Before the 1980s and the emergence of the so-called fifth generation of Chinese film directors, mainland Chinese cinema was pretty unknown elsewhere in the world. In the international film community, Chinese cinema was synonymous with Hong Kong cinema and in most people's minds, it could basically be summarized into one word: kung fu. When non-Chinese people thought about mainland Chinese cinema, images of communist propaganda posters immediately sprung into their minds, if they even bothered to go so far as to give the matter some thought.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, a new generation of enthusiastic and conscientious film directors emerged on the national scene. The members of this group of directors all graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982 and belonged to the fifth class to graduate from the school, hence the term "fifth generation." The most famous members of this group of future film-world movers and shakers include Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, whose works have been loved by critics and audiences alike. Other outstanding directors to come out of this famous group of graduates include Tian Zhuangzhuang and Zhang Junzhao, who, however, have remained somewhat unknown to Western audiences.

Zhang Yimou has often criticized reporters' habit of grouping all the directors from his graduating class under one category, as their bodies of work differ very significantly. However, what they all have in common is a penchant to draw on Western cinema, instead of Chinese, for inspiration. They all also pioneered in bringing a whole new degree of visual richness to Chinese films, which combined elements derived from Chinese traditional arts and literature with Western-style storytelling.

Social criticism and the female hero

The directors drew on their experiences during the Cultural Revolution as inspiration for their work, thereby opening the floodgates for more candid analysis and discussion about China's recent history and the socialist society as a whole. In fact, the films by this fifth generation of directors often present a harsh view of the society, although they also manage to partly circumnavigate direct critique by channeling it instead through stories of vindicated female heroines. An oppressed woman, then, symbolized ordinary Chinese people, repressed by communism and the Cultural Revolution, which, as a film subject, would have been a red cloth for the Chinese government. But due to the films' rich symbolism, the censors were not always able to clamp down on them, albeit some films were naturally banned in mainland China.

The first fifth generation films that came out before the Tiananmen Square events in 1989 were highly critical of the Cultural Revolution and touched on the clash between a communist and a feudal form of society. One of most famous films in this category include Zhang Yimou's Red Sorghum (Hong Gaoliang) from 1987, which catapulted young Chinese starlet Gong Li to worldwide fame. Zhang himself says that the Chinese society is full of intriguing stories about women, but that in his films, he tries to avoid presenting women solely as symbols of a repressed nation, using them instead to also address the issue of women's oppression. Red Sorghum went on to win a Golden Bear film award, among others and helped set Chinese cinema on a path towards worldwide success.

One of the most pivotal fifth generation films was Chen Kaige's Yellow Earth (Huang Tudi) from 1984, which tells the story of a young communist cadre, who moves to countryside to spread communist ideology. He takes residence in a house inhabited by an elderly father, a young girl and a mute boy. In the film, the father, who represents the old, feudal society, sells his daughter to a man she has never
met. The young communist cadre symbolizes the prospects hailed by communism, but he, too, is unable to save the girl from being forced into marriage with a complete stranger. The mute son represents future promise and a generation, that would not have to bow down to neither the codes of an archaic agricultural society nor communism.

China's film industry took off in earnest at the end of the 1980s, thanks in large part to the pioneering efforts of its fifth generation of movie directors. This young group of graduates from the class of 1982 of the Beijing Film Academy revolutionized the Chinese film industry by eagerly exploring new themes and cinematographic styles in their films. The most famous individuals to stand out from this group of talented directors include Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, who still today continue to turn out highly acclaimed films for the enjoyment of audiences all around the globe.

