

The Last Auteur Cinema: Poetic Expression in Sixth- Generation Cinema

YANG BIWEI

Yang Biwei holds a Ph.D. in Literature from Minzu University of China and completed postdoctoral research in Art Studies at Peking University. Her academic research spans literature, rock music, folk music, cinema, photography, and installation art. She has published numerous collections of poetry, essays, and critical writings, including *Going South to Nanyang*, *Traveling to Mars*, and *Standing on a Cone*.

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Any discussion of auteur cinema (cinéma d'auteur) inevitably brings to mind François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960). In the 1950s, "auteur cinema" emerged from the French New Wave. Before then, Western literary theory had already registered the presence of the "author." In *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, M. H. Abrams identifies four coordinates of art criticism: the work, the artist (or author), the universe, and the audience. Here the "artist" is the creator of the work—that is, its "author": "And since this is a human product, an artifact, the second common element is the artificer, the artist."¹ From the 1930s onward, following in the footsteps of Anglo-American New Criticism, the status of the "author" began to be displaced by the "text." In the middle and later decades of the twentieth century, structuralism and the deconstruction that followed it subjected the author to an unsparing negation. Michel Foucault proposed the "disappearance of the author," while Roland Barthes declared bluntly that "the author is dead."

Paradoxically, although literature banished the "author," cinema took up the concept and once again made it the basis of a theory with worldwide influence. In January 1954, Truffaut published "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" in issue 31 of *Cahiers du cinéma*, introducing the cinematic concept of the "author." Together with Godard, Claude Chabrol, and others, he went on to formulate auteur theory. This theory clarified the function of the "author"—the director—holding that "the film and the director are inseparable; in essence, they are one and the same."² According to this theory, the director should occupy the central position in the shooting and production of a film and should display continuity of personal style. At minimum, this requires two characteristics: "absolute control over the film's production and creative process, and the consistent continuation of personal themes in the selection of subject matter."³

Auteur theory also profoundly influenced Chinese cinema. Dai Jinhua observed: "Perhaps no theory exerted a more profound influence on the creative work of the Fourth and Fifth Generations than auteur theory. At least throughout the 1980s, every mainland Chinese film director aspired to become a 'film author'; and the essence of auteur theory—the director at the center, with writing and directing united in one person—became extraordinarily powerful for a time after the emergence of the Fifth Generation."⁴ In fact, the profile of the Sixth Generation

1 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 6. The Chinese source cites the translation by Li Zhiniu et al. (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1989), 5.

2 See Ma Li and Liu Hui, "当'作者论'遭遇'结构主义'——论传统'作者'电影理论" [When "auteur theory" encounters "structuralism": On traditional auteur film theory], *当代电影* [Contemporary Cinema], no. 3 (2005): 134–37, esp. 134.

3 Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie, *当代电影分析* [Contemporary Film Analysis], trans. Wu Peici (Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press, 2005), 26. The French original is *L'Analyse des films* (Paris: Nathan, 1988).

4 Dai Jinhua and Yong Yi, "革命·意识形态批评·文化研究：1968年5月与电影" [Revolution, ideology critique, cultural studies: May 1968 and cinema], *电影艺术* [Film Art], no. 3 (1998): 40–47.

was likewise closely bound to auteur cinema. Directors commonly identified with this generation—including Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye, Wang Chao, Lu Xuechang, Guan Hu, Jia Zhangke, Li Yang, and Ning Hao—generally combined solid professional training with broad intellectual and cultural formation beyond their specialization, providing the necessary conditions for them to write and direct their own work. At the same time, they faced problems of capital investment and institutional support early in their careers and therefore generally adopted low-budget modes of production. In outlook, subject matter, and production quality, however, they sought to meet international standards, striving to assert distinctive styles and to express themselves freely. For the Sixth Generation at that time, this mode of operation was the optimal strategy. The generation lived up to expectations, creating works marked by forceful personal styles. These films won them critical reputations, became indispensable personal signatures and cultural calling cards, and laid the groundwork for the next phase of their creative work.

