the city, from epic and august styles to playful, relaxed, and MTV styles. I am planning to make a film about city life, one about country life, and one about history. If I make another film about city life, it will definitely be different from *Keep Cool*.

Keep Cool sold extremely well at home, but not so internationally. Of course, the promotional strategy was not efficient. It did not sell as well as my previous films, and the international reviews were not so favorable. For sure, there has been some noise domestically too. This was definitely a risk, I realized this when many foreign film companies came to see the film. It is like selling cloisonné: for many years, ten carts full of cloisonné had a market guaranteed for ten cart loads. If you suddenly replace cloisonné with lacquer tea cups, the

merchants dare not buy them. "OK, leave them here for the moment." Thus, a deal cannot be reached. In many countries, the audience never had a chance to see this film, because the merchants never bought it. "Since this is a film made by Zhang Yimou," a foreign merchant would think, "I should not offer a low price because I do not want to be disrespectful. But if you want me to pay the same price as for his previous films, I dare not, because this is not the type I am used to. I am unsure of the market."

This time it was very bad. Many of the merchants who previously bought many of my films were dubious after the screening. It is definitely risky—the more you appear unpredictable, the more problematic you become to market. Nevertheless, film critics are happy about it because it provides them with a new topic. I am willing to run such risks. If there are people who are willing to fund me, and I do not have to worry too much about money, why shouldn't I take the opportunity?

You said that you chose Qu Ying⁷ because of her modernity. Are you becoming more modernized?

Not necessarily, I chose her because her image matched the story.

In general, what do you think of Chinese actors?

Uneven. There are good ones, but most of them are unqualified.

Reading your notes about cinematography for Yellow Earth, one can tell you like traditional arts, especially traditional Chinese paintings.

Yes, I love painting. I also love traditional theory on painting, but I have not accomplished much in painting. In Italy [the summer of 1997, when Zhang was directing the opera *Turandot*] we borrowed a great deal from Chinese classical aesthetics and principles on painting. We turned theory into reality.

It seems you prefer the bold and expressionistic school [xieyi] to the delicate and detailed one [gongbi]?

That's right. I am no good with delicate substance. So my films, including *Keep Cool*, may have different styles and emotions, but toward the end of my life, when I have finished filmmaking, all my hundreds of changes can be unified as characteristic of a Northern Chinese. That is, I love the strong and the trenchant. *Keep Cool* is very strong. If its second half could have been done my way, I could have made this film much better. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to do that. Originally, *Keep Cool* was divided into two parts. It was like driving a car from the east, then reversing to the west. You are first made to believe it was cheerful, foolish horse-

play, but after the turn, the heroine disappears and towards the end it becomes black humor. The story could have been very interesting, but there was no way we could do it freely. Even the present version was almost censored.

My next film is entitled *Going to Beijing Immediately* (*Mashang jin Beijing*). I am not sure whether I can get it made. I intend it to be a Chinese highway film where all shots show movements. Many of them are on trains, buses, and taxis. At this stage, I am still trying to find the best way to do it. I think this film should have many meanings. Unlike foreigners, Chinese people don't drive a car on a highway. Even though I drive a jeep, the majority of the Chinese are definitely unable to do so. Therefore, I want to catch glimpses of Chinese people's lives. It is a certain kind of visual language that I hope to apply to filmmaking. It should not be mere decoration. Before every film, I try seriously to grasp such a visual language. Unless I have found it, I cannot make a film.

As He Saifei⁸ mentioned, you work not only conscientiously but also collectively. Very often you invite opinions from your crew.

This can be said as one of my merits. If there is anything I cannot handle, I will invite people to chat with me. Only during the discussions can I find inspiration. It has become a habit of mine.

Apart from learning through practice and watching films made by others, do you have time to improve yourself through other means?

It is not that I am too busy to do anything else. I saw a ballet the day before yesterday. And I am always reading. All kinds of books, even trashy books, magazines, and papers. I read whatever I can lay my hands on, mostly novels. I subscribe to more than thirty magazines. All of them are fiction; I rarely read theory.

