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Song of Youth: Youth Narratives and Representations of Young People in Contemporary  
Chinese Literature, Film, and Popular Culture

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in East Asian Languages and Literatures

by

Ying Liu

Dissertation Committee:  
Associate Professor Bert Scruggs, Chair  
Professor Kyung Hyun Kim  
Chancellor's Professor Jeffrey Wasserstrom

2016



## **DEDICATION**

To

my dear mother

in recognition of her support and sacrifice

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

### **Ying Liu**

- 2007            B.A. in English, Huazhong University of Science and Technology
- 2007-10        Teaching Assistant, School of Humanities, University of Colorado at Boulder
- 2010            M.A. in Chinese Studies, University of  
Colorado at Boulder
- 2011-16        Teaching Assistant, School of Humanities, University of California, Irvine
- 2016            Ph.D. in East Asian Studies,  
University of California, Irvine

### **FIELD OF STUDY**

Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature, Chinese and East Asian Cinema, Mandarin and Language Pedagogy, Chinese Urban History, Post-socialism and Globalization, Critical Theory

## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Song of Youth: Youth Narratives and Representations of Young People in Contemporary Chinese Literature, Film, and Popular Culture

By

Ying Liu

Doctor of Philosophy in East Asian Languages and Literatures

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Professor Bert Scroggs, Chair

The challenge for contemporary literary scholars comes down to the question of how useful a cultural product is in describing and configuring the contemporary cultural scene, for example, the impact of literature, film, and TV in the globalizing era. Many scholars, in order to capture this diversified post-socialist cultural phenomenon, explore as many genres of art as they can in their research. However, identifying the common feature of post-socialist diversity in China still remains a question without answer. My research focuses on the theme of youth narratives in order to provide a solid and concrete perspective to assess contemporary Chinese culture and society.

My research is motivated by a cultural phenomenon that I observe in contemporary China, namely the prevalence of youth narratives in fiction, film, and popular culture. The youth narrative has been frequently intertwined with China's pursuit of modernity and its nation-building projects under different political and cultural ideologies. My research traces the emergence and evolution of youth narratives in modern Chinese literature and then delves into various recurring themes and motifs about youth in literature, film, and TV

from the 1990s to 2010, to discuss the cultural, social and political significances of youth narratives in contemporary China in order to capture common and critical features of diverse post-socialist status and engage with the furious debate on post-socialism and globalization in the Chinese context. What is more, my study reveals conflict between elitist state discourse and civil discourse implied by youth narratives from the 1990s to the present. This period provides rich textual and visual materials that showcases the most heatedly-discussed phenomena in China and resonates with classic dilemmas and ambivalences of Chinese modernity. Moreover, each of these phenomena relates to drastic economic change and social transition during the contemporary period. In a nutshell, these texts do not only reflect the moment but are also part of the moment. Hence, my research of contemporary Chinese culture links the past, present, and future; and is located at the intersection of historical and cultural studies, providing both diachronic and synchronic visions of key issues such as modernity, nationalism, and globalization.

## INTRODUCTION

As a major literature practice, youth narrative (*qingchun xushi* 青春叙事) has been playing an important role in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese culture. However, many scholars and literary critics have explored youth narrative merely as a subculture under the shadow of dominant discourse, or a subgenre that is dependent to the conventional European *Bildungsroman*.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Chinese youth narrative has frequently intertwined with the country's pursuit of modernity and its nation-building projects under different political and cultural ideologies throughout Chinese cultural history. Generally speaking, the evolution of youth image is a mirror reflecting cultural and ideological turns in China's most recent century. Therefore, youth narrative deserves critical consideration and serious study. My research aims to trace the emergence and evolution of youth narrative in modern Chinese literature and cinema and then focuses on youth narrative in contemporary Chinese fiction, film, and popular culture from the 1990s to the present. Youth narrative is treated as a cultural medium for the purpose of reflecting on the degradation of socialism and the global expansion of consumer capitalism. My research provides a new insight to the phantasmagoric post-socialist situation.

Youth is always regarded as a space between,<sup>2</sup> a period of transition, and a period that is fluid. Due to its transitional character, the definition of youth may vary with different

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<sup>1</sup> Liu Guangtao's 刘广涛 *The History of Twentieth Century Chinese Youth Literature* (Ershi shiji zhongguo qingchun wenxueshi yanjiu 二十世纪中国青春文学史研究) approaches youth literature under the grand historical, political discourses and ideologies. Fan Guobin 樊国宾 *The Generation of Subject: Research on Bildungsroman in 1950s* (Zhuti de shengcheng: 50 niandai chengzhang xiaoshuo yanjiu 主体的生成: 50年代成长小说研究) and Li Hua's *Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua: Coming of Age in Troubled Times* analyzes contemporary Chinese youth narrative in the realm of western *Bildungsroman*.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974,) vii.

sociological and cultural background. In the context of contemporary China, according to the Chinese Communist Youth League to join the organization, the official age range for Chinese youth is between 14 and 28. Although the ages of the young protagonists portrayed in the fiction and films that are described in my research are not explicitly revealed, their background and behavior suggest that the duration of youth in Chinese context can be loosely defined as between teenage to early thirties.

To grasp the new characters of youth narrative in contemporary Chinese culture, it is necessary to situate them within a broad historical and generational context. Throughout the twentieth century, youth narrative emerged concomitantly with China's pursuit of a modern national identity, especially focused on national salvation. Liang Qichao's essay "The Young China" ("少年中国说") in 1900 praised China as a young nation-state that fitted neatly within the global image of a modern world. Liang's statements set the keynote of youth narrative in China that is to search, represent, and construct national image and cultural identity.

The May Fourth New Cultural Movement in 1917 marks the beginning of a new literary trend in terms of narrative. May Fourth intelligentsia excavated youth mentality from classical literature<sup>3</sup> and reinvented it into youth narrative in order to arouse young people's rebellion against obsolete feudalism and patriarchal society for the sake of constructing a health modern national identity. These youth-oriented Chinese scholars and cultural figures include Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, and Li Dazhao. Writers such as Yu Dafu, Ding Ling, Shen Congwen, Ba Jin and so on wrote many stories centralized on young people and the conflict between their mental world and cruel reality. "The solitary traveler"(Leo Lee's

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<sup>3</sup> Youth mentality are widely existed in classical Chinese literature, canonical texts include *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

term) is the recurrent image of youth in May Fourth youth literature. For example, Lu Xun's "Hometown" (故乡), "Regret for the past" (伤逝), and Yu Dafu's "Sinking" (沉沦). The young protagonist is often an urban young intellectual and is deeply caught between tradition and modernity, between a nostalgia for the forever lost world of childhood innocence and a disillusionment with present scenes of corruption and deterioration. May Fourth writers always chose young people as their protagonists to rejuvenate China and pursue a modern national identity, but their young protagonists were at times seized by frustration and perplexity.

Youth narrative in the socialist period (from 1949 to 1977) is different from how the May Fourth literature had approached such theme. The May Fourth literature mainly focuses on nationalistic characteristic, while the socialist youth literature highlights revolutionary characteristic. Individuality is succumbed to collectivism, youth narrative shifted from a cultural theme to a political and ideological trope. The end of the Mao era in 1976 opened up a new space for youth narrative. The rusticated young people's experience in the remote countryside and backward areas became the motif of youth narrative after the Mao era.

Stepping in to the 1980s, according to Chinese scholar Chen Sihe's observation: Chinese literature witnessed a shift from writing under shared denominator (共名) to unshared denominator (无名),<sup>4</sup> and youth literature also echoed this shift. The relatively loose control of socialization of adolescents, and the declining socialist collective ideology provided space for young people to develop autonomy, freedom and independence. The avant-gardists' youth narrative unfastened from political discourse, which paved the way

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<sup>4</sup> Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng*, 336.

for the emancipation of youth narrative from ideological tools since the 1950s and 60s. As a result youth narrative separated from the socialist collective “we” to the post-socialist individualistic “I”. In the 1990s, the “New Generation” young literary rebels launched a movement to break with the mainstream; their writings on youth demonstrate an iconoclastic attitude toward socialist cultural canon.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the commodity culture of consumer capitalism overspread China. Youth narrative further transforms into the consumer and commercial-oriented “I” in the era of capitalist globalization, when writers of the post-80 generation<sup>5</sup> stepped on the stage. Most of the post-80 writers are commercially cyber-savvy. With the help of book merchants, those post-80 writers were well packaged to become pop idol writers. Although their writing about school life, friendship, love, and pain of emerging adolescence are often criticized by literary critics as slick and satirical<sup>6</sup> (Julia Lovell’s criticism), they are designed to cater to the tastes of urban youth who has the most leisure time and disposable income. Therefore, many post-80 young writers become remarkable cultural entrepreneurs. The commercial success of their youth literature (early 2000s to present) demonstrates a bifurcation between cultural capital and economic capital in the case of youth narrative.

What is more, the recent vogue of Internet writing in the 2000s has brought new features into the writing of youth narrative, especially to the post-80 youth literature. In terms of the publication and circulation venues, Internet novels are regarded as Internet products. Two important features of the online writing mode make their novels special.

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<sup>5</sup> The post-80 generation refers to people that were born between 1980-89, and were the first cohort of only-children due to the one-child policy.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Lovell, “Finding a Place: Mainland Chinese Fiction in the 2000s,” in *Journal of Asia Studies*, Vol. 71. No.1, 6.

First, the Internet publishing platform and readership create an immediate and intimate relationship between the author and the reader. This new author-reader dynamics enhances the spontaneity of writing, blurs the boundary between fiction and fact, high and mass cultures, and challenges the hegemonic mode of state narratives as well as elitist perspectives. Second, compared to print media, Internet products get much less severe censorship, and thus are able to discuss more sensitive topics and unsettling issues, such as post-80 generation writer Han Han's provocative articles on his blog. The rapid developments of technology and cyber environment provide space to promote Internet writing, and further revolutionize the traditional way of writing by diminishing the distance between the virtual and the actual. Youth literature with its large amount of readers has been reinnovated in the age of digital media and that is also analyzed in my research.

In cinematic representations, youth narrative has also been explored for more than a century. The leftist films of the 1930s inherited the revolutionary spirit of the May Fourth Movement, were obsessed with debunking the cruelty of feudal society, and probed into the project of national salvation against the western powers, with special focus on young people's urban adventure and frustration, such as *Children of Troubled Times* (风云儿女, dir. Xu Xingzhi, 1935), *Street Angel* (马路天使, dir. Yuan Muzhi, 1937), *Crossroads* (十字街头, dir. Shen Xiling, 1937) and so on. In those films, the recurring youth narrative pattern is a youngster confronting phantasmagoria and unfairness in urban life, experiencing a series of moral/spiritual/emotional dilemmas, disillusionment and despair, and finally choosing to fight or to surrender. In general, those young people's predicament symbolizes Chinese national plight confronting western modernity.



Cinema made under the Communist rule after 1949 continued May Fourth political tradition but shifted its thematic concerns from national to revolutionary due to its political and ideological agendas. During this period, films related to demonstrate young people's revolutionary zest and praised their devotion to revolutions dominated the screenscape. The end of Mao period terminated the guidance of socialist revolutionary ideology and marked the beginning of a diversified post-socialist cultural market. From the early post-Mao period to the 1980s, Fifth Generation directors astonished the world with their innovative cinematic aesthetics. Fifth Generation films were featured by a collective favor in adopting historical allegory, which made youth narrative absent.

In the 1990s, youth narrative has emerged again in Sixth Generation films, and has been adopted to depict the social conflicts in the transitional period.<sup>7</sup> Compared to Fifth Generation, Sixth Generation directors chose individual narrative, and they paid attention to individual life in the grand period. Youth narrative thus became a promising starting point. As a group of independent filmmakers outside the state-owned system, Sixth Generation directors chose to keep themselves away from official discourses, therefore issues of coming of age, migrations, grassroots became intricately intertwined with sensitive and edgy topics such as poverty, prostitution, and the polarization between haves and have-nots in their films. Sixth Generation directors' independent or underground status and their struggle of coming up to the ground made them enamored with the youth powerlessness and vulnerability in coming of age. In those films, the young protagonists' inevitable pain in coming of age is concomitant with the throes of social reform in the post-

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<sup>7</sup> *Xiao Wu* (小武, dir. Jia Zhangke, 1997), *Making of Steel* (长大成人, dir. Lu Xuechang, 1997), *Seventeen Years* (过年回家, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1999), *So Close to Paradise* (扁担姑娘, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 1999) and so on are all coming-of-age stories. They portray the tensions between individual and social transition in the post-socialist era.

socialist. All those films depict the process that young people's ideals and imagination of a beautiful new world turn into disillusionment when they confront the society's demand and fever of material development. Sixth Generation directors express their ambiguous doubt for the validity of the material development at the cost of demolition.

Sixth Generation independent films and the post-80 generation writers' youth literature are the main subjects of my research. Some scholars affirm post-80 writers' innovation of writing, and their vivid capture of the lives of contemporary Chinese youth; some criticize their close coalescence with commercial society and bemoan the wane of pure literature.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, post-80 writers' ways of writing and representing deeply influence the development of contemporary Chinese literature and cinema. Furthermore, my research illustrates that a striking number of films and TV series about young people has sprung up in the past two decades or so when Chinese society has been deeply and extensively impacted by capitalist globalization. These films and TV series showcase a variety of young people's adventures in the globalizing China, as well as their social positioning in the course of the socio-economic revolution.

### **Youth and Urbanization**

The emergence of Chinese youth narratives is concomitant with Chinese intellectual's imagination and obsession with modernity. Such an imagination of modernity is closely related to urbanism. Consequently, young people's urban adventure becomes a recurrent and important theme in Chinese youth narratives. Modern Chinese writers more or less had their own urban narrations. Although the Maoist youth literature and the post-

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<sup>8</sup> Literary critic and book merchant Bai Ye 白烨 criticized post-80 writer Han Han 韩寒 in his article "the present and future of post-80 generation" ("80后" 现状与未来) URL: <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=553974481>. Famous writer Wang Meng 王蒙 and Tie Ning 铁凝 recommended post-80 writers Guo Jingming 郭敬明 and Zhang Yueran 张悦然 to join China Writers Association 中国作家协会. Professor Cao Wenxuan 曹文轩 of Peking University prefaced Han Han's 韩寒 book *Triple Doors* (Sanzhong men 三重门), 1-4.

Mao rusticated youth literature frustrate the urban tale, the rural experience are always told through the perspective of urban youth. Due to the one-child policy instituted in 1979, urban youth become a more coherent cohort. The urban narrative dominates the post-socialist youth literature.

Based on the above-mentioned facts, the task of understanding the characteristics of China's post-socialist youth narrative should be associated with the rapid urban development in China, which further requires me to consider the continuities and discontinuities between youth narrative and the socialist and pre-socialist urban history. In order to trace and summarize the features of China's urban transitions in the post-socialist period that manifested by literary and cinematic representations, I intend to jump out of the debate on urbanization related to modernity or postmodernity. Instead, I incline to situate my argument in the context of globalization. I am also trying to avoid trapping in the simple demarcation of China's urban development as mostly represented by the two cities Beijing and Shanghai.

In the context of China, globalization is not a newly emergent phenomenon. Chinese modern history has been deeply influenced by the global expansion of capitalism and imperialism. At this point, globalization in contemporary Chinese context is more like a process of reglobalization, to recuperate the fame as being a cosmopolitan center, which is now realized by the rapid development of a more tightly interconnected world.

The post-socialist urban development is characterized by selective effacement or rearrangement of the socialist past and fantasizing the pre-socialist past by using nostalgia in order to connect past and present for the sake of global tourism. For example, two prevailing historical periods in contemporary Chinese nostalgia are the republic period of

the 1920s and 1930s and the socialist period of the 1950s to 1970s. The post-socialist strategy of urban development is to shake the rigid socialist anti-urban urban strategy and repackage it with the pre-socialist urban features. To contemplate the post-socialist urban development in the context of globalization, it seems necessary to consider how it continues and discontinues the legacies of urban development in previous historical periods.

### **The Cultural Logics of Post-socialism and Capitalist Globalization**

The collapse of the socialist bloc in 1989 turned many previous socialist countries and regions into post-socialist states. It makes post-socialism a global phenomenon. In China, under the Open-up policy, post-socialism and capitalist globalization often intertwined with each other to influence cultural products. What I have in mind is the strategy to tie my research subject (which is youth narratives and representation in literary, cinema and other popular culture) in the context of post-socialism and global capitalism. With the hope for understanding the cultural politics of post-socialism and capitalist globalization, I need to characterize features (indexicality) of post-socialist condition. This task requires me to consider it within the context of globalization, or specifically in the shadow of capitalist global expansion.

The post-socialist condition starts with the collision between socialist legacy and the global capitalist logic of deterritorialization. According to Deleuze and Guattari's observation, the logic of capitalist marketization is: the capitalist social machine substitutes the "code" (which was applicable to the whole social field) with the "axiomatic" (the capitalist machine essential characteristic of deterritorialization, i.e. the potential of

breaking apart, fragment, detachment).<sup>9</sup> To some extent, the post-socialist marketization of deterritorialization is originated from the same logic that incubated the capitalist marketization. However, it is almost the same but not quite. Taking cultural industry as an example, the post-socialist marketization (the autonomy of market) is not a given condition, but rather a tendency with transformation from and contrast to the previous socialist logic of culture, which now serve as a source of nostalgia. Whereas, in capitalist countries, the capitalist marketization is a given one featured with pluralization since its very beginning. The post-socialist economic and cultural mode has its unique mode by conflating socialism and capitalism. For example, in the post-socialist film industry, the state-owned enterprise earns its profits by selling its own legitimacy (socialist past) and then sharing in the product's success (capitalist present).

I intend to map the post-socialist condition in China from the following three features: First, *post-socialism vs. socialism*. Post-socialism mainly tackles issues between post-socialist culture and the residue of socialist culture. As a transitional period, post-socialism does not have a stasis and fixed temporality, rather a fluctuant and dynamic situation. Change becomes the most prominent feature of the post-socialist condition, though most of those changes involve demolition and reconstruction. The post-socialist condition in China is manifested by the coexistence and conflation of the clearly fading socialist revolutionary legacy and the burgeoning capitalist materialism and consumerism. For instance, the prevailing nostalgia for the socialist idealism such as self-sacrifice, innocence, and so on becomes a resurgent theme in China's post-socialist cultural products. In a socialist-turned-consumerist society, such production of nostalgia should be

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<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 33.

understood dialectically. On the one hand, nostalgia for the socialist past is a reaction against the present consumer society; on the other hand, it is a fabricated cultural product used to cater to the tastes and sentiments of Chinese consumers.

Second, *post-socialism vs. post-socialism*. Borrowing from Arif Dirlik, who uses those terms to predict a duality of post-socialism (the disillusion of socialist future and the possibility of returning to socialism if it is demanded). What I imply in my research is different from Dirlik. I would like to characterize China's post-socialist condition as a shift from the socialist appendix (*post-socialism*) to self-positioning among other post-isms (*post-socialism*), such as postmodernism, post-colonialism, and so on. Such shift is driven by China's integration into the global system. It leads to ambiguity and anxiety in the post-socialist cultural product.

