Marlina Gonzalez:
Good evening. I heard Bruce say my name so I won't introduce myself any more. I'm really very proud to be here introducing the people we have here tonight, because believe me we went through a lot to get this evening together tonight.

I personally became familiar with Chen Kaige as a filmmaker in the mid '80s when I was still doing the Asian American Film Festival, and with his first feature film, Yellow Earth, and that was 1984 when it was released in China, and released in the United States in '85. Since then, in spite of a very young career, actually five films to date, every single one of them has received international critical acclaim.

So tonight too is sort of a coup because we are opening, as Bruce may have said, the first Regis dialogue, the first of the fiscal year but also the first under our new supporter. I think it's a strong statement that we are trying to state here that there is great cinema as well beyond Europe and beyond American films. And so ladies and gentlemen, I'm very proud, surrounded by a lot of controversy and intrigue but finally, pleased to welcome to the Walker stage, director Chen Kaige and film critic Amy Tobin.

Chen Kaige:
Thank you.

Amy Tobin:
We've actually not planned this to any great extent except that I chose some clips, and we'll be coming back and forth to the clips. I think I should tell you in advance that the new film, Farewell My Concubine, is only available in a teeny, teeny video clip, but the others are nice 35 millimeter prints.

Amy Tobin:
So I think we're going to start off and try to be chronological, and so I'm going to ask the very obvious question, which is how did you get involved in filmmaking?

Chen Kaige:
This is very difficult to answer, because I remember I tried to pass the examination to go to film school in '78. I wrote to my father, who was not in Beijing but in another province making a not very good film, and I said that I want to study in the film school. He just wrote back and said, "It's not a very good idea. You better not do it." And I said, "Well, this is my decision, you know, you've got to respect this."

Chen Kaige:
That's how I went to film school. It's not easy, because after the Cultural Revolution the whole university, colleges, including film school, reopened. And I remember more than 3,000 young people wanted to study in the directing department. But finally they just got 20, 28 students. It's very difficult.

Chen Kaige:
The reason I told you what my father said is that because his own experience during the cultural revolution
is not very enjoyable. So it's not easy for me, not because my father is a film director, I just want to do something that he did before but I think, it's very hard to say. I became a film director ... Let me say this. I think, you know, I didn't really know that much about cinema history, filmmaking, and so on. I became film director because I just felt there's a lot of things here that I want to say. I found it's the best way for me to express what I feel about the world, life, myself and so on.

Amy Tobin:
And did you know that before you'd ever made a film?

Chen Kaige:
No, I didn't know that. I remember I went to see the Western films ... The funny thing is, that I mean the professors and teachers from Beijing Film Academy told us in the first place that we don't know how to teach you because we didn't teach anyone for like 10 years, so the only way you're going to learn the film making is go to the film archive. Because the school used to be pretty far from the city, we went to the film archive probably twice a week or three times a week to see foreign films. Then we had discussions. That's how we learned, I mean how to make film.

Amy Tobin:
And what kind of films were available?

Chen Kaige:
A lot of American films, I mean classical films, meaning '30s and '40s, and also European films obviously, some very good, I mean the masterpieces. Also some Chinese films made in '30s.

Amy Tobin:
So, and Soviet film?

Chen Kaige:
Yes. But, because those professors and teachers were trained by Soviet people, I mean Russians, in the early '50s.

Amy Tobin:
Was there a prevailing theory? I mean, was there something like, oh I don't know, like was there the auteur theory, or any kind of the theories that were prevalent in Europe at the end of the '70s? Like Bazin or anything like that?

Chen Kaige:
Yes, yes. We were encouraged to read a lot of books, and we learned ... Because I think, you know we were influenced by European film directors, I mean film directors other than Americans. We know some, I mean for example I want to mention the director's name, like David Griffith or Orson Welles, of course. But basically I think because those teachers, they are sort of anti Hollywood. They, there's no dream, I mean especially after cultural revolution.

Amy Tobin:
And so, then after you went to ... And so the film students, when you were a film student, who graduated with you, that's what's called the fifth generation?
Chen Kaige:
Yeah.

Amy Tobin:
And what is that? I mean, what is the fifth generation?

Chen Kaige:
I don't know.

Amy Tobin:
That's what I thought you'd say.

Chen Kaige:
I guess the first generation film makers of China started to work in the early '20s. That's the concept of time, you know, maybe we ... I think, well it doesn't mean anything. I think the fifth generation film makers means the students from, I mean graduates from Beijing Academy after cultural revolution, I mean as the first class students. And we all went through the cultural revolution, they either joined the army or worked in the countryside or worked in the factory, you know as a, I mean regular workers and so on. So very, very different life experience from other generation directors, and so that's why, I guess ... This is the name created by both, some European critics and Chinese critics.

Amy Tobin:
And then when you went to make your first film, *Yellow Earth*, which we're about to look at a clip from, what made you go to this location, or what was the genesis of that film?

Chen Kaige:
Interesting question. Actually I told you just now that we didn't know that much about film making, you know. We had, I think American people don't know that much about China, Chinese culture, or what happened during the cultural revolution. So we are very, very special just because cultural revolution. So I remember when cultural revolution broke out, I was 14. I tried hard to join the Right Guard. I couldn't be one because my father's so called political problem, you know he was in the formal, I mean member of Commandant, and it wasn't a problem until cultural revolution, it's become very, very big problem. So this means that I actually, you know, I was suffering, you know. I have learned a lot from that. I think it, cultural revolution is just a turning point of Chinese history. We have learned a lot, especially my generation.

Chen Kaige:
So when we were ready to make the first film ... You know, this is very difficult, because I was signed to the Beijing Film Studio but the film is made by Guangxi Film Studio, it was this very, I mean small studio in south China. And so Zhang Yimou, the camera man, and Hu Qun who was the art director, they were my school mates. They were signed to Guangxi Studio. Then I went to Guangxi Studio because I want a job, I want to work. I thought I was ready to make a film.