*You said that freshness in your work excites you. Your *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* were fresh to many people, particularly to Westerners. For this reason some Chinese critics said that you were creating "Orientalism" to please foreigners. Also, in your first films, the leading roles were mainly female; some other critics thus said you were a "feminist," but I don't think that was accurate either, because traditionally in Chinese theater, female characters have more appeal to the audience.*

Right. It was neither Orientalism nor feminism. All that was not deliberately designed. There is a lot of speculation in the West. When I was interviewed there, from their questions I could tell they had many preconcep-

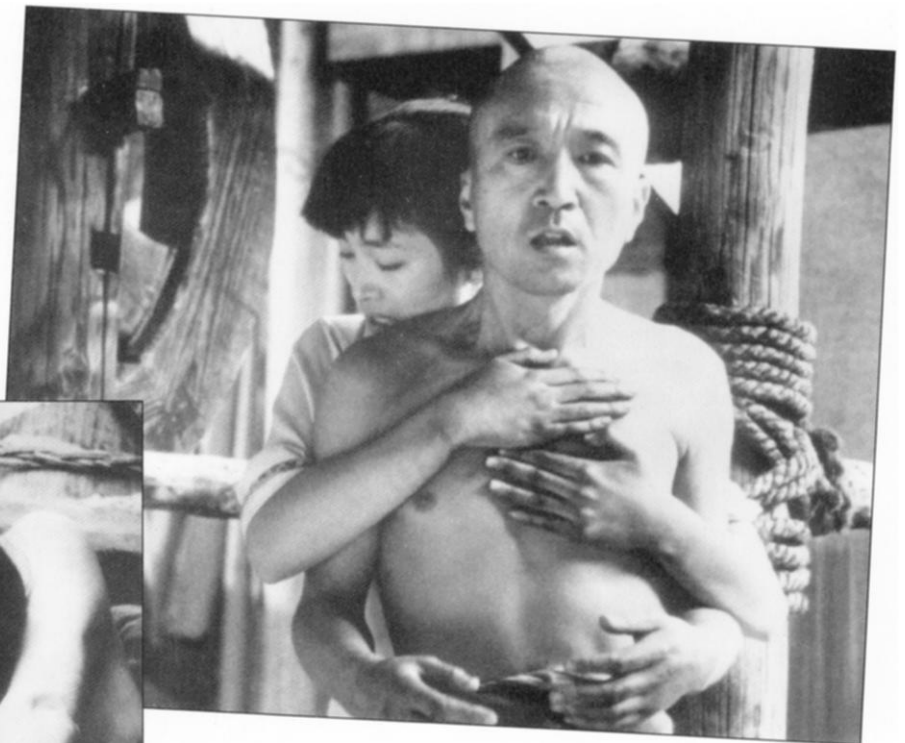
tions. I did not bother explaining. Film by nature is for society. I do not care how you perceive my films. But really I was not deliberately making up anything ideological; I did what my creative urge and my passion prompted me to do.

A film scholar has said Judou was about incest, but Judou does not have an affair with Tianqing until after she realizes that he has no blood relation with Jinshan.

To put it simply, we did not intend to tell a story about incest. The original novel was about incest; Tianqing was Jinshan's biological nephew. Since we did not want to deal with incest, we changed Tianqing's role to that of an adopted nephew. The reason was that incest was not the theme of my work. As a matter of fact, I treat *Judou* as the antithesis of *Red Sorghum*. *Red Sorghum*

is about unaffected and unrestrained humanity: there are no rules, no imperial laws. *Judou* is about the opposite side of Chinese humanity, which is oppressed by rules and imperial laws. It is about distortion and persecution. In other words, the hero in *Red Sorghum* has both the desire and the courage of a bandit, and the courage is stronger than the desire. The hero in *Judou* has the desire of a bandit but no courage. Even if he has done something gutsy, he still lives in fear. He feels like an underdog. In fact, one film is about freedom and courage, the other about humiliation and oppression. I believe that these two are the best of my works, which reveal both sides of the Chinese. So, absolutely, it is neither incest nor classical Greek tragedy.