Among Sixth-Generation directors, Jia Zhangke is a major representative of auteur cinema. He had a strong literary foundation in his early years and, before entering the Beijing Film Academy, published fiction that attracted attention in Shanxi literary circles. Yet his single-minded pursuit of cinema led him, without hesitation, to Beijing. From *Xiao Shan Going Home* in 1995 through 2022, Jia produced more than twenty moving-image works, including feature films, documentaries, and advertising shorts. Certain elements recur throughout his cinema: a sustained gaze at his home region, a longing for distant horizons, and an enduring concern for marginalized people. Fused with the characteristics of poetic cinema, these elements constitute the basic form of Jia's work and make his cinema a particularly representative form of auteur cinema. As one scholar has written: "As a representative Sixth-Generation director who combines artistic accomplishment with personal expression, Jia Zhangke makes films that are paradigmatic works of auteur cinema. His handling of realist subjects is delicate, and his use of film language is steady and unforced; his films therefore retain a natural sense of reality stripped of ostentation."⁵ Taking Jia Zhangke as its principal example, this essay examines the embedding of poetic structures in Sixth-Generation auteur cinema, identifies their basic characteristics, and analyzes how, under the organizing authority of the "author," they achieve a mode of storytelling akin to poetry and display poetic qualities that are difficult to reproduce.

Let us begin with the structure of poetry. In both East and West, poetry in the classical period possessed an internally unified structure and a coherence maintained from beginning to end. Western narrative poems represented by the Homeric epics have complete story structures: from beginning through development and climax to conclusion, their content unfolds step by step, without anything left "suspended" in between. Ancient Chinese narrative poems such as "The Peacock Flies Southeast," "The Ballad of Mulan," and "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" are shorter, but their structures are broadly similar. The same applies to the lyric. A lyric poem often concentrates on a single fragment, a cross-section of life; yet even within that fragment, the poet's emotions and poetic thought remain continuous, unfolding in a single breath without division or interruption. Classical Chinese poems can therefore be rewritten as short prose pieces in modern Chinese: at the level of thought, the former possess the same continuity as narrative

⁵ Wang Jianan, "我国作者电影的历史、现状与未来" [The history, present condition, and future of auteur cinema in China], 青年记者 [Youth Journalist], no. 30 (2018).

prose. As Fei Ming remarked, “The poetry of the past, whether old-style verse or ci lyric, consisted of the content of prose.”⁶

In the West, Aristotle was the first to require unity in poetry: “Epic poetry should likewise construct its plots dramatically, centering on a single action that is whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, so that, like a single whole living creature, it may produce its proper pleasure.”⁷ In ancient China, unity likewise meant that “a single thread runs through” the whole. Liu Xizai summarized the principle as follows: “In composing any piece, its governing intention must be expressible in a single sentence. . . . Master complexity through simplicity: one thread runs all the way through, and myriad changes never depart from their root.”⁸ The unity found in literature accords with the inner logic of agrarian civilization. With the advent of modern civilization, self-sufficient modes of existence were disrupted, while individualism and individual consciousness grew ever stronger; a unifying logic could no longer be sustained. Poetry changed in tandem with this transformation.

Hugo Friedrich precisely grasped the characteristics of modern poetry: “loss of direction, dissolution of ordinary things, collapse of order, disappearance of inner unity, a tendency toward fragmentation, reversibility, a style of juxtaposition, depoeiticized poetry, destructive flashes, severing images, violent abruptness, disjunction, defocused vision, and estrangement.”⁹ Factors of “rupture” multiply within poetry; the leaps between lines become more pronounced; gaps and discontinuities appear everywhere; and poetry can no longer be rewritten in the language of prose. Modern poetry thus becomes a fragmentary form. The fragment’s repudiation of unity raises the banner of individualist will and marks poetry’s movement away from the “group” toward extreme individualization. Fragmentation also allows poets to give full play to individuality, capture fleeting inspiration, and shape a personal style. Baudrillard praised the fragment in these terms: “Fragmentary writing is, ultimately, democratic writing. Each fragment enjoys an equal distinction.”¹⁰ Jiang Lan similarly observed: “The form best suited to the expression of individual thought is often the fragment, rather than the lofty sermon of a systematic or institutional discourse.”¹¹

From the Fourth Generation to the Sixth, the transformation of film poetics is equally clear. In its poetic expression, Sixth-Generation cinema largely abandoned the poetics of unity and

6 Fei Ming and Zhu Yingdan, 新诗讲稿 [Lectures on New Poetry] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 12.

7 Aristotle, *Poetics* 23, 1459a17–21. The Chinese source cites Zhang Zhongzai, ed., 西方古典文论选读 [Selected Readings in Classical Western Literary Theory] (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000), 62.

