

## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

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CARLOS ROJAS

As Dai Jinhua notes in her discussion of Zhang Yimou's 2003 film *Hero* in this volume, the work contains two pivotal scenes in which the swordsman known as Broken Sword is seen writing Chinese characters. In the first, he uses a brush dipped in bright red ink to write an enormous version of the character 劍 (*jian*, "sword") on a sheet of paper or fabric, while in the second, he uses his sketch to write the two characters 天下 (*tianxia*, "all under heaven") in the desert sand (see accompanying images).

In the first instance, the visual image of Broken Sword's calligraphic rendering of *jian* comes to have an iconic significance in the film. Hung in the palace behind the king of Qin, the text comes to symbolize the military might that would permit the king to conquer the rival states in the region and establish a unified dynasty. By contrast, in the second instance all we observe is what Dai Jinhua describes as Broken Sword's "fluttering-sleeved, sword waving posture" (chapter 2, this volume) as he inscribes the two characters in the sand, and we never see the written characters themselves. Instead, we learn the content of his short inscription when the assassin Nameless (who observed Broken Sword writing the two characters in question) relays the contents of this short message to the king of Qin, who takes it as an affirmation of his political goals. Equally importantly, the same message also helps convince Nameless to abandon his own plans to assassinate the Qin king, precisely so that the king might then be able to realize his ambitions to establish a unified empire.

The notion of *tianxia* is, as Dai Jinhua observes, central to Zhang Yimou's reimagining of the events leading up to the founding of China's first unified dynasty, the Qin (221–206 BCE), which viewed itself as ruling over "all under heaven." Literally meaning "all land under heaven" (in the subtitles prepared for the U.S. version of Zhang's film, the term is rendered simply as "our land"), the concept of *tianxia* designates an ethnoculturally



Images from Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2003).

grounded understanding of universality, and historically it has been used to articulate a vision of sociopolitical order within a specifically Chinese frame of reference.<sup>1</sup> Zhang's film was controversial when it was released in 2003, because it was seen by viewers as offering an apologia for China's history of imperial conquest, and as an indirect commentary on the political aspirations of the contemporary Chinese state. Part of that controversy resonates with a set of parallel discussions of attempts to reappropriate a traditional notion of *tianxia* in relation to the contemporary world.

At the same time, this concept of *tianxia* also metaphorically captures a central objective of the present volume as a whole, in that as a detailed

and theoretically informed critical engagement with the sociopolitical configuration of modern China, the volume constitutes an attempt to map a sociocultural space onto a conceptual order that is both intrinsically part of that space but at the same time ontologically outside of it (somewhat like the paradoxes that emerge from Borges's parable of the "map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it").<sup>2</sup> More specifically, this volume is concerned with an analysis of Chinese film, and in her discussion of the desert calligraphy scene, Dai notes that "cinema as a genre bases its true text on the image. That which is not visible, then, lacks signification" (chapter 2). In her own analysis throughout the volume, Dai similarly attends to the visual specificities of cinematic works, but at the same time is equally interested in the works' erasures and blind spots. Her goal, in other words, is to make legible the works' occluded sociopolitical and ideological implications in order to consider how the films' focus on history offers a commentary on a contemporary process of historical amnesia.

Although it is true that written characters for *tianxia* remain invisible in Zhang's film, we are nevertheless shown a thirty-second sequence of *Broken Sword* sketching the characters in the sand, in a series of elaborate dramatic arm motions that appear to correspond to several long, curved written strokes. In fact, the writing sequence is so elaborate that many viewers have speculated that *Broken Sword* may not have been sketching the relatively simple characters for *tianxia*, but rather something different altogether. Moreover, even if *Broken Sword* was indeed writing the characters for *tianxia*, as is subsequently reported by *Nameless*, it is nevertheless unclear which version of the Chinese script *Broken Sword* is presumed to have been using in the first place. Before the king of Qin founded the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE, many different versions of the Chinese writing system were in use in the region that is now China. One of the first things that the king did upon becoming emperor was to oversee the systematic standardization of the Chinese script. The Chinese writing system has been reformed many times since then, most recently in the 1950s under Mao Zedong, during which over two thousand different characters were simplified (though the previous traditional forms of the characters continue to be used in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other overseas Chinese communities). When *Broken Sword* writes the character for *sword* in the film, accordingly, he uses not the version of the character in use today (劍), but

rather a version that closely resembles one preserved in the early dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* (Explanation of simple and compound graphs), in which the character is rendered as 𠄎. Similarly, although the contemporary version of the binome *tianxia* consists of a mere seven nearly straight strokes, 天下, the rendering of the same two characters in the *Shuowen jiezi*, 𠄎 𠄎, is significantly more curvy, and would appear to match more closely what we observe of Broken Sword's arm motions as he writes the two characters in the sand.

On the other hand, even if the characters preserved in the *Shuowen jiezi* are indeed presumed to be the model, in Zhang Yimou's film, for both Broken Sword's (visible) rendering of the character for *sword* and, possibly, his (invisible) rendering of the binome "all under heaven," this nevertheless underscores a fundamental ambiguity within the film itself—which is that the work is set during the period immediately preceding both the establishment of the Qin dynasty and the ensuing standardization of the Chinese writing system that was the basis for the compilation of the *Shuowen jiezi* three centuries later. The fact of the matter is, we have no real idea what precisely the Chinese characters written by a historical figure during this immediate pre-Qin period would have looked like, and by projecting a vision of the post-Qin script back onto the pre-Qin era, the film is in effect reproducing in miniature its more general attempt to take a post-Qin (and, indeed, contemporary) understanding of *tianxia* and the Chinese state, and project it back onto a pre-Qin moment.

The resulting temporal chiasmus, meanwhile, is the focus not only of Dai Jinhua's chapter on Zhang's *Hero*, but also of this volume as a whole. Through a series of incisive analyses of contemporary films dealing with periods ranging from the pre-Qin to the contemporary moment, Dai considers the ways in which these works view the past through the lens of the present, and in the process she argues that they comment ironically on how the post-Cold War present is constituted through a process of strategically eliding critical elements of its own past.