The classical Greek tragedy uses incest to preach about moral taboos. We do not want to present this simplified morality. We want to discuss the complemen-



Judou (left and above): Forbidden love—
between Judou (Gong Li) and Tianqing
(Li Baotian)

tary sides of Chinese culture. We often say that had Yang Tianqing had My Grandpa's⁹ temperament, he would have burned the dye mill a long time ago, killed that old man, and eloped with the man's wife. But his temperament is not like that; therefore, under pressure he acts furtively and humbly, hiding his real intention under an innocent front. If you exchange the dispositions of the male leads in these two films, you can see my point more easily. What I did in both films was characterization.

We talked about the simple primitive power of Yellow Earth. This and all other Fifth Generation films have been overly interpreted. Raise the Red Lantern, for instance, has been treated as an allegory of the Gang of Four.

Some people's interpretations of our works overshadow the works themselves. It has been common for interpretations to impose themselves on art works.

Theory seems to have little influence on you, although when Li Tuo¹⁰ and his comrades began talking about the reforming of Chinese film language, you did read some theory, correct?

Correct. But that was a short period lasting between six months and a year. Only during that period did we read seriously, Nietzsche and so on. That was it. It was very trendy in China then. To my knowledge, no Chinese director reads philosophy anymore. Philosophy is no more a part of our conversational topics.

Another issue is history. The biggest difference between Kaige and me is that I do not necessarily like historical themes, of which Kaige is fond. He is conversant with classical Chinese literature and fond of history. To me, history and the present are the same. The reason that I make more films about history is that historical themes are less censored. Although a strict system of censorship has existed in China for many years, there is some leeway in historic themes.

Even during the first years of the Fifth Generation, when filmic forms were considered the most important, many of your films were adaptations from literary works. What do you think of modern Chinese literature?

Literature today is not very good, worse than that of more than ten years ago. Literary circles will surely disagree with me, yet I'm convinced of this. Because not only has the subject matter changed, but also the writers' egos have expanded. To put it bluntly, I find today's literature boring, without appeal. I am not saying that literature has to teach morals or connote some historical significance or responsibility. Ten years ago,

when a new literature had just come into being, no matter what the subject, no matter if it was "root-search" [*xungen*] literature or "scar" [*shanghen*] literature, it was very powerful [the former searched in traditional culture for the reasons for the abnormality of the Cultural Revolution; the latter depicted the scars left on people's hearts by the revolution]. Today's literature is as boring as those city people who live under the influence of materialistic desire and money worship. Sometimes literature becomes the property of a small circle. The more boring it is, the more it is considered by some people as pure literature. With such petty self-pity, literature becomes more and more maudlin, divorcing itself from the people and the interests of the broad audience, and becoming something treasured by a small circle.

Today's China is unlike the West, which is post-industrial and postmodern. People in the West are really lonely and disappointed. Their loneliness and disappointment I feel is from their hearts. Today's China is boiling everywhere. No matter whether it is to gain power or to make money or merely to survive, the whole country is boiling, stirring, and agitating. A big blowup, a dramatic change, even a volcanic eruption may take place. No matter whether the change is for the better or for the worse, it is unlike that in Western society. Therefore, there's not much market for modern Western plays and performance art in China. What we see in Chinese literature is only self-promotion and the attempt to be fashionable. In today's China we see naked desire and craving everywhere. I am not judging this morally, what I am saying is that society is filled with instability and demands. A country of 1.3 billion people is now like this. Such a situation should excite literature and make it captivating, but it does not.

But the situation for film is the opposite of literature. Because of the stern, extremely stern system of censorship that has been renewed many times, film has no room to breathe. Literature has much less restriction. With such freedom, if writers cannot turn out good works, it is the problem of the writers. If we were given just a little freedom, if the control was loosened just a little, we could make much better films than the current ones. *Keep Cool* would have been a much better film had we been allowed to express what had been intended. Under the current system it became a farcical facade without any essence.

