CHINESE CINEMA AFTER THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION:
FROM REVIVAL TO A NEW CREATIVE ERA (1977–1986)

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by
Wei Jia Reader, B.A.

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The Ohio State University
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Master's Examination Committee:                              Approved by
Yan-Shuan Lao                                               Robert W. Wagner
Clayton K. Lowe                                               Advisor
Robert W. Wagner                                             Department of Photography
                                                          & Cinema
To My Mother
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VITA

February 10, 1954 .......... Born - Beijing, China

1974 .......................... B.A., Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

1975-1980 ....................... Interpreter, Institute of High Energy Physics, Chinese Academy of Sciences

1980-1985 ....................... Editor, China Daily, Beijing

1986-1987 ....................... Administrative Associate, Dept of Photography and Cinema, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1985-Present ..................... Master's Degree Candidate, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

Major Field: Cinema

Studies in film history, theory and criticism.
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INTRODUCTION

Chinese cinema has a history almost as old as that of the cinema itself. Just ten years after Louis Lumiere's film Arrival of a Train was shown in Paris in 1895, Dingjun Mountain, the first Chinese film ever made, was screened in Feng Tai Photography Shop on Beijing Culture Street.\(^1\) For more than 80 years since then the Chinese mainland has turned out thousands of films; yet few of them have ever been shown overseas. Consequently, few pieces of western literature have ever dealt in depth and length with Chinese cinema compared with the tons of works on world cinema that have been written.

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies of Chinese cinema in the West was done by French scholar Regis Bergeron. He watched many Chinese films made between 1920 and 1959 while working in China as a language specialist for the Foreign Language Press, and "was shocked to discover that China had a number of good films unknown to the world."\(^2\) He therefore wrote with great enthusiasm an article entitled "The Unknown Chinese Films", which received warm encouragement from well-known French film historian George Sadoul. From then on he spent some twenty-five years
in writing his four-volume work, *The History of Chinese Films*, and completed it by 1984. The book was referred to by prominent French film theorist Jean Mitry as "future classics".\(^3\) Prior to Bergeron's book, American film scholar Jay Leyda, who worked at the Chinese Film Archive between 1959 and 1964, completed a book called *Dianying: An Account of Films and Film Audience in China* (1972) encompassing the Chinese contribution to the pre-history of the moving image and the Chinese films made up to 1965. The most current book concerning Chinese cinema has just been completed by Dr. George Samson, a film professor at Ohio University, who worked as a foreign expert at the Chinese Film Import and Export Corporation for a year between 1984 and 1985. His *Chinese Film: State of the Art*, to be released in August of 1987 by Praeger Press in the United States, is a combination of the author's first-hand interviews with a number of Chinese filmmakers and articles by Chinese film scholars. Other than these few works one can find some periodical articles on the subject, such as Mark Pinsky's "A Small Leap Forward" in *American Film* magazine of April 1984, and Tony Rayn's "Yellow Earth" and "The Fifth Generation" in *Film Bulletin* of the British Film Institute (October 1986).

In view of the unbalanced situation that, on the one hand, China has a relatively long history in filmmaking with about one-fifth of the world audience, and on the other hand there
is a lack of research on Chinese cinema in the West and minimal reference to it in American cinematic text books, as a Chinese film student I feel obligated to add to the study of Chinese cinema in this country.

This thesis will mainly explore the new movements in Chinese filmmaking since the end of the Cultural Revolution and analyze a select number of recent Chinese films. The purpose of this work is twofold: to introduce the present state of Chinese filmmaking to America; and to explore problems in Chinese cinema for the sake of its improvement. Hopefully, by the end of the research the hypothesis can be proved that Chinese cinema is entering a new era of creativity and that given the right condition the country can produce great filmmakers and universally acclaimed films.

In doing the research, I have employed both historical and critical methods. The thesis is chronologically organized into five chapters. The first chapter deals with the Chinese cinematic tradition (1905-1948). The second chapter is about the Chinese cinema of 1949-1976 and its social context. The third chapter concerns the revival of the Chinese cinema (1977-1980). The fourth chapter focuses on the search for new realism (1981-1983). The fifth chapter is devoted to the "fifth generation" filmmakers and other filmmakers who have individual styles as well as reference
to their creative works (1984-1986). In the third, fourth and fifth chapters theoretical debates in Chinese film circle are also discussed. The final part of the thesis provides the conclusion of this study as well as suggestions for future research on the subject.

There are some limitations in this study that need to be stated at the outset. The first and also biggest problem is that I do not have access to the majority of Chinese films; and very few mainland Chinese films have been transferred to videotapes or exported to America. Therefore I have to rely on my recollections of the films I saw when I was in China and draw on information obtained from other sources, such as personal contacts and readings, which is not the same as firsthand viewing. Although I have a few recent Chinese films on videotape (they are either fourth or fifth generation) at hand for the study, their visual quality and audio effects are far inferior to the original films shown on a large screen. Another difficulty is that, as pointed out earlier, very little related literature is available in America on the subject of the present Chinese Cinema; therefore, this study is based on considerably limited sources. Moreover, in order to be practical, this thesis does not cover every aspect of the Chinese cinema, but focuses on the feature films only. Lastly, this thesis does not include the study of Chinese films made in Taiwan and
Hong Kong due to the inaccessibility of necessary materials.

This study, while far from complete, is a beginning. What has been done here is as a Chinese proverb goes, "to cast a brick to attract jade". But it is my hope that this thesis may encourage more and insightful research on Chinese cinema by film scholars in the future.
CHAPTER ONE
THE CHINESE CINEMATIC TRADITION (1905-1948)

It is interesting to note that the first film made in China demonstrated a close relationship in its form with the Chinese traditional opera. Dingjun Mountain (1905) directed by Ren Fengnian is a three-reel Beijing opera film, starring the famous Beijing opera actor Tan Xinpei. Ren's subsequent films made up to 1909 (when a fire accident demolished his photography shop) were all recordings of popular theater scenes.¹ This characterized some other Chinese films made in the early period.

It was not until 1913 when the first fiction film was made in China. Zheng Zhengqiu wrote a filmscript called The Difficult Couple and co-directed it with Zhang Shichuan. Though a short one, the film marked the beginning of feature film production in the country.² It might also be the first film touching upon the social problems of the time as it focuses on the social custom of mercenary marriage prevailing in Zheng's hometown. It led to a number of films dealing with humanity and social problems.

But the beginning years actually saw more films of slapstick comedy and melodrama, which were obviously
imitations of the Hollywood products of the time. As in many other countries, the Chinese film market was dominated by American films in 1920s-40s.

By and large, the Chinese films made in the early days were fairly crude and unsophisticated because few of the pioneer filmmakers had ever been trained professionally. There was no film school in old China; they learned the trade simply by watching western films and by making films modeled after them. As elsewhere in the world filmmaking at first was not taken seriously as an art.

In addition, the semi-colonized China at that time depended entirely on foreign countries for imports of cameras, projectors, raw film and almost all other film equipment. When World War I cut off Shanghai's supply of German raw film, production virtually came to a halt and could not resume until 1916, with raw film imported from the United States.

Despite the difficulties, however, the film industry was growing and finally reached its Golden Age between the thirties and forties, a time when China had a war with Japan followed by the Chinese Civil War. During this period, many original, expressive films were made by a group of progressive filmmakers, such as Yuan Muzhi, Cai Chusheng, Jin Shan, Sun Yu, Shen Xiling, Zheng Junli and Shi Dongshan. Their films reflected their extraordinary creative energy as
well as political commitment to confront the issues of the day: poverty, unemployment, government corruption and the war. Following are some of their representative works:

*Spring Silkworm* (1933, directed by Cai Chusheng) is a documentary-like feature film concentrating on southern farmers' hard life. The realistic details make the film very touching. *Big Road* (1934, directed by Sun Yu) has both an original subject and treatment of the road workers. The eight leading characters are individually characterized and developed. The scenes in the workers' quarters have excellent touches of reality. *New Women* (1934, directed by Cai Chusheng) is based on the recent suicide of the film actress, Ai Xia, transformed into a novelist called Wei Ming in the film. The excellent acting of Ruan Lingyu in the role of Wei Ming does credit to this tragic film. Also starring Ruan is another successful film, *The Goddess* (1934, directed by Wu Yonggang), which portrays the life of a prostitute. The simple composition of the picture, the fluent transition of the shots and especially the effectively created mood make the film very touching and penetrating. *Song of the Fisherman* (1934, directed by Cai Chusheng), a simple and direct tale about a fisherman's family left helpless by the death of the father in a storm, was so popular that it won an award at Moscow's International Film Festival in 1935, the first Chinese film
to win international recognition. Street Angel (1937, directed by Yuan Muzhi) is a tragic comedy about four young people at the bottom of Shanghai society. An angry vein of social criticism sharpens the humor and acting. Crossroad (1937, directed by Shen Xiling) is an innovative Great Depression comedy about the hardships facing unemployed graduates in the thirties Shanghai. The overall realism is very impressive.

A powerful film is 8,000 Li of Cloud and Moon (1947, directed by Shi Dongshan), spanning the ten years from the start of the Anti-Japanese War to the threshold of the Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Communists. A young couple tour with an anti-Japanese theater troupe and then return to a Shanghai riddled with corruption, misfortune and injustice. Elements of documentary make it all the more fascinating. Another film that captures the spirit of the time is The Spring River Flows East (1947, directed by Zheng Junli). This critical film reflects the social contradictions through the story of a teacher who joins the Red Cross in the Anti-Japanese War, but becomes disillusioned in the dissolute society of post-war Shanghai. While his wife and child wait anxiously for news of him, he remarries into high society and obtains a well-paying job. Along the Songhua River (1947, directed by Jin Shan) recounts the tribulations of a peasant family in northeast
China under the occupation of the Japanese. It is a realistically original film poetry with a sensitivity to the rhythms and values of rural life.

The best of all is probably *Crows and Sparrows* (1949, directed by Zheng Junli), which depicts the life of the inhabitants of a boarding house commandeered by a Kuomintang official. This film is regarded by Jay Leyda as "a milestone in Chinese film history, worthy to be shown alongside the best of international cinema produced in the postwar years". He describes it as a fore-runner of what was later called "neo-realism" in western cinema:

> This casual naturalism determined the approach to every element in the film, its acting mostly evidently, its direction and camera work most subtle. It is a new tone in Chinese films; it was new in European films, too, when Rosellini and De Sica established a style, gathered from many tentative in the direction from the cinema's beginning, that critics happily labeled neo-realism. But the Shanghai filmmakers had not seen the Italian films that were pointing the way to the rest of the film world. With or without models to follow, *Crows and Sparrows* is a significant film.

Leyda also considers the first musical comedy *Scenes of City Life* (1935, directed by Yuan Muzhi) "a masterpiece.... Tricks are played with music and unreal sound. There are many visual jokes and seasoning of stylized action."

However, the Chinese cinema of this period remained almost unknown in the West until 1980 when London held a Chinese Film Retrospective. The British audience was highly
impressed by many of those innovative and realistic films. Two years later when another Chinese Film Retrospective was held in Italy a signed article titled "Neo-realism Originated in Shanghai" was carried in the Italian newspaper Solidarity, regarding the Chinese films as the first sign of neo-realism in film history. Whatever the case, realism was the most distinctive feature of the thirties and forties Chinese film. These masterpieces established a rich heritage and fine tradition for Chinese film history.
CHAPTER TWO
THE CINEMA OF 1949 - 1976 AND THE
SOCIAL CONTEXT

"The social and political environments have a powerful, if not determining, effect on the production, distribution and viewing of films."¹ This is especially true in China, where the political climate tremendously influences the culture. Throughout the years many important events took place in China - the founding of the People's Republic of China, land reform, cooperative transformation of agriculture, the Korean War, the Great Leap Forward, the anti-rightist movement, and the Cultural Revolution. All these events were reflected on the Chinese screen. This historical period can be roughly divided into two phases (demarcated by the outset of the Cultural Revolution): from 1949 to 1965 and from 1966 to 1976.

During the first 17 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 more than 600 feature films were produced nationwide.² Most of them, unfortunately, were politically orthodox and theatrically stylized. A number of them, however, are outstanding, carrying forward the fine tradition of social realism.
These films are exemplified by the following:

_This Whole Life of Mine_ (1950, directed by Shi Hui) chronicles more than 40 years in the life of Beijing, from the collapse of the corrupt Qing Dynasty to the Civil War of the late forties, as seen through the eyes of a policeman on the beat. The film is also marked by period details and the fine performance of the director who plays the central character of policeman. Another masterpiece is _White-Haired Girl_ (1950, directed by Wang Ping and Shui Hua). With a blend of realism and stylization, the film tells the story of a poor farmer's daughter who escapes captivity by the local landlord. _Zhao Yiman_ (1950, directed by Sha Meng) is an excellent biographical film of a true revolutionary heroine who served as political commissar in the Northeast Anti-Japanese Army until her capture and death in 1937 at the age of 32. Another good war film is _New Heroes and Heroines_ (1951, directed by Shi Dongshan) with common themes like: defense against aggressors and heroic sacrifice for the revolutionary cause. Technical directness and visual simplicity distinguish the film from the flamboyance and theatrical postures of many other films made during and after the time of the Korean War.³ Acted by stage actors and actresses, _Dragon Beard Ditch_ (1952, directed by Xian Qiu) is an adaptation of a stage play based on Lao She's story about the inhabitants of an overcrowded courtyard in
Beijing at the turn of China's liberation. It is an interesting blend of forties social realism and fifties stage stylization. *Gate No. 6* (1952, directed by Lu Ban) is another past-and-present film based on a play. As Leyda commented, "Here the present is wisely reduced to a speedy epilogue of the liberation of Tianjin. The body of the film, circling about the desperate schemes of a gang boss, is the most realistic picture of rich life immediately before 1949 that I've ever seen in a Chinese film."4 *Reconnaissance Across the Yangtze River* (1954, directed by Tang Xiaodan) centers upon a small group of scouts who cross the river unobserved by the Kuomintang garrison troop in order to contact the local guerrillas and to radio information back to their base. Leyda observes, "It is an adventure film, and a good one, full of suspense. It is one of the best and most continuously interesting of the guerilla films of China."5

A well acclaimed spy thriller called *The Unfailing Beam* (1958) was directed by Wang Ping, China's leading woman director. The protagonists are a man-and-wife team operating a secret radio contact between Shanghai and a revolutionary base in Yenan. The film convincingly evokes a night-time city fraught with political intrigue, and has a sharp sense of the techniques of suspense. The director tempers the heroics with the ordinary details of their
lives. *Storm* (1959) is a powerful film concerning the 1923 strike by railroad workers. Jin Shan wrote the script, directed the film, and also played the leading role of a lawyer. The characters grow and change and are convincing. The use of color is a dramatic support rather than a pretty ornament in this film. Another wonderful film is *The Lin Family Shop* (1958 by Shui Hua), an engrossing humane story about a shopkeeper's desperate attempts to survive financially in the thirties. As Leyda commented: "Its period was precisely evoked: the reconstruction of a provincial town in the early thirties was managed with extra attention to each costume, each background. The camera work was rich, though timid." *Hurricane* (1961, directed by Xie Tieli) explores the interrelating problems in rural areas at the time of land reform: superstitious and frightened peasants, the clan ties and private armies of the landlords, the city-born cadres challenging centuries of traditions. Human contradictions are examined in this wonderful film. A popular yet controversial film called *Early Spring* (1963) was also directed by Xie Tieli. The central romance and humanity override its political content. A teacher on the brink of political commitment comes to a small village, falls in love and provokes the hostility of the local people. According to Leyda, a foreign visitor obtained a seat "with the utmost difficulty" found it "the most
interesting film" that he saw in China.7 **Serf** (1964, directed by Li Zhong) is an original film set in Tibet and played by Tibetan actors. The remarkable performance of the chief character, Jamba, an orphaned serf and house slave, makes this story of oppression and brutality all the more convincing. The film has some visually stunning scenes.

