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**An Analysis of the Chinese Fifth Generation Film Makers Based on  
the Theory of Film Movements**

by

**Huiping Zhang**

**A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through the Department of Communication Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada**



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## **Abstract**

Introduced by films such as *Farewell My Concubine* and *The Story of Qiu Ju*, the new Chinese cinema film makers in the 1980s and 1990s have made important contributions to the innovation of film language in the development of world cinema. Their influence has extended beyond the limits of time and national boundaries and will remain as an interesting area of research for film scholars and critics for years to come.

This thesis examines the Fifth Generation as a film movement based on the film movement theories of George Huaco, Terry Lovell, and Andrew Tudor. The Fifth Generation were compared to the traditional Chinese cinema in aspects such as themes, ideology, and film language to determine whether there has been a major aesthetic break between the two. The film makers' family, as well as educational background, and their unique life experiences during the Cultural Revolution, were examined to explain their motivation and intention to revolutionize the Chinese cinema. Their intentionality and aesthetic break from the traditional cinema qualify them as a film movement based on the criteria from the theoretical framework employed.

The Cultural Revolution served as a precipitating event for the appearance of the Fifth Generation. The violence and chaos caused by the Cultural Revolution worsened the political and economic conditions in China at the end of the 1970s. In 1976, the Cultural Revolution officially ended. Following that, a period of relaxation in government policy began. As a result, the four structural determinants necessary for the development of a film movement were becoming established. These included the availability of basic film

making equipment and film personnel, as well as a favourable organization of the film industry and a tolerant political atmosphere. The 1982 class enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy, who were the first group of students the Academy welcomed following the Cultural Revolution, started to develop their innovative film style. The trends in other areas of the arts during the same time frame, including theatre and literature, also contributed to the maturing of the Fifth Generation style. The Fifth Generation were able to make ground-breaking films and reach an international audience.

The investigation in the above areas enlightens us, from a sociological perspective, on how the emergence of a film movement is closely related to the social, economic, cultural and political context of its time.



## **Acknowledgments**

I owe my life after the age of twenty to the Department of Communication Studies. In the spring of 1994, I was delighted to find out that I had been accepted by the University of Windsor, into the Master's program in Communication Studies. At that time, I had just turned twenty . I quickly passed on this good news to the seven other girls who shared our tiny dormitory room at Xiangtan University, Xiangtan, China. They were just as thrilled as I was. The news got passed on to my parents, grandparents, my sister, my cousins... From that time on, my life began spinning faster and I could hardly keep up. Fortunately, it has been for the better.

Three and half years from then, I look back. Many thoughts linger. In the course of my study, I lost three of my four grandparents, and I only had the chance to visit the tombs of two of them during my visit home in the summer of 1995. I want to pay tribute to them as I am finishing up my education here in the Master's program. I know how proud they would be of me. I am the first of the forty people in my immediate family to receive a university education. Soon, the first one to receive a Master of Arts degree. I only regret that my deceased grandparents did not live to see this day and I have not had the opportunity to repay their love and support to me.

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I have been very satisfied with my thesis committee. All my advisors have been nice to me and supportive of my work. I appreciate that with all of my heart.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The Fifth Generation were the first graduates in 1982 from the Beijing Film Academy after it reopened in 1978 following the Cultural Revolution. Their films differ from traditional Chinese films in some fundamental ways. They are unique as well as controversial.

The Fifth Generation came at a time of change in Chinese history. The economic reforms, which started at the end of the 1970s, have transformed and continue to transform China both politically and economically. The reforms have also brought changes in people's values and other important factors in life. To get rich is no longer considered counter-revolutionary and bourgeois but glorious. While providing a certain element of freedom, market forces, like never before, are also taking their toll on the arts. Film, television, and other media are going through painful and exploratory transformations to commercialization.

The Fifth Generation brought fame and critical acclaim to Chinese cinema at this time of change. Yet, the response to them is ambivalent. On the one hand, people are proud of these film makers because they brought the country much-needed international recognition and pride. On the other hand, their films are sometimes banned, and often given the cold-shoulder in their own country. Most of them have been box office failures. Most people don't appreciate or understand these films, nor do they support the film

makers' experimentation.

In the midst of such controversial response from the domestic audience, there has been a surge in interest in the Fifth Generation in both domestic and international film research circles. Within the last several years, numerous articles with various research focuses have been published on this subject both in Chinese and in English. The subjects of these publications touch upon national identity, cultural politics, gender and sexuality, market pressure, etc. Critics and researchers are terribly interested in these film makers. They are as enthusiastic about the Fifth Generation's artistic endeavours as they are concerned about the development and growth of this new wave.

This thesis joins this growing research area with the same enthusiasm but a different approach. The perspective is historical and international. My inspiration comes from sociological studies about other recognized film movements in the history of international cinema. And I do what social scientists love to do: search for patterns. I look for a pattern of how film movements form and the social-economic, political and cultural conditions of that pattern.

According to Huaco (1965), an examination of film history over sixty years reveals three kinds of phenomena. First, we see the emergence of the work of isolated film makers. Second, we see the emergence of film makers whose films are grouped into stylistically heterogeneous clusters. Third, we see the emergence of film makers whose



films are grouped into stylistically homogeneous clusters, or waves of film style. The examination of isolated film makers' work most often leads to the film makers' creative personality, further analysis of which often dwells in the realm of psychology. The examination of stylistically heterogeneous clusters seems unrewarding since the heterogeneity usually extends beyond style to subjects, themes, motifs, and social matrices. This limitation in explanatory possibilities makes a sociological analysis of this group less tempting. In contrast, an examination of a stylistically homogeneous cluster proves to be more effective. The homogeneity extends beyond style, and the common subjects, themes, and motifs can be compared to those present in the larger cultural context. The cluster as a whole eventually can be linked to specific social structures and configurations in the larger social system (Huaco, 1965).

Since the mid-1980s, the Fifth Generation have made their appearance with such films as *Farewell My Concubine* (winner of the Palme d'Or at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (winner of the Golden Lion at the 1992 Venice Film Festival). The films made by the Fifth Generation have won numerous international awards from Oscar nominations to the most prestigious film festivals. The Fifth Generation's innovations in cinematic language and their stylistic virtuosity are critically acclaimed. Headed by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige<sup>1</sup>, this group of film makers share similar backgrounds, a factor which I will discuss in depth in the thesis.

The goal of this thesis, then, was to discover possible explanations for the

---

<sup>1</sup>In this the thesis, all Chinese names will follow the Chinese tradition, with last name going before first name.

emergence of the Fifth Generation. The first and foremost question to ask in this thesis was whether the Fifth Generation qualifies as a film movement. Various criteria in film movement theory are used to make an evaluation. To illustrate how crucial determinants of a film movement develop, I examine the historical and cultural context from which the Fifth Generation emerged. The overall assumption behind this thesis is that major political, social, and economic changes in the larger society exert very important influences on art.

Andrew Tudor(1974) makes an insightful observation about the relations between society and cinema. He points out that the societies from which well-defined film movements have developed, such as the Soviet Cinema of the 1920s, German Expressionism, and Italian Neo-realism, share some obvious characteristics: they had all undergone a drastic socio-cultural trauma immediately prior to the rise of the 'movements' and all developed distinctively new approaches to cinema, representing a major aesthetic break from existing traditions. We can easily relate this observation to the Chinese situation. The "drastic socio-cultural trauma" in the Chinese case is the Cultural Revolution, a deceptive name given to a process which some have viewed as a cultural and economic suicide. The Fifth Generation emerged shortly after the Cultural Revolution ended and they have established their own distinctive style different from that of the traditional Chinese cinema. I believe that there is a high level of correspondence between a social trauma and the development of a film movement. Hopefully the analysis in this thesis helps us better understand that correspondence.

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical framework and methodology**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Film movements refer to periods in the history of cinema when a certain concept of film production, involving interdependent stylistic techniques and themes, influence a group of film makers. A specific movement is often associated with an individual country, though this may not hold true in every case. A significant movement flourishes during a limited time span and most likely in an individual country, but its effects may spread beyond that time and that place (DeNitto, 1985).

### **2.2 Film movement as a descriptive or theoretical construct**

Though much research has been done about the history of famous film movements, film movement theory remains a rather under-developed area in film studies. By that I mean very little systematic effort has been made to develop theories that address the nature of film movements and the conditions under which they develop. Various research has been undertaken and literature written about film movements/waves<sup>2</sup>. However the term in most of these studies is used in what might be characterized as a strictly descriptive sense, similar to the way “film movement” was used in the last paragraph. Descriptive accounts are given as to the observed characteristics of film movements, but

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<sup>2</sup> Film wave and film movement are used interchangeably in this thesis.

no systematic, theoretical criteria are used to evaluate whether the collection of films and film makers under scrutiny could be considered a film movement.

A good example of this would be Susan Hayward's recent (1996) book, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*. This book is a supposedly comprehensive overview of film-related literature, including film concepts, terminology, and important events in film history. The Free British Cinema, the French New Wave, German Expressionism, and similar cinematic developments are all referred to as "film movements" or "film waves" (or even "schools") and descriptive accounts are provided along the lines outlined by DeNitto above. But while terms such as "realism" and "documentary" are both formal entries, along with numerous other film terms, film movement and film wave are not. The omission of these two basically synonymous terms from full definition, but their utilization to characterize other, "key" concepts, underscores the point of film movement theory's underdeveloped status and its general use in simply a descriptive sense.

### **2.3 The theories of Huaco, Tudor and Lovell**

In this thesis, the term "film movement" is used in the more rigorous, theoretical sense. Various film movement theory criteria are used to determine whether the Chinese Fifth Generation qualify as a film movement, not just descriptively, but also theoretically. Also to be determined is whether the various developmental conditions necessary for the existence of a film movement apply in the case of the Fifth Generation.

The theory I use in this thesis is a combination of several sociologists' propositions, including those of George Huaco (1965), Andrew Tudor (1974) and Terry Lovell (1971). Such a combination offers us a framework to examine a film movement's relation to the society from which it emerges. This framework takes into account the triggering effect a social trauma has on the formation of a film movement. It also aids in locating the specific factors which contribute to that effect. The framework provides a perspective from which I investigate the emergence of a stylistically homogeneous film wave (namely the Fifth Generation in this case), in terms of possible socio-historical preconditions.

Since film movement is the centre of our research, it is necessary to clarify the concept's exact meaning. In his book, *The Sociology of Film Art*, George Huaco (1965) vaguely defines film movements as "stylistically homogenous clusters." Tudor (1974) refines it, claiming that a film movement is first of all "a distinct grouping of films" which share in the break from the traditional cinema, and thereby "suggest innovation." A movement, then, is "a distinct cluster of films representing a break with the films of the past" (Tudor, 1974: 169). Terry Lovell (1971: 19) supplies a further criterion:

"Movement" is an intentional concept, implying collective action towards some conscious goal. A.F.C. Wallace's definition of "revitalization movement" is pertinent: "a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to provide a more satisfying culture."

Film movements are thus those aesthetic breaks consequent upon collective and self-conscious actions of the artists involved (Tudor, 1974). The concept of movement differs

from related concepts, such as “revolution” and “change,” according to Lovell.

Revolution emphasizes achievement rather than intentionality. A revolution often is the outcome of many movements which may be heterogeneous and even opposed in their aims and interests (Lovell, 1971).

Having clarified the concept of film movement, an examination of Huaco’s sociological model is in order. Huaco’s model is essentially made up of two sub-models. One macroscopic model is employed to analyze the major political, social, and economic changes in the larger society, and a middle-range model is exploited to analyze the historically specific social matrix of the art, film or literature in question. The link between these two models is the assumption that major political, social, and economic changes in the larger society tend to affect art, literature, or film by being channeled or filtered through the social structures which constitute their social matrix (Huaco, 1965).

The macroscopic model is used to examine whether the four required structural determinants for a film movement are present in a given society. Upon his analysis of three established film movements<sup>3</sup>, Huaco(1965) points out that each wave began only when four necessary structural factors were already present, and they lasted only as long as these factors were present. The gradual elimination of one or more of these factors was accompanied by the gradual decline and eventual destruction of the particular film wave.

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<sup>3</sup>The three film waves Huaco analyzed are German Expressionism, Soviet Expressive Realism, and Italian Neo-realism.

The presence of the four determinants was examined through an inspection of the historical events which occurred around the time of the film wave and the various social, political, and economic responses to these events. The following are the four structural determinants suggested by Huaco (1965:212):

(1) a cadre of trained film technicians, directors, cameramen, editors, and actors; (2) a basic film plant including studios, laboratories, raw stock, and equipment; (3) a mode of organization of the film industry which was either favorable or tolerant toward the ideology of the future film wave; (4) a climate of political norms which was either favorable or tolerant toward both the ideology and the style of the future film wave.

Having used the macroscopic model to evaluate the presence of the four structural determinants, Huaco then employed the middle-range model to analyze the stylistic features of the particular film wave and the source of that unique style. As Dennis DeNitto (1985) notes, most film movements are related to and even derive from movements in the other arts. While sharing with its counterparts in other arts, it developed its own uniquely filmic form and content. ( For example, Expressionism was a movement in the literature and visual arts of Germany more than a decade before its tentative appearance in cinema, and a complete filmic realization was not achieved until almost two decades later). Huaco carried out a content analysis of the films to discern the stylistic features. He also examined artistic trends in other areas of art and the background of the film makers to locate the source of that particular style.

Even though somewhat different in terminology from Huaco's, Andrew Tudor and Terry Lovell's foundations are essentially of a similar nature. Recognizing a film

movement as a collective effort undertaken by the film makers, both Tudor and Lovell borrow some conceptualizations from Neil Smelser's approach to the analysis of collective behaviour. Smelser's set of determinants are: structural conduciveness and structural strain; generalized belief; precipitating factors and mobilization; and social controls. All of them play some part in determining the consequent episode of the movement and add their value to the final outcome. Tudor (1974: 171-2) relates these seemingly scattered terms in the following way:

First, the structured context itself [the society in question] must permit such a possibility. This given, there must be some socio-cultural root for the development, conceptualized by Smelser in the unsatisfactory term 'strain.' There must be a general belief which spreads through the group pinpointing their common antipathies and aims. There must be some final precipitating event and some basis and pattern of mobilization for action. Finally, we must include the potential restraining influences of the larger social context; their means of controlling the episode, if means they have.

Even though Tudor and Lovell both draw from Smelser's collective behaviour theory, Lovell focused on the French New Wave as a case study, whereas Tudor furthered his discussion on the universal qualities of film movements and compared his work with that of Huaco's. Both Tudor and Huaco's models take into account the material conditions as well as the ideological conditions for a film movement to form. Tudor includes Huaco's four structural factors (personnel, equipment, industrial organization, political atmosphere) under the headings "conduciveness" and "strain," which encompass most of the contextual factors involved in precipitating a film movement. While some derive from the larger socio-cultural world, others stem from the more immediate context of film making, all of which have to be either favourable or tolerant toward the ideology of



the future film wave. The issue of intentionality is dealt with under the heading “general belief.” It is evaluated by whether there is “a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to provide a more satisfying culture.” The headings “precipitation and mobilization” account for the triggering effect a social trauma has on a film movement, based on the degree of conduciveness and strain such a drastic situation creates.

A noticeable difference between Tudor / Lovell and Huaco, however, lies in the degree of emphasis on the different stages of film movement analysis. Tudor and Lovell both devoted great attention to theorizing the definition of film movement. They established two criteria of what qualifies as a film movement: the presence of a major aesthetic break, and the intentional efforts among film makers involved. Compared to Tudor and Lovell, Huaco focused most of his attention on the sociological preconditions upon which a film movement can develop, not so much on what constitutes a film movement. Table 1 presents a comparative summary of the components of Tudor / Lovell’s and Huaco’s theories. As we can see from the table, beyond the several overlapping areas, Huaco’s theory does not address the issues of aesthetic break or intentionality; and Tudor / Lovell’s theories fail to account for the influence from the other areas of the arts.