Chen Kaige:
But I found two screenplays there, I was given two screenplays. One was *Yellow Earth*, the other one I forgot totally. I thought it's very, very interesting. I haven't been to that area, where it's very remote area of northwest China, but what make me very interested in this project. Number one is the area. This used to be, I think this is a Yellow River area, so we consider this as a base of Chinese civilization. It's the source. And also, I mean
at the center of the area there's this tiny city called Yan'an, used to be the base of Communist party, long time ago before they took over.

Chen Kaige:
So we just went over there with this screenplay. I wasn't very happy with the screenplay but I was very curious about this area. When I went there, I was totally shocked. I was convinced that this is the place I want to make a film. It's beautiful, really. You can see the landscape. I just like, I mean the landscape itself just looked like history of China. And Yellow River, the mountains, the trees and the small roads. Especially the people. They hardly talk, you know, they didn't really talk that much, but they treat me very, very well. I mean, just remind me of what happened during the life in the countrysides. You know they live in very poor life conditions. They never complain. They are very, very brave, very nice, you know, to all their people.

Chen Kaige:
I was moved when I, when I was on the bank of Yellow River. It's at morning. I saw an old man just try to get water from the river. At that moment I realized what I wanted to do. I want to tell people something about this nation, about, something happening inside Chinese society and so on. So I wasn't that ready technically, you know, but I know there is something I can say and it can do better than other people.

Amy Tobin:
And were the actors nonprofessional, or did you bring professional actors?

Chen Kaige:
I think, you know my understanding about performance, that I think everyone could take a part in a film. It depends what the film it is. I do believe everybody's an actor and actress. I believe so. But for this particular film I work with, they are actor and actress. Professional. But they don't really look like professional actors and actresses.

Amy Tobin:
Not at all. Not at all. And, well I actually think that we should look at this little clip, but I'm not sure how many people out here saw all the films in the series, so just very quickly, do you want to just set the scene or should I set the scene, or how should we do this?

Chen Kaige:
Well just, basically this is a film about a soldier went, go to the countryside, try to collect folk songs. The storyline is very, very simple. But this is about a girl who want to find another kind of life, a new life, you know dream about freedom, but she failed to get that, I guess.

Amy Tobin:
And she's been, there's been a marriage arranged for her, and she actually wants to go with the soldier and join the army but he's not willing to take her right away. He goes away and he says, "I'll come back for you," and in the meantime she's facing this arranged marriage. So instead of staying and waiting for that she sits out on the Yellow River and, it's just very clear that, I mean this is not, I don't know if one takes it as a suicide but she's not going to make it. I mean, she's going to go out on the river and she's going to drown.

Chen Kaige:
Basically what I can say about this film is that I think, you know people heard a lot about arranged marriage and so on. I think this film just, the film is done in a very special way. I mean it's pretty, I mean I'm talking
about visual image. It's very different from other films. I think that this is, the film actually is a similar situation, the characters and so on but it's done in a very different way.

Amy Tobin:
And it's the end of the '30s, right?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah.

Amy Tobin:
So, and is that when Mao's army was there-

Chen Kaige:
Yes.

Amy Tobin:
And they were holed up there?

Chen Kaige:
Yes. They were there.

Amy Tobin:
So Patrick, I think we actually have to ... Could we have this first clip?

Chen Kaige:
I didn't see this for a long time.

Amy Tobin:
Well, it opens up a lot of questions for me. I'm mean, I guess the largest question I have has to do with ... I don't know if you want to say that it's irony or ambivalence, but there she is rowing out there and she says, "The Communist party saves," and clearly she's going to her death. I mean, the next second she's disappeared into the water and she's never seen again. And so I want to know, I mean, is that an intentional irony, what is that? Is that, you know ...

Chen Kaige:
This is the film it is. You know, you can ... There's not much I can say. I just feel that it's very difficult for this girl to cross the river, even though, I mean she wants to join the Communist party maybe. Actually I don't know how to answer this question. This is what the film is.

Amy Tobin:
I mean the other thing, I mean I think that, I mean I really love this film, and I think what I love so much about it has to do with the way the people are in the landscape, that the people and the landscape are inseparable and that you have this real sense that they are who they are because they're there in that place, and to the degree that they aren't really personalities in the American sense of personalities in movies but they are so formed by the place that they're in, and I think that's what's extraordinary about the film. And you know this was, I think the film that as someone wrote put Chinese cinema on the map as far as recognition in Europe
and to a certain degree in America was concerned. But I'm curious about what the reception was for the film in China.

Chen Kaige:
Actually what happened is that the, this is a long time ago, you know. This is my first film. Of course I hope the film company received it real well in China, but unfortunately what happened is right after the leaders of censors screen print, I mean the film, is that the head of the film bureau told someone else that he doesn't like the film at all because he couldn't understand the film and he thinks that the film is very unique, very weird and doesn't know what the director want to say, and he just suggested, I mean he didn't tell me that, I mean, but he told someone else that the film must be cut. And of course as the film director, especially as the director who did the first film, I had to make a compromise. I cut the film. And the sequence that you are not able to see now is the sequence that the peasants pray for rain. That's the sequence they hate a lot. You know, they said, "What is that."

Chen Kaige:
And also it caused a lot of criticism from the leadership in saying that a director just want to show the dark side of China to please foreign devils. I'm joking. This is what happened. But when the film is ... I cut the film. I mean, but when the film is released in Hong Kong they received it very well, that I mean things became different in that the film became pretty popular in the big cities, I mean people come to see this film and so on.

Chen Kaige:
But still I think the influence of the film is pretty limited until I got prize, award and so on. So I think this is what happened basically, at that time. But I really, really believe in what I was doing. I believe in this film. I think I told, I really told truth to the people, to the Chinese people.

Amy Tobin:
And then since it was a controversial film, how did you manage to get your second film made?

Chen Kaige:
Well, that's ... Actually, as a filmmaker you have to deal with a lot of different problems, I mean pressures and so on. I had an idea to make second film even before this one, because I heard, there's a military parade on the National Day of '84. So we were talking about a possibility to make a film about, I mean this ceremony I mean is ... So we get the title as The Big Parade.