Third, *post-socialism vs. globalization* (or global capitalist expansion). Internationally, globalization has encroached the world as well as the state authority. As a result, the official discourse under the socialist ideology is gradually diminishing, and is substituted by universally concerned issues, such as coming of age, migrations, grassroots, which are intricately intertwined with sensitive and edgy topics like poverty, prostitution and social polarization. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the impact of globalization in the post-socialist society.

As I mentioned above, nostalgia is a prevalent topic in post-socialist countries as well as in capitalist postmodernist countries. Therefore, to understand it might be helpful to pinpoint the characteristics of post-socialism. Marshal Berman defines nostalgia as a modern feeling that implies longing for the recent past destroyed by industrialization.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marshal Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*.

John Frow argues that nostalgia seeks the absence that generates the mechanism of desire that lies in the ontological homelessness.<sup>11</sup> Frederic Jameson claims that postmodern nostalgia is a commodified cultural product, which offers false realism to efface history and distort memory.<sup>12</sup> However, those texts approach nostalgia from capitalist modern or postmodern sense, and have little to say about it in the post-socialist condition. Then what is the post-socialist nostalgia? Does it follow the same logic as it in the capitalist societies? Or does it challenge the logic?

I am inclined to understand the nostalgia for the socialist revolutionary past in the post-socialist period as a form of amnesia. As John Su briefly disentangles the relation between memory and nostalgia in his *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* by arguing that memory signifies intimate personal experiences, which often differ with institutional history, that nostalgia is a false appropriation of those experiences or an effort to recast such experiences. Combining his idea and Frederic Jameson's notion of nostalgia for the present (which is nostalgic for a non-existing epoch), and Dai Jinhua's imagined nostalgia, I would say that post-socialist nostalgia can be viewed as amnesia.

After the collapse of totalitarianism, the ideology of deideologized, the politics of depolitical become new official discourse in the post-socialist societies. The post-socialist nostalgia-cum-amnesia functions under such ideology. The collective trauma of the socialist past was hardly acknowledged. On the contrary, the recovery of memory gave way to a new longing for the imaginary ahistorical past, the age of stability and normalcy. The

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<sup>11</sup> John Frow, "Tourism and Semiotics of Nostalgia" in *Time and Commodity Culture*, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Nostalgia for the Present" in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 279-296.

mass nostalgia is a nationwide midlife crisis. They are longing for the time of innocent childhood and youth, and partaking collectively in a selective forgetting.

According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia can be retrospective or prospective, restorative and reflective. She thinks that the post-socialist nostalgia is self-reflective, which is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. The reflective nostalgia suggests new flexibility. It focuses on the mediation on history and passage of time. Reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory. This nostalgia is aware of the gap between identity and resemblance. My understanding of the post-socialist nostalgia is not reminiscence with fixed direction of looking back to the past or looking forward to the future. It has a transitional and fluctuant temporality and always sets itself contrast to fixed temporality as past, present, and future. Such nostalgia laments for the loss of time and space in the social transition. At this point, the post-socialist nostalgia shares some common features with the capitalist nostalgia. My research discusses how nostalgia is adopted as a cultural strategy in the post-socialist China. Through analyzing those literary and cinematic works, I hope to gain a comprehensive view on how nostalgia in contemporary Chinese cultural products depoliticizes grand ideologies into the level of fragments and trivialities in the lives of ordinary people.

The challenge for contemporary literary scholars comes down to the question of how useful youth narrative is in describing and configuring contemporary cultural scene, here particularly the impact of literature, film and TV in the post-socialist and globalizing era. Many scholars, in order to capture the diversified post-socialist cultural phenomenon,



explore as many genres of art as they can in their works.<sup>13</sup> However, identifying the common feature of post-socialist diversity in China still remains as a question without answer. My research focuses on the theme of youth narratives in order to provide a solid and concrete perspective to assess contemporary Chinese culture and society, and to disclose critical features of China's post-socialist cultural and social diversity. Traditionally, critics were compelled to discuss youth narrative within the control of mainstream ideology. Youth narrative has been in a subordinate position to dominant discourses. I argue that there is an important narrative mode, which is youth narrative, centered in traditions of modern and contemporary Chinese cultural history. Studying this narrative by looking at various representations in literature, film, and popular culture in the contemporary era can greatly help scholars understand China's transformation and repositioning in this globalized age, and further comprehend cultural discourses and ideological strategies employed in various negotiations between different cultural products and markets, nationally and internationally.

My study discusses youth narrative in depth and explores how representations of young people in both print and visual media reflect the social changes. The texts that are described mostly came out from the 1990s to the present. My research focuses on the contemporary period, namely from the 1990s to the present. The reason why I choose this period is because (1) the contemporarity of the narrative refracts the kernel social and cultural issues in China when it fully steps into post-socialist stage, and confronts to the overwhelming encroachment of global capitalism; (2) it is the period in which youth culture

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<sup>13</sup> Robin Visser uses post-socialist aesthetics to cover all kinds of cultural products in the post-socialist China, which includes fiction, drama, painting, film, TV drama, and so on in *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*. Jason Magrath also tries to capture the diversified cultural pheromone in contemporary China by bringing literary criticism, ideological debate, and film into his discussion in *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*.

drastically changes; it is the period in which Chinese young people witnessed education flourishing and economy booming, the capitalist market economy gradually replaced the socialist planned economy, and the growth of transnational communication; (3) this period provides rich textual and visual materials, which not only showcases the most heatedly-discussed phenomenon such as social inequality, conflict of generations, massive internal migration, and gap between urban and rural areas all relate to drastic economic change and social transition during contemporary period, but also resonates with classic dilemmas and ambivalence of Chinese modernity. In a nutshell, these texts not only reflect moment but are also part of the moment. Hence, my study of contemporary period links the past, present, and future. My research is located at an intersection of a historical vertical coordinate and a cultural horizontal coordinate, and provides both diachronic and synchronic visions regarding key issues such as modernity, nationalism, and globalization since the beginning of twentieth century in Chinese culture.

My research has two primary goals: (1) to provide a new insight into Chinese youth narratives by considering their place in twentieth century Chinese cultural history; and second, to establish a preliminary contextualization by providing representative works, writers and filmmakers of this narrative mode to discuss them productively. In order to do so, I provide a survey study, which is like an establishing shot of a film, serving as the foundation for close analysis. (2) To delve into various themes and motifs about youth in literature, film and TV from the 1990s to 2010s, to discuss the cultural, social and political significances of youth narratives in contemporary China in order to capture common and critical features of diverse post-socialist status and engage with the furious debate on post-socialism and globalization in Chinese context. This part is like medium shots and close-

ups, and is the focus of my research.

My dissertation has four chapters organized thematically: (1) From “New Men” to “New New Human”: A Historical Reflection on “Youth Narratives”; (2) Balls Under the Red Flag: Father and Son Tales in the Post-socialist Nostalgia; (3) Nothing to My Name: Rupture and Rebellion in the New Generation Youth Stories; (4) My Zone My Way: the Post-80 Generation Youth Literature and Youth Narratives in the New Millennium. The detailed chapter outline is attached below.

### **Methodology**

My research consists of two primary components: (1) a survey study of youth narrative in Chinese cultural history, which serves as the foundation for all the discussions and analysis. This survey study is a descriptive categorization of representative works on the topic. Considered the differences between media (print and visual), and genres (narrative, documentary; fiction, nonfiction; etc), general comparisons between literary and cinematic representations, big screen and small screen productions, mainstream features and independent films, etc are made.

(2) An analytical study of themes, motifs and narrative strategies are the focus of my research. This analytical study offers close readings of a variety of thematically related works, and explore topics such as cultural significance of the youth literature in contemporary China, negotiations between individual, collective, state, and the society, as well as shifting attitudes towards nationalism and globalization. In addition, my research pays special attention to the inconsistency between literary works and cinematic representations, and excavates ideological implications behind youth narrative.

My research is exploratory rather than exhaustive, thus may not touch upon all the topics out there. In terms of the organization of chapters, they are arranged primarily chronologically with thematically subdivision. In each chapter, I look into representative works from various periods and explore different narrative strategies and discourses around the topic. Moreover, in terms of research approach, the structure of my dissertation suggests a “mode of depth”—from concrete to abstract, from discussions of phenomenon to analysis of deep logic behind them.

In the analytical study of particular texts, why I focus on certain novels, films and TV productions rather than others is based on the following three parameters: (1) popularity, (2) quality, and (3) novelty. Popularity considers the readership/audience of a particular work. If a work is a best seller, or written by an influential writer, or a huge box office hit, it reaches the broadest readership/audience in society, and thus deserves critical consideration within the framework of a serious study on the topic of youth. Social and cultural reasons for the popularity and messages conveyed by the representation are usually worth exploring. What should be paid special attention to is the transitional works by well-established writers and filmmakers. A shift of subject matter from one arena to the topic of youth narrative in their works often strongly hints at a cultural and ideological turn.

Award-winning literary works and films are another group of texts that I include in my close readings. In the big pool of youth narratives, uneven quality is a problem. As a research trying to describe and reposition youth narrative mode in Chinese cultural history, and remapping narrative traditions in Chinese literature, film and TV, my study has

the mission to recognize good-quality productions, and provide a critical perspective on the genre.

In addition to popularity and quality, novelty is another important factor that bears upon my selection of works to be analyzed. Some books and films only have limited distributions or do not manifest good quality, but they show novelty in terms of theme, style, narrative structure, and circulation. I also pay attention to these works because new ways (whatever formal or thematic) of representing youth usually articulate different perspectives and reflections on the topic. By looking into them, my research is able to delve into more innovative and edgy areas, making a relatively comprehensive observation, at the same time illustrating the multiplicity and heterogeneity within youth narrative.

The primary sources for my research are literary texts (novels, novellas and short stories), mainstream, underground feature narrative films, TV series made during the 1990s to the present. The primary goal of my research is to map a trajectory of how youth narratives have developed and transformed from the 1990s to 2010s. Based on the research of the social and cultural phenomenon of China in contemporary era, a hidden narrative tradition gradually comes to our sight—a space between the mainstream narrative and the alternative narrative is opened up, providing a more accurate description and a more profound examination of literary and cinematic representations of Chinese youth.

Although my research focuses on the period from the 1990s and onward, the tradition of this youth narrative can be traced all the way back to the May Fourth period and continues through the whole of modern Chinese cultural history. However, due to the scope limitation, the literary and cinematic representations of youth before the 1990s are

not elaborated in my dissertation. I just make a very brief archeological investigation into modern Chinese literary and film history to illustrate its root and its existence in the fashion of *wuming* (无名 unshared denominator<sup>14</sup>) throughout time.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my research strive to carve out a space for youth narrative in the cultural traditions of narratives. Its origin in the twentieth century Chinese literature and film can be traced all the way back to the May Fourth period and throughout the whole of modern Chinese cultural history. It deserves a separate study of its own. Yet, for the scope of this research, I am focusing on the contemporary period, namely from the 1990s to 2010s, situating my research in a historical framework of globalization, and carefully examining its cultural and political implications through the lens of literature, film and new media.

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<sup>14</sup> Chen Sihe's term.

## Chapter 1—From New Man to New New Human

This chapter intends to provide an archeological investigation into youth narratives in the twentieth century Chinese literature, film and popular culture. The important tropes and themes of youth narrative in modern and contemporary Chinese cultural history will be discussed in the following sections.

### **A Century of Youth Narratives in Chinese Literature, Film, and Popular Culture**

The second half of the nineteenth century in Chinese history witnessed the shocking weaknesses of the corrupt Qing government. China was dismembered by the European powers after the Second Opium War, and in the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, China was disastrously defeated by Japan, which had been regarded as an inferior tributary state by the Qing government. Its aftermath included the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki in which China was forced to cede the island of Taiwan to Japan.<sup>15</sup> Eight foreign powers victoriously intervened in China during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. The precarious situation of Qing China made young Chinese intellectuals realize the urgency of reforming the country and making new the people. Although the elitist One Hundred Days Reform<sup>16</sup> was abruptly and bloodily repressed, it led to a collective consciousness of nationalism and liberalism and to the development of a modern national identity, which obsessed generations of Chinese intellectuals.

“The young are the ones who bear the responsibility of building a new young China... When the young are wise, the country will be wise; when the young

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<sup>15</sup> The Treaty of Shimonoseki 马关条约 was signed on April 17, 1895 between the victor Japan and the defeated Qing Empire, ending the 1895 Sino-Japanese War. The Chinese Qing government ceded to Japan Penghu group, Taiwan and the eastern portion of the bay of Liaodong Peninsula.

<sup>16</sup> The Hundred Days' Reform, also known as Wuxu Reform 戊戌变法, is a failed 104-day national reform movement in late Qing Dynasty China from June 11 to September 1898. The reform was supported by the young Guangxu Emperor and undertaken by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. It was short-lived, ended by powerful conservative opponents in the Qing imperial court.

are rich, the country will be rich; when the young are strong, so will be the country; when the young are independent, the country will be, too; when the young are free, the country will be free; when the young progress, the country will progress; when the young surpass Europe, the country will surpass Europe; when the young dominate the globe, then the country will as well.”<sup>17</sup>

Written in 1900, not long after the aborted One Hundred Days Reform, Liang Qichao’s 梁启超 “Ode to Young China” (Shaonian zhongguo shuo 少年中国说) poignantly criticized the stifling “dark room”---the old Qing empire---and urged to rejuvenate the country and its people. Liang Qichao’s passionate writing praised China as a young nation that fit neatly within the global notion of modernity, and conveyed to the masses a cosmopolitan perspective of modern nation-state identity. He encouraged China’s young people to fight for the nation’s new destiny. “Ode to Young China” set the tone for a newly emerged narrative---a youth narrative---in the Chinese cultural realm in order to search for, represent, and construct national image and cultural identity. Since then, youth narrative has been closely attached to national rejuvenation and salvation. Liang Qichao’s “Ode to Young China” inspired a generation of young people, but it did not pinpoint a plausible way to achieve the promising future that he envisioned.

Liang Qichao’s 1902 *Discourse on the New Citizen* (Xinmin shuo 新民说)<sup>18</sup> indicated that for China to rise up as a modern nation, its most urgent task would be to make the new citizen. Liang Qichao further elaborated on this obsession with the “new” or “making new” by linking it to the ideology of nationalism. His understanding of the new was based on a temporal and spatial imagination, which proposed a linear view of history in which other nations and ethnic groups around the world can be compared to each other. Liang Qichao’s

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<sup>17</sup> Liang Qichao, “Ode to Young China” was originally published on Feb.10, 1900 in Qingyin bao (The China discussion), see Joseph R. Levenson’s *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> Liang Qichao, *Yinbingshi heji-zhuanji* 饮冰室合集, 4:1 ed. Fang Songjing and Hong Hui, Zhonghua shuju, 1989.



obsession with the new reflects the influence of European Enlightenment on his thoughts and demonstrates a cosmopolitan intellectual perspective.

However, Liang's perception of Chinese enlightenment is different from Enlightenment in the West. According to Kant, "enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage,"<sup>19</sup> and man's goal is to use his own understanding based on a modern rationality. However the predicament that Liang Qichao's generation of Chinese intellectuals confronted was how to tell the story of a fettered nation. It fundamentally determined the different road of Chinese enlightenment, which is to prioritize the collective and the national rights over the private and the individual interests. Shouldering the burden, Liang Qichao's evocation of making a new citizen urges to create and enlighten a collective consciousness and a national identity.<sup>20</sup>

In "On the Relationship Between Fiction and the Government of the People" (Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhiguanxi 论小说与群治之关系)<sup>21</sup>, Liang Qichao continues to explicate the progressive relationship among the enlightenment narrative, making new citizen, and modernizing the country. "To renovate the people of a nation, we must first renovate its fiction,"<sup>22</sup> he stressed the necessity of establishing an enlightenment narrative in fiction for the sake of renovating the people, and ultimately for renovating the country. Liang Qichao believed that fiction has distinct powers that are "capable of shaping the world as well as

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<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" from *On History*, ed., translated by Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Tang Xiaobing, *Global Space and the National Discourse of Modernity: the Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao*. California: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 11-45.

<sup>21</sup> Original text: Liang Qichao, "Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi," (1902) in Guo shaoyu and Wang Wensheng, comps., *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan*, Shanghai: Guji, 1976, 3:405-9. Gek Nai Cheng, trans., "On the Relationship Between Fiction and the Government of the People," in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 74-81.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

establishing and nurturing the various norms of society.”<sup>23</sup> At the end of the article, he switched to criticize: “young men between fifteen and thirty years of age concern themselves only with overwhelming emotions of love, sorrow, or sickness. They are amply endowed with romantic sentiment but lack heroic spirit.”<sup>24</sup> This comment contained an undertone of expecting and advocated a vigorous youth narrative to fulfill his imagined national narrative.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 80.

Liang Qichao’s elaboration of the “new” sets a prelude to the entanglement between youth narratives and the ideology of national enlightenment. His self-confident optimism and obsession with the new profoundly influenced the May Fourth generation, which directly led to a pervasive youth mentality in the May Fourth intelligentsia. The New Cultural Movement in 1917 marks the beginning of a new literary trend in terms of narrative in China. In order to break off from the traditional way of narrating and establish a new and youthful national image, young Chinese intellectuals were eager to write their own stories in a different and



Fig. 1.1 Front cover of *La Jeunesse*

innovative narrative mode. Youth narratives therefore were adopted by the May Fourth precursors to arouse young people’s rebellion against the obsolete feudalism and the smothering patriarchal society for the purpose of constructing a healthy and modern national identity. In the 1915 inaugural issue of the revolutionary magazine *La Jeunesse* (New Youth, 新青年), Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 published “Call to Youth” (Jinggao qingnian 敬告青年). In his article, he draws a parallel between the relationship of youth to society to new cells to the human body. Li Dazhao’s 李大钊 “Youth” (Qingchun 青春)<sup>25</sup> called for “founding of a youthful nation with young people” (see Figure 1.1). Under the guidance of those cultural figures, youth narrative of the May Fourth generation inherited its spiritual precursor Liang Qichao’s imagination to serve for national salvation, and started to conceive revolutionary consciousness.

<sup>25</sup> “Youth” in *New Youth*, 2:1, 1916.

The adoption of youth narrative is more noticeable in May Fourth literature, mostly in the form of a personal soliloquy. Leo Ou-fan Lee once pointed out “the solitary traveler”<sup>26</sup> is the recurrent image of youth in the May Fourth literature. Those stories often center on young people’s personal journey and the conflict between their mental world and external environment. Such young intellectuals are caught between tradition and modernity, between nostalgia for the forever lost world of childhood innocence and a disillusionment with the present situation of corruption and deterioration. The image of the wandering and awakened young man recurs frequently in the works of the May Fourth writers. Among them Lu Xun 鲁迅 and Yu Dafu 郁达夫 stood out as perhaps two poles.