The term “social control” deserves some clarification. Social control can come internally from the organization of the industry and government policy, or it can extend as far as international market conditions. Briefly mentioned by Huaco, Tudor gives it

**Table 1: A Comparison of the Components of Tudor/Lovell's and Huaco's Theories of Film Movements**

<b>TUDOR/LOVELL</b>	<b>HUACO</b>
Distinct grouping/clusters of films	Stylistically homogeneous clusters
Innovation or break from traditional cinema	[no explicit equivalent]
Intentionality or collective and self-conscious actions	[no explicit equivalent]
Structure conduciveness and structural strain	Macroscopic model (of major political, social and economic changes in the larger society) to evaluate the presence of the four structural determinants (personnel, facilities and equipment, industry organization and political norms)
Precipitating factors and mobilization	Dealt with implicitly in the application of the macroscopic model
[No explicit equivalent]	Middle-range model (used to analyze the historically specific social matrix of film and the other arts)
Social control (internal and external)	Dealt with implicitly in the application of the macroscopic model

additional emphasis. It has crucial influence on the development of a film movement. The diminishing of the famous German Expressionism movement illustrates its importance:

It began in the notorious inflation of 1923, an economic disaster which had not initially had drastic effects on the film industry. The measures introduced to deal with the crisis, however, were far from beneficial to the movement. In 1924 came the Dawes Plan, an attempt to solve the worst of the German economic problem. In the cinema it brought in a great deal of American investment while drastically cutting the export market. Most historians seem to agree that the American film industry enthusiastically grasped this opportunity to infiltrate and undermine. The Parafumet agreement of 1926 is a major example, its terms permitting MGM and Paramount to plant both feet solidly in the doorway. Not only did their investment guarantee them 50 per cent exhibition in Germany, it also, quite fatally for the movement, precipitated the wholesale departure of German film-makers to American shores. Of the major figures Lang held out the longest. Berger, Dupont, Leni, Lubitsch, Murnau, and Pick were soon gone, accompanied by Jannings, the major acting figure, and lesser performers like Pola Negri and Conrad Viedt. By the end of the decade many more had followed them. In this way the American industry exercised fatal control, ensuring the decline of the movement by removing its major members....in removing the artists, the American industry had eliminated one of a whole set of essential factors, leaving the impetus, of which this cinema had been an expression, to find other channels of development. What had been a crucial cultural configuration, as someone once said, died a quiet death.(Tudor, 1974: 175-6)

From the German case, we see the power that government policy and international competition have on prolonging or diminishing the life of a film movement.

#### **2.4 Theory and methodology to address research questions**

In this thesis, I have followed Huaco's structure of analysis, but take into account Tudor's suggestion regarding a possible relation between a social trauma and a film movement. Tudor and Lovell's emphasis on factors such as social control have been

borrowed to accommodate a more holistic analysis. I analyzed the Fifth Generation's style by studying previous research that has been done about their films and artistic features, which was then compared to those of the traditional cinema. Based on that analysis, a judgment was made whether the Fifth Generation has marked an aesthetic break. An evaluation of the Fifth Generation as a film movement was next pursued by examining whether there have been intentional and collective efforts by the film makers. Also, I have extended the attempt to locate the source of the Fifth Generation style by investigating the trends in the larger artistic-literary-dramatic context and the social-economic background of the directors. Historical context was examined to illustrate how it prepared the necessary structural determinants for a film movement. The Chinese government's policy and international market conditions have also been analyzed in their role as social control.

More specifically, then, the efforts made to address the research questions, have included:

- An historical review of the development of the Chinese cinema to illustrate the formation of the classical Chinese cinematic tradition.
- A secondary analysis of the existence of major unifying themes and common stylistic features of the Fifth Generation films, which were compared to those of the traditional cinema to determine whether there has been an aesthetic break between the two.
- A study of the Fifth Generation film makers' common social characteristics, and an analysis of the commentaries and interviews of these film makers with regards to their

motivation and intentions in making films, to determine if their efforts met the requirements of commonality / intentionality.

- An examination of the larger artistic-literary-dramatic cultural context of China in the early 1980s that might have resonated with or contributed to the genesis of the Fifth Generation style.
- An examination of the Cultural Revolution, and especially its aftermath, to determine whether it created the circumstances considered necessary for the emergence of a film movement, in this instance the Chinese film makers known collectively as the Fifth Generation.
- An analysis of the existence and nature of Huaco's four structural determinants in the Cultural Revolution period and its aftermath.
- An analysis of Chinese government policies and the international market conditions which made it possible for Chinese films to reach an international audience, which in turn brought international attention and recognition to the Fifth Generation.
- An examination and analysis of any factors or elements that might lead to or have led to a diminution of, or potentially could lead to the disappearance of the Fifth Generation as a film movement.

Successful achievement of these efforts allow an assessment to be made of the Fifth Generation as a film movement and to speculate on its possible future.

## **Chapter Three: Movement requirements related to films**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine the history of the traditional Chinese cinema and the development of its style, which is then compared to that of the Fifth Generation. We will be able to decide whether there has been a major aesthetic break between the two after the comparison, such a break being an important requirement for the Fifth Generation to qualify as a film movement.

### **3.2 Development of the traditional Chinese cinema**

Before proceeding to the history of Chinese cinema, it will be helpful to clarify the classification of different generations in the Chinese film industry, as Semsel(1990) outlines them. The first generation of Chinese film makers (1905-1932, approximately) consist of those who introduced film into China and subsequently made films themselves (e.g., Zhang Zhenqui, Yang Shichuan); the second generation(1932-1949, approximately) consist of those directors who joined the industry before Liberation and remained active for some time afterwards (e.g., Cai Cusheng, Zhang Junli); the third generation(1950-1960, approximately) refer to those educated during the period following Liberation, who formed the backbone of the industry during that period (e.g., Xie Jin, Wu Tianming); and the fourth generation(1960-1980, approximately) are the middle-aged directors who

received a college-level education in film or theatre before the Cultural Revolution and who became the major force of film making immediately after it ended<sup>4</sup> (e.g., Zheng Dongtian, Wu Yigong). The Fifth Generation, as discussed earlier, refer to the graduates of the 1982 class from the Beijing Film Academy.

Chinese audiences saw a motion picture for the first time on August 11, 1896 at the Youyicun Teahouse in Shanghai's Xu Garden, eight months after the world's first public showing of motion pictures in Paris on December 28, 1895. The first American film came a year after the Europeans. It included a sequence of belly dancing by Little Egypt at the Chicago World's Fair. Another clip showed "Negroes eating watermelon" (Leyda, 1972: 2,7). This was an immediate success as the audiences were amazed and delighted to see real people and things reproduced on screen. Thus film as a new commercial entertainment was gradually introduced to China.

James Ricalton of America was probably one of the earliest to see the lucrative market in China. In 1897 he began to import movies to China and show them at tea houses. More and more foreign film entrepreneurs followed suit, and they soon dominated the film markets in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Early imports came mainly from France, but beginning in the 1920s, Hollywood movies dominated the Chinese markets for almost thirty years. (Wu, 1994: 197)

The first attempt to produce a Chinese film was made in the late 1890s by a

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<sup>4</sup> The Fifth Generation have a more homogeneous nature. They are often referred to by film critics as a group. The other generations do not have the same kind of group homogeneity, and are known more for the individual film makers. As a result, the term the "Fifth Generation" is normally presented in capitalized form whereas the other generations are usually presented in lower case.

businessman, Ren Jingfeng, from north-eastern China. He opened a still photograph studio called the Fengtai Photo Studio in Beijing in 1892 and later set up a cinema to show films. His studio made the first Chinese film ever in history and later turned out to be the breeding ground of the Chinese film industry.

As there was a shortage of Western films in the market, he [Ren Jingfeng] gradually lost audience. Then the idea occurred to him to make a Chinese film. He bought a French camera and fourteen reels of film from a German merchant and began his experiment. In the fall of 1905, in the courtyard of the Fengtai Photo Studio, the first Chinese film, *Dingjun Shan* (Dingjun Mountain), was produced with Ren Jingfeng as producer, Liu Zhonglun as cameraman, and Tan Xinpei, the prominent actor of Beijing drama (Beijing opera), as the main actor. It took three days to finish the three-reel project. Based on an episode from the classic novel *Sanguo yanyi* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) by Luo Guangzhong (c. 1330-1400), *Dingjun Mountain* is a classic item in the repertoire of Beijing drama. Obviously, China's first film is in fact a record of an old drama performed not on stage but in a photo studio. The nature of the dramatic original helped define the early cinema audience that in turn influenced the films made to attract it. (Wu, 1994: 197-8)

Ren Jingfeng's first film started Chinese cinema's long-lasting, intimate relation with drama. Theatrical influences on his films were obvious:

Theatrical traditions were so strong that the cinema spent its early years working with dramatic conventions, and even acting styles were transferred from stage onto screen. The transition from the traditional form of old drama to the new art of cinema is significant because, on the one hand, Chinese audiences could feel on familiar ground with mellow falsetto or violent swordplay, and on the other hand, old drama films could establish themselves as a unique type in Chinese cinema. For decades, Chinese filmmakers have continuously made use of traditional materials from theater repertory and historical tales. Later, many more famous actors of Beijing drama put their art on camera in the Fengtai Photo Studio, such as Yu Jusheng, Zhu Wenying... (Wu, 1994: 198)

The notion that film is essentially drama started then and continued throughout the



long years of Chinese cinema development. This aesthetic is sometimes referred to by film critics as the “shadowplay aesthetics,” since film was called shadowplay when it was first introduced to China (Bao, 1973). Moreover, the word shadowplay summarizes the core concept of Chinese film aesthetics (Chen, X., 1990: 193):

In Chinese, shadowplay (ying xi) is a word group consisting of a modifier and the word it modifies. Its key word is play, which means drama; shadow, which means the image on the screen, is only the modifier of play. The basic understanding of the relationship of shadowplay to film is that play is the origin of film, but shadow is its means of presentation.

Shadowplay refers to both the concept and structure of film that occupied the dominant position in early Chinese film making. Shadowplay reflected the basic understanding of film makers about the medium. According to Chinese film makers during the 1920s, film was neither the direct recording of reality, nor a game of shooting and editing, but a drama. Hou wrote in 1926 that “Shadowplay is a kind of drama. It possess all the same values as drama” (quoted in Chen, X., 1990: 193). Xu noted further that, “Although shadowplay is an independent thing, as regards its properties of presentation (i.e., showing a story by actors or actresses), it is still drama. Although the forms of drama differ, its properties are fully the same” (quoted in Chen, X., 1990: 193). Looking at film as drama was the central concept of film during the early stage of Chinese film making. And this concept goes beyond the specific historical category of early Chinese film, and becomes a basic concept that summarizes the overall traditional understanding of Chinese film (Chen, X., 1990).

China's first generation of film directors' efforts came to fruition in the early 1920s. The producer and the director of China's first feature-length film *Nanfu nanqi* (The Suffering Couple, 1913), Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan respectively, are the representatives of this generation. *Nanfu nanqi* exposed and condemned China's feudal marriage system through the tragedy of a young couple. It also marked the beginning of a cinematic tradition that film must help reform society and educate the masses (Wu, 1994). If *Dingjun Shan* marked the beginning of a dramatic tradition in Chinese cinema, then *Nanfu nanqi* indicated the start of a didactic tradition that film is an educational tool.

The decade-long collaboration of the two film makers lured audiences with adaptations of traditional adventure tales, and lurid criminal cases from the tabloid press. By the end of the 1920s, the interests of these two auteurs started to diverge. Zhang Shichuan started to specialize in long serial adaptations of Chinese knight-errant tales; *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (1928-31), filmed in twenty-eight parts, is the predecessor of the contemporary kung fu film. Zheng Zhengqiu was creating a new genre of romantic melodrama, imbued with themes of social reform. Zheng's films paralleled the new 'mandarin duck and butterfly school'<sup>5</sup> of urban fiction which also addressed the problems arranged marriages brought and the anxieties of first-generation city dwellers. These film makers established the two dominant trends within Chinese cinema in the 1920s: pure entertainment rooted in tradition, and a socially conscious, didactic cinema (Faubel, 1990).

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<sup>5</sup> The entertainment school of Chinese literature as opposed to the didactic school.

The film industry developed rapidly as more people saw its commercial potential in the 1920s. According to reported statistics, in 1925, there were 175 film companies all over China, 141 in Shanghai alone. Most of these companies went out of business without ever producing one film due to lack of experience and expertise in film making (Wu, 1994). In the late 1920s, more than a hundred films were made annually, most of them dealing with sentimental romances and martial arts adventures (Wu, 1994).

The 1920s established a foundation for the development and maturation of Chinese cinema. During this period, film equipment and studios proliferated and film personnel gradually became experienced. By the start of the 1930s, Chinese cinema had advanced into a golden age, as film making entered the sound era. For the first time, in 1931, Chinese audiences saw films with sound, while the number of films produced and the number of new artists emerging reached a peak in this decade. Between 1930 and the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1937, 565 films were produced by Chinese studios (Armes, 1987). In the process, large numbers of promising directors, scriptwriters, and actors were making their appearances (Wu, 1994).

In spite of the rapid development of domestic film production, Hollywood films still dominated 90% of the Chinese market in 1929, and 85% between the years 1930 to 1937 (Armes, 1987). As film makers were exposed more to Hollywood films, Chinese cinema moved closer to the dominant international style of film, imitating the narrative formulas and studio production methods of Hollywood, and focusing on movie “stars”

(Faubel, 1990: 7):

The waning of traditional influences in Chinese cinema in this decade is not surprising when we consider that 85% of all films screened in Chinese theaters were imported from Hollywood. Urban Chinese audiences were enamored of the screen characters Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and especially Charlie Chaplin's "little tramp," identified by the Chinese moniker of "little mustache." ...The Star Company, China's most successful studio, housed a stable of actors under exclusive contracts-including "China's Garbo," Ruan Lingyu. Film supplements in the daily Shanghai newspapers informed fans of the star's latest romantic entanglements.

The invasion of the Japanese and the corruption of the government in the 1930s created the environment for a left wing movement in literature and art, as well as in cinema. Films with strong anti-feudal and anti-Japanese themes started to appear. Chinese cinema's didactic tradition was gaining its strength during this time. For instance, over forty films made in 1933 advocated democratic and nationalistic ideas, among the over seventy films in total made in that year (Wu, 1994). Left wing artists throughout China were working together as a group to save the country.

This underground movement was spearheaded by the playwrights, Xia Yan, Tian Han, and Yang Hengsheng, who concentrated on writing scripts as a means of infiltrating the American financed, Chinese studios. Noted filmmakers of this era, such as Cai Chusheng, Yuan Muzhi, Shen Xiling, and Sun Yu, defied government censors by creating anti-Japanese and social exposé films from these scripts.(Faubel, 1990:8)

The second generation of Chinese filmmakers were those who came to the cinema at the beginning of the sound era with backgrounds in drama. Outstanding films made in the thirties (silent and sound ) include Shen Xiling's *Shanghai ershisi xiaoshi* (Twenty-four Hours in Shanghai, 1934), Wu Yongang's *Shenmu* (Goddess, 1934), Cai Cusheng's

*Yuguang qu* ( Song of the Fishermen, 1934), Yuan Muzhi's *Malu tianshi* (Street Angel, 1934), etc. *Goddess* exerted a far-reaching influence on Chinese film making as a result of its realistic style. It served as the pioneer of the realist tradition in Chinese cinema, which became the inspirational source of the post-1949 socialist realism cinema:

Produced by the Lianhua Film Company, *Goddess* is about the miserable life of a woman struggling for survival in Old China. Raped by a villain, she tries several times to escape from his control but in vain. Later, she becomes a prostitute in order to support the family and pay for her son's education. When the school authorities learn that she is a prostitute, they expel her son from school. Not totally discouraged, she believes that she can use her savings to send her son to study in a remote place. When she discovers that all her savings have been stolen by the villain, she is so enraged that she throws a vase at him, killing him accidentally. Consequently, she is sentenced to twelve years in prison. Full of deep sympathy for downtrodden women, this film reflects their misery with great artistic power. Its success shows the progress made in technique and direction as well as in acting. (Wu, 1994)

The left-influenced film productions of the 1930s rejected the semi-Westernized fashions and backdrops of Shanghai which provided the glossy mise-en-scène of their competitor's films. Turning their cameras on the underside of this urban life, they fashioned a hard-edged, highly realistic style which is often compared with the Neo-realist style of the post-war Italian cinema (Faubel, 1990).

