reflecting the many problems that cultural hybridity entails, also posits a hope for a hybridized future. It is through greater knowledge that cultural understanding and tolerance prevail. Contemporary Japan, while remaining ethnically homogenous, is demonstrating a cultural awareness of numerous ethnic communities, both occidental, and oriental. Contemporary Japanese film, then, makes itself accessible to a global market by highlighting the current Japanese vogue in globalization—a concern that the whole world shares.

References


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Critical Reception of Rashomon in the West

Greg M. Smith

Most of us who write about films may as well relax and confess that we know nothing at first hand about Japanese movie production; that all we have as data has come to us from press-sheets, from quick consultations with the nearest Japanese bystander, or... whatever we have been able to find useful in the way of analogy and of seeing the “unaccredited” performances of Kabuki.

--Vernon Young (1955: 416)

When Rashomon appeared before Western eyes in the September 1951 Venice Film Festival (and in its subsequent 1951-52 release in the United States and Europe), reviewers were poorly prepared to comment on it. Most film reviewing depends on a knowledge of tendencies within the appropriate national cinema, an understanding of the auteur's oeuvre and a film’s place within it, an awareness of the stars' constructed images, or a familiarity with the film's genre conventions. Film reviewing is a comparative exercise, construing the unknown (the new film) in terms of what one already knows.

Yet few of Rashomon's reviewers had seen any film from Japan or were familiar with the highly specific classificatory system of Japanese film genres. Almost no one knew who Toshiro Mifune, Michiko Kyô, or Akira Kurosawa were (Variety's review of the film lists Kurosawa as a cast member with an “impassive, glowering presence”). (1951: 15) Little inside information was available concerning the details of the production, removing another important source of reviewer data. Without much of the information upon which a reviewer depends, how does one write about a film? Does Rashomon's reception in the West constitute a moment in which film reviewers could confront a film purely on its own terms as a work of art which transcends cultural boundaries? This paper explores the contemporary critical writings concerning Rashomon not so much to provide fresh insight into the text itself but to investigate Western critical strategies. The criticism allows us to see clearly the schemata on which reviewers depend, even when they lack information about the film itself.

Though most reviewers were as ignorant as Vernon Young, few approached the film with the same admission of ignorance.1 Even those who admitted that Rashomon appeared out of the blue worked hard to maintain the appearance of superior knowledge. Given the pressure for a reviewer to appear culturally knowledgable, the writers made links between the film and what they did know, no matter how partial their knowledge.
In this instance the strategies of popular reviewers bear great resemblance to those of more culturally highbrow sources (such as Cahiers du Cinema). This paper will rarely differentiate between high and low criticism because no productive difference was found between their assumptions in this case. In part this paper argues for a continuity of the uses made of knowledge across varying critical practices. Both high and low critics chose remarkably similar background sets to compare to Rashomon, and both used them in remarkably consistent ways.

The “First” Japanese Film in the West

Though most reviewers treated Rashomon as a film without precedent in the West, several reviews did note that it was not the first Japanese film to be shown in New York, citing the fact that another film was shown 14 years earlier. Mikio Naruse’s Wife! Be Like a Rose! (Tsuma yo Bara no yo ni) reached Manhattan theaters in 1937 under the title Kimiko, selected by a group of Chicago University professors who judged it as being both representative of modern Japan and appealing to American audiences. However, no reviews mention an earlier Japanese export exhibited in America in 1932: avant garde filmmaker Teinosuke Kinugasa’s Crossroads (Jujiro).

Undoubtedly this is because of the way in which Crossroads was marketed in the United States. In Europe the film was released as Shadows of Yoshiwara; in New York the film was retitled Slums of Tokyo, an Oriental Sex Drama. “Painted Lilies Barter Bodies in Yoshiwara Tenderloin... For Adults Only! Nobody Under 18 Admitted!” the advertisements proclaimed. (Bernardi, 1985: 291) Because of the exploitative marketing, the film received little critical attention. Many foreign films would receive a similarly creative repackaging as exotic exploitation films, but this strategy did not help Crossroads achieve wide acceptance (critical or economic) in the States. European marketing positioned the film as a more artistic enterprise, and critics commented on its editing and lighting, eliciting comparisons with Dreyer. (Anderson and Richie, 1982: 57) Early in the marketing history of Japanese film, the films were portrayed as art films and exploitation films, two significantly different approaches which influence critical understandings.

