

Alienation, Instability, Invisibility, and the Aesthetics of Compromise

An Introduction to Sixth-Generation Chinese Cinema

by Gözde Top



Abstract

This article introduces China's Sixth Generation filmmakers through four representative films: *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), *A Touch of Sin* (2013), and *So Long, My Son* (2019). Situating these films within the social transformations of the reform era, it examines how directors such as Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai portray migration, urbanization, inequality, and historical trauma through a realist aesthetic. The article argues that rather than engaging in overt political resistance, Sixth Generation filmmakers developed an "aesthetics of compromise," using subtle storytelling to negotiate the constraints of censorship while maintaining a critical perspective on contemporary Chinese society.

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Introduction

In 1992, following Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, China's paramount leader and the chief architect of its post-Mao economic reforms reaffirmed the reform and opening-up agenda, accelerating the expansion of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). These state-designated areas were created to attract foreign capital through preferential economic policies and were an important part of the broader reform and opening-up process, which profoundly transformed urban China. These top-down reforms triggered profound socio-economic and cultural transformations, giving rise to new social groups and new social challenges. While the effects of these changes were most visible and acute in major urban centers, smaller cities also experienced their share of this rapid transformation. Once a predominantly agricultural society, China was now home to a vast "floating population,"¹ rural migrants who flocked to urban centers in search of jobs and a better life.

Against this backdrop of rapid social change, the so-called Sixth Generation filmmakers, a cohort that emerged from the Beijing Film Academy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, increasingly turned their cameras toward the lives of the "floating population" and the everyday struggles of those left at the margins of China's transformation. Their works often reflected characteristics of Italian Neo-realism of the 1940s, favoring on-location shooting and non-professional actors to portray the daily struggles of the poor, working class with authenticity.

The Sixth Generation filmmakers are distinct from their predecessors in both thematic focus and stylistic approach. Commonly labeled the Fifth Generation, this earlier cohort includes prominent figures such as Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*, 1993), Zhang Yimou (*Red Sorghum*, 1988), and Tian Zhuangzhuang (*Red Elephant*, 1988), and developed a shared aesthetic marked by visually striking imagery, historical allegory, and rural or pre-socialist settings. Their films typically reimagined Chinese history through stylized narratives that resonated strongly with Western art-house audiences. The Sixth Generation filmmakers emerged within a broader intellectual climate shaped by the trauma of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and the ideological shift of the 1990s, often characterized as anti-radicalism², which reflected growing skepticism toward radical political change and the idea that history followed a clear path toward a better future. Their films reflect a world marked not by revolution or overt political confrontation, but by alienation, displacement, and quiet survival.

The state's response to these out-of-studio, independent productions has frequently been ambivalent, oscillating between censorship and selective tolerance. This reflects both the pragmatic logic of post-Mao governance, in which the state has sought to maintain political and ideological control while allowing limited flexibility when cultural production serves economic and international interests. The government has also been concerned with how China is represented both at home and abroad, creating room for some critical cultural works while restricting those considered politically threatening. Within this space of uncertainty, the filmmakers of the Sixth Generation developed what might be called an "aesthetics of compromise," a strategy of subtle negotiation with political and market constraints that allowed them to remain critical without being overtly oppositional.

New Realisms: Sixth Generation Filmmakers Emerge

The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests began not as an explicit challenge to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, but as a response to growing concerns over corruption, lack of transparency, and the unequal consequences of economic reforms. Beginning in April 1989, thousands of students gathered in Beijing's Tiananmen Square to call for greater political openness and accountability, the movement soon attracted support from workers, intellectuals, professionals, and other urban residents.³ After weeks of demonstrations, the government declared martial law and sent troops into Beijing in early June to suppress the movement, resulting in widespread casualties. What started as calls for procedural transparency gradually expanded into broader demands for political participation and democratic freedom, although not for the overthrow of the Party.⁴ The government's decision to label protesters as "counterrevolutionaries" and suppress the movement by force profoundly reshaped China's intellectual sphere.

In the aftermath of Tiananmen, the Party sought to restore its legitimacy by reaffirming its commitment to economic reform. Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992 accelerated the reform and opening-up agenda, reassuring an emerging economic elite and expanding middle class that China would not return to the radical politics of the Mao era.⁵ Together, these developments ushered Chinese intellectuals into a period of political retreat and ideological reorientation.