Is it true that for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the world cinema and the 90th anniversary of



Shanghai Triad: (left) Shun Chun as Song with Gong Li as Xiao Jingbao; (above) Li Baotian as the Godfather



the Chinese cinema, none of the Fifth Generation directors were invited?

None of us were allowed to show up at the celebration. We are considered not as representatives of the Chinese cinema but as suspicious characters.

What do you make of this kind of mentality?

All this is temporary. This kind of political restriction will be removed sooner or later. In the long run I am optimistic. In ten, twenty, or thirty years, this kind of political, ideological restraint will be removed with the changes in society.

But an artist does not have so many years to wait. That's really true. That is the misfortune for us.

People like you and Chen Kaige, who are well-known internationally, should be considered fortunate. It will be harder for the artists who are still unknown. Have you seen Lu Xuechang's To Grow Up (Zhangda chengren)?

Not bad, but it lacks any youthful and explosive impact. If it is to be the debut or the ground-breaking work for the entire Sixth Generation, *To Grow Up* falls short of the energy needed for a ground-breaking work.

Looking back now at *Red Sorghum* or *Yellow Earth*, they both have warm blood and life, which are missing in the works of the Sixth Generation. I think this is because the Sixth Generation was subject to practical considerations. It cannot be resisted: the need for money, the dilemma caused by censorship, and the awards at international film festivals. At a very early stage, the young people of the Sixth Generation knew much more and saw things more clearly than we did. Their aesthetics is much more expanded, as if there were a whole lot of different standards and contrasts. I think this is bad at a time of ground-breaking.

Maybe they are having a more difficult time than you did because when you were coming out, there were few good Chinese films; no big directors were there to block your way. Also, when you started making films, the studios were funded by the government; you could experiment as much as you wanted without worrying about the box office. They do not have such an advantage.

You cannot compare different historical periods. I do not think those objective conditions and circumstantial elements should be fundamental obstacles. I still believe a person's will can triumph over objective obstacles. I am a pagan who believes in human efforts. In my opinion there are more opportunities in today's China than ever before.

Including filmmaking?

Yes, because, first of all, international society has talked about the Fifth Generation for more than ten years. They are sick of talking about it and are looking for the appearance of the Sixth Generation. Many foreigners who study Chinese films are eager—with an almost excessive enthusiasm—to help the Sixth Generation grow. Time and again they come to Beijing when a Sixth Generation film is still unfinished and watch the editing. They recommend the film to international festivals even before the film is finalized. Such enthusiasm and attention were not available to us. In addition, to tell you the truth, it is not really difficult to find money in China today. It is much easier than finding money for film in the West. Some young people can casually develop a plan, get several friends and begin to shoot. The Chinese media are the most interesting. They pay special attention to the novices. As a matter of fact, the domestic media have been more negative than positive to Kaige and to me for the last few years.

Since the appearance of the Fifth Generation, haven't domestic critiques always been more negative than international ones?

The excessive coverage of the Fifth Generation has brought about the current negative opinion. A critic would say, "The endless talking about you has become so boring that I will make it a point to talk about somebody else." I don't think that the Sixth Generation has more difficulties. We are all under the same sky. If I did not accomplish anything more than ten years ago, I would blame no other person but myself for lack of will, a will to succeed regardless of any obstacles.

Of course there is censorship. It was also very stern when we started. "Chairman Mao" and "the Communist Party" were still sung as "mainstream melody"¹¹ in *Yellow Earth*. Still, the film struggled and succeeded in presenting something of our own. That was what I meant by "strength." That kind of strength can be generated. Even though one is restricted by politics, under the political umbrella, one can still bring out something fresh and powerful. What the current new generation lacks is strength, this kind of power. Therefore, under the same sky they cannot create anything substantial, even with certain compromises.

Is it because they have not experienced the Cultural Revolution?

It may have something to do with that, but we cannot generalize. Maybe those younger than the Sixth Generation will be more powerful. I am not sure.

Are you suggesting that the Sixth Generation is not very talented?