Kimiko’s depiction of modern day Japan, as mentioned before, received the approval of academia. But as Variety noted,

Despite optimism of the college professors, Kimiko has little entertainment value for average American film audiences... Film’s chief flaw is its dreary pace. Also fact that Japanese are racially not emotionally demonstrative, as result of which performances are agonizingly underplayed. (1937: 18)

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Variety stressed the film’s novelty value as its strong selling point along with the “wealth of picturesque atmosphere and vivid photography.” The film was marketed as neither exploitation nor art but instead as a combination of quaint Orientalism and culture-crossing universal themes: “It’s Cherry Blossom Time and Boy Meets Girl in Tokyo.” (Advertisement, 1937: 4)

Some critics supported the film, but most echoed Variety’s complaints: the pace was slow and repetitive, the actors unexpressive. The decorative atmosphere and the universal light-hearted theme were not strong enough selling points. American audiences interested in such comic drollery were referred to “Mr. Deeds Goes to Town” or “My Man Godfrey.” (“Kimiko,” Variety, 1937: 18) A film like Kimiko served to reassure Hollywood producers that Japan’s prolific cinema industry is not a serious menace. (“Kimiko,” Time, 1937: 42).

A Daisi Production Released by RKO Radio Pictures

Rashomon announced itself as a very different film from its predecessors. After its surprise victory at the Venice Film Festival, it also was voted Best Foreign Film by the National Board of Review, which also gave Kurosawa its Best Direction award. Newspapers across the United States emphasized this distinguished pedigree when advertising the film. Clearly the primary marketing strategy was to pitch Rashomon as an art film.

But Rashomon differs from almost all the Japanese films which would follow it in the 1950s because it was distributed by a major, not a small independent. Rashomon was situated as an art film but with the clout and stature that comes with a major distribution contract.

The trade press noted this unusual circumstance and commented on it. The only previous attempt by a major to release a subtitled foreign film was 1948’s Man About Town, an RKO-distributed, French-made product starring Maurice Chevalier. RKO Studios under Howard Hughes was falling on hard times in 1951. Production halted, and the distribution organization actively solicited independent product. “It has gone so far afield as to take on Rashomon, Japanese pic with English subtitles,” a desperate move by Variety’s standards. (“Films,” 1952: 3, 12) RKO’s experiment paid off, and Rashomon’s economic success encouraged RKO to acquire other foreign films. However, these successors did not sell as well, discouraging other majors from following in RKO’s footsteps. Rashomon remained fairly distinctive as a foreign subtitled film with major distribution clout.

Critical Schemata and Hypotheses

Who is Akira Kurosawa? What are his other films, and does he stand alone as the exponent of a strong and sophisticated art, or are there in Japan others like him? We don’t know; I at least don’t. (Whitebait, 1952: 45)

When most reviewers saw Rashomon, it had the status accorded any film that could claim Venice’s title of “World’s Best Film.” Here was a film so important, one could claim, that a major distributor handled it. Yet these circumstances did not help the reviewer except to position Rashomon as a significant art film, not an exploitation or pure entertainment film. The traditional background sets of national cinema, auteur, star, and genre were virtually inaccessible. How, then, was a reviewer to interpret this film?

David Bordwell in Making Meaning (1989) has discussed academic film criticism as a set of practices operating with certain shared hypotheses, schemata, and knowledge structures. Two of the strongest schemata for interpreting a film are genre and personification (which involves understandings about characters, filmmakers, personified style/narration, and spectators). (Bordwell, 1989: 146-168) Though Rashomon’s initial Western reception makes the genre and filmmaker schemata difficult to apply, note that other types of personification (particularly personified style/narration and spectators) are available to critics/reviewers.