Moreover, there were some other impressive films that belong to different forms. **Fifteen Strings of Cash** (1956, directed by Tao Jin) is the most imaginatively conceived Chinese opera film of the time. The tale, based on a piece of classical Chinese literature, is about a girl wrongfully accused of murder, and involves to the tracking down of the real criminal. The director skillfully stylizes the color, set, and music to highlight the suspense and humor. **Young People of Our Village** (1959, directed by Su Li) is a realistic comedy on a present-time subject drawn from one of the thousands of small reservoirs that Chinese villagers were building that year. Instructional as the film obviously is, the director also made it genuinely entertaining. The color of the film is bright and lively as its young actors. **Red Guards of Lake Hong** (1961, directed by Xie Tian) is a rare musical set in 1940, about the struggle between local guerrillas and the army of a Kuomintang landlord for control of a village. It is a
robust action film spiced with lyrical songs, one of them soon became a pop song in the country. The colorful folk musical, *Third Sister Liu* (1961 by Su Li), is resolutely an original masterpiece. Based on a folk legend of the Zhuang minority people in southern China, it depicts a young peasant girl whose witty songs beat three self-important scholars hired by a local landowner at a singing contest. Set on location in the beautiful scenery of Guilin, the visuals are as lyrical as the melodies. *Li Shuang-Shuang* (1962, directed by Lu Ren) is a wonderful feminist comedy dealing with a farmer's wife rebelling against being confined to doing housework and demanding equal work opportunities for herself and other village wives. Her husband's male ego is deflated at every turn. *Adding Flowers to Embroidery* (1963, directed by Xie Tian) is another excellent rural comedy. Picturing the present day life of the farmers, it is remarkably funny and humorous, arousing repeated laughter from the audience. It certainly is "a great contribution to the development of a specifically Chinese comedy film."8

Many of these films won international film awards and caught the world's attention. But quality films like them accounted only for a small number of the total Chinese films made then. Artistically speaking, Chinese films had many apparent and common problems, some of which still affect
China's present filmmaking to a certain extent. One problem was that, probably influenced by the ancient Chinese theaters where instant recognition was necessary and colorfully painted masks were created to prevent ambiguities of the characters, Chinese films also tended to incorporate some means of identification—gesture, voice, pose, music—to suit the habits of the Chinese audience. In Chinese films positive characters were almost always played by good-looking actors, while negative characters were usually played by actors with mean faces and hoarse voices (very often dubbed for this purpose). Heroic postures of good guys as opposed to the ineptitude of bad guys was yet another convention, and "good characters grow only firmer in their resolve, bad characters only become more violent and desperate." "In general, the characters are fixed from the beginning of a film, and as the film progresses we see only the hero struggling against some evil, without ever failing, not even in the most difficult situations." Splendid heroism was executed to the extreme in Chinese war films; there was even a kind of behavior lesson: "When all else fails, show defiance to the enemy, especially if he is about to shoot or hang you." A terrible film built entirely on the defiance formula was Heroine Liu Hulan made in the fifties. Color in Chinese films was used "less for appropriateness and more for the importance of their
Typecasting may be the suitable word that can summarize all those drawbacks in Chinese film structures, as Leyda put it:

Typecasting is so firmly defined that in the introductory cast list, which would always be divided into good and bad characters, the music actually changes at the division from good to evil: the audience is being guided before the film begins. -14-

In addition to technical cliches, many Chinese films are regarded as ideologically dogmatic by Western viewers. This was certainly a long-time serious problem in China. The situation in China was much like what was stated by Robert Withers:

Film has been involved in the political and social currents of modern history (1) as an instrument of pure propaganda, (2) as a means of confirming and establishing social and political values, and (3) as an instrument of social change and political advocacy. Even when a film is not made for a political purpose, it tends to reflect the social and political climate of the country in which it was made. -15-

Film in China was essentially used as a political or educational instrument rather than a form of art. It was made very clear by Chinese officials that "in the film industry, the basic principle is to eliminate the poisonous imperialist films gradually and strengthen the educational nature of the people's film industry, orienting our films towards the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers..."16

As early as 1944 Mao Zedong made a speech at a cultural
conference in Yan'an saying: "Art should assume the function of attacking the enemy and educating the people." The idea of "art for art's sake" was absolutely opposed by Chinese officials, and artists were instructed to give political quality the first place and the artistic quality the second.

Sraitjacketed by these dogmatic guidelines, the creativeness of the artists was virtually suppressed. A careful study may find that Chinese films often focused on a few subjects at different times. Now there was a flux of war films, now came films on past-present subjects, now on land-reform and farmers, now on workers and industrial development, and now back to war heroes. It was not that the filmmakers could not find other subjects, but that they had to play it safe to avoid causing themselves political troubles. A few daring artists were actually persecuted for making controversial films, and others took it as a warning.

There was a short relaxation between 1956-57 after Mao pronounced in May 1956 the policy of "Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend," purportedly for promoting the development of the arts and sciences. However it turned out to be a short-lived slogan and what really happened was that quite a few original works created under this policy were soon labeled as "poisonous weeds" and banned for many years. For instance, Lu Ban's short film, Before the New Director Arrives (1956),
saturizes bureaucracy, a social plague at the time, with a sharp style. His next comedy, The Man Careless of Details (1957), is even bolder, depicting a careless writer whose encounter with authorities show them as blind and stupid, if not worse. Lu Ban's last film, An Unfinished Comedy (1957), ended his filmmaking career as that year's "anti-rightist" movement made him an immediate target. Articles carried in a film journal criticized him: "It was his 'mask of humor and its appeal to the superficial laughter of the audience' that concealed his true anti-party and anti-socialist ideology.... He has rejected the idea of using typical characters of our society and uses instead common behavior 'that could be enjoyed by all'."17 And all the three films were banned thereafter.

More filmmakers were under attack in endless movements, such as the 1958 campaign of "erecting red flag and uprooting white flag", the 1959 campaign of "anti-rightist opportunism", and the 1960 movement of "anti-revisionist cultural trend." It was no surprise that for a time the filmmakers created a motto for themselves, which goes "Never strive for an artistic success, but make sure of the political soundness."18 Artistic stagnation was inevitable in China.

Ironically, some films made in the wake of the ever-changing political winds ended up going through adaptations
because the winds turned so quickly that the policy widely implemented at the time the film was being conceived was shortly rejected when the film was being made. Li Shuangshuang (discussed earlier) was one such example. An episode of a communal kitchen contest was changed during the shooting as a result of the policy change.\textsuperscript{19} Another film Reservoir (1958), also through no fault of its own, did not stay long in circulation due to a big change in policy while it was being made.\textsuperscript{20}

Another thing that distinguished Chinese filmmaking from that of any other countries was that it was nationally planned, as if to match with the country's planned economy. This is shown in the following excerpts from a 1958 Beijing Review:

China's film workers, at a conference last week, decided to produce 75 feature films this year, 23 more than originally planned, in the spirit of socialist emulation now sweeping the country.... Reflecting present trends in Chinese art, a good proportion of the new films deal with the life of workers, peasants and soldiers. At least two will be widescreen; The Long March deals with the epic march of the Chinese Red Army from Jiang Xi to Yenan; New Story of an Old Soldier tells a typical story of today about a demobilized veteran who gets a tough assignment as director of a new state farm in China's northeast.... There will be historical films, such as The Opium War.... There will also be a film about the building of the spectacular Sikang-Tibet Highway and one about the creation of China's modern air force. -21-

Restrictive as the policy was, the filmmakers still
managed to produce a number of non-conventional films, such as those mentioned earlier. Soon after the Cultural Revolution started, however, all the pre-1965 Chinese films before as well as foreign films imported from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries were consigned to cold storage although most of them had been admired as revolutionary works. Jiang Qing, Madam Mao, who seized the power of Chinese cultural authority, strangely insisted that there were too many "poisonous weeds" among those films made after 1949 and that the thirties and forties films were full of "petty-bourgeois emotions." As a result, except for restricted discussions-showings of criticized films of the recent past, such as Red Sun, The Lin Family Shop, Sisters on the Stage, and A Thousand Li Against the Wind, few films were screened in this period.

To make it worse, film production was virtually brought to a standstill; in about six years (1966-1972) not a single feature film was produced in the whole country.22 Thousands of filmmakers were sent to work in the countryside along with intellectuals and artists in every other field. Some of the wrongly accused filmmakers were persecuted to death or forced to commit suicide during those catastrophic years.

In 1972-76, only a dozen or so feature-length films were made, and most of them were simply recordings of ready-made materials of the so-called "eight model revolutionary
dramas" created under Jiang Qing's personal supervision, namely White-haired Girl, Red Detachment of Women, Seeds of Revolution in Reed Marshes, Strategic Siege of Tiger Mountain, Tales of Red Lantern, Ode to Dragon River, Seaport and Azalea Mountain. These films, centering upon either current or war-time heroes, have an excessive neatness of development and style built upon characters whose "masks" rarely melt into human resemblance. The heroes have no flaws whatsoever and never make mistakes; they are a synthesis of all the human virtues that can be thought of. These highly schematized agitprop dramas were perfect examples of what was called "the combination of revolutionary realism with romantic realism," the principle instituted by the Chinese cultural officials, particularly Jiang Qing, in the Cultural Revolution. With these hyperbolic, lifeless figures on the screen, how can one expect a warm response from the audience? And imagine that they were the only few films available at the time for 800 million people, and that no matter whether the people liked them or not they were forced to watch the films repeatedly because they were as compulsory as Mao's "red book"! How devastating the Cultural Revolution was to Chinese culture! The film industry was almost dead for ten years!
CHAPTER THREE
THE REVIVAL PERIOD (1977-1980)

Based on the first two chapters' brief overview of the Chinese film tradition and the situation prior to the end of the Cultural Revolution, we are now ready to move forward to look at the revival period of Chinese filmmaking. Soon after the downfall of the "Gang of Four", the film industry, which had been turned into a "no-man's land" for almost a decade, began to recall the filmmakers back from the countryside where they had been forced to do physical labor under Mao's instructions. Many old generation filmmakers who had distinguished themselves with their work before and after 1949 were persecuted to death during the Cultural Revolution, which was essentially neither "cultural" nor a "revolution". The survivors now were eager to resume their filmmaking as they finally got the chance. But as they had just gone through those wasted years, in which they were totally denied the access to the medium and were neither able to study film nor able to watch any foreign films, the filmmakers were now literally facing the problem of refreshing themselves.

As the film studios were getting ready for production,
Chinese films made in the fifties and sixties were gradually released after being banned or locked up for a decade in order to quench the film-starved audience. A few imported foreign films that had been shelved at the same time also reappeared in the movie theater. In May 1978 the Beijing Film Institute, the only professional film training school in mainland China, began to recruit students from all over the country after it had been closed for about twelve years in the Cultural Revolution like many other educational units. Film periodicals, like Cinema Art, Popular Cinema, and Cinema Technology resumed publication in January 1979. Old film studios were resuming their normal productions; new studios, meanwhile, were being set up. The whole film industry was undergoing revival.

There was an apparent sense of relaxation everywhere in the country. Nevertheless, a lingering fear still haunted many artists, as they had experienced too many ups and downs over the past twenty-seven years in China. Some of them, however, had been more or less brainwashed by the country's art doctrines, such as: put class struggle in command; politics first, art second; and art for politics, etc... Therefore, the few movies made in 1977-78 remained somewhat politically dogmatic and artistically conventional, which aroused great dissatisfaction from the audience.

It was not until late 1978 when Deng Xiaoping officially
proclaimed the failure of the Cultural Revolution and the mistakes of Mao and also pronounced "emancipation of the mind" that Chinese cinema began to show great change. Following Deng's speech, a lively debate over the art policy that had always been restricting the country's cultural development was going on at all levels in the art circles. For the first time in nearly thirty years, the doctrines of "art for politics" and "art for socialism" were questioned publicly. Although some Party officials were insisting on the significance of political stance and social influence of the art—especially film because of its popular nature—the artists began to argue that taking art as a political instrument was "against the law of art" and "hampering the proper development of art." Some asserted that since socialism is far from perfect and still has dark sides, our art cannot hide the problems for the sake of eulogizing the positive side. Others stressed the importance of humanism and humanitarianism, the concepts that had been taboo and criticized as "petty bourgeois ideas" by the leftists in the past; they appealed for these isms' rightful place in socialist art and literature. These debates were fundamental and had a far-reaching impact on the development of art in this traditionally politics-oriented country. The results were to be seen immediately in the following years.
The first sign of breakthrough emerged in the change of subject matter in some literary works which centered upon the problems of the Cultural Revolution and the drawbacks of many other political campaigns. These works were later called "wound literature" in China. Similar subjects were soon brought onto stage and screen by the dramatists and filmmakers. Since the Cultural Revolution had as devastating an effect on one-fifth of the world's population in China as that of the holocaust on the European people, it naturally became a major subject and would remain to be so for a considerable time to come. Such films include: 

*Winds of October*, *Hope, Tear Marks, From the Silence, Distressed Heart, In a Flash*, and *Spring Rain*, etc... Yet, there was little improvement in the form of these films. The old problems of theatricalization, typecasting, and staginess were still prevailing.