8 Liu Xizai, “经义概” [Principles of classical exposition], in 艺概 [Overview of the Arts], cited in Zheng Yishou, ed., 辞章学辞典 [Dictionary of Rhetoric and Composition] (Xi’an: Sanqin Publishing House, 2000), 556.

9 Hugo Friedrich, 现代诗歌的结构: 19世纪中期至20世纪中期的抒情诗 [The Structure of Modern Poetry: From the Mid-Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century], trans. Li Shuangzhi, ed. Zhou Xian (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2010), 40.

10 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Cool Memories III, 1990–1995*, trans. Emily Agar (London: Verso, 1997), 8. The Chinese source cites the translation by Zhang Xinmu, Chen Minle, and Li Lulu (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2009), 13.

11 Jiang Lan, “一个随笔主义者的世界观” [The worldview of an essayist], 天涯 [Tianya], no. 1 (2010).

harmony, replacing them with fragmentation and dissonance. As Chen Xuguang puts it: "Sixth-Generation films reveal a cultural impulse to resist, dissolve, and overturn modernity's unity and totality through narrative play and a deconstructive spirit: this is a declaration of war on totality."¹² Within the Sixth Generation, Jia Zhangke's films visibly embed the structure of modern poetry and mount a challenge to "totality." Their poetic structure appears principally on two levels.

First: Narrative Structure—Fragments, Anti-Totality, and the Integrative Force of Poetic Thought

"'The scissors of poetry' are the breath of narration."¹³ In cinema, the arrangement of narrative determines how poeticity appears. Compared with plot-driven films, works inclined toward poetic cinema tend to present ordinary, subdued events that lack major conflict and dramatic intensity. The traditional narrative pattern of "beginning—development—climax—conclusion" gives way to a mode of understatement sustained from beginning to end: tempests and towering waves no longer arise, while faint ripples of emotion become the film's most delicate affective accents. Andrei Tarkovsky mastered this understated mode of narration. He wrote: "I find poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema, extraordinarily pleasing. They seem to me perfectly appropriate to the potential of cinema as the most truthful and poetic of art forms."¹⁴ His celebrated poetic film *Nostalgia* contains no forceful conflict and dispenses with a dramatic climax. The film's deeper meanings—its reflections on existence and belonging—are sewn into a subdued plot; only from a metaphysical vantage can the viewer grasp its central import.

Jia Zhangke's early films deliberately draw closer to poetry in their narrative method. They do not rely on forceful plots for effect; instead, they spread a poetic texture—both lyrical and aesthetic—evenly across the film. The events they depict involve little conflict, yet they lie closer to the ordinary course of human feeling and therefore create a greater sense of intimacy. In telling their stories, the films offer a comprehensive observation of groups of people within a particular time and place; their viewpoint more closely resembles a nonlinear, scattered-point perspective.¹⁵ Their narrative rhythm is calm and in no hurry to advance the plot; it is usually slow and can even appear somewhat protracted.

Take *Platform*. Its principal characters are Yin Ruijuan and Cui Mingliang, yet Yin appears relatively little in the second half of the film. After she rejects him, Cui leaves his hometown and begins touring with a performance troupe. His cousin Sanming, the twin sisters, and others

12 Chen Xuguang, "抒情的诗意、解构的意向与感性主体性的崛起——试论第六代导演的'现代性'问题" [Lyrical poeticity, the intention of deconstruction, and the rise of sensuous subjectivity: On the "modernity" of Sixth-Generation directors], 杭州师范学院学报 (社会科学版) [Journal of Hangzhou Teachers College (Social Sciences Edition)] 27, no. 1 (2005): 66–73.