The critical activity is guided at a more abstract level by certain general hypotheses: that films will be coherent and that they will be verisimilar (mimetic). (Bordwell, 1989: 134) It is to be expected that these hypotheses will function even more clearly when other critical routines are blocked. In the Rashamon case study, the mimetic hypothesis is particularly strong, leading critics to make claims based on commonsensical understandings of human nature or of Japanese society in particular.

Edward Said’s landmark study Orientalism (1979) articulates how scholars construct the category of the “Oriental.” According to Said, scholars draw lines between conceptions of West and East which are monolithic and irreducible. Certain characteristics are Western, certain others are Eastern, and the East in particular is timeless, unchanging. (1979: 108-9) Said traces this Orientalizing tendency back to origins in the 18th century, depending on a global vision, historical confrontations, sympathy for the Other, and an impulse toward classification. (1979: 113-120)

Said’s description of the formative conditions behind 18th century Orientalism aptly fits the Cold War state of affairs during Japan’s Occupation. The Cold War itself is based on a global vision that divides the world into capitalist and communist forces. The confrontation between Japan and the United States was vivid in the minds of former soldiers and their families. The U.S.’s effort toward rebuilding Japan depended on a sympathetic and paternalistic attitude toward a former enemy. And though classification describes a large trend dating back to Linnaeus, the critic is particularly interested in classification. Drawing such lines of difference and categorization...
is central to criticism, making postwar criticism of Japanese art a prime candidate for Orientalism.4  

But what are the forms of Orientalism specific to the World War II Pacific conflict? John Dower has suggested that the primary Western imagery of the period depicts the Japanese as savages/animals, madmen, and children. (1986: 118-146) The fact that the Japanese are physically “little people” becomes the rationale for treating them as children who can become delinquent, exposing themselves as a deranged race. They are in need of education, civilizing their savage instincts, curing their collective illness.  

Dower notes the malleability of this imagery to fit varying circumstances. During the war the simian imagery portrayed Japan as bestial and dangerous. In peacetime the same animal imagery could be used disparagingly to depict Japan as a charming little monkey, as good pupils with a knack for mimicry. The fact that similar imagery can be used to convey different strands of Orientalist racism (overt and tacit) emphasizes the adaptability of such constructions to a wide variety of cultural interchanges.

**Reviewer Reception of Rashomon**

None of these notifications [Rashomon’s awards] has fully or sufficiently conveyed the strange and disturbing fascination of this conspicuously uncommon film. And we have the uncomfortable feeling that this may turn out inadequate, too. (Crowther, 1952: 1)

To the Orientalist frame of mind, the East, like Rashomon itself, is an enigma that cannot be fully captured by language. Several reviews begin (as Bosley Crowther’s [above] does) with an admission of the inadequacy of the critic’s language to convey a sense of the film. Such statements are narratively justified by Rashomon’s technique of undermining the authority of its characters’ narration. Critics often suggested that there was no single unitary meaning to be gained from Rashomon, that one can “find all kinds of symbols: the unhappy state of the world today, the selfishness of people, the rebirth of Japan in the final scene with the baby, etc.” (Hartung, 1952: 350)

Such criticism favors a strategy that makes the critic’s and the filmmaker’s final products resemble each other in structure or in the style of their rhetorical address. If a film seems to proffer a unitary meaning, the review should do so as well. If a film like Rashomon foregrounds the differences among viewpoints, the review should acknowledge the possible variant readings among audience members. This rhetorical strategy emphasizes the critic’s cleverness, suggesting that the virtuosic critic can adapt his/her style to the style of the film being reviewed.

Film reviewers must not only establish their cleverness; they must also position themselves as authoritative figures. They principally do this through citation of information or appeal to outside authorities. With few authorities and little “insiders” information available, the reviewers establish themselves as authorities familiar with other relevant fields. Lacking contextualizing data, the critic’s job is to place the text within an appropriate context.