After a long period of isolation from what was going on in the world's film industry, the Chinese filmmakers began to have access to a limited amount of old and modern western films. This helped them quickly realize how far behind Chinese filmmaking was lagging and how much they had to learn from western filmmakers. The deep-rooted problem of theatricality in Chinese film was the first obstacle to be removed. Bai Jinsheng raised this issue in early 1979, suggesting in his article that the Chinese filmmakers should
"discard the theatrical walking stick."¹ His suggestion was based on his observation that for a long time the Chinese tended to discuss films in almost the same way as they perceived dramas and the theater, and that filmscripts were usually written with the same structure as playscripts. Bai asserted that film, as a grown-up, independent art form, need not rely on the form of the theater anymore.² His point was vigorously responded to by many film theoreticians as well as the filmmakers. One theoretician supported the idea, saying: "It is time for the film to divorce the theater."³ Another theoretician, however, expressed disagreement, fearing that non-theatricality may cause filmmaking to slip into modernism.⁴

When these arguments were still going on, the slogan of "modernization of film language"⁵ was put forward by a middle-aged couple, Li Tuo the husband, and Zhang Nuanzин the wife, a teacher of direction at the Beijing Film Institute. They pointed out that the film language used in Chinese films were outmoded compared with the contemporary western films and with the changing pace of Chinese life in modern times.⁶ A strong repercussion evoked by these progressive ideas came not only from the theoretical side but more importantly from the filmmaking side.

Little Flower (1979, directed by Zhang Zheng, a middle aged woman), was the first to attract much attention. The
story line is very simple: a country girl called Little Flower, orphaned by the war, is searching for her brother after seventeen years of separation and finally reunites with him in a Liberation Army unit. What made the film cause quite a sensation for a time was that it employs some cinematic techniques which had rarely or never been used in any Chinese films before. Alternating black and white with color in the same film, manipulating temporal and spacial orders, and the flexible use of flashback and flashforward were something new in Chinese films, while they had long been practiced in many western films. The excitement over this progress in China was considerable; the film not only made a box-office hit, it also won the year's Hundred Flower's Award for best feature film, a national film award drawn from the general audience's ballots.

Troubled Laugh (1979, directed by Yang Yanjin and Deng Yinin) deliberately avoids dramatization in its plot. With fewer external conflicts, the film focuses much on the main character's psychological conflicts. It is about a journalist facing the dilemma of telling the truth or making up stories to cater to his boss, a follower of the "Gang of Four". The directors explored the cinematic technique in its capacity of portraying human subconscious and illusion in this film, which was the first such attempt ever made in mainland China's filmmaking and a successful one.
Another explorative director, Teng Wenjin, also made an original film in the same year, Vibrant Sounds of Life. The film is set at the time when the Chinese people spontaneously gathered at the Tiananmen Square, mourning over Zhou Enlai's death, whereas the Gang of Four attempted to harass the activity. Evolving around the fate of a music composer, the film cleverly employs the technique of counterpoint of image and sound, which was innovated by Russian filmmakers more than forty years before. It introduced something fresh into Chinese film and was widely acclaimed.

These films are not only marked by their unconventional cinematic forms, but also by their proper treatment in the context of humanism and humanitarianism, thus breaking through the previous taboo. If these films are shown today, however, it would be easy to find their flaws and unsophistication in applying the new techniques; yet their significance in pushing forward the improvement of Chinese cinema should never be underestimated. Noticing the great changes in 1979's films and the lively theoretical debates occurring at the same time, the filmmakers called the year "unforgettable 1979".

Following that year rapid changes in Chinese cinema took place one by one in a short period of time, forming a situation very much like what caused Bazin once to observe:
"Cinema is too young an art still, too involved in its own evolution to be able to indulge in repeating itself for any length of time. Five years in cinema is the equivalent of an entire literary generation." The evolution of Chinese cinema continued vigorously throughout the Post-Cultural-Revolution years, which will be further discussed in later chapters.

In the meantime, however, some problems came along with the filmmaker's ongoing endeavors to look for new forms and a new cinematic language. A major problem was that some filmmakers paid too much attention to cinematic forms and techniques at the expense of the content or meaning; many thematically mediocre, and even terrible, films were produced. Another problem was that some cinematic techniques were not used properly and looked unnatural in many Chinese films. In addition, such techniques as change of focus within a shot, freeze frame, fast motion and slow motion were overused and soon became cliches in Chinese films.

Some officials and theoreticians became worried about this situation, fearing that filmmaking was moving toward a wrong direction. Zhang Junxiang, a senior filmscript writer, brought up this issue at a national conference of film directors in 1980. He advocated that films should emphasize the "value of literature", by which he meant the ideological
meaning of the work, the typicality of the characters, the expressive method in the literature, and the rhythm, style and form. In his view, all these things should be provided and decided in the screenplays, whereas the directors ought to translate them into screen languages. His prejudice was obvious, although popular among writers. It was challenged by others, however, notably the senior film theoretician Zheng Xuelai. He said, "I really doubt whether it is appropriate to use the term 'values of literature' as a strict art concept. Any form of art has its ideological meaning as well as the function of portraying the typical; they are not limited only to literature.... I suppose we should not talk about the nature of film without considering cinematic means of expression." Contradictory as these arguments sound, the talented filmmakers assimilated the kernels of both into their filmmaking.

One example is Legend of Tianyun Mountain (1980, directed by Xie Jin, the most prestigious film director at present in mainland China). Adapted from a novel called Heroes in the Pine Woods by Lu Yanzhou, the film depicts the fate of a wrongly designated "rightist". Instead of using conventional narrative structure, it relates the story in a subjective manner, looking at the hero from different perspectives of three women characters. The film also employs the technique of counterpoint of image and sound in
contrasting the past and present, and effectively reveals the inner conflicts of the characters.

Another example is A Rainy Night in Ba Mountain (1980, directed by Wu Yonggang and Wu Yigong). Based on a short story written by Ye Nan, this film portrays eight distinctive characters, each with a different background, who happen to meet on the same boat cruising on a river winding along the Ba Mountain. Although set in a day during the Cultural Revolution, the film has no negative character or "class enemy", which was another breakthrough in mainland China's filmmaking. In a unique style, the film shows the inner world and good nature of these well-developed characters. It is a wonderful search for poetic self-expression. This film and Legend tied for the Best Feature Film of the Golden Rooster Award, China's Oscar launched in 1980.

Before 1980 there was a censorship of filmscripts in China; all the scripts had to be reviewed by the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture before they were passed for production. In 1980 the Film Bureau's censorship was abolished and since then the studios are entitled to decide whether to put a script into shooting. This action was the first step China took in reforming the organizational system of the film industry, a system that was basically modeled after the Soviet Union's starting in the early fifties.
Actually it soon became clear that the system did not fit the Chinese film industry, and a Chinese delegation was sent to study the film industries in some European countries, France, Britain, Italy, Sweden and Yugoslavia, which resulted in a detailed proposal for reform in 1957; but the reform was never implemented due to the interruption of the anti-rightist campaign. After the Cultural Revolution this issue was inevitably brought up again and the reform was undertaken gradually along with China's economic reform.

In the years between 1977 and 1980 the Chinese film industry not only recovered from the setbacks inflicted by the Cultural Revolution, but also made substantial progress. Even so, some deep-seated problems were still there, such as those mentioned earlier in this chapter, and they were also noticed by the renowned Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, who said in a speech at a Chinese filmmakers' conference in November 1979 that:

As a senior filmmaker, I would like to say I appreciate very much the achievements Chinese cinema has made so far. But there is one thing I want you to be more careful of—that is, it seems to me that the seventh art in China, the cinema, sometimes is too closely linked with and confined by two ancient sister arts, literature and theater. Of course, there is no doubt about the positive influence upon film by these two forms of art. But film should have its own independent, peculiar, genuine, dynamic, and modern language.

It looks like more Chinese have realized the problem of the relation between film and theater, but fewer have realized
the problem of the relation between film and literature. The latter will be discussed in following chapters. Furthermore, the British film critic Tony Rayns was not exaggerating by saying: "In the late 1970s, Chinese cinema was dominated by sentimental melodramas, and very few directors seemed able to broach immediate human issues."
CHAPTER FOUR
THE SEARCH FOR NEWER REALISM (1981-1983)

Not surprisingly, like the Soviet cinema in Stalin's time, the major tendency of Chinese cinema in Mao's time was socialist realism. This entailed building up characters, settings and plots from elements that may be found in many individual characters and situations, with an overall aim of creating "types" and "typical" stories. In practice, it was a restricted expression of the social-political changes in China, which have been discussed in Chapter II. This socialist realism was later modified into "combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism" and became closely associated with Madam Mao, Jiang Qing, who virtually had hardened the "type" into stereotypes till her fall in October 1976.

It is not going too far to say that the long-time dissatisfaction with socialist realism and the Jiang-style realism generated a crisis in Chinese realism filmmaking until the early 1980s, when the problem was brought to general attention following the release of quite a few films based on made-up stories or containing falsified details to
the extent of being absurd.

For instance, *The Second Handshake* (1980, directed by Dong Kena) is a fictitious story about a couple of university graduates who fall in love but cannot get married because of the father's arrangement for the young man to marry another woman. After a gap of thirty years, the two old lovers meet again but the woman is disappointed to find out that the man has not kept his promise to her and married the woman his father selected for him. Because of the filmmaker's ignorance of life in America, many details depicting the woman's life in America are unnatural, and aroused negative responses from the American audience when it was shown in California.¹ Fabricated plots and details are rampant in such films as *Mysterious Buddha* (1980, directed by Xie Hong), *Love Song in Quiet Valley* (1981, co-directed by Wu Guojiang and Huang Yanen), *Hidden Shadow* (1981, co-directed by Guo Baochang and Huang Ling), *Flight Symphony* (1981, directed by Li Wenhu), *Love Story in Lu Mountains* (1980, directed by Huang Zumo), and many others.

Chinese audiences became irritated by such fabricated films and they wrote in prompt response to a Chinese national newspaper's solicitation of criticisms on those films. The newspaper in the end listed fifty examples of fabrications in a summary article of the audience's comments.² Meanwhile, a search for realism began to gain
force among the Chinese filmmakers, while articles emphasizing the significance of realism poured in from almost every film magazine, forming a consensus that a major issue in Chinese cinema was to narrow the gap between film and reality and to move back to realism. The realism here, notably, was not exactly the same as the earlier socialist realism, and was entirely different from the Jiang-type realism. It was toward a newer realism—one that captures the social reality of the country and at the same time utilizes the proper cinematic form and techniques, such as deep-focus and long take.

Coinciding with this search for realism, the western film theories developed by Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer between the fifties and sixties were first translated and introduced into China. The Chinese filmmakers who were so quick and eager to accept the so-called new forms of expression used in foreign films learned from Bazin's What is Cinema? the new mode of expression "deep-focus" and "long take" and applied them to their filmmaking.

The year of 1981 witnessed a sharp increase in realism and social criticism in mainland Chinese movies. At least three remarkable films made in that year signaled the trend: Neighbors, Sha Ou, and Love-Forsaken Corner, all of which were made by middle-aged directors. Drawn from Ma Lin's screenplay called Kitchen Symphony Music, Neighbors (1981)
centers upon the prevailing housing shortage in big cities, a sensitive issue in China at the time. Set in a university dorm inhabited by families of the faculty and staff, one of whom is a retired vice-president of the university, the film provides a natural and intimate look at the daily life of the urban people, and through it reveals the complex clashes between the ordinary people and the privileged officials and bureaucrats. The director Zheng Dongtian, a professional lecturer at the Beijing Film Institute, attempted to make this film true to life in every aspect with the belief that only by doing so could the film be made convincing and strike a chord in the hearts of the audience. Instead of casting the characters with the beauties, still a common practice in China, the director deliberately chose a group of actors who have in them the same traits as those of the characters. In only 440 shots in all, the film frequently uses long takes, tracking, and panoramic shots to achieve a more realistic effect, imitating the means used in the forties Chinese realism films and the post-war Italian neo-realism films.³ The director paid a lot of attention to the details in the set, minimized the use of make-up, and employed the natural source of lighting. To break with the cliche of incorporating a theme song into almost every film, this film includes only one piece of music, which comes from a radio in a scene towards the end of the film. The
filmmakers also managed to make the ambient sound more authentic, although it was dubbed, and not achieved through synchronization, a technical problem in China which has yet to be solved. Treated with uncommon realism, the film enjoyed favorable responses from both the general audience and film critics, and was the winner of that year's Golden Rooster Award for best feature film.