Chen Kaige:
Basically what I want to talk about in Yellow Earth is the relationship between the lands, I mean the land and the human beings. Those Chinese peasants really love their land, but also they hate the land because they cannot get out of that. They cannot have another kind of life. I mean even though I think the landscape in this film create a very, very important role, I mean it's the biggest character in the film. But in Big Parade I really try to describe the relationship between the individual and the collective, I mean the society.

Chen Kaige:
Even though those kind of things happened everywhere, I mean if you were a soldier you got to listen to your, I mean to your boss, right? I mean, but in China there is no film was made this way before. So I went to where they train the soldiers. It's a compound that I went there and stayed there for like 40 days and talked to a lot of soldiers, they told me stories and so on, and that they probably took longer than eight months but they, to
do, I mean physically it's very, very difficult, but they just spend one minute probably or two minutes, I mean to cross the Tiananmen Square, I think, you know.

Amy Tobin:
In the real parade.

Chen Kaige:
In the real parades, yes.

Amy Tobin:
And they trained for ...

Chen Kaige:
Eight months.

Amy Tobin:
Just to do that, it wasn't just part of their regular training.

Chen Kaige:
Yes, just to do that, yeah. The question is not whether it's worth to do or not. The question is, in China, I mean Chinese society is really different from Western societies that we used to be the part of social machine. We never, ever tried to be individuals. That's the case. So I try to figure out what's going on. I mean you can say the film is pretty symbolic in terms of the way it is cautioned to discuss the relationship between the individual and the society. So yeah, it's also very difficult to make, because we went to Tiananmen Square on the National Day but we were told the day after that, we got stopped because the head of studio doesn't believe that the film is going to make any money. So then I went to ...

Amy Tobin:
And does that matter? I mean is that always taken into consideration, whether the film will make money?

Chen Kaige:
In last 10 years, yes. Yes. Before that it's not the case, it's not a problem. So then I went back to Guangxi Studio, because this is another Guangxi production. I talked to the heads and convinced them. Finally I got the film made. That's the end of, I think that's probably the end of '85. But what happened is just the same, you know, even worse, because those, I mean army generals came to the film bureau, and I was sitting there, watched the film. Their reaction is very, very negative. They said, they hate the film. They said that I tried to destroy the image of PLA, I mean the liberation, I mean the People's Liberation Army. But obviously I never ever tried to do that, I don't really have such great power, you know, to destroy an army.

Amy Tobin:
And again, these were real soldiers or these were actors acting soldiers?

Chen Kaige:
Mostly, most of them are soldiers, real soldiers.

Amy Tobin:
So in that sense, I mean we're going to look at about a five-minute really quite horrendous scene from this
film in a minute. But in that sense they're real soldiers but you staged the scenes, or is this footage in here that's real documentary, what you would call documentary footage?

Chen Kaige:
Well I mean the last sequence, I mean the ending is being changed as well. That's me, I did the dirty job again, but I got to do it. The original ending of the film is really different from what you can see now. There's no parade at all. You just see empty land and the sea, the sun rays, and you hear the voiceover of the soldiers laughing and talking, nothing more than that. But those, I mean military people said, "It doesn't make sense. The title is Big Parade. Why don't you just let people just see something about parades?" Then I said, "Well, you know, from artistic point of view better not let people just see this because that's not the point. The point is, I want to tell people something beyond military training. I don't really concentrate on this." But they were not convinced. Yeah, you can see it.

Amy Tobin:
Well, we're not actually going to look at the ending, but we're going to look at the...

Chen Kaige:
Right, right, right.

Amy Tobin:
Okay. Patrick-

Chen Kaige:
Let me tell you, I mean the film, I mean the music, I don't like the music at all. But this is a, I mean what I was asked to add into the film because, make the whole thing more revolutionary.

Amy Tobin:
The music would give it drama, or ... ?

Chen Kaige:
I don't know. This is what I was asked to do.

Amy Tobin:
It would be, the music would make it moving in a kind of ... It's odd, because what the music, I mean it's so...

Chen Kaige:
Sentimental?

Amy Tobin:
Yeah, exactly.

Chen Kaige:
Right.

Amy Tobin:
But I mean something that interests me a lot is, on the one hand, you're showing how the soldiers get made
into this part of a machine, like it's a big machine, and that's partly what that arrangement, I mean they aren't separate people there. This rank. But on the other hand, there's the Fata Morgana effect, that it's hot and you have the heat waves rising and so they look like a mirage. And I wondered if you could talk a little bit about what that mirage effect was for you, if it was something more than just it's very hot and therefore you see them through the heat waves, or if it's meant to look like a dream or like ... I mean ...

Chen Kaige:
Well as a soldier you have to do this, this is the thing. But on the other hand the terrible thing is that you'll find that you really enjoy it, sometimes. You want to be a part of a parade. You want to be the part of a machine.

Amy Tobin:
But I think I'm asking a little bit about the way that the camera looks at the soldiers. It's a little bit as if, sometimes as if they're not really there, it's a thing that's imagined rather than ... Do you know what I mean? It's a little bit expressionistic or something like that.

Chen Kaige:
Well, I never think this way. I think, you know, I just told Zhang Yimou, the camera man of this film, that the film must be done this way. Because I saw this before I start to make this film. I saw some visual image really, and this is their life, this is the way how they live, you know. Soldiers. Because I was a soldier. I knew what was going on, really.

Amy Tobin:
How long were you a soldier?

Chen Kaige:
I hate to tell you. Five years.

Amy Tobin:
And how old were you then?

Chen Kaige:
From I think 18 to 23.

Amy Tobin:
And what did you do?

Chen Kaige:
What did I do?

Amy Tobin:
Yeah.

Chen Kaige:
I did a lot of things. Not everyone was qualified to join the army. The reason a lot of young people want to join army at that time was that this will be, makes things more easier to go back to the city, where I go, being with my family.
Amy Tobin:  
Because this was after you were in the country in the Cultural Revolution.