Although the films made by each of the fifth generation directors differ markedly from each other, they all started out making films that mainly dealt with the Cultural Revolution and problems plaguing the Chinese society. The aspiring directors also wanted their films to feature never-before-seen cinematographic elements that drew their inspiration from traditional Chinese arts and literature. The story-lines, on the other hand, relied more on Western than Chinese influences. Another novelty attributed to this fifth generation of film directors is a more modern portrayal of women. Female vindication is a recurring theme in their films, and one that many see as symbolizing a nation’s fight against its oppressors. Through their rich use of symbolism, the directors were able to avoid getting their films cut up by censors, and it also allowed them to freely explore the role of the female in the society. In the tense political atmosphere of the post-Tian'anmen period, the films of this group of directors failed to arouse any great interest and many were censored. And still as recently as in 1996, these directors were not regarded as accomplished enough to be invited to the celebrations marking 90 years of Chinese cinema.

Focus on China

The beginning of the 1990s became the golden era of this generation of film directors. Zhang Yimou continued to work on his film trilogy, with strong females and forced marriages as its central themes. The first film in the series was Red Sorghum, but real success only came with Raise the Red Lantern, 大红灯高高挂, in 1991. The movie starred the beloved Gong Li, who had come to represent the generic Chinese female through her performances in a number of films by various fifth generation directors. Raise the Red Lantern tells the story of a young woman named Songlian, who is married off to a rich merchant as his fourth wife in the era of Chinese warlords. The wives are confined to a life within the walls of their courtyard and have to constantly vie for attention from their husband, who each night selects one to spend the night with. The wife he chooses for the night is lavished with attention and receives a red lantern to light her room with. Songlian soon finds herself trying to come to grips with living among a bunch of scheming and desperate people, and eventually loses her sanity in her desperate struggle to find justice. The story of the red lantern is heart-wrenching, but the film's exceptionally rich visual palette also makes it extremely moving and captivating to watch. It comes as no surprise, then, that the film went on to win numerous prizes at international film festivals and helped to draw attention to new wave Chinese cinema among Western audiences. Chinese authorities, however, still deemed the film too critical of socialist societies and banned it in mainland China.

The second fifth generation film to make it to the mainstream was Chen Kaige's masterpiece Farewell My Concubine, 魂断长亭 from 1993. Like Raise the Red Lantern, Farewell My Concubine also focuses on China's tumultuous decades in the early 1900s. The film tells the story of a group of Peking Opera performers and a woman who comes between two male members of the cast. The storyline weaves in scenes from a famous Peking Opera piece also called Farewell My Concubine, which become
an integral part of the story. Due to its politically sensitive content, Farewell My Concubine was banned in China but garnered numerous awards at some of the world's most prestigious film festivals.

Art film commercialized
At the end of the 1990s, the fifth generation directors continued making critically acclaimed films that also managed to find their way to the mainstream. Chen Kaige's most popular film to date is his historical romantic drama The Emperor and the Assassin, Jing Ke ci Qin Wang, from 1999. This film genre has experienced a boom since then, but The Emperor and the Assassin was also a critical success. As for Zhang Yimou, he released two award-winning films that same year, namely Not One Less, Yi ge dou bu neng shao about life in China's impoverished countryside, as well as The Road Home, Wode fujin mugin, a tragic love story between a teacher and his student set in the China of the 1950s. The Road Home was also up-and-coming super star Zhang Ziyi's big breakthrough.

The common bond among the fifth generation directors has gradually diminished, although many of them are still actively making films. In recent years, however, their films have become less critical of the Chinese society across the board, and Zhang Yimou, for example, is today better known for his kung fu spectacles such as Hero and The House of the Flying Daggers than his earlier, more provocative work. Ironically, however, his success is more attributable to the imperatives of making commercially viable films than, for example, the government's censorship policies: Over the years, China has continued to shave funding from the nation's films studios, forcing them to focus on producing sure box office hits. All in all, there has also been a decline of interest in social issues and China's recent history among the general public. This same trend seems to hold true in the West, where younger cinemagoers by and large choose Hollywood blockbusters over domestic films. Nevertheless, all these transformations have been conducive to helping fifth generation directors gain their due recognition. And that they truly have, as Zhang Yimou's selection to direct the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics shows.