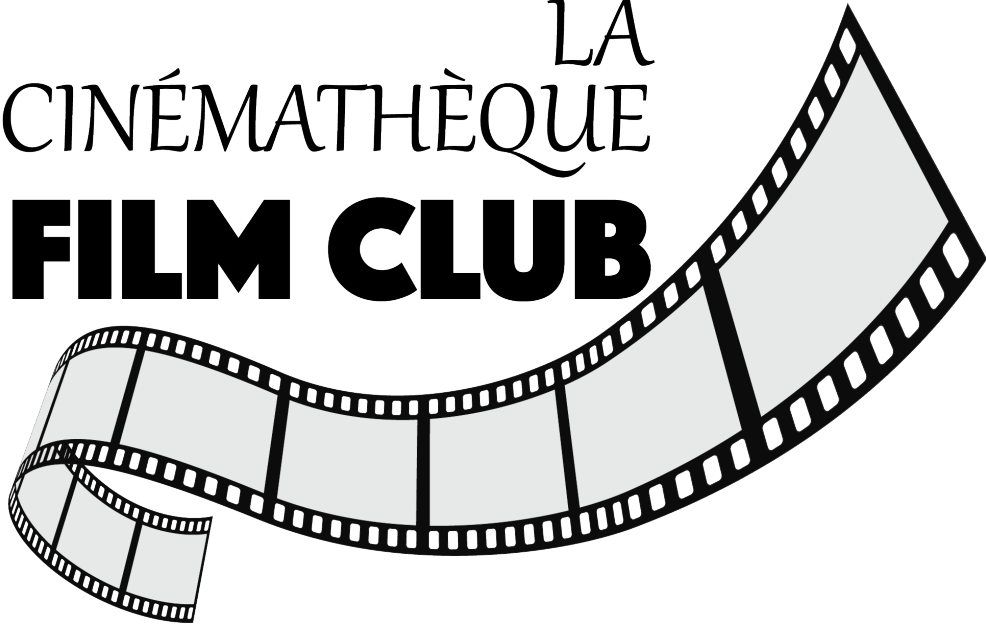


LA
CINÉMATHEQUE
FILM CLUB



Chinese Series
Spring 2019

Chen Kaige
b.1952

Farewell My Concubine
1993

10 essential modern directors from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan

John Berra • 16 January 2017

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Your guide to some of the greatest filmmakers to emerge in Chinese cinema since the 1980s, from Wong Kar-wai to Hou Hsiao-hsien.

Ann Hui

Essential films

Boat People (1982), The Postmodern Life of My Aunt (2006), A Simple Life (2011)

What's special about her?

Ann Hui has amassed a considerable body of work despite often going against the popular tide of her local film industry. A prominent member of the Hong Kong New Wave, with an interest in familial strife, national identity and social issues, Hui explored cultural displacement with her Vietnam trilogy, consisting of the television episode Boy from Vietnam (1978) and the features The Story of Woo Viet (1981) and Boat People.

This concern also permeates more commercial works such as the crime thriller Zodiac Killers (1991), in which a Chinese student living in Tokyo is sucked into the dangerous world of the yakuza. Hui's humanistic melodramas often address the ageing process: The Postmodern Life of My Aunt features a retiree who is swindled out of her savings, while A Simple Life beautifully details the relationship between a film producer and his elderly servant when the latter falls ill.



Tsui Hark

Essential films

Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain (1983), Peking Opera Blues (1986), The Blade (1995)

What's special about him?

A wild fantasist often referred to as 'the Steven Spielberg of Asia', Tsui Hark would become a leading purveyor of escapist fare with Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain, which mixed local ghost legend with Hollywood-style special effects. Hark is a master of mining Chinese history for crowd-pleasing storytelling: the hectic action-comedy Peking Opera Blues takes place during the democratic revolution of the 1910s while Once upon a Time



in China (1991) follows the adventures of folk hero Wong Fei-hung, and the martial arts epic Seven Swords (2005) is set after the founding of the Qing dynasty.

But his stylistic masterpiece is *The Blade*, a near-psychedelic reimagining of *One-armed Swordsman* (1967). Following a run of disappointments in the 2000s, Hark has returned to form with the mainland co-productions *Detective Dee* and *Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010)

and *The Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* (2011).

Tian Zhuangzhuang

Essential films

The Horse Thief (1986), *The Blue Kite* (1993), *Springtime in a Small Town* (2002)

What's special about him?