Chen Kaige:  
Yeah, right. I mean if you want to join the army you must show that you're from a working class family, that, but since my father had that kind of problem I, actually I couldn't be a soldier. You know why it's so funny that, you know why I could join the army? Because I could play basketball. That's the reason. You know, you may see, as a Chinese man I'm pretty tall and so ... But I enjoyed it, and also I was signed, this is a very special period. I was signed to Laos. This is the war, I mean this is wartime.

Amy Tobin:  
During Vietnam?

Chen Kaige:  
Yes, yes. Obviously Chinese, I mean we're on the Vietnamese side. That's why ... But I didn't really fight. I was sent there to build roads. But we were, we means, I mean the troops, I mean the soldiers, were bombed by American B-52 cargo. I really, I was scared, you know. I mean that's what happened. I know something about army soldiers and the way they live.

Amy Tobin:  
Okay. And so the reception for this film again, you were forced to change the ending and put the music on, and then did people go and see it? Because again, in Europe this film was a big success.

Chen Kaige:  
Yes. Yeah, I remember someone said, "Have you seen the film called Full Metal Jacket?" I say, "Yes, I saw that film." "And your film is called as the Chinese version of Full Metal Jacket." I don't know whether it's true, I think it's very different.

Amy Tobin:  
But Full Metal Jacket is years after this film anyway, I mean it's like-

Chen Kaige:  
So that's to say, I mean the ... yeah. Stanley Kubrick's version of Big Parade.

Amy Tobin:  
Okay. So now you have these two controversial films and you're going to go and make a third film, which is King of Children. Which is actually the film of all those films that I somehow think is in a way the most autobiographical in a sense. I mean for me it's very much about, I mean when you said that you went to film school and they said, "We haven't taught in 10 years and we don't know how to do this," that's kind of what the experience in this film is of this teacher who comes and who's really never taught and discovers these children who've been taught badly, minimally but badly, and reinvents the teacher student relationship all over again. Whenever I saw that film I thought, "Oh well, this must have something to do with your experience in going to film school and inventing it from nothing."

Chen Kaige:  
Yeah. What I can tell you about this film is that this is a film that's based on a very, very good novel. I mean, it's a long short story written by a famous writer named Ah Cheng who lives in Los Angeles now, and he
moved to the States, I think it's probably six or five years ago. He wrote a very famous novel, *King of Children*, which is this one, and also *The King of Tree* and *The King of Chairs*. This is one of his novels.

Chen Kaige:  
I think the film is pretty different from the novel. I think what I'm trying to say ... Of course I put my own life experience into the film because I went to the countrysides in the same area. It's called Hunan Province. I stayed there for like two and a half years. So I experienced the same thing, you know, what you can see in the film. And also I thought that we used to be very proud of old civilization, and old culture and so on. But I also feel that, I mean I, but we don't know what to do today. I mean, to culture, you know. I think traditional culture sometimes just like a very, just like a circle, you start from one point and you come back at the same time, at the same place. I'm not just trying to talk about educational system in China. I mean, we just repeat what the people did before. There's no new creation, I guess, that's ... And you can see, I mean I shouldn't say that much before you see the sequence.

Amy Tobin:  
Well, we're going to actually look at two sequences and actually the projectionist is going to have change in the middle, so we could look at the first one and then talk more and get to the second one. The first one comes, oh it's about 40 minutes into the film and this teacher has already met his pupils and he's discovered certain things about the way they've been taught. For one thing, they have no books, and they basically are being taught just to copy things by rote. And he begins to question that method of education.

Amy Tobin:  
I'm just curious because they don't translate it, what is the text that's up there? Does it matter?

Chen Kaige:  
There's no book. No text.

Amy Tobin:  
No, but the text that's on the blackboard, what is it?

Chen Kaige:  
Right. What is that?

Amy Tobin:  
Yeah.

Chen Kaige:  
It's not very significant, it's nothing for you to know.

Amy Tobin:  
I mean, I guess what interests me about this film is that this is the beginning of seeing this charismatic character who's at the center of the film, the teacher, and it seems to me that more than the first two films, this film begins to be about relationships in an odd way, and about a process of making relationships. I mean it's specifically the teacher student relationship, but I find him just a most extraordinarily charismatic character, and like the teacher you always wanted to have, mostly because he gets up there and says, "I don't know how to do it," you know. And so he opens the whole issue of what is this process that goes on between teachers and students. And I just think that's extraordinary.
Chen Kaige:
I think you said everything, right. I don't know, I mean actually there are a lot of I can say about this film is that I went to a boys' school before Cultural Revolution, you know. I think I was pretty well educated in terms of, I mean social, I mean socialism, you know. We used to believe in Mao himself, believe in communism for sure. But I think after the Cultural Revolution broke out, some friends of mine, you know I mean the classmates of mine who were from, I mean high ranking official families. They joined the Red Guard. They beat people up on the streets. They put on the army uniform, which was from their parents. They beat people up with very wide belts.

Chen Kaige:
So that make me to think about that. The education, you know, doesn't really work. Why everything I saw at the time was absolutely different from we were told. So I start to thought about this kind of education. We used to be very, very comfortable to obey whatever the teacher or parents ask us to do, this kind of situation. And also I think I was very sad when I was in the countryside to see those students copy everything, you know, just make a copy of, copy a newspaper or dictionary or whatever. They never, ever want to think. They are very, very smart kids but they don't want to think. They just do whatever they are told.

Chen Kaige:
So I think, in this case I think about that, I mean something's wrong with this kind of educational system. So that's why I really, really love this teacher. This actor, he's a professional actor. He graduated from the acting department of film academy the same year with me. He's a very good actor. Because he doesn't look like an actor.

Amy Tobin:
Okay, I think that we probably should look at the second clip, which is the very ending of the film, and if you haven't seen the film, it begins with this kind of cryptic interchange where you understand that he's being fired, because he hasn't taught according to the established methods, and he's made bets with his students and all kinds of stuff like that. So he's being fired, and then he leaves.