As the Japanese occupation further penetrated Chinese society, both Japanese invaders and the corrupted Nationalist government started to promote "soft films," also known as "enlightening films," intended to prettify the Japanese presence in China and to counteract left wing films' motivational efforts to resist the Japanese. Left wing critics ridiculed these films as "Ice cream for the eyes and a comfortable sofa for the mind,"

stirring public resentment against escapist entertainment in a time of national crisis (Wu, 1994). Between 1934 and 1936 the Nationalist government forced fourteen studios out of business for patronizing the work of the left wing film groups and started to sponsor the production of “soft films” (Cheng, 1963).

In northeastern China, the Japanese aggressors controlled the film industry and produced more than 200 “enlightening films,” more than 120 entertainment films, and more than 300 documentaries from 1937 to 1945. Although about 240 features were made in Shanghai from 1938 to 1941, most of them were ancient history costume dramas roughly produced. When the Japanese seized all the concessions in Shanghai in December 1941, they also took control of filmmaking there. In Shanghai, from 1942 to 1945, more than 130 features were produced under the Japanese occupation. (Wu, 1994: 203)

Fighting harsh censorship under the Nationalist government, Chinese left wing films reached the height of their popularity as socio-economic conditions worsened in the years prior to the 1949 revolution. More than 240 films were produced in the areas under the Nationalist Party’s rule, of which more than 40 were written and directed by progressive artists. Successful films in the period include *Baqian lilu yun he yue* (Eight Thousand Miles of Clouds and Moon, 1947), *Yijiang chunshui xiang dongliu* (The Spring River Flows East, 1947), and *Yanyangtian* (Bright Day, 1949) (Wu, 1994). The decade of Japanese invasions created the background for epic melodramas such as *The Spring River Flows East* (Cai Chusheng, director)- the Chinese equivalent of *Gone with the Wind*. The three hour film chronicles the separation and reunion of a young couple during the anti-Japanese war years. The husband becomes a government official and is corrupted by the privileges of power, while his wife labours at menial jobs in occupied Shanghai to

support their son. The debauched husband gets married to a prominent socialite only to be discovered by his first wife when she is hired as a maid for one of their parties (Faubel, 1990). The film was an immense success. It was in the theaters for three months and 710,000 tickets were sold (Wu, 1994).

The film industry also developed under adverse conditions in the Communist areas as it was booming in Nationalist-ruled areas.

Following Zhou Enlai's<sup>6</sup> instructions, the Yanan Film Workshop was set up in the fall of 1938, with one of the cameras donated by the famous filmmaker Joris Ivens from Holland. Then, in 1939, the workshop set up a projection team. This workshop produced a few documentary films, but it dissolved when all of its forty members went to northeastern China to take control of the film institutions there from the Japanese after their surrender. The Yanan Film Studio was set up in 1946, but it produced only a few newsreels and an unfinished feature, Chen Boer's *Bianqu yingxiong* (Heroes in Communist Areas). In October 1946, the Northeast Film Studio was also set up under the leadership of the Communist Party. The footage produced in Communist areas in these days was not for commercial profits, but to carry the propaganda of Communist ideas. Although it mainly produced documentary films, the studio also turned out animations such as Chen Boer's *Huangdi de meng* (Emperor's Dream, 1947) and a four-reel feature, Lin Qi's *Liuxia ta da laojiang* (Leave Him Behind to Fight Chiang Gai-shek, 1948). (Wu, 1994: 205)

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government nationalized the Shanghai studios. A central Film Bureau was established under the Ministry of Culture to inspect the work of the studios and supervise production. A nation-wide distribution network was created which employed some 2300 mobile projection teams that extended the film audience beyond the cities for the first time (Clark,

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<sup>6</sup> A Party leader who later became the first Premier of the People's Republic of China.

1987).

The statistics available for the growth of the film industry in the first decade since the founding of the People's Republic of China suggest that the new government, committed to a period of post-revolutionary institutionalization, placed a very high priority on rapid progress in getting new films out to the people. Given the size of China, the enormity and diversity of its population, and the almost complete destruction of its economy after fourteen years of Japanese invasion, plus another four years of civil war, the task of building and transforming a film industry was formidable. Nevertheless, in the decade between 1950 and 1960, film attendance jumped from 150 million to 5.4 billion per year; the number of motion picture theaters climbed from 522 to almost 1,800; the number of workers in various departments of the state-operated film industry rose from 3,000 to 90,000; the number of major studios went from 3 to 12; and, perhaps most impressively, the number of mobile film projection teams for the countryside shot up from 500 to over 9,000 (Liu, 1971: 202; Scott, 1965:78; Survey of China Mainland Press, n.d. No. 905: 40, No.2464: 19; *Culture and Education in New China*, 1950: 79).

As a consequence of an urge to make cinema a medium of political education, as well as the desire to gain a national audience, films that subscribed to the credo of "socialist realism" began to be produced in increasing numbers, the Soviet Union providing the model and impetus. The themes of films include revolutionary zeal and fervour, the actions of positive heroes who had the interests of the masses in mind, class



struggle, and the triumph of progressive forces over reactionary forces (Dissanayake, 1988).

The socialist realism aesthetic concentrates highly on the social function of film and demands that film communicate specific, ready-made ideologies of ethics or politics. It emphasizes content over form, and insists that form obey content. Consequently, the fundamental nature of the traditional cinema is that of an educational tool (Chen, X., 1990).

In the early 1950s, a series of political campaigns targeted the bourgeoisie for public criticism and the remaining prints of American films ceased to be screened in China. Soviet films were imported to fill the temporary gap in domestic production as the film industry was re-organized. Experts from the Soviet film industry were also utilized to train a third generation of Chinese filmmakers that would staff the new state studios (Faubel, 1990). The strongest work by the third generation was a series of adaptations of opera, folk tales and May Fourth period literature (from the years 1915-1926). Representative films by this generation are *Liu sanjie* (Third Sister Liu, 1962), *Zao chun eryu* (Early Spring in February, 1963), and *Li Shuangshuang* (1962).

*Third Sister Liu* (Su Li dir. 1962) transforms a Guangxi folk tale into a modern musical that manages to be both entertaining and politically correct; the finale of the film features a call and response singing contest in which the heroine outwits an entourage of scholars retained by the local despot. Xie Tieli's *Early Spring in February* (1963) faithfully evokes the alienation from the traditional society and the ideological wavering which many intellectuals felt during the twenties. The film is unique among post-1949 adaptations of

May Fourth literature in that it makes few attempts to update the political outlook of its protagonists to correspond with official interpretations of the May Fourth era... The most popular film of this period, *Li Shuangshuang* (Lu Ren dir. 1962), uses comedy to examine the difficulties of agricultural collectivization. The film is a prototype for the reform film (*gaige pian*) where a progressive, model figure demonstrates the correct path of action to an indecisive populous. Such films recognized the problems of socialism and showed audiences how they might be remedied, usually through the efficacy of the resident Party cadre. *Li Shuangshuang* is unusual because the film's heroine challenges the male dominated status quo on behalf of the other women in her village. (Faubel, 1990: 15-6)

The fourth generation of Chinese filmmakers were the first graduates of the Beijing Film Academy which was founded in 1959. Their careers were suspended by the outbreak of the ten-year Cultural Revolution in 1966, during which the film industry almost came to a standstill. Film making in this period was limited to Jiang Qing's<sup>7</sup> *model operas* (*yangbanxi*). The censorship was so heavy that even the selection of camera angles was strictly codified (Clark, 1987). In 1970 the first new films to appear, after feature production came to a complete stop in the mid-1960s, were film versions of the *model operas* (*yangbanxi*). These films were marked by their lack of ambiguities and a revolutionary realism pushed to the extreme. The characters were mostly homogenized "stock" characters. Aside from the hero/heroine, there was always a kind, elderly woman, "Granny," who was perpetually available with a tearful recollection of the bitter past; a young woman eager to join the revolutionary struggle; and an old man who sometimes wavered in loyalty to the cause until the hero put him right. Class enemies and Japanese, the usual kinds of negative characters in these films, similarly lacked depth or nuance.

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<sup>7</sup> Jiang Qing was Mao's wife, and a member of the Gang of Four, which was the driving force behind the Cultural Revolution.

Their evilness sometimes made them seem more interesting than their zealous, but bland, opponents (Clark, 1987). A common scene is as an observer noted in 1978: “In these films the goodies are always holding meetings, while the baddies are constantly eating and drinking” (Clark, 1987:135).

The fourth generation are part of the “lost generation” spawned by the Cultural Revolution, in the sense that they are not old enough to recall or recreate the altruistic spirit of social regeneration in the early years of the People’s Republic. The first fourth generation films are characterized by humanistic, albeit sentimental investigations of the victims of the Cultural Revolution. They became a central theme of Chinese film in the early 1980s (Faubel, 1990). *Ku Lian* (Unrequited Love, 1981) tells of the career of a patriotic Chinese artist who returns from America to the motherland following the 1949 revolution, only to die as a fugitive at the end of the Cultural Revolution. The film posed the question which confronted many intellectuals who lived through this period: “you love your country, but does your country love you?” (Clark, 1987). Other outstanding films made by the fourth generation included *Yieshan* (In the Wild Mountains, 1985), *Xiangnu Xiaoxiao* (Xiaoxiao: Girl from Hunan, 1987), and *Chengnan jiushi* (Memories of Old Beijing, 1983).

The influence of drama extends to the 1980s and remains the dominant basic concept by which the Chinese understand film. People speak of film from the perspective of drama, and screen writers apply dramatic structure to their scripts. Films made in this

period continue to rely heavily on dramatic conflicts as the basic structure of film and on dialogue as their primary means of cinematic representation (Bai, 1990).

The traditional Chinese socialist realism aesthetic has its historic roots. The development of its dramatic and didactic characteristics can be traced to various stages of Chinese cinema. The dramatic tradition was started in the very early days of film making by pioneer Ren Jingshen and his made-for-film stage dramas. Since then, film has been considered a kind of drama which possesses the same values as drama. Dramatic conflicts, rather than shooting and editing, function as the primary component of film. The dramatic tradition was passed down from one generation to another and has been the fundamental concept of how traditional Chinese film makers understand how films are to be made.

### **3.3 Summary of traditional Chinese cinema aesthetics**

In the early 1920s, the emergence of China's first feature-length film, *Nanfu nanqi*, marked the beginning of another cinematic tradition: film must help reform society and educate the masses. Zhang Zhengqiu, who was the producer of *Nanfu nanqi* and a representative figure of the first generation of Chinese film makers, created a new genre of romantic melodrama, imbued with themes of social reform. This tradition was strengthened in the leftist movement of the 1930s. The Japanese invasion and the corruption of the government in the 1930s prompted a nation-wide left wing movement in

literature and arts, as well as in film. Anti-Japanese, anti-feudal films, which embodied strong political messages, proliferated on the Chinese screen during that period.

The second generation of Chinese film makers came to the cinema at the beginning of the sound era. They brought to the Chinese screen a series of powerful, realist melodramas, such as *Goddess*, *Street Angel*, and *Song of the Fisherman*. These films became the precedent of the post-1949 socialist realism approach. Heavy Hollywood influence between 1932 and 1949 underscored emphasis on the dramatic element in film.

The work of the third and fourth generations followed the traditional socialist realism route. The bulk of the third generation's work were adaptations of opera, folk tales and May Fourth period literature (1915-1926). The fourth generation were the first graduates of the Beijing Film Academy, but their careers were suspended by the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. A few of them had the chance to make some model operas during that period, but their careers did not start on a full scale basis until the early 1980s. They made films full of nostalgic memory of their wasted youth in the ten-year Cultural Revolution.

The traditional Chinese cinema could therefore be characterized as melodramatic, didactic, socialist realism. Traditional film makers consider films to be a medium to transmit political and ideological messages which should have an influence on the viewers. Traditional films rely heavily on dramatic conflicts as the basic structure of film, and on

dramatic elements, such as dialogue, as their primary means of cinematic representation.

### **3.4 Comparative analysis of the Fifth Generation films**

1976 was an eventful year in Chinese history. The ten year long Cultural Revolution formally ended, following Mao's death and the collapse of the Gang of Four. In December, 1978, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Communist Party Central Committee launched the Four Modernizations program. Massive reforms began to take place throughout Chinese society. Higher education was restructured to emphasize intellectual "expertise" rather than political "redness." A large number of students were sent abroad for advanced study (Browne, 1994). A period of relaxation in Party policies toward the arts began. Literature, and other areas of the arts, entered a period of vigorous development. As it welcomed the first graduates of the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution, Chinese cinema also advanced to a most exciting stage: the emergence of the Fifth Generation of film makers that would bring Chinese film international recognition never achieved before.

Since the founding of the new China, film had always been considered a reliable tool for political propaganda, which was made to educate people or to support current political movements. The Fifth Generation challenge this mode of film making. Upon graduation, they immediately set themselves the task of modernizing Chinese cinema by pursuing a universal humanistic identity for it, independent of the specific social-political

milieu of contemporary China (Ma, 1990). Their films have won a succession of international awards including the Palme d'Or (Cannes, France) and the Golden Bear (Berlin International Film Festival). The Fifth Generation have elevated the artistic value of Chinese cinema to a higher level. "In China no serious film making took place for decades, and now great films are coming in a torrent from that country," Roger Ebert (1994) has commented. Some of their representative films are: *One and Eight* (Zhang Junzhao dir. 1984), *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige dir. 1985), *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou dir. 1988), *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou dir. 1991), *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou dir. 1992), and *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige dir. 1993)<sup>8</sup>.

The Fifth Generation films differ from the traditional cinema in some fundamental aspects, as I demonstrate in the following analysis. First, the two film aesthetics have different preferences in themes. Traditional films mostly deal with revolutionary zeal and the actions of positive heroes who have the interests of the masses in mind. Class struggle and the triumph of progressive forces are given great emphasis (Dissanayake, 1988). The new cinema marks a break. Their films begin to focus on more personal and philosophical aspects of people's lives instead of portraying their heroic deeds in the bitter years of war (Ma, 1988). The historical reappearance of the "self," and an analysis of its denial in previous historical periods are the dominant themes of the new cinema (Browne, 1994).

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<sup>8</sup>English titles are mostly used here in light of the fact that the distribution of these films in the West made their English titles better known than their Chinese ones.