The Sixth Generation of filmmakers emerged in the aftermath of the Tiananmen events of 1989. Most of them had graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1985 and 1987. As members of the post-Tiananmen generation, their conflict with state authorities should be understood within this specific historical context. Like many within the intellectual community who had begun to question their role in the reform era,⁶ the new generation of filmmakers also struggled to define both their political stance and personal filmmaking style.⁷ Amid this oppressive atmosphere of the early 1990s, Sixth Generation directors initially turned toward deeply personal, often semi-autobiographical narratives as a strategy of expression.

China's second wave of economic reform after Deng's 1992 Southern Tour accelerated urbanization and entrenched consumer and mass culture, rendering nearly everything a commodity.⁸ The intensity of these economic changes deeply unsettled the social fabric of Chinese society. As market reforms prioritized urban centers and widened the rural-urban gap, economic opportunities became increasingly concentrated in cities. As a consequence of these top-down economic changes, rural-to-urban migration increased dramatically, resulting in a vast "floating population"⁹ in the cities. The term "floating population" refers rural migrants who lacked urban residency status and full access to social rights, and who were frequently portrayed in public discourse as contributors to social disorder and urban instability¹⁰ despite being employed in construction, manufacturing, domestic service, and other low-paid jobs. These rural migrants, often marked with distinct accents, differing moral values, and limited familiarity with urban life, were perceived as outsiders. Over time, they became a marginalized and often stigmatized presence in the urban landscape. These socio-economic conditions would soon be reflected in the thematic concerns of Sixth Generation filmmakers, who began to shift their focus from personal narratives to the alienation, instability, and invisibility experienced by the urban underclass.

The year 2003 marked a turning point for independent filmmakers in China. Previously working independently and underground, Sixth Generation directors began negotiating with the Chinese Film Bureau and reached a compromise that allowed them limited access to the state-owned film system,¹¹ as China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) heightened the Party's sensitivity to global visibility and the management of its cultural image. Directors Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai were among those who participated in state-sponsored projects and gained visibility among domestic audiences. Wang, for example, collaborated with a state-owned studio on *Shanghai Dreams* (2005). From this period onward, filmmakers began to alternate between underground and officially approved projects. Despite this institutional cooperation, they managed to maintain their critical edge abroad and continued to show sympathy for China's marginalized populations. Yet, this negotiated space between filmmakers and the state remained inherently unstable, subject to shifting political priorities and periodic institutional reconfiguration.

Tracing a Generation: Four Films, Four Moments

To better understand the aesthetic and political sensibilities of Sixth Generation filmmakers, it is useful to examine a set of key films that span different moments in recent Chinese history. Each of these works—*Xiao Wu* (1997), *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), *A Touch of Sin* (2013), and *So Long, My Son* (2019)—reflects not only the shifting social landscape of post-reform China, but also evolving modes of cinematic expression. Together, they offer a cross-section of how this generation has grappled with themes of urban transformation, economic dislocation, and personal loss, often through restrained, realist storytelling. The following close readings trace how these filmmakers negotiate authorship, ethics, and independence under changing political conditions.



Figure 1. *Xiao Wu* (1997), directed by Jia Zhangke. © Jia Zhangke.
Source: *Xiao Wu* (Hu Tong Communication, 1997).

***Xiao Wu*: Life on the Margins in Reform-Era China**

Xiao Wu (1998) is Jia Zhangke's debut feature film. Made with a very limited budget, the film was produced outside the state-run studio system, commonly referred to as an "out-of-studio production." Because it was not approved by the Film Bureau, *Xiao Wu* could not be shown in Chinese cinemas. Instead, it gained international recognition after being selected for the Berlin International Film Festival in 1998, where it won the Wolfgang Staudte Award.

This method—bypassing domestic censorship by taking the film abroad—became a common strategy among many independent Chinese filmmakers in the 1990s and early 2000s. While such films could not reach domestic audiences, they helped shape the international image of Chinese cinema as artistically bold and socially critical. The limited domestic visibility of *Xiao Wu* reflects how difficult it was for independent voices to enter the public space in China at the time, even when their stories were deeply rooted in local life.