13 Guido Aristarco, 电影理论史 [History of Film Theory], trans. Li Zhenglun (Beijing: China Film Press, 1992), 131.

14 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 18. The Chinese source cites the translation by Chen Ligui and Li Yongquan (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2003), 14.

15 *Translator's note*: 散点透视 (*sandian toudishi*), rendered here as "scattered-point perspective," denotes the multiple or shifting viewpoints associated with traditional Chinese pictorial composition, in contrast to single-point linear perspective.

successively enter his experiences on the road; Cui's main storyline is repeatedly interrupted and shared among these other figures. The film also contains another couple, Zhang Jun and Zhong Ping. Their screen time is substantial and roughly matches that of Yin and Cui. Platform, then, does not concentrate on the story of a single character. Instead, it places its characters within a specific temporal and spatial background and reflects an era through scattered-point perspective. The pace of its narration is not fast, nor do the actors speak much; the characters' emotions are often conveyed through concrete situations and *mise-en-scène*. In one sequence, Yin Ruijuan and Cui Mingliang stand beneath the city wall, one in front of the other. At first they exchange desultory remarks. When Yin mentions that she is going on a blind date, Cui becomes uncomfortable; words fail them, and they simply stand in silence in the snow. Rather than record their expressions directly in close-up, the sequence uses a long take in long shot to establish the space and their relative positions. That spatial relation reflects their psychological distance while also registering the reticent, shy emotional culture of the period. The image is composed of two tonal fields, light and dark: the snow and sky are bright, while the city wall is yellowed and blackened. The boundary between light and dark lies on a diagonal, and the two characters stand upon that slanting line, each absorbed in private thoughts. The sequence contains little dialogue, but its *mise-en-scène* already performs both narrative and expressive functions. The film's plot remains subdued. Relatively speaking, the film's most intense moment is Zhong Ping's angry outburst, yet even this is utterly ordinary when placed within everyday life; it is nothing earth-shaking. Apart from this episode, all other turbulence passes naturally beneath the surface of feeling. Yin later marries and has a child. When viewers see her soothing the child, they naturally understand that her dreams have been sealed away. What she experienced in the intervening time remains beyond the screen, leaving room for the audience to imagine.

Platform also contains many minor stories, each of which can stand as an independent fragment that vividly recreates the life of the period: Zhong Ping having her hair permed, Sanming going to work in a coal mine, and the twin sisters dancing. Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* is likewise composed of numerous "fragments," and its narrative rhythm is marked by even sharper leaps of the kind found in modern poetry. In modern poetry, "ruptures" occur between sentences, making it difficult to "translate" them into the language of prose. Yet within the context of a single poem, those leaping sentences are governed by the same poetic thought, and together they reflect the poem's affective orientation. Similarly, *A Touch of Sin* consists of four stories—that is, four principal narrative lines. Numerous narrative offshoots branch from these main lines. These episodes appear discontinuous and have little concrete connection with one another, but taken together they compose a portrait of Chinese society. The different narrative strands are all suspended from an invisible main thread.

Second: Structure of Meaning—A Composite Texture and Type-Forming "Poetic Eyes"

If the poetic expression of Fourth-Generation cinema was relatively simple and suffused with classical coloring, that of the Sixth Generation is far more complex. In Sixth-Generation cinema, poeticity and meaning combine into an inseparable composite texture. Although, within a postmodern context, the generation's poetic expression also confronts uncertainty, division, and decanonization, the invisible "poetic eye" remains embedded in the film's structure of

meaning.¹⁶ In Sixth-Generation auteur cinema, each distinct structure of meaning constitutes a poetic eye in its own right.

Emotion is the soul of classical Chinese poetry. The ancients held that “poetry is rooted in feeling.”¹⁷ In the traditional Western division of genres, the lyric is one major category, the other two being narrative and drama. Romanticism further elevated the status of lyricism within poetry. In modern poetry, however, lyricism is no longer the sole criterion of judgment. Language’s ontological status becomes increasingly prominent, even displacing poetic feeling to occupy first place. Modern poetry also values experience, explores the intellect, and stresses the importance of poetic thought. All these phenomena show that modernity places more numerous and complex demands on poetry. Lyricism is thereby reduced to a threshold condition. For modern poetry, lyricism alone is insufficient; it must also integrate language, intellect, aesthetics, and other dimensions. Within this composite texture, modern poetry possesses a distinctive structure of meaning.

Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* is a model of a modern-poetic structure of meaning: the film’s poeticity resides within its composite texture. At the level of character, it has two principal narrative lines—Sanming searching for his wife and Shen Hong searching for her husband. From the perspective of time and space, however, the historical transformation of the Three Gorges is the true main line. At the intersection of these strands, the film produces a multidimensional field of signification: the joys and sorrows of ordinary people living within a great historical era; respect for labor and for common people; the impermanence of worldly affairs and the necessity and contingency of life; regret and remembrance before the imminent disappearance of the city of Fengjie; and an earnest hope for the future. . . . Because the film itself contains rich layers of meaning—complex, diverse, and full of ambiguity—we interpret it much as we interpret a modern poem.

The film’s aesthetic treatment is likewise closely linked to its internal structure of meaning: aesthetic principles and meaning are organically joined. The film, for example, adopts a documentary mode of filming. First, it records the characters’ activities within a broader real-world setting rather than an artificial set; while preserving historical actuality, it also unfolds a fictional story, allowing the real and the fictive to generate one another and thereby presenting ordinary human feeling and the textures of life. Second, the film faithfully incorporates the sounds of the ruins. From within reality, these sounds exceed the merely real and acquire a modern poeticity. Discussing *Still Life*, the poet Xi Chuan observed: “This tremendous noise—those hammering and banging sounds, sounds that ordinarily strike us as chaotic—acquires a kind of poetry in Jia Zhangke’s film. It is not poetry in the traditional sense, but a poetry Jia himself discovered: another kind of poetry.”¹⁸

16 *Translator’s note*: 诗眼 (*shiyān*, literally “poetic eye”) is a traditional critical term for the word or line that animates and organizes a poem. The author extends it to the structuring motif or semantic center of a film and, later, of an auteur’s oeuvre.

17 *Translator’s note*: The formulation 诗者，根情 (“poetry is rooted in feeling”) comes from Bai Juyi’s 白居易 “与元九书” (“Letter to Yuan Zhen”), where poetry is described as rooted in feeling, sprouting in language, flowering in sound, and bearing fruit in meaning.

18 Bei Dao, ed., and Ouyang Jianghe, executive ed., 中国艺术电影 [Chinese Art Cinema] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House, 2011), 233.

A structure of meaning does not exist only within an individual film. In auteur cinema it persists across an auteur's works, carried forward and deepened until it acquires typological characteristics. Auteur cinema therefore contains a series of recurring motifs that compose structures of meaning marked by the author's style. These recurring structures of meaning are themselves the films' "poetic eyes": they provide the crucial channels through which viewers understand the films and apprehend their emotions, poetic beauty, and values. In Jia Zhangke's cinema, these structures of meaning or poetic eyes include hometown (Xiao Wu, Platform, Mountains May Depart, Unknown Pleasures); the distant elsewhere (Platform, Still Life, Ash Is Purest White); transformation (Still Life, 24 City, Mountains May Depart); reality (Xiao Wu, Xiao Shan Going Home, Unknown Pleasures, A Touch of Sin); and jianghu (A Touch of Sin, Ash Is Purest White).¹⁹ Multiple lines of meaning often intersect within a single film, while one line can recur across different films. Consider "transformation." Still Life, 24 City (2008), and Mountains May Depart (2015) all possess historical depth and are threaded through by the ancient theme of time. "Transformation" also intersects with "reality." 24 City, for example, represents the differences among three generations associated with an old state-owned factory and their present circumstances, indicating how urban change affects human lives in the process of urbanization. By Mountains May Depart, the spatial span has grown larger, extending from a small city in Shanxi to Australia. Jia's viewpoint begins to "go outward," and the reality represented by his film begins to acquire a diasporic character under globalization. In sum, through both narrative and meaning, Jia's cinema embeds the structure of modern poetry. Film, poetry, and poeticity are linked by an intimate internal relationship, and this relation forms the foundation of cinematic poetic expression.