Tian Zhuangzhuang graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982 alongside Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. His early work evidenced a fascination with ethnic minorities: *On the Hunting Ground* (1985) is a documentary-style account of life in inner Mongolia and *The Horse Thief* (1986) explores the rugged landscape of Tibet.

One of Tian's most acclaimed works in the west would also stall his career as the *The Blue Kite* ran afoul of the local censors for illustrating the impact of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution on a Beijing family. Banned from directing until 1996, Tian mentored Sixth Generation filmmakers, eventually returning to the director's chair for the contemplative drama *Springtime in a Small Town*. Since then, Tian has applied his consummate craftsmanship to the handsome biopic *The Go Master* (2004) and the ambitious historical adventure *The Warrior and the Wolf* (2009).



Hou Hsiao-hsien

Essential films

A City of Sadness (1989), *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996), *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998)

What's special about him?

Exquisite compositions, long takes and languid moods are characteristics of Hou Hsiao-hsien's work, even when dealing with tragic ruptures. Many of Hou's films take place at times of turbulent social-political transition: *The Time to Live and the Time to Die* (1985) follows a boy's coming of age after his family leaves the mainland for Taiwan in 1947; *A City of Sadness* chronicles the post-Second World War impact of the Chinese Nationalist government on a Taiwanese family; and *The Puppetmaster* (1993) finds a master puppeteer being forced to use



his craft as a propaganda tool under the Japanese occupation.

Hou's recreation of the past reached a feverish peak with *Flowers of Shanghai*, which takes place in the brothels of the English concession in 1884. His meditations on contemporary Taiwanese society include the deceptively lackadaisical small-time crime study *Goodbye, South Goodbye* and the hypnotic nightlife odyssey *Millennium Mambo* (2001).

Edward Yang

Essential films

The Terrorisers (1986), *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), *Yi Yi* (2000)

What's special about him?

The films of Edward Yang were sadly little seen in the west during his lifetime because the director was not concerned with selling his work for profit. Often utilising the multi-stranded narrative format, Yang took the urbanisation of Taiwan as his subject: *The Terrorisers* is a mystery concerning the connections between an assortment of amoral strangers; *A Brighter Summer Day* follows the activities of 1960s street gangs; *A Confucian Confusion* (1994) critiques materialistic young professionals; *Mahjong* (1996) takes place in the modern underworld; and *Yi Yi* examines the life of a middle-class family over the course of a year.



Yang came to wider international attention when he was awarded the best director prize at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival for *Yi Yi*, but a lengthy battle with colon cancer meant he was unable to make another feature before his untimely passing in 2007 at the age of 59.

Zhang Yimou

Essential films

Raise the Red Lantern (1991), To Live (1994), Hero (2002)

What's special about him?

Zhang Yimou's enduring associations with ravishing rural landscapes and iconic leading lady Gong Li would begin with his debut feature Red Sorghum (1987) after which he collaborated with Gong on a run of celebrated period dramas. Ju Dou (1990), Raise the Red Lantern and To Live were sometimes seen as pandering to the



foreign gaze with their sumptuous visuals, but very much foregrounded the struggles of the individual while criticising state policies from a historical distance.

In the 2000s, Zhang brought his painterly touch to China's burgeoning blockbuster market with the resplendent wuxia epics Hero, House of Flying Daggers (2004) and Curse of the Golden Flower (2006).

Although he is synonymous with stately drama and stirring spectacle, a more eccentric side to Zhang's talents can be found in his frenetic urban comedy Keep Cool (1997) and slapstick farce A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop (2009).

Wong Kar-wai

Essential films

Days of Being Wild (1990), Chungking Express (1994), In the Mood for Love (2000)

What's special about him?

Wong Kar-wai became an arthouse favorite in the 1990s with such aesthetically invigorating cinematic love letters to Hong Kong as Days of Being Wild, Chungking Express and Fallen Angels (1995). Famed for his protracted production process – both In the Mood for Love and 2046 (2004) would take more than a year to shoot as footage was scrapped, plot strands were dropped, and locations were changed – Wong has kept his company Jet Tone afloat by taking on various advertising assignments alongside his dream projects.

Wong's vivid style was pioneered in partnership with the Australian cinematographer Christopher Doyle with their collaboration on the melancholic romance Happy Together (1997) transforming Buenos Aires into a hyper-



saturated space for unfulfilled longing. Such charismatic local stars as Tony Leung, Leslie Cheung, Maggie Cheung and pop diva Faye Wong have thrived under Wong's idiosyncratic direction to create the memorably lovesick protagonists who populate his intoxicating universe.

Tsai Ming-liang

Essential films

Vive l'amour (1994), What Time Is It There? (2001), The Wayward Cloud (2005)

What's special about him?

