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# Introduction: Wu Tianming at St Andrews

**By Dina Iordanova**

The cluster of video and written essays dedicated to the life and work of this great Chinese cineaste is a direct consequence of the great opening up that we are witnessing.

In the past two years, I have received several doctoral students who have been sponsored by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) - some are in the UK to pursue a degree, whilst others are visiting for a year. In the Fall of 2017, I sat in a meeting with them and suggested that, as part of the work of the Institute for Global Cinema and Creative Cultures (IGCCC), we would organise a showcase for a lesser-known aspect of Chinese cinema. Perhaps it could be something in the series of workshops dedicated to high profile cinema personalities who have passed recently, like the ones we already held for Abbas Kiarostami, Andrzej Wajda, or Om Puri?

The students immediately proposed Wu Tianming (1939-2014), a great director and producer they said, known as the father of the Fifth Generation of directors and yet a man whose work is not as well known. It was time to correct the record, they said. And indeed, some months into the academic year, we were able to hold a workshop dedicated to Wu. This took place on 9 April 2019, and was organised with the assistance of visiting doctoral student Lifei Liu from East China Normal University in Shanghai (<https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/filmstudies/event/wu-tianming-st-andrews-an-igccc-workshop/>). The materials presented here first featured in the context of this event.

Two aspects in the life trajectory of Wu make him stand out:

First, the fact that he opted to take on the management of a large film studio, the one in Xian, near his native Shaanxi province. This choice meant that he made fewer films as director, as so much of his energies were taken up by administrative and management duties. There was a pay-off for this, however: as the key decision maker at Xian, Wu became key enabler for a number of other directors who were now empowered to making films in the nurturing milieu he provided. Whilst producing various mainstream blockbusters, Wu was able to finance and see through the nascent new independent cinema of China, which enjoyed a widely acclaimed international break through in the 1980s and triumphed at festivals all over.

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Secondly, Wu is one of the Chinese directors who found himself at one point as an émigré to the USA, but who then returned to China where he worked until his death. Wu happened to be in America in 1989, at the time when the Tiananmen Square protests took place. Due to the overall political insecurity at the time, he opted to stay on in the US and await further developments. This stay lasted five years, which he spent living in California, on the fringes of society. Here he was not the respected studio head, but is known to have made ends meet by running a video rental service for the Chinese diaspora, as well as for having been connected with some of the diasporic directors and even had a small role in the *Wayne Wang Joy Luck Club* (1993). Wu had his doubts about the USA, but also said he learned a lot from his exposure to American and Western cinema in general. The film *King of Masks* (1996), which he made after returning to China, reflects these new influences.

During the workshop we managed to bring to light new information and discuss different aspects of Wu's life and work. Having started as an actor and having been involved with film all throughout his life, his most important legacy is one as film director. Here I would like to present a few brief notes related to some of his films, which were subject of our discussion.

Connoisseurs of the work of Wu Tianming often quote his *Life* (1984) as the most important film of the director – not least as this film was widely discussed at the time of its release and is still regarded as one of the most influential discourse-producing cinematic texts of the new Chinese cinema. Told in an extraordinarily audacious and frank manner, it is the story of a young male teacher who makes pragmatic career choices and who is similarly inauthentic in his personal relationships. A remarkable film that marks the beginning of a new period in Chinese cinema.

However, we chose to screen in full his award-winning *Old Well* (1987), an exemplary film to view and one of outstanding stylistic quality. It is a story of rivalry between two villages over limited resources, showing a rural China quite different from the sanitized propaganda image, and depicting the Chinese as ordinary people who are as much in the grip of human passions as everyone else. Zooming in on everyday life upheavals and challenging life conditions, the film is a pre-cursor of later films that are stylistically very similar and yet better known. One could discover the roots of China's Fifth Generation filmmaking in the approach taken by this older director – the mise-en-scene, the camerawork, the colour choices, and the dramatic line proved much closer to the style of the younger directors than to the typical socialist realism canons that supposedly restricted innovative filmmaking. Director Zhang Yimou may have graduated as a cameraman, but due to his interesting looks he was known to have been in great demand as an actor – and indeed, we see

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him in the male lead on *Old Well*, a role for which he has been widely acclaimed. The film won awards for best film, best director, best male star and best female supporting actress, at China's authoritative Golden Rooster awards, as well as best film and best actor at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1988.

