Interview conducted between Lesley Qin of Shanghai Film Distribution & Exhibition Association and director Zheng Dasheng.

Q: From The Incorruptible Inspector Yu, to Useless Man and Falling City, it seems that you tend to adapt from existing literary works. What is the purpose to that? What do you want to achieve by looking into historical stories?

I do have a continuous passion for reading, and many of the readings are historical stories and legends. The biggest legacy of China is the history, as history can take the form of drama and opera; there is the common belief of Chinese people, the street wisdom and interpersonal relationships, all in the history. So for me, the biggest dramatic legacy does not lie in any existing scripts, but in this historical literature. In Chinese literature, perhaps aside from Zhu Zi Bai Jia (the various schools of thought and their exponents during the period from pre-Qin times to the early years of the Han Dynasty), most of the life philosophies of Chinese people can be found in the history. Reading history has been a personal interest. But from the perspective of storytelling, I need a distance, which is offered by this so-called ‘historical subject matter’. It allows me to examine things more clearly, and to express things better, so that it won’t end up like an unrecognizable mess. And also, against the backdrop of a historical story, it offers me a position to comment on the current situation we are in.

Q: How do you choose which historical story to adapt? Do you get stimulated by any happenings at large that would influence you in terms of choosing which story to tell?

When I read historical texts, of course I bring current feelings and perspectives to look at the things and people that are in the past. And there must be the ‘stimulation’ of the present that spurs my interests and sentiments, and it pinpoints the relevance of the story. For example, in Useless Man, I felt so achingly that everyone in the streets disappears into the void as part of the crowd, with a simmering sense of anxiety and insecurity. They are striving so hard, by the Chinese standard, but still they are wary. So what is it that has put that expression onto their face? This clueless concern is so common in the world we live in. The people in the streets, too often they idle doing nothing. We are not conscious of the decisions we make, and don’t even know that we need to make choices. So we disappear into the crowd, busy with making money, making a living, saving for houses and cars, and kids cannot fail at the start. This was actually the original stimulus for me to pick Useless Man. The story happens in Tianjin in 1937, when the Japanese aggression suddenly breaks out. And everyone is forced to make changes in the midst of such a huge turmoil. So that is the origin - about the present condition and this particular story. In fact every time when we approach a film, or a novel, or a story, or a drama, essentially it is all about telling things allegorically, because it is you at the present telling people who are at the present. It can be a story that happens in the past, but it is you telling it now.
Q: Would you tell us something about your family background? Your grandfather Wang Zuolin is a famous Peking opera performer and your mother Huang Shuqin was a famous Fourth Generation female director. It seems that drama, stage plays, operas and films are elements all incorporated in your films. Can you tell us a little bit about how you deal with different types of media?

Drama and films are deeply rooted in my family. I grew up on the film set when I was little, and the influences must have been quiet and unnoticed. I was unclear about it. After I started to get film education and create my own films I recognized these influences. For me, compared to films, traditional opera has a much longer and richer history, and it is a bed of nutrition for films. The long history of operas and folk arts encompass different aspects: the craft, the thoughts, and everything. The Chinese opera is so rich in the way that it explains why Chinese are Chinese, why Chinese act the way they do now. These are etched in operas clearly and deeply. They are not to be wasted, of course. I felt that I have acquired endless resources from Chinese traditional operas. I can learn about the traditional value system and thoughts from operas, along with an exquisite aesthetic system and advanced expression skills. These are worth studying.

For me, the three media are not fundamentally different and the thresholds can be overcome, because deep down they are intrinsically connected. For example, the Chinese opera is expressionistic. The looks and the moves are ideographic, abstract and subjective. And the understanding of Chinese people towards images is: “These are essentially shadows.” So if connected together, the still frames would create the illusion of moving. For Chinese, there is no fundamental difference between moving in an opera performance and the motion in a moving image. So it was only Chinese who called the early cinema “shadow plays”.

Q: I think in the lyrics of traditional Chinese operas there are explicit statements of moral and ethical stances. But in movies, the indexical capture of the real life is a different approach. Your films juxtapose the two. Can you talk about it? Also, your years in The Art Institute of Chicago - what did you learn there? What was different from what you studied at Shanghai Theatre Academy?

My BFA in directing at Shanghai Theatre Academy and MFA in Chicago have given me two solid kinds of systematic filmmaking trainings. But they were so different in terms of how to perceive films, drama, opera, and art history - the methods, the standpoints, the perspectives... Shanghai Theatre Academy has laid for me a solid foundation of filmmaking. And the Art Institute of Chicago has opened another new world for me. There I didn’t learn what a film should or should not be, but what it can be and what more it can also possibly become. It is a presumption, not a conclusion. It is a premise that can be updated, not a solution. So it has inspired to such a mentality that there can always be some other way to tell a story and to make a film. If there were not enough resources or time to film, then I would resort to this mentality.
Q: And it looks like your films have a direct pathway to the CCTV channel. But they are not the normal kind of TV-films we would see on TV. Did you find it challenging to work within such boundaries?

In terms of expressing myself, I couldn’t wait. In China it is a time of transition and it will last for a long time. And I happen to be working in this period. You cannot wait until the environment changes ultimately. All my films are shown on CCTV. It is a blind coverage and it is a chance for my films to be seen. The independently distributed films are emerging now. Venues dedicated to those kinds of films are being built, but not enough yet. There is no Angelika Cinemas in Shanghai, but they should burgeon soon. I am trying my best to get my films seen.

Q: Who are the directors in the film history that are most influential on you?

A lot, but it changes. When you were at school, there were directors the school wanted you to learn about. And when you start on the creative path on your own, you were also attracted to certain filmmakers. I don’t have one or two particular names that have impacted my career. In my case it really changes a lot.

It is funny that I learned a lot from my crew members I collaborated with. I had a set coordinator. He was very worried one day, asking me if the shoot would finish on time. I asked what happened. He said he had to go back to harvest. He goes to different sets across the country 11 months of the year and only goes back to his family twice. I felt I learned from him so much. He was not a pro and started everything from scratch, but he could do everything - boom recording, gaffer, everything. He had worked on international co-productions. But in the harvest season he must go back to his hometown and family.

Q: It is moving what you said. There is a genuine passion for this form of art, just the way ordinary people love folk arts and operas.

Yes.

Q: About the Fourth Generation directors - the Shanghai Art Film Federation parallels your film with Xie Fei’s to do this series. Many say that the Fourth Generation paved the way to the Fifth Generation, but they got fewer opportunities than they deserved. What is your opinion on this generation?

Until the Fifth Generation, the division is clear between the different generations of directors. For the Fourth Generation, which is my mother’s generation - when they started making proper features they were already more than 40 years old, because they didn’t have the chance to make films earlier in their career. In their formative years, the whole country was deep in the political frenzy. For the Fourth Generation, they only had
ten years and their career ended prematurely. Into the Nineties, the social environment radically changed and the market economy exploded, which halted their creative careers.

**Q:** Do you have a particular period of Chinese film history where you draw inspiration from?

Every period deserves close studies and reexamination. For example, for the 17-Year Period (1949–1966), we would discover some valuable legacies from the period, even hidden and undiscovered treasures. Even in *Chun Miao (Spring Shoots, 1975)*, a model film back then, it still boasts some exquisite designs and expressions. *Qing Song Ling* (Pine Ridge, 1973), for another example, begins with a folklore song, accompanied with panoramic shots of the clouds, mountains, forests and all different nature elements. It is really like the opening of a crosstalk, such as *The Moon Over the West River*, which opens with poetic couplets. That surprised me. For me every film in the film history deserves re-examination. I also saw galloping horses in the film, and the technique must be a huge challenge, to shoot horses charging forwards when spurred. The shots were complicated and well executed. Little parts like that shocked me. If you extended the sequence, then it would have been a *Ben-Hur* epic. How could a film crew achieve that?

**Q:** I also think it is a matter of how much memory the audience had towards our own film history - how the films from the past look, what is the relevance to be found in these films... How are your films received?

I got very nice reception when we toured with the film. The audiences were young, educated, eager, and they demanded good films. They gave me meticulous feedbacks, which was precious. There were difficult questions as well. It was a packed house for *Useless Man* - and a young man stood up, very agitated, and asked what I thought about the disputes over Senkaku Islands. I answered him honestly that I hoped Mr. Chen Yinke (famous Chinese historian) was alive and I wished his voice to be heard in the midst of the clamor.

**Q:** It relates to how we approach the history and historical facts - and then how to represent it in story telling.

Not only the facts about Chinese film history, but also in the history of China, especially the modern history of China. A lot of facts are still covered and ignored. If it keeps on, generations later, these facts would no longer exist. So for me the interest in history reading really lies in the fact that I wanted to step out of the confines and frameworks dictated by the textbooks I grew up on. What really happened?