*One and Eight* was the first film made by the Fifth Generation film makers. Set in northern China during the Second World War, it is a story about nine prisoners confined in an Eighth Route Army prison. The nine of them include traitors, thieves, deserters, and Wang Jin, an Eighth Route Army soldier falsely accused of treason. Wang's determination to prove his innocence and his insistence that national interest take priority over personal suffering in a time of a national war win respect from the eight others and from their captors. Eventually their guards enlist them in the fight against the Japanese pursuers (Clark, 1989). At first glance, the plot looks like a familiar party cadre story. However, this film goes beyond the traditional depiction of party cadres' heroic deeds. Through the portrayal of the conflict among the prisoners, a subjective, psychological time and space are created, and the conflict between ideological orthodoxy and the basic human need for freedom and love is played out (Ma, 1990). The significance of the film lies in the awakening of not only cinematic innovation, but also more importantly, a humanistic consciousness. They convey through their films what they saw and how they felt in those turbulent years. "The main purpose of art is to understand and be understood," says Zhang Yimou (quoted in Luo, 1990: 176 ). The Fifth Generation, for the first time in Chinese history, thoroughly represent individualism on the screen (Semsel, 1990).

Seeking communication with the audience surpasses weaving together dramatic conflicts as the utmost important element of Fifth Generation films. Their subjective representations take priority over the normal objective structures. Plot and narrative in their films are no longer in the dominant position (Semsel, 1990).



If the classical Chinese socialist realist films can be said to have their origin in Hollywood and Soviet realism, then the Fifth Generation owe their inspiration to European art cinema. During their education at the Beijing Film Academy, the Fifth Generation studied and learned extensively from great French, German and Italian films. It is not hard to detect the influence of international art cinema from their approach to narrative.

In parallel with Bordwell's (1985) general notion of classic cinema narrative, the socialist realism of Chinese classical cinema pursues a tacit coherence among events and a consistency of individual identity: There is always a clear and insurmountable line between good and bad: good people cannot have bad moments; bad people definitely cannot do good things. Cause and effect in films are well-established; continuity editing breaks up the narrative into a number of shots and locks the audience into the linear flow of the plot. All these factors facilitate a well-plotted drama. This is consistent with traditional Chinese cinema's "film=drama" aesthetic.

The Fifth Generation narrative, influenced by international art cinema, however, takes its cue from literary modernism. Plot and narrative in their films are no longer in the central position. Their narrative does not divulge the outcome of the causal chain. Long shots are frequently used, contrary to the frequent use of close-ups in the traditional socialist realism cinema (Faubel, 1990). Close-up shots direct the audience to identify with, and convey the emotions of, the characters in the frame. A film shot mainly in

closeups, deprives us of setting and imposes the subjective intentions of the film maker. However, a film shot mainly in long shot emphasizes context over drama and dialectic over personality (Monaco, 1981). By distancing the camera, long shots are used to depict life truthfully without adding the film maker's bias, thus empowering the audience to construct meaning and invoke emotions. Art cinema aesthetics claim that the world's laws may not be knowable; personal psychology may be indeterminate. This narrative reinforces the subjective, interpretive capacity of the audience: the spectator is free to construct the significant story information within the scene. Their films make you think when leaving the theater. The ambiguous ending acknowledges the narration as not simply powerful but humble; the film makers' narrative knows that life is more complex than art can ever be, and the only way to respect this complexity is to leave causes dangling and questions unanswered (Bordwell, 1985).

By bringing challenges to the audience, the Fifth Generation films establish a strong intellectual presence, and have changed the stereotype the world had about Chinese cinema. The new cinema, with its freedom from commerce and emphasis on the creative genius of its film makers, effectively reinforces the opposition with the traditional cinema, which tended to emphasize collective creation, and the use of film as propaganda. The power of the Fifth Generation films lays in the strong personal statements film makers make about their understanding of life and reality in China, all of which are presented with their unique narrative structure and innovative cinematic language. Arthur Knight's statement accounting for the power of European art cinema also applies to its Chinese

counterpart:

Art is not manufactured by committees. Art comes from an individual who has something that he must express, and who works out what is for him the most forceful or affecting manner of expressing it...There is in them the urgency of individual expression, and independence of vision, the coherence of a single-minded statement. (Quoted in Bordwell, 1985: 231)

The narrative style of the Fifth Generation is remarkably more ambiguous than that of the classical cinema which provides a “clear, didactic signification” (Berry, 1994). This ambiguity in itself constitutes another model, one that by various strategies refuses either to set up a clear moral/political position for the audience or to construct an exemplary positive or negative figure for emulation or criticism (Berry, 1994). This deviation from the traditional film ideology consequently makes their films easy targets of government censorship. Thus, film makers have to be more subtle in filmic expression to pass the scrutiny of cultural officials and reach a wider audience.

One important tool used to convey this ambiguity is the incorporation of ritual as an element of the narrative. Ritual has been defined as “repetitive, formalized activity set off from day-to-day life” (Sutton, 1994:31). According to the 1988 edition of the Oxford Dictionary, ritual refers to both the series of actions used in a religious or other ceremony, and a procedure regularly followed by people. And I discuss both usages: ritual includes religious activities such as the prayer for rain invoked in *Yellow Earth*, as well as regularly followed procedures such as the foot massage ritual practiced by the Chen family in *Raise the Red Lantern*.

Zhang Yimou and other Fifth Generation film makers have taken advantage of the eloquence and persuasiveness that ritual exerts within its full social context (Sutton, 1994). Ritual can concretize a social situation and open up a window on family and village life in all its complexity. Portrayals of rituals in film can criticize with great economy the old order, as distinct from the wrongs and evils of particular individuals. Ritual can also depict the effort to survive and resist and replace that order and it is a means by which people have fought to improve their status and access to local resources. Ritual is thus very effective in the historical depiction of China in a critical and humanistic manner, especially in the peculiar context of film making in contemporary China (Sutton, 1994).

There is in ritual a fundamental ambiguity that is fully in accord with what contemporary film critic Chen Xihe sees as the nature of modern, as distinct from traditional film in China. Modern films should construct a two-way relationship between screen and audience. The audience, while viewing the film, is inspired to participate actively in the creation of meaning, and the film maker seldom frankly and directly reveals information to the audience (Chen, 1993). As an example, he refers to the series of long shots at the start of *Yellow Earth*, in which we contemplate the bridal party from afar on its zigzag journey without seeing a close-up of the bride and her tears. The viewer is encouraged to contemplate actively what the situation is inside the sedan and how the bride feels. No direct information is “fed” to the viewer. Simply manipulating the audience’s emotions is obviously not the director’s intention. As a contrast, one could

point to the melodramatic 1956 version of Bajin's equally melodramatic novel *Family*, in which no emotion is left unexpressed (Leyda, 1972), and the opportunity for ritual depiction of a great family in decline is missed.

Such ambiguity embodied in rituals is extraordinarily useful if one considers the diversity of audiences for the Fifth Generation films. For instance, directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige have to worry about the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, which occupies itself with such matters as moral standpoint, sex, and violence and not the least with how the Chinese Communist Party is represented (Wang, 1989). Moreover, they aim for the highest international standards of films competing at Cannes and other leading festivals. For these film makers, ritual is valuable for its intrinsic ambiguity, its unspokenness, and its persuasiveness. This ambiguity in expressing their views helps to protect them from official criticism and to appeal to their diverse audiences. There is room for varying interpretations by a country peasant, a cultural commissar, or a Western film critic. This would never be the case with the aural slogans and visual clichés of government approved popular films in contemporary China (Sutton, 1994).

*Raise the Red Lantern* can serve as a clear example of how ritual is used, as Sutton (1994) has analyzed it. The story is set in the 1920s in Northern China. Nineteen year old Songlian is forced to marry Chen Zuoqian, the lord of a powerful family, after her father's death. Fifty year old Chen already has three wives, each of them living in a separate house within the great castle. The struggle among the wives is intense, as their master's attention

carries power and privileges. Each night the old master must decide which wife to spend the night with and rows of red lanterns are lit in front of the house of his choice. Each wife schemes and plots to make sure her house is lit by the lanterns.

The symbolism of the red lanterns functions beautifully both aurally and visually: clacking metallicly as they are put in place, and booming hollowly as a manservant blows through a bamboo tube to extinguish them in the morning. As Sutton (1994) notes, the sexual implication of raising the lanterns is strengthened by the ensuing ritual of the chosen wife's foot massage by an old servant. Its tapping sound, almost as a form of foreplay, echoes through all parts of the sprawling compound as a humiliating reminder to the other wives. Through the use of ritual, Zhang Yimou is able to simplify with great clarity the myriad personal relations in an old-style household. The husband is never seen clearly, and never in bed with any of his wives. His power is abstracted into the raising of beautiful red lanterns, a symbolic act that sums up and indeed constitutes the household's micro politics. The texture and routine of lives lost are thereby recaptured with surprising economy. The viewer begins to realize how the pre-revolutionary society could be oppressive for many of its members, yet still function (Sutton, 1994).

To everyone's surprise, the red lanterns are absent in Su Tong's novel *Wives and Concubines*, on which *Raise the Red Lantern* is based. In the book, there is only one reference to a lantern of any colour, to the effect that the old master prefers to sleep with the lights on (Chute, 1991). Yet the whole look of the film is built up around the visual

hook of the “ hot” light of red paper lanterns. Similarly, in Liu Heng’s short story on which Zhang Yimou based *Ju Dou*, no dye mill is mentioned. Meanwhile, the ancient fabric-dyeing mill is the backdrop for the disturbing tragedy that embodies battery, adultery, pyromania, patricide and manslaughter in one plot. The key symbolic act in *Ju Dou* involves the suspended bolts of material and the great dye vats, specifically the accidental unreeling of the bolts. The camera is repeatedly addressed to the long skeins of silk and the great red dye vat. Westerners may assume that the film’s backbreaking hand-operated textile plant is an authentic old Chinese design. Zhang Yimou says no. He chose the setting, and then designed and built it from scratch (Chute, 1991).

Zhang Yimou’s invention of the red lanterns and the dye mill shows his definite recognition of the usefulness of ritual in portraying societies from the past. The visual and aural appeal of ritual, and its ability to concretize a social situation, prove to be of special value to the Fifth Generation film makers. Given wide divergences in belief among the audience, it has been argued that certain common rituals were central to the maintenance of a common Chinese cultural identity (Watson, 1988). At the same time they allow considerable variation in form and interpretation. Ritual, it can be said, embodies the unity and the diversity of China - Chineseness in all its complexity (Sutton, 1994).

Ritual is not only amply utilized by Zhang Yimou, but also by other Fifth Generation film makers. It takes form in such traditional acts as praying for rain, and a wedding. It is also seen in a more abstract form - song, which is considered by some

anthropologists to be a ritualized form of communication (Bloch, 1989). In films such as *Yellow Earth*, song plays a central role.

*Yellow Earth* is about an Eighth Route Army soldier, Gu Qing, assigned to collect folk songs in northwestern China. Cui Qiao, the daughter of the family where Gu is staying, is inspired by Gu's account of the independent existence women lead at the Communist Party base Yan'an, and consequently escapes an arranged marriage. Cui Qiao drowns while crossing the river at night in an attempt to flee to Yan'an. As she crosses the Yellow River at night, the camera focuses on the river's torrent rather than the progress of her raft. Her death is suggested when the song she is singing comes to an abrupt stop and is replaced with the sound of the river's current (Faubel, 1990). The songs in *Yellow Earth* express, with more force and emotion than the soldier's words, the hardships of farm life and of arranged marriages, and the autonomy and endurance of folk tradition. Much is left unsaid. We don't quite know why Cui Qiao drowns in the Yellow River as she flees her marriage to join the Eighth Route Army. It is up to the viewer to decide what this death means. Whether China can be truly changed seems to be at the core of the film, and the question is raised far more effectively by unexplicated ceremony, song, and daily life than by any eloquent speech (Sutton, 1994).

The Fifth Generation's fondness for the ambiguity of ritual is also seen in films such as *The Big Parade*, *Farewell My Concubine*, *On the Hunting Ground*, *Red Sorghum*, *Shanghai Triad*, etc. Accordingly, the use of ritual is considered a very distinct artistic



feature of the Fifth Generation.

The Fifth Generation are very aware of the film medium's unique visual and aural potential and are able to use them to full effect, a characteristic highly praised by international film critics. David Chute (1991:65) describes Zhang Yimou as a "story teller who uses color and light, and even set dressing, expressively," and comments on his films as a "masterful orchestration of color... a new form of visual grand opera." Roger Ebert(1996) calls Zhang Yimou "one of the best visual stylists of current cinema." His films are noted by critics for their use of colour and light:

...he [Zhang Yimou] is virtually without equal. His movies are divine items, richly hued, sumptuously textured, musically paced objects of desire. The silken, erotic flow to his imagery is like a sweet kiss to the eyes.(Hinson, 1992)

The cinematography in "Red Sorghum" has no desire to be subtle, or muted; it wants to splash its passionate colors all over the screen with abandon, and the sheer visual impact of the film is voluptuous.(Ebert, 1996)

Color isn't just important to Zhang Yimou. It's his leading lady. In "Raise the Red Lantern," the Chinese director selects from a stirring palette of glowing reds, subtle yellows and twilight grays. There isn't an arbitrary hue in the movie. In purely aesthetic terms, "Raising the Red Lantern" is breathtaking.(Howe, 1992 )

### **3.5 Assessment of the Fifth Generation as an aesthetic break**

The basic aesthetic features of the traditional Chinese cinema and the Fifth Generation film makers have been summarized in Table 2. The traditional Chinese cinema strives to uplift the spirit of society and educate the masses. It communicates specific

Table 2: A Comparison of the Traditional Cinema and the Fifth Generation

	<b>THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE CINEMA</b>	<b>THE FIFTH GENERATION</b>
<b>GOAL</b>	Educational, propaganda: communicate specific ideologies of ethics or politics.	Build a two-way communication between film and audience; express film makers' understanding of life and the world.
<b>THEMATIC FEATURES</b>	Revolutionary zeal; the actions of positive heroes who have the interests of the masses in mind; class struggle; and the triumph of progressive forces over reactionary forces.	Representation of individuality; discovery of humanistic identity in Chinese cinema; feministic and historic portrayal of Chinese women's fate in pre-communist settings.
<b>INTERIOR FORM: PLOT</b>	Dependence on dramatic conflict; clear ending.	De-emphasize coherence of plot; open-ended.
<b>EXTERIOR FORM: CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION</b>	Dialogue is the primary tool.	Full use of the medium-colour, lighting, sound.
<b>NARRATIVE FEATURES</b>	Didactic	Ambiguous

ideologies of ethics or politics. The nature of the traditional cinema is educational and political. The Fifth Generation films are part of the cultural introspection trend of the 1980s; their films become both vehicles for the rediscovery of Chinese culture, and a means of reevaluating the culture as the source of China's inertia. The film makers are not willing merely to stir the emotions as their predecessors did either in propagandistic melodramas or films used as tools for political ends. They aspire to arrive at a deeper understanding of human nature and two-way communication with their audience.

Thematically, traditional Chinese films focus on stories of party cadres who had the interests of the masses in mind, and of the eventual victory of progressive forces. The messages delivered in films are generally very clear. As a change, the new cinema began to focus on more personal and philosophical aspects of people's lives instead of portraying their heroic deeds in the bitter years of war. They have brought the historical reappearance of the "self." A majority of their films take a feministic and historic approach, as we see from films such as *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Ju Dou*, and *Farewell My Concubine*, just to name a few. They portray women's fate in China sympathetically, as distinct individuals rather than class representatives as in earlier heroic depictions. Such films are set in the pre-communist era, however, to avoid conflicts with authorities.

According to contemporary film critic Chen Xihe (1990), the narrative continuity in story and plot of film is the interior form; the image, or the level of cinematic language, is the exterior form. In Chinese traditional film making, interior form is primary and

determinant in that it dictates the nature of film: film is essentially drama; dialogue is the primary means of cinematic representation; exterior form is secondary and subordinate.

