



# Spectacular Fifth Generation films share fatalistic view **Cinema** OF MISERY

by Andrew Sun

Chinese Film Festival Survey

As National cinema goes, Communist China is as consistent in putting out quality pictures as any other country.

Since the early 80s, movies from the mainland have been hits on the international movie festival circuit and a handful have even been released to tremendous critical acclaim in North America.

A good opportunity to catch a sample of what China has to offer is now being presented at the Bloor Cinema from Nov. 16 thru Nov. 22, and will feature six new works from the Chinese Cinema.

Yet for all their laurels, one could be hard pressed for specific names who lead the cinematic charge from the East. This relative anonymity can be attributed to one single factor—their numbers. Directors like Xie Fei, Chen Kaige, Xie Jin, Zhang Yimou, Wu Ziniu and others should be considered among the top of the field internationally. However, with virtually no media exposure or even a hint of what these directors even look like, it is too easy to toss them all into one group called the "Fifth Generation" Filmmakers.

The title was given to the crop of filmmakers who've graduated from the Beijing Film Academy (the only film school in China) since 1982. It was closed for 12 years during the Cultural Revolution until 1978 when the doors reopened to 150 plus filmmakers. Unfortunately some of these graduates will probably never make film again because of last June in Tiananmen Square. Of the films that have been made, *Red Sorghum*, *Girl from Hunan*, *Yellow Earth* and *Hibiscus Town* were each made by a different director. Numerous other less celebrated gems exist and even the films that fail are noble failures.

The "Fifth Generation" films all possess a panache for strong visuals and a natural narrative flow.

Technically, these movies look as spectacular as the best from



*King of Children*: Dead Society's Poet: Yang Xiuwen (student) and Xie Yuan (teacher) in CHEN

Hollywood. (Sven Nykvist could have been the cinematographer for every film I've ever seen from China!)

One common denominator of these films is that they share a similar fatalistic outlook.

Thematically, Chinese film can be described as the cinema of misery.

No other country has been so successful in portraying the anguish of simple peasants struggling against nature, landlords, armies, and bureaucracy.

One person who has been relentlessly trying to tear down China's cinematic wall is Russell Chan.

For more than three years, his company, Jasmine Tea Films, has been bringing films from China to the Bloor Cinema.

"China's 'Fifth Generation' Filmmakers never fail to impress with their work, all the more since last year's June 4th incident in Beijing," comments Chan, "these six films show [that the Chinese cinema] has gone beyond beautifully shot films about rural life. It now includes films of astonishing depth and candour."

A good depiction of rural Chinese life is Chen Kaige's (*The Big Parade*, *Yellow Earth*) new film, *The King of Children*.

It is about a mountain villager, Lao Gan (played with appropriately stolid expression by Xie Yuan), involuntarily hired to teach peasant children. Faced with no choice in this responsibility, he takes on the job rather earnestly only to find the school's supplies inadequate even for his limited teaching ability.

*Evening Bells* is an un-extraordinary film by Wu Ziniu, about the stand off between five

Chinese soldiers and an impoverished Japanese regiment set after the end of World War II.

Winner of the "Special Jury Prize" at the 1989, Berlin Film Festival, this stylish drama features some spectacular panoramas of China's harsh and adverse landscape.

Many of the characters are pretty standard war archetypes (what can one say about characters identified only as the Captain, the Giant and the Beard)?

However, for anyone familiar with China's prejudices, *Evening Bells* is curious for possibly being the most sympathetic portrayal of Japanese soldiers in a Chinese film.

The most astonishing film in the series has to be *Black Snow*.

It was shot after the Tiananmen massacre and director Xie Fei (*Girl From Hunan*) received a Special Achievement Award at this year's Berlin Film Festival.

The talented Jiang Wen (*Red Sorghum*) plays a prisoner just released and trying to re-adjust to life on the outside.

Wen's character implies that he is a thug and trouble maker by the way that he quietly broods, but he could also be a disillusioned stu-

dent activist.

Fei balances, on the one hand, a devastating statement about political repression, and on the other, government propaganda concerning what happens to corrupt comrades who do nothing useful for the State.

The hands of the government censors are quite obvious in several scenes but Fei works around them quite neatly.

*Black Snow* is powerful filmmaking and despite the overly symbolic closing shot this is a director who knows how to work for and against the system.

Two other films continue the surprisingly strong contingent of Chinese female directors.

*The Story of Women* explores the lives of three women travelling to Beijing from a small rural village to sell their wares, while *Far Removed From War* is a family drama on China's generation gap.

The final film, *The Filmmakers* is a bold, controversial look at a group of filmmakers desperately trying to finish a project. The film's erotic lesbian scenes have caused quite a stir within China.

The series continues at the Bloor Cinema until Thurs. Nov. 22, and is definitely worth a look.



*Black Snow*: Jiang Wen in the first Post-Tiananmen film to come out of China