Over and over again reviewers compare Rashomon to various Japanese cultural forms. Rashomon is like Japanese feltwork, an Oriental glass puzzle, Kabuki theater, or simply Japanese aesthetics in general: “the traditional simplification of the image, the sensitive variation of tone, the dramatic use of acute angles.” (Hatch, 1952: 22; Coe, 1952: 20; Beaufort, 1952: 12; “Rashomon,” Newsweek, 1952: 59) The urge to create a unified Japanese aesthetic (as opposed to a Western aesthetic) is indicative of Said’s Orientalism. All Japanese cultural forms reflect these aesthetic principles, making such comparisons possible.

Vernon Young’s early revisionist criticism of Rashomon attacks this reviewer’s commonplace, asking critics to specify what kind of painting should be compared to the film and how the comparison fits in more than a merely superficial way. (1955: 436) As more and more Japanese films became available in the West, the less acceptable a mere invocation of a “Japanese aesthetic” became as an authority-gaining move for reviewers.

Reviewers often compared Rashomon to cultural works that are much more familiar in Western art criticism circles. Rashomon is like Ufa’s Siegfried, Cocteau and Anouilh, Swift, Browning, Pirandello, and French and Italian film. (Hart, 1952: 37; Coe, 1952: 20; “Rashomon,” Time, 1952: 88; Whitebait, 1952: 45; Nichols, 1952: 9; Arden, 1952: 15) The most detailed of these comparisons is made by Parker Tyler, who expounds at some length the connection between the multiple subjective viewpoints in Picasso’s Cubist works and in Rashomon. (1967) The critic is on somewhat safer ground in making such moves because the comparison links the film to material he/she is more likely to be familiar with and because such comparisons imbue the film being reviewed with the high art status accorded these other works.

Not all such comparisons are intended as compliments, however. Manny Farber calls the film “Louver-conscious,” comparing it to “a tiny aquarium in which a few fish and a lot of plants have delicately been tinkered with by someone raised in Western art-cinema theaters and art galleries.” (Farber, 1952: 66) The New Yorker says that “a Japanese potpourri of Erskine Caldwell, Stanislavski, and Harpo Marx isn’t likely to provide much sound diversion.” (McCarten, 1951: 60) Whether such comparisons are used to praise or damn the film, they situate the reviewer as an authoritative, knowledgable figure, regardless of whether he/she knows anything about Japanese cinema.

Critical comparisons need not be restricted to the realm of the arts. If the mimetic hypothesis is held, a work of art will be assumed to have a verisimilitudinous relationship with the real world. The question becomes:
which portion of the world is being represented?

The obvious answer in *Rashomon* is that Japan is being presented. Yet few reviewers argued that *Rashomon* is merely a period piece revealing information about 9th century Japan. Several considered the film to reveal truths about the present-day Japanese condition. For example, the *Christian Science Monitor* notes that

At the time of the action, the city’s original splendor had long since been lost, owing to natural disasters, wars, and troublesome times. For Japanese spectators, then, the picture may serve as an ancient fable with a modern application. (Beaufort, 1952: 12)

The past is depicted not for sake of historical reconstruction but for its relevance to current conditions. The critic assumes a continuity between the past and present which enables one to move across time as if little had changed. The immutability of the East discussed by Said allows one to treat a period piece as a commentary on the present.

Once the link between the depicted period and Occupation Japan is established, the critic can call on commonplace about the Japanese national character. Such comments are not confined to articles reflecting a relative lack of knowledge about Japanese culture. Even detailed accounts of Japanese film are filled with references to the Japanese attitude toward Nature and the human body, bearing out Said’s argument that informed intellectuals carry out a great deal of the work of homogenizing the Orient and giving it its timeless character.2

A Japanese film can also give the critic new insight into the Japanese character to correct the Western commonplace. For example, *Rashomon’s* broad acting style clearly contradicts the reigning understanding of the Japanese as an unexpressive people. The *Baltimore Sun* said,

If anyone still regards the Japanese as a phlegmatic, undemonstrative race, he should take a look at *Rashomon*. The film is white hot with passion much of the time, and the actors often vent their feelings with a fury and hysteria which go far beyond our own acting habits. (Kirkley, 1952: 16)

*Rashomon* violated the dominant conception of Japanese taciturnity, an image that had kept filmgoers away from the earlier film *Kimiko*.