As the only love story written by Lu Xun, “Regret for the past” (Shangshi 伤逝, 1925) depicts the remorse of a so-called new man (xinren 新人). The male protagonist Juansheng is an awakened intellectual (juexingzhe 觉醒者), who receives new thoughts in the New Culture Movement and breaks with the tradition. Feeling the obligation to enlighten and guide his lover Zijun, Juansheng persuades Zijun to escape from the control of her feudal family and live with him. However, there is a spiritual instability in their understanding of radical antitraditionalism. Their modern romance is not enough to bring about a successful marital relationship. Soon after, Juansheng is tired of Zijun and views her as weak and dependent. Under the financial pressure of daily life, Juansheng suggests Zijun to return home. Zijun goes back with her father and dies shortly afterwards. Juansheng’s final abandonment of Zijun discloses the weakness of his personality and overpowers “the small

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<sup>26</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, “The Solitary Traveler: Images of the Self in Modern Chinese Literature” in *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*, eds by Robert Hegel, and Richard Hessney. Columbia University Press, 1985. 283-307.

self under his fur-lined gown.”<sup>27</sup> Although Juansheng regrets and laments for Zijun’s death, in his confession, he tries all his best to find excuse for himself and flee any kind of responsibility through forgetting and lie. Lu Xun uses the tragedy of Juansheng and Zijun and their inability of how to escape from the iron house to call on a clear guide and an utterly revolutionary attitude to fight for the future (see Figure 1.2). May Fourth writers reinvented Ibsen’s Nora<sup>28</sup> to be the prototype of the new Chinese woman, who broke her shackle and ran away from the prison-like family. May Fourth intellectuals invented an allegorical metaphor—the oppressed woman represents China, the patriarchal family represents the traditional feudal society, and women seeking subjectivity symbolize China’s pursuit of identity. Under the formidable task of constructing a national identity, the female image in May Fourth literature is shaped as rebellious and revolutionary.

Women’s search for self finds its focus in the National self, sacrificing the self sexually to fight against feudalism with the goal of a political and ideological cause greater than female identity. The main motive of the May Fourth writers is to debunk the cruelty and inhumanity of the feudal social morals, so that in their writings, they arrange female protagonists to rebel against the Law of the Father and to abandon the old



Fig. 1.2 Cover of Lu Xun’s novel “Regret for the past”

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<sup>27</sup> Lu Xun, “An Incident” in *Selected Stories of Lu Xun*, translated Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1960.

<sup>28</sup> *A Doll’s House* is a famous play written by Ibsen in 1879 about a housewife’s awareness of subjectivity. Through a series of dramatic plots, Nora, the housewife, has realized that her husband is not the man she thought he was, and that her whole existence has been a lie. Her fantasy of love is just a fantasy. In the finale, she decides that she must leave to find out who she is and what to make of her life. Chinese women found themselves in this play, being treated like a plaything, first by their fathers then by their husbands, so that many writers in the May Fourth period chose the escaped Nora as the model female role in their fiction.

rules for individualism and freedom. However, without a safe guidance, new women would inevitably face a predicament—where to go and what to do after running away from family, marriage, and the control of the patriarch?

Lu Xun once asserted that the escaped Noras would either be deprived or come back.<sup>29</sup> Emancipation from feudalist family did not promise new women a happy ending. Where to go and what to do after running away from the control of the patriarch were the questions beyond the imagination of the May Fourth writers. The greatness of “Regret for the past” is in which Lu Xun unveiled the illusion of enlightenment through the love tragedy of two young people and the life tragedy of a new woman, and it further disclosed a mirror structure in the new woman myth that is the underrepresented Zijun as a mirror to reflect the representative Juansheng and his role as the awakened guider. Lu Xun poignantly debunked the hypocrisy, cowardice and self-centredness of awakened intellectuals, and provided a continuation of escaped new woman in May Fourth literature.

Unlike the awakener in Lu Xun’s works, the young protagonist in Yu Dafu’s stories always appear as a superfluous man (*lingyu zhe* 零余者). In the short story “Sinking” (Chenlun 沉沦, 1921), Yu Dafu created a solitary wanderer adrift in an alien country. The protagonist is constantly caught between his adolescent sexual impulse and the concomitant moral burden, his concern switches between individual interests and the national future, and his effeminate body serves as a metaphor for his weak



Fig. 1.3 Cover of Yu Dafu’s novel “Sinking”

<sup>29</sup> Lu Xun made this statement in a speech of “Nala zouhou zenyang?” 娜拉走后怎样? (What happens after Nora leaves home?), see *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集 (Collected works of Lu Xun), vol.1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1963), 274.

and sickly nation (see Figure. 1.3). If the awakener in Lu Xun's works represents an elitist intellectual radical power for change, the sentimental journeys of Yu Dafu's superfluous man is aimless wandering marked with uncertainties.

The awakener and the superfluous man are the representative figures of youth in the May Fourth literary repertoire. For instance, Jiang Guangci 蒋光慈 creates the rural boy Wangzhong in *Young Wanderer* (Shaonian piaoliuzhe 少年漂泊者, 1926), and Ba Jin's 巴金 *Family* (Jia 家, 1931) depicts the awakening of Juehui, the young master of a feudal bureaucratic family. Youth narratives during this period focus mainly on the theme of "obsession with China."<sup>30</sup> Writers of the May Fourth generation often choose young people as their protagonists to rejuvenate the nation and to establish a modern identity, but their young protagonists are at times seized by frustration and perplexity. The pervasive entanglement of enlightenment and bewilderment in the May Fourth period manifests the erratic spiritual situation of Chinese intellectuals; they oscillate between Chinese learning and Western learning, old learning and new learning, belief and doubt, which bespeak the duality and the antinomy of enlightenment.

In the 1930s, parts of China were occupied by Japan. Communities were destroyed and families were ripped apart. The spread of Marxist proletarian thought and the Communist Internationale ideal brought youth narratives the sprout of revolutionary ideology. The leftist film movement in the 1930s inherited the national sentiments of the New Culture and the May Fourth movements, and emphasized class struggle and external threats. Youth narratives were extensively explored in the left-wing films. Films such as

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<sup>30</sup> C.T. Hsia, "Obsession with China: the Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," in *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 533-536.

*Youngsters of the Time* (Shidai de ernü 时代的儿女, dir. Li Pingqian, 1933), *Children of Troubled Times* (Fengyun ernü 风云儿女, dir. Xu Xinzhi, 1935), *Street Angel* (Malu tianshi 马路天使, dir. Yuan Muzhi, 1937), *Crossroads* (Shizi jietou 十字街头, dir. Shen Xiling, 1937), and *March of Youth* (Qingnian jinxingqu 青年进行曲, dir. Shi Dongshan, 1937) are the major ones in this tide (see Figure 1.4-1.5). Those films mainly concern about debunking the social cruelty, probing into the struggle of lower classes, and awakening and celebrating revolutionary activities. These progressive films are noted for their portrayal of young people's frustration when confronting phantasmagoria and unfairness in life. In those films, young protagonists always experience moral, spiritual, and emotional dilemmas, disillusionment and despair, and finally choosing to fight. For instance, the film *Crossroads* sets its background in the Great Depression of the 1930s. It tells stories among four jobless college graduates and a female textile factory worker. Zhao wants to be a writer but is stuck editing; Tang wants to be an artist but can only find a job to dress windows. Xu has given up hope and contemplates suicide; Liu wants to go north to fight the Japanese. Miss Yang works in a textile factory and moves to be their neighbor. Yang and Zhao meet on a tram and develop a romance. Eventually Xu has committed suicide because he is unemployed. Zhao and other friends conclude that they must be optimistic in facing their paths in life. They walk forward side by side with their arms entwined. The film exemplified the growing revolutionary trend of leftist film movement. Put another way, the recurrent uncertainty and indeterminateness in early May Fourth youth narratives were replaced by the resolute determination to fight during the wartime period.





Fig. 1.4-1.5 Film posters of *Troubled Times* and *Crossroads*

With the success of the Communist revolution in China in 1949, youth narrative changed in order to construct the socialist state. Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" redefined the May Fourth concept of "new man":

"The Great Rear Area is also changing. Readers there expect authors in the revolutionary base areas to tell about the new people and the new world and not to bore them with the same old tales."<sup>31</sup>

In a speech to Chinese students in Moscow in 1957, Mao further praised young people as the "morning sun" (bajiudianzhong de taiyang 八九点钟的太阳):

"The world is yours, and also ours, in the final analysis, it is yours...You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine o'clock in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you."

Mao's revolutionary slogans "new man" and "morning sun" highlight the agency of youth in the making of a socialist nation, and canonize revolutionary youth in the socialist regime.

The best-known youth image in the socialist China is Pavel Korchagin, who is the protagonist of Russian soldier turned writer Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1934). The novel depicts Pavel Korchagin's growth through all kinds of

<sup>31</sup> Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art"

hardships, and by sacrificing his love and health he finally develops into a solid-willed communist soldier. When the novel was introduced to Chinese readers, Korchagin quickly became the model of socialist youth, and the novel also turned into one of the so-called red classics together with some of the very few other texts that were available in the Mao era. Influenced by Ostrovsky's Pavel Korchagin, communist discourse on youth in socialist China is replete with idealism, heroism, and revolutionary romanticism. Yang Mo's 杨沫 *Song of Youth* (Qingchunzhige 青春之歌, 1958) and Wang Meng's 王蒙 *Long Live Youth* (Qingchun wansui 青春万岁, 1953, published 1979) are the representative works of Maoist youth literature (see Figure 1.6-1.7).



Fig. 1.6-1.7 Front cover of *Song of Youth* and *Long Live Youth*

Yang Mo's *Song of Youth* tells the story of the heroine Lin Daojing's development from a lonely and sentimental petty-bourgeois young girl into a strong-minded communist fighter, who finally joins the party. The novel aims to promote the correct ideological thinking by creating a Korchagin-like heroine Lin Daojing, whose political maturity is compatible with the revolutionary nature of youth and the national project of constructing a new Communist nation. However, Lin Daojing is different from Korchagin, not merely

because of her female gender, but her class identity. Korchagin is from a poor worker's family in Ukraine, while Lin Daojing's father is a landlord, her biological mother is a peasant. In her own words, she has "both white bones and black bones." The sensitive class identity makes her a complicated subject with dual nature. On the one hand, due to the impurity of her blood and class, she should be subject of correction or re-education in the Marxist proletarian revolution. On the other hand, as a youth, she belongs to the powerful force that is needed by the party, so she is the subject to be absorbed for the construction of the communist nation. The individual political awareness and progress is the dominant line of the transformation of the protagonist's consciousness, even the protagonist's three love affairs parallel her political development, from a liberal to a theoretical Marxist, finally to a Maoist Marxist, and the individual youth's psychological growth merges with the massive collective that is the nation.

*Long Live Youth* was written by Wang Meng when the author was 19 years old. The novel depicts the happy life of a group of schoolgirls in Beijing between 1952 to 1953. Unlike Yang Mo's Lin Daojing, who struggles with her class impurity, Wang Meng's characters in the socialist new China belong to the new generation of youths who are new people since their birth and grow up in the new society. They take for granted their political purity. There is a celebrative intonation permeating the novel, just as its title "Long Live Youth" is a popular slogan during the Mao era that conveys a festive mood, scholar Song Mingwei defines it as carnival.<sup>32</sup> The central theme of the novel is to glorify the beautiful new life in socialist state, and young people's strong passion for happiness. However, the novel does not aim to reiterate political correctness, it reveals the reality of

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<sup>32</sup> Song Mingwei, "The Taming of the Youth: Discourse, Politics, and Fictional Representation in the Early PRC" in *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 9:2, 2009.

adolescence by depicting the annoyance and nuances of adolescent feelings. For instance, the major character Yang Qiangyun, a politically progressive girl, is constantly captured by the uncontrollable youthful sentiments and adolescent desires. Wang Meng's *Long Live Youth* challenges the party's radical revolutionary ideology by depicting the universally existing youthful sentiments.

The cinematic exploration of youth narratives in the Mao era echoes the party's call for young people's education and re-education. Films stress taming and reshaping young people in the socialist construction and communist revolution, for instance, Su Li's *Youth in Our Village* (*Women cunde nianqingren 我们村的年轻人*, 1959) and *Steps of Youth* (*Qingchunde jiaobu 青春脚步*, 1957), Cheng Yin's *Shanghai Girl* (*Shanghai guniang 上海姑娘*, 1958), Chen Huaiai's *The Wave of Life* (*Shenghuode langhua 生活的浪花*, 1958), and Wang Yan's *The Youth in Flames of War* (*Zhanhuozhongde qingchun 战火中的青春*, 1959) (see Figure 1.8-1.9). These titles disclose a reality of the Mao era that is the word adolescence (*qingchun 青春*) gradually took center stage and overshadowed the May Fourth term youth (*qingnian 青年*). Scholar Zhong Xueping explains the shift in this way: *qingnian* (youth) mainly refers to young people and often an individual youth, while *qingchun* (adolescence) means the time period and essential quality of being young.<sup>33</sup> Modern China's youth discourse started with the word *qingnian*, and reached its summit in the May Fourth literature I mentioned above, which presented a liberal individuality. The Maoist switch to *qingchun* manifested a collective determination after the founding of the PRC. One of the famous slogans in the socialist period says "revolutionary people are

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<sup>33</sup> Zhong Xueping, "'Long Live Youth' and the Ironies of Youth and Gender in Chinese Films of the 1950s and 1960s" in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall, 1999), pp. 150-185.

forever young” (革命人永远是年轻). It manifests two ideological connotations: one is the youth mentality inherited from the May Fourth generation; the other is the revolutionary mentality---the kernel of communist revolution and construction. In the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao appeared in Tiananmen Square, waving his arms to millions of Red Guards, encouraging the Chinese youth to unleash their youthful passions and vigorous energy to challenge the authorities: the amalgamation between young people and the party’s revolutionary ideology.



Fig. 1.8-1.9 Film posters of *The Wave of Life* and *Youth in Our Village*

The Maoist youth literature and films highlighted the radical revolutionary characteristics, within which individual interest is diminished and is sacrificed for collective profit, personal sentiments give way to the socialist project of industrial modernization. Youth narratives in the socialist period surpassed the May Fourth individualism and liberalism, and accepted Marxist collectivism. Youth narrative shifted

from a cultural theme of the May Fourth generation to a political and ideological trope in the Mao era.

The end of the Mao era and the termination of ten-year Cultural Revolution in 1976 opened up a new space for youth narrative that was represented by literature of rusticated youth (zhiqing wenxue 知青文学). There are two distinctive phases of the rusticated youth literature. First, scar literature (shanghen wenxue 伤痕文学) in the early post-Mao era of the late 1970s and the early 1980s is featured by depicting the rusticated young people's experience in the remote countryside and backward areas. The obsessive self-pity, speaking bitterness, and indicting rusticated young people's suffering of blood and tears are the recurrent themes of rusticated youth literature in this period, such as Ye Xin's 叶辛 *Wasted Years* (Cuotuo suiyue 蹉跎岁月, 1980). Second, in the midst of 1980s, youth literature has returned to portray rusticated young people's youthful passions and to speak highly of their idealism and heroism. Later, influenced by the reflective trend (fanshi sichao 反思思潮), youth literature highlighted the retroactive mode. Shi Tiesheng's 史铁生 *Stories of Settling in the Communes* (Chadui de gushi 插队的故事, 1986), Liang Xiaosheng's 梁晓声 novel *A Storm is Coming Tonight* (Jinye you baofengxue 今夜有暴风雪, 1984), Zhang Kangkang's 张抗抗 *The Invisible Mate* (Yinxing banlü 隐形伴侣, 1986), and Zhang Nuanxin's 张暖忻 film *Sacrifice of Youth* (Qingchun ji 青春祭, 1985) reminisce the life of rusticated youth with positive memorization of the beautiful adolescence, and at the same time reconsider the distortion of human nature in the Cultural Revolution. The film *Sacrifice of Youth* is based on a novella. During the Cultural Revolution, a young girl from the city is sent to a mountainous village in a Dai minority region. She is assigned to live with a local

family. There she is attracted by the Dai minority uninhibitedness and sensuality, and learns to enjoy being young and gains a new outlook on life. The film contrasts the civilized but repressed Han self with the idealized and unfettered minority other. It tells the hard history of Cultural Revolution from a soft perspective. In a nutshell, youth literature in the early post-Mao era still shares a common topic that is to rethink the relationship between individual fate and grand political movements (see Figure 1.10-1.11).



Fig. 1.10-1.11 Cover of novel *Scar* and film *Sacrifice of Youth*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the rising of avant-garde writers unfastened youth narrative from political discourse, which paved the way for the emancipation of youth narrative from ideological tools since the founding of communist China. The avant-garde writers started their literary debut in the middle of 1980s. Their experimental language and innovative way of narrating swept away the pessimistic mood of the scar literature after the Cultural Revolution. As a newly emerged literary group, many avant-garde writers chose youth narrative to make a name for themselves. Yu Hua's 余华 first national renowned short story "Leaving Home at Eighteen" (Shibasui chumen yuanxing 十八岁出门远行, 1987) and full-length novel *Cries in the Drizzle* (Zai xiyuzhong huhan 在细雨中呼喊, 1993), Su Tong's 苏童 early short story "Memories of Mulberry Garden" (Sangyuan

liunian 桑园留念, 1988) and the 1994 novel *North Town* (Chengbei didai 城北地带) in his Fragrant Cedar series (Xiangzhangshu xilie 香樟树系列), all of these works are about the urban southern teenagers' coming of age in the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, and disclose the absurdity of a special society in a chaotic period. The avant-garde writers break away from the allegorical narration and culturally root-seeking ethos in the reflective trend. They pay attention to individual's private experience and memory, nearly most of their works involve urban youth people's recollection. Their works present a different and complex narration of history that is unprecedented in the narratives about the Cultural Revolution. The avant-garde stories are full of metaphors and symbols, scholar Liu Kang regards the avant-gardist style as "illusory and allegorical narration of dreams, hallucinations, mysterious metaphor and symbols, and minute and objective details and descriptions of conversations."<sup>34</sup> These avant-garde writers deconstruct grand narratives and eschew collective history, they indulge in individual memory. However, their private and fragmented memories and their reminiscence of childhood innocence and youthful adolescence always allude to the spectral history of the Cultural Revolution. The common theme of their coming-of-age in troubled times is abnormal maturity of deviant youth in the social chaos. Their growing-up intermingles and contains essential characteristic of youthhood that are restless, indignant, and aimless.

The phenomenon of avant-garde literary creation appeared after the culturally root-seeking trend. These avant-gardists abandoned the illusionary cultural root, but they quickly found themselves flounder in clashes between diverse ideologies, oppressive

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<sup>34</sup> Liu Kang, "Short-Lived Avant-Garde Literary: The Transformation of Yu Hua," in *Modern Language Quarterly* Vol. 63, No. 1, 2002:3, 89-117.



governance, and unrealistic democracy. Liu Kang commented “those avant-gardists are aesthetically radical and subversive only in the realm of language and form but are politically disengaged.”<sup>35</sup> In spite of this, the avant-gardist works signify the transformation of youth narrative from the socialist collective “we” to the post-socialist individualistic “I”.