Xiao Wu captures the quiet yet powerful social shifts of late 1990s China. Shot in Fenyang, the director Jia Zhangke's hometown, the film bears strong influences from Italian Neorealism, particularly in its use of non-professional actors, on-location shooting, and focus on the everyday struggles of ordinary people. Set against the backdrop of the 1997 Rectification of Social Order Campaign, a state-led effort to eliminate crime within three years, the film questions the evolving moral landscape in a society undergoing rapid economic change. The campaign itself is never directly explained, but we hear regular loudspeaker announcements in the streets that signal the growing presence of state authority.

The protagonist, Xiao Wu, is a small-time pickpocket who finds himself increasingly disconnected from a society that is moving forward without him. His first major confrontation with this new order comes when he reunites with his former friend Xiaoyong. Once a petty thief like Xiao Wu, Xiaoyong



Figure 2. The final sequence of *Xiao Wu* (1997), directed by Jia Zhangke.
© Jia Zhangke. Source: *Xiao Wu* (Hu Tong Communication, 1997).

has now become a successful businessman trading cigarettes and managing a nightclub. Although his new lifestyle appears legitimate, the film subtly suggests that these occupations are merely the old ones repackaged. For example, smuggling and sex work rebranded under market-friendly labels like trade and managing a nightclub. In this way, the film critiques how economic reform has not necessarily brought moral clarity, but instead redefined social acceptance through wealth and status.

Xiao Wu is deeply shaken when he learns that Xiaoyong has not invited him to his wedding. The exclusion symbolizes a broader social rejection. In an attempt to prove his worth and fulfill a promise, Xiao Wu steals money and offers it as a wedding gift. However, the gift is rejected, making it clear that he, and what he represents, has no place in the new order.

His isolation deepens through a failed romantic relationship with a bar girl and a final, painful encounter with his family, where he is forced out of his father's home. These moments of personal rupture echo the broader social transformations taking place across China. Xiao Wu cannot—or will not—adapt. The final scene of *Xiao Wu*, in which the protagonist is handcuffed to a street pole as passersby stop and stare, serves as a powerful moment of public shaming. This exposure reflects the criminalization of poverty and marginality in a rapidly modernizing society that no longer has space for people like Xiao Wu.

The emotional weight of the film lies in its quiet portrayal of interpersonal breakdown. Scenes of crumbling cityscapes mirror the erosion of trust and connection. With a restrained, observational style, Jia Zhangke offers a sharp critique of the emotional and moral cost of economic development. Rather than delivering overt political opposition, the director invites reflection through its careful attention to ordinary lives under extraordinary change.



Figure 3. *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai. © Beijing Film Studio, Arc Light Films (Taiwan), and Pyramide Productions (France). Source: *Beijing Bicycle* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2001).

Beijing Bicycle: Migration, Youth, and the Urban-Rural Divide

Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) explores China's growing urban-rural divide through the intersecting lives of two teenage boys. Guo Liangui, a recent migrant from the countryside, arrives in Beijing hoping to earn a living. He lands a job at a courier company, which provides new employees with sleek mountain bikes, a symbol of modernity and status. But there is a condition: the bikes officially belong to the workers only after they have completed a set period of work. For Guo, owning the bicycle becomes a symbol of survival and success in the city. But just as he is about to claim it as his own, the bike is stolen.

Meanwhile, in another part of Beijing, a high school student named Jian buys Guo's stolen bicycle from the black market. For Jian, the bike is not a tool for survival, but a status symbol meant to impress his girlfriend and friends. When Guo eventually tracks down his bicycle, a struggle over its ownership begins. The bike means something entirely different to each boy: necessity for Guo, identity and pride for Jian. They strike an uneasy compromise, sharing the bicycle on alternating days, but tensions rise as both begin to lose their footing in their respective social worlds.

Eventually, both boys are pulled into a violent confrontation with Jian's former friend group. When Guo sees them trying to destroy the bicycle, he loses control and, in a fit of rage, strikes one of the attackers with a rock. In the film's final scene, Guo walks away slowly, carrying the damaged bicycle on his shoulder. He disappears into the crowd, and the story ends with no clear resolution, mirroring the uncertain future faced by millions navigating China's rapid urban transformation.