Drama is the dominant concept which dictates the traditional cinema's understanding of film construction. Within this tradition, film critics speak of film from the perspective of drama, and screen writers apply dramatic structure to their scripts. Films rely heavily on dramatic conflicts as the basic structure of film and on dialogue as their primary means of cinematic representation. Stock characters proliferate on the screen and stories are often predictable. Characters usually have extremely clear identities. There is a very clear line between bad and good, and it is almost unacceptable to have "gray" characters who are in between. Little room is left for the audience's interpretation.

In the Fifth Generation's film making, the characteristics are the opposite. Their weariness with conventional narrative techniques reflects an emphasis on film as an innovative, unique medium in its own right (Faubel, 1990). For them, story and plot are no longer in the dominant position, and the more purely cinematic aspects of film are all very important.

The Fifth Generation film makers convey their messages not predominantly by verbal statements, but through visual images of striking originality. Their expressive utilization of film composition, lighting, colour, and music brings the artistic values of Chinese films to a new level. It marks a breakthrough into a new style distinct from

traditional Chinese film aesthetics, which is based on literary and dramatic conventions and is heavily dependent on the spoken word (Li, 1989).

The Fifth Generation owe their inspiration to international art cinema and utilize some of art cinema's prominent characteristics, such as de-emphasizing the coherence of the plot, and open-endedness. In their films, communication with the audience takes precedence over composing an overly simplistic, cohesive story. Their narrative style is noticeably more ambiguous than that of the traditional cinema. They refuse to set up a clear moral and political position for the audience and they reinforce the subjective, interpretive capacity of the audience, who are in turn encouraged to construct meaning freely within that context. The ambiguity in their films proves their acknowledgment that life is more complex than art can ever be, and leaving the ending open to the audience's interpretation is their way of respecting this complexity.

On all five dimensions outlined in Table 2, then, the features of the works of the Fifth Generation film makers are markedly different from those of the traditional Chinese cinema. As a result, their films mark a significant aesthetic break from the past.

## **Chapter Four: Movement requirements related to the film makers**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I investigate the common social characteristics of the Fifth Generation as a group with a specific background and also statements made by members about their aims and intentions as film makers. This examination will provide an additional explanation for the distinctive ideology of the Fifth Generation films (e.g., individuality) and the film makers' intentions to create a new cinema in China.

First, let me briefly explain the scope of my analysis and the research involved. I used George Huaco's analysis of the film makers from the three established film movements<sup>9</sup> as my model. In his analysis of their backgrounds, Huaco focused on three factors: age, profession before becoming film makers, and father's profession. The analysis of the three factors defined those film makers' socio-economic backgrounds well. Hence, to achieve the same effect for the Fifth Generation members, I wanted to conduct a similar analysis, and started looking for similar biographical information, but ran into prohibitive obstacles in obtaining it.

After rounds of fruitless searches in the library, I contacted a group of internationally renowned scholars in Chinese film, but acquired hardly any more

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<sup>9</sup> German Expressionism, the Soviet Cinema of the 1920s, and Italian Neo-realism.

information in addition to what I already had. My list of contacts included: Chris Berry of Australia; George Semsel of the U.S.; Xie Fei, the vice-president of the Beijing Film Academy; Xia Hong, researcher, and editor of numerous Chinese film publications; Suzie Young of the Asian Cinema Society; Michael Taylor, a Ph.D candidate in Asian cinema from the University of Chicago; Paul Pickowicz from the University of California; Zhangde, my classmate from my undergraduate studies, currently teaching at Nankai University, Tianjin, China; and people who host Chinese film home pages and news groups about Asian films and Chinese culture. Even these people who are very knowledgeable in this field could give me little help.

In August, 1997, I attended the 1997 Asian Cinema Conference at Trent University and presented part of my thesis research there. During my presentation, I asked the attendees at the conference to help me with more biographical information needed to do a social background analysis of the Fifth Generation. Many people gave me suggestions. Among them, Paul Pickowicz, who is a Chinese history professor at the University of California, offered me an opportunity to interview his wife, Li Huai, a Fifth Generation member who graduated in 1982 from the Production Design Department of the Beijing Film Academy. Unfortunately, due to limited time and resources, I could not go to California and interview her. Moreover, he had indicated that his wife is very shy and does not like to be interviewed over the phone. “You need to go meet these people, and get to know them in order to get the information, because none of this kind of information is documented,” said Paul Pickowicz (1997).

Another source of information I tried to access, was the Beijing Film Academy itself, but I was not successful, since it would take an enormous amount of networking with the personnel that work there. Xie Fei (1997) could have brought me some information, but he did not have the time to make the effort. “It is summer time, and all the offices are closed,” he explained [but he is the vice-president!]. If I had the time to go to Beijing and patiently network, I probably could have secured some first-hand information. But again, it was not an option open to me at the time. In the future, if I go on to pursue a doctoral degree, I would love to do additional research in this area. By then, I should have more time and resources to conduct more thorough research about this subject.

The information I did manage to find is the Fifth Generation’s age, their early educational background, common experiences during the cultural revolution and studies at the Beijing Film Academy. Some additional information about Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Chen Kaige was also available, since they are well-researched due to their status and achievements. Though not exhaustive, then, the information obtained does help us understand how the Fifth Generation’s style of film making has been influenced by their earlier life.

#### **4.2 Designation of “key” Fifth Generation film makers**

There were 153 individuals who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982. Among them, 28 were directors, 32 actors and actresses, 26 cinematographers, 40



production designers (including animation), and 27 recording artists (*China Film Year Book*, 1983). According to the generation concept of the Chinese film industry, all the 1982 graduates would be considered the Fifth Generation. However, I doubt whether they should be all considered members of the Fifth Generation, according to the theory of film movements. Sociologist Terry Lovell (1971), in his article “Sociology and the Cinema,” suggests that only part of an overall movement needs to be examined as a movement, namely those who produced the nucleus of films that heralded recognizable innovations of style and theme.

In my opinion, there are a few directors whose stylistic innovations were widely recognized and can be regarded as constituting the heart of the Fifth Generation film movement. Among them are Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chen Kaige, Zhang Junzhao, Zhou Xiaowen, Wu Ziniu, and Hu Mei. Though there may be some personal bias in these choices, there are valid reasons for their selection, in terms of awards won and critical acclaim received.

All these film makers have received international awards and/or been the recipients of critical acclaim, both of which are normally based on an assessment of innovative style and/or subject matter. Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Chen Kaige are looked upon without much controversy as the leaders of the Fifth Generation by critics both within and outside of China. The numerous awards they have won is a recognition of their talents and achievements. Zhang Junzhao’s *One and Eight* is considered the very first

appearance of the Fifth Generation. Zhou Xiaowen has been known for his contemporary urban films, *Obsession* (Feng Kuang De Daijia, 1988) and *No Regrets* (Qingchun Wuhui, 1991). His bitter-sweet comedy, *Ermo* (1994), about a peasant woman who wants to buy the biggest TV in town, won the Locarno International Film Festival Swissair/Crossair Special Prize in 1994. Wu Ziniu is the winner of the 1989 Golden Rooster Best Director Award.<sup>10</sup> His film, *Evening Bell* (1989), won the Silver Bear Award at the 1989 Berlin International Film Festival. Hu Mei is the only female Fifth Generation director; her feminist approach to films is unique among the Fifth Generation directors. Her films, *The Army Nurse* (1984) and *Far Away From War* (1987), were well received by the critics.

#### **4.3 Social background of key Fifth Generation film makers**

The Fifth Generation are a young generation; they started making films in their early thirties shortly after their graduation from the academy. Most of the Fifth Generation members were born during the early- to mid-1950s (*Zhong Guo Dian Ying Da Ci Dian*, n.d.). For example, Zhang Yimou was born in 1950; Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chen Kaige, Wu Ziniu, and Zhang Junzhao were all born in 1952; and the youngest, Hu Mei, was born in 1956<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> There are two major film awards in China. One is called the Hundred Flower Award, which is voted for by the audiences. The other is the Golden Rooster Award, which is voted for by film critics.

<sup>11</sup> Zhou Xiaowen's year of birth could not be identified through available research material.

These Fifth Generation directors not only are about the same age, but also have almost identical educational backgrounds and very similar life experiences. Their early education ended before they could enter or finish high school, when they were sent down to work in the countryside. In addition to this lack of, or limited secondary education, they did not have professional training in film making before their education at the Beijing Film Academy. They all graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the first class after the academy reopened following the Cultural Revolution. These seven directors all did their undergraduate study in the directing department of the Beijing Film Academy. Compared to the previous generations who entered the industry without training, the Fifth Generation are very well-educated. Their formal education at the Beijing Film Academy exposed them to a wide selection of the world cinema, and gave them a more international and historical perspective in their film making careers than earlier Chinese film makers had experienced.

The Fifth Generation members are victims of the Cultural Revolution, being sent down to the countryside during those ten chaotic years. This period had a very important influence on their ideology of film making. The Cultural Revolution involved an upheaval of national dimensions, to an extent not seen since the War of Resistance against Japan. On the other hand, huge number of people, particularly the relatively educated young, had an opportunity to travel, rare under a regime usually offering its citizens about as much geographical mobility as a medieval society. This experience on such a scale meant that the Cultural Revolution had a profound impact on the perceptions of its people, especially

on the educated youth (Clark, 1987).

To a large extent, the Cultural Revolution contributed to the young artists' construction of an independent vision. When the urban educated youth were sent down to the countryside for rustication, the rural life they were exposed to was quite different from, if not being downright contradictory to, what school and family experience had taught them. The economic backwardness and cultural ignorance of Chinese peasants (who constitute 80% of China's population) were an enormous shock for the youth who had grown up in the belief that the Communist Party had saved people from misery and given them a good life. The contradiction between what their education had led them to believe and the reality they experienced directly prompted them subsequently to rely on their own thinking rather than wholeheartedly believing everything they had been taught, as directors such as Chen Kaige and Hu Mei have each expressed in their interviews (Berry, 1995; Zha, 1994). Contemporary film critic Chen Xihe (1993: 53-4) expresses his thoughts on this contradiction :

For years, works of art more often than not applied a simple method of political and class determinism in their depictions of life and human conduct...We tried to categorize all things as proletarian or bourgeois, socialist or capitalist, worker or exploiter, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary, turning the richness of life and society into a few unvarying formulas...But artworks of this type, taken to the extreme, become simple stories of good guys and bad guys, overly simplified answers to life which fail to inspire people to think of its complexities...The complicated practices of the Cultural Revolution brought this flat, one-dimensional notion to total collapse, because people could not find an answer to life in such works, nor in the way of thinking they provided, and so people were led to feel that the works were hypocritical.

#### **4.4 “Core of the core”: Zhang, Tian and Chen**

Among all the Fifth Generation members, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang can be said to be the “core of the core” within the grouping. Their films fully embody the stylistic innovations the Fifth Generation represent. And they subsequently received a great deal of media attention and critical acclaim. I use their experiences during the Cultural Revolution as examples of how the Cultural Revolution influenced the Fifth Generation’s life and film making, based on the fact that all the members of the Fifth Generation were sent down to the countryside, and their experiences were more or less similar.

In 1950, Zhang Yimou was born into a Chinese middle-class family. His mother was a dermatologist; his father a graduate of the famous Huangpu Military Academy. When the KMT (Kuo Min Tang, the nationalist party) army fled from the mainland to Taiwan in 1949, Yimou’s father stayed behind and was later labeled an “historical counter-revolutionary” by the Communist Part as a result of his connection with the KMT (the Communist Party’s enemy). He remained unemployed for most of his life for his “political incorrectness.” Yimou grew up under the stigma that surrounded his father.

When the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, he was still in secondary school.

Like most youth from once privileged families, Zhang was forced to quit school and undertake physical labour. In this case, he was sent to work in a textile factory because of his father's involvement with the KMT in earlier years. Between 1968 and 1978, Zhang worked on farms in Shanxi Province and later as a labourer in a spinning mill. Work was not only hard but also dangerous—workers sometimes had their fingers cut off. To escape hardship, Yimou offered to draw hundreds of portraits of Chairman Mao for his cultural unit. During this time, he developed his talents as a designer by drawing such portraits and discovered a deep-seated love for still photography. Rumour had it that he sold blood to buy his first camera. Largely self-taught, absorbing techniques from books and manuals written by pre-communist Chinese professional photographers, he was soon able to publish many photographs in newspapers such as the *Shanxi Daily*. His still photography work won him some national awards and later became his stepping-stone to the cinematography department of the Beijing Film Academy (Luo, 1990; Chute, 1991).

Tian Zhuangzhuang was born into a film making family. Both his parents were cinematographers who later became administrators in the film industry. Like others, Tian was sent to work in the countryside when he was still in middle school. A year later, he joined the People's Liberation Army. Upon his return to civilian life from the army several years later, he was assigned to work in the Beijing Agricultural Film Studio as a cameraman, because he had taken some photography before. Tian claims to have a genuine passion for cinematography. He chose to take directing at the Beijing Film Academy because he had surpassed the age limit the department of cinematography had

for students (Semsel, 1987).

Chen Kaige was born in 1952 into a film industry family. His father was a well-known film director, and his mother an actress and film editor at the Beijing Film Studio. Since his father, whom he would later describe as a classically aloof Chinese patriarch, was often away on location, Chen and his sister were left in the care of two loving women: Chen's mother and a Manchu nanny who lived with the family. In the relative tranquility of pre-Cultural Revolution Beijing, Chen recalls a childhood spent wandering around charming old neighborhoods, lolling by flower and goldfish vendor carts, and playing games with kindergarten friends by the local swimming pool. The Chen family lived in an elegant walled-in compound, once the mansion of a Manchu prince of the early Qing dynasty. Chen's mother, dressed in silk pajamas, would settle into a bamboo lounge chair in the courtyard and teach her young son to recite classical poems selected to fit the changing seasons. "Beijing then was like the reflection of the turrets in the city moat," he would write in his memoirs, "a serene dream in a breeze, swaying yet unbroken" (quoted in Zha, 1994: 29).

As a teenager, he joined the mass exodus of urban youth to the countryside in 1968 during the Cultural Revolution, and worked for two years on a rubber plantation in the south-western province of Yunnan. He served five years in the People's Liberation Army, and fought in some of China's border skirmishes with Vietnam during that period. In 1975, he returned to Beijing and worked for three years in a film processing lab before

being admitted to the Beijing Film Academy, where he studied directing (Robert Sklar's editorial introduction in Chen, K., 1990).

More than anything else, the Cultural Revolution is what prevented Chen from becoming a spoiled urban dandy sheltered from real hardship and pain (Zha, 1994). It meant that in adolescence Chen would witness his parents' political downfall, a reversal of fortune that culminated in a mass denunciation rally where Chen shoved and howled at his father. It meant watching his Red Guard classmates raid his house and burn the family books. The era has remained with Chen not just as a source of personal memories — recalled in *My Days as a Red Guard*, a memoir written when he lived in New York in the late 1980s — but also as the subject of an ongoing ambivalence (Zha, 1994). Despite the anguish he suffered, Chen calls the Cultural Revolution “a great time...the beginning of the new China and the end of the old” (quoted in Cheshire, 1992: 38). Its traumas, he says, forced the Chinese to question collectivist manias and begin to think for themselves. That observation essentially summarizes the essence of the Cultural Revolution, and what it meant to young film makers.

The commonality that exists among the three film makers' experiences lie in three areas. Firstly, they all demonstrated strong interest in, or had experiences with, the visual media, either through their previous professions or family influence. Zhang Yimou was a freelance still photographer and an experienced painter/drawer; Chen Kaige had a very artistic upbringing, both from his father, who was a director, and his mother, a very



educated and literary woman; both Tian Zhuangzhuang's parents worked in the film industry and as a result, he grew up in the circle of filmmakers. In interviews, Tian has been vocal about his fascination with cinematography. Their interest in the visual media is one of the things that contributed to their success in film making.

