

BEIJING FILM STUDIOS — EXTRA REGISTRATION FORM

**Name:** Fenfang Wang

**Sex:** Female

**Date of birth:** 1980

**Place of birth:** Ginger Hill Village  
Yellow Rock Council  
Zhejiang province

**Parents' class status:** Peasant, non-communists

**Education:** Middle-school graduate

**Height:** 168 cm

**Bust circumference:** 85 cm

**Waist circumference:** 69 cm

**Hip circumference:** 90 cm

**Blood type:** B

**Animal zodiac:** Monkey

**Star sign:** Scorpio

**Personality:** Flexible, can play extrovert  
and introvert, outgoing or  
shy

**Relevant experience:** Cleaner at Day to Day  
People's Hostel; factory  
worker; usherette at Young  
Pioneers Cinema

**Skills:** Level 2 English; typing;  
fabrication of tin cans  
(5 cans in 45 seconds)

**Limitations:** None

**Hobbies:** Watching films, especially  
Hollywood films; reading  
translated novels from the  
West

MY YOUTH BEGAN WHEN I WAS 21. At least, that's when I decided it began. That was when I started to think that all those shiny things in life – some of them might possibly be for me.

If you think 21 sounds a bit late for youth to start, just think about the average dumb Chinese peasant, who leaps straight from childhood to middle age with nothing in between. If I was going to miss anything out, it was middle age. Be young or die. That was my plan.

Anyway, when I was 21, my life changed just by filling out this application form. Before then, I was just an ignorant country girl who didn't know how to do anything except dig up sweet potatoes, clean toilets and pull levers in a factory. Okay, I'd been in Beijing a few years, but I was still a peasant.

My momentous transformation took place at the Beijing Film Studios. It was a boiling hot afternoon. The walls of the recruitment office were still messy with the slogans of Chairman Mao: 'Serve the People!' Green-headed flies buzzed over a lunchbox of leftover noodles.

Behind the lunchbox, a hero of the people was dozing away on his chair. He was supposed to be supervising the registration of film extras. It had obviously worn him out. He paid no attention to us. We were flies too.

There were three other girls filling out forms. They looked much cooler than me: dyed hair, tattooed arms, fake leather handbags, jeans with holes, the whole lot. They chatted and giggled like geese. But I could tell that, underneath their fully armed appearance, they were just brown-skinned peasant girls from yellow sandy provinces, like me.

I picked up a pen from the desk, a Hero fountain pen. Only old communists still use Hero pens. I've never liked them. They're lousy. As I wrote, the Hero started to leak. The ink ruined my application form. My fingers turned black, and my palm too. My mother used to say a black palm would cause your house to catch fire. So I started to worry my inky palm would bring me bad luck.

The office was totally full of application forms. CVs were piled from floor to ceiling. Dust hung in the air like the milky way. As I attached my photo to the top-right-hand corner of the sheet, the hero of the people dozing behind the lunchbox woke up. The first thing he did, he stood up and swung a fly-swatter around his lunch to exterminate the flies. The three girls stopped filling out their forms and looked frightened by this sudden violence. *Bam*, one fly. *Bam*, a second. He sat down again, two dead bodies on the desk in front of him.

I handed over my 15-yuan registration fee. Without looking at me, he took a bunch of keys from his belt and, leaning forward, opened an old squeaky drawer. He found a big stamp, adjusted some numbers, and pressed it into a red ink pad. Then he raised his arm and slammed it down on my form. *Extra No. 6787.*

So, I was the 6,787th person in Beijing wanting a job in the film and TV industry. Between me and a role stood 6,786 other people – young and beautiful, old and ugly. I felt the competition, but compared with the 1.5 billion people in China, 6,786 wasn't such a daunting number. It was only the population of my village. I felt an urge to conquer this new village.

Still without looking at me, the fly-swatting hero of the people started to study my photo on the stained form.

'Not bad, young girl. Compared to other parts of your face, your forehead has something: it's nearly as broad as Tiananmen Square. And your jaw's not bad, either. It will bring you good fortune, believe me. Square jaws do. As for your earlobes – fat as Buddha's. The fatter the luckier, did you know that? Mmm... you're not that ugly. You can't imagine how many ugly people come to this place every day. I don't get it. Don't they look at themselves in the mirror first?'

I listened patiently and then thanked him. Leaving Extras No. 6788, 6789, 6790 behind, I walked back out into the street. The noon sun hit the top of my head so

heavily it immediately fried my hair. The summer heat and dust of the city rose up from the concrete pavement. I was caught in the middle of this heat fight. I almost fainted in the noisy street. Maybe I really fainted, I can't remember, it doesn't matter anyway. The important thing was: I had been given a number. From this day on I would never again live like a forgotten sweet potato under the dark soil. Never.



FRAGMENT TWO

How Fenfang, bewildered,  
put down roots in Beijing



MY FIRST NIGHT IN BEIJING. A 17-year-old who thought that drinking a can of ice-cold Coke was the greatest thing ever. I lugged my suitcase from one hotel to the next. Hotels weren't for peasants, I knew that. So what was I doing? Even if I'd had pockets full of yuan, they wouldn't have let me in. Each time I passed a hotel, the doorman's face confirmed that fact. It was obvious what those bastards were thinking: what are you doing here, peasant? I needed to find a cheap place instead, but all the cut-price hostels were in basements and I wasn't so crazy about spending my first night underground. Beijing was a brave new world for me, bright even at night. I wanted to rub up against it.

I ended up in the east of the city, near Bei He Yan, a Hutong area. The Hutongs. Long, thin alleys bordered by low, grey houses surrounding noisy, crammed courtyards. Countless alleys packed with countless homes where countless families lived. These old-time Beijing residents thought they were the 'Citizens of the Emperor'. They didn't seem so noble to me.