In recent years, Sixth-Generation directors have begun to move onto a larger stage. At the same time, Chinese cinema has entered an age of consumption, entertainment, and carnival. The collective image of the Sixth Generation has gradually dispersed and blurred, while a younger cohort of directors after them has come to be known as the "new forces." Under the demands of the market, the poeticity of new-force cinema must itself become consumable. New-force directors must therefore exercise individual agency while also submitting to the market system, balancing multiple powers as "auteurs within the system." Take Bi Gan. To describe Kaili Blues and Long Day's Journey into Night merely as "auteur films" in the modern sense is far from sufficient. In the hands of new-force directors, cinematic poeticity moves increasingly toward synthesis. First, poeticity on the literary, medium-specific cinematic, and market levels is organically integrated. Second, tradition and modernity enter into a symphony: these films possess a floating, sliding, ambiguity-laden postmodern poeticity while also turning back toward classical aesthetics. Third, they attend both to elite culture and to popular accessibility, making the films more broadly accessible without sacrificing their intellectual and spiritual stature.

In the two preceding installments of this essay, I outlined the poetic characteristics of Fourth- and Fifth-Generation cinema. In fact, from the Fourth Generation to the present, poeticity in mainland Chinese cinema has followed a trajectory of transformation from classical beauty toward marketization. During this process, mainland Chinese cinema has passed through classical, modern, and postmodern stages, and each phase of transformation corresponds to a generational shift. Yet phase transitions and generational changes do not connect seamlessly.

19 *Translator's note*: 江湖 (*jianghu*) literally means "rivers and lakes," but in literature and cinema it denotes a mobile social world outside or at the margins of formal institutions, often involving itinerancy, outlaw life, loyalty, and underworld codes. It is retained in pinyin because no single English equivalent covers its range.

Several generations often occupy the same time and field, and the blurred zones of their intersection and replacement are precisely where the classical, the modern, and the postmodern undergo their decisive transitions. Within these deeper layers and fissures, cinema reveals an even more intricate aspect.

Even today, the auteur style of the Sixth Generation still lingers. Yet as their films acquire more commercial characteristics, the traces of auteur cinema gradually fade and yield to new elements such as plot-centered storytelling. At the same time, as the film industry becomes more fully developed and sources of capital more diverse, the constraints imposed by multiple parties substantially limit the director's power. The commodity character of film has become increasingly prominent in China: shooting, production, publicity, and distribution must take market demand into account rather than simply satisfy the director's personal tastes. Every indication suggests that the new works of Sixth-Generation directors are moving from auteur-centered creation toward collective production, from the niche to the mass public, from lyricism to narrative, from art-house aesthetics to plot-driven storytelling, from low-budget production to capitalization, and from art to commodity. Judging from current trends in film development, no large-scale wave of auteur cinema will emerge in the short term after the Sixth Generation.

This reality also confirms the breakdown of generational naming in Chinese cinema. Directors after the Sixth Generation are difficult to classify as a "Seventh" or "Eighth Generation," while "new forces" is only a provisional designation belonging to a particular historical stage. Rao Shuguang long ago observed that "with Jia Zhangke as the endpoint and Ning Hao as the beginning, the new generation of directors entered an 'age without sovereigns or fathers.'"²⁰ Viewed across the long span of history, generational divisions made with such frequency and density are intrinsically suspect: "Generational relations, never clear to begin with, now collude with the operations of capital in this commercialized social context, making them still harder to determine; 'generation' can therefore no longer serve as a totalizing category for classifying these directors."²¹ It is time to abandon the generational classification of cinema. Today, within an increasingly internationalized context of the internet and mass culture, all generations inhabit the same reality: the reality of an industrialized film system, and the reality of commerce and capital.

20 See Yu Ji and Ge Jinsong, "中国电影导演代际划分的终结" [The end of generational classification among Chinese film directors], 当代文坛 [Contemporary Literary Review], no. 5 (2015): 130–34. The phrase 无君无父 literally means "without sovereign or father"; here it denotes the absence of a commanding authority or stable patriarchal line of succession.

21 Yu Ji and Ge Jinsong, "中国电影导演代际划分的终结," 130–34.