Reflecting the fact that he was born in Malaysia of Chinese ethnic background and later relocated to Taipei, the films of Tsai Ming-Liang are often concerned with dislocation as his lonely characters lack a sense of



belonging. *Vive l'amour* follows three alienated people who unknowingly share an apartment; *What Time Is It There?* alternates between the life of a Taipei street vendor and a woman who is visiting Paris, with the two people linked across time by the sale of a watch; and *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006) concerns a homeless man who is cared for by a Bangladeshi migrant worker after being beaten by a street mob.

A master of stillness and silence – *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) features only a dozen lines of dialogue – Tsai also has a fondness for neo-surrealist musical numbers, as seen in *The Hole* (1998) and *The Wayward Cloud*.

Jia Zhangke

Essential films

Platform (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *Still Life* (2006)

What's special about him?

A fierce critic of China's transformative society, Jia Zhangke's studies of problems at grassroots levels have blurred the line between fact and fiction due to his integration of documentary elements. Jia was an early convert to digital video who extended the postmodern aesthetics of *Xiao Wu* (1997) and *Platform* when he switched formats to chronicle disenfranchised youth in *Unknown Pleasures*.

Since then, he has turned his attention to the encroaching effects of globalisation with *The World* (2004) and *Still Life*, the latter of which takes place against the backdrop of the transformative Three Gorge Dam project. Jia's documentary works include *Dong* (2006), a portrait of the artist Liu Xiaodong that overlaps with *Still Life* by sharing the same setting, and *I Wish I Knew* (2010), a history of Shanghai that spans the 1930s to the present which was officially commissioned for the 2010 World Expo.



Lou Ye

Essential films

Suzhou River (2000), *Summer Palace* (2006), *Spring Fever* (2009)

What's special about him?

Although his frequent clashes with China's restrictive censorship board have cast the Sixth Generation filmmaker Lou Ye as a figure of controversy, his work is more defined by its sensuous quality. From his mesmerising noir *Suzhou River* to recent Bi Feiyu adaptation *Blind Massage* (2014), Lou has conflated sex and politics to emotionally devastating effect as alienated characters navigate eroticised urban landscapes.



Summer Palace follows the experiences of a hedonistic female student at a Beijing university in the late-1980s and the traumatic impact of the post-Tiananmen fallout on her social circle; *Spring Fever* concerns a gay Nanjing travel agent who casually flits between lovers to maintain his sexual freedom; and *Mystery* (2012) follows an upwardly mobile

businessman who is leading a dangerous double life. Such films never fail to linger in the memory due to the manner in which Lou filters bold social provocation through uniquely seductive atmospherics.

Filmography as director

- **Legend of the Demon Cat** (2017)
- **China's Megatomb Revealed** (2016) TV
Movie Documentary
- **Monk Comes Down the Mountain**
(2015)
- **Caught in the Web** (2012)
- **Sacrifice** (2010)
- **Forever Enthralled** (2008)
- "Zhangxiou Village" segment of **To Each
His Own Cinema** (2007)
- **The Promise** (2005)
- **Together With You** (2002)
- "100 Flowers Hidden Deep" segment of
Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet
(2002)
- **Killing Me Softly** (2002)
- **The Emperor and the Assassin** (1998)
- **Temptress Moon** (1996)
- **Farewell My Concubine** (1993)
- **Life on a String** (1991)
- **Duran Duran: Do You Believe in
Shame?** (1989) Video short
- **King of the Children** (1987)
- **Da yue bing** (1986)
- **Qiang xing qi fei** (1984) TV series
- **Yellow Earth** (1984)

Farewell My Concubine

Roger Ebert • October 29, 1993

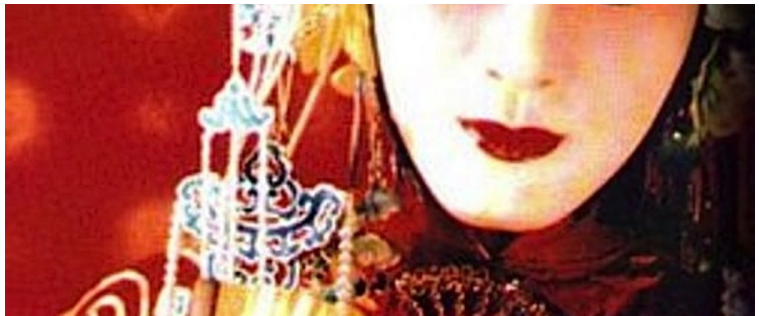
Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/farewell-my-concubine-1993>

4/4 Stars

"Farewell My Concubine" is two films at once: An epic spanning a halfcentury of modern Chinese history, and a melodrama about life backstage at the famed Peking Opera. The idea of viewing modern China through the eyes of two of the opera's stars would not, at first, seem logical: How could the birth pangs of a developing nation have much in common with the death pangs of an ancient and ritualistic art form? And yet the film flows with such urgency that all its connections seem logical. And it is filmed with such visual splendor that possible objections are swept aside.

