

Honorary Doctor of Letters

Mr ZHANG Yimou

Citation written and delivered by Professor LEE Chin-chuan

Pro-Chancellor:

Mr Zhang Yimou is one of the best-known and widely respected Chinese film directors. In 1987, he directed his first film, *Red Sorghum*, which proved an instant success, winning 12 coveted prizes both inside and outside China. Since then, almost every film he has directed has won critical acclaim, making Zhang the “best story-telling director” in China.

Born in 1950 into a family labelled one of the “Five Black Categories”, Zhang Yimou grew up in an environment of recrimination and discrimination. Upon finishing junior high school, he was sent to work in a Shaanxi village and later transferred to a cotton mill. Going through the tumult of the Cultural Revolution during his youth made him realize how insignificant an individual could be. At 18, without his family knowing, he sneaked into town and sold blood for five months in order to raise enough money to buy his first used camera. This experience later strengthened his determination to “overcome adversity and fight for his destiny”. He believes that success only comes through hard work, persistence and self-confidence, while a person’s worth can only be proved by rising to the occasion.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and two years later Zhang applied for the Beijing Film Academy. By then he was already 27 and without the prerequisite academic qualifications. He was almost rejected. By winning a petition to the Ministry of Culture, he was admitted to the Department of Cinematography and joined Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Junzhao, who would later establish the core of China’s Fifth Generation film directors. Zhang considered himself fortunate enough to make films in a new era of great change and openness, unlike his predecessors whose creative impulses had been wasted by political movements.

Zhang Yimou is best known as a film director, but he is more than that. After graduation, he worked at the Guangxi Film Studio as an assistant cinematographer.

In the studio, instead of wasting time when there was a lack of assigned work, a group of young men took it upon themselves to make films, with the approval from the Chinese authorities. In 1983, Zhang shot Zhang Junzhao's *One and Eight*, the film that pioneered the Fifth Generation cinema. In 1984, he shot Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, earning him the Golden Rooster Award for Best Cinematography on account of his unique and spectacular portrayal of the vastness and vigour of the yellow earth highlands in northern China. Soon after, he returned to Xi'an, his hometown, to star in and shoot *Old Well* (1987), directed by Wu Tianming, vividly portraying the image of young intellectuals in a rural village. His performance in that film won him the Best Actor Award from the 11th Hundred Flowers Award, the 8th Golden Rooster Award, and the 1st Tokyo International Film Festival.

In 1987, he released his debut film, *Red Sorghum*, a story of sex and oppression against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion in Shandong. Using bold colours, quick rhythms, and extensive close-up shots, the film combines expressionism and realism. It contrasts stylistically with *Yellow Earth*, which unfolds with steady rhythms and a sense of detachment. *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival and brought the director, and the 21-year-old Gong Li, to international stardom. Zhang released *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* in 1990 and 1991, respectively, both films condemning feudalistic rituals which had subjected Chinese women to abuses based on gender, tradition, and class. *Raise the Red Lantern* also expressed Zhang's concerns about the eruption of a political campaign that suppressed dissent and set China's clock back. Film critics have praised it as his finest work but Zhang thinks of it as only one of his representative works. Both *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* won the Silver Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival and were nominated for Oscars as Best Foreign Language Film.

Just when film critics believed that they had grasped Zhang's signature cinematic art, they were treated, surprisingly, to *The Story of Qiu Ju* in 1992, reverting back to a simple and straightforward style. In this film, he uses a quasi-documentary technique to magnify and tell the story of a pregnant peasant from Shaanxi seeking justice for her husband who was beaten by a village leader for a crime he did not commit. Zhang had knocked on the door of Venice Film Festival three times before and finally, with this film, he won a coveted Golden Lion. In 1999, he won another, this time with *Not One Less*. Surprisingly, none of the cast had acted before, proving Zhang right when he said: "Anyone can be an

actor”. During this period, he directed *To Live* (1994) and *Shanghai Triad* (1995). In 1997, at the invitation of the Florence Opera House, Zhang directed a Peking Opera-inspired version of Puccini’s *Turandot*. The following year, the same production was staged open-air at the Forbidden City in Beijing, with Zubin Mehta conducting.

In 1999, Zhang Yimou’s *The Road Home* was a box-office hit and winner of a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. After that, he tried his hand at a martial arts epic, *Hero*, depicting battling ancient warriors sweeping across the landscape of the northern Chinese wilderness. The music, art, martial arts skills, and enhanced digital effects combine to create a sense of extraordinary power and grandeur. In 2004, he made the romantic martial arts feature, *House of Flying Daggers*, which conveys the director’s poetic sense of cinematic beauty. Both *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* have been commercially successful and, at the same time, instigated a heated debate over artistic form and content.

From *Red Sorghum* to *House of Flying Daggers*, Zhang has continued to win prizes and attract controversial reactions, yet he remains the most famous Chinese director. CNN once asked him: “How much is your brand-name Zhang Yimou worth?” He paused before replying. “I am only worth the cost of an old camera.” It is the camera he bought with his own blood at the tender age of 18 that paved his way to success in cinema. Although he is grateful for the prizes and his popularity, what Zhang appreciates most is an audience that loves his movies and understands him through these movies. How would he like to be assessed? He would be content if the verdict is: “There are strong visual expressions and a remarkable Chinese style in Zhang Yimou’s movies”.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, it is my great honour to introduce China’s most outstanding film director Mr Zhang Yimou. Without further ado, I now present Mr Zhang Yimou to you for the award of the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, for his outstanding contributions to the art of cinema.