Made with an attempt to look for real cinema art and cinematic means of expression, Sha Ou (1981) is another important film that has pushed the Chinese cinema a step forward. The director Zhang Nuanxin who, along with her husband Li Tuo, started a debate not long before by putting out the slogan of "modernization of the cinematic language," co-wrote the film script with Li again, with a determination to put her reformist idea into practice even though it was going to be her first film. Through the portrayal of a woman volleyball player called Sha Ou, who cherishes a goal of winning an international championship and dedicates herself to improving China's volleyball team despite her personal misfortunes, the film was intended to signify the spiritual state of the Chinese people after so many social disorders. Aside from its ideological meaning, the film is most noteworthy for its consciously cinematic treatment. The director, who started her film training at the Beijing Film Institute in the late fifties coinciding with the surge
of the French New Wave, displayed both the New Wave imprint and her courageous creativity in this personally stamped film. With the variant usage of deep-focus, moving camera, various angles and hidden camera, the dynamic film captures the vigorous life of young sportswomen. Departing from the conventional centralized framing in Chinese films, in which heroes and heroines are always placed at the center of a shot while the camera often unnecessarily and invariably moves with the action of the central figure, this film innovatively practices decentralized framing to achieve a less manipulative but more natural way of seeing. The freshness and realistic effect of the film was also enhanced by the director's careful handling of the leading actress, who was picked from among professional volleyball players and has a less beautiful face but the right temperament for the character. The film is purposely shot entirely on location for both the interior and exterior scenes, and natural lighting is used as much as possible. Sound effects too are creatively used in the narrative structure. This free-of-cliche film helped to shorten the gap between the Chinese cinema and the world cinema, and was highly acclaimed in China. Zhang Nuanxin's successful debut feature proved her own statement: "Cinema is neither a record of theater, nor a passive translation of literature or poetry... Cinema is cinema... and must be approached
with cinematic means."

Set in a backward, poverty-stricken rural village, *Love-Forsaken Corner* (1981, co-directed by Zhang Qi and Li Yalin) is a bleak account of marriage tragedies taking place in socialist China, spanning almost 30 years from 1949 to 1978. Adapted by Zhang Xuan from his own novella of the same title, the film bravely provides glimpses of real poverty and disturbing scenes of tragedy-bound arranged marriages, resulting from the Chinese Communist Party's leftist policies in rural areas. An emotionally dramatic story, the film remarkably uses a lot of details to illustrate its central message. It also creates a few well-developed characters, young and old. However, this otherwise powerful realistic film loses some of its effect toward the end, leaving an impression of a hasty solution to the compound problem under the current rural policy, thus falling back into a conventional formula -- ending the story with a bright future, which is apparently a remnant from the socialist realism, especially the "romantic realism". Still, the film is realistic, although more in its content than in its form. Actually the film benefited much from the script, which won the writer the 1981 Golden Rooster Award for best scriptwriter.

The realism trend was further reinforced by many films to follow. *When One Enters Middle Age* (1982, co-directed by
Wang Qimin and Sun Yu) focuses upon the current problem of the middle-aged intellectuals, who have become the major working force yet their incomes remain the same as they were ten years before and their living conditions have not been improved much. Wishfulness (1982, directed by Huang Jianzhong) is an anti-hero story about a kind-hearted janitor working at a middle school, who has a secret romance with the daughter of a wealthy official of the late Qing Dynasty. A Village in a City (1982, directed by Teng Wenjin) portrays a model woman worker who, being kept at a distance by most of the fellow workers, finds herself attracted to a young worker generally considered indecent because of his past mistakes. A Lawyer in Apprenticeship (1982, directed by Han XiaoLei) deals with a lawsuit as well as a group of graduating law students who have different goals for their future. Under the Bridge (1983, directed by Bai Chen) openly brings up the problem of unemployment and the previously taboo subject of the unwed mother who is, in this case, a victim of the Cultural Revolution. Ward No. 6 (1983) looks at various attitudes towards life among contemporary youth; A Story that Should Not Have Happened (1983) explores the problem that some rural Communist Party members lose their prestige because of their wrongdoings and bureaucratic errors. Shunned by the farmers away from their spontaneously organized work teams, the Party members
realize that they must modify themselves before they can regain the farmers' confidence. *Our Fields* (1983, directed by Xie Fei) also deals with the inner world of contemporary youth by looking back at their experiences on farms during the Cultural Revolution. *Sunset Street* (1983, directed by Wang Haowei) is a "slice of life" movie like *Neighbors*, portraying vividly a group of urban residents with their distinctive characters. *Sound of the Village* (1983, directed by Hu Bingliu) shows that a hidden yoke of traditional ethic codes still affects today's rural family relationships. It provides a natural and intimate look at the daily life of a truly loving couple in the countryside.

All of these films draw their raw materials from China's present and past social realities; many of them are very critical on the darker side of the society. Quite a few of them also utilize proper cinematic approaches to treat the subjects. Impressive sequences achieved with deep-focus, long takes, and hidden camera can be found in *Wishfulness, A Village in a City, A Lawyer in Apprenticeship, Our Fields, Sunset Street,* and *Sound of the Village.* The last one, particularly, has only a little over 300 shots in the whole film, but the use of long takes matches well with the slow pace and lyrical style of this stunningly beautiful film, winner of the 1983 best feature film of Golden Rooster Award. The film is also notable for its original use of
sound track in both enhancing the mood and relating the story, a marvelous edge on most of the Chinese films, which are often weak on this point.

Almost all the new realism films were well received by the popular audience; however, some of them suffered negative critical responses. *Love-Forsaken Corner* was seen by a couple of critics as being too dark and critical of the socialist China, saying "it looks as if the film was picturing the old China". Some, including the prestigious film theoretician Zheng Xuelai, criticized *Wishfulness* for its "non-typical characters", "ambiguous meaning" and "pursuit of formalism". *A Village in a City* was also questioned for its "social effect" since it treats the heroine as being isolated by most workers and does not provide a solution to the problem. Strangely, there were hardly any counterarguments against these dogmatic comments, which are basically ideological or sociological criticism—the dominant, if not the single, form of film criticism in China. This kind of criticism is extremely picky on themes and contents, disregarding the fact that many films are true reflections of the social realities, whereas it fails to take into account the nature of art and aesthetic experience.

To make it worse, some remnant leftist ideas, especially those among the officials, are still a fetter to the
creative artists. One case in point is the banning of *Sun and People* (1981, directed by Peng Ning), a very powerful and expressively stunning film about the tragic experiences of a few artists and intellectuals in the political upheavals of the past two decades in China. Based on Bai Hua's novelette titled *Bitter Love* and co-scripted by him and the middle-aged director, the film is unprecedently bold in explicit as well as implicate exposure of the problems of inhumanity, the religion-like personal cult, the mistakes of the late Chairman Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party. It expresses the patriotic intellectuals' feelings, especially their doubts about the tragedy-linked policies of China. Thematically, the film is immensely thought-provoking; structurally, it is highly expressive and imaginative. The cinematography in this film is forceful, precise and often strikingly beautiful. The explorative adoption of the cinematic means of manipulating the spacial and temporal orders, intercutting of the flashback, illusion and present time, and displaced diegetic sound make the film all the more effective. The film does have some flaws, such as incorporating fabricated details to illustrate the painter's popularity in America before he returns to China. But on the whole it is an extraordinary film. Nevertheless, the film was accused by the officials as "anti-Party", "anti-socialist China" and "a reflection of the current
trend of bourgeoisie Liberalism", and was banned before its public release. Bai Hua was severely criticized. It might be interesting to note that the original novelette *Bitter Love*, published in a national literature magazine two years earlier, had never been criticized before it was turned into a movie. This was either because cinema is considered to be more influential than literature or because the officials would not bother to spend time in reading. No wonder in China cinema in a sense often lags behind the development of literature, fine arts and music! Cinema is too big a target to be overlooked by the officials. This incident has intimidated other filmmakers as well. The ups and downs around the production of *When One Enters Middle Age* was more evidence of the leftist influence.

Along with the growing realism, other genre films were also making progress, such as comedies, historical epic films, kung-fu films, musicals, and films based on classical Chinese literature. Outstanding comedies include *In-Laws* (1981, directed by Zhao Huanzhang), *Laugher at Moon Bay* (1981, directed by Xu Suling), *Endless Stream of Trucks and Carriages* (1981, directed by Lu Ren) and *Nui Baisui* (1983, directed by Zhao Huanzhang), all drawing their subjects from the present rural life, and all made box-office hits in both urban and rural areas.

*Xian Incident* (1981, directed by Cheng Yin) and *Liao
Zhongkai (1983) are historical reconstruction films, remarkable for avoiding the norms in dealing with historical subjects and figures. Chiang Kai-shek and other Kuomintang generals in Xi'an Incident are not caricatured as idiots and villains as they appear in other films. The portrayal of them as lifelike complex figures, coupled with a faithful treatment of the historical facts, make the film more convincing. Yet the portrayal of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in the film is contrastingly weak and unnatural.

Two wonderful films adapted from classical novels by Lao She, a prominent Chinese writer, were made in 1982 by a couple of senior directors, Ling Zifeng and Xie Tian. Both are among China's "third generation" filmmakers who generally distinguished themselves in the fifties and sixties. (The pioneer filmmakers in the silent movie period were the "first generation"; the thirties and forties filmmakers were the "second generation".) Ling Zifeng's Rickshaw Boy, which had been a dream project of Chinese-American cinematographer James Wong Howe, captures the flavor of the thirties life in Beijing through an elaborate work on the set, props, costumes, behavior, and every element of the mise-en-scene. The actress Siqin Gaowa is in her finest performance in the film, which won her a Golden Rooster best actress award. Xie Tian's Tea House is noted for its cast of excellent stage actors who proved their
ability for a more subtle style of acting in front of the camera.

Among the flux of kung-fu films, Wu Lin Zhi (1983) outshines the others not only for its amazingly skillful martial arts but also for its fine portrayal of the characters. Two musicals on contemporary subjects, Bright Moon over the Sea (1983) and The Girl who is Not a Dancer (1983) are also noteworthy as they represent a new genre film in China.

Coinciding with the realism trend in 1981-83 was the emergence of some other original films which are likewise worthy of special attention. Small Street (1981, directed by Yang Yanjin), a uniquely structured film, opens with the director Zhong (acted by Yang Yanjin) interviewing the leading character Xia. It evolves as Xia recalls his encounter and friendship with a girl called Yu, who suffers a great deal after her parents are imprisoned by the leftists in the Cultural Revolution. Xia loses contact with Yu after he becomes blind due to the red guard's beating of him on the face when he tries to protect Yu from being humiliated, and has never met her again since then. The film ends with the directors' three different assumptions of what has become of her in the past few years. The film received warm responses from the urban audience. The film director acknowledged later that his inspiration was sparked
from reading modern western literature.

Another unconventional film, *Awakening* (1981, directed by Teng Wenjin), also aroused great interest among the young urban audience because they found the young protagonist identifiable to them. Breaking from the linear narrative structure, the film deals with a number of issues: the reformist Tian Dan, like many other young people with innovative ideas, is often frustrated by the bureaucracies above; as one of a new generation, Tian has his own independent thinking and sense of values, and is repulsed by his father's marriage arrangements; the generation gap is there and sometimes can become a clash. The young protagonist is not a positive "type" hero, he has weaknesses; whereas the conservative father is not a negative "type" character, but has many strong points. In a word, the film features a few characters who are less predictable and more like life. And with an open ending, it invites the audience to think for themselves. The creative effort of the filmmaker, however, was not fully appreciated by some of the audience and critics, who criticized the film as "unintelligible" and "obscuring the right and wrong". Such comments are just one example of the traditional way of thinking among many Chinese, by which they see everything as either good or bad and there seems to be nothing in between. To a certain extent the problem can be attributed to being
exposed to too many "types" and the "typecasting", which made many Chinese too simple-minded. Hopefully this film will be reevaluated someday and given its rightful credit.

As a departure from the dialogue-occupied Chinese films, Friendly Strangers (1982, directed by Xu Lei) offers a rare look of subtle style of acting by the young actress Li Ling, who is among the best of Chinese young actors. Li is in the role of a wrongly accused defendant, a victim of the Cultural Revolution. She speaks not a single word in the first half of the movie, though the apprehensive and distrustful look in her eyes speaks volumes when she is approached by two strangers sitting opposite to her in a passenger train heading to southern China. The film is extraordinary in conjuring up the specific social ambience from the wispiest material—looks and glances, subtle movements and behavior, flashbacks and dreams—rather than relying on any complexities of plot development. This film was highly praised in an international film festival but was given a cold shoulder by many Chinese audiences since the film is less dramatic than most of the Chinese films they usually see.

Memories of Old Beijing (1982, directed by Wu Yigong) is an excellent film with an original poetic style. Drawn from a novel written by Lin Haiyin, a Taiwan woman writer born in Beijing, the film employs a prose-like narrative structure
to express the writer's nostalgic feeling of her early life in south Beijing. Set in a twenties urban community, it looks at the dismal city life and people through the eyes of a naive little girl called Ying Zi. Three stories with no causal relations to one another are unfolded one by one along with Ying Zi's growing up, each displaying a different facet of the time and society. With a balanced tempo and rhythm as well as expressive visual images, the film subtly expresses a complex feeling toward the transition of the temporal and cultural changes in China at that time. One critic regarded it as the "only exquisite work of art since the downfall of the 'Gang of Four'". The film won Wu Yigong the laurel of 1982's best director of the Golden Rooster Award.

It is clear that the years of 1979-83 saw quite a few fresh-looking new films which have more or less broken the norms in conventional Chinese films. Original as the films are, they have plenty of room for improvement compared with more sophisticated western films; but nonetheless they have a far-reaching impact for the future. In this regard Semsel made an accurate comment: "Though often to the eyes of the western film audience they lack maturity and contain technical and formal flaws, most of these productions exhibit the spiritual energies and create exuberance which is, I believe, a glimpse into things to come."
It is also noteworthy that almost all the innovative films discussed above were made by middle-aged, or the "fourth generation" filmmakers, who were mostly trained at the Beijing Film Institute and graduated not long before the Cultural Revolution. A generation denied, once given the chance, had many things to say and express; they quickly became the most energetic group of filmmakers during this period. The "fourth generation" directors include: Zhang Nuanxin (director of *Sha Ou*), Zhang Zheng (*Little Flower*), Teng Wenjin (*Vibrant Sound of Life, Awakening* and *A Village in a City*), Yang Yanjin (*Troubled Laugh* and *Small Street*), Wu Yigong (*Rainy Night in the Ba Mountains*), Xie Fei (*Our Fields*), Wang Haowei (*Sunset Street*), Huang Jianzhong (*Wishfulness*), Hu Bingliu (*Sound of the Village*), Han Xiaolei (*A Lawyer in Apprenticeship*), Peng Ning (*Sun and People*), Xu Lei (*Friendly Strangers*), and many others. Zhang Nuanxin, Zhang Zheng and Wang Haowei are women directors. The "fourth generation" filmmakers beat a new path for Chinese filmmaking, and their explorative works showed signs of the future of Chinese cinema. Yet they were soon to be challenged by a younger generation.

