

Series Editor's Preface

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WHEN JIA ZHANGKE, in one of his conversations with Michael Berry that compose this volume, remarks that “good films come in all shapes and sizes, but bad films all have a common feature,” he is inverting the principle famously articulated in the first line of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” The irony in Tolstoy’s original formulation, of course, is that even as *Anna Karenina* focuses on several radically unhappy families, the novel itself has come to be regarded as an apogee of nineteenth-century literary realism. Even so, Tolstoy’s work simultaneously heralded a wave of modernist developments in Euro-American literature and the arts, which in turn helped to reconfigure the standards for what might be considered an exemplary (or “happy”) work of art. In contemporary China, meanwhile, Jia Zhangke has played a similarly decisive role in helping to expand assumptions of what constitutes a “good” film in the first place.

Almost precisely a century after the 1877 publication of *Anna Karenina*, the 1978 debut of post-Mao China’s reform and opening-up campaign marked the beginning of a far-reaching reassessment of the standards of realism and of aesthetic value that had characterized cultural production under Mao. For the first quarter of a century following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, there was an expectation that cultural production would conform to the strictures of socialist realism, wherein art was viewed

primarily as a vehicle for disseminating Communist values. The result was a relative homogeneity of cultural production that was disrupted during the post-1978 Reform Era, when a relaxation of China's censorship apparatus, an influx of European and American cultural works, and a rapidly growing economy helped facilitate the emergence of a more openly experimental, and even iconoclastic, art scene.

These developments had a particularly notable impact on domestic film production. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), China's flagship film school, the Beijing Film Academy, was shuttered, and it was not until 1978 that a new cohort of aspiring filmmakers (who came to be known as the Fifth Generation) was able to enroll in the recently reopened academy. After graduating in 1982, members of this cohort, which included figures such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, began producing films that diverged dramatically from the aesthetic and technical standards of earlier Maoist-era works, and in turn provided a new set of standards for what might be considered a "good" film.

Meanwhile, Jia Zhangke, who was born in 1970, describes how in 1991 he finally had a chance to watch Chen Kaige's classic *Yellow Earth* (1984), which he says changed his life and helped inspire him to become a filmmaker in his own right. In 1993, accordingly, Jia enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy, and after graduation he came to be recognized as one of the leading representatives of a rather eclectic group of young filmmakers sometimes referred to as the Sixth Generation. Unlike the Fifth Generation, this later cohort produced films that were often set in the contemporary post-Mao period, and they tended to favor an aesthetic that took inspiration from documentary cinema *verité*. To this end, these younger filmmakers often pursued a comparatively unpolished feel that not only sought to make a virtue of necessity (many of these early Sixth Generation films were produced on a low budget and without official permission) but also attempted to generate a more realistic sensibility.

Jia Zhangke's second feature-length film, *Platform* (2000), for instance, is set in Jia's hometown of Fenyang, in Shanxi Province, and explores how the cultural transformations that characterized the Reform Era gradually impacted not only China's urban areas but even relatively isolated communities like his hometown. Produced on a low budget with nonprofessional actors, the film spans the "long decade" of the 1980s, from 1978 to 1990, focusing on youngsters in a small song-and-dance troupe that shifts from performing canonical revolutionary works to more pop works inspired by international figures like the contemporary Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng (Deng Lijun) and

the 1984 American break-dancing film *Breakin'*. The result is a moving exploration of not only the historical conditions under which Jia himself came of age but also some of the tectonic shifts in China's cultural and aesthetic orientation during this same period.

Three years after Jia Zhangke released *Platform*, China's Film Bureau organized a symposium at the Beijing Film Academy for filmmakers who, like Jia, were producing works without previously obtaining approval through official channels. Jia recalls that more than fifty "underground" directors showed up at the meeting, and that it was as a result of this event that he decided to submit his recently completed screenplay for official approval. The result was *The World* (2004), which was Jia's first film to be officially approved for domestic screening, though it still retained many of the documentary-style qualities that had distinguished *Platform* and his other underground productions.

Meanwhile, even as Jia's subsequent body of feature films, documentaries, and shorts has continued to extend his cinematic vision in new directions, his oeuvre continues to be driven by a concern that has shaped it from the beginning—namely, an attempt to reexamine and expand conventional assumptions about what constitutes a "good" film.