Not necessarily. Judging by their works, I should say that they are quite talented. What they lack is will. In the last analysis, our first films were not necessarily the result of talent. I now firmly believe that, no matter what you pursue, will is needed—a strength from the bottom of your heart. Deliberate calculation is no good. Some Sixth Generation directors I know are too smart. They understand too many things; they are so well-informed about the outside world and so familiar with the path to success that their filmmaking becomes an unemotional process. For instance, when they make underground films, at a very early stage, when the films are still being edited, they have already contacted foreign embassies and secured the channels to export the films.

When Kaige and I were making *Yellow Earth*, he knew little about the outside world, but he had an urge to talk about culture and history. At that time I knew this film would be outstanding. People say that it was because of the cinematography. No matter what, the director's intention was expressed, a very ardent intention. His emotions were expressed in a work that was supposed to serve contemporary politics. That to me is the most crucial. Now I judge a film not by how much

philosophy it contains. The more philosophy it contains, the more I dislike it. I now revert to the most basic elements. When watching a film, I don't just watch how skillfully the story is told or whether the actors perform well; I look for the director's inner world, whether his emotions are strong, and what he tries to say. In his film we can discern his emotions, which, whether expressed in a tragedy or a comedy, will move the audience. That is what I call strength.

You cannot experiment for the rest of your life. Are you heading in one fixed direction?

I don't want to finalize my style too soon. But I think one cannot escape oneself, no matter how many changes one makes. This may be a rule, but I do not want to settle down too soon, nor do I want to deliberately formalize myself. I just want to do something new. If my current film does not differ from the previous one, I will feel bored from the beginning to the end. Freshness is the necessity of creation itself; I do not think too much about the rest.

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Notes

1. The division of Chinese film directors has never been agreed upon, but the following is adopted by the majority: The First Generation (1905–1937) starts from the silent films and ends at the beginning of the War of Resistance against Japan; The Second Generation (1937–1949) covers the War of Resistance against Japan and the Civil War; The Third Gen-

eration (1949–1978) starts from the Communist takeover of Mainland China till two years after the death of Mao Zedong; The Fourth Generation (1978–1983) starts after the death of Mao and ends shortly after the Fifth Generation's graduation from Beijing Film Academy; The Fifth Generation (1983–1989) starts at their first film, *One and Eight*, and ends at the Tiananmen Square incident; The Sixth Generation (1989–present) is the new generation of the post-Tiananmen era.

2. Fifth Generation director, whose major works include *Yellow Earth (Huangtudi)*, *Big Parade (Dayuebing)*, *King of Children (Haizi wang)*, *Life on a String (Ming ruo qinxian)*, *Farewell My Concubine (Bawang bie ji)*, *Temptress Moon (Fengyue)*, and *The First Emperor (Ci Qin)*.
3. Fifth Generation director, whose major works include *On the Hunting Ground (Liechang zhasa)*, *Horse Thief (Daomazei)*, *Rock 'n' Roll Youth (Yaogun qingnian)*, and *Blue Kite (Lan fengzheng)*. Tian Zhuangzhuang is a strong supporter of the Sixth Generation. After he was forbidden to make films, Tian became the producer for *To Grow Up (Zhangda chengren)*, which is an important landmark of the Sixth Generation films.
4. With Zhang Junzhao as the director and Zhang Yimou the cinematographer, *One and Eight* is the first noticable Fifth Generation film.
5. Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen, the four Communist leaders considered responsible for the disastrous Cultural Revolution.
6. Written by Shi Tiesheng, *Ming ruo qinxian*, is a philosophical story and Chen Kaige further philosophizes it in *Life on a String*.
7. Qu Ying: the female lead in *Keep Cool*.
8. He Saifei: trained as a traditional Chinese opera singer, He Saifei played the third concubine in *Raise the Red Lantern*.
9. My Grandpa: the hero in *Red Sorghum*.
10. Li Tuo: a Chinese film critic who, in 1979, with his wife Zhang Nuanxin, a Fourth Generation director, published *The Modernization of Film Language*, which triggered a nationwide debate on how to rejuvenate Chinese film.
11. "Mainstream melody": a catchy term invented by the Chinese Ministry of Propaganda to resist "politically incorrect" art works.