*King of Moks* may appear to be one of the director's most polished films, and indeed it features unforgettable and multiple award-winning performances by Zhu Xu and Zhou Renying. It tells the story of a traveling street performer who adopts a child in view to train a heir to his artistic skills, to soon discover that what he thinks is a young boy is actually a girl, and thus 'useless' in his patriarchal frame of mind. It is a complex story of confrontations and endurance where the protagonist does come to terms with his inner contradictions. Crisp colours and immaculate framing make this a memorable film, which is also of importance as it presents a radical critique of traditional attitudes to the female gender.

*Song of the Phoenix* was Wu's last film, and he passed away without being able to complete it. The film is based, in part, on Wu autobiography: as child, he was trained to play the suona, a traditional Chinese instrument. The story accounts the experiences of a youth whose formative years are spent cultivating respect to traditions and heritage whilst the outside context inevitably leads to confrontations with the fast-paced realities of modernising China. It is a film about Confucianism and capitalism, about generations gap, and about finding one's place in the world. Wu could not complete the film, so it was only after his passing that several of his friends managed to wrap up the project and make it available (one can find it in full on YouTube, with English subtitles, as well as a [tribute to the film](#) by director Martin Scorsese). *Song of the Phoenix* was released across cinemas in China during the winter of 2016, but did not attract as many viewers as expected. One of the distributors of the film posted a video in which he made a teary plea to audiences to go see the film - this went viral and is regarded as one of the curious incidents in modern-day Chinese cinema promotion. At our event in St Andrews, Jinuo Diao discussed the industry aspects of the finishing and post-humous distribution of this film.

And now, a brief discussion of what this cluster of contributions to Frames Cinema Journal contains:

First, colleagues contributed several video essays, which cover different aspects of remembering Wu Tianming. Prof. Chris Berry, UK's leading specialist on Chinese cinema, gives a vivid account of Wu's great personality and his idiosyncratic approach to cultural bureaucracy, and highlights his ability to navigate the treacherous waters of dealing with

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the stringent control of culture in China. Effectively it was this ability that permitted Wu, in the period between 1983 and 1989, to enable the completion of some of the most important films that opened Chinese cinema to the world, in close collaboration with Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, among others.

Then, famous director Xie Fei, a contemporary of Wu and himself a celebrated Fourth generation director of well-known films such as *Black Snow* (1990) and *A Girl from Hunan* (1988), gives a personal account of his memories in this heartfelt tribute. This interview was recorded courtesy of Wang Yao from the Beijing Film Academy. Due to the work of Wang Yao, we also have the video essay by Prof. Wu Guangping, Chair of the Film Studies Department at Beijing Film Academy, who discusses the lifepath and creative trajectory of Wu Tianming and aims to assess the legacy of the director in the pantheon of Chinese cinema.

Yet it is the video essay by Peize Li, who is in the second year of her doctoral studies at St Andrews, that Wu Tianming's complex personality comes alive. She weaves together in the different strands of Wu's studio engagements and remarkable oeuvre. Li uses numerous images as well as excerpts from films that he produced, to chart Wu's contributions as teacher at the Beijing Film Academy and director of the Xian film studio, and thus enabler of the Fifth-generation directors.

Last but not least, we also include two pieces of writing dedicated to specific aspects of Wu's work. In a highly original essay, September Liu explores the formative years of the director and analyses some of the important cinematic influences, such as Alberto Cavalcanti and various Soviet directors. Deng Huimin's text scrutinizes one of the most interesting films by Wu, *A River Without Buoys* (1983), which subtly addresses the repercussions of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of ordinary people.

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