Among the film's central concerns—urbanization, internal migration, and widening social inequalities—what stands out most is Guo's unwavering determination to overcome each obstacle he faces as a rural migrant in the city. His struggle is not dramatized as heroic but rendered through the quiet resilience of someone for whom persistence is a means of survival. In this sense, *Beijing Bicycle* offers a powerful depiction of individual agency under structural constraint. Its commitment to realism is realized through its focus on the hidden geographies of the city—the backstreets and narrow alleys, where social tensions and daily struggles unfold. Rather than offering a panoramic view of Beijing's rapid urban transformation, the film foregrounds the everyday conflicts that define the lives of those at the margins.

Yet beneath this narrative of resilience lies a quieter, more pervasive tension: the subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination that rural migrants routinely face in the urban landscape. In China, being an “outsider” is not only a matter of political dissent but also of cultural and social exclusion.¹² Rural migrants are not just products of economic reform, they are strangers who struggle to find a place within the system. *Beijing Bicycle* gives visibility to this form of marginalized otherness, one that is not overtly political but still deeply shaped by structural forces.

A Touch of Sin: Corruption, Violence, and Moral Crisis in Contemporary China

Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* offers a powerful critique of bureaucratic and societal corruption in modern China. In contrast to the naïveté of *Xiao Wu*, *A Touch of Sin*, released in 2013, the year Xi rose to power, employs a violent and forceful mise-en-scène to depict a revolt against corruption in coal-mining administration in Datong, Shanxi. Interestingly, the film's release coincided with Xi's anti-corruption campaign, which was declared his administration's top priority. This alignment is believed to have enabled the film's rare approval for domestic screening in Chinese cinemas.

The film portrays the transformation of modern China through four distinct narratives centered on different individuals. The protagonist of the film's second story, Dahai, raises the flag of rebellion against the village chief, who sold the local coal mine, once considered communal property, without distributing the proceeds to the villagers. Moreover, he also takes a stand against Jiao Shengli, a local figure who personally profited from the sale and became wealthy through questionable means. Dahai decides to go to Beijing to file a formal complaint against the village chief and the mine's new owner. He publicly demands travel money from Jiao Shengli, who has just arrived in the town by private jet and is warmly welcomed by the villagers. Attempting to rally public support, Dahai denounces the injustice of excluding the villagers from the mine's profits. However, his appeal falls on deaf ears. Isolated and unsupported, he is violently beaten by the boss's men.

What follows marks a turning point for Dahai. He arms himself and kills both the village chief and Jiao Shengli. While he frames these acts as a fight for justice, personal resentment also fuels them. This becomes especially clear when he shoots the man we earlier saw viciously whipping a horse, presumably its owner or caretaker. The man's cruel treatment of the animal, and perhaps his symbolic role in a broader system of



Figure 4. *A Touch of Sin* (2013), directed by Jia Zhangke. © Xstream Pictures (Beijing).

Source: *A Touch of Sin* (Xstream Pictures, 2013).

abuse, makes him a target of Dahai's personal fury. The release of the horse that follows can be interpreted as a symbolic moment, one of many in the film that subtly reflect the tension between political violence, social injustice, and personal frustration.

A Touch of Sin was released in China in November 2013, a year after the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012 during which Xi Jinping was elected the General Secretary. Without waiting to be appointed President of the Republic, Xi pledged to crack down on both “tigers and flies,” referring to powerful officials as well as low-ranking bureaucrats.¹³ This high-profile anti-corruption campaign shaped the political atmosphere of the early Xi era, creating a moment of intense scrutiny and symbolic action.

In this context, the timing of the film's release invites a reading of *A Touch of Sin* not just as a commentary on social injustice, but as a carefully crafted artistic intervention. While the film is not an endorsement of official slogans, it explores the same moral decay that Xi's campaign claimed to confront. Rather than expressing overt political opposition, Jia Zhangke offers a more subtle form of critique. Through fragmented storytelling, brutal realism, and emotionally complex characters, the film reflects the moral ambiguity and social violence that lie beneath China's economic transformation. And yet, the film was not banned. On the contrary, it was approved for domestic release, a decision that reveals Chinese authorities' pragmatic attitude toward politically sensitive art. When a film resonates with prevailing concerns, even if it carries a critical edge, the state may allow it to circulate as a controlled form of reflection. In this sense, *A Touch of Sin* represents not only the director's artistic statement, but also the state's selective openness to narratives that echo its own anxieties.