Throughout these years theoretical debates also played an important part. Unlike the situation in America where many filmmakers care little about what the theoreticians say, most Chinese filmmakers do take film theories seriously and
try to apply them in practice. Some even participate in the theoretical debates through their own writings, such as Zhang Nuanxin, Zheng Dongtian, and Huang Jianzhong. By and large, the Chinese attach much importance to theoretical study in almost every field, including literature, art and film. But for some reason Chinese research of cinematic theory is still in a premature stage: China has not yet developed its own film theory despite its long film history; the study of western film theories generally remains at the level of the fifties and sixties. Like most film theoreticians elsewhere in the world, the Chinese film theoreticians or scholar-translators, to be more exact, have the tendency to accept one or two types of theories and reject the others, being limited by their own prejudices and dogmatic thinking. Except for Eisenstein, Bazin and Kracauer's books on film theories, few other western theoretical works, especially the more current ones, have been translated into Chinese. Consequently, what was available to the Chinese filmmakers and what tendencies the Chinese theoreticians had in introducing the western film theories inevitably affected the country's filmmaking. The realism film trend coinciding with the learning of the film theories developed by Bazin and Kracauer had indeed a positive effect on Chinese filmmaking. Yet some people therefore concluded that realism is the highest goal as well
as the vital criterion for Chinese cinema;\textsuperscript{14} others took Bazin and Kracauer's theories as representatives of modern cinematic concepts.\textsuperscript{15} The first idea became quite popular, especially among the officials, and could have limited the diversity of Chinese cinema had the filmmakers conformed to it without any exceptions.

It is evident that in this period the theoretical debates in the film circle benefited China's filmmaking to a certain extent. Nevertheless, some theoretical arguments also caused confusion and resulted in negative influences upon filmmaking. For example, the making of the great Chinese writer Lu Xun's \textit{Stories of Ah Q} (1981, directed by Qin Fan) into a film was a flop even though the original work has a strong "value of literature". Instead of using cinematic means to express the writer's thinking, the film clumsily translates the literature onto the screen. \textit{When One Enters Middle Age} suffers the similar problem although the original novelette won a national literature award. The adaption of another one of Lu Xun's stories, \textit{Repentance} (1981, directed by Shui Hua), is also workman-like, using a high proportion of the leading character's introspective voice to narrate most of the film. Semsel's criticism on this situation was to the point:

That most Chinese feature films are based on literary works will surprise no one in the West where the commercial industry has for many years regularly looted book racks of
available fiction as a short-cut to saleable ideas. What is noteworthy, though, is that most Chinese regard film more as a vehicle for literature than as an art in itself. Understanding this is essential to understanding Chinese film. For the Chinese, story comes first, whether it be in novel, short story, drama, or film. All other aspects of a medium are subordinate, of lesser value. Film as an individual art has not yet been fully recognized by practitioners in the field any more than it has been by the government leadership. 16

Therefore, it is no surprise that a professional seminar on the subject of adaptation of literary works into films emphasized the adaptation's faithfulness to original works, opposing the idea that filmmakers may take literary works as raw materials and turn them into something new. Even a film as well-acclaimed as Tea House has also been criticized for deviating from Lao She's writing. There have been fewer studies, however, on the problem that some films, due to their fidelity to the original works, have damaged their cinematic qualities. The problem might derive from, among other things, the state of contemporary Chinese literature and the screenplay, which are often filled with dialogue, stories, descriptions of the character's faces and actions, but little description of the milieu. Many of the modern literary works contain too few of the necessary qualities that can be turned into wonderful visual-audio art; while hundreds of screenplays simply read like dialogue-dominated plays with little screen value. There is, however, an
unexplored wealth of classical Chinese literature, in which one can easily find fine passages of description that are so sensuous as to make the reader feel what the characters experience in the stories. But many Chinese scriptwriters have not learned much from this cultural heritage except the way of building dramatic conflicts.

As with the case of the debate over "values of literature", the notion of "nationalization of Chinese cinema" has never been clearly defined and therefore has aroused many disputes. The rebuttal argued that cinematic language is virtually international, so the "nationalization of Chinese cinema" does not stand; and so long as a Chinese film reflects the life, custom and culture of the Chinese, the film is national.\textsuperscript{17} The favorable side asserted that the idea of "nationalization" held true since there was a flood of Chinese films imitating western lifestyles as well as the cinematic language, and that Chinese cinema should assimilate Chinese traditional aesthetics from other arts such as classical paintings and poems, which are usually implicit and suggestive rather than explicit and straightforward.\textsuperscript{18} Many such arguments are problematic and confusing in themselves, and after constant debate for a few years no satisfactory conclusions have yet been drawn.

Over this period of time, another major step was taken in reforming the managerial system of China's film industry.
Under the new system, the film studios have begun to enjoy more economic freedom— they receive a share of the box-office profits from their productions rather than surrendering the whole sum to the single national distributor, the China Film Distribution Corporation. While no longer entirely funded by the state, the studios now have to finance with production from their own profits. By the same token, they have to assume the responsibility for their own losses, which used to be covered by the state.¹⁹ Now that the economic law has started to govern the film industry as it does in most other Chinese enterprises, the filmmakers are better motivated to increase film production. In 1981 the national feature film production went beyond 100 for the first time in Chinese film history, and thereafter, the annual output remains between 120 and 140.²⁰ However, like China's on-going economic reform bearing with it some unpleasant side-effects, the reform in the film industry has also given rise to some unexpected problems, which will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE
A NEW CREATIVE ERA (1984-1986)

Seen within a larger context—the continuous economic reform and open-door policy, the relaxed political situation and the development of the literature and arts that make up the all-around Chinese Reform Movement—the filmmakers were in an unprecedented social climate to exert their creative efforts. The time was ripe for a revolution. The courageous "fourth generation" filmmakers made the initial breakthrough and paved the way for new development of Chinese cinema. Greater changes were taking place in 1984, a year in which a good number of creative films were made by both the middle-aged and senior filmmakers, and more importantly some formally more radical works were turned out by a group of young filmmakers, mostly in their early thirties.

These young filmmakers, recognized as the "fifth generation", were almost all among the first batch of graduates from the Beijing Film Institute after the Cultural Revolution.¹ They won their entrance into the institute in 1978 through a highly competitive examination—only 153 people were accepted out of thousands of applicants. They
valued their four years of comprehensive study, which covered every aspect of filmmaking as well as aesthetics, world history of the arts, western film history and two years' of filmmaking practice. They saw as many films as they could: Chinese films from the thirties to fifties, the foreign classics and contemporary films, especially those made in the United States, Soviet Union, France, Italy and Britain. They were also encouraged much by the recent films made by the "fourth generation" filmmakers, many of whom were their teachers at the institute and influenced the students with their ideas. It was during these school years that they began to form their idea of setting off a revolution in Chinese cinema. According to Chen Kaige, a leading figure of the "fifth generation", every one of his fellow students was utterly indifferent to the Chinese cinema that he or she had grown up with, and all shared a deep conviction that a radical personal intervention was the only strategy that could release Chinese filmmaking from its orthodox mode; and they did.

These young talents demonstrated their creativity even before their graduation. Their school projects, such as Our Field, Our Corner and We Are Still Young are outstanding. Our Field was soon expanded into a full-length feature film by the president of the institute, Xie Fei. We Are Still Young caught the attention of Tony Rayns, a British film
critic who was visiting the institute in 1983. In an article in *Sight and Sound* magazine Rayns predicted: "If there is ever a 'new wave' in mainland cinema, then this will be the generation that breaks it."³ In a later article, he acclaimed: "It's gratifying to report that the wave has broken: the first generation of post-Cultural Revolution graduates from the Institute have now made their first features, and they are achieving a distinctively new kind of Chinese cinema."⁴

Four debut features made by these young graduates in the year of 1984 marked the beginning of this "new wave". The first one was *One and Eight* (directed by Zhang Junzhao), but unfortunately it has been somewhat ignored by Chinese film critics. The film is unique in many ways. Without a ready-made script, the film was drawn from a posthumous poem of the late poet, Guo Xiaochuan. It depicts nine prisoners in the custody of a small group of communist soldiers struggling to break through Japanese troop's encirclement. Eight of the prisoners are either Kuomintang soldiers, defectors or spies; but one of them is a communist army officer falsely accused of being a spy. This film looks at the Kuomintang soldiers from an original humanistic point of view, providing images of them fighting against the Japanese troops. The most shocking scene, however, is at the end of the film in which one Kuomintang soldier, seeing the
communist army nurse being surrounded by five Japanese soldiers in an attempt to assault her, raises his gun and shoots the nurse with the only bullet left in his gun and he is instantly killed by the Japanese.

But the most remarkable thing of this film is the brilliant camera work done by Zhang Yimo, also a graduate from the film institute. The stunning visual images were so fresh to Chinese filmgoers; with every single shot being well-composed, each shot is a marvelous picture in and of itself. The overall lighting is uncommonly beautiful; and the most innovative of all is the conscious use of off-screen space and decentralized compositions. Each actor has a distinctive face, offsetting the usual problem caused by the armymen's indistinctive uniforms. Except for an a cappella chorus repeated at different times, the film has no music.

Viewers of the film preview were overwhelmed by this shining maiden work. Yet reproaches, such as "defeatism" and "unreal" poured in from someone higher up. The film was forced to be revised before it was allowed to be released. More than seventy shots were ordered cut or reshot. The young director reluctantly compromised under high pressure. The cinematographer, Zhang Yimo, was deeply hurt when he saw the final scene of the film was altered into a cliche: the Kuomintang soldier magically kills all of the Japanese
soldiers in a flash of a second, and survives the bloody shooting along with the nurse. As a result of this change, the powerful effect of the original has been considerably subdued. Even so, the film was not passed for release until a year after it was finished, and it has never been allowed outside the country for overseas screening although it deserves to be more widely known. Like all new generations in any artistic context, the young Chinese filmmakers had to overcome resistance from the conservatives. But their creative vitality could not be easily throttled.

Shortly afterwards the second unorthodox film Yellow Earth (1984, directed by Chen Kaige, also with Zhang Yimo as the cameraman) was made. This film, the most widely acclaimed of the "fifth generation" works, breaks the norm of dramatic and complete plot-line in Chinese cinema. Employing a minimal story-line, the film, adapted from a prose work, delineates the encounter and relationship between a communist soldier and a poor family of three: a widower farmer, his daughter and son. The soldier is sent from the Communist base in Yan'an to the arid northern part of Shannxi Province in 1939 to collect folk songs for possible adaptation as revolutionary songs. With its unusual minimal dialogue and plot line, the film seems to tell us little. Yet the strong message lies in its impressive images, settings, and particularly the elements of nature. For the
first time in Chinese films, nature plays an important role, a role that shows the close tie between the land, the Yellow River and the people, and how nature affects the local people's life and customs. During a pre-production survey of the location on Loess Plateau, the filmmakers' creative impulse was triggered. The region around the Yellow River is where the Chinese civilization was born in prehistoric times; the grave of the legendary first emperor, Xuanyuan, is supposed to be in the hills. The region is the cradle of the Chinese race and culture. The Yellow River has both nurtured the life and brought disasters to the people over thousands of years. This phenomenological view may have hit them only by accident, but the filmmakers effectively drove their point home in this uncommon, expressive film. The film gives the viewer a complex feeling: on the one hand, one is amazed by the exquisitely beautiful scenes of the hilly land and tranquil river, and impressed by the simple and diligent farmers; on the other hand, one is struck by the barrenness of the land, the sheer poverty of the people, the unpleasant images of the obtrusive, ignorant and backward farmers which are unfortunately not too different from the present day farmers in some parts of the country. The deliberately long takes achieved with an immobile camera force the viewer to ponder over every image for the meaning behind it. The film is also characterized
by a large array of poetic folk ballads. *Yellow Earth* is more expressive than realistic despite its truthful images, and is a far cry from the conventional films. Just as Rayns commented:

"It speaks a language new to Chinese Cinema, a language of muted colors, glances, unspoken thoughts, shadows and delicately modulated rhythms. The images derive from the tradition of Shaanxi peasant painting, just as the rhythms (alternatly languorous and hectic) derive from the tempos of rural life." -7-

In another review he continued:

"There is next to no camera movement; nearly everything is shot in natural light; and the color palette is carefully restricted. Individual shots are scrupulously framed to link the characters with the land and the elements..., the fact that these images have palpable roots in folk culture evidences the filmmakers' determination to forge a distinctively Chinese film language, with no obvious debt to either Western or previous Chinese cinema." -8-

The excellent work done by the non-conformist director Chen Kaige in his debut film is apparent. Meanwhile, the credit goes as much to the cinematographer Zhang Yimo as to the director. Zhang, born and raised in the same region, captured the sheer natural beauty of the scene through his careful handling of the camera and enhanced the film's artistic value, which won him the 1984 Golden Rooster Award for best cinematography.

When it was shown at the 19th Hong Kong Film Festival, the film aroused an immediate sensation and won an award. A
critic wrote in Hong Kong's Youth Weekly: "I was very much surprised to see *Yellow Earth* at the Festival. I am pleased to know that China has made a film of such quality, reaching an exceptionally high level in screenwriting, directing, acting, and cinematography. It demands that I rethink my old ideas about Chinese films." Since then the film has been invited to participate in a number of international film festivals, and obtained four awards separately in France, Switzerland, Britain and the United States.

The film, however, was frowned upon by Chinese officials who saw it as "catering to the tastes of western viewers, who are curious about the backwardness of China." Yet the momentous impact of this film cannot be diminished. Rayn's comment is right: "*Yellow Earth* has given Chinese cinema the shake-up it has needed for decades. It is also one of the very few first features of the 1980s that has broken new ground."

