

XIE Jin

Xiè Jin 谢晋

1923–2008 *Film director and writer*

One of the best-known Chinese film directors of the twentieth century, Xie Jin blended Confucian morality with melodrama into more than twenty films—from state-sanctioned evaluations of Chinese history or bleak portrayals of the Mao years to wildly popular features.

Xie Jin occupies a complex, vitally important position in the history of Chinese cinema. A director of celebrated talents, his *Stage Sisters* (1964) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986) have gained reputations as examples of some of the finest filmmaking to emerge from the People's Republic of China during the twentieth century. At the same time, Xie's cultural authority has become institutionalized through his close ties to state studios and artistic organizations. He served as a vice chairman of the national committee of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and was a standing committee member of the Eighth and Ninth Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences, an advisory body to the PRC government. Nonetheless, the "Xie Jin school" of filmmaking, supposedly based on the melding of melodrama with Confucian morality, has been both emulated and challenged by Chinese filmmakers during the post-Mao era.

A native of Shangyu, Zhejiang Province, Xie's directorial training began in Sichuan during the 1940s, when he attended a public dramatic arts institute near Chengdu. As a consequence of wartime migration, this institution boasted several cultural luminaries as teachers, including both dramatists (Cao Yu, Hong Shen) and directors

(Huang Zuolin, Zhang Junxiang). Xie followed several of these mentors to Chongqing in 1943, essentially working as a fulltime understudy.

Xie Jin recommenced his studies at the Nanjing National Theater Institute in 1946, and began work as an assistant director for the Datong Film Company two years later. After another period of political training at the Huabei (North China) People's Revolutionary University in 1950, he entered the Shanghai film world at a time when the transition to a state-run system left very few opportunities for new arrivals. Xie distinguished himself, however, and by 1954 was already directing his own films. *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (1957), recognized at the Fourth World Youth Assembly in Moscow, constituted his first notable success. A series of cheaply made films promoting the state's Great Leap Forward production-policies followed, after which Xie released a series of well-received features, including the wildly popular *Red Detachment of Women* (1961).

By this time, several patterns in Xie Jin's filmmaking method had already emerged. First, he developed a reputation for directing films centered on female characters and for launching the careers of relatively unknown actresses such as Xiaoqing (now an infamous subject of tabloid gossip) and Siqin Gaowa (a recent recipient of the Hong Kong Film Award), with whom he often worked. Second, Xie's films proved capable of attaining both domestic popularity and international acclaim—his masterpiece, *Two Stage Sisters* (1965), remains a classic of melodramatic social realism. Third, Xie was able to maintain this level of quality within a variety of political environments, as attested to by the fact that he was one of a handful of directors picked

to transform “model operas” (a mode of “proletarian” theater devised by Mao Zedong’s wife, Jiang Qing) into films during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Xie Jin’s popularity during the 1980s and 1990s was often overshadowed by the international success of Fifth Generation directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. (Xie, whose career began after World War II, belongs to the Third Generation.) Yet Xie proved as durable as any of his famous successors. *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986) earned him plaudits for bleakly realistic portrayals of the Mao years, while subsequent films such as *The Opium War* (1997) wedded big-budget aesthetics with an officially sanctioned take on China’s colonial past.

Xie was a member of numerous professional film associations in the PRC and abroad. While his final works were directed mainly toward domestic markets, during these years he also acted as the state’s official ambassador

as vice-chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles to cinematic and scholarly communities worldwide. Xie died in Shanghai in 2008.

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Further Reading

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