So Long, My Son: Family, Memory, and the Legacy of State Policy

Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Long, My Son* (2019) received the official “dragon seal” from the China Film Administration, and was supported by the Shanghai Film Development Fund. The film focuses on the profound social and individual transformations that accompanied China's economic reforms. At its core lies the Chinese Communist Party's one-child policy, which serves not only as the foundation of a family tragedy but also as one of the most striking examples of the state's intervention in the private lives of its citizens. Remaining faithful to the characteristic themes of Sixth Generation directors, Wang explores issues such as political loyalty, guilt, and personal loss in a deeply nuanced way.



Figure 5. Dragon Seal of the Film Bureau of China, shown in *So Long, My Son* (2019), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai. © Dongchun Films Production, 2019. Source: *So Long, My Son* (Dongchun Films, 2019).



Figure 6. *So Long, My Son* (2019), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai. © Dongchun Films Production, 2019. Source: *So Long, My Son* (Dongchun Films, 2019).

The film tells the story of Liyun and Yaojin, a working-class couple whose lives are devastated by the loss of their only child, unfolding across multiple decades through a fragmented, non-linear narrative. As private memory intersects with national history, personal tragedy becomes inseparable from China's political and social transformations. The film portrays the devastating impact of past political policies on private lives, including forced abortions, the relocation of educated youth to the countryside, and university education shaped by political ideology.

While the director does not explicitly blame those who carried out the policies (such as Haiyan, the Party official responsible for enforcing a forced abortion), the audience can perceive how the relationship between the individual and the state continues to reproduce social inequalities. When the characters reunite years later, the contrast in their lives is evident. Liyun and Yaojin, former factory workers, struggle under harsh living conditions, whereas Haiyan and her family, once loyal Party servants, now live comfortably in a major city. Although never stated outright, this contrast functions as a powerful critique of systemic injustice. In this way, the film uses personal memory and trauma to reflect on the social consequences of China's past policies.

These issues, no longer denied by the Communist Party and perhaps now acknowledged as part of China's official historical narrative, may explain why the film passed censorship. Yet the film does not merely acknowledge these past policies, it engages with them critically and emotionally, shedding light on their long-lasting human consequences with remarkable boldness.

Reframing Independence: The Aesthetics of Compromise Revisited

Rather than engaging in overt political resistance, Sixth Generation filmmakers like Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke navigate the constraints of censorship and market demands through subtle storytelling and ethical compromise. This raises crucial questions about what it means to be "independent" in an authoritarian regime, and how critical ideas can be expressed without openly defying the state. Independence in this context is not simply about operating outside official institutions, but about maintaining a moral stance: choosing to represent marginal experiences, social contradictions, and historical trauma despite systemic limitations.

Films such as *So Long*, *My Son*, and *A Touch of Sin* exemplify this approach: they avoid direct political confrontation, yet expose the human cost of state policies like the one-child policy or encroachment of capitalism. By focusing on personal grief, fractured timelines, and social disparity, these filmmakers offer implicit critiques that resonate deeply with viewers. The fact that such films passed censorship during the Xi Jinping era, when ideological control has tightened, suggests a shift in what the state is willing to tolerate, or at least acknowledge, as part of the national narrative. In this light, ethical storytelling becomes both a form of negotiation and a quiet assertion of autonomy within the bonds of an authoritarian system. Therefore, when viewed through the lens of these films, independence does not mean stepping outside the system, but rather creating room for maneuver within it and using that space in creative ways.

Yet even systems built on constant surveillance are never fully airtight. These films demonstrate that even in tightly controlled ideological environments, moments of ambiguity, hesitation, or oversight can create openings for critical expression. It is within these fleeting gaps that independent filmmakers carve out their space, proving that control is never absolute, and silence is never total.

Notes

¹ Michael Dutton, “Street Scenes of Subalternity: China, Globalization, and Rights” in Xudong Zhang, *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 364.

² Arif Dirlik, *Culture and History in Postrevolutionary China: The Perspective of Global Modernity* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011).

³ Rebecca Karl, *China’s Revolutions in the Modern World: A Brief Interpretive History* (London: Verso, 2020), 152–153.

⁴ Karl, *China’s Revolutions in the Modern World: A Brief Interpretive History*, 152–153.

⁵ Timothy Cheek, *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 248.

⁶ Els van Dongen, “Goodbye Radicalism: The Early 1990s.” Chapter. in *Realistic Revolution: Contesting Chinese History, Culture, and Politics after 1989*, 1–33. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 8.