*Secret Decree* (1984, directed by Wu Ziniu) is another non-traditional film. Wu accepted this assigned project in order to gain experience and was required to finish the production in a few months. The original script, however, was hopelessly mediocre and cliche, posing difficulties for the young director. The film is based on a 1939 historical event, in which Chiang Kai-shek issued a secret decree to the Kuomintang troops to "ally with the Japanese and fight
against the communists", but the written decree fell into the hands of the communists. Although dealing with such a routine wartime thriller, Wu consciously tried to make the film different and to generate something new. Having little awareness of the event, he looked into piles of historical records on the subject and talked to many old people before forming an idea of how to recreate the historical milieu. He made substantial changes to the script and made the first attempt to screen the scene of Kuomintang soldiers providing relief to the starving people in a refugee camp. Surpassing previous Chinese thrillers, the film captures the atmosphere of the time and makes the audience see more than a single event. The film is also notable for its unusual cinematography achieved by Wu's fellow student, Zhang Li, who helped to make the film visually impressive and who, with Wu, brought an artistic credibility to this otherwise conventional film.

Later in that same year, another "fifth generation" director, Tian Zhuangzhuang, completed his "new wave" widescreen color film, On the Hunting Ground. This Nanook-of-the-North-like depiction of the Mongolian herdsman's ritualistic life and hunt on the Inner Mongolian prairie as well as their ancient customs passed down from the 12th century Genghis Khan is breathtaking from the very beginning. Instead of using a conventional establishing
shot, the film opens with close-ups of horses and herdsman, and soon turns into a stimulating scene of shooting antelopes and deers. Similar to a piece of music, the rhythmic film variably contrasts the violence of the hunt with the tranquility of the Mongolian existence on the beautiful grassland. The innovative superimposition of the sun and moon in the same picture is very poetic. The cinematographer-turned director and his cameramen of the film, Lu He and Hou Yong, all graduates from the institute, made this film visually exciting despite its diminished plot. Contrary to the stationary shooting extensively used in Yellow Earth, this film has many scenes shot with tracking, panning, zooming in and out of the long-focus lens, and even 360 degree circling around an object. Sometimes the cameramen shot a hunting scene by carrying the camera on horseback while chasing the animals amid the flock of herders, which makes the audience feel involved in the action too. Unlike the usual Chinese minority films made by the majority Han people, all roles are played by non-actor local Mongolians, who speak their own language with an overlapping narrator's voice interpreting their dialogues. Deep-focus and long takes are employed in most of the scenes to achieve a truthful effect close to a documentary. After watching this film, Joris Ivens acclaimed: "Chinese film has great hope!" Many Chinese viewers were virtually stunned
by it, exclaiming: "How on earth can a movie be made like this?"\textsuperscript{13}

Truly! The "fifth generation" filmmakers' debut films are extremely different from any Chinese films made previously. The young radicals consciously broke almost all the norms, especially in film form, with the intention of bringing about a more drastic change in Chinese cinema. The result was no less than an earthquake, and the aftershock was still noticable after a couple of years. The "fourth generation" filmmakers were as pleased as surprised to see the younger generation's outstanding works, though in the meantime they felt a kind of pressure and push from behind. The "third generation" realized the gap between them and the young successors. The theoreticians and critics were at a loss; they simply could not find any proper terms in western theoretical writings which would classify these new films into whatever "isms". These films are not copies of any kind of western films; they are very Chinese. Neither are they identical to their Chinese predecessors' films. They are an entirely new kind of Chinese film. They are also quite distinctive from each other. The few western film scholars who were lucky enough to see these films in China immediately recognized their significance. As George Semsel put it: "These filmmakers are China's avant-gardes. Their work deserves our serious contemplation."\textsuperscript{14}
But what about the Chinese audience? What were their responses to these films? Regretfully, for several months after their release, most people did not even know of them, let alone go to see them. This strange situation might have stemmed from several reasons: first, the officials of the Film Bureau disliked these films and so there was little publicity about them; second, there were few reviews of them as the critics did not know what to say about them; third, the bureaucrats of the distribution company underestimated the potential of the film market, and fewer copies of these film were made; fourth, the managers of movie theaters did not expect the audience to like these films, and so rather than lose money they did not run them or ran them for only a few shows.

Only after word came from Hong Kong that Yellow Earth was highly acclaimed by the Hong Kong audiences and critics alike were these films given wider publicity and distribution in mainland China. Based on this instance, people in Shanghai suggested that a special movie theatre be set up to screen these "explorative" new films, like Yellow Earth, to the intellectuals and young audience who might better appreciate them. As they wished, a special theatre soon appeared in that most populous city in China. The initial two films, Yellow Earth and At the Beach, were shown there to packed houses for several weeks.
At the Beach (1984), although directed by a "fourth generation" director, Teng Wenjin, is also seen as an "explorative film", a term used by the Chinese to describe those experimental films or films that are radically different from mainstream films. The most prolific and creative director among his own generation, Teng made this aesthetically significant film, as novel as the "fifth generation" films emerging almost simultaneously. Yet unlike Yellow Earth and One and Eight, which deal with history, Teng's film focuses on the present. Set in a conflict between a new born industrial city and a traditional fishing village, the film is a deep exploration of the changes China is undergoing, a meditation on values and thinking, and on the inter-relation of the old and new. At a time when China is enthusiastically trying to modernize the country, At the Beach questions the situation with a complex feeling and leaves the questions open for viewers' contemplation. The new factory symbolizes progress and civilization, but with it comes the problems of alienation of people, selfishness and pollution; the old fishing village symbolizes backwardness and feudalistic tradition, but with it remains the good things of harmonious existence with nature, peacefulness and kindness of people. The film does not have much story or drama, neither does it preach to the audience as most Chinese films on contemporary subjects
do. But through a cross-sectional presentation of today's life and culture in China, and especially through its carefully contrived cinematic structure, the director's philosophical thinking is discernable.

The statement lies in the structure. Narrated in a rare, contrastive structure, the film constantly employs the technique of parallel-editing. At one time, we see the breathtaking scene at the beach, where the fishermen set their nets in the sand at low tide, as their ancestors did for centuries; at another time, we see the dynamic scene of growing industry and dancing couples in the town. The beach scene is always shot at dawn or dusk under the warm color of sunlight. The factory scene, however, is often shot with dazzling bright light. Moreover, as Semsel observed:

Of special significance in this film is the use of cinematography. Camera is used in a manner rare to Chinese film. Discreet use of the instrument and, with it, screen space, is integral to the meaning of the film. The division between old town and the new is amplified through careful compositions and camera placement. The result is that the scene in which the story occurs is defined in purely cinematic terms. Off-screen space, that area we don't see, but which we understand to exist, also becomes a significant part of the film's reality. What we cannot see, but know to be there, is as important as what is on the screen before us. Crisp and often pictorially exciting uses of the basic tools of filmmaking generate visual insights into thematic problems.

He acclaimed: "Through thoughtful use of camera tone, color, rhythm, music, symbol and metaphor, a film worthy of
international attention has been created, and stands as a strong indicator of the rise of Chinese cinema."16

Unfortunately, very few Chinese have ever seen this film due to a lack of distribution, and for some reason the film received little critical acclaim in China and has never been shown outside of the country. Probably, the film was ahead of its time, coming at a time when the Chinese people were in too great a fever for modernization and would not think about the side effects modernization may bring, or perhaps some viewers found the film too implicative to follow; therefore, At the Beach has almost been buried in oblivion. To make matters worse, someone even labeled the scene in the film when young lovers hug each other as "vulgar", and said: "This film should not be shown publicly as it may instigate hooligans."17 But, as time goes by, people's ideas may change, and hopefully one day this film will be given its credit in the history of Chinese cinema.

Meanwhile, another middle-aged woman director, Lu Xiaoya, made her debut feature, Girl in Red (1984), one of the best films of the year. It stars fourteen-year-old middle school student Zou Yitian, whose free-flowing, spontaneity-like acting matches well the lively attitude of the leading character An Ran, a middle school student in the film. Clever and lively, An Ran is developing a sense of individuality at the threshold of growing up. Pure and
honest, she is pursuing her own way of thinking, even if it causes problems. In the classroom she questions her teacher's pronunciation; in a world dressed in blue and grey, she wears a bright red blouse. Her youthful independence does not, unfortunately, win her the love of others. Some people like her, for she is honest and straightforward; others dislike her, for she refuses to conform to the norms of society. She is often confused by what she observes in her world, but she persists in seeking answers to those unanswerable questions. Though a film acted mostly by teenagers, the thematic subject also stimulates the adult audiences' contemplation. Semsel commented:

Told, with keen perception and understanding, from An Ran's point of view, this is more than a film about growing up. It is a film about integrity, about that desire we all have as young people, to be forthright and honest in a world where many have been crippled for being so, and where to be individualistic may be dangerous to one's well being. It is a film about the disillusionment which comes at the end of childhood, and the loss of innocence. The film is a microcosm, a parallel to China itself as the country develops closer relationships with the international community.-18-

Rendered in a conventional realistic form, the film nonetheless has a carefully designed structure. The ending deliberately echoes the beginning, where a very young An Ran leaves the countryside, running ahead of her mother, asking: "Why? Why? Why?" only to be asked the same question at the
end of the movie by a neighborhood child. It also employs a fine metaphoric treatment at some points. The film was awarded the year's Golden Rooster Award for best feature film in a contest with a number of outstanding films made in the same year.

Some other "fourth generation" filmmakers also came out with something new in their works, such as *Life* (1984, directed by Wu Tianming), *Yamaha Fish Stall* (1984, directed by Zhang Liang) and *A Girl from Huangshan Mountain* (1984, co-directed by Zhang Yuan and Yu Yanfu). *Life* is a thought-provoking film, touching upon the unhealthy social tendency of "back-door" dealings as well as reflecting the clash between reformist ideas and traditional ethics. Through a young man's ups and downs in his career and romance, the film provides a glimpse of the social reality and shows the complexity of human beings. The market scene and wedding scene are among the brilliant episodes of the film. *Yamaha Fish Stall* is concerned with a group of young people who try to set up a private fish stall. The naturalistic settings and lively acting add much to this amusing painting of contemporary Canton. *A Girl from Huangshan Mountain*, an account of a diligent and innocent country girl working as a maidservant in Beijing, reveals the complex human relationships in contemporary China. Li Ling, who added credit to *Friendly Strangers* with her
excellent acting, increased the beauty of this film by her marvelous acting as the maidservant.

The "third generation" filmmakers, on the other hand, also made their efforts to improve Chinese cinema. Romance in Philately (1984, directed by Sang Hu, who was among the few people trained in Moscow in the early fifties) is an amusing light comedy about how a young worker's romance changes his behavior and attitude towards study. The film is rich in subtle humor as well as meaningful insights.

Garlands at the Foot of the Mountain (1984, directed by Xie Jin) is more than a sentimental melodrama set against the Chinese border conflict with Vietnam. The director experimented with the use of multi-cameras in shooting this war film, probably the first time this technique was used in mainland China's filmmaking, giving it a more realistic touch in both visual effects and acting. In view of the complications of editing caused by the lengthy footages created by multi-cameras, the film's editor, Zhou Dingwen, was given the Golden Rooster Award for best editor. Like most of Xie's films, Garlands was a box office hit at home and was said to be well received by the Hong Kong audience.

Senior director Ling Zifeng's Border Town (1984) is a poetically stylized film based on a novel of the same title by Shen Congwen, a noted Chinese writer of the 1930s. The film relates a love tragedy that takes place early this
century in a mountainous region in the south. An old ferryman, his pretty teenaged granddaughter, and a shipowner's two sons who wish to marry the girl, are well-drawn characters in the film. The film is like a Chinese hand scroll painting, which gradually unfolds the wonderful environment of a purling river flanked by dark green bamboo on either side. The cinematography is remarkable, and the music score by Liu Zhang is a fine effort. Though traditional in its form, this appealing film earned Ling a Golden Rooster Award for best director of 1984. Despite the award, however, only a few prints of the film were ordered in the whole country. A university student's words may help explain the situation: "We're getting tired of the same old stuff."¹⁹

A stranger thing is that, contrary to the increasing amount of films made in 1984--roughly 150 feature films--and the improvements made by young and old filmmakers, movie theaters saw a drastic decrease in attendance figures in the cities. A sense of crisis in the film circle led to studies and discussions of the problem. It was realized that the situation might be caused by many factors, such as concerts, theatre, and especially night school, which attracted many young people who had lost their chance for higher education during the Cultural Revolution. The improvement of television programs kept many city people at home. Being
exposed to western films in the past few years, the Chinese audience sharpened their eyes for well-made films. While most Chinese films were still non-creative, less sophisticated and not as artistic as those western films, the audience was naturally losing their interest in Chinese films. There seemed to be no simple solution to the problem. The most urgent task was to raise the general film quality.

However, some people attributed the problem totally to the lack of commercial films in Chinese cinema as they learned that many illegal theaters secretly running the videotape shows of martial arts or kung-fu films smuggled from Hong Kong somehow attracted larger audiences. And with economic reform in the film industry, people generally recognized that film is both an industry and an art form, and that filmmaking should also comply to economic law. For a while many articles talked about the importance of commercial films. At a 1984 symposium on film directing, this issue was brought up for general attention.

In the following year, one big film studio openly announced that it would make more commercial films that year to make a profit, which would then be used in creating one or two artistic films. Other studios were following suit. For a time many filmmakers were engaged in a chase for box-office takings. But there was little study of how to make
commercial films with aesthetic quality and why western commercial films were so popular. Not surprisingly, 1985 saw a flux of kung-fu films, thrillers and comedies flooding the movie theaters; yet the audience figures were still dropping. A major reason was pointed out by Shi Fangyu, the Director of the Film Bureau, at a conference that the majority of Chinese films were still mediocre and that some were unreal, vulgar, superficial and crudely made.23

Fortunately, 1985 also witnessed a few excellent films that stand heads and shoulders above others. In the Wild Mountains, Black Cannon Incident, and Swan Song are among the best films of the year. In the Wild Mountains (1985, directed by Yan Xueshu) is a quartet telling of two unhappy rural couples getting divorced and forming new families, a new phenomenon in the Chinese countryside. The film takes on an increasingly broader perspective in which we see the growing impact of the social and economic changes in bringing a breath of fresh, liberating air to a farming village still leading so poor a life that its shabby homes have neither electricity nor even glass for the windows.