Stepping into the 1990s, Chinese literature presented a kaleidoscope of memories, as Chinese scholar Chen Sihe observed: Chinese literature witnessed a shift from writing under shared denominator (*gongming* 共名) to unshared denominator (*wuming* 无名),<sup>36</sup> and youth literature also echoed this shift. The relatively loose control of socialization of adolescents, and the declining socialist collective ideology provided space for young people to develop autonomy, freedom and independence. Youth literature in this decade demonstrates multiplicity. Wang Shuo’s novella “Wild Beasts” (*Dongwu xiongmeng* 动物凶猛, 1991) and its cinematic adaptation *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子, 1994) by Jiang Wen present a different expression of history and self (see Figure 1.12-1.13). Unlike the didactic and bitterness-obsessed scar literature and the experimental avant-garde stories, Wang Shuo’s cheerful recall of brilliant teenager year in a hot summer during a turbulent period explores less political turmoil than nostalgic personal memory, as film scholar Dai Jinhua noted:

“The memory of the Cultural Revolution is written as a story of sexual romance, a personalized history...The salience of Wang Shuo’s and Jiang Wen’s work consists not only of sexually romanticizing the remembrance of revolution and individualizing the writing of history, but, more importantly, it embodies the ‘self’ and the expression of self. This is manifestly different

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<sup>35</sup> Liu Kang, *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004, 102-126.

<sup>36</sup> *Gongming* refers to works sharing grand and unified themes that is granted by the time, while *wuming* as opposed to *gongming*, basically means that in the relatively open era without grand theme, works demonstrate independent individuality and multiple values. Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng* 中国当代文学史教程, 336.

from the self of the 1980s vocabulary of historical narratives, which is not only encumbered with a certain grand narrative but more closely resembles the embodiment of a newly born of suddenly emerging collectivity.”<sup>37</sup>



Fig. 1.12-1.13 Film *In the Heat of the Sun* and Wang Shuo’s novel

In Wang Shuo’s novella and Jiang Wen’s film, the grand history and social disturbance retreat to a nostalgic backdrop. The revolutionary era has been recasted and romanticized. The retroactive mode of Wang Shuo and Jiang Wen’s narration provide an alternative type of youth narratives in the post-revolutionary era.

<sup>37</sup> Dai Jinhua, “Imagined Nostalgia,” translated by Judy T. H. Chen, in *Boundary 2*, Vol. 24, No.3. *Postmodernism and China*, Autumn, 1997, 153-154.



Fig. 1.14-1.15 Yu Xiu's *Flower and Raining Season*

Meanwhile, high school student writer Yu Xiu 郁秀 finished the novel *Flower and Raining Season* (Huaji yuji 花季雨季, 1996) when she was 16 year old. The novel depicts the life of contemporary high school students involving friendship, love, school life, and growing up in the special economic region Shenzhen during the reform period. The novel sets the model type of youth literature for *balinghou*<sup>38</sup> generation in the commercial-oriented era. The novel was regarded as the 1990s' "Song of Youth" by the mainstream media, and was quickly adapted into film and TV drama (see Figure 1.14-1.15). Yu Xiu portrays the ongoing youthhood, which is imbued with youthful vigor and vitality. The huge commercial success of Wang Shuo and Yu Xiu's original novels and their cinematic adaptations signify a bifurcation between cultural capital and economic capital in the case of youth narratives during the reform era.

<sup>38</sup> *Balinghou* (the post-1980) generation refers to people were born between 1980 to 1989 in Mainland China under the intensive One-child policy. This generation grew up entirely within the reformist era, and has been characterized by its for consumerism,

The Revolutions of Eastern Europe in the 1989 and the collapse of Soviet Union in the early 1990s turned many previous socialist countries and regions into post-socialist states. Post-socialist condition became a global phenomenon. In China, with the impact of the Open-up policy, socialism and capitalist globalization often intertwine with each other to influence cultural products in the post-socialist era. In the year of 1992, Deng Xiaoping made the famous “southern tour” speech and advocated the market economy. The Party Congress further made marketization and commercialization the official state policy. Since then, post-socialist situation fully blossomed in China. Under such influence, the culture industry became the front line of economic restructuring.

In the year of 1998, a group of young literary rebels including Han Dong 韩东 and Zhu Wen 朱文 launched a movement named “Rupture”(duanlie 断裂).<sup>39</sup> They made a questionnaire to pose an artistic challenge to the socialist literary canon since Mao’s Yan’an Art and Literature forum, as well as contemporary critics and literary magazines (see Figure 1.16). These young writers were recognized as the “New Generation”(xinshengdai 新生代). They were born in the 1960s and 70s, and began publishing in the 1990s. Most of the New Generation writers have received college education after the Cultural Revolution. The easy access to different thoughts and the new enlightenment in the reform era provided the New Generation writers a space to pursue individual freedom. However, the collision between capitalist democratic ideas and the lingering socialist ideology in the post-socialist environment made their mind capricious and inconsistent. There is a strong transitional characteristic in their writings. They are infatuated with capitalist thoughts and materialistic consumption, and know the corruption of current system. However, they

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<sup>39</sup> Zhu Wen, “Rupture: A Questionnaire and 56 Answers” in *Beijing Literature*, Vol. 10, 1998, 19-47.

are sentimentally attached to the system and lack agency to change. Scholar Ge Hongbing terms the New Generation writers as “loyalists of the red era” (hongseshidai de yimin 红色时代的遗民).<sup>40</sup> Chinese rock singer Cui Jian’s 崔健 famous song “Balls under the red flag” (Hongqixia de dan 红旗下的蛋, 1994) vividly portrays this post-loyalist mentality of the New Generation young people:

“Of course we understand inside whose descendants we are...we are no longer pawns in a chess game following lines drawn by others. We try standing up ourselves, get moving, and take a look at everything.” (see Figure 1.17)

The New Generation writers share a strongly individualistic concern. They write personal life experience, depict the harshness of contemporary daily life and young people’s profligate living style. For instance, Murong Xuecun’s 慕容雪村 online-serialized novel *Leave Me Alone, Chengdu* (Chengdu jinye qingjiangwo yiwang 成都今夜请将我遗忘, 2002) tells the dark story of three young men’s struggles in Chengdu. Despite their aspirations in the newly capitalist China, they find their lives are beset by dead-end jobs, gambling, drugs, and whoring. The novel discloses the other side behind the prosperous façade of a provincial capital and the scandalous situation that is counter to the official propagandized spiritual socialist civilization since 1996. Another hallmark of the New Generation novels is the hedonism of urban materialistic consumption, especially in the so-called “beauty woman writer’s” (meinü zuojia 美女作家) works. In Mian Mian’s 棉棉 *Candy* (Tang 糖, 2000) and Wei Hui’s 卫慧 *Shanghai Baby* (Shanghai baobei 上海宝贝, 1999), we can see bar, party, luxurious brands, foreign lover, etc. Kevin Latham regards the hedonism of individualistic and materialistic consumption in the reform period as a twisted

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<sup>40</sup> Ge Hongbing, “The Compendium of New Generation Novels” (新生代小说论纲), in *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣, Vol. 5, 1999.

continuation of its radical pre-stage<sup>41</sup> (see Figure 1.18). Underneath the excessive sensational and materialistic hedonism, there is an anxious mental world and an ideological void. The New Generation writers' incisive writings on the quotidian life, capitalist society, and the mental state of urban young people in the reform era demonstrate an iconoclastic attitude toward socialist cultural canon. Their works provide an alternative comprehension of the social transformations and are regarded as a contrast to the mainstream understandings of the transitional period.



Fig. 1.16-18 Representative works of the New Generation writers

The end of the Mao period terminated the supreme guidance of socialist ideology and marked the beginning of post-socialist diversified cultural market. In the film industry, Fifth Generation directors astonished the world with their innovative cinematic aesthetics in the 1980s. Fifth Generation films were featured by a collective favor in adopting historical allegory. Fifth Generation directors were enamored with tracing and reinventing the history of Chinese nation. Youth narrative were absent in their films.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin Latham, "Rethinking Chinese Consumption: Social Palliatives and the Rhetorics of Transition in Post-socialist China" in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, edited by C. M. Hann. London: Routledge, 2002, 217-37.

In the 1990s, youth narrative has emerged again in Sixth Generation films, and has been adopted to depict the social conflicts in the transitional period.<sup>42</sup> Before the appearance of Sixth Generation films, youth narrative in Chinese film is a present absentee. Despite different explorations of youth in previous generation's films, youth narrative has always been endowed with the burdens of national, ethnic, and revolutionary ideologies. In those films, youthhood is regarded as the important stage of an individual's self-remolding for the sake of revolution and national construction. An individual coming-of-age has been adopted to be a carrier of the grand historical narration. The cruelty and vulnerability of youth are oppressed by heroic idealism and collectivity.

Compared to Fifth Generation directors' grand historical allegory, Sixth Generation directors favor individual youth narrative, they pay attention to individual situation in the reform era. Youth narrative thus becomes a promising starting point. Sixth Generation directors' independent or underground status and their struggle of coming up to the ground made them enamored with the cruelty, powerlessness, and sentimentality of youth. As a group of independent filmmakers outside the state-owned system, Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, Guan Hu 管虎, and Lu Xuechang 路学长 keep themselves away from official discourses and the state system of production, distribution, and exhibition. In their films, the young protagonists' inevitable pain in coming of age is often concomitant with the throes of social reform in the post-socialist state. All these films depict the process within which young people's ideals and imagination of a beautiful new world turn into

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<sup>42</sup> Films such as *Dirt* (Toufa luanle 头发乱了, dir. Guan Hu, 1992), *Xiao Wu* (小武, dir. Jia Zhangke, 1997), *Making of Steel* (Zhangda chengren 长大成人, dir. Lu Xuechang, 1997), *Seventeen Years* (Guonian huijia 过年回家, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1999), *So Close to Paradise* (Biandan guniang 扁担姑娘, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 1999), etc, describe the life of young people in the early reform period. These films portray the tensions and conflicts between individual and social transition in the post-socialist era.

disillusionment when they confront the society's demand and fever of material development. Sixth Generation directors express their eager but nihilistic self-positioning as well as their ambiguous doubt for the validity of social reform at the cost of demolition (see Figure 1.19-1.21).



Fig. 1.19-21 Representative films of the Sixth Generation directors

Entering millennium, with the fully development of post-socialist marketization and its close cooperation with the global commercialization, the consumerist and commercial-oriented “I” has dominated the Chinese youth literature, mainly represented by the post-80 writers (baling hou zuojia 80 后作家) and their works. The post-80 generation refers to people born between 1980 to 1989 in China under the intensive one-child policy. The concept of post-80 generation in literature was proposed to name a group of young writers and the literary phenomenon of youth fiction (qingchun xiaoshuo 青春小说) they have created since the early 2000s. In terms of timeline, the post-80 generation in China is close



to Generation Y.<sup>43</sup> It is the first time in the history of Chinese literature to define writers by the years of their birth. Actually generational division is not rare in the research of Chinese film history. It was adopted to describe the collective emergence of Fifth Generation directors. Chinese film scholar Paul Clark wrote “there were no generations commonly spoken of in the Chinese film enterprise until the distinctive group started to make its mark on the history of Chinese cinema with the invention of a ‘fifth generation’, and so other generations had to be more specifically identified.”<sup>44</sup>

After that, film scholars trace previous generations directors. In the case of post-80 writers, their identity is ambiguous and the validity of this naming is still controversial. However, many of them are best-selling writers and have large readership. The huge cultural and economic effects gradually bring the post-80 writers, this loose classification and attention from academia inside and outside China.

Many post-80 writers started their literary practice through the “New Concept Writing Competition,” (Xingainian zuowen dasai 新概念作文大赛) which has been organized by the state-owned literature magazine *Sprouts* (Mengya 萌芽). Winners over the years include Han Han 韩寒, Guo Jingming 郭敬明, and Zhang Yueran 张悦然, later they became the leading figures of the post-80 writers. The post-80’s youth literature casts off the dependence on grand historical narration, mainly focuses on delineating fragmented living situation of contemporary young Chinese urbanities. Han Han’s *Triple Doors* (Sanchongmen 三重门, 2000) rebels against China’s exam-oriented education system (see

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<sup>43</sup> This western demographic term refers to people born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, but post-80 generation in China only refers to people born in the 1980s.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and its Films*. The Chinese University Press, 2006, p.187.

Figure 1.22). Guo Jingming's *Tiny Times* series (Xiaoshidai 小时代, 2008) focuses on the friendship between four girls, as they navigate between relationship and work in the metropolis Shanghai (see Figure 1.23). His defamiliarization of language was highly appreciated by famous writer Wang Meng as poetic and melancholic. Zhang Yueran's short story collection *Sunflower Missing in 1890* (Kuihua zoushizai 1890 葵花走失在 1890, 2003) and full-length novel *Distant Cherry* (Yingtaozhiyuan 樱桃之远, 2004) were noted by Nobel laureate writer Mo Yan 莫言 "to record the sensitive and sentimental psychological growing track of young people, and reflects the mental reality that is congruous to their age."<sup>45</sup> Chun Shu's 春树 *Beijing Doll* (Beijing wawa 北京娃娃, 2002) subheading "I am a seventeen girl, a very bad girl," was regarded as "the voice of a new generation" by the western media and Chun Shu's face appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in February 2004 (see Figure 1.24). Most of the post-80's cruel youth fiction (canku qingchun xiaoshuo 残酷青春小说) revolve around school, family, friendship, love, and the ineluctable tribulations suffered by Chinese youth against contemporary society. Post-80 writers are always regarded as the spokesperson for contemporary young Chinese people, they write what they are currently undergoing and illustrate the titanic transformation happening to the life of Chinese youth.

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<sup>45</sup> Mo Yan, "Noble Sorrow and Fancy Imagination" (高贵的忧伤与奇特的想象) in *Qingnian sixiangjia* 青年思想家, vol.1, 2004, 124-125.



Fig. 1.22-24 Representative works of the *Balinghou* writers

The advent of the age of Internet and the rise of new medias in the late 1990s and 2000s signal a new phase in the publication, circulation and consumption of cultural productions. In the case of youth literature, many post-80 writers use web blogs and microblogs to have immediate and intimate communication with their book fans. This new author-reader interaction promotes the reader-oriented form of writing on the website, blurs the boundary between actual and virtual, and what is more, challenges the quality-control mechanisms and the hegemonic state censorship. For instance, Han Han continuously blogs on topical and sensitive issues. Although his articles are often immediately deleted by the state censor, his provocative and edgy discussion still provide a channel for contemporary Chinese youth to express dissensions, meanwhile, bring him domestic and international attention. Guo Jingming serializes extracts of his novels on the Internet before publishing, as a taster to attract readers, and carefully manages his personality cult to enhance his role as teen popular idol for high school and university

students who have most leisure time and disposable pocket money. Internet also brings a new type of cooperation between literature and film adaptations. For example, the post-80 web writer Xin Yiwu's 辛夷坞 best-selling novel *To Our Youth that is Fading Away* (Zhi women zhongjiang shiqu de qingchun 致我们终将逝去的青春, 2007) was serialized on literature website, later was adapted into a film *So Young* (Zhiqingchun 致青春, 2013) by the actress-turned-director Zhao Wei 赵薇 as her directorial debut (see Figure 1.25).



Fig. 1.25 Film *So Young*

What is more, the wide application of DV as well as other filmmaking softwares, and the video-sharing websites stimulate online films (microfilms) and provide professional, amateur, and even student filmmakers opportunity to make films. The relatively loose control of the Internet environment allows online productions to eschew ideological restrictions and touch upon sensitive issues that mainstream media do not. Moreover, the online video-sharing platform's independent venue of distribution frees the filmmakers from the bondage of market; hence filmmakers can experiment innovative way of expressions. However, due to the limited fund and amateurism of the filmmakers, the aesthetic value and quality of online films always bring about accusations. In 2010, a

microfilm *Old Boy* (Laonanhai 老男孩, dir. Chopstick brothers) has been rapidly circulating on the Internet, reminiscing two ordinary youth pursuing their dreams, and using humorous scenes to pay homage to youth (see Figure 1.26). The film addresses two core tensions of youth in contemporary China: the frustration of achieving the mainstream dream of a well-off middle class life; and the frustration of losing original individual dreams. The popularity of this film is not a surprise, it packages typical things related to the post-80 youth with spot-on cultural references, echoes the prevailing nostalgic mode in youth narratives, and speaks for the grass-root Chinese youth as well as their helpless and desperate emotions. The film is an independent piece of the microfilm omnibus *The Bright Eleven* (Shiyidu qingchun weidianying 11度青春系列微电影) sponsored by China Film Group and Youku website, which selects eleven young Chinese filmmakers to produce microfilms focusing on the theme “adolescence of post-80 youth.” The Internet and online video-sharing platform offers phantasmagoric expressions to the life of contemporary Chinese urban youth.



Fig. 1.26 Microfilm *Old Boy*

Other visual representations of post-80 youth show the multiple dimensions of China’s young people and their self-positioning in the urbanizing and globalizing Chinese

society. Films such as *Heaven Eternal, Earth Everlasting* (Baling hou 80'后, 2010) and *Tiny Times* (Xiaoshidai 小时代, 2013) are directed by post-80 director Li Fangfang 李芳芳 and Guo Jingming. Both these films accordantly chose a retrospective narrative mode to provide a panorama of post-80 urban youth's experiences (see Figure 1.27-28). Zhao Wei's *So Young* depicts the life of college students as a shared memory of to those who were born in the 1970s and early 80s.



Fig. 1.27-28 Film *Heaven Eternal, Earth Everlasting* and *Tiny Times*

Beside films, a striking number of TV series has appeared on the small screen. These works showcase the realistic living situation of young people and demonstrate a much broader array of their pursuits and struggles in the society. Zhao Baogang's 赵宝刚 *Youth Trilogy* (Qingchun sanbuqu 青春三部曲): *Struggle* (Fendou 奋斗, 2007), *My Youth Who Call the Shots* (Wode qingchun shuizuozhu 我的青春谁做主, 2009), and *Beijing Youth* (Beijing qingnian 北京青年, 2012) portray the life of post-80 generation youth after graduation from college (see Figure 1.29). This trilogy TV series touch the pulse of the era by

incorporating the most heatedly discussed phenomena such as blitz marriage (shanhun 闪婚),<sup>46</sup> naked marriage (luohun 裸婚),<sup>47</sup> NEET group (kenlaozu 啃老族),<sup>48</sup> ant tribe (yizu 蚁族),<sup>49</sup> etc. These popular films and TV series have struck a responsive chord among ordinary young audiences because of two features. First, they provide the young audiences illusory bubbles of freedom that is strongly expected by contemporary young people who live under the tight pressure of social competition. Second, it realistically tells all kinds of hardships and frustrations that young protagonists undergo in the society, which recall consensus and self-pity from urban young people. Looking into these visual representations, it helps to understand the complicity and profundity of cultural production on contemporary Chinese youth.

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<sup>46</sup> It is a Chinese slang for a marriage between partners who know each other only for a short time.

<sup>47</sup> A recent Chinese slang to describe marriage between partners who do not yet own any significant assets, such as house and car.

<sup>48</sup> NEET refers to young people who are not in education, employment, or training. It is also known as Boomerang Generation, which refers to young adults who cohabit with their parents after

<sup>49</sup> A neologism used to describe a group of low income college graduates who settle in compact communities on the outskirts of big cities in China.



Fig. 1.29 Zhao Baogang's TV series *Youth Trilogy*

Following the popular trend from Hong Kong and Taiwan, contemporary young people in Mainland China who were born in the 1970s and 80s call themselves “new new human” (xinxin renlei 新新人类).<sup>50</sup> “New new human” is a fuzzy concept, which intermingles with postmodernism, cyber culture, especially post-socialism in China, etc. This group of new generation young people and the cultural representations of contemporary Chinese urban youth have emerged along with China’s social transformation, which are featured by the post-socialist socio-economic revolution and the capitalist global expansion.