The range of acting styles in the film received much comment, but most of the commentary was reserved for Mifune’s flamboyant performance. *Time* describes Mifune’s bandit as “an unforgettable animal figure, grunting, sweating, swatting at flies that constantly light on his half-naked body, exploding in hyena-like laughter of scorn and triumph.” (“*Rashomon,*” *Time,* 1952: 88)

Many of the critics saw Mifune’s performance in terms of animal imagery, which may be interpreted in various ways. Kurosawa reports (Richie, 1970: 77) that he encouraged Mifune to convey the ferocity of a lion in his performance, and so one could consider this directorial intention particularly well conveyed to the audience. Or James Davidson (1954: 497) suggests that Mifune is incarnating an ogre, a folk figure considered to be a depiction of a foreigner. In his reading Davidson argues that *Rashomon* is a Japanese attempt to come to terms with their defeat at the hands of the foreigner. Mifune’s antics, which seemed to astonish the Western press, may be construed as an attempt to depict the West for the Japanese. Or one could situate the animal imagery invoked in Mifune’s performance as an invocation of the bestial imagery of the Pacific War conflict. As Dower argues, the Japanese “beast” may be read by Westerners either as dangerous animal or as the charming antics of a mimicking monkey, depending on the circumstances. Westerners understand Mifune’s animalistic performance in terms of a large history of racist depictions of Japan.

When reviewers applied the mimetic hypothesis to *Rashomon*, they often came to conclusions about the current state of affairs in Japan or about the immutable Japanese national character. But many reviewers saw *Rashomon* as conveying verisimilitudinous information about the character of humanity itself, not just the Japanese. They saw *Rashomon* as a humanist document which crosses international boundaries because it reveals something about the human condition.

For these critics, *Rashomon* is about innate selfishness, heartlessness and meaning, the frailty of the human animal, or the tendency to describe things the way we want them to appear. (“*Rashomon,*” *Christian Century,* 1952: 447; Crowther, 1951: 18; “*Rashomon,*” *Time,* 1952: 87; Hart, 1952: 34) *Rashomon* functions as a canonical example of internationalist fantasy that dominated much writing about the art cinema in the 1950s. It is “an almost perfect example of the universality of the film medium,” illuminating a “timeless theme,” proving that “the motion picture is one of man’s greatest poetical tools.” (Hart, 1952: 7-8) *Rashomon,* an unknown film from an unknown film industry, dramatically demonstrated film’s ability to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries if it deals with themes which are basic to all humanity.

Though these films were expected to maintain a sense of their original country (and thus maintaining their marketable difference), they were viewed by critics whose expectations were shaped by classical Hollywood narratives. When a film violated a deeply imbedded norm of “good storytelling technique,” the reviewer noted the discrepancy as a flaw. Films which avoided such discrepancies while still maintaining their national flavor (a difficult balancing act, at best) could circulate as successful expressions of the international film community spirit.
Reviewers perceived *Rashomon* as violating the Hollywood norm of continual presentation of new plot events. Though each retelling of the story yields new information and presents another variation of the plot, the film does not have strong sense of linear time associated with the Hollywood cinema, instead substituting a more cyclical version of time. While many complimented this innovation, many at the same time complained about the repetition and the slow pace. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* said,

The quadruple version may seem an adroit device, but it slows the picture up too much and compels a feature-length picture to sustain on only enough story material for a short. In consequence, *Rashomon* seems longer than its actual time in minutes. (Barry, 1952: 7)

Just as in the case of *Kimiko*, reviewers compared the Japanese film to a canonical norm of pacing and narrative structure and found the film lacking. Similarly many commented on the perceived inappropriateness of the ending. The poor woodcutter’s adopting the foundling baby violated the principle of narrative consistency for these reviewers, inserting a false note of hope in an otherwise cynical film. While some justified the ending in humanist terms, many considered the epilogue to be narratively unjustified according to norms of consistency and coherence.