Another commonality about the backgrounds of these three members of the Fifth Generation is that they all come from very well-educated, sometimes privileged families. Zhang Yimou's father went to the prestigious Huangpu Military School, which recruited students mostly from rich and powerful families. Zhang's mother is a doctor. Chen's father was a film director and his family was wealthy too. Tian's mother was the head of the Children's Studio and had served years in administration in the film industry. Paul Pickowicz (1997), who married a Fifth Generation art designer, has made the observation that most Fifth Generation members are "brats" from film makers' families.

Thirdly, an additional commonality in their backgrounds is that they all have had an involuntary traumatic change in their life from a middle, or secondary school student to a rather lowly occupation, such as labourer or soldier, during the Cultural Revolution. And this most likely holds true for all Fifth Generation members. They matured early during these unexpected changes in their lives, and later brought inspirations from these exceptional experiences to bear in their films.

#### **4.5 Elements of intentionality**

The Fifth Generation directors have provided the audience with unique and personal observations drawn from their own life experiences. They wasted ten precious years of their lives, answering the Party's call to go to the countryside and devaluing intellectual pursuits, as was the fashion in the Cultural Revolution. This bitter-sweet experience contributed to their independent vision. They learned that the insights derived from their experiences are more reliable than the preaching of government propaganda. With the appearances of their films, traditional concepts of right and wrong, of values and ethical standards, have changed. As Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang have said:

I've been a soldier, a worker, and a peasant, during the cultural revolution, a student from the three classes. ...I want my films to express the life that I have seen myself. That's very important to me, to record what I have seen with my own eyes. What I've seen and understood, I try to put into my films, my work. (Chen Kaige quoted in Semsel, 1987:134)

I am going to put forth my own views on life. The film will be based more on my interpretation of life. The film will be based more on my interpretation of life than on the original script...we have only one wish: to catch up with the international cinema. (Tian Zhuangzhuang quoted in Semsel, 1987: 133)

The Fifth Generation pursues individuality in their films. "The main purpose of art is to understand and be understood," says Zhang Yimou (quoted in Luo, 1990: 176 ). He also says that art must remain free; the film maker must be allowed to express his ideas and to do so in a way that is the most forceful for him (Semsel, 1987). There are in their films "the urgency of individual expression," and "independence of vision" (Bordwell,

1985). At the least, these films have led people to realize the limitations of traditional Chinese film aesthetics and the potential of the film medium.

If their experience in the Cultural Revolution shaped the thinking of this generation, their education, together with the movement toward ideological liberation and the open-door policy which ensued, provided them with opportunities denied those who came before them. These film makers were not only able to view many Chinese films of the 1930s and 1940s, but also a variety of contemporary foreign films (Semsel, 1990). They apparently had a preference for western European films. Chen has confessed that he didn't care much for Hollywood movies (Zha, 1994).

From the dusty back alley of China's post-Cultural Revolution wasteland, they peered into the glorious days of the high modernist European masters: Truffaut, Godard, Bergman, Antonioni, Bertolucci; Eisenstein and Kurosawa were up there too, though less central. It wasn't a broad vision of 20th century cinema - in contemporary China there was no such thing as a well-rounded education. But in those hopeful years when China had just re-opened itself to the world, these students were the nation's best and brightest. Armed with new equipment and heads full of innovative ideas, they shared a desire to reinvent Chinese cinema (Zha, 1994).

It is generally hard to find film makers' direct statements on their intentions to invent a new cinema. As Tudor (1974: 171) puts it: "though there is little in the way of

evidence independent of their film-making activity, from the scattered interviews and memoriams we can infer [the intentional efforts of the German Expressionist film makers].” In each of the film movements he examines, Tudor provides only very brief justification of intentional effort underlying the movements. Although not overly impressive in either their number nor length, the following analysts’ comments and film makers’ statements are at least as comprehensive as the data on which Tudor based his judgments.

When the Fifth Generation graduated from the Beijing Film Academy, they immediately set themselves the task of modernizing Chinese cinema (Ma, 1990). They consciously sought a breakthrough in filmic expression and alternatives to the propagandistic norm of PRC cinema (Semsel, 1990). “We have too many films that tell us how things ought to be,” declares Zhang Yimou (quoted in Chute, 1991). Every last one of his fellow classmates 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 drag Chinese movies out of their Stalinist years (Cheshire, 1992).

According to Chen Kaige: “We were not satisfied with what was happening to Chinese film making. We all thought that if we ever had the chance to work independently, to have some freedom away from the assigned work, we would try to change it. We had a great confidence in our ability to do this”(quoted in Semsel,

1987:135). Tian says: “We have only one wish: to catch up with the international cinema” (quoted in Semsel, 1987:133). Speaking of their conception of film, Zhang Yimou says, “Our simplest and most practical aim is to innovate”( quoted in *Film Art Reference Material* 8, 1985).

#### **4.6 Assessment of the Fifth Generation as an intentional or collective endeavour**

The Fifth Generation share very similar backgrounds. They are all roughly from the same age group and most of them come from very educated families, many of whom are connected to the film industry. They all had strong early interests in the visual media and managed to gain experience through either family upbringing or previous professions. Their unusual life experiences during the Cultural Revolution and formal education from the Beijing Film Academy provided them with the source of inspiration, as well as necessary technical training, to express their views through their film making activities.

Unsatisfied with the uniform nature and propagandistic state of the Chinese film industry, they were motivated to change the situation, and provide the audience with a more personal and original kind of film . Their intentional and collective efforts to create a new Chinese cinema is proven, by both the innovativeness of their films and their expressed determination to their colleagues and the media. The Fifth Generation members were very aware of the shortcomings of the traditional cinema and were very clear about their goal: to “innovate.”. Members each contributed to that common goal by producing

creative and thought-provoking films.

The collective efforts by the Fifth Generation directors, cinematographers and other artists have brought to the Chinese screen a whole new kind of cinematic language and their influence shall extend beyond their own time and nationality. On this basis, as well, then, they would appear to qualify as a film movement.

## **Chapter Five: Movement requirements related to the political, social, cultural and economic context**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter is a sociological analysis of the historical, artistic, and social-economic conditions related to the emergence of the Fifth Generation. The sociological model discussed in chapter two serves as an organizational framework. Various aspects of events and phenomena surrounding the Cultural Revolution are examined based on this framework.

### **5.2 The influence of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath**

In this section, I employ the macroscopic model from chapter two to explore the nature of the four structural determinants of a film movement in China in the 1980s. The four determinants suggested by Huaco (1965: 212) are:

(1) a cadre of trained film technicians, directors, cameramen, editors, and actors; (2) a basic film plant including studios, laboratories, raw stock, and equipment; (3) a mode of organization of the film industry which was either favorable or tolerant toward the ideology of the future film wave; (4) a climate of political norms which was either favorable or tolerant toward both the ideology and the style of the future film wave.

The four determinants can be identified during the course of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. My examination starts with the availability of trained film makers.

### **5.2.1 Trained film makers**

The majority of China's film makers come from the Beijing Film Academy. It is the only university in China that offers professional training for the film industry. It was formerly known as the Performing Arts Institute, founded in 1950. Prior to its founding, most film makers entered the industry without training and worked their way up to various positions. During the 1950s, three Soviet teachers came to the academy to teach directing and acting. They also brought with them the system used in the Soviet Union for training film makers. In 1956, the curriculum was expanded to a form close to the one that is still in use. The academy was later patterned after the Moscow Film Academy. A number of faculty members, as well as film personnel, were trained in the USSR. In 1966, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution interrupted the operation of the Beijing Film Academy. Students and faculty members were sent down to work on farms in the countryside. As a result, there were no graduates from any of the programs of the academy for about a decade. In 1978, the Beijing Film Academy reopened and it welcomed its first group of students after the Cultural Revolution, who later became known as the Fifth Generation (Semsel, 1990).

The academy has six departments: directing, cinematography, acting, design (which includes animation), recording, and literature (which includes film history, film theory, and script writing). Each leads to a four-year undergraduate degree. In addition, there is a two-year program which is designed for people who already have experience in



filmmaking (Semsel, 1990).

The education the Beijing Film Academy offers is a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on practice. Students take eight or nine courses every year. Classes are small, and are often tutorials. Students attend classes for twenty-eight hours over a six day week. On Sundays they work on the production of their own films. Senior students make approximately six short narratives on 35 mm film each year, collaborating with each other. The academy has three studios for students' use. The three studios are well-equipped, and when students are not using them, they are rented out as commercial facilities. There is also a studio for faculty members only, namely The Youth Studio. This studio is of professional quality and its purpose is to keep faculty members in touch with film making activities. Each faculty member has an opportunity to work on at least one feature film every five years. The Youth Studio produces several commercial features every year (Semsel, 1990).

The training the Fifth Generation received from the Beijing Film Academy provided them with knowledge and techniques necessary to enter the film industry. Their graduation marks the emergence of the first structural determinant, film personnel.

### **5.2.2 Basic film plant**

The Chinese film industry in the early 1980s already had the infrastructure and

resources to facilitate the development of the Fifth Generation. Since the founding of People's Republic of China, film has been highly regarded as a powerful medium to educate and influence the masses. It was given more priority than other areas of the arts, such as the novel and painting, which require a more literate audience than film does.

The overall structure of the Chinese film industry is as follows. On the top is the China Film Bureau. It is the branch of the Ministry of Culture directly responsible to the government for all film operations. Under the film bureau are the other film organizations: the film studios which produce the films; the China Film Corporation, which is the sole agency responsible for distribution and exhibition; the Film Art Research Centre, which maintains an archive as well as a study centre; the Beijing Film Academy, which trains film professionals for the industry; processing laboratories; the Film Equipment Corporation; and the Co-production Unit, which coordinates all film productions involving film makers from other countries (Semsel, 1990).

There are 22 major studios in the People's Republic, and some smaller ones in the 29 provinces and municipalities. Among the major studios, 16 have approval from the film bureau to produce feature films. Most studios were named after their location: Beijing, Changchun, Emei, Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Kunming, Pearl River, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Tibet, Xi'an, Xiaoxiang, Xinjiang. Ba Yi (August First) Film Studio is operated by the People's Liberation Army. The primary purpose of their films is to educate, as well as entertain army personnel. The Children's Film Studio, with a staff of

90, was established by the Ministry of Culture. Its sole mission is to make films for children. The Youth Film Studio, as was discussed earlier, is attached to the Beijing Film Academy. Several studios have their specialties: Central Documentary and Newsreel; Beijing Scientific and Educational Film Studio; Shanghai Scientific and Educational Film Studio; Beijing Agricultural Film Studio; Shanghai Animation Studio; and the Shanghai Dubbing Studio. The Shenzhen Film Studio located at the Special Economic Zone near Hong Kong makes films mostly for export to overseas Chinese. The smaller studios in the municipalities and provinces were built as part of a government plan to decentralize film production facilities. They were designed to produce documentaries and newsreels for people within their respective districts (Semsel, 1990).

The various-size studios spread over municipalities and provinces of China provided film personnel the basic equipment and plant to produce films, and proves that the second structural determinant is available.

### **5.2.3 Favourable / tolerant mode of organization**

The innovations the Fifth Generation film makers made would not have been possible without the support of regional studios. In the big studios such as those in Beijing, Shanghai, and Changchun, there was a collection of older directors waiting to get a chance to direct. New graduates had to work for years as assistants before they got a chance to do so. The growth of small regional studios provided such opportunities, as

well as great creative freedom for young film makers. This change in the organization of the Chinese film industry, namely the growth of regional studios, provided the third structural determinant which was crucial for the development of the Fifth Generation movement.

Cinema has become a national industry in China since 1949, and film productions have traditionally been centered at the three major studios in Beijing, Shanghai and Changchun. From 1949 to 1966, more than 600 feature films were produced, about 75% of which were made by these three studios. From 1981 to 1988, the number of films made increased to over 1000, but less than half of these came from the three major studios. This means that regional film studios in Pearl River (Guangdong ), Nanning (Guangxi), Xi'an (Shanxi), and other provincial cities have been making more films in recent years (Clark, 1987). Regional studios are generally much smaller in size, and not as amply-staffed compared to the major studios. In turn, they welcome young and less experienced directors to make films for them. Directors such as Zhang Junzhao, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Yimou each got their start this way, even though some may still be attached to large studios where chances for directing are slim<sup>12</sup>. Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang are both employees of Beijing Film Studio, but they directed films for other provincial studios (Li, 1989). Many regional studios became well known, as a result of being

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<sup>12</sup> They are listed as employees of the studios which they were assigned after their graduation. But they can work with other studios on an assignment basis, provided that they receive invitations from those studios.

associated with the success of these young directors.

The success of Xi'an Studio is a good example of regional studios' function in the development of the new Chinese cinema. Founded in August 1958, Xi'an produced only 19 feature films in the eight years from 1959 to 1966. Production increased to 48 during the nine years from 1975 to 1983, but they were neither popular nor distinguished. Wu Tianming<sup>13</sup>, an established director and head of the Xi'an Studio at that time (early 1980s), was at the forefront of supporting the new cinema. He adopted a policy of making successful commercial films, including kung-fu movies, to finance artistic ventures, which often fail at the domestic box-office (Li, 1989). In his opinion, there are three audiences that have to be satisfied in China. One is the government, one is the art world, and one is the ordinary general audience. Although the studio is supposed to satisfy all three at once, that is rarely possible, and so a studio often makes different films for different audiences. For ordinary audiences, it's kung fu and detective films; for the art world, it's 'exploratory' films; and for the government, it's reform movies<sup>14</sup>(Berry, 1988-89). Wu gathered at his studio talented directors such as Chen Kaige, Huang Jianxin, and Zhang Yimou, who were given complete creative freedom as well as moral and budgetary support. A good percentage of China's outstanding films have been produced under his patronage, and

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<sup>13</sup>Wu was the director of the prize-winning *River without Buoys* (1984), *Life*(1984), and *Old Well*(1987). He was the head of the Xi'an Studio during the early 1980s, a representative figure in revolutionizing Chinese cinema.

<sup>14</sup>There are films that focus on the post-Cultural-Revolution reforms and their achievements. They have a strong political slant and normally realize very little in the way of artistic achievement.

Xi'an Film Studio has quickly become well known in Europe, America, and Australia (Li, 1989).

#### **5.2.4 Climate of political norms**

Regional studios' openness to young film makers' experimentation and innovations has to do with the overall relaxation in political atmosphere across the nation after the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution ended after Mao's death and the fall of the Gang of Four late in 1976. An extended period of relaxation of Party policies toward writers, artists and other intellectuals began. In August 1977, Chairman Hua Guofeng spoke to his political comrades at the Chinese Communist Party's 11th National Congress: "For socialist culture to prosper, we must conscientiously carry out the policies of 'letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend'" (quoted in Li, 1989: 92). At the Third Plenary Session of the CCP's 11th Central Committee in December 1978, the importance of "emancipating the mind" was emphasized and discussed. In October 1979, Vice-Chairman and Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping told an audience of writers and artists that (quoted in Li, 1989: 92):

In such complex mental labor like literature and art, it is necessary for writers and artists to give free rein to their individual creative spirit. As to what to write and how to write, this can only be explored and resolved step by step through artistic practice by the writers and artists themselves. In this respect, no arbitrary interference is warranted.

The "open-door" policy and decrease of government control on art are conducive

to its development. They make it possible for film makers to undertake artistic explorations. They also make the film industry significantly more tolerant to these explorations as well, “going with the flow” of a relaxed cultural policy. The relaxed political atmosphere and the industry organization allowed the Fifth Generation the amount of artistic freedom that could not be imagined previously. The fourth structural factor was then available.

### **5.3 Trends in the artistic-literary-dramatic context**

After examining the presence of the four structural determinants, I turned to the other areas of the arts, in an effort to determine how the Fifth Generation were influenced by features of and developments in them.