From May Fourth “new man” to post-socialist “new new human”, youth narratives project a great transition in social and cultural structures. The significance of looking closely at the century journey of youth narratives in Chinese cultural history is not only providing an archeological investigation to coming-of-age stories in modern and

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<sup>50</sup> New new human is a popular phrase that first appeared in Taiwanese advertisement in the 1990s.



contemporary Chinese cultural repertoires, but, more importantly, offering a viewpoint to comprehend changes that China is going through and cultural interventions and negotiations behind it. In the following section, I will discuss the thematic modes of youth narratives.

### **Thematic Modes of Chinese Youth Narratives**

Many scholars chose to approach Chinese youth narratives by using or comparing with the conventional European genre of *Bildungsroman*/*chengzhang xiaoshuo*.<sup>51</sup> I would argue that the “youth consciousness” and “youth mentality” in modern Chinese cultural history are very different from its European counterpart, and should be treated distinctively. The literary genre *Bildungsroman* emerged in European middle-class culture in response to modernity in Europe at the turn of the eighteenth century. The burst of industrial revolution changed the traditional manufacturing model as well as people’s lifestyle. Young people found them could not follow their parent’s life and career path when they confronted an uncertain future. Modernity and the rapid development of technology led to radical social and economic changes, which challenged people, especially young people’s cognition of the world. The narrative of *Bildungsroman* appeared at this historical moment, and develops around the tension between societal and individual. In a nutshell, modernity and the innovation of technology inspire mobility and inner restlessness of youth, as a result the psychological stage and moral growth of young people became a symbolic arena of modernity.

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<sup>51</sup> See Li Hua’s *Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua: Coming of Age in Troubled Times*, and Fan Guobin’s *The Making of Subject: Research on Bildungsroman over 50 Years* (主体的生成: 50 年成长小说研究).

According to M. H. Abrams, the genre *bildungsroman* is defined as, “the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experience—and often through a spiritual crisis—into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one’s identity and role in the world.”<sup>52</sup> In another word, *bildungsroman* not only stresses the protagonist undergoes hardships to probe into his inwardness, but also portrays his outward exploration as being initiated into the external world. Therefore, a *bildungsroman* story always ends with a terminative solution that is the protagonist’s assimilation or non-assimilation into society.

Contrasting to the European *bildungsroman*, Chinese youth narratives emerged in troubled times confronting national crises. Therefore, the anxiety and concern of the nation overshadow the enthusiasm for enlightenment. Chinese intellectuals entrusted their pursuit of national salvation and imagination of modernity in youth narratives. As I illustrated in the previous discussion, the Chinese youth narrative is not something that suddenly emerged; and its tradition can be traced all the way back to late imperial and May Fourth period. Although the social, political and cultural backgrounds changes variously, the cultural representations of youth inherit, adopt and share a few familiar topics that had been explored and reflected by writers and filmmakers of different periods. Two heritages show strong influences on the representations of Chinese youth—the narrative mode of “scholar and beauty” romance from the traditional Chinese novel and the youth rebellion from the May Fourth tradition.

Youth mentality has existed in the traditional Chinese literature for a long time, and was mostly represented in the form of the scholar and beauty romance. For instance, the

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<sup>52</sup> M. H. Abrams, “Novel,” *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005. 200-201.

romantic tale between Zhangsheng and Yingying in *Romance of the West Chamber* (Xixiang ji 西厢记), Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang's love beyond life and death in *The Peony Pavilion* (Mudan ting 牡丹亭), and the psychological exploration of the youth maturation in *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Honglou meng 红楼梦). The youth mentality in traditional literary works can be found in the romance between a young scholar and a beautiful lady. In the *Chuanqi* tales (tale of marvels 传奇), young scholar or young hero meets a fair beauty, after undergoing a series of troubles and fighting for parental approval, they are always provided with a happy ending. This scholar and beauty mode defamiliarizes realistic marital life and consummates idealistic love. It underlines the romantic features of a story, but does not aim to discover subjectivity or enlightenment.

In the early-20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese literature and films, when modernity and Marxist revolutionary ideas spread in China, the traditional scholar and beauty narrative mode conformed to the times and transformed into another mode---revolution plus love. As a theme or formula, revolution plus love was popularized during the late 1920s as a literary response to political events and social turmoil in China. The May Fourth movement (1917) evoked the expectations of revolution, as a result, Chinese intelligentsia turned their attention to the increasing clashes between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and the position of the self within society. They believe that the association of revolution brings positive changes to the obsolete society, which lead to progress, newness, enlightenment, national salvation, and ultimately modernity. In the "revolution plus love" stories, love plays the guiding role that leads protagonists to revolution, such as Zhang Wentian's novel *Journey* (Lü tu 旅途) and Jiang Guangci's *Young Wanderer*. The protagonists devote themselves to

revolution after their love tragedy. In the process of revolutionary enlightenment, they realize that revolution is the only solution to avoid tragedy. Leftist writers describe that revolutionary enlightenment has the power to rescue individuals and makes them grow up into mature revolutionaries. The theme of love as the heritage of May Fourth romanticism and liberalism helps to enlighten and catalyze protagonist's revolutionary consciousness. At this point, the revolution plus love mode separates the revolutionary self from the May Fourth liberal self.

The thematic preference of the May Fourth literature and the latter socialist literature are mostly about how to modernize China, how to modernize the spirits of Chinese people, and further diminish the inequality between classes. The primitivity of youth became the ideal vector to carry out above revolutionary expectations, therefore young character was favored by leftist progressive writers during the May Fourth and socialist revolutionary literature. The rebellious characteristic of youth primitivity has been magnified for the purpose of revolution. Individual affection is diminished in order to display individual maturity during the process of revolution. During 1949 to 1978, the youth mentality in the socialist revolutionary discourse introduces a set of "radicalized, dramatized revolutionary ethics that desires to lift the individual youth from the all-too-human reality and send him or her into the sublime domains of nationhood, collective, and communism."<sup>53</sup> The revolutionary youth narrative reached its summit in the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>53</sup> Song Mingwei, "The Taming of the Youth: Discourse, Politics, and Fictional Representation in the Early PRC" in *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* Vol. 9:2, Hong Kong, 2009.

After the Mao period, communist revolutionary ideology fell off, “the entire society slips out of paternalistic protection and unity, the sense of family is disappearing, and people are obliged to secure a position of their own.”<sup>54</sup> In the late 1980s, “youth consciousness” or “youth mentality” widely spread in the post-Mao fiction,<sup>55</sup> which is understood as a response to a spirit of “pervasive restlessness” in contemporary China. Youth narrative after the Mao era witnessed a descent of revolution zest and collectivity, but at the same time, an ascent of individuality and subjectivity. The private narrative has replaced the grand narrative, which is manifested by youth narratives through themes such as rebelliousness of school truants, problematic father-son relationships, fatherless son and the specter of father, frustration and cruelty of growth, etc. All these reflect a pervasive uneasiness over the society. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, the Open-up policy surged the spiritual and economic revolution in China. The Maoist communist regime was revised and reformed. Young people during this period confront such a dilemma: they oscillate between two worlds one is dead, and the other is not born yet.

Entering millennium, the post-socialist reshuffle lead to the radicalization of market-economy and consumerism in China. With China’s fully engagement with globalization<sup>56</sup>, “linking up with the tracks of the world” becomes the national frenetic mantra and influences lives of every Chinese people. Post-80 generation youth literature is affected by the times and has a strong synchronicity, through portraying the ostentation

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 103-104.

<sup>55</sup> Wang Zheng and Xiao Hua, “The complementary youth consciousness: Things relevant or irrelevant to Su Tong” (互补的青年意识: 与苏童有关的或无关的) in *Reading*, July/August 1989, 102-107.

<sup>56</sup> On December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, China became a member of WTO, which marks China’s truly and officially entering to the globalized world arena.

and perplexity of youthhood they are undergoing, it reflects the shocks and mutations of the times and the society (see Figure 1.30-1.31).



Fig 1.30-31 A migrant young worker peep through the cracks in the wall

### **The City in Youth Narratives**

The emergence of Chinese youth narratives marches in step with Chinese intellectual's obsession and imagination of modernity. Such an imagination of modernity is closely related to urbanism. As a result, young people's urban adventure becomes a recurrent and important theme in Chinese youth narratives. Although the Maoist youth literature and the post-Mao rusticated youth literature frustrate the urban tale, the rural experience are always told through the perspective of urban youth. The urban shift in the 1980s moves away from Maoist orthodoxies and brings back the urban narratives. Due to the one-child policy instituted in 1979, urban youth become a more coherent cohort. The urban narrative further dominates the post-socialist youth literature.

In order to better understand the characteristics of China's post-socialist youth narrative, it requires association with the rapid urban development in China, more

specifically, the continuities and discontinuities with socialist and pre-socialist urban history. Talking about tracing and summarizing the features of China's urban transitions in the post-socialist period that manifested by literary and cinematic representations, scholars are always trapped in the debate on urbanization related to modernity and postmodernity, or arbitrarily demarcate China's urban development as mostly represented by the two cities Beijing and Shanghai. However, this binary cultural logic of China's urban development does not fit in the diversified patterns in narrative, style and aesthetics after China's fully engagement with globalization. Hence, I incline to situate my argument in the debate of globalization as China's economic booming march in step with the process of deepened globalization, and meanwhile China has to face and respond to a series of side effects of the overwhelming encroachment of globalization.

In the context of contemporary China, globalization is not a newly emergent phenomenon. Chinese modern history has been deeply influenced by the global expansion of capitalism and imperialism. At this point, globalization in contemporary Chinese context is more like a process of reglobalization, to recuperate the fame as being a cosmopolitan center, which is now realized by the rapid development of a more tightly interconnected world.

The post-socialist urban development is characterized by selective effacement or rearrangement of the socialist past and fantasizing the pre-socialist past by using nostalgia in order to connect past and present for the sake of global tourism. For example, two prevailing historical periods in contemporary Chinese nostalgia are the republic period of the 1920s and 1930s and the socialist period of the 1950s to 1970s. The post-socialist strategy of urban development is to shake the rigid socialist anti-urban urban strategy and

repackage it with the pre-socialist urban features. To contemplate the post-socialist urban development in the context of globalization, it seems necessary to consider how it continues and discontinues the legacies of urban development in previous historical periods.

Modern Chinese urban history is highlighted by its vacillation between nationalism and modernity, which is manifested by the cultural debate of soilbound countryside (xiangtu 乡土) and modern city (dushi 都市). Chinese urban culture since the nineteenth century distinctively featured by its inheritance of traditional agrarian culture and meanwhile with its exploration, negotiation, even resistance (not rejection but resistance through negotiation and compromise) to the modern and bourgeois urban hybridity. Historians sometimes situate their discussions on Chinese urban culture of the nineteenth century within the binary set of traditional legacies and modern innovations. They think that the forced opening of the treaty ports by the Opium War of 1840 brought China modern urban plan as well as the concept of nation.<sup>57</sup> This leads to a result that when confronting the semi-colonial situation of modern China and the urgency of seeking national identity, Chinese patriotic intellectuals often regarded the modern city (mostly treaty ports) as corruptive and evil that was polluted by Western imperial capitalism vis-à-vis the backward yet primitive countryside that stood for the intact Chinese origin and purity. Therefore, the portrayal of urban life during the nineteenth century was often depicting city as either the imperial legacy or a capitalist adventure spot, where harbored social injustice and deterioration of urban life.

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph Esherick, *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900-1950*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.



Chinese intellectuals manifest a strong suspicion of the moral implications of the modern city. City was depicted as corruptive and decadent. The city is gendered in their narratives. It is viewed as a seductive and mysterious woman, who lures provincial and rural young men, bringing them hope and pleasure, and at the same time tortures them by ruthlessly breaking their dreams and corrupting their souls. The recurrent urban narrative pattern is that a rural and provincial young man is enchanted by phantasmogoric urban life. For instance, late Qing novelists Wu Jianren's *The Sea of Regret* (Hen hai 恨海, 1905), and Han Bangqing's *The Sing Song Girls of Shanghai* (Haishanghai liezhuan 海上花列传, 1894) depicted the provincial young men's urban adventures. They come to the city, and experience a series of pleasure, displacement, disillusionment, and despair.

In the literary and cinematic representations of urban culture by Chinese nationalist intellectuals, city was depicted as corruptive and decadent. For example, literary works, such as Ba Jin's *Famliy* (Jia 家, 1933), Mao Dun's *Midnight* (Hong 虹, 1937), and Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* (Luotuo xiangzi 骆驼祥子, 1936), exposed the severe social conflict between tradition and modernity in cities. Other writers depicted urban life as modern and fashionable in their works, such as Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies novels and Eileen Chang's petty urbanities fictions. In terms of films, Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* (Shen nü 神女, 1934), Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* (Malu tianshi 马路天使, 1937), Cai Chusheng's *Spring River Flows East* (Yijiang chunshui xiangdongliu 一江春水向东流, 1947) and so on, reflected tensions in modern cities and the masses' anxiety for national identity during

war-time period. China's urban culture of the Republican era was characterized by the anxiety for constructing "cities that would be both modern and Chinese."<sup>58</sup>

After the founding of the Communist China, the debate between nationalism and modernity on urban construction was overshadowed by the state's urgency of building ideal Marxist cities to keep out any reactionary. Urban construction became a site to realize the political and cultural ideologies of the socialist state. The Chinese Communist Party set up its base area in countryside and got its power from peasants. Therefore, the Party declared the idea of "countryside surround cities" as its revolutionary strategy. Based on this revolutionary ideology, city in the Maoist period (1949-1976) was represented as a socialist utopia but still hideout for counterrevolutionaries so that revolution would never stop.<sup>59</sup> As scholar Yomi Braester observed, Lao She's drama *Dragon Whisker Creek* (Longxu gou 龙须沟, 1951), and the film *Sentinels Under the Neon Lights* (Nihongdengxiade shaobing 霓虹灯的哨兵, 1964) both mobilized the masses to construct Marxist ideal cities to defend capitalist or bourgeois pollution. Generally speaking, the socialist utopian-style urbanization is an anti-urban urbanization.<sup>60</sup> On the one hand, the central government promoted to construct socialist cities; on the other hand, it strengthened the political and social controls in regulating urban life, such as using the household registration system to confine internal migration, supervising its urban citizens through the dense network of work units, and so on.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Harry Kuoshu, *Metro Movies: Cinematic Urbanism in Post-Mao China*, pg. 7.

The new era opened by the launch of Deng Xiaoping's Open-up policy. The urban development since the 1980s switches its focus from socialist class struggles to post-socialist economic development. China's post-socialist urban development is further highlighted by its global hybridity, which contains the vestiges of late imperial culture, the innovative elements of the modern or bourgeois culture of the Republican era, the residue of socialist culture, and elements of both modernism and postmodernism. The Open-up policy and economic reforms in 1978 made the post-socialist urban constructional projects attract both domestic and foreign enterprises to invest. In a short time, global capitalism, consumerism, commerce and so on swarm into Chinese cities to meet with China's integration to the global world. This led to changes as well as problems in Chinese cities. First, the collapse of socialist collectivity along with the bankruptcy of planned economy paved the way for the rise of individuality as well as the commercialized, market-oriented popular culture in post-socialist cities. Most Sixth Generation and post-Sixth Generation films, urban films in particular, deviate from the grand narration and historical allegory invented by Fifth Generation filmmakers. Sixth Generation directors focus mainly on contemporary daily life in cities, they endeavor to capture changes of the post-socialist era. Thus Sixth Generation filmmakers resort to their own experience or people that they are familiar with to explore various social and cultural problems in the post-socialist China. Migration, fragmentation, rootlessness, loneliness, alienation and so on are pronounced in their works, which refract the status quo of China's post-socialist urban environment.

### **China's Cultural Phenomenon of Youth Narratives in the Post-socialist and Globalizing Era**

Scholar Song Mingwei once indicates "youth as a symbolic figure is a discursive constellation that has a profound influence on the national construction and social

transformation.”<sup>61</sup> As I mentioned before, my study of China’s youth narrative will be focusing on cultural aspects, and views the phenomena more as a collection of stories and metaphors, which not only showcase multiple dimensions of the China’s urbanization and globalization, but also reflect the interesting dynamics of fiction and fact in the making of various discourses around the phenomena.

Two elements show strong influences on the contemporary cultural representations of Chinese young people—the One-child policy and the expansion of Internet. One-child policy has been applied in China since 1979 in order to alleviate social, economic, and environmental problems. As a result, it causes unfair distribution of social resources between urban and rural as well as issues concerning biopolitics in China. The post-80 generation is a first cohort of only-children due to the one-child policy. The cohort is growing up accompanied by China’s initiation and deepening of its reform and opening up. Along with China’s increased interaction with the world, different technologies, thoughts, and ideologies swarmed into the country. The post-80 generation was exposed to various types of information provided by the Internet and other medias. Their self-understanding, self-representation and problematized collective identification refract the social, economic and cultural environment of contemporary China.

The arrival of the age of web 2.0 has not only changed ordinary people’s social life, but also opened a new venue for publication and circulation of cultural productions. The expansion of Internet writing, digital media, and massive consumerism along with China’s self-integration into the world bring new features to youth literature. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the rise of Internet writing and the resourceful and socially active book

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<sup>61</sup> Song Mingwei, “The Taming of the Youth: Discourse, Politics, and Fictional Representation in the Early PRC” in *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 9:2, 2009.

merchants (shushang 书商) with marketing ploy have revolutionized the publishing industry and traditional writer-reader relationship. Book merchant acts as cultural entrepreneur, private publisher, and agent in the age of media frenzy. They scout for talented writers and package them and their fiction. Besides book merchant, the upsurge of Internet writing in the information age challenges the traditional cultural market. Before the Internet, modern literature was an elite activity, and it was hard for writers to break the sponsorship of the state-owned publishers. The Internet publishing platform and readership challenge the traditional relationship between the authors and readers. The online mode of literary representations enhances the spontaneity and reader-oriented form of writing. In the web literature, the text is a continual process of becoming, writers change their writing according to readers' feedback. Although the artistic value of Internet writings is uneven and controversial, the open, anonymous, spontaneous and collaborative virtual environment of the Internet provides a perfect channel for ordinary people especially young people to express their feelings and opinions.

This chapter is only an overview of youth narratives in Chinese literature, film and popular culture. It aims to map out a trajectory of youth narrative tradition in Chinese cultural history, and meanwhile to showcase the proliferation of the narrative and its rich complicity in different periods and in relation to different media. In the following chapters, a study in depth on its imbrications with various dominant discourses in media representations will be given. Moreover, a close examination on themes, motifs and narrative strategies as well as aesthetics in alternative representations will be provided. In addition, representations of young people bring some underdeveloped areas of cultural

studies to our sight, such as audience research, literary adaptation and cross-media practices. The following chapters will also incorporate these issues into the discussion.