I sat by the road on my suitcase. Two old men were squatting near me, drinking tea and playing chess. They looked as though they'd been there for hours, or weeks, or maybe even centuries. After a while I realised I felt really hungry. Not my usual kind of hunger, the low grumble that begins in my belly the moment I get up and doesn't stop, however much I eat. This was serious hunger – the kind when you've been on a train for three days without anything proper to eat. I got up and bought a baked potato from a roadside vendor. Then I sat down again. In the sunset, the street lamps started to glow. One by one small lights illuminated the windows. There were no people about. Even the chess players had gone. I started to worry. I worried about my future, or more precisely, about my tomorrow. I got anxious.

Through the open curtains of a nearby window, a girl and her mother were arguing. Shadows flickered in the room as their voices grew louder and louder, shouting vehement but indistinguishable words. I couldn't believe a mother and her daughter could have so much to say to each other. They must be very close. In my family, no one talked. My father never talked to my mother, my parents never talked to my grandmother, and none of them ever talked to me. In my village, people lived like insects, like worms, like slugs hanging on the back door of the house. There wasn't much to talk about. I felt drawn to this house and its loud voices. I could sense something was going to happen between this house and me.

Suddenly the door was flung open and the young girl ran out, chased by her mother. It all happened very quickly. A van was hurtling past. The fleeing girl jumped into the road, her mother close behind. My half-eaten potato rolled out of my hand on to the ground. Under the van, the two dismantled bodies were crushed, along with my dead potato. There was an unbearable scream of brakes and the driver leapt out of his van. He pulled the mother and daughter into the back and, without saying anything or looking at me, he drove off. I blinked. When I looked again I saw that there was only a bit of blood on the pavement, glistening in the street lights.

I sat in that same spot for a long time, not knowing what to do with my first night in a big city. There was no one else around. The door the mother and daughter had run out of was still open, the light still on. No one had gone in. No ghosts had come out. After half an hour, I decided to look inside.

On the wall, there was an old-fashioned clock – the kind with a woodpecker which taps out the hour with its beak – and a world-city calendar showing that famous red bridge in San Francisco. A cup of green tea sat on the table. I touched it, it was still warm. In the oven, the coal was burning weakly. By the door, the tap was dripping. There were two beds, one narrow, one wide. I chose the narrow one. A flowery skirt was lying on it, so I guessed it must be the daughter's. I lay down and stared at the rain-stained ceiling. The more I thought about the

last few hours, the less I cared. I was too tired to care about anything – and cold. Heavenly Bastard in the Sky, was I cold. As cold as that damp ceiling.

A whole month passed and no one came. I was the only visitor to the empty house. I spent every night there, free of charge. A guest house all to myself. At the end of the month I found a job and left.

When I left my village, it was like I took a step with my right foot and, by the time my left foot came to join it, four years had passed. For these four years I was just like some spare chair forgotten in the dark corner of a warehouse. My first Beijing job was as a cleaner in a hotel called the Day to Day People's Hostel. I wasn't allowed to clean the rooms, only the corridors and toilets, but at least I could share a bedroom with four of the other cleaners. I stuck it out for a year or so, but eventually I quit. Then I worked in a state-run toy factory making plastic guns and aeroplanes. There were about 5,000 women workers and I couldn't stand the noise and stink of the dormitory, so I quit that job too. From then on, I kind of drifted from job to job. I spent a few months in a tin-can factory monitoring the tin-can-making machines, until finally I ended up as a cleaner at a rundown old cinema called The Young Pioneers. Despite the name, it didn't show young-pioneer-type films, only Hong Kong martial-arts movies. Monks hitting each other, that kind of stuff. After each screening, I had to sweep up all the sugar-cane

peels, half-eaten chicken legs, peanut shells, melon rinds and other crap that people leave behind – sometimes even fried frogs.

But I sort of liked this job. I slept on a broken sofa in the projection room, and I got to watch movies all day. Plus, I could keep the things people left under their seats. I once found an English dictionary. It was an exciting find. There was this famous high-school student from Shanghai who had got into Harvard University after learning to recite the whole English dictionary off by heart. I couldn't remember his name, but he became our national hero. I figured I could be like him – that this forgotten dictionary might be my passport to the world too. Anyway, I started learning the words. It wasn't that difficult, but it got a bit boring after a while so I stopped. Even so, I could say a few words to the foreigners who came to the cinema. And I thought a cinema was a pretty cool place to live. I spent all my spare money on film magazines and going to other cinemas to see the latest releases.

But the best thing about my cinema-sweeping job was meeting the Assistant Film Director. I helped him find an umbrella he'd lost. He told me it had been a gift from his girlfriend when she'd moved to Shenzhen, after which he'd never seen her again. He seemed upset when he talked about her, but if a yellow umbrella had been her parting gift, then no wonder.

Why did I give this pathetic umbrella man my

number? He was as scrawny as a pencil, with a sharp military-style haircut and the cheapest kind of red V-neck peasant sweater you can buy in the market. But I didn't care. He told me how he'd worked with Gong Li, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, names I was in awe of. Plus, he didn't look like a liar or a thief. I gave him my ID number, my Young Pioneers Cinema number, my mobile phone number, my home phone number and my next-door neighbour's phone number. He told me to get a black-and-white passport photo and go to the office at the Beijing Film Studios.

Who would have thought an umbrella could play such a key role in the design of my future? I returned a crappy old umbrella to an Assistant Film Director and, one month later, I was working as an extra, earning 20 yuan for a day's work. Finally I was getting closer to the shiny things.

Xiaolin, before he got violent



FRAGMENT THREE