So *Rashomon*’s Western reception resembles *Kimiko*’s U.S. reception in several important ways. Both films were full of decorative touches pointing to their culture, both had content that transcended cultural boundaries, both had difficulties in maintaining narrative interest. What were the most significant factors discussed in the reviews which allowed *Rashomon* to achieve greater critical and financial success?

I have already discussed two important differences: *Rashomon*’s status as an internationally award winning film and the physically and emotionally demonstrative acting styles. Another value perceived to compensate for the film’s lack of narrative pace was its philosophical richness. Reviewers discussed *Rashomon*’s argument concerning the nature of subjective and objective truth, a philosophical issue with a long intellectual heritage, and this issue continued to set the terms of *Rashomon* discussions for years afterward. (Richie, 1970: 71-75) *Rashomon*, along with the works of Ingmar Bergman, helped define the 1950s art cinema as a place where philosophical issues were debated in ways that were central to the intellectual community.

The other feature that was almost universally praised was Kurosawa’s and Kazuo Miyagawa’s flashy camerawork. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*,

the camera’s mobility makes it seem to be a wood nymph, skipping and running and gaping, reveling in the brightness of the sun glittering through the trees, terrified and fascinated by the darkness it sees in the human heart. (Nichols, 1952: 9)

In lieu of information about Kurosawa as filmmaker, the reviewers depended on the foregrounded camerawork to provide them with a personification of style. The bold camera style gave reviewers data on which they could use the personification hypothesis. The emphasis on camera movement encouraged them to posit Kurosawa as a true *auteur*, even though they knew almost nothing about him or his other work.

**Epilogue**

Though the reviews discuss *Rashomon*’s camera style and its philosophical issues at length, there is almost no discussion of the sexual or violent content of the film (except for Parker Tyler’s essay placing violence at the center of a moral enigma). (1967: 133) The reviewers followed the lead generally set by the advertisements, construing the film as an artwork and ignoring the potential for exploitation.

However, the advertisements and publicity in local newspapers, while primarily emphasizing the film’s awards and reviews, still depict the sexual allure of an erotic film. Here one notices the pictorial emphasis on Machiko Kyô, whose performance is only briefly discussed in most reviews. In the advertising and publicity, however, Kyô is a central attraction. Almost all the ads chosen to run in local newspapers feature a drawing of Kyô’s face partially hidden behind a veil and the words “Introducing the beautiful Machiko Kyô.” Almost every publicity still run in local newspapers is a closeup of Kyô, usually in period dress.

The film could have been marketed in a variety of ways, and some of these generally unused options can be seen in the *Rashomon* pressbook. Though the ads do emphasize the critical acclaim, the exhibitors could have chosen an even more highbrow marketing approach, using publicity stills like the one entitled “Philosophical Trio” in the pressbook, which shows three ragged actors in repose looking pensive. Though the most frequently used ads mention the exotic sexual angle, exhibitors also could have chosen a much more exploitative campaign along the lines of *Slums of Tokyo*. One series of ads show Mifune and Kyô wrestling with a knife, with this accompanying print: “The Husband Said: ‘SHE BETRAYED ME!’ The Bandit Said: ‘SHE OFFERED HER LOVE!’ The Wife Said: ‘I WAS ATTACKED!’” The press kit also offered a traditional cheesecake picture of Kyô in a bikini lying on a rocky beach, but most newspapers ran a still in period dress (though as auspicious a paper as the *Washington Post* ran the bikini photo on the cover of their Sunday Amusements section). (“Life,” 1952: 1)

The discrepancy between the advertisements/publicity and the reviews
is striking. Though both emphasize *Rashomon* as art, the advertisements also feature Kyo's sexual appeal almost exclusively, and the reviews discuss Mifune's acting almost exclusively. The reviewers promoted the film along more culturally acceptable lines of acting, camerawork, and philosophical arguments, ignoring the sexual appeal of the advertisements and publicity. Faced with the task of reviewing a film they knew little about, reviewers not only applied familiar schemata and hypotheses to the film but also they took only the appropriate cues from the advertising, cues which portrayed *Rashomon* as high art.