## Chapter 2—Balls Under The Red Flag: Father and Son Tales in the Post-socialist Nostalgia

Suddenly the door opens  
But actually not so sudden  
The time has come  
But who knows what to do?  
The red flag's still aflutter  
But there's no fixed direction  
The revolution still continues  
The old men have still more power  
Money flutters in the air  
We have no ideals  
Although the air is clear  
We can't see any further  
Although our chance has come  
We don't have the guts for it  
Our personalities are all rounded  
Like balls under the red flag  
The head suddenly comes out  
It's the hope of many years  
Standing tall, chests thrust out, shouting  
It's a natural inheritance  
Of course we understand inside  
Whose descendants we are  
No matter if our behavior is good or bad  
Deep inside we still know we're pure  
Authority fluttering in the air  
Often gusts over my shoulder  
Suddenly there's an idea  
Don't follow others blindly  
Although the body's weak  
Although it can only yell  
Look at the eight to nine o'clock sun  
Like balls under the red flag  
My stomach is full now  
My brain is clear now too  
But don't say this is a great favor  
It can never be repaid  
We are no longer pawns in a chess game  
Following lines drawn by others  
We try standing up ourselves  
Get moving and take a look at everything  
Reality is like a stone  
Spirit is like an egg  
Although stones are hard

Eggs are life  
Mother is still alive  
Father is a flagpole  
If you ask us who we are  
We are balls under the red flag  
---Cui Jian 崔健 <Balls Under The Red Flag> (红旗下的蛋)



Fig. 2.1 Front cover of Cui Jian's album *Balls under the Red Flag*

Representations and narratives of young people in the history of 20th century Chinese literature, film and popular culture illustrate a kaleidoscopic panorama of the youth narrative phenomenon as a cultural scene. A thorough going examination of youth narratives and the related aspects of this topic seems in order. This chapter will probe into the negotiation between the socialist revolutionary legacy and post-socialist reminiscences in youth narratives. This study will focus on social and cultural contexts, laying out a clear trajectory of youth narratives that is intrinsically intertwined with narratives of the state and its history. It has to be pointed out that youth narratives do not stand alone, but arise from a matrix of multi-layered representations, and have implications both aesthetic and ideological. My exploration of and reflection on this narrative form aims to excavate a historically neglected and culturally unaddressed narrative mode and emphasize its significance in the contemporary political, cultural, social and economical landscape.



Through looking at the youth narrative up close, my study will provide an outline of its evolution in different media from the early 1990s to the 2010s. The focus of this chapter is the question of how post-socialist youth stories imagine the socialist period through nostalgia. As descendants of socialism, how do young people inherit or eschew socialist ideology? All these issues will be discussed through the conflict between father and son in the selected visual representations.

In traditional Chinese Confucian culture, the father plays the role of the spiritual leader of the family and society. The father has been stereotyped as the authoritative figure and the keeper of order. In Chinese cinema, the image of father is an important signifier for family, nation, society and culture. Therefore, relocating and reevaluating the role of the father becomes a crucial index for contemporary Chinese cultural identification.

Beginning with the May Fourth generation, the tension between father and son has been a main theme haunting Chinese intellectuals. In the May Fourth literature, anti-traditionalism, patricide and the imaginative collapse of patriarchal control reflect that the father is still the center of symbol and practice.<sup>62</sup> For the rebellious son generation, the father is the target to attack, but also the model to imitate. Unlike male writers, who often arranged for their protagonists to escape from home or to leave the nation in a bold gesture of fighting against the father, female writers held ambivalent feelings of hatred and love toward the father.<sup>63</sup> In the patricidal era, with the temptation of being the father, the May Fourth intellectuals identified themselves as impious and abandoned sons shouldering the flag to overthrow feudalism and patriarchalism. In doing so, they chiseled out a way to

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<sup>62</sup> Such works include Lu Xun's novel "A Madman's Diary" and "Medicine", Ba Jin's *Family*, and Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*.

<sup>63</sup> For instance, Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River* and Eileen Chang's "Sutra of Heart."

write their stories and establish their discourse. However, the ambivalent attitude towards the father among the male and female writers of the May Fourth generation manifests their unsettled mental world and the still powerful patriarchal control of the time.

After Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" in 1942 and the founding of Communist China in 1949, Chinese literature increasingly became an instrument for legitimizing and strengthening the Communist regime. In the socialist period, the once-denounced father was remolded into the revolutionary father. The party became the family, the political father replaced the biological father, everyone became the son of the party, and Chairman Mao was regarded as the patriarch of the communist state. The May Fourth generation's ambivalent feeling towards the father was replaced by unanimous worship of the revolutionary father in the socialist period. Revolt, violence, and overthrow were all under the guidance of the revolutionary father, as the slogan says, "the heaven is great, the earth is great, but they cannot compare with the greatness of what the party has done for the people. Dear are our father and mother, but Chairman Mao is dearer still." (天大地大不如党的恩情大, 爹亲娘亲不如毛主席亲.) Socialist society was a masculine society but also a desexualized one. The party propagandized defeminization, as Chairman Mao's poem praised, "Chinese daughters love weapons more than make up" (不爱红妆爱武装). However, man, and especially the father, was castrated and lost his power before the mission of communist revolution.

In the post-Mao period, after the collapse of revolutionary ideology, scar literature and reflective trends dominated the literary market. These works include Han Shaogong's 韩少功 *Ba ba ba* (Bababa 爸爸爸, 1985), which chose a young mute as the spectator to unfold the reality of lost patriarchal control and the failed pursuit of a spiritual father. The

familial history novel (Jiashi xiaoshuo 家史小说) is another type of root-seeking literature, the representative works of which are Nobel laureate Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum Clan* (Honggaoliang jiazu 红高粱家族, 1986), Su Tong's *Wives and Concubines* (Qiqie chengqun 妻妾成群, 1990) and Yu Hua's *To Live* (Huozhe 活着, 1993). Unlike the rebellious May Fourth generation, authors who grew up in the socialist period often lamented the lost patriarch and ancestral rules in their national, historical, and folkloric allegories. They were baptized by the communist revolutionary ideology, but after the fall of the spiritual father, they had to confront the void of their mental world, as well as the dilemma that they had stepped into the age of being a father. Having the anxiety of accomplishing the transformation of role from son to father, but without an exemplary father to model themselves on, writers and filmmakers of the socialist generation fell into a loop of searching for and rejecting the father. Therefore, father-son tales became recurrent tropes of their works.

Cinematic representation in the post-Mao years echoed the shift of the cultural ethos from radically praising the communist revolution to rethinking the ruin of human relationships in the socialist political movement. Xie Jin's 谢晋 film *The Herdsman* (Mumaren 牧马人, 1982) tells a story about a reunion between an overseas father and his "rightist" son after the Cultural Revolution. The image of father is relatively negative. He had abandoned his wife and son to do business in America. Xie Jin uses this character to reveal the reality of losing a spiritual prop after the decline of the exemplary revolutionary father.

In the late 1980s, Fifth Generation filmmakers emerged collectively. No longer echoing revolutionary discourses, their films defiantly challenged socialist authoritarianism. Fathers in Fifth Generation films are always weak, morbid and ignorant. For instance, the father in *Yellow Earth* (Huangtu di 黄土地, 1984) is a good-hearted but ignorant father whose stubbornness directly leads to his daughter's tragedy. The father in *Ju Dou* (Ju Dou 菊豆, 1990) is a morbid and impotent man, who tortures his wives to death if they fail to produce a son. Eventually, he has a son, the cruel irony being that he is not the biological father of the child. The patriarch in *Raise the Red Lantern* (Dahong denglong gaogaogua 大红灯笼高高挂, 1991) whose face is never clearly shown in the film, possesses absolute command of his household. He becomes the incarnation of old customs and traditions. Although Fifth Generation filmmakers departed from grand-narratives of patriotic duties as well as heroic nationalism, they presented political events from a more personal and subjective perspective. They wandered in a labyrinth of conflict between national, historical, traditional, collective, and individual choices. This reflected their spiritual unease at the collapse of the father.

This chapter specifically examines the conflict between father and son in post-socialist films, and explores how filmmakers used this theme to rewrite, reconstruct, and reinvent the socialist past. In terms of the cinematic narration of father and son stories, there are two dominant modes: post-socialist nostalgia for the socialist past and the post-socialist dilemma of the present. I argue that these films highlight the tensions between father and son resulting from the decline of socialist ideology and revolutionary frenzy. Socialist vestiges syncretize in the image of father who lost his leadership and his position in the post-socialist era. Young people in these films grew up with the lack of an

authoritative father whom they could rebel against and also succumb to. In the following sections, I will respectively discuss these two dominant modes of post-socialist youth narratives: one orients towards socialist revolutionary ideals and acclaims its inheritance and succession of socialist legacy; the other expresses that such legacy is obsolete and cannot conform to Chinese present situation.

**I. Calling Him Father Is Too Hard: Nostalgia for the Socialist Past and the Post-socialist Dilemma in *I Am Your Dad* (我是你爸爸, 1996), *Sunflower* (向日葵, 2005), and *11 Flowers* (我 11, 2012)<sup>64</sup>**

The history of modern Chinese literature and cinema started by criticizing the feudalistic tradition and denouncing the traditional patriarchal father, which enabled the younger generation of Chinese intellectuals to establish their own discourse. From the May Fourth writers to Fifth Generation filmmakers, the subtle relationship between father and son has been a mysterious leitmotif haunting Chinese intellectuals. Is the drama of the father-son relationship a life-or-death rivalry or a symbiotic attachment? The son regards the father as a target to attack and a formidable adversary to fight against. Such an imagination helps him to complete his narcissism as a woeful hero. Self-pity and narcissism, therefore, become two underlying features of the father-son myth in Chinese literature and cinema. When sons bravely oppose their fathers' violence, they wallow in an imaginative mirror and incessantly sublimate their solemnity and loftiness as heroes.

In the socialist period, under the authoritative influence of state ideology, father-son tales tactically changed by incorporating Marxist proletarian revolutionary ideas, and forged a new image of the father---the heroic revolutionary father. However, after the fall of

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<sup>64</sup> *Calling Him Father Is Too Hard* is a quasi-autobiography written by Ai Bei 艾蓓. In the book she declares herself the illegitimate daughter of Chinese prime minister Zhou Enlai 周恩来.

communist revolutionary ideology, the exemplary revolutionary father was on the wane, as represented by Fifth Generation filmmakers.

Fifth Generation is regarded as a relatively coherent group who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and emerged collectively in the 1980s. They have experimented with all kinds of formal and narrative techniques to revive Chinese cinema, and at the same time have negotiated between state ideology and their audiences. They have challenged Maoist totalitarian aesthetics. Despite the commonalities between Fifth Generation filmmakers, they have manifest diversity as well. Each director had his or her own cinematic aesthetics. Wu Ziniu 吴子牛 was very capable of capturing the changing spirit of his times, delving into various dilemmas and social issues that had emerged along the road to Chinese economic development. Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮 was fascinated with primitives and politically controversial topics. His films revealed strong retrospective and critical meanings. Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 minimized storylines, and was interested in exploring the individual vs. the land (*Yellow Earth* 黄土地); the individual vs. the collective (*The Big Parade* 大阅兵); and the individual vs. the culture (*King of Children* 孩子王). Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 was a master of combining visual beauty and visual brutality. In terms of cinematography, he was fascinated with color. He explored male chauvinism, suppressed women's desires and historical traumas in his films, and provided many national allegories due to his political engagement. In an interview, Zhang Yimou mentioned the three different paths that Fifth Generation directors have taken: realism is represented by Tian Zhuangzhuang, intellectualism is represented by Chen Kaige, and visualism is represented by Zhang Yimou. Female directors of Fifth Generation such as Hu Mei 胡玫, Peng Xiaolian 彭小莲, and Liu

Miaomiao 刘苗苗 are interested in making films about women to reflect women's psychological and social states in the new era.

Fifth Generation cinematic experiment has arguably manifested a breakthrough: film is no longer only a vehicle for disseminating political and social ideologies favored by the state and the party. This is not to say that Fifth Generation directors are apolitical. Political messages do not disappear in Fifth Generation films but are interwoven with new techniques and conveyed in a more subtle and exquisite way. Fifth Generation directors criticize traditional socialism and seek an alternative for the state's future.

In terms of plot structure, Fifth Generation replaces Maoist paradigms such as revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism with psychological dramas, and focuses on exploring individuals' inner struggles rather than their actions. Moreover, the films of Fifth Generation create a new discourse, which encourages free thinking by adopting "Rashomon-style narratives."<sup>65</sup> Contrary to the clear-cut Maoist formula, which does not allow for ambiguity, cinematic works in the new era usually depict individuals' complicated subconsciousness from multiple perspectives, and thus deploy ambiguous situations and visions.

Growing up during the heyday of socialism and directly participating in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as Red Guards, most of Fifth Generation directors were sent to the countryside in their teens and experienced many physical and mental difficulties. The undesired interruption of their education and life plans made Fifth Generation filmmakers question or feel disillusioned about the political and cultural system

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<sup>65</sup> Yomi Braester, "A Blinding Red Light: The Displacement of Rhetoric in the Cinema of the Early 1980s" in *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 131-145.

in socialist China. Such questioning and disillusionment later became a recurring undertone of Fifth Generation films. Meanwhile, the experience of living in the remote, unrestrained countryside as sent-down young people fueled their nostalgia for these experiences years later.

### **Nostalgia and Post-socialist Cultural Logics**

In the 1990s, a series of films dealt with personal and family memories with reference to the political turmoil of Chinese revolutions and socialist modernity. In these films, rewriting and exploring the past is conducted in the name of the victim and the survivor. The most conspicuous of these films are the award winners of international film festivals such as Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (Bawang biejie 霸王别姬 1993), Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (Huoze 活着, 1994) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (Lan fengzheng 蓝风筝 1993), all of which were made by Fifth Generation directors. Scholar Rey Chow discovers an "endurance-survival" ideological mode in these films,<sup>66</sup> which she elaborates by associating the concept of survival with various historical, cultural, and political traditions in China. Chow indicates that the most crucial necessity for Chinese people is not political rights but rather biological needs. So "to live" becomes the most essential thing for Chinese people and can also be understood as their basic resistance "to the random disasters befalling them under a political system that has failed in its mission."<sup>67</sup> Fifth Generation directors use the motifs of food, traditional Peking opera, and shadow puppets to demonstrate how Chinese people have endured many hardships and

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<sup>66</sup> Rey Chow, "We Endure, Therefore, We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou's *To Live*" in *Ethics After Idealism*, Indiana University Press, 1998, 113-132.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 128.



developed the ability to absorb all external difficulties into themselves throughout history. Fifth Generation's obsession with the past reflects a collective anxiety and anguish for the present. What is more, they manifest a prevailing ambiguity toward socialism in the post-socialist period, although what they indict is traditional socialism, not socialism itself. In a nutshell, Fifth Generation directors still hold an optimistic stance toward socialism.

After the termination of the Cultural Revolution and the end of Mao period, China step into a post-revolutionary condition, which was manifested by the coexistence and confluence of a clearly fading socialist revolutionary ideology and a burgeoning capitalist materialism and consumerism. In the current post-socialist society, official discourse under socialist ideology has faded and is gradually being replaced by universally concerned issues. Nostalgia is one of these universal sentiments. Also, the most urgent demand of post-socialism is to reconsider its relationship with socialism. Thus the prevailing nostalgia for socialist utopian and idealist values, such as self-sacrifice and innocence, become resurgent themes in Chinese post-socialist cultural products. Fifth Generation directors' narrative logic of nostalgia, ironically, falls into the same method of the "contrast between the old and the new"<sup>68</sup> as their socialist-realist precursor Xie Jin, albeit for radically different ideological and political effects. This willful contrasting of the old against the new reveals Fifth Generation directors' resolute embrace of a new world saturated with market consumption and private property in their sentimental nostalgia. In a socialist-turned-consumerist society, Fifth Generation's sentimental nostalgia might be understood in a fourfold manner: 1) as an ideological guardian that reiterates the legitimacy of state authority, 2) as a reinvention of a traumatic history that alludes to the chaotic present and

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<sup>68</sup> Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*. Duke University Press, 2008.

the unsettled imagination of the future, 3) as an anodyne to assuage collective pain in social transition, and 4) as a fabricated cultural product that is used to cater to the tastes and sentiments of consumers for the sake of market consumption and global tourism.

Nostalgia always presents a problem that counters the modern concept of time because it disturbs a linear temporality through spatiotemporal noncontemporaneity or nonsynchronism.<sup>69</sup> The paradigm for the nostalgic work is the palimpsest, like the palimpsest nostalgia is a textual doubling that allows one stratum to be constructed via another. Nostalgia blurs distinctions between the past and the present, allowing past and present to cohabitate in one frame representing historical nonsynchronism. As a transitional period, post-socialism in China does not have a static and fixed temporality, but is rather a fluctuant and dynamic situation. It is often viewed as a 'pre' but exists at the same time as a 'post' of some other stages. Post-socialist nostalgia is not reminiscence with a fixed direction of looking back to the past or looking forward to the future. It has a transitional and fluctuating temporality and always sets itself against fixed temporality as past, present, and future. Such nostalgia laments the loss of time and space in the social transition from socialist to post-socialist era, which is concomitant with a thematic shift of nostalgia from the narration of history to the imagination of the future. For instance, in director Jia Zhangke's 贾樟柯 film *Platform* (Zhantai 站台, 2000), the coexistence of fading socialist slogans on desolate infrastructures and burgeoning capitalist bourgeois elements, such as bell-bottom trousers, perms, and cassette boom-boxes, displays a moving image of disappearance and appearance in the socialist-turned-consumerist society. The soundtrack

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<sup>69</sup> About "nonsynchronism or noncontemporaneity," see Bliss Cua Lim's "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film as Historical Allegory" in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9.2 (2001) 287-329.

of the film highlights such a moving image by way of the socialist revolutionary songs vanishing away and popular songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan replacing them. While the diegetic sound of the film constructs and emphasizes temporality and the presentness of social reality. The film is replete with coexistent images of socialist residues and capitalist sprouts as well as hybridized fashion in the post-socialist period. Through those elements, Jia Zhangke creates a nostalgia to eulogize the loss of time and space in the social transition. While Jia's *Platform* mainly manifests a nostalgia for the loss of time, another Sixth Generation film, Wang Xiaoshuai's 王小帅 *Beijing Bicycle*, expresses a nostalgia for the loss of space. For example, the final scene of young people chasing each other on bicycles in traditional Beijing alleys (*hutong* 胡同) showcases the quickly disappearing Beijing cityscape. It points to the social feature of post-socialist China with dilapidated architecture and semi-demolished buildings. Overall, these Sixth Generation directors' lament the loss of time and space not as a "restorative" nostalgia that longs for a lost society, but rather as a "reflective" nostalgia<sup>70</sup> for time and space as universal sentiments to attract both domestic and international audiences.

