

# Innovative Breakthroughs and Artistic Presentation

## —A Look Back at the Mainland’s Fifth-generation Movies

Zimo Liang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Independent Researcher

Correspondence: Zimo Liang, Independent Researcher.

doi: 10.56397/AS.2022.08.03

### Abstract

The fifth generation of film, as the inevitability of history, has come to the fore in the turbulent transformation of the times. Innovations in cinematic language, narrative style, and the portrayal of characters in fifth-generation films have sprung from old-fashioned artistic creation and remain implications for the film industry in China today.

**Keywords:** fifth-generation movies, fifth-generation directors, cinematic language, narrative style, character building

### 1. Introduction

The fifth generation of the film was born in a special period of social transformation in China. As a necessary result of history, it emerged in the public’s vision during the agitation and change of the times. The fifth generation of movies has emerged from the rigid and archaic art mode in aesthetic style and has made a sharp innovation. Looking back on the fifth generation of film, it is of great reference value and enlightenment to Chinese filmmakers and the artistic creation of cinema in the modern context.

### 2. The Context

Fifth generation director refers to the “gang of four” in the late 1970s, after the smash and resumption of college entrance examination admissions, Beijing film academy recruited and cultivated the first mainly directing department, but also extended to photography, fine arts, and other graduates. The main representative characters are Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuang, Wu Zhiguo, Zhang Junzhao, Huo Jianxin, and so on. Their works not only promote the innovation and development of Chinese films but also realize cultural exchanges and spiritual dialogue between Chinese films and the world to a certain extent.

The fifth-generation director has similar life experiences, social experiences, and cultural experiences. As teenagers, they were caught up in social unrest and endured a decade of devastation. Their knowledge of climbing up and down the mountain, entering the army factories, and feeling their way through the lower rungs of life gave them an insight into the reality of Chinese society and the hardships of material and mental poverty. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, they were fortunate to be selected from many young people eager to study higher education and were allowed to visit the Beijing Film Institute.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the reform and opening and the ideological liberation movement flourished, historical changes also created a good learning environment and conditions for the Class of “78” at the Beijing Film Institute. In the field of thought and ideology, the Class of ‘78 experienced a great discussion on the standard of truth. In film theory, they have also experienced a great deal of talk about the concept and characteristics of the film. These together influenced his understanding of the art of film and the thought of social art. At the same time, they have access to various western literary reviews and film genres, broadening the

artistic vision and enriching the accumulation of art, and inspiring the courage of creative innovation. Therefore, although the fifth generation film is not a recognized film genre, it still presents similar artistic features to some extent and forms the original aesthetic qualities of the fifth generation film creation.

Aesthetic features

### *2.1 Cinematic Language*

The fifth generation of the film has formed its unique aesthetic style with the combination of documentary and formality. The fifth generation film "image aesthetics" changed the simple image style of realistic cinema, began to pursue the courtesy and modeling of film language, gave full play to the creativity of composition, light, color, and so on, and formed a kind of publicity visual effect, so that the film has a strong sense of form, to produce meaning and connotation beyond the specific image. Form factors such as light and color are no longer hidden behind the story but are placed in the foreground as another important means of creating meaning outside the story.

For example, in "yellow land," the high horizon composition makes the loess plateau and yellow river take up most of the space in the frame, forming the color contrast between the earth and sky, making the color of the loess plateau in the film appear deep and heavy, giving it an oil-like texture. When realism is combined with freehand style, the loess plateau in the movie is no longer real and pristine, nor is it presented as an environmental element in the story but emerges from the story as an image independent of the characters and plot. There is a strong sense of form when a movie screen's symbolic nature has an expression independent of the story.

The rise of the fifth-generation film modeling consciousness and the establishment of the film image standard caused by it are important manifestations of the modernization of Chinese film. "One and Eight" marks the transition of Chinese cinema from documentary aesthetics to image aesthetics. "Red Elephant" is the beginning of the fifth generation of image modeling, which makes many bold attempts at photographic composition and light color. One and Eight feature a black-and-white tone, the flexible use of unconventional asymmetric design, and the photo-image modeling method of large light ratio to create a strong visual impact and psychological shock for the objective audience object. Depressing lens language speaks powerfully to the soul's distortion and the prisoner's guilt. As a work of the same director, "king of children" adopts a relatively simple and realistic image style, in which the characters act as the subjects in a particular historical situation, and the narrative merged with the graphic image expresses a rational thought, in which the characters' appearance, behavior, and events become the object of study and are incorporated into the creators' ideas and philosophical messages.

Compared with the active exploration of film language and concern for social reality in the third generation of Chinese films, the expression of a strong sense of social responsibility and mission in the fourth generation focuses on the contrast between the thinking tension of visual presentation and the emotional strength of narrative expression in the fifth generation of Chinese films and the previous film expression. The fifth generation of Chinese cinema has brought about significant changes in aesthetic, artistic, and cultural forms.

