

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION



When they came to Beijing in March 1994, my Japanese friends Kimata Junji and Seki Masami urged me to write a book about the early days of the Fifth Generation. They requested an account of their youthful experiences before entering the Beijing Film Academy and during the movement to send educated youths up into the mountains and down to the countryside, their student days at the Academy, and the production of their first films. As I understood it, they wanted me to write a kind of prehistory of Fifth Generation cinema.

They stipulated accurate historical materials and lively writing with an emphasis on fact over commentary, so that readers could trace the emergence of the Fifth Generation for themselves. Because I began teaching at the Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s, I became both mentor and friend to the Fifth Generation. When *One and Eight* and *Yellow Earth* appeared, I also wrote quite a few reviews to draw attention to them. That is why Kimata Junji and Seki Masami felt I would be suited to the task they proposed. And this is how the first edition of this book came to be published in Japanese in Nagoya, Japan.

In the early 1980s, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Li

Shaohong and the other members of the Fifth Generation were still only students, but their outlines were becoming visible on the horizon. Events from their student days in a flotilla of buildings landlocked by the fields of Zhuxin Village outside Beijing came readily and vividly to my mind. However, they had taken separate creative paths over the last decade, and so I felt I should interview each of these directors, cinematographers, sound designers, and production designers that I used to be so close to. With their agreement, between March and May 1994 I took advantage of gaps in their busy shooting schedules to seek them out one by one and conduct detailed interviews with them.

What a wonderful and happy time that was! We went over familiar and moving stories, delving deep into their memories for past events. We remembered bitter and almost unbelievable incidents from the Cultural Revolution period. And we reviewed the many slings and arrows Fifth Generation cinema had endured as it emerged. While we talked, I experienced the mixture of distance and understanding that characterizes the special relationship between two generations. I heard many stories from their youths that were unique yet also had much in common with other tales from the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. Together, they constituted the prehistory of a film art movement that this book supplies, as well as a collective biography of the Fifth Generation filmmakers. From these empirical materials, I not only gained a deeper understanding of the artistic tendencies of early Fifth Generation cinema, but I also formed the structure of my argument, which reveals itself between the lines of this text.

Whenever anyone mentions China's Fifth Generation cinema today, the focus of attention is sure to be on Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. This tendency evolved gradually over the last fifteen years. There is no question that their work together produced the stark look, powerful emotions, national anxiety, and deep reflection that characterize early Fifth Generation cinema. Their collaboration and later split shaped this film art movement decisively. However, the most noteworthy historical facts documented here concern the development of another Fifth Generation filmmaker, Tian Zhuangzhuang. He was very prominent during their college days and around the time of their graduation, and his lyrical artistic style, organizational abilities, and personal charisma indicated that he was destined to lead a group of artists. Yet, ultimately, it was Zhang Yimou, with his assertively expressive film style, extraordinary artistry and energy, abso-



The author, Professor Ni Zhen, teaching in the Academy's Production Design Department in 1981. Photo courtesy of Beijing Film Academy.

lute refusal to accept fate, and meticulous organizational skills, who became the actual figurehead of Fifth Generation cinema. His sudden emergence unexpectedly changed the public face of this art movement from a potential continuation of Fourth Generation lyricism and naturalistic realism to peculiarly Chinese imagery in strong and expressive colors. I feel that uncovering the underlying reasons for this change and the historical origins of this artistic formation are important contributions to history.

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At the end of May 1994, I began writing the first chapter of this book in high spirits. Because the materials were complete and I was familiar with the cast of characters, I finished the chapter in one stretch over a few days. Sadly, just then my wife Zhao Fengxi discovered during a medical checkup that she had lung cancer and that it was already advanced. This terrible blow had an immediate effect on my writing. I became very distracted. My wife was an associate professor in the Cinematography Department of the Beijing Film Academy. She had a very close student-teacher relationship with Zhang Yimou, Hou Yong, Lü Yue, Gu Changwei, and many others.

She was also a typically tireless and selfless Chinese woman. As she ignored her illness and exercised determined self-control, continually encouraging me and spurring me on, I did my very best between June and early August to focus on completing the remaining three chapters. There are evident disparities between the first chapter and the last three, which are less sophisticated and more hastily written. Furthermore, there are some interview materials that I was unable to include in full, to my deep regret. I will never forget early spring 1995. My wife's illness had become critical. Lü Yue, Hou Yong, and Xiao Feng came to her sickbed to express their concern, and Zhang Yimou called from Tokyo, where he was engaged in postproduction, especially to extend his sympathy. I have detailed these events here because I want to express my profound gratitude to my late wife Zhao Fengxi. I also wish to offer a brief explanation of the weaknesses and inadequacies of this book.



Quite a number of overseas scholars expressed an interest in translating this book for publication in English. My friend Chris Berry was one of them. He worked in Beijing between 1985 and 1988, during which time he was the English-language consultant for China Film Corporation's *China Screen*, the sole periodical on Chinese film in foreign languages at that time. This experience has been an enormous aid to him in the translation of this book, for he himself witnessed the burgeoning of Fifth Generation cinema. To ensure accurate and expressive translation, he came especially to Beijing for a month in winter 1999, and together we carefully checked the historical details in the translation manuscript and the precise meaning of Chinese literary allusions and quotations in the text. I have been very impressed by Chris Berry's exhaustive work on the English translation and his meticulous attention to detail. I have taken advantage of the occasion of the English edition to make a few additions to various chapters, sections, and passages, but without altering the framework or scope of the original. Apart from this, the number of photographs has been increased significantly, from the original twenty-two to a final total of eighty-eight.

I would like to express my thanks to all of the Fifth Generation filmmakers discussed in the book. Their generous provision of written materials and photographs, as well as their willingness to be interviewed, has enabled the completion of the book and the strengthening of its contents.

At the same time, I wish to thank Chris Berry for his efforts on all fronts concerning the translation and publication of the English edition, as well as Duke University Press and Reynolds Smith, without whose dedication its publication would have been less swift.

I must also mention my friend, Mr. Shan Dongbing. His assistance in proofreading, carefully checking the English translation against the original Chinese manuscript, and his work in finding source materials for the filmography have involved a lot of effort and have been an enormous help in producing the English edition of this book. Here, I express my gratitude to him.



The directing class of 1982, photographed on entry to the Academy. Front row: second from left, Li Shaohong; sixth, Professor Wang Suihan; seventh, Professor Situ Zhaodun. Second row: second from left, Pan Hua; second from right, Hu Mei; third, Chen Kaige; fifth, Wu Ziniu. Third row: Liu Miaomiao at left, and Peng Xiaolian at right. Back row: second from left, Tian Zhuangzhuang; fourth, Xie Xiaojing; sixth, Pan Yuanliang; second from right, Xia Gang; fourth, Zhang Junzhao. Photo courtesy of Beijing Film Academy.