Since 1992, when Deng Xiaoping made his "southern tour" speech and the Party Congress radicalized the socialist-market-economy as official state policy, Chinese society has stepped into an intersection of confronting ideological forces. In order to grasp the essence of contemporary Chinese society, it is necessary to understand the cultural politics of post-socialism, late capitalism, and the logic of its global expansion. In the context of China, the post-socialist condition can be examined via three indicies: *post-socialism vs. socialism*, *post-socialism vs. post-socialism*, and *post-socialism vs. globalization*, which

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<sup>70</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic books, 2001, 49.

intertwine with each other leading to mutual influence, and which are manifested in cultural products. In this section, I will explain the first index; the other two will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

*Post-socialism vs. Socialism:* post-socialism as a periodizing concept and a historical condition in China fully blossomed in the 1990s. Post-socialism in China combines mainly the capitalist economy with communist politics, directly leads to socioeconomic changes, and further ignites cultural interventions, reflections, and negotiations in the transitional society. The flourishing yet controversial post-socialist condition attracts attention and also arouses debates among scholars. Arif Dirlik sees post-socialism not as the end of socialism; it rather offers socialist opportunities for renewal and transformation.<sup>71</sup> The aim of post-socialism is to use capitalism to expedite socialist construction. However, some scholars have a different viewpoint. Paul Pickowicz considers post-socialism as “a negative and dystopian condition that prevails in later socialist societies”<sup>72</sup> Though these scholars hold divergent opinions, both of them analyze conflicts and continuities between post-socialism and the residue of socialism. I am inclined to view China’s post-socialism as a transitional period that does not have static and fixed temporality but is rather a fluctuating and dynamic situation. Change becomes the most prominent feature of the post-socialist condition, though most of the changes involve demolition and reconstruction. Post-socialism enables people, especially intellectuals and policymakers, an opportunity to rethink the whole socialist system and come up with applicable reforms.

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<sup>71</sup> Arif Dirlik, “Postsocialism? Reflection on ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.’” in Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, eds., *Marxism and the Chinese Experience*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989, 362-384.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Pickowicz, “Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism” in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1994, 60.

In the context of China, the post-socialist period of the 1990s and onward is quite distinct from the post-Mao period of the 1980s, which is illustrated by the coexistence and conflation of fading socialist revolutionary legacy and burgeoning capitalist materialism and consumerism. Taking the prevailing trend of reinventing the Red Classics in contemporary China as an example, it first echoes the state's ideology to acclaim its inheritance of the socialist revolutionary legacy in order to enhance its legitimacy. Meanwhile, it is also influenced by the state's politics of depoliticizing socialism by eradicating or de-revolutionizing the socialist revolutionary legacy for the sake of conforming to the current ideology of economic development. In a nutshell, in these reinvented Red Classics and espionage fiction and films, socialist revolutionary legacy has been sublimated but also castrated. The role of socialism now is merely a symbolical guardian of ideology.

Chinese film critic Dai Jinhua 戴锦华 regards Fifth generation filmmakers as “the son generation” (子一代) and “the patricidal generation” (弑父的一代).<sup>73</sup> However, compared with Fifth generation filmmakers' sentimental entanglements with the father, his absence in Sixth Generation filmmaking is actually more patricidal. The masculine and patriarchal discourse has increasingly disappeared in Sixth Generation films, which are substituted by solitary wanderers. For instance, *Mama* (妈妈, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1990), *Beijing Bastard* (Beijing zazhong 北京杂种, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993), *Xiao Wu* (小武, dir. Jia Zhangke, 1997), *So Close to Paradise* (Biandan guniang 扁担姑娘, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 1999) and *Beijing Bicycle* (Shiqisui de danche 十七岁的单车, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001) all

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<sup>73</sup> Dai Jinhua, *Wuzhong Fengjing: Zhongguo dianying wenhua, 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化, 1978-1998. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006.

featured the absence or marginalization of a father. Sixth Generation directors strive to cast off the patriarchal shadow and the father complex. They focus on narrating their own growing experience and representing their unique youthhood. Fatherlessness or the absent father in Sixth Generation films is a symptom of the era mingled with directors' personal sentiments. Sixth Generation filmmakers are enamored with portraying young people's predicament, disillusionment and displacement in post-socialist society. Many of them choose nostalgia as narrative strategy to contrast the socialist and post-socialist conditions. In the following paragraphs, I will choose three important media representations of father-son tales to closely examine the post-socialist nostalgia for the socialist past. The three films are 2012 Wang Xiaoshuai's *11 Flowers*, 1996 Wang Shuo's *I Am Your Dad* and 2005 Zhang Yang's *Sunflower*.

All of the three films demonstrate the absence and impotence of the father. This signifies a decline of the patriarchal political power that was embodied by strong and robust men, who were once symbols of high-level productivity and the mainstay of the modern nation. The new socio-economic transformation subversively weakens the dominance of father in the traditional youth narrative, and at the same time creates new prototypes of rebellious youth.

In the three visual texts that I choose here, we can find not only the facts of absence or impotence of the father in youth narrative, but also the different ways that the father figure is disempowered and the political and cultural implications of this absence, impotence, and disempowerment. Moreover, the films that I discuss here reflect how Sixth Generation filmmakers imagine the socialist past and demonstrate their attitudes toward the post-socialist present.

## **(1) Post-socialist Nostalgia for the Socialist Past in *11 Flowers***

- **Post-socialist Nostalgia for the Socialist Past and the Nostalgic Amnesia**

Ancient nostalgia is about the pain of ignorance, of not knowing, of nonrecognition, such as in Odysseus's homecoming. Modern nostalgia is mourning for the impossibility of return. Marshall Berman defines nostalgia as a term coined in the nineteenth century to describe a modern feeling that implies longing for the recent past destroyed by industrialization.<sup>74</sup> John Su reinforces this epistemological notion of nostalgia, incorporating a longing to return to a lost homeland.<sup>75</sup> John Frow argues that nostalgia seeks the absence that generates the mechanism of desire that lies in ontological homelessness.<sup>76</sup> Turning from ancient and modern nostalgia to a contemporary postmodern nostalgia, Frederic Jameson claims that postmodern nostalgia is a commodified cultural product merely recapturing and representing certain ways of viewing the past, which offers false realism to efface history and distort memory.<sup>77</sup> John Su briefly disentangles the relation between memory and nostalgia by arguing that memory signifies intimate personal experiences, which often differ with institutional history, and that nostalgia is a false appropriation of those experiences or an effort to recast such experiences. Therefore nostalgia can be viewed as a form of amnesia.

The aforementioned authors and theorists' ideas on nostalgia are based on their observations of postmodern and capitalist societies. The post-socialist reinvention of a

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<sup>74</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

<sup>75</sup> John Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*. UK: Cambridge Press, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> John Frow, "Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia," in *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays on Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Oxford University Press, 1997. pp.123-51.

<sup>77</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.

socialist past also inextricably involves nostalgia. Svetlana Boym elaborates on nostalgia in post-socialist countries. According to Boym, nostalgia can be retrospective or prospective, restorative and reflective.<sup>78</sup> She thinks that post-socialist nostalgia is self-reflective, which “is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude.”<sup>79</sup> I am inclined to understand post-socialist nostalgia for the socialist revolutionary past as a form of self-reflective amnesia. Because post-socialist nostalgia is frequently reified by the motifs of “searing age” and “innocent youth.” It romanticizes the troubled past and eroticizes the revolutionary frenzy. Such nostalgia is an obliteration of historical reality, a construction of a culture, a fashion, a consumer’s need, and a psychological comfort.

In early Fifth Generation filmmaking, directors were nostalgic about the pre-modern society that was replete with primitive passions.<sup>80</sup> In their films of the 1980s and the mid-1990s, Fifth Generation directors fantasized Chinese origins associated with socially oppressed classes such as women, the indigenous, ethnic minorities, and peasants from the backward countryside. Meanwhile, the motif of the primitive, rural peasant is largely adopted as the pure origin of China in these films for the sake of reviving the nation. Hence, the primitivism in Fifth Generation nostalgic films has a duality: it carries the directors’ ideal of reinventing China as the victimized third world nation but also an empire with glorious civilization.

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<sup>78</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Book, 2001.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 49-50.

<sup>80</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.



Fifth Generation's myth of primitivity shares the same cultural logic as the myth of national character in the May Fourth literature. According to Lydia Liu's incisive observation on the myth of national character in Lu Xun's stories, Chinese intellectuals, under the impact of the western discourses, engendered the myth of national character by adopting themes of alienation, otherization and Europeanization.<sup>81</sup> In stories of national character, China has been positioned as an imagined space within which nation and country are constructed. In Fifth Generation films, nostalgic primitivity is represented by fantastic spectacles involving the countryside, indigenous people, and folkloric agrarian culture. These visual representations reconstruct China as a temporally belated and spatially exotic nation.

The primitive China in early Fifth Generation films is often embodied by the subaltern who represents the nation under the control of patriarchal and ancestral rule. For example, the oppressed women in Zhang Yimou's films demonstrate the intact and primitive origin of Chinese ethnography. Chen Kaige's films express his philosophical contemplations on the relationship between Chinese literati and traditional Chinese culture through his demonstration of male narcissism in films, such as *Yellow Earth*, *Life on a String*, and *King of the Children*. Even if *Farewell My concubine* is about transgender people, it discusses the conflict between power and traditional artistic culture and stresses an allegorical expression of national cultural identity.

Fifth Generation films also disclose primitive passions via folkloric elements inherited from traditional agrarian culture for the sake of reinventing a pure and unscathed

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<sup>81</sup> Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity-China, 1900-1937*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. pp. 259-378.

origin of national culture. For example, the acid tone in *Yellow Earth*, the three-stringed Chinese lute in *Life on A String*, the wine making in *Red Sorghum*, the dying mill in *Judou*, the shadow play in *To Live*, and the meticulous handiwork and rustic utensils in *The Road Home*, all convey the message that agrarian culture or peasant knowledge is the origin of the Chinese civilization.

Early Fifth Generation nostalgic filmmaking might be characterized as primitive; however in the 1990s, under the impact of market economy and the lure of the profit of entertainment film industry, Fifth Generation directors switched their concerns from the myth of primitivity to warm-sentimentalism. Examples include Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* (Fengyue 风月, 1996), *The Emperor and the Assassin* (Jing Ke ci Qinwang 荆轲刺秦王, 1999), *Together with You* (Heni zaiyiqi 和你在一起, 2002), and Zhang Yimou's *Shanghai Triad* (Yao a yao, yaodao waipoqiao 摇啊摇, 摇到到外婆桥, 1995), *Not One Less* (Yige dou buneng shao 一个都不能少, 1999), *The Road Home* (Wode fuqin muqin 我的父亲母亲, 1999). Film scholar Rey Chow opines that Fifth Generation directors' embrace of sentimentalism with domesticity is the extension of their obsession with primitivity because the house contains the most primordial relationship in the quotidian life. The family is the arena of conflict, compromise, and reconciliation. The prevalence of nostalgic sentimentalism in Chinese cinema at the turn of the twentieth century can be viewed as the emergence of an alternative political language and ideology to pacify the public nervousness as the state gradually lost its authority through social changes.

Entering the new millennium, the patricidal Fifth Generation directors re-established the image of father in their films to reconcile with the father whom they once denounced. The father is no longer negative and morbid, but bears and endures his plight

with stoicism and fortitude. For instance, the Emperor Qin in Zhang Yimou's blockbuster *Hero* (Yingxiong 英雄, 2002) is not a tyrant but a powerful and fatherly founder of the Chinese kingdom; the silent father with enduring loyalties in the tear-jerker *The Road Home*; and the father-like teacher in Chen Kaige's *Together with You*. The return of father and the reconciliation between father and son become the theme of Fifth Generation films during this period.

Nostalgic and sentimental films dominate contemporary Chinese cultural production. This situation is under the impact of the shift of biopower from industrial production to post-industrial reproduction of life that is characterized by immaterial labor such as domestic service and affective labor in the globalized age. The narrative strategy of post-socialist nostalgic cultural products in the capitalist globalized era is to depoliticize political ideologies into the fragments and trivialities of the lives of ordinary people. In a socialist-turned-consumerist society, such a production of nostalgia should be understood dialectically. On the one hand, nostalgia for the socialist past is a reaction against the present consumer society; on the other hand, it is a fabricated cultural product used to cater to the tastes and sentiments of Chinese consumers.

There is a tendency among Fifth Generation directors to forget their traumatic past. Their nostalgia for the present is to recall past sorrows and savor present joys. Memory in Fifth Generation nostalgic films serves to reinvent history under impacts of rampant consumerism that is to some extent as a threat to erase it. History is located in personal life, tradition, everyday practices and a mythical past in Fifth Generation nostalgic films. Compared to Fifth Generation, Sixth Generation filmmakers, as the post-revolutionary generation, also choose nostalgia as a narrative strategy to tell their coming-of-age stories

for the purpose of portraying the predicament, disillusionment, and displacement of youth in post-socialist society. There is a crucial difference between Fifth Generation and Sixth Generation's nostalgia, which can be ascribed to the different financial circumstances to start their cinematic careers.

Fifth Generation directors were offered opportunities to make their own films right after their graduation in the early 1980s. At that time, state-owned studios provided them with sufficient subsidies as well as relatively more creative freedom. Hence, young graduates were able to experiment with innovative techniques and establish their own styles. As Chinese scholar Dai Jinhua notes, because of Fifth Generation directors' attachment to the state system of production, distribution, and exhibition, the only elements that those directors do not need to care about are market and audience. However, after the collapse of state-owned studios and with the increasing commodification of China, Fifth Generation directors have to dance with post-socialist marketization and commercialization.

Due to the complete collapse of the socialist planned economy in China, Sixth Generation directors were not able to get an assigned job in state-owned film studios unlike Fifth Generation. They had to make films outside the state system, and largely rely on very low budgets from individual investors or overseas funding. Most of Sixth Generation films are not allowed to be screen in China. Therefore, in the past their primary markets were the international audience and art film festivals. However, in recent years, due to the circulation of multinational capital and under the prevailing vogue of co-production, Sixth Generation directors have started to make films that are funded by both

the state and overseas investors. This of course leads to the concomitant change of their primary market and unavoidable compromises.

The different circumstances of Fifth and Sixth Generations filmmakers' cinematic careers have led to their different attitudes regarding economic and social reforms in post-socialist China. Fifth Generation directors, though in an ideologically rigid but politically loose pre-postsocialist period (from 1976-1989), foresee the imminent arrival of social transformation and insist on rethinking the socialist ideals in their films. Their work obviously demonstrates doubts about socialist ideology, and moreover it foregrounds their optimistic determination to the still unsettled reform. For instance, in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, a girl named Cuiqiao crosses the Yellow River on a small boat. Her fate is unknown. This setting manifests Fifth Generation directors' resolute determination to an unsettled future. They embrace the imminent change even if its direction and result are opaque and unsettled. While Sixth Generation directors are active in an era known for its relatively flexible politics and ideology, changes have already occurred and been settled; however, their films are replete with ambiguity, anxiety and manifest indetermination about the validity of reform.

In terms of nostalgic personal memory and grand historical reality, Fifth Generation grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and much of their adolescence was spent in the countryside as rusticated youth. The ten-years of socio-political chaos is a haunting topic in their films. The three leading figures of Fifth Generation filmmakers Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang all made films about their memories of the Cultural Revolution: *Farewell My Concubine*, *King of Children*, *To Live* and *The Blue Kite*, respectively. They shun directly tackling the irrational passion and fever of the Cultural Revolution, but

choose a philosophical and contemplative way to practice their deconstruction of history. They avoid explicit ideological expression and clear-cut socialist realist fashion, but use dense and obscure visual images to display the primitive, desolate and intact “yellow earth” where they set their discussion of history and reality, civilization and barbarism, peace and violence, collectivism and individualism, society and nature, among other binarisms. The Cultural Revolution and its historical narration become eternal metaphors in Fifth Generation films.

Sixth Generation directors’ independent or underground status and their struggle to come above the ground make them enamored with the marginal and powerless people in the real world; they are attracted by the fragments and trivialities of daily life. They do not deal with politically sensitive topics but allude to them indirectly. Sixth Generation directors are not interested in criticizing state politics, and they all choose to keep themselves away from official discourse, instead portraying a fractured China undergoing immense reform. Sixth Generation filmmakers reject the sentimentalism favored by Fifth Generation, and embrace a post-socialist critical realism<sup>82</sup> as opposed to both the socialist realism and entertainment sentimentalism. They emphasize on-the-spot spontaneity, immediacy and documentary directness to establish an observational style. By doing so, they invoke the audience to reflect on various social issues newly emerging in the reform era.

Sixth Generation filmmakers focus on individual experience. Historical events and socio-political turmoil retreat into an indiscernible background. For example, the Cultural

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<sup>82</sup> Jason McGrath, “The New Formalism: Mainland Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Century” in Paul Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, eds. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Cultural in Contemporary China*, New York: Powman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.

Revolution and the Tiananmen incident become structuring absence in most of their films. Sixth Generation directors were mostly born in the 1960s, so the Cultural Revolution was only a small part of their early childhood. They are not interested in the broad sweep of history, and the Cultural Revolution is not a heavy spiritual shackle for Sixth Generation. Sixth Generation directors concentrate on personal accounts of young people's experience including childhood memory. Sixth Generation's personal memoir of the Cultural Revolution and socialist past is replete with sex, friendship, and self-discovery, which is different from scar literature. However, their unreliable memory make them incapable of suturing fragmented experience to represent the times they live in, and results in their collective ambivalence towards history.

Unlike Fifth Generation's obsession with grand narrative, and national and historical allegories, Sixth Generation directors probe into how social and political upheavals bring humanistic distortion to their parental generation that indirectly leads to the incapability of communication between father and son. All these are represented by indifferent kinship, remarriage not for emotion, love, but mechanically to form a family in their films, such as the reorganization of single-parent families in Zhang Yuan's *Seventeen Years* (Guonian huijia 过年回家, 1999) and Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle*, as well as the non-kinship lineage in Li Yang's 李杨 *Blind Shaft* (Mangjing 盲井, 2003). In these films, Sixth Generation directors show economic growth under a strong, state-controlled political system, and include themes as the crisis of faith, the rebellious and delinquent youth, the drifting population, among others. Modernity, fragmentation, rootlessness, loneliness and alienation are recurrent themes in Sixth Generation filmmakers' works, all of which allude to the traumatic effects of history.

Benjamin once argued against modernity's complacency with the past, that is, the way that a "future-oriented" present understands the past only insofar as it serves the aims of the future.<sup>83</sup> Nostalgia proffers a present-oriented past (nostalgia is originally aroused by the present and so the present is a future to the past, a present for the contemporary present) blending with a future-oriented present (the present anxiety is caused by the uncertainty of the future), and the future's absence creates a sense of haunting presence in nostalgic films. All past epochs have unfulfilled expectations for the future, and the future-oriented present is consigned to a corresponding past through reminiscence. Nostalgic films capture and represent the collective anxiety towards an uncertain future pervasive in post-socialist Chinese society during the global age.

Nostalgia claims the falsehood of memory in history. Sixth Generation's nostalgia is prone to perplexity. They resort to their own experience and people that they are familiar with to explore various social and cultural problems in post-socialist China. This self-pathetic youth narrative carries a deep narcissist sentiment. Sixth Generation's fragmented views of history make their memory doomed to be a palimpsest and partial amnesia. Their view on post-socialist reform and globalization are neither affirming nor annihilating. This inexplicit and ambiguous attitude towards the sociopolitical anarchy pervades their films.