The Fifth Generation’s ideology toward film making is echoed by artists in other areas of the arts, such as painting, literature and theatre. First, with respect to the relationships between the Fifth Generation style and painting, their visual style finds its root in one school of traditional Chinese painting.

#### **5.3.1 Painting**

The Fifth Generation draws from traditional Chinese painting’s *xieyi* school. *Xieyi* refers to the expressive power of the blank space of the image in ink-wash landscape

painting. The viewer uses his or her imagination to “fill in” the blank space of the painting (Faubel, 1990). The essence of *xieyi* can be described in terms of emptiness, simplicity and suggestion; and *xieyi* paintings present a unique relationship between the known and the unknowable (Rowley, 1959). The opposite of *xieyi* is *xieshi* — a realistic description of nature rendered in minute detail. The Fifth Generation’s preference for long takes and empty space in composition has been linked to the aesthetic of *xieyi* — “suggesting the idea.” The Fifth Generation cinematographers are fond of using large empty space, dwarfing characters to suggest the presence and power of nature, as we can see in films such as *Yellow Earth*. Their art cinema aesthetics, similar to *xieyi*, emphasize utilizing the audience’s interpretive capacity instead of feeding them information directly. Recent studies have suggested the union of *xieyi* and the long take as the foundation for this new cinema (Faubel, 1990).

The innovative spirit of the Fifth Generation is also seen in artists from areas of literature and arts in the same time span. In the early 1980s, in art circles, the focus of attention was on how to deprioritize political concerns. In painting, the rebellion against Maoist art was expressed by the recognition of formal beauty. It was characterized by battling for free artistic presentation and rejecting the imposition of political and social themes. Between 1979 and 1980, artist Wu Guanzhong published several articles in which he argued that art should not attempt to provide an equivalent for every political, historical or literary form, because form is the substance of art and the beauty of the form may be independent of its theme. He suggested that the meaning of art should be decided by the



form, which embodies the creative process (Dijk and Schmid, 1993).

Artists in the 1980s were inspired by early twentieth century Western trends in art (impressionism, post-impressionism, Fauvism) as well as by decorative Chinese folk art and religious wall paintings (Lang, 1993). The doctrine of using art as an instrument for maintaining traditional morality and the status quo was questioned. Artists strived to replace the standardized style of socialist realism. The new art, no longer dependent on politics, absorbed the external appearances of life and nature; it no longer functioned as an appendix to literary or narrative interpretations; it emphasized the portrayal of the world and the meaning of life visually in an intuitive manner. Personal feelings, the expression of which had been strictly limited during the Cultural Revolution, broke free as if a dam had burst (Pi, 1993). This artistic current spread quickly throughout China.

### **5.3.2 “Scarred” art**

Beginning in 1979, the most apparent phenomenon in art is the appearance of “scarred” art, such as scarred literature and painting, in opposition to the standardized socialist realism. “Scarred” is used in a metaphorical sense to describe the sad sentiments of the artists who created them. The creators of “scarred art” were urban youths who returned to the cities from the countryside. Their work depicted their painful, long separation from their families during the Cultural Revolution, and the struggles to return to their urban lives after the Revolution was over. The competition among “sent-down”

youth to come back to the city was very intense. Many people betrayed their friends, and abandoned the families they had established in the countryside in order to return to their city homes. When they did come back, the city that they had left behind for almost ten years was no longer the same as what they remembered. Regret, nostalgia and a sense of rejection in the “new” city were the common sensations embodied in scarred art.

In their criticism of the Cultural Revolution, the “scarred” artists established two basic themes: truth and humanity. This generation, which had grown up with the development of a China closed to the outside world and had received only limited artistic education, came to value the principle of “reflecting life as truthfully as possible.” During their enforced stay in the rural regions, the reality they experienced stood in sharp contrast to a world full of sunshine, promised to them during their education. They were exposed to poverty, backwardness and inhumanity, an environment they had to live involuntarily in for almost ten years. They felt deceived by the authorities they once admired and trusted, and they also started to realize the danger of trusting such authorities without first pursuing the truth. A deep sense of betrayal left the “scar” which led to their meditation on Maoist art and awakened their rejection of a reality which had been concealed from them. Instead of the “great,” “important” and “perfect” Maoist art, they dedicated themselves to the portrayal of the “small”(everyday life), the “bitter” and the “old”(Li, 1993).

Concurrent with “scarred art,” and followed by many more artists in different

media, was an interest in the portrayal of rural life and in the culture of China's ethnic minorities. Many young artists were, as others of their generation, sent to rural areas during the Cultural Revolution and experienced the life of farmers, nomads, and ethnic minorities. On their return to urban life, they chose to portray the hard and simple life with nostalgia (Dijk and Schmid, 1993).

### **5.3.3 Literature**

Within the same time frame, the general belief in the area of literature was that it should not approach reality through the means of education or commentary but by honest observation. Authors started to recognize the literary value of such an orientation (Kahn-Ackermann, 1993). During the mid-1980s, several young writers started making their appearances in the form of documentary style literature. Their work refused to take on the mission of improving society. They wanted to confront history, and more particularly literature, by dealing with innovations of literary form and language. By working with revised but unvarnished documentation of recorded interviews, those writers exposed their readers to experiences and desires of ordinary people. The documentary style was new to Chinese readers; particularly refreshing was the fact that those writers made no attempt to "educate" their readers (Kahn-Ackermann, 1993).

Just as in painting, writers in the literary world started to question the absolute domination of content over form, and they began experimenting with literary forms. Some

took the radical step towards so-called “littérature puré.” Littérature puré are mainly stylistic and linguistic experiments which ban logic and realism from their prose by specializing in artificial and artistic language, quotations, associations, dreams and fragmentation of events. These writers were celebrated by the critics, but not well accepted by the majority of their audiences. In these experimenters’ opinion, this type of literature could not and was not meant to satisfy the mass reader. Writer Can Xue declared that they expected a permanent readership of a particular group of people and nothing more. With this intended, or at least accepted rejection by the masses, younger authors therefore not only spurned the moral and political task of literature but also freed themselves from a readership that greeted their work with the same lack of understanding as had cultural officials (Kahn-Ackermann, 1993). These writers’ attitude toward the acceptance of their work and their audiences is similar to Tian Zhuangzhuang and Hu Mei’s. In an interview, Hu Mei expressed her agreement with Tian, that their films are made for more perceptive audiences of the twenty-first century (quoted in Berry, 1995).

Another notable phenomenon in the world of literature was that many writers went, at least in the literary sense, into the remotest Chinese regions, to Tibet or to villages noted for their wide-ranging rituals (Kahn-Ackermann, 1993). There has been a similar tendency in the film industry. Several of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou’s films have been set in remote north-western China, while Tian Zhuangzhuang explores the mystery of Tibet and Inner-Mongolia in his *On the Hunting Ground* and *Horse Thief*.

### 5.3.4 Theatre

Theatre had always been used as a mouthpiece for ideological dogma and had not been regarded by the Chinese public as an independent art form. In the early 1980s, a fierce discussion started within the world of theatre about its structure and function, in response to the new course of economic reforms and the opening of China to the outside world. The direct result of these discussions were a series of experimental practices. Young artists claimed that they had the right to artistic self-realization. They refused to be used as a medium for mundane political announcements, which deprived them of creative freedom (Budde, 1993).

Among the many experimental plays staged in the early 1980s was *Waiting for Godot*. This play demonstrates the total hopelessness of mankind and embodies the most vital longings and innermost uncertainties of the participating artists (Meng, 1993). An actor (whose name was not noted) expressed in his program notes his desire for free artistic expression, which can be said to be representative of the shared emotions among theatrical artists:

We want to see the world through other eyes to find strength from an immortal passion and a sparkling, deeply poetic feeling which enables us to run, jump and fly and which will liberate us from the chains of tradition and the bad habits of dull thought to let our values breathe unrestricted in a free atmosphere.( quoted in Meng, 1993:79)

The overall current we see in painting, theatre, and literature is a strong artistic concern rather than a political one. The pursuit of free artistic expression is shared by

artists in these fields as well as the Fifth Generation film makers. All of them express, to varying degrees, an antipathy to being used as a medium for political propaganda, combined with a wish to communicate personal views and emotions. An artist's goal is no longer to educate people or uplift the spirit of society but to share experiences and observations of individuals. Western influence is ever strong, and artistic experimentation was beginning to increase. An emphasis on form over content is noticeable. These characteristics of the larger artistic-literary-dramatic context are congruent with those of the Fifth Generation.

#### **5.4 Social control: government policy and market conditions**

In a September 1986 interview in China's most widely read film magazine, *Popular Cinema*, the Fifth Generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang made a comment regarding the poor sales of his films, which instantly upset many among Chinese audiences, critics and government officials (quoted in Berry, 1995). Unconcerned about his lack of fans, Tian declared that he was making films for audiences of the next century. Why? One has to ask why Chinese audience of this century, at this time, are not ready for his films.

The answer is that the Chinese audiences' taste is not yet developed to appreciate art cinema. The Chinese government's strict control over public access to films limited people's appreciative capacity. Most people have not had the opportunities to become accustomed to and further develop an appreciation for art films. "I do not consider the

Chinese audience as primitive, but habit has attached them to those dramas and films that were furthest removed from the surprises and changes of the real. The immutability of a beloved screen figure has been more important in China than elsewhere," says film researcher Jay Leyda (1972: 200). The Fifth Generation's innovation of film language including cinematography are not well-appreciated by most audiences. The reason is that for years the audience have been "trained" to like melodramas. Story is the only criterion for judging a film.

As the medium that could most effectively connect the political leadership with the greatest number and range of people, film has been a battleground for the educated elite seeking access to the rest of society (Clark, 1987). Of course the government is not going to allow ordinary people to have free access to this powerful medium. Almost none of the world cinema classics are seen in China by ordinary film goers, whether in theatres, on video-tapes, or on broadcast TV. Some of them are available on videotape as educational "reference materials." Students from the Beijing Film Academy often get to see the best of international cinema this way, but almost none of their audience have. There are almost no university level film classes, except for the professional training offered to a very limited number of students at the Beijing Film Academy. There are no museums or audio-visual centres open to the public, at minimal expense, where people can see films they have heard about or read about. Even active film makers are often unable to see the productions of their colleagues (Berry, 1988).

The China Film Export and Import Corporation has a complete monopoly on all imports. For various reasons, whether it be commercial or political, it imports a very limited number of films. Film fans can read about Eisenstein, Vertov, Godard, Ray, Ozu and others, but they have a very slim chance of seeing their work. The China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation is a sister body to the China Export and Import Corporation. It has a complete monopoly on distribution and exhibition in China. No other corporation or individual has legal rights to show or distribute films, except for privately organized, non-commercial screening.

The China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation once attempted to set up theatres specializing in more "artistic" films in certain places. Several art theatres opened up in Shanghai in 1984, but this experiment did not last very long. It came to an end in 1986 due to "lack of suitable product"- there weren't enough art films available, local or imported, to run an art house cinema effectively (Berry, 1988). The reason behind this is very simple: most art films are banned.

The Fifth Generation are at the forefront of producing art films. Most of their films have been banned for various reasons, the main one being their films have touched "sensitive themes," or have criticized the government, even in an indirect way. Films such as *Farewell My Concubine* and *Yellow Earth* fell into the banned category. *Farewell My Concubine* touched upon homosexual issues, and *Yellow Earth* exposed audiences to the "ugly and backward" side of China, which is interpreted by the government as criticism



against it.

It is as difficult to do certain kinds of research as it is to view films publicly. Chinese films are just as inaccessible as foreign films. It is impossible to access any film even in places like the National Film Archives in Beijing, allegedly the most extensive archive in the country. The administrative systems in public libraries and archive centres are ambivalent; networking and bribes are key to accessing film research materials. Very few formal procedures are effective, or followed at all. Most researchers, who do not have extensive connections with top officials, can't see anything in the archives without negotiating complicated permissions from all sorts of levels within the Chinese bureaucracy. Even then, the archives are so under-funded and understaffed that one may see nothing in the end. After endless efforts, one most likely ends up watching a videotape and not the film itself, and then only once (Berry, 1988). Film critic Chris Berry (1988: 4) has these comments about the inaccessibility:

I do not see how a film salon can be effectively run, or a film class held, or film research done, until films are available for viewing and analysis. Not just a few current films, but a wide range of classics, experimental films, avant-garde films and so forth. It is tragic that 1000 enthusiastic film buffs in Beijing meet regularly, but have no hope of ever seeing, say, a D. W. Griffith movie. And it is equally appalling that film makers often have to wait to see their peers' films when they finally come on TV a year or two after they have been made. Until the basic problem is solved, I worry that film enthusiasts may not be able to build up the audiences needed to support a cinema of truly international stature over the long term, even in a country of one billion.

Making matters of reaching audiences worse for the Fifth Generation is the frequent banning of their films. The vast majority of their films have been banned in the

domestic market at one time or another. The Chinese government, which has a strong preference for happy endings and family values, deemed the Fifth Generation films too dark and tragic. The Fifth Generation films usually do poorly at the box office as it is; banning prevents them from reaching an audience at all.

This can be a problem for the Fifth Generation in the long run. Even though their films have been critically acclaimed abroad, China still constitutes their roots. The Chinese domestic audience is the audience that potentially has the best understanding of the culture and values embodied in their films. The curiosity of the international audience could fade eventually, and the Fifth Generation might end up being a group of film makers without an audience.

Even for the films that did manage to reach the Chinese cinemas did not do too well at the box office. Market forces are taking their toll and have a substantial influence on the art cinema route the Fifth Generation have chosen. The average Chinese film sells about 100 prints, but only a few of the Fifth Generation have reached this level. *Yellow Earth* only sold 30 prints within China, and many others have sold even fewer. Particularly notorious in this regard have been the largely non-narrative, ethnic minority films of Tian Zhuangzhuang. *On the Hunting Ground*, Tian's account of traditional Mongolian life, sold only two prints, both to the head offices of the China Film Corporation for reference purposes, not for distribution. His next feature on Tibet, *Horse*

*Thief*, sold only seven prints (Berry, 1988-89)<sup>15</sup>.

After some policy adjustment in the mid-1980s, studios have been responsible for balancing their own budgets, and the China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation no longer buys films from studios indiscriminately. They used to pay a flat fee for each film. While film admissions and revenues have been dropping, the cost of production has skyrocketed. Fewer and fewer studios are willing to fund Fifth Generation films which pull in very little cash at the box office. Under box office pressure, some Fifth Generation directors have had to switch to profitable entertainment films to continue their film making careers, since most studio heads are hesitant to give projects to money-losing directors. The director of *One and Eight*, Zhang Junzhao, is among the directors who had to make this change. In an interview he expressed how he felt:

My first concern has to be surviving, right? If survival is threatened, talking about goals and ambitions is a waste of breath. To tell the truth, if I'd shot another film like *One and Eight*, I may have been unable to continue as a director. (Gao Jun, 1988-89: 125)

In the mean time, Esther Yau (1993:1) notes the sources of international interest in the work of the Fifth Generation films makers:

Internationally, the phenomenon known as "Chinese cinema of the 1980s" is the result of various projections cast onto the screens of international film festivals. The superimposition can be traced back to at least three image-making processes: the rewriting of China's political and cultural complexities by young film makers; the diplomatic exhibition of artistic talent in support of an open-door policy by the government of the People's Republic of China;

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<sup>15</sup> Data could not be found concerning the sale of prints of Fifth Generation films for the most recent time period (1989 -1997).

and the search for new varieties of art cinema by (mostly western) film critics.