⁷ Yinjing Zhang and Zhiwei Xiao. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 307.

⁸ Dutton, “Street Scenes of Subalternity,” 354.

⁹ Mcgrath, Jason. “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic,” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. (Duke University Press, 2007), 90–91.

¹⁰ Mcgrath, “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke,” 91.

¹¹ Wei Nie, “The Generation, Transformation, and Dissipation of the ‘Sixth Generation’ Cinema in China: The Entropy Change of a Concept,” *Journal of Chinese Film Studies* 1, no. 2 (November 1, 2021): 377–97, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcfs-2021-0033>, 382.

¹² Dutton, “Street Scenes of Subalternity,” 358.

¹³ Tania Branigan, “Xi Jinping Vows to Fight ‘tigers’ and ‘flies’ in Anti-corruption Drive.” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/22/xi-jinping-tigers-flies-corruption>.

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<https://mubi.com/en/tr/films/a-touch-of-sin>
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<https://mubi.com/en/tr/films/pickpocket>
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<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcfs-2021-0033>.
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<https://mubi.com/en/tr/films/beijing-bicycle>
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<https://mubi.com/en/tr/films/so-long-my-son>
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Pedagogical Resource Component

Learning Objectives

After reading this article, students should be able to:

- Explain how China's post-1992 economic reforms reshaped social life and cultural production.
- Distinguish between the Fifth and Sixth Generations of Chinese filmmakers in terms of themes, aesthetics, and historical context.
- Understand the concept of the "aesthetics of compromise" and how it operates under authoritarian governance.
- Analyze how film can serve as a form of social critique even under conditions of censorship.
- Evaluate the relationship between state power, public intellectuals, and cultural producers in reform-era and contemporary China.

Key Terms for Students

- Sixth Generation Cinema
- Floating Population
- Anti-radicalism
- Censorship

- Urbanization
- Social Realism

Teachers may ask students to define these terms in their own words using examples from the films discussed.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms change everyday life in China, particularly for rural migrants?
2. What does the article mean by an "aesthetics of compromise"? Why might this strategy be necessary in China's political context?
3. How do films like *Xiao Wu* or *Beijing Bicycle* portray marginalization without openly criticizing the state?
4. Can subtle or indirect criticism be more effective than overt political opposition? Why or why not?

Suggested Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Film Scene Analysis (Small Groups)

- Assign each group a short clip from *Xiao Wu*, *Beijing Bicycle*, *A Touch of Sin*, or *So Long, My Son*.
- Ask students to identify:
 - Who is marginalized in the scene?
 - What social or political forces shape the character's situation?
 - How realism (setting, actors, dialogue) contributes to the film's message.
- Groups present their findings to the class.

Activity 2: Timeline Exercise

- Students create a timeline connecting:
 - 1989 Tiananmen protests
 - 1992 Southern Tour
 - 2001 WTO entry
- Students then discuss how each moment influenced cultural production and film.

Writing / Assessment Prompts

- **Short Essay:** How do Sixth Generation filmmakers critique social inequality without directly opposing the state?
- **Comparative Essay:** Compare one Fifth Generation film and one Sixth Generation film. How do their approaches to history and politics differ?
- **Creative Assignment:** Ask students to imagine a short film set in contemporary China that reflects the "aesthetics of compromise." What themes would they choose, and why?

Teaching Tip for Instructors

Teachers unfamiliar with Chinese cinema may wish to emphasize that these films are not documentaries or protest works, but carefully crafted narratives shaped by political constraint. Encouraging students to focus on *what is shown indirectly* (silences, gaps, everyday suffering) can help them understand how critique operates under censorship.

Selected Film List

Fifth Generation

- *Yellow Earth* (1984), Chen Kaige
- *Red Sorghum* (1987), Zhang Yimou
- *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), Zhang Yimou
- *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Chen Kaige
- *To Live* (1994), Zhang Yimou

Sixth Generation

- *Beijing Bastards* (1993), Zhang Yuan
 - *The Days* (1993), Wang Xiaoshuai
 - *Xiao Wu* (1997), Jia Zhangke
 - *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), Wang Xiaoshuai
 - *The World* (2004), Jia Zhangke
 - *Still Life* (2006), Jia Zhangke
 - *A Touch of Sin* (2013), Jia Zhangke
 - *So Long, My Son* (2019), Wang Xiaoshuai
-