Amy Tobin:
So I want to ask you two questions about that. One has to do with the figure of the boy that he sees, maybe the boy or he may be imagining the boy, but he's met him earlier in the film and he's a goat herd, or cow herd, and he's never been to school, and he asks him earlier, "Don't you go to school?" Or, "Didn't you learn," and the boy doesn't say anything. What is his position in the film, or who is he for you?

Chen Kaige:
Actually this boy doesn't exist in the novel, so I think I need a little boy who can represent nature, another kind of life. Refuse to be educated, refuse to be a student, or something like that. And I think at the very end of the film, before the fire, I think that's the, used to be a forest, which is destroyed by fire.

Amy Tobin:
Intentionally destroyed by fire?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah.
Amy Tobin:
And is that what we call scorched earth? I mean, we use scorched earth-

Chen Kaige:
I used as, I think this is a symbol in the film that I'm, I think becoming destroyed, the forest, I mean actually can represent those students. I mean, what happened to them. Yeah, that little boy is just ... I mean, refused to be civilized.

Amy Tobin:
And what's the character that's on the blackboard at the end?

Chen Kaige:
That is ... very interesting. That character, that doesn't exist in Chinese language. That is created by me.

Amy Tobin:
So that's the future?

Chen Kaige:
It could be.

Amy Tobin:
To be imagined?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah. Or, let's do something else, you know. Let's do something different. You know, I mean I'm really, you know, I mean, fed up with this, this kind of situation, you know, being forced to learn something, and so ...

Amy Tobin:
So after this film you did something different and you came to New York?

Chen Kaige:
Right. Yes.

Amy Tobin:
And why did you do that?

Chen Kaige:
Come to New York?

Amy Tobin:
Yeah, why did you leave?

Chen Kaige:
Well, I got a scholarship actually, from Rockefeller Foundation, and also I was invited to go to NYU film school as a visiting scholar. And of course I didn't, I told you that I didn't know that much about American film industry. I wanted to know something about that. And also I think, I dream about New York, you know I heard a lot
about that city, and so I thought, it's time for me to go to New York and just live there for a while. So that's the reason. I really enjoyed living there, it's really great.

Amy Tobin:
And were you trying to get, were you interested in making a film in New York or did you have your next film in mind, in the works?

Chen Kaige:
Actually this is a very difficult question. Of course I wanted to do something in New York. I met a lot of people there who came from different countries and they're doing different things. I just felt that even though, you're sitting at home you still feel that you share something with other people. It's really great. I want to do something in New York. I wrote a very good synopsis actually you know, starring one treatment which is called *A Maoist in New York*. I think it's very interesting because I interview a lot of Chinese people. I'm not interesting, I mean making a film about, I mean the Chinese people come to United States, you know, work in the restaurant, you know, I mean suffering, and so on. I don't like this at all. I mean, maybe this is reality, it's a part of reality…

Amy Tobin:
One of my students made this film, right?

Chen Kaige:
Right. I mean, but I just try to find a point, a different point, try to see the whole thing from different angle, you know. I must find the soul, what I really want to say. I can't get into details, but it's kept the very interesting comedy. The guy is so afraid of police. I mean he doesn't know that the police means different thing in this country, you know.

Amy Tobin:
Little bit.

Chen Kaige:
Yeah, a little bit, yeah. But you know, I mean he's so scared, running away from one place to the other, avoids policemen, so that's the beginning of the story. But I'm not so sure, because there are a lot of things that I want to do in China, so I don't know. And I got some, actually I got some offers from even Hollywood, to work here in the States, but I have to make sure I ... You know, after you see some sequence of one film you may find out that I'm the man can only do something I really want to do. Then …

Amy Tobin:
That's what you tell them.

Chen Kaige:
Yeah, I told them already, yes. I already told them. So I have to make sure that everything is there that I really enjoy to do this.

Amy Tobin:
So you stayed in New York what, three years?
Chen Kaige:
Almost three years.

Amy Tobin:
And you wrote Life on a String while you were in New York?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah. And also I wrote a book for a Japanese publisher. It's doing real well. It's an autobiography of ... Actually, that book just covered five years, from '65 to '70.

Amy Tobin:
About the Cultural Revolution?

Chen Kaige:
About myself.

Amy Tobin:
In the Cultural Revolution?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah.

Amy Tobin:
And it's published where?

Chen Kaige:
Japan. It's going to be published in Italy, Germany. But I, actually I contact some American publishers. They asked some Chinese experts to read the book. They love it, but they say, but the only thing they don't like is that they think the book is not long enough. They want me to write more. Things I have, there are a lot of things I have to do. I said no, I can't do it. So that's why ...

Amy Tobin:
You could have pictures.

Chen Kaige:
Right. But I think it's a, it's a very good book. Very honest. And even better than my films, I guess.

Amy Tobin:
And so can you, so you wrote Life on a String then, and you went back to China to make it, but the financing came from outside, right?

Chen Kaige:
Right.

Amy Tobin:
And that was the first time that you did that, work with outside financing?
Chen Kaige:
Right. The film is financed by European countries, money from different sources actually. European money.

Amy Tobin:
But then-

Chen Kaige:
The film was ...

Amy Tobin:
... resources of a film studio in China, right?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah. In association with Beijing Film Studio. But financed by foreign companies.

Amy Tobin:
Okay. And I mean, Life on a String I think is considerably different than the early films, and I wondered if it was that you came in contact with a certain kind of film making when you were in New York that you got involved with and that's what the difference is? I mean it's a much more, I mean it's magical realism. I mean it's not, you know.