Of course, fifth-generation movies don't quite break from the realist paradigm. Their styling tends to be confined to the interior of a single shot, and the overall composition of the film doesn't play to the montage of time created. The fifth-generation film expands the film's sense of space infinitely without paying enough attention to its inventiveness in time. Therefore, the film's overall structure, far from realizing the freedom of time and length of the film's "formalism" narrative, still follows the time principle of realism. In addition, the fifth generation of films mainly focuses on a fixed-length lens, which makes the narrative of the film show objectivity in the image of a strong sense of realism. The French film theorist Bezan thought that the long lens could show everything, reveal the inner meaning of people and things without disrupting the original appearance of people and things, and maintain the unity and integrity of time and space, reflecting the characteristics of realism.

### *2.2 Narrative Style*

Although the fifth-generation director emerges from the collective rationality and temporal rationality of the third and fourth generation directors, he does not deviate completely from his grand narrative style. Fifth-generation movies often have serious and grandiose themes, ups and downs of the rhythm, open and magnificent scenes, vivid colors, bleak and tragic music, and so on, giving people a sense of deep sleep.

Thematically, the fifth generation of directors did not stray from the previous generation's enthusiasm for serious subjects but only resolved them into different appeal styles, thus departing from the collectivist appeal model of the previous generation. In the expression of the fifth generation of films, there are often national spirit, national ambition, national culture, and even national aesthetics.

From theme to style and technique, "Yellow Land" presents a grand narrative in the form of a variation. The film combines the pursuit of style with a focus on people and a concern for the fate of the nation's history to create a

new realm of “speaking through the lens.” Zhang Yimou said of the two scenes in “Yellow Earth”: “The waist drum and the prayer for rain are focused on freehand, hoping to show the inner strength of the Chinese nation through the grand momentum. And the whole world is big. If the waist drum shows the depth of the earth, the prayer for rain shows the breadth of the sky.” Chen also said, “What I want to tell the audience over and over again in” Yellowland “is that our nation can’t live like that anymore.” “When the time for national renewal begins to come, we want to start from scratch, and we want to develop ideas from where we have been hurt that are strong enough to uplift the spirits of the nation.”

The essence of the macro narrative style of the 5th generation directors is still the macro fascination with social themes, so this kind of fractured grand narrative strategy is a social narrative strategy.

### 2.3 Character

The fifth generation film is more realistic in portraying characters with typical and symbolic features. The unity of commonality and individuality is one of the characteristics of real distinct characters. In the fifth generation of films, the character image is this kind of “universal,” universal or symbolic character image, is a character image with some historical consciousness or cultural implication. For example, Zhao’s epistles in “Black Gun Incident” are regarded as typical images of intellectuals. But the characters in “Yellow Land,” “Red Sorghum,” “Grand Parade,” and “The Hunting Ground Zasa” seem to have a certain tendency to “symbolize” and seem to be far away from the principles of realist characterization. However, their essence is still the result of, or an extreme expression of, prototyping, so there is a “self-deconstruction” effect. Almost every character is a lens of history and culture. The characters show more of a collective unconscious than an individualized emotion. The nation’s image is often hidden behind the individual, and the surface is more like a symbol of the national picture.

In “Yellow Land,” Cui Qiao Dad, Cui Qiao, and Hanhan are just the embodiment of the brand image of the “ancient Chinese nation.” The meaning of Cui Qiao is not to lament personal tragedy but to reveal and reflect the tragedy of the tradition, and Cui Qiao’s father just became the symbol of that backward, ignorant ancient tradition. “My grandfather” and “my grandmother” in the film “Red Sorghum” are also nothing like real people, whose wild vitality makes them more like mythical gods. Personality retreated to the back of commonality, barely seeing the uniqueness and specificity of the individual.

The fifth generation focuses on characters’ social and anachronistic characteristics in social, historical, and cultural contexts. Characters often lack the complexity and polysemy of individualized natural nature but present themselves as a “cultural image” with clear meaning and social orientation. Chen Kaige borrowed a sacred story of “individuals molded into groups” in his film “Great Parade,” reflecting a realistic ideology in contemporary China: individuals can only find the meaning and value of existence in groups. And this is exactly the thought pattern that film-making at that time insisted on and continued: seeking the ideological meaning and weight of the characters in the social and historical context.

### 2.4 Modern Evolution

Today, with the rapid development of the market economy, the flourishing of the film industry, and the surge of cultural thoughts, the film market in China today also shows the phenomenon of “blockbuster” games and “IP.” The pursuit of material pleasures and the blind indulgence of “pan-entertainmentization” make artistic creation more and more reckless, trapped in the dilemma of flow and capital.

In this era and the current market situation, looking back at the history of fifth-generation film engraved on the process of modern civilization is undoubtedly very enlightening. We need to rediscover the soul of national culture at the height of contemporary society, reshape the concept of film narration, create more oriental verve and style, and create more diverse features of domestic films. The subjectivity of national culture in making films highlights the unique humanistic advantages of Chinese cinema and promotes the harmonious symbiosis and sustainable development of the film industry and culture.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).