**Endnotes**

1. One should note that Young was not among the initial reviewers of the film. He and other writers like James F. Davidson (1954) were part of a second wave of criticism in scholarly nonfilmic journals which called for a reevaluation of earlier reviewers' assumptions.

2. Mark Van Doren called it "one of the most moving films I know." (1937: 419)

3. Bordwell's metacriticism, though dealing specifically with academic film criticism, isolates assumptions that are also shared by more popular writings on film.

4. Said's study deals with Orientalism among intellectual theorists and historians, showing that racist assumptions cannot be located merely in the less educated. There is no high/low distinction to be made here.

5. Consider the conclusion of Fosco Maraini's "Tradition and Innovation in Japanese Films":

   Cinema is a visual art and the Japanese are great visualists; it is somehow related to the theatre and the Japanese have a thousand years of splendid theatrical tradition; it has a technical, magic side and the Japanese, like the Americans, love to work with their hands, twirl little difficult things around and make them work; also, films are made more by teams than by individuals, and Japan is the country of teams. Finally, good films only appear where there is a genuine poetic talent coupled with a common experience in human suffering: the Japanese are great poets, and they have greatly suffered. (1954: 305)

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**The Past, the Present, and the Future**

**An Interview with Wu Ziniu**

Conducted by Haili Kong

Wu Ziniu has been considered one of the most important Fifth Generation Chinese filmmakers. Wu has directed more than ten films, such as Evening Bell (1988) and Nanjing, 1937 (1995), and won numerous awards both at home and abroad which includes a Silver Bear Award in the Berlin International Film Festival. In October 2000, he was one of four featured Chinese directors at an international symposium on Chinese cinema at Swarthmore College, and lectured at Temple University, Columbia University, and New York University. Kong conducted this interview in Beijing, May 31, 2002.

Kong: The emergence of the Fifth Generation filmmaking is widely considered a milestone in the history of Chinese cinema, which reflected both collective and individual efforts of the 1982 graduates from Beijing Film Academy. As a member of this group, do you think there was a common aesthetic ideology or principle guiding your filmmaking especially before 1995?

Wu: I should say both “yes” and “no.” As a matter of fact, we never formally discussed our common principles or set up a goal for us to pursue. On the contrary, we all tried to show our individuality and differences in our film products at the time. However, we could not avoid being “similar,” especially from the outsiders’ point of view. First of all, because most of us were born in the first half of the 1950s, we went through very similar hardship during the Cultural Revolution. I was sent down to the countryside to receive “re-education” in Sichuan, and, as you know, both Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige had to do the same in the different parts of the country. By the time when we entered the Beijing Film Academy, we were all “old” college students with ample social experiences. In a sense, we were more appreciative of the opportunity we finally grasped for college education. Secondly, we all more or less felt the heaviness of the tasks we needed to fulfill and the urgency to catch up with the time we had already lost during the Cultural Revolution. A better expression, I should say, is that we all felt a strong sense of history and would like to express our own interpretation of, or feeling about life through our individualistic camera lenses.

Kong: Since the common thoughts the Fifth Generation filmmakers shared are related to a strong sense of history, then, it should be natural and not coincidental that a group of epical films came out around the year of 1995, such as Zhang Yimou’s *To Live*, Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*, Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Blue Kite* and your *Nanjing 1937*. Do you agree with this?

Wu: Yes. Those grand-theme films are heavier and more mature indeed,