Chen Kaige:
Right. It's magical realism, that's true. But the reason I want to do this film is that I feel that after Cultural Revolution we just lost the belief system, and I think sometimes you know our religions really work, I mean, you know in certain societies, have to have a certain ... I mean, stability. But we don't have national religion in China. Then we don't know what to do, you know. After a very beautiful dream was broken during the Cultural Revolution. So that's why ... I think this is a film about, people's dream. I mean, you know because the story, you know the story, the old man really, but the blind artist believe that if he can break one thousand strings then he's going to see. He believe in it, and make a lot of efforts to break one thousand strings. But of course, I mean, he failed to see. I mean, at the end. That make him to think whether he should believe in this or not and so on. So it's become his, to break one thousand strings become his religion.

Amy Tobin:
Or his, the practice of his religion. It's not what, I mean it's what he does, not what ...

Chen Kaige:
Yeah.

Amy Tobin:
Because he believes that he'll find God at the end of his sight, at the end of ...

Chen Kaige:
Right. And so this is a film, because I'm really, I still very care and concern about what happen in China today spiritually. I mean, the landscape you can see in the film is not that real. It's like, I mean that is the, I mean this black man's, I mean blind man's inside world. Spiritual, I mean reflect his spiritual life, which is very, very colorful.
Amy Tobin:
And also the way the scenes are connected. I mean it's a very associative film, so that scenes are connected
in this rather dreamlike way. I mean you can't say that there's some sort of causal narrative line, there isn't. I
mean you know, it's kind of picaresque but it's also much more associative and the things that happen are
kind of magical in that way.

Amy Tobin:
And I mean, I think what I chose to show and I'm wondering if ... We're beginning to get late here. I'm
beginning to wonder if we can show both scenes. So I think maybe we're just going to show the opening film
and not show the war part. But if you haven't seen the film you can see from the opening that it's just a very
different texture, and there's a very different relationship between the scenic elements and the people within
them.

Amy Tobin:
So I want to ask you two questions about that. One has to do with the figure of the boy that he sees. He may
be the boy or he may be imagining the boy, but he's met him earlier in the film and he's a goat herd, or a cow
herd, and he's never been to school, and he asks him earlier, you know, "Don't you go to school?" or, "Didn't
you learn?" And the boy doesn't say anything. What is his position in the film, or who is he for you?

Chen Kaige:
Actually, this boy doesn't exist in the novel, so I think I need a little boy who can represent nature, another
kind of life. Refuse to be educated, refuse to be a student, something like that. And I think at the very end of
the film, before the fire, I think that's the, used to be a forest which is destroyed by fire.

Amy Tobin:
Intentionally destroyed by fire?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah.

Amy Tobin:
And is that what we call scorched earth?

Chen Kaige:
I mean, we used scorched earth...I used as, I think this is a symbol in the film that I'm ... I think destroyed the
forest actually can represent those students, I mean what happened to them. Yeah, that little boy is just, I
mean refused to be civilized.

Amy Tobin:
And what's the character that's on the blackboard at the end?

Chen Kaige:
That is ... very interesting. That character, that doesn't exist in Chinese language. That is created by me.

Amy Tobin:
So that's the future?
Chen Kaige:
It could be.

Amy Tobin:
That you've imagined?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah. Well, let's do something else, you know. Let's do something different, you know. I mean, I'm really, I'm fed up with this, this kind of situation, being forced to learn something and so on.

Amy Tobin:
So after this film you did something different and you came to New York?

Chen Kaige:
Right. Yes.

Amy Tobin:
Why did you do that?

Chen Kaige:
Come to-

Amy Tobin:
Yeah, why'd you leave?

Chen Kaige:
Come to New York? Well, I got a scholarship actually, you know, from Rockefeller Foundation, and also I always wanted to go to NYU film school as a visiting scholar. And of course I didn't, I told you that I didn't know that much about American film industry. I wanted to know something about that. And also I think, I dream about New York, you know I heard a lot about that city, so I thought that it's time for me to go to New York and just live there for a while. So that's the reason. I really enjoyed living there. It's really great.

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Amy Tobin:  
So once again, this was a film which was extremely well received in Europe and in the U.S. I mean, this film was in the New York Film Festival?

Chen Kaige:  
Yes.

Amy Tobin:  
I think that's where ...
Chen Kaige:
Also it was in competition of Cannes Festival yes.

Amy Tobin:
And, but how did you get from this film to Concubine, because ... I mean, that's a really big ...

Chen Kaige:
This is very, very, very different. This film is very different because the budget's not very big. You know, it's based on a short story. I worked with the writer. I wrote the screenplay and so on. I think compared to Concubine it's very, very different. It's a more personal ... so yes-

Amy Tobin:
But there are a lot of ... In this film, however, there are all these big scenes with lots of crowds of people. I mean, it's odd because it's a very small, personal film that has this kind of epic, these epic scenes in it.

Chen Kaige:
Well you see something of basic elements of Farewell in this film as well, I think so. Because I don't really, because I think, maybe I'm wrong you know. I don't really believe in so-called personal style. I mean, you have to know, as a filmmaker you are also a landlord. You've got to know how big the territory is, how big the land is. Each film should have different approach. You always, I mean I think I always try to do things in different ways. But this film, I wish you saw this film then, you know, there's not that much I can tell if you don't see the film, I think it's very, very different. I actually no more to say about this film.

Amy Tobin:
I mean, I think of all of them it's in a way, I mean obviously it's, you can see that it's a landscape film, and obviously it's just as tied to the landscape as the other films but the events that happen are not so, I mean they're more allegorical. There's this, you can read everything in this film in an extremely allegorical way, and at the same time it has that kind of associative quality that an extremely, you know a person's dream would have. So it both is like allegory and then it's a very inward looking film.

Amy Tobin:
But it also has the thing that you talked about a little which seemed to be the place that Farewell, My Concubine begins, which is with something like a belief system that holds a person, you know makes a life possible. Makes a particular kind of work possible, and also, I mean this film is a film about an artist. He's a musician, and Concubine is also a film about an artist, and has something to do with artistic integrity and all of that.

Chen Kaige:
Is this the question?

Amy Tobin:
No, it was just maybe an opening. So anyway, so Concubine is this big budget film which appealed to Miramax. I mean so, I don't know, when you started to make this film did you have the sense that you were going to make a film that was in certain ways like a '30s epic costume movie? I mean in terms of style, did you think in that way?
Chen Kaige:
Well, I think, I'd like to talk a little bit about *Concubine*, because I met my producer, Hsu Feng, who is from Taiwan. She used to be a very good actress in Taiwan. I met her in Cannes five years ago, and in the beginning we couldn't really get it on because she's from Taiwan and I'm from mainland China, you know. And so on.

Amy Tobin:
And she's incredibly flamboyant.

Chen Kaige:
Right. But eventually we got to know each other, especially that year *The King of Children* was in competition, but I didn't win anything, and I mean she just invite me for dinner, you know. Everybody was drunk. And that's very good for that particular evening. And she give me this novel, because *Farewell* is based on a novel written by a Hong Kong woman writer, Lillian Lee. So I wasn't so sure that I could do it. So I took almost two years to make decision. After I finished *Life on a String* I told Hsu Feng that I was ready to do this film. The reason I wasn't so sure is that I really liked the basic relationship between two actors. I think it's right. But the novel is sort of empty in terms of, I mean background and so on. I don't know what's going on. People cannot really relate to those people because people don't know what happened behind them, you know.

Amy Tobin:
So in the novel there's no sense of the political events? This-

Chen Kaige:
No. No, not at all.

Amy Tobin:
These 40 years?

Chen Kaige:
No. I mean story cover 50 years, but for example let me tell, there's, Gong Li's part was pretty, it's just like shadow character. I told the writer that number one, I mean you are not from mainland China, you don't know that much about Peking opera and the Cultural Revolution. and we definitely need another one who can help. So I found another writer from Cheung's studio, we worked together like ... Actually we spent almost one year on the screenplay. And for this cast everything, you know, I make sure this is what we want. And also I told her that I find, I mean the whole story, it's just like, you know, a crust, that you can tell, you can combine a lot of different elements with the basic story. Like Peking Opera, love, passion, you know.

Amy Tobin:
You mean, when you say the basic story, you mean the triangle?

Chen Kaige:
Yeah, the triangle. I think this is a, I thought this is probably a very good chance to tell people more about what's going on inside Chinese society, you know the history, political chaos and so on and so forth. So this is a, make this as a epic.

Chen Kaige:
I know, I mean this is a, the Cultural Revolution period. Of course you can feel the certain atmosphere around
you, but you cannot really tell what time it is. But this film is very different. I mean, everything's more straightforward, more directly, and you just ... Yeah. I think this film should be done this way because the story, because the relationship. I mean, melodrama, just kind of ...  

Amy Tobin:  
Well, I think that actually we should take a look at this kind of odd trailer that one ... extremely commercial trailer that Miramax has made for this film. It's going to be a video projection and ...  

Chen Kaige:  
Very commercial.  

Amy Tobin:  
Because some of you have seen this film, but it's about to open here I think, in another week or so, and ...  

Chen Kaige:  
It is pretty commercial but I like it a lot. Right now I mean, this is the Cultural Revolution period. Of course you can feel the certain atmosphere around you, but you cannot really tell what time it is. But this film is very different. Everything's more straightforward, more directly, and you just ... yeah. I think this film should be done this way, because the story, because the relationship. I mean [inaudible] drama, you know, this kind of thing.  

Amy Tobin:  
Well, I think that actually we should take a look of this kind of odd trail of one, extremely commercial trail that Miramax has made for this film. It's going to be a video projection, and then ...  

Chen Kaige:  
Very commercial.  

Amy Tobin:  
Because some of you have seen this film, but it's about to open here I think, in another week or so, and ...  

Chen Kaige:  
It is pretty commercial. But I like it a lot. Quite well done.  

Amy Tobin:  
I think it could have been the trailer for Age of Innocence, it's just this kind of generic trailer. It's just that the images are so great.  

Amy Tobin:  
So I think what's so extraordinary interesting about this film has to do with what must have made it very difficult for you to make it, and that's that the question of identity, the construction of identity on the one hand is involved with political events, and that people's lives, and people's beings, are just turned over every six years by these political upheavals.  

Amy Tobin:  
But on the other hand that identity is an issue of gender, and in this film, you know, the leading character, Leslie's character, the concubine character, this is a boy who has to at some point say, "I'm not a boy, I'm a
girl." When he finally makes himself say that, then he constructs his whole identity around that, so there's no separation in his life between his stage character and his real life character as there is for the King character. I mean, he can go up and have this life because he hasn't really shaped himself in that way. And I just think that the connection between the political events and the construction of person around these, this big thing of gender, is real extraordinary in the film. And so I was wondering if you wanted to say something about ...

Chen Kaige:
Of course I mean, basically this is a story about an artist, you know, who is forced to play a female part on stage. Forced to be trained as a woman and to be a woman, especially when his extra finger being cut off by his prostitute mother, I think his sexual identity is totally changed.

Amy Tobin:
In other words he's symbolically castrated in order to be able to get into this school.

Chen Kaige:
Right. And because the preening, because the education and everything, and also because his mother is a prostitute, I mean I think she, he identified himself as a woman rather than a man. Because even himself tried, because he tried to be secured. He protect ... I mean protect that I'm a woman so I have a right to love that man. Basically, this is a ... But at the end of the film, before the suicide, and he repeat the lyrics that, I mean, he learned when he was very little. He made a mistake again. I'm by nature a boy, not a girl. So that's the moment he realized that his whole life is a mistake, but it's a very beautiful mistake. What I mean is that, I mean, but it's too late to change. So that's why I think this is a story about a man in love with another man.

Amy Tobin:
But is it a mistake or is it...

Chen Kaige:
Maybe mistake is not the word.

Amy Tobin:
It's a construction, but he takes responsibility. I mean the meaning is that he takes responsibility for it.