This most recent manifestation of Chinese cinema is getting the similar kind of international attention that the Czechoslovak cinema did in the 1960s, and the Japanese and Polish cinema did earlier in the 1950s (Hames, 1985). However, to the western critics, the novelty value of these three earlier cinemas declined after a period of time, and it is a question also as to how long western critical enthusiasm for the Chinese cinema is going to last.

### **5.5 Conclusion**

The four structural determinants of a film movement became available in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution in the early 1980s: in 1982, the graduation of the first class of students from the Beijing Film Academy following the Cultural Revolution provided the Chinese film industry with a good collection of trained directors, editors, and cinematographers; the government's preference for film as a medium of mass motivation benefitted the film industry with funding for many studios and a steady supply of film equipment and stock; the more open and relaxed cultural policies following the Cultural Revolution and the growth of many regional studios created a conducive environment, tolerant of the ideology of the new film wave. Thus the availability of these four structural determinants made the appearance of the Fifth Generation possible.

The trend in the other areas of arts within the same time frame appeared to be congruent with the Fifth Generation's style, which was experimental in form, and advocated individualism and creative freedom. Artists from other areas of the arts, such as painting, literature and theatre, shared the Fifth Generation's rebellion against the government's over-emphasis on ideological righteousness. They embodied personal experiences into their work, which was rare for artists in the past .

The Chinese government's policies related to the film industry have direct effects on the existence and future of the Fifth Generation. By restricting public access to films and related education and research material, the Chinese audience's appreciative capacity is limited. Consequently, the majority of them have trouble in understanding and appreciating the Fifth Generation films, which are nontraditional in many ways. Frequent banning of the Fifth Generation films resulted in an even smaller audience. Market pressure intensified as their films performed poorly at the box office. Under that pressure, some directors had to withdraw from their innovative art films and undertake more commercial projects in order to continue their film making careers. The generalized belief of revolutionizing the Chinese cinema, shared among the Fifth Generation members, is under threat, and questions also arise as to how long the enthusiasm of western critics is going to last.

The Cultural Revolution's precipitating effect on the Chinese new cinema is similar to that of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution on the Soviet cinema of the 1920s and the

Second World War on Italian Neo-realism. These major social traumas created the necessary structural determinants in their countries, especially the change to a tolerant political atmosphere toward the future film wave. In the Soviet Union, the November 1917 revolution established the Bolshevik government which was tolerant toward the ideology of the antinaturalistic and experimental expressive realism of the films and highly supportive of their Bolshevik themes. In Italy, most of the conditions for the rise of Neo-realism were established during the fascist era, and the film wave began shortly after the collapse of the Italian fascist regime in 1945. A slight difference in the Chinese case is that it was not exactly the Cultural Revolution itself, but the changes after the Cultural Revolution in reaction to it that generated the more open, relaxed political atmosphere, which was conducive to the appearance of the new Chinese cinema.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

### 6.1 The Fifth Generation as a film movement

In the early 1980s, Chinese government policies started to relax, following the Cultural Revolution. The open-door policy gave the Fifth Generation opportunities to be exposed to many world film masterpieces. Their formal education and global vision prepared the Chinese film industry with capable personnel. The development of regional studios gave them chances to produce feature-length films after their graduation from the Beijing Film Academy. This favourable mode of organization in the film industry, and more relaxed political atmosphere, made it possible for the Fifth Generation to produce experimental films that were formerly considered unacceptable: films that were innovative in techniques, and expressive in themes. The same experimental trend prevailed in the fine arts, literature and theatre during the same time frame. Artists from these areas became inspirational sources for each other. Time was right for the Fifth Generation to surface. Their first film, *One and Eight*, was an immediate success. It was quickly identified as remarkable by Chinese film critics and sent to the Hongkong International Film Festival, and from then, exceptional films were produced one after another. Audiences around the world started to watch and discuss their films. A movement was born.

The Fifth Generation marks its aesthetics distinctively from the traditional cinema. They certainly have brought far-reaching influences to the Chinese cinema. Sharing the

same motivations to create a new Chinese cinema, they challenged the Chinese people's traditional perception of cinema's role in society, and their approach to film as an art. In their hands, film is no longer approached as a tool for uplifting the spirit of society, or for educating the masses. It does not have to convey the ideology of the Party or represent that for which it stands. Instead, film becomes the medium for their strong personal statements, which communicate their views and emotions freely to the audience.

Artistically, the Fifth Generation brought to the Chinese screen innovations like never before. They revolutionized the fundamental concept of Chinese film. In their aesthetics, film is finally being treated as a medium on its own terms, bearing unique characteristics unlike any other, instead of being looked upon as no different from drama. Compared to the earlier Chinese cinematic generations, the Fifth Generation enriched film language with sound, visuals, and editing. Dramatic conflict is no longer the only and primary means of expression. The Fifth Generation brought the Chinese film industry fresh blood and long-needed changes and innovations. People think of them as a generation of artistically revolutionary, talented artists.

The Fifth Generation have met all the major criteria of film movement theory: They emerged when the necessary structural determinants of a movement were established in the aftermath of a traumatic socio-political occurrence, namely the Cultural Revolution. They came from similar social backgrounds and life experiences, and had common interests in the visual media. Moreover, they expressed a conscious desire to revolutionize



Chinese cinema, and their film making endeavours, so motivated, resulted in a fundamental break from the aesthetic practices of traditional Chinese cinema. In a theoretical as well as a descriptive sense, then, the Fifth Generation Chinese film makers constitute a full-fledged film movement .

## **6.2 The Possible future and/or decline of the Fifth Generation**

The future of the Fifth Generation is uncertain. As George Huaco suggested, if any of the four structural components of a film movement disappears, a film movement will come to an end. For the Fifth Generation, the four components (personnel, equipment, organization of the film industry and national political atmosphere) are not necessarily stable. The fact that the Fifth Generation lack a solid domestic audience could diminish their flourishing growth and possibly become a threat to their very existence. As market forces continue to take their toll on the film industry, the Fifth Generation are under increasing financial pressure from studios due to insufficient domestic box office sales. Film studios are more reluctant to fund the Fifth Generation art films that return very little revenue for them. It is worth noting in this regard that lack of audience support (combined with government indifference) eventually led to the demise of Italian Neo-realism.

Right now, the Fifth Generation are managing relatively well by drawing international investment, thanks to the international critical acclaim they are receiving.

But what if in the near future international critics don't give them the kind of recognition they are getting now? This may not mean their films are not as good, but aesthetic interests can and do change over time. Will the overseas money still be there for them? That is a question the Fifth Generation must consider. We can already see that when their films start to tackle more culturally specific, less universal themes, it becomes difficult for international film critics to comprehend and appreciate the meaning of the films. We also hear comments such as the Fifth Generation films just look good, and looking good is not enough (a comment Siskel and Ebert made when they were reviewing Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* on their TV program in the summer of 1997).

In China, the Fifth Generation films continue to be banned, no matter what kind of artistic achievement they have accomplished. The domestic audience has persistent difficulties understanding and appreciating their films, further narrowing their audience. If the Fifth Generation loses the support of the film industry due to financial reasons, the film makers will no longer be able to produce films, and the film movement will end as a result of that. Unfortunately, the scenario is not entirely impossible. Some of the Fifth Generation have already begun producing more commercialized films in the hopes of sustaining funding for more of their personal film projects in the future.

At present, the Chinese government is adopting a series of policies encouraging films that embellish the achievements of the government and the Party. Complementary to that, the government is trying to prevent films that don't fit into their ideology from being

distributed, according to director Xie Fei (1997), who is also the vice-president of the Beijing Film Academy. *Temptress Moon* (Chen Kaige, dir.) was denied distribution rights in China because it is considered a foreign film (it was funded by overseas money); therefore, the government had an excuse not to distribute it simply by saying the number of films imported each year is very limited. When asked if *Temptress Moon* happened to be about the achievements of the Chinese government, wouldn't it rush to import the film, Xie Fei (1997) shook his head and laughed. He said the Fifth Generation would never incorporate that kind of theme into their films; it was a scenario that was never going to happen.

Xie Fei's own film, *Opium War*, was very attractive to the government. It allegedly fit very well with the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, as it depicted the terrible crimes that western countries had committed against China, such as burning the Summer Palace, killing many people, and seizing Hong Kong. The film serves as a good reminder of how great the Communist Party has been in saving the Chinese people from such miseries. Workers from factories, students from secondary schools and universities, and government personnel were organized by the Party to watch the film. As a result of this inflation of the audience, *Opium War* attained a very high box office gross, even higher than the Chinese gross for the very popular Hollywood blockbuster *True Lies*. Xie Fei (1997) also said that the government even bestows large cash awards (almost a million Chinese Yuan ) on films that serve their purposes as described above.

Other conditions, such as film personnel and general political atmosphere, have the potential to change as well. Film personnel are paid little money in China, just like employees in any other state-owned industry. Offers of higher pay from other countries might entice the backbone of the Fifth Generation away from their native country, similar to the way the exodus of German film makers led to the disappearance of German Expressionism in the 1920s. Within China, the profitable entertainment section of the film industry is pulling film makers away from their commitment to art films. For economic reasons, more and more film personnel have had to switch to making TV shows, mini-series and entertainment films. Though there is nothing necessarily wrong in principle in making entertainment films, without the generalized belief about revolutionizing the Chinese traditional cinema and the stylistic homogeneity they once shared, the Fifth Generation would merely be a collection of very capable film professionals. They would no longer exist as a film movement.

The Fifth Generation would not have made their artistic explorations had there not been the nation-wide political and economic reforms following the Cultural Revolution. Personally, I do not think the open-to-the-outside-world, more relaxed policy will change in the near future, which would certainly be good for the Fifth Generation. But the policies the government is enforcing now to discourage the Fifth Generation-style art films would certainly have an impact on the enthusiasm of film makers and on the marketability of their films. Overall, the current political atmosphere is tolerant of, but not encouraging to the ideology of the Fifth Generation movement. If the political atmosphere changes

back to the closed borders that existed previously, the future of the Fifth Generation would be completely jeopardized.

The immediate problem the Fifth Generation have to solve is working out a balance between their films and the audience, and a balance between artistic exploration and film's ultimate function as a form of entertainment, so they will continue to receive funding and continue to make their own films, as a result. Aside from these various conditions, the Fifth Generation movement should continue, at least in the near future.

### **6.3 Possible modifications to film movement theory**

In the process of writing this thesis, I observed a few points in film movement theory that are not adequately developed and need further elaboration.

First of all, no one single theorist is completely comprehensive. To explain the dynamics between a major social trauma and its effect on a film movement through a sociological analysis, I find it insufficient to draw just from one theorist, be it George Huaco, Andrew Tudor or Terry Lovell. A holistic analysis of the Fifth Generation called for the combination of the three complementary film movement theories, each of which has a somewhat different emphasis. Critical components of my theoretical framework, such as the aesthetic break between the "old" and "new" cinema, the intentionality of the film makers involved in the film movement, and the four structural determinants of a film

movement, each comes from a different theorist: Tudor, Lovell and Huaco respectively. I find my combination of the three theorists makes the film movement theories more coherent and effectively explanatory than any theory used in isolation.

Secondly, audience is a neglected factor in the present film movement theories. Theorists fail to account for the effect of audience on the prosperity or decline of a film movement. Lack of domestic audience is a problem that is serious enough to create a threat to the Fifth Generation's very existence. As such, it deserves to be discussed, or at least mentioned in film movement theory. The audience's level of education and their ideology bear influence on the acceptance of a film movement as we have seen in the example of the Fifth Generation. Given such potentially important influence on any film movement, the audience's role should be acknowledged explicitly.

Thirdly, with regard to what determines the decline of a film movement, the present theories fail to take into account the "natural evolution" of human beings: the potential changes in interests and priorities as individuals age and their personal circumstances and experiences alter. Huaco limited the cause of a film movement's decline to the gradual elimination of any of the four structural determinants. He made no mention of the dynamics of the film makers' lives and careers. Those who are involved in a film movement are humans; they are subject to potential changes at various phases in their lives, just like any other human beings. Marriage, parenthood, death of one's parents are some of the life occurrences that could potentially alter one's outlook on and approach

to the world in all its various facets, including career goals, aesthetic principles and political orientations. If there are variations in this regard among the members of the film movement, the requirement of commonality/intentionality could be lost and the movement would be a victim of fragmentation. On a more mundane level, it may be the case that the film makers could simply run out of energy and/or inspiration; like T.S. Eliot's description of the fate of the world, the film movement would "end not with a bang, but with a whimper." Film movement theory needs to incorporate this more personal element into its sociological framework of analysis.

Fourthly, the continued existence of the Fifth Generation cannot not be adequately explained by the present film movement theories. In Huaco's terms, the political norms have to be supportive or at least tolerant of the ideology of a film wave before it could develop. This notion is congruent with, but does not explain sufficiently, the Chinese government's current state of reluctant tolerance of the Fifth Generation. This tolerance is the result of the interplay among multiple factors, both political and economic, and domestic and international. On the one hand, since the economic reform in the late 1970s and early 1980s, China has been more open than any other period in the history of the People's Republic; however, it still prohibits any negative portrayal of the government and its policies, regardless of whether it is truthful or not. To the government's dismay, most of the Fifth Generation's work tackles sensitive issues, including the Cultural Revolution, and the repression of natural human desires to love and to be intimate, under the yoke of traditional Chinese culture, to name just a couple.

On the other hand, in spite of accolades from international film critics and art film goers, the Fifth Generation enjoys limited acceptance by the mass domestic audience. As noted earlier, the main domestic audience for the Fifth Generation films are urban intellectuals, such as university students. Therefore, in the government's eyes, the Fifth Generation's film making activities create little threat of political upheaval for the regime. Tolerance of its existence becomes a great diplomatic tool to present China to the world as an open country, where its citizens have freedom to express their views. This complexity of interplay between political interest and international positioning in a modern context should be expressed more elaborately in the film movement theories than simply stating that the political atmosphere has to be tolerant of the ideology of a film wave. More has to be said of the context of a tolerant atmosphere and the factors contributing to it.

#### **6.4 Possible areas for future research**

First, in this thesis, the inaccessibility of background information on the film makers limited the thoroughness of the analysis of the Fifth Generation's motivations, intentions and commonalities based on their family background and upbringing, experience during the Cultural Revolution, profession before they became film makers, and explicit statements about underlying philosophies of and approaches to the film making process. This could be a potentially rewarding area in future research endeavours, allowing for a more detailed and refined assessment of the collective and intentional aspects of the Fifth



Generation as a film movement.

Secondly, the weaknesses of the film movement theories discussed earlier could be instructive for future research: Could Huaco, Tudor and Lovell's film movement theories be integrated more fully, offering an even more holistic perspective on the examination of film movements? What is the potential effect of changes in filmmakers' personal life circumstances on the continuing existence or eventual decline of a film movement? What is the role of the audience in a film movement and does the extent of and variations in its support influence the movement's fate? What is the mix of factors that contribute to a favourable or tolerant political atmosphere?

Thirdly, one promising potential project identified by this thesis relates to China's left wing film "movement" in the 1930s. This movement highly reflects the revolution-movement relationship, as its emergence occurred immediately after the Japanese invasion of China during the 1930s. The analysis of this film movement has the potential to further our understanding about film movements and their preconditions. Moreover, a comparison between the left-wing movement in the 1930s and the Fifth Generation will be enlightening about the commonalties and differences between the two movements in the Chinese context.

Hopefully this thesis will create more research interest in this fascinating and exciting area.

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### **Vita Auctoris**

Huiping Zhang was born in Hengyang City, Hunan Province, People's Republic of China on December 20, 1973. She attended the Foreign Languages Department at Xiangtan University, Xiangtan City, Hunan Province, P.R.China from 1990 to 1994. From there she received her B.A. in English Literature and Linguistics.

In the winter of 1995, Huiping started her Master's in Communication Studies at the University of Windsor. She will complete her degree in early 1998.