

Dr Zhang Yimou

Doctor of Humanities *honoris causa*

Citation

Zhang Yimou was born in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province in 1950. During the Cultural Revolution, he was sent down to the countryside and put to work in a cotton mill. After the Cultural Revolution, Zhang went back to school in the Department of Cinematography at the Beijing Film Academy. After graduation in 1982, he was assigned to Guangxi Film Studio. There he served as cinematographer on his first film, 'One and Eight', which heralded the beginning of the fifth generation of Chinese films. His next two films as cinematographer were 'Yellow Earth' and 'The Big Parade', both fifth generation classics directed by Chen Kaige. He returned to Xi'an in 1985 to work as a cinematographer at Xi'an Film Studio. Two years later, Zhang made his directorial debut by helming 'Red Sorghum', an adaptation of Mo Yan's novel of the same name. The breathtaking cinematography, soaring folk music, crisp editing, and gripping magic-realist narrative successfully complemented an unforgettable romance plot. One of the finest Chinese films of the 1980s, 'Red Sorghum' received numerous awards, including the Golden Rooster Award for Best Picture, the Hundred Flowers Award for Best Picture, and the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival. The film established Zhang's reputation as an auteur of the highest rank.

The success of 'Red Sorghum' was just the beginning of a wide-ranging creative career – both in the cinema and beyond. Over the next decade, films such as 'Judou', 'The Story of Qiu Ju', 'To Live', 'Raise the Red Lantern', 'Not One Less', and 'The Road Home' dazzled both Chinese and international cinephiles, and won him two Golden Lions at the Venice Film Festival, the Cannes Jury Prize, the Silver Bear Grand Jury Prize in Berlin, and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. By the turn of the millennium, Zhang was the most decorated Asian film director in the world.

Globalisation was radically transforming the Chinese film industry at the time. Zhang responded to the trend with a trilogy of China-Hong Kong co-productions, 'Hero', 'House of Flying Daggers' and 'Curse of the Golden Flower'. These were epic *wuxia* (martial arts) films that reinterpreted Chinese history and classic literature. Zhang was richly rewarded for his efforts to develop the commercial market with the arthouse film: he set the box office record for Chinese films twice, and was crowned the annual Chinese-language film box office king four times. What a contribution he has made to the development of the film industry in China! He showed the world how a Chinese director could revitalize the *wuxia* heritage with state-of-the-art film technique and magnificent *mise-en-scène*.

Zhang's box office gold has never tempted him to debase his artistry; he has, to the contrary, continued to challenge himself creatively with every new project. In films such as 'Under the Hawthorn Tree', 'Coming Home', 'Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles', 'One Second', 'Cliff Walker' and 'Sniper', Zhang broke new ground by probing traumatic episodes in recent Chinese history, offering the reassurance that this too shall pass, that penitence will lead to forgiveness, and that basic human decency will see us through the worst of times.

In the late 1990s, Zhang made his first foray into the wider world of the visual arts, when he was invited by Maestro Zubin Mehta to direct Puccini's 'Turandot' at the Florence Opera. Zhang's incorporation of Chinese elements in his interpretation of a classic Western opera met with rapturous applause. In 2000, Zhang worked with conductor Zubin Mehta to stage in 'Turandot' in the Forbidden City. The film Zhang made of the gorgeous live production brought his work to a worldwide audience of film goers and opera lovers. He entertained an even larger audience, which has been described as 'the biggest live audience in human history', by directing the opening ceremonies of the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Making innovative use of colour, graphics, costumes, dance, and technology, Zhang contributed enormously to the host country's enthusiastic welcome to athletes from all over the world, both in 2008 and for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

Zhang's works, especially his experiments with Chinese and Western cultural elements and his groundbreaking film scenarios, are difficult to sum up in so many words. They must be seen and heard in order to appreciate their true rhythm and beauty.

Mr Chairman, in recognition of Zhang Yimou's extraordinary achievements in the field of visual arts, particularly his tremendous contribution to cinema, I respectfully request that you confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Humanities, *honoris causa*.

The citation was written and delivered by Professor Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu