

## Director Wu Tianming and China's Generations of Filmmakers

Motion pictures are not new to China. The first recorded screening of a motion picture in China was in 1896. As in America, film began as "acts" on a variety bill.

Film historians generally categorize China's filmmakers into "generations," relative to the period of time in which they worked. The years are more than just dividing lines. The social and political climate of China during these periods shaped not only the kinds of stories filmmakers told but also their cinematic styles.

The first three generations were: 1905 – 1932; 1932 – 1949; and 1950 – 1960. The Fourth Generation, from 1960-1980, coincided historically with the Cultural Revolution. During this period, art -- including film -- was primarily an educational tool. Most films of this period were social histories of the country and were intended not just to entertain but also to educate China's masses. Wu Tianming, director of *The King of Masks* (1996), is a Fourth Generation filmmaker. His films focused on the lives of ordinary people. Yet, as a filmmaker during the Cultural Revolution, his films were subject to government censorship. "If the government does not like the [film's] content, it is changed," he stated in a recent interview. In 1989, Wu Tianming left China and did not return for a number of years, due in part to political differences with the government.

In the mid-1980s, the Fifth Generation, sometimes also called the "New Wave," began to make movies. Many of these filmmakers explored the effects of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of individuals. Wu Tianming returned to China. The first film he directed after his return was *The King of Masks*. The hero of this film is Bian Lian, a street performer who desperately longs to pass the secrets of his traditional art to a male heir. Some film historians believe Bian Lian is a "stand-in" for Wu Tianming, who likewise believes in the importance of passing along his art to future generations.