The most unusual is that, as a departure from all other mainland Chinese films which unexceptionally use postsynchronization to add sound to images in post-production, the middle-aged director Yan and his crew attempted to employ synchronization throughout the film. As
China's sound equipment is not sophisticated enough, and the generator often makes a loud noise which can be heard in a couple of miles, the filmmakers faced considerable difficulties in this attempt. But their efforts paid off as it provides us with a more authentic rural milieu of lively images and sounds. The synchronization also helped the actors, who did not have to worry about losing their truthful emotional tones in the usual process of postsynchronization. As a recognition and encouragement for their tremendous efforts, the film was given the 1985 Golden Rooster Award for best sound recording as well as the awards for best picture, best director, and best leading actress.

*Black Cannon Incident* (1985) is an original debut feature directed by 31-year-old Huang Jianxin, a new figure of the "fifth generation", who went through a one-year intensive training program at the Beijing Film Institute. The film takes its title from a missing chess piece referred to by an engineer in his telegram to friend, who is asked to help find the piece. But the word "black cannon" arouses much suspicion among the Party committee members of the engineer's factory, and an investigation is therefore undertaken and he is replaced by another person as the interpreter for a recently-arrived German expert. As a result of a translation mistake made by the young interpreter, who is incompetent for technical translation, a
serious accident occurs soon after the German expert has left. The investigation is not over until it is finally found out that the "black cannon" is but a chess piece. This satirical film sounds bizarre, yet it reminds the viewer of many such ridiculous cases in China. It daringly attacks the old-line, paranoid bureaucratic mentality that is still a big obstacle to the modernization drive.

The film is also creative in its form, which cleverly employs many metaphors and symbols to convey its messages. Color is likewise turned into an expressive medium; the extensive use of red corresponds with the overture of the film and enhances the unrestful mood throughout the film. The leading actor, Liu Zifeng, did well in his role of the bookish engineer, reaching the point of non-acting. Liu justly took the Golden Rooster Award for best actor of 1985. The film opened to critical attention and was enthusiastically received by Chinese intellectuals and students. It was regarded by many professionals as the best film of the year even though it did not win the Golden Rooster Award for best picture. The film was chosen to be shown in Los Angeles in January 1987 as part of UCLA Film Archives' "Discovering the New Chinese Cinema: The Revolution of Style".24

Zhang Zeming rose as another "fifth generation" star with his directorial debut, *Swan Song* (1985). Zhang, in his
early thirties, was twice rejected a place at the film institute,²⁵ but through years of practical work starting as a script boy at a studio in Canton, he made a surprising success with his outstanding film, which is a bitterly ironic chronicle of the life and fate of an elderly Cantonese musician. The film is adapted by the director from Kong Jiesheng's short story of the same title, but it surpasses the original work in many ways. The characterization of the father and son, the two leading characters, and the depiction of their relationship with the neighbors and other people are as subtle and well handled as the best realist films made by senior Chinese directors. As a further development of the traditional realism, the film is marked by its excellent cinematography, lighting, sound track and authentic setting.

Set in a small Canton alley inhabited by ordinary people, the film not only presents the lively graphic images of the life and culture in Canton, but also captures the vibrant sound and music of the city life, which make the film full of local flavor. Though an anti-hero study of ordinary people's mentality, the touching and humanistic story grabs the audiences's attention from the beginning to the end and provokes their meditation. The most noteworthy, however, is the masterful use of motif, which is rarely seen in Chinese films though a very important cinematic means used by many
prominent western filmmakers. The film opens with an establishing shot of the empty alley accompanied by a lingering flute melody, the same scene with the same melody is repeated twice at each turn of the time spanning around 30 years. The motif functions both in the narrative structure and in creating the mood. No wonder this extraordinary film was selected by Marco Miller to participate in the 1986 Venice Film Festival as an entrant for the maiden work contest.26

In addition, the distinguished "fourth generation" director, Zhang Nuanxin, made her second film, Sacrificed Youth (1985), an adaptation from Zhang Man Ling's novel called There Is a Beautiful Place. Set in a scenic subtropical area inhabited by minority people, the film is like a genre painting of the Dai people's unpolished life and custom, as a contrast to the Han people who, confined by both the centuries' old traditional ideas and the leftists' doctrines, lead a nearly ascetic life. It also shows an aspect of China's drive of the educated youth going to labor in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. The leading character, Li Chun, as one of those educated youth, is sent from Beijing to this southern village. In her association with the rustic villagers, her repressed instinct for beauty is aroused. But there still seems to be an unsurmountable gap between the educated Han youth and the
primitive-like Dai people in terms of their cultures, thinking, and behavior.

This impressive graphic study of the differences between two cultures and nations was achieved through careful camerawork done by Mu Deyuan and He Wei, both graduates from the film institute, as well as through Zhang's direction. The unusual sequences of long takes increase the film's realistic effect, and the deep-focus helps to capture the beauty of the picturesque setting. But a couple of night scenes are too illuminated, not matching the overall realism striven for by the director. Music is also notable in the film, which was composed by a young couple who had recently graduated from China's Central Conservatory of Music. They went with the shooting crew to the local place and incorporated into their creative work the local music, ballad, and nature's sound. In addition to a few Han characters, most of the characters are played by the Dai people who have no previous experience of acting. Yet the nuances of their expressions and feelings are well captured in delicate details. This lyrical film has a rare kind of feminine charm that can hardly be achieved by male directors. It distinguishes Zhang's style from those of the other filmmakers.

Following his Wishfulness (1982), the "fourth generation" director Huang Jianzhong made A Girl of Good
Family (1985), which looks at the traditional problem of Chinese women married to bedwetting kids. Starting and ending the film with a relief of the old Chinese pictographic character for "woman", which resembles a human figure kneeling down on the floor, in the accompaniment of a piece of moody music, the film effectively brings forward the message of emancipation of woman and human nature to the audience. The director dealt with this unorthodox subject with an equally unconventional approach. The film is slow and atmospheric, with lushly expressive visual symbols, and rather minimal dialogue. It was quite popular with the Chinese audience.

These new films either tackle unorthodox subjects or incorporate something new in their forms, each one bears an individual character. The impact of a film like Yellow Earth was conspicuous, the "new wave" movement was gathering momentum. Meanwhile, the Chinese film theoreticians were under pressure to adjust their thinking to the new films, and to re-examine their earlier arguments. Zhang Wei analyzed the limitations of Bazin and Kracauer's theories and concluded that, since film, like all other forms of art, is subject to creative manipulation, Bazin and Kracauer's arguments of film as copies of physical reality are incorrect. He also eloquently refuted the popular saying in China that "faithfulness to reality is the life of art,"
which takes art as the reflection of external reality and suppresses the artists' attempt to express their inner feelings or internal reality, a problem, he said, stemming from the long-dominated Chinese art theory of mechanical reflection.²⁸ He made a truthful statement: "Individual character is the kernel of the aesthetics of art, and the life of art. It is an irresistible iron law of every form of art."²⁹ Another theoretician attached the importance of imagination and expressiveness to filmmaking in his article.³⁰ All these arguments were revolutionary, seen in the context of a political orthodox culture. The ideas derived from the practices of those creative filmmakers, and in turn justified as well as guided their practices. If every filmmaker tries to make a film with his or her personal stamp, the Chinese film will become a real "hundred flowers" garden; yet most filmmakers still have not realized it.

Looking at Chinese films made in 1986, one can easily number a series of "blockbuster" or historical epic films, such as Sun Yat-sen, Genghis Kahn, War in Zhifeng, The Unusual President, and Bloody Fighting at Tai Er Zhuang. Among them Sun Yat-sen and The Unusual President are on identical subjects although the former is much better made than the latter. The total number of blockbusters during this year was higher than in any other year in Chinese film
history. Some people took the phenomenon as an indication of the growth of Chinese filmmakers, since many of them proved their ability to handle such large-scale films. But it can be looked at another way; making such films is costly, but were they worth making? No, they were duplications of other films, and most of them were non-creative or no more than a waste of money. However, no matter how mediocre some of them are, they are not controversial in that their subjects are safe, all dealing with historical figures, and that they were made at the time when China was celebrating the 120th birthday of the late Sun Yat-sen and the 75th anniversary of the Revolution of 1911. This situation in a sense reminds people of the similar practice in China ten years before, when cinema played a direct political role.

It is a pleasure to find that the year was also brightened up by several new-style films. Young director Huang Jianxin made his *Wrong Position* (1986), an imaginative science-fiction-like film. It turns the same engineer in *Black Cannon Incident* into a director of a bureau, who is so tied up in numerous meetings and paperwork that he never has time to do scientific research. To solve the problem, he creates a robot that looks like him and lets the robot go to meetings for him. But the robot gets out of control, causing him a series of problems and in the end the director
is forced to destroy the robot. Some wonderful dream scenes are well conceived and very expressive. Although it received as much criticism as acclaims, the film proved Huang's determination: "I'd rather fail in my explorative attempt, than to play it safe in conformity to conservativism."\(^{31}\)

**A Death Call on People Alive** (1986) is China's first surrealistic film directed by middle-aged Huang Jianzhong. Drawn from Liu Shugang's play of the same title, the film revolves around Xiao Xiao's trip back to the real world to probe into people's minds for life and death values after he is stabbed to death on a bus for attempting to catch a pickpocket. The film asks the philosophical questions and tries to combine the present with the ancient past in order to find the root for today's problem. This intensive film also includes several stunning and symbolic scenes: in one scene, several hundred naked children are running over a wasteland; in another scene, hundreds of clay figures of warriors and horses, which were shot at the Qin Tomb in Xi'an, fill up the screen.\(^{32}\) The novelty of this film can compare with the "fifth generation's" representative works, and bears the influence of them.

Possibly driven by his ethnographic curiosity, Tian Zhuangzhuang made another film in remote area of Tibet. Entitled **Horse Thief** (1986), the film is about a young
herdsman reduced to stealing horses by hard times. For that he is driven forever from his tribe. The film provides the audience with a rare look into the Tibetan customs and religion. Surpassing his *On the Hunting Ground*, the director incorporated techniques of surrealism in his portrayal of the environment, coupled with outstanding cinematography. His peer, Chen Kaige, termed the film as Tian's pinnacle work so far. But like his *Hunting Ground*, this experimental film failed to attract the general audience. Tian, however, claimed that "this film can't be accepted by the audience because it is made for the audience of the next century." His remark was probably too extreme and ignored the reality that had been noted by Hungarian film theoretician Bela Balaz over thirty years ago in his *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*:

The film as a product of a large-scale industry costs too much and is too complicated a collective creative process for any individual genius to create a masterpiece in defiance of the tastes and prejudices of his own day. And this applies not only to the capitalist film industry which envisages immediate cash returns. Even a socialized film production cannot make films for the public of some coming century.

Following a similar line, Siegfried Kracauer said that "a mass medium like the film is bound to yield to the enormous pressures of social and cultural conventions, collective preferences, and ingrained habits of perceiving...." Shortly after, Tian realized that he could not ignore the
audience by saying: "It is not delightful to have no audiences to appreciate your films. You can blame them for their ignorance, but you can't be sure whether you are right or wrong in your pursuit."\footnote{37} It is pleasing to learn that Tian will base his next film on a short story by the renowned writer Lao She in an attempt to attract a larger audience. He said that in the film he will seek a linkage with the audience while developing his own film style, and hoped that the film would satisfy both the audience who like dramatic stories and those who dislike them.\footnote{38}

Other "fifth generation" pioneers were also continuing their artistic pursuit, but they encountered some setbacks on the way. Chen Kaige started making his second film, The Big Parade (1986), in 1985 and had completed a rough cut when it was taken out of his hands and shelved for nearly a year. The film deals with the training of present-day air force pilots, and in particular with the preparations for their part in the 35th National Day parade in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.\footnote{39} Having served in the army before, Chen captured the harsh life and strict training authentically, which offended the army leaders at the preview for they were afraid that the harsh reality recorded in the film might scare people away from joining the army.\footnote{40} It was said that after some modification the film was passed for release in early 1987.\footnote{41} Imagine that Chen planned to end the film
with shots of Tiananmen empty, overlaid with just the sound of the parade; the film could have been very expressive. Currently Chen is making a film in Xishuangbana of Yunan Province, where he worked in a rubber plantation at age 15. The film titled King of Children is adapted from a short story by Zhong Acheng, who likewise labored in this place for many years and related his experience in this story.

Zhang Junzhao made further exploration following his directorial debut of One and Eight. But his second film Come On! The Chinese Team (1986) was a flop. Obviously, he was trying some new techniques in an attempt to create a sense of modernism. By quick cutting and disordering the shots taken from strange angles, the film does look modern, but at the same time loses its aesthetic appeal as well. A lesson for the young radicals.

After his Secret Decree, Wu Zinui took his crew to make another battle film, Dove Tree (1986), a treatment of the Sino-Vietnamese border war of the late 1970s. Although inclusive of some gruesome, blood-shedding images, the film is apparently pacifistic in that it shows a Vietnamese woman who accidentally runs across wounded Chinese soldiers and stops to bandage their wounds, despite the on-going fighting. When the wounded are ready to leave the dangerous place they insist on taking the Vietnamese woman with them, but the platoon leader, who has seen many of his soldiers
killed by the Vietnamese, shoots the woman instead. This unique, humanistic film is also marked by its forceful cinematography done by Zhang Li, the same cameraman from Wu's first film. It is so cinematic that with only three lines of dialogue in the whole film the visual impression is penetrating. The film also uses synchronization for its sound track. However, this film has never been released, and not even been printed from the original print. Touching upon a sensitive subject, the film was denounced by officials as "pro-Vietnamese propaganda." (It would be interesting to find out what they would say about American films like Platoon (1986) and Hearts and Minds (1974).)

Frustrated as Wu Zinui was, he never stopped his creative work, but proved to be a prolific young director with his later Alternate Team Member (1986), a film about children, The Last Day of Winter (1986), a delinquent youth's story, and later Night Bell (1987), another war film. It was said that The Last Day in the Winter was not successful, but indicated the director's weakness in handling characters and dramatic stories. It was probably a common problem among the graduates of the Beijing Film Institute, President Xie Fei said, attributing it to the lack of training in this aspect while they were at school. The "fifth generation" filmmakers still have a long way to go.