The film opens on a setting worthy of Dickens, as two young orphan boys are inducted into the Peking Opera's harsh, perfectionist training academy. The physical and mental hardships are barely endurable, but they produce, after years, classical performers who are exquisitely trained for their roles.

We meet the delicate young Douzi (Leslie Cheung), who is assigned to the transvestite role of the concubine in a famous traditional opera, and the more masculine Shitou (Zhang Fengyi), who will play the king. Throughout their lives they will be locked into these roles onstage, while their personal relationship somehow survives the upheavals of World War II, the communist takeover of China and the Cultural Revolution.



Under the stage names of Cheng Dieyi (Leslie Cheung) and Duan Xiaolou

(Zhang Fengyi), the two actors become wildly popular with Peking audiences. But they are politically unsophisticated, and Dieyi in particular makes unwise decisions during the Japanese occupation, leading to later charges of collaborating with the enemy.

Their personal relationship is equally unsettled. Dieyi, a homosexual, feels great love for Xiaolou, but the "king" doesn't share his feelings, and eventually marries the beautiful prostitute Juxian, played by China's leading actress, Gong Li. Dieyi is resentful and jealous, but during long years of hard times Juxian stands heroically by both men.

That the Peking Opera survives at all during five decades of upheaval is rather astonishing; apparently its royalist and bourgeois origins are balanced against its long history as a Chinese cultural tradition, so that even the Red Chinese accept it in all of its anachronistic glory. What almost does it in, however, is the Cultural Revolution, as shrill young ideogogues impose their instant brand of political correctness on the older generations, and characters are forced to denounce one another. Xiaolou even denounces Dieyi as a homosexual, and Dieyi counterattacks by denouncing his friend's wife as a prostitute.

The movie's director is Chen Keige, who knows about the Cultural Revolution first hand. Born in 1952, he was sent in 1969 to a rural area to do manual labor; the scenes involving the Peking Opera's youth training programs may owe something to this experience.

The son of a filmmaker, he was a Red Guard and a soldier before enrolling in film school, and at one point actually denounced his own father, an act for which he still feels great shame. (The father, sentenced to hard labor for several years, worked with his son as artistic director of this film.) "Farewell My Concubine" won the Grand Prix at Cannes this year, but Chen Keige returned to find his film first shown, then banned, then shown again and banned again in China. His particular offense was to show a suicide taking place in 1977, a year in which, government orthodoxy holds, life in China did not justify such measures. The Chinese authorities were also uneasy about the homosexual aspects in the story.

What is amazing, given the conditions under which the film was made, is the freedom and energy with which it plays. The story is almost unbelievably ambitious, using no less than the entire modern history of China as its backdrop, as the private lives of the characters reflect their changing fortunes: The toast of the nation at one point, they are homeless outcasts at another, and nearly destroyed by their political naivete more than once. (It is perhaps an unfair quibble that although they must be 60ish by the end of the story, they look only somewhat older than when they were young men.) The Peking Opera itself is filmed in lavish detail; the costumes benefit from the rich colors of the world's last surviving three-strip Technicolor lab, in Shanghai, and the backstage intrigues and romances are worthy of a soap opera. In a season when "M. Butterfly" sank under the weight of John Lone's unconvincing performance as a transvestite, Leslie Cheung's concubine is never less than convincing, and his private life - he is essentially raised by the opera as a homosexual whether or not he consents - contains labyrinthine emotional currents. Gong Li, as the prostitute, is sometimes glamorous, sometimes haggard, and always at the mercy of two men whose work together has defined their individual personalities.

The epic is a threatened art form at the movies. Audiences seem to prefer less ambitious, more simple-minded stories, in which the heroes control events, instead of being buffeted by them.

"Farewell My Concubine" is a demonstration of how a great epic can function. I was generally familiar with the important moments in modern Chinese history, but this film helped me to feel and imagine what it was like to live in the country during those times. Like such dissimilar films as "Dr. Zhivago" and "A Passage to India," it took me to another place and time, and made it emotionally comprehensible. This is one of the year's best films.