Chen Kaige:
So that's why, yeah, I agree with you, mistake is not the word. What I mean is that I think he's the main, has no sense of the difference between the real life and the life on the stage, and the dream and the reality, male and the female. I think I, what I can say, he's a Peking Opera fanatic. He's a dreamer, you know. He lives in his dream. But he's, on the other hand I must say that he's a pure, I mean he's a very brave artist. Always make decision on his own, you know, what he wants to do both on the stage and in the real life. He's a very, very independent.

Chen Kaige:
Of course this film is involve a lot of political issues, but I don't think this is a film about Cultural Revolution. Cultural Revolution is very important. I put my own experience into this film. I mean, Cultural Revolution. What happened, what you can see in the film, this is almost what I did during the Cultural Revolution. I was forced to denounce my father in front of a lot of people. It's still a very painful experience for me, even though I say sorry to my father and so on. But still, this stayed in my memory. I hardly forgive myself.
Chen Kaige:  
Because I think, we can, in China after Cultural Revolution, no one wanted to take the responsibility for anything. This is the mistake made by Mao and again [inaudible]. Let them take the responsibility. But I think it's not the best way to resolve the problems. I think, I wished one day I could see people stand up and say that, "Look, this is my fault." I think, I really hope, you know ... So that's why I did this film. I tell people what's going on at that time. I'm the man, you know, made a mistake. Even though I can say I was a young boy, 14 years old, I was forced to do this, decision made by others, but still, you know, I feel very ashamed. Because I knew what I was doing. I knew that. I knew my father was not a spy. But I did that. Because I was selfish. That's it.

Amy Tobin:  
What happens in the film is that you begin to make, I mean you make a number of connections, and on the one hand, everyone is forced to make these denunciations to save their own skins, and also because it's a kind of form of mass hysteria, also, I mean it gets so heightened. But there also is a level in this film that, you know, the relationship between these three people before this point is so extremely complicated and filled with such anger and jealousy and rage that for them all to betray each other, it's like that's just an excuse to express the incredible anger and hostility between all of them, and so the psychological dimension comes into play like the psychological dimension between fathers and their adolescent sons might have come into play, that this isn't just purely political.

Amy Tobin:  
And I also think that's what's extraordinary about the film, that at every moment ... You know, I mean in one way it's like this big epic where every time there's a crucial thing that happens between the people in the triangle, there's also this enormous change of power, so at one crucial point when they get engaged the Japanese enter, and when they're going to break up, and the nationalists come back. I mean it's like that, and those things are matched, but it's more that how the psychological dynamics and the political dynamics, you can't separate them.

Chen Kaige:  
No.

Amy Tobin:  
And that's what's really interesting.

Chen Kaige:  
Yeah. Because in China art and the politics are always together, really. But as a filmmaker I try hard to keep away from that. I can't. It's really difficult.

Amy Tobin:  
So could you talk a little bit about, we know that, we know from all the articles that the version that's going to play here is cut, and actually I saw a version last spring which is longer than the version I just saw in New York. But the cuts I take it that Miramax asked you to make are different cuts than the cuts you were asked to make in China, and so I just wanted that clarified, how this film has been altered and by whom.

Chen Kaige:  
Right. I mean the version you're going to see in the States is different from the version that people saw at Cannes. I think you know, we started this caution even before Cannes. I mean, they took the picture, I mean
before Cannes festival, I mean Miramax. And they told me that, I think I knew a little bit about American market, and I was told by Miramax that some American audience, there's not very, I mean, patient with something that they are not familiar with. So for example, Peking Opera. I think what they said makes sense. And also remember there's a scene in which the patron and the concubine capture are together. Then you see the turtle got killed. Then I was told it's a little bit too much for American audience, and that Miramax is going to receive a lot of letter from animal rights organizations or something like that. So that's what make me to cut the film.

Amy Tobin:
But the pacing of the film, I mean even as I saw it last spring, is very different than the pacing in your other film. I mean this film moves, I mean it really moves at an almost frantic pace. It's like the film is trying to keep up with these events that are almost too much for it, and it just goes from beginning to end. And there's very little kind of contemplative space in the film. And so were you thinking that way from the beginning or is it that you had so much that you wanted to get in, I mean that the film just moves faster than anything you've ever made.

Chen Kaige:
Well, I think I took long time to edit film. I made decision of, almost, I mean in terms of change, almost every day. I worked very close, I had a very close working relationship with the editor. Actually I saw some, like I told you before that I saw something before I do it, and, but also that I change almost every day. A new decisions, and so on. For example I shot a lot about, I mean the sequence of kiss, I mean the opera school. Actually I think I have at least five hours long footage, but now it's just less than 40 minutes, something like that. Well, let's come back to the version of China. I didn't cut it. The information from New York Times is-

Amy Tobin:
Seems like you cut it once and then they cut it a second time.

Chen Kaige:
No, I didn't really cut it. I was informed that they want to cut the film, and I just said, "Well, I can't do this job." After how many times I did this kind of things many times, I very not to do this this time. Because I don't know what to say 20 years later. I have to be responsible for original version. Because this is the political decision, this is a political requirement, you know, because someone don't like the film not because that they see something, I mean from a political, I mean artistic point of view, they don't like it and so on because they can't take this film because political reasons. So I refused to do this job, I didn't cut it.

Chen Kaige:
But I think, according to someone saw the film in China, the change is not that big because I believe those film officials tried hard to protect this film.

Amy Tobin:
And so as far as you know the ending is intact, I mean the suicide-

Chen Kaige:
No idea. I have no idea. I'm afraid to see this film in the theater, so. Do you think I should-

Amy Tobin:
No, I don't think you should look at it.
Chen Kaige:
Okay.

Amy Tobin:
I mean, why make yourself really unhappy?

Chen Kaige:
Right.

Chen Kaige:
I think eventually the situation will be improved anyway. I think for example, that I can imagine that of this film can be done on like 10 years ago. No way. So I do believe that. I mean, things are getting better.

Amy Tobin:
Well, I think that's a kind of good note to end on. thank you very much.

Chen Kaige:
Thank you.

Amy Tobin:
Thank you all very much.

Chen Kaige:
Thank you.