On the other hand, the prominent "third generation"
director Xie Jin, whose films assumed a conventional form and always attracted the popular audience, was challenged by a couple of young men in their newspaper articles. Zhu Dake wrote: "Xie Jin's exquisitely-plotted stories are stereotypes: Virtuous men suffer misfortune... In the end selfish people are converted, coming to understand their evils, and the heroes always resume their offices and all conflicts are solved." He said that the sensational melodramas often moved the audience to tears, while depriving them of the ability to look at the stories critically, which is opposed to independent thinking and scientific rationalism of the modern world.\textsuperscript{52} In defense of himself, Xie denied that his films are "stereotyped", and argued that different types and styles of film are reflections of artists' different personalities and tastes, and that only if they are allowed to exist together can film art be flourishing.\textsuperscript{53} His latest film Hibiscus Town (1986) was as well conceived and executed as most of his works; but the audience response was less enthusiastic.

The year 1986 also saw a number of other good films, most of them are fresh in their subjects. The Last Sun (1986, directed by Jiang Haiyang) is about the aged people and their mentalities.\textsuperscript{54} My Classmates and I (1986, directed by Peng Xiaolian) depicts a group of lovely middle-school students.\textsuperscript{55} City Masquerade (1985, directed by Song Jianbo)
is an original satirical comedy about human relations in a modern city. Strange Circle (1986, directed by Sun Sha) deals with five single women who live together and finally drop off one by one to seek their male partners. Zhenzhen Beauty Parlor (1986, directed by Xu Tongjun) tells of a self-employed girl who runs a barbershop and does fair business. A Girl from Hunan (1986, co-directed by Xie Fei and Wu Lan) looks at feudalist China in the 1920's, in particular a 18-year-old rural woman is married off to a child husband. Village Folks (1986, directed by Hu Bingliu) examines the clash between the traditional rural culture and the current free economy in China's rural community. 84-85 in T Province (1986, directed by Yang Yanjin) is a documentary-type film centering upon economic reform and the significance of law. Bloody Fighting at Tai Er Zhuang (1986, directed by Yang Guangyuan) is a period piece on the Kuomingtang army's battle against Japanese invaders in 1938.

In the wake of the breakthroughs made by the "fourth generation" and "fifth generation" filmmakers, more Chinese filmmakers joined in the force to bring forth new ideas in filmmaking. Making films with individual characters was becoming a conscious practice. By the end of 1986, the amount of mediocre films was dropping, and the audience figures stabilized. Since early that year, when the
government decided to combine China's film industry with the television station, as they had been competing with each other for audience, and put them together under the supervision of the newly set-up Ministry of Broadcasting, Film and Television, good results were coming about. Some film directors who rarely had any chance to make a film in a big studio before are now able to display their talent by making TV shows; whereas the TV stations now have access to better equipment in film studios as well as a bigger talent pool.64

Up to present, however, a big common problem still bothers the Chinese film, even the best films of recent years: the problem of sound. As is mentioned earlier, except for In the Wild Mountains and the never-released Dove Tree, all other Chinese films resorted to postsynchronization to produce sound for several reasons. Apart from the fact that China does not have good-enough sound recording equipment, lack of experience is also a hang-up for the filmmakers. Before the mid-sixties, they did attempt synchronization in making a number of films, but that was all done inside the studios, which was easier to control compared to today's filmmaking that involves a great deal of location shooting.65 This technical problem has long been sacrificing the quality of Chinese films as very often we see in Chinese films a speaker's lip movement is out of sync
with the sound track or a sound coming from a distance loses
the perspective because of the limitations and complications
created by postsynchronization.

Even so, this problem did not draw much attention in China
until recently. Probably the letter from Canadian professor
Brian Damuerd, had given China a big push. Damuerd, who
visited China as a guest of the Beijing Film Institute in
June 1986, wrote to a professor at that institute a few
weeks after he returned home, saying:

...My only criticism about Chinese cinema is
in the aspect of sound... As nearly 99 percent
of Chinese films used postsynchronization, it
is fair to generalize that most of the Chinese
contemporary audience have never seen a
Chinese actor's genuine and integrate acting,
the acting during the shooting. In addition,
since most of the foreign films shown in China
were dubbed in the same way, therefore it
seems that the Chinese audience never know
that there is natural sound or
synchronization... In most parts of the world,
this would be considered a nightmare and
slipshodness... As a movie-fan and a man who
has developed a deep feeling for Chinese arts
and culture, I find it tragic that the
beautiful Chinese films are devalued due to
their sound tracks.-66-

The situation is perhaps changing; the Film Bureau has been
emphasizing upon synchronization lately; and it is expected
that synchronization will become one of the criteria for a
winner of the Golden Rooster Award for best sound track
recording starting in 1987.67 Chen Kaige's current
production of King of Children is reportedly employing
synchronization. Once the camera and tape recorder started
to roll, all the traffic in the vicinity was halted, while
the camera and cameraman were covered under three layers of
quilt, leaving only the lens out.68

As China's filmmaking was improving rapidly over the past
few years, the Chinese audience was also growing up. A
film-magazine-oriented discussion among dozens of Beijing
University professors after the screening of Xie Jin's
Hibiscus Town, Yang Yanjin's 84-85 in T Province and Tian
Zhuangzhuang's Horse Thief indicated that most of the
intellectuals liked Horse Thief better than the other two
because they found aesthetic pleasure and originality in it
and regarded it as more cinematic.69 As Balazs said:

It has always been the rule in the history of
art and culture that the two were functions of
each other in dialectic interaction. Art
educated the taste of the public, and the
better taste of the public demanded and
rendered possible the development of art to
higher levels.-70-

Since 1984, professional filmmakers and teachers from the
film institute voluntarily have given lectures to the public
on film appreciation. Quite a few universities have opened
courses on film, while Fudan University in Shanghai will
soon become the first university in China to have a film
department.71 Meanwhile China has recently begun sending
students and scholars to overseas film schools like the
Motion Picture and Television Division at the University of
California at Los Angeles and the Centro Sperimentale in
Rome. Chen Kaige is also going to come to the United States in late 1987 to study film for a year or so. Plus the non-government-sponsored students, there are about thirty Chinese studying film in America alone. It is foreseeable that this group of people may bring about greater changes in Chinese filmmaking after they have returned home.
CONCLUSION

After an overall survey of the post-Cultural Revolution cinema in China and a brief overview of the previous situation, it becomes apparent that the Chinese cinema has been undergoing a tremendous change over the past ten years. Throughout the years between 1977 and 1986, Chinese filmmaking demonstrated its vitality and the creativity of Chinese filmmakers. Many sparkling works showed what the filmmakers could do if they were trusted and given freedom of expression. The gradual removal of the political orthodoxy and cultural restrictions in China in the past few years ensured the essential change of Chinese cinema from an utterly political instrument to an art form. The dauntless exploration by the talented filmmakers, especially those of the "fourth generation" and "fifth generation", contributed much to the improvement of Chinese cinema, which is now boasting a number of excellent films that have attracted international attention.

Since the revival of Chinese cinema in the late 1970s, the development of Chinese cinema is roughly moving in three directions: the first direction carries the conventional form that has been developed in the tradition of Chinese
cinema and includes such films as Richshaw Boy, Tea House and Border Town; the second direction is mainly toward a novelty in thematic subjects, like Girl in Red, Life and Strange Circle; the third direction stresses formal innovations, which are represented by Yellow Earth, On the Hunting Ground, Black Cannon Incident and A Death Call on People Alive. Although the first two kinds of film usually attract more popular audience than the last one, the formally innovative film has had greater impact on Chinese cinema in exploring the full power of the medium and in raising the aesthetic value of the film. In addition, these explorative films are beginning to win over more audience as indicated in the last chapter.

Compared with its past, when socialist realism was enforced as the dominant form of film, Chinese cinema has now become more diversified in terms of both content and form. Entertainment and box-office have also come into the film industry's considerations, which were totally ignored before. Many films reflect the society in its everyday qualities, and many others are critical of the social problems and deep in thematic meanings.

Yet censorship still takes its toll, as in the cases of Sun and People and Dove Tree; the old problem of Chinese officials' sensitivity about criticism remains. Although they seem to be more tolerant about criticism of the past or
recent past, if a film touches upon any serious aspect that has to do with the present government, they would interpret it as criticism of the regime and ban it from the public. The freedom of expression is still limited; the filmmaking in China is under a tighter control than any other form of art. For this reason, politically schematized films are occasionally being made, and many films tend to reflect current government policies and assume an educational function.

In comparison with U. S. films, most Chinese films are close to physical realities and serious in content; and few of them take the forms of fantasy, horror, sex and concert films. One cannot find a pure art film or abstract film even among China's explorative works, and there is hardly any science fiction film yet. This has much to do with Chinese culture and tradition. But changes are possible as more and more western films are shown in China today and the audience's taste may change.

In a collective attempt to create a more satisfying culture, the Chinese filmmakers have pushed the Chinese cinema a big step forward and made quite a few films known to the world. It is clear that, if in an atmosphere of greater creative freedom, China can turn out as well-made films and distinguished directors as those in the world. Seen in the perspective of China's current social and
economic changes, the Chinese cinema which has always been reflective of social reality may see some thematic changes in the near future. There will probably be more films like *At the Beach* (1984) and *That Day on the Beach* (1983), a Taiwan film looking at the lost illusions of a generation which has seen Taiwan transform itself from an "innocent" agricultural backwater of the fifties to the aggressive, sophisticated, urbanized society of the present.

As stated in the introduction, this thesis completed by August 1987 is just a beginning attempt in Chinese film research. There is still a great treasure left unexplored in this field, which could provide topics for further studies. First, a comprehensive study of Chinese cinema, which includes the film histories of mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and an examination of similarities, differences and interrelations among them. Second, an in-depth study of the thirties and forties Chinese films and filmmakers. Third, a study of the "fifth generation" filmmakers and detailed analysis of their works. Fourth, a comparative study of Chinese cinema with any other country's cinema in terms of their characters and differences. Fifth, a study of Chinese cinema in relation to its own traditional culture and philosophies. Sixth, a study of Chinese cinema as a reflection of China's social and political changes. Seventh, an in-depth study of one or two Chinese film
directors, such as Xie Jin and Teng Wenjin, and their works. Eighth, a study of the Chinese audience's perception of Chinese films and western films. Ninth, a survey of Chinese film studios and their management systems. Tenth, a study of scientific and educational films made in China and their functions. Eleventh, a study of China's only animation studio in Shanghai and characters of Chinese animation films. Twelveth, an historical study of Chinese newsreels and the production at the Chinese Newsreel Film Studio, maybe the only one still in existence in the world. Thirteenth, a survey of China's works. Fourteenth, a study of recent Chinese film coproductions with other countries. (Canada, United States, Japan, Italy, France, etc.)
FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION


2. "Author Writes First French History of Chinese Film--An Interview with Mr. Regis Bergeron," *China's Screen* (Chinese Foreign Language Press, 1985) p. 34.

3. Ibid. p. 34.

CHAPTER ONE


2. Ibid. p. 18.


7. Ibid., p. 177.

8. Ibid., p. 100.

CHAPTER TWO


4. Ibid., p. 207.

5. Ibid., p. 213.


7. Ibid., p. 313.

8. Ibid., p. 312.

9. Ibid., p. 199.

10. Ibid., p. 194.

11. Ibid., p. 194.

12. Ibid., p. 195.

13. Ibid., p. 310.


17. Popular Cinema No. 18 (1957). Quoted from Jay Leyda, p. 222.


CHAPTER THREE


2. Ibid., p. 11.


6. Ibid., p. 15.


CHAPTER FOUR


5. Ibid., p. 400.

6. Ibid., p. 401.


9. Ibid., pp. 52-53.


16. George Semsel, p. 32.


18. Ibid., p. 55.
CHAPTER FIVE

1. The Beijing Film Institute was set up on June 1, 1956 with the assistance of Soviet experts. At the beginning, there were departments of directing, acting and cinematography. In 1959 the Department of Art Design was added. In 1960 the Department of Film Engineering was opened. In 1961 the Department of Literature was created. In addition many short-term training programs were also organized for professional filmmakers. Before 1966, approximately 2,500 people were training at the Institute. The institute was literally closed during the Cultural Revolution and was not reopened until 1978, when it started to admit students from all over the country and recalled its faculty from the countryside. In the Cultural Revolution, a small number of filmmakers who came from workers, peasants and soldiers without entrance examination were trained at the May 7 Art College established by and under the direct control of Jiang Qing.


8. Tony Rayns, "Huang Tudi (Yellow Earth)," Sight and Sound Vol. 53 (October 1986) p. 296.

10. I learned about this through my correspondence with Yu Xiaoyi, and editor of *Popular Cinema*, who got the information from the Film Bureau. Yu's letter is dated June 24, 1987.

11. Tony Rayns, "Huang Tudi (Yellow Earth)," p. 296.


16. Ibid., p. 33.

17. "New Film At the Beach," *Beijing Daily*, December 1984, p. 4.

18. George Semsel, p. 32.

19. Ibid., p. 34.


22. I remembered hearing that Wu Tianming, the head of the Xi'an Film Studio, said this in 1985.


24. I was told this news by Xie Fei when he visited OSU in the spring of 1987.


28. Ibid., p. 59.

29. Ibid., p. 61.


32. Wu Caibin, "China's First Surreal Film Due To Be Released Soon," China Daily (January 1, 1987) p. 5.

33. From a personal telephone interview on May 1987 with Ma Yaowen, Chen Kaige's former schoolmate, who was studying film at the University of Iowa.

34. Wu Caibin, p. 5.


37. Wu Caibin, p. 5.


41. Ibid.

42. Tony Rayns, p. 298.

44. Yin Xin, p. 31.

45. From a personal telephone interview in May 1987 with Feng Lingling, sound recording technician for Dove Tree, who was studying film at the University of Iowa.

46. Tony Rays, p. 298.

47. Yin Xin, p. 31.


51. From my conversation with Xie Fei in the spring of 1987 at the Ohio State University.


64. Ibid.


70. Bela Balazs, p. 19.

71. From my conversation with George Semsel at Ohio University in August 1986.

72. From a telephone conversation with Ma Yaowen and Xie Fei in May and July 1987.
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