

## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION



When my former colleague at the magazine *China Screen*, Zhang Dan, invited me to lunch with our mutual friend Professor Ni Zhen of the Beijing Film Academy, I accepted with alacrity. Professor Ni is erudite, cultured, and something of a gourmet, so I expected both interesting conversation and good food. Little did I know I would also be asked to consider translating this book. I was aware of the honor Professor Ni was bestowing on me, but worried if I had the time. When I read the manuscript, however, such concerns evaporated: I knew at once that this was a most unusual and exciting work. Therefore, my first thanks are to Zhang Dan for arranging lunch and to Professor Ni for giving me the opportunity to translate this fascinating book.

The appeal of *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy* for me lies in its unusual and accessible style and in its scholarly significance: it is both a good read and a contribution to knowledge and debate. No one could dispute that the emergence of the “Fifth Generation” of Chinese filmmakers in the mid-1980s was the breakthrough that brought Chinese cinema to the attention of the world. As the English critic Tony Rayns writes, “It’s tempting to put an exact date to the birth of the ‘New Chinese Cinema’: 12 April

1985. That was the evening when *Yellow Earth* played to a packed house in the Hong Kong Film Festival in the presence of its two main creators, director Chen Kaige and cinematographer Zhang Yimou. The screening was received with something like collective rapture, and the post-film discussion stretched long past its time limit.”<sup>1</sup>

Given this crucial role, the absence of a monograph in either Chinese or English devoted specifically to the Fifth Generation is striking. I am happy to say that *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy* fills that gap. In the process it gathers together a large amount of vital information about the early days of the Fifth Generation and also rectifies many misunderstandings about them. As Professor Ni points out in the preface he wrote specially for this edition, the prominence attained by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou through successes such as *Farewell, My Concubine* and *Raise the Red Lantern* has obscured the fact that the Fifth Generation includes many other equally distinctive filmmakers, each with his or her own style and interests.

The reasons for the absence of a monograph on the Fifth Generation in China itself are readily inferred from Professor Ni's postscript, which was also written specially for this edition. There, he frankly lays out the critical fate of the Fifth Generation in post-Tiananmen China, where the rhetoric of postcolonial theory has been appropriated to accuse these filmmakers of pandering to the Western colonial desire for the exotic. In this way, he makes it clear that this book is intended as a critical intervention in that debate and a reminder of the ideals and concern for China that have motivated the Fifth Generation from their earliest days.

*Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy* also reminds us that critical discourse cannot be divorced from the operations of power that either suppress or facilitate its production and distribution. For all the loosening of government control in the People's Republic, we cannot lose sight of the fact that none of the local uses of postcolonial and postmodern theory in China today would be possible if they offended the regime. However, although these contemporary critical currents may suit the regime, they are the products of today's intellectuals. Therefore, we also need to ask why so many of today's generation in China feel a need to denigrate and dismiss the more radical culture of the 1980s, which culminated in the 1989 Democracy Movement. Is it really simply that they are callous, materialistic, and unmoved by all those lives lost on or maybe—as the Chinese government insists—“only” near Tiananmen Square? Or are they angry with



From left: New Zealand scholar Paul Clark; head of Xi'an Film Studio and director of *Old Well*, Wu Tianming; the translator of this volume, Chris Berry; and Zhang Yimou, in Beijing in 1986. Photo courtesy of the author.

their predecessors because ultimately they failed to produce lasting political and cultural reform to match China's economic transformation? Or is it that the regime's determination to keep political reform off the agenda means that dismissing the 1980s is crucial to maintaining social cohesion in the People's Republic today? At present, we can only speculate about this, for the frank discussion of the topic remains off-limits within the People's Republic itself.

In addition to its contribution to knowledge and debates about recent Chinese cinema and society, the narrative style of *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy* is striking and unusual. In the first chapter, Professor Ni remarks that the story of the Fifth Generation is "like a legend." And indeed, he tells the story as though it were an episode about a band of Robin Hood-style heroes from *The Water Margin* or a similar Chinese martial arts classic. This strategy is an interesting one. First, it communicates the appeal of the Fifth Generation phenomenon for its many supporters, and it makes the book a joy to read. Second, it highlights the way in which all history narrativizes factual data, as well as the role that this process plays in deciding what and who gets the spotlight. For example, as one of the Duke University Press readers pointed out, there is no doubt that the legend of the Fifth Generation is a male one. The female members of the group, although not ignored, get relatively less attention. It is also a highly patriotic narrative.

The unique style in which this volume is written—blurring the bound-

aries of conventional academic analysis, biography, and storytelling—is a strong part of its appeal. When we consider the author's background, however, this style is not a surprise. Professor Ni is not only one of China's leading film scholars, he is also one of the teachers of the Fifth Generation and a leading screenwriter responsible for some of their most noteworthy films. In his work as a professor at the Beijing Film Academy since 1980, Ni Zhen came to know the Fifth Generation as students and friends long before they ever made films, giving him access to the personal histories and frank comments given here. As the chief editor of the Academy's journal, he has also written numerous scholarly articles, some of which have previously appeared in English. Moreover, Professor Ni is the author of a number of the most important contemporary monographs on Chinese cinema, including *The Exploratory Screen* and *Reform and the Chinese Cinema*.<sup>2</sup> This scholarly effort accounts for the rigorous research and detail of the volume. Finally, Professor Ni's storytelling skills are attested to by his numerous film and television screenplays, including the Fifth Generation classics *Blush*, directed by Li Shaohong, and *Raise the Red Lantern*, directed by Zhang Yimou, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

Professor Ni has also brought his scholarly eye for detail here to the production of the English edition. To help the reader less familiar with China and the world of Chinese cinema, he has not only produced a new preface and postscript, but also worked with me to provide the necessary citations for quotations and references that the educated Chinese reader would take for granted. We have also inserted the dates of all films mentioned in the main text on their first appearance, except where the date is clear from the immediate context. In addition, I am particularly grateful to Professor Ni for taking time out from his hectic schedule to answer my numerous questions about the text itself. Much of this additional work occurred during a trip funded by the International Researcher Exchange Program of the Australian Research Council. It was also during this period of work together that we decided to add the elements mentioned above.

I also want to thank Duke University Press editor Reynolds Smith for his good humor, patience, and persistence. Thanks also to Cui Jian for answering my “stupid foreigner” questions as I translated the manuscript. My old friend and colleague from China Film Corporation, Shan Dongbing, who has always been generous with his time and knowledge, helped me

again by tracing numerous English export titles of films and reading my translation against the original. I am forever in his debt. Cui Junyan also checked the translation against the original. I relied on that most dedicated fan of Hollywood classics, Chen Mei, to help me trace back the original English titles from the Chinese, and on Aiko Yoshioka, Dr. Raj Pandey, Seio Nakajima, and Professor Chong Suwon to help me trace Japanese names and film titles. Sally Ingleton helped with film production terminology, and Dr. Bill Routt with references to Soviet cinema. To all of them, I am very grateful. Last, and maybe most important of all, Freda Freiberg gave generously of her time to read the final manuscript and make numerous astute suggestions regarding correct and felicitous use of English; with gratitude, I incorporated nearly all of them. Any remaining problems and errors are, of course, my own.

Chris Berry