According to Benjamin, representations of history in language, script, and images are always fragmentary and allegorical, that separate themselves from historical "facts." The power of the past is captured in the present through a pastiche representation of the

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<sup>83</sup> Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The ghost film as historical allegory" in *positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9.2 (2001), 287-329.



past.<sup>84</sup> Based upon this point, Wang Xiaoshuai's *11 Flowers* provides us a typical example through its nostalgic narrative. *11 Flowers* relates an incident in 11-year-old Wang Han's boyhood. It portrays the material and spiritual deprivations of the Cultural Revolution as also the universal condition of childhood, a period characterized by intense curiosity and profound cluelessness. The film focuses on the personal experience of pre-adolescence protagonist Wang Han, whose family has been relocated to Guizhou from Shanghai as part of Mao's Third Front campaign. The story revolves around Wang Han's searching for his lost white shirt, which is a luxury to honor his leading position at school's daily calisthenics. The white shirt is stolen by a young murderer to stanch the bleeding of his wound when Wang Han encounters him on the run in the mountains. The fugitive killed the man who raped his younger sister. In the end, the fugitive is caught and executed. This incident marks the transition of Wang Han from childhood naïveté to a firmer understanding of the world around him. All these memories are fixed in the teen Wang Han's mind.

The film is close to a patchwork of the director Wang Xiaoshuai's personal memoir of his coming-of-age in the late Cultural Revolution era. He uses a subjective point of view to restore and reproduce a bygone historical era from a child's perspective. The nostalgically presented elements and items characterizing that period suffuse the film, including the teen-gang violence of Red Guards, revolutionary patriotic anthems that blare from loudspeakers and propaganda slogans on the factory wall (see Figure 2.2). Bergson states that memory creates the virtual past and the past has its own virtual reality. In the film, history has been visualized and trivialized into the quotidian life, and compressed into personal segmented memory. Memory becomes a locale for re-engaging with history and a

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<sup>84</sup> Azade Seyan, "Visual citations: Walter Benjamin's dialectic of text and image." In *Languages of Visuality: Crossing between science, art, politics, and literature*. 229-41.

source for people to reestablish community bonds. In this nostalgia film, the director focuses on the personal, but the historical and the political periodically intrudes, through Wang Han's eyes, the Cultural Revolution is not so much an exercise in ideological excess, but the periodic explosion of street rampage. Wang Han experiences his growth evolution alongside societal anarchy. He is incapable to have a clear cognition of the society around him, but is able to sense obscurity, indistinctness and irreflectiveness of his boyhood. The last scene of the film shows that Wang Han chasing the patrol wagon of the fugitive but suddenly stopping with a perplexed facial expression. A grown Wang Han narrates that he could not remember if he heard the gun shot but shortly after China experienced major upheavals including the death of Premier Zhou Enlai, Chief Commander Zhu De and Chairman Mao as well as the termination of the Cultural Revolution. All these memories are fixed in his mind when he was 11 years old. This perpetual hallucination echoes Sixth Generation's collective ambiguity and uncertainty toward the past and the future. What is more, the impossibility of communication between people and the time. As the country shifts into its next phase, its future remains unpredictable and ambiguous as Wang Han's teenage years.



Fig. 2.2 Film still of *11 Flowers*

### • **The Haunted Memory and The Specter of History**

Fifth Generation's relation to historical myths and national allegories reflects their adolescent experiences during a politically chaotic period and their collective enchantment and disenchantment of the socialist utopian ideals. The imagined nostalgia of Sixth Generation films manifests their disengagement from grand history and attachment to personal memory. Chinese film critic Dai Jinhua opines that Fifth Generation's memories of the Cultural Revolution and the post-Cultural Revolution is to denounce father, is the carnival of the son generation, is the revolution of defying the state system within the system.<sup>85</sup> Fifth Generation directors make films in state-owned studios, but they challenge the state system by castrating the order of father as a metaphor for the state, overturning and reconstructing the empirical father.

Sixth Generation takes a different approach. They are out of favor of the state system. Their marginal status disentangles them from a heavy historical burden. The traumatic memory of Cultural Revolution, hidden in Fifth Generation allegorical tales, becomes merely the aspect of Sixth Generation's coming of age stories, and nurtures nostalgia in Sixth Generation's cruel stories of youth. In *11 Flowers*, the brutality of the political movement and the violence between Red Guards and the conservatives that the protagonist Wang Han witnesses are regarded as part of the inevitable pain of coming of age (see Figure 2.3). The film adopts a first-person shot with a slow, static, and sometimes voyeuristic distance; close-ups are rarely used. The plot unfurls elliptically. The protagonist Wang Han is an observer as his eyes peek through windows and the bathroom steam; in

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<sup>85</sup> Dai Jinhua, *Wuzhong Fengjing: Zhongguo dianying wenhua, 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化, 1978-1998. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006, 53.

this way, information leaks through from the adult world mostly in the form of glimpsed interactions and overheard conversations (see Figure 2.4). He eavesdrops on his friends discussing the murderer at the river, his parents and other adults discussing politics at the dinner table, and his older schoolmates gossiping about the rape of a young girl. All of these scenes represent Wang Han's confusion of and disconnection from the ongoing revolution. He overhears something, but is incapable of interpreting and understanding the reality. This might represent the relationship between Sixth Generation filmmakers and the history of the Cultural Revolution. That is, Sixth Generation directors did not participate in the Cultural Revolution they observed and witnessed it through a veil of mist, which haunts their memories. Therefore, they try to recapture every tiny scrap of memory through their cinematic nostalgia. The director restores these mementos and plants them into Wang Han's coming of age story.



Fig. 2.3-2.4 Film still of *11 Flowers*

In terms of the father and son relationship, although the father is only back to home once a month from his working unit, warmth suffuses family relations in the film, especially when Wang Han spends time alone with his art-loving father Wang Boju. Wang Boju works in an out-of town opera theatre. Each time he commutes to work, he accompanies Wang Han part of the way to school. It becomes an important ritual that cements their bond (see

Figure 2.5). Wang Boju teaches Wang Han how to appreciate famous foreign paintings, takes him to observe and sketch still life scenes from nature and encourages him to become a painter. Wang Boju explains impressionist paintings with the hope of letting his son evade ugly and hideous things and always keep eyes on discovering and enjoying the beauty of life (see Figure 2.6). Although Wang Han seems not really understand why his father wants him to be a painter, he enjoys spending time with his doting father.



Fig. 2.5-2.6 Film still of *11 Flowers*

Political turmoil and monstrous revolution is so implicable and is vaguely unfolded in this coming-of-age film. The societal influence and the revolution's manipulation loom large in Wang Han's personal growth and psychological trajectory. There is a scene in the film when Wang Han and his parents see the fugitive's father and sister in distance at the entrance of prison, all of them stand silently without any facial expression (see Figure 2.7-2.8). They are witnesses and the specters of history. This horrific picture and the narrative innuendo announce a truth: all of them avoid historical truth, and the bloody fact has been hidden in depth.



Fig. 2.7-2.8 Film still of *11 Flowers*

## **(2) Post-socialist Dilemmas in *I Am Your Dad* and *Sunflower***

If we view the nation as a large family, the authoritative figure is the leader and the father. It is notable that since the mid-1990s, China has shifted its emphasis from political control over social issues to developing the economy. Every aspect of society was restructured at this time. As a result, the image of the Chinese government as an iron fist ruler was no longer appropriate. Traditionally, the father is the representative of ancestral control and order and is associated with agricultural civilization. Due to the gradual collapse of traditional socialist ideology along with an emergent capitalist globalization in the 1980s, despotic patriarchy and nationalist patriotism, which have long been embodied in the image of the father, lose their position of domination in popular representations of youth stories. Family melodramas during this period are sociopolitical metaphors that focus on tensions within family relationships and on changing family mores as China undergoes modernization. Confronting rapid economic development along with immense spiritual challenges, the previously authoritative father is impotent and incapable to quickly adjust to the new-socio-economic transition toward a market mechanism. The father's diminished role in media representations informs China's epochal turn from priority-to-politics to priority-to-economy.

*I Am Your Dad* is the famous, Chinese contemporary writer Wang Shuo's first and only directorial film. It is based on Wang's 1991 novel. The film documents the tumultuous relationship between a widowed inadequate father, Ma Linsheng, and his rebellious teenage son, Ma Che, as they adjust to life together after the death of the mother. Ma Linsheng works as a low-level party functionary. During the day, he is the head of a worker's committee but only in charge of some trivial public business and has no respect from his colleagues. At night, he tries to regain his authority at home, but finds more challenges and frustrations in raising his son. The father-son relationship is constantly volatile. Sometimes, Ma Linsheng makes sincere attempts to bond with Ma Che by creating a miniature family "democracy," and at other times he falls back to being a blustering tyrant who insists on his son's absolute obedience (see Figure 2.9-2.10). The film displays a sharp contrast between the public and private faces of the father as a feature of post-socialist society. The highly formalized ideology associated with socialist bureaucratic authoritarianism has been deeply rooted in the father's generation. However, young people's nature to pursue liberty is increasingly expressed by the son's generation. When large-scale social and economic reforms threaten and affect every stratum of society, Ma Linsheng finds himself unable to secure a position in the changing world, so he strives to keep his authority in the domestic household. This makes Ma Che despise his incompetence and cowardice. All of these lead to an irreconcilable contradiction between Ma Linsheng and Ma Che.



Fig. 2.9-2.10 Film still of *I Am Your Dad*

The film is a deeply perceptive study of the psychology of power and family relationships and also a revelation about the dilemmas of urban Chinese in the reform era. Ma Linsheng is portrayed as a powerless or disempowered patriarch. He is obsequious outside the family but demands his son's unconditional submission to his fatherhood inside the family, including denying his son any personal privacy. In Chinese tradition, the patriarchal authority overrides other moral norms. Parents, especially the father, have the complete right in the domestic territory, and this is regarded as the unalterable and unquestionable principle from Heaven. Deeply affected by this thought, Ma Linsheng in the film justifies his right to inspect the son's private belongings. Although Ma Linsheng is aware that his behavior is no longer appropriate in the new social structure, he refuses to admit his failure in retaining the name of the father, as he defends himself by saying, "why don't you understand what I do is for your own good?" Ma Che sardonically responds, "why don't you understand I don't need what you did for my own good." Both Ma Linsheng's success and failure, as a father as well as the bitter father-son relationship, exhibit the struggle and helplessness of two generations of Chinese people.

Post-socialist policies loosen social and political restrictions, and this complicated traditional ethics and values. Parental authority is a legitimate authority in the Chinese



tradition. However, it becomes more fragile and insecure in the post-socialist period, when everything turns from politics to economics. Ma Linsheng has been defeated by this reality and beholds his own incompetence even before his son's denunciation. Ma Linsheng's dilemmas mirror the collective agony in the post-socialist period. He belongs to the mainstream of the city and is the representative of the urban petty philistine. However, the social structural transformation and economic reforms subversively weaken his fatherhood by exposing his economic inferiority and social awkwardness as manifested in this film. It establishes a representational mode on the post-socialist family melodrama in which fathers are inevitably disempowered and marginalized in China's socio-economic transition toward a market mechanism. Ma Linsheng, and many other Chinese people like him, cannot adjust to the post-socialist structure. They are anxious to maintain the ramshackle order and the tottering authority, which leads to a contradiction between prosperous socio-economic transformation and the dilemmas of the father's generation.

- ***Sunflower***

The relationship between parents and their growing children took the central stage of the post-socialist family melodrama. Sixth Generation director Zhang Yang's Father-Son Trilogy *Shower* (Xizao 洗澡, 1999), *Quitting* (Zuotian 昨天, 2001) and *Sunflower* (Xiangrikui 向日葵, 2005) focuses on the tensions within the domestic household between two generations. The father-son tales indicate the decline of the patriarchal system of the nation as well as shifting power relation between young reformists and old conservatists in the transitional era. What is more, Zhang's generational trilogy also provides a social metaphor to the disappearance and demolition caused by social reforms.

*Sunflower* tells the story of a troubled father-son relationship across three decades in post-Cultural Revolution Beijing, accompanying with tumultuous social changes. It adopts a simple and conventional melodramatic structure, but paradoxically stretches a panorama of social and political changes in China during the late 20th century, and demonstrates how historical experience and social changes have shaped human character and personality. The film is split into three segments spanning thirty years. The first segment flashes backward to 1976, the 9-year-old boy Zhang Xiangyang confronts the return of his father Zheng Gengnian, who is an upright painter, but can no longer draw after several years of re-education in a labor camp during the Cultural Revolution. Zheng Gengnian tries to demonstrate love through domination and discipline. He furiously tames Zhang Xiangyang and forces the son to realize his lost ambition as an artist. Zhang Xiangyang rebels and willfully refuses to follow orders. This leads to conflict between father and son for the next three decades has been formed.

In the subsequent two segments, set in 1987 and 1999, the family conflicts ebb and flow. By 1987, tremendous changes had occurred in China as the country opened itself to the world. Zheng Gengnian has looked forward to Zhang Xiangyang attending college. Zheng Gengnian remarks that Zhang Xiangyang is more talented than he was, and he has come to see Zhang Xiangyang as his own second chance. But Zhang Xiangyang falls in love with a young girl, and wants to master his own fate by leaving home with the girl for a new life. Zhang Gengnian prevents Zhang Xiangyang and makes the choice for him once again.

The narrative moves forward to 1999, the period in which most of China is turned upside down as the country rushes into modernization, and construction mingling with demolition marks the new outlook of Beijing. Zhang Xiangyang is a 32-year-old married

artist, but refuses to have children and become a father. Zhang Gengnian lives alone in the old, self-contained, isolated community. Both Zhang Xiangyang and his mother opt for materialistic pursuits and move to modern apartment. The spatial separation does not terminate the conflict between father and son. The film concludes with Zhang Gengnian's departure and a slim understanding between two generations.

The combat and struggle between father and son, to some extent, mirror the power struggles in Chinese society during a period of many changes, including 1976 Tangshan Earthquake, the death of Chairman Mao, the downfall of the Gang of Four, the economic revolution and so on. The upheavals in the father and son's lives parallel with those of the country, and the tension between tradition and modernity. The father and son represent the historical struggle in contemporary Chinese society between traditional collective values of sacrifice and deference to authority, and the self-involved individualism seeping into the social system with the new market economy. The communist elder generation fails to keep the younger, materialistic generation ideologically connecting to the past. The younger generation seeks to break away and immerse themselves in liberal lifestyles and values, but the son generation's pursuits always encounter opposition from the father generation. In the film, Zhang Xiangyang's struggle to define his own life apart from the destiny Zhang Gengnian has chosen for him reflects the aspiration of the entire son generation.

The three segments of the film represent three distinct sections of Zhang Xiangyang's life: boyhood, adolescence and young adult, each reflecting a time of great

changes in China. According to Lacan's idea of the mirror stage,<sup>86</sup> the infant establishes the mental representation of an 'I' by identifying with the external image, which serves as a gestalt of the infant's perceptions of selfhood. However, this external image or the Other does not correspond with the underdeveloped infant's physical vulnerability.

Reinterpreting Lacan's idea, throughout life, the difference between the projected image and his actual self, will continue disrupt the infant's experience of his own existence. The child will go on to elaborate a self-image based on his relations with other people. The mirror stage is an ongoing process, the child endlessly struggles in a loop of referring to and splitting with the external images during his growth. In the film, Zhang Gengnian as an external image has been absent for many years in Zhang Xiangyang's boyhood. When he returns, he finds an unfamiliar son, and Zhang Xiangyang finds a strange father. This unfamiliarity with father characterizes Zhang Xiangyang's whole boyhood (see Figure 2.11-2.12). In his adolescence, Zhang Xiangyang seeks an exemplary model to imitate for his transformation to an adult. Father is primarily the ideal model for this process, but Zhang Xiangyang's imitation of his father accompanies with the awareness of his individual self, he faces a dilemma: to become the person that father wants him to be, or to be himself? This problem without solution leads to constant conflict between father and son.

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<sup>86</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in *Ecrits: the First Complete Edition in English*, Bruce Fink and Heloise Fink translated, New York: W.W. Norton Co. 2006.



Fig. 2.11-12 Film still of *Sunflower*

Towards the end of the film, Zhang Gengnian comes to Zhang Xiangyang's art exhibition. The exhibition is held in a socialist factory workshop, it displays Zhang Xiangyang's paintings that record the growth of a boy in the socialist-turned-post-socialist period. The parents were painted in black and white, while the son was painted in red, and all the characters have a formulaic and stereotyped facial expression. The paintings demonstrate the continuity and discontinuity between generations. The son generation inherits something from the elder generation, but he demands difference, change and individuality. However, as the ball under the red flag, ideologically, the son generation gets influenced from revolutionary ideology, from which they strive to flee but in which they are inescapably enmeshed. Each painting has a corresponding photographic image in real life (see Figure 2.13-17). The imaginative personal memory and the historical photographs crystalize in this cinematic images. When Zhang Gengnian and Zhang Xiangyang sit in front of portraits of themselves, the father Zhang Gengnian initiatively holds the son Zhang Xiangyang's hand, at that moment the perpetual tension between two generations starts diluting (see Figure 2.18-20).



Fig. 2.13-15 Art exhibition in *Sunflower*



Fig. 2.16-17 Art exhibition in *Sunflower*



Fig. 2.18-20 Art exhibition in *Sunflower*

The art exhibition is divided into two sections: one side is the paintings of an ordinary family in different periods, and the other side is the parody of socialist revolutionary propaganda pictorials as well as capitalist commercial advertisements (see Figure 2.21-22). This sequence aptly demonstrates a contrast between the socialist past and the post-socialist present. Moreover, it indicates assimilation of different even contradictory ideologies in the post-socialist society.



Fig. 2.21-22 Juxtaposition of socialist pictures and capitalist advertisements

One of the remarkable characteristics of China’s modernization is that there is not only a disconnection of relations and affects inside a domestic household, but also the physical demolition and reconstruction of buildings, facilities and urban landscapes outside the family. Besides the fates of individual people in the social transformation, the film also pays attention to the outcome of modernization and industrialization since the launch of the “Reform and Open-up” policy. The director adopts a synchronic perspective and makes an outward comparison between domestic family conflicts and post-socialist modernization. Each of the three subsequent segments reveals the massive geographical changes in the urban landscape, as the high-rise buildings tower over communal courtyards and Zhang Gengnian rides his old bicycle passing construction sites (see Figure 2.23-25). Modernization demolishes the old urban infrastructure, and it brings irreversible changes to society. The closing scenes of *Sunflower* present a glimpse of the playfulness of elders in modern Beijing, where they gather to dance, to exercise, and frolic together in the city parks. The aging generation of father has been left out in the onrushing urban development, like the old communal courtyards waiting for their doomed fates. The director utilizes many long shots to display the status quo of contemporary China, a state of

construction alongside demolition, and expresses an elegiac regret for these devastated areas and these lost social arteries of the city. It symbolizes the sociopolitical fate of China, a vulnerable and precarious work in progress.



Fig. 2.23-25 Remolding area in Beijing

Ironically, in *I am Your Dad*, Ma Linsheng leaves home and remarks, “I am not competent to be your dad, so I quit.” In *Sunflower*, Zhang Gengnian also chooses to leave the family after Zhang Xiangyang shouts, “you are merely my dad, but you are not a good father.” However, Zhang Gengnian does not say his farewell words to his son directly, instead he records himself in a tape and confesses his perplexity about being a father. Zhang Gengnian physically disappears but his voice in the recording tape becomes his avatar that perpetually exists and haunts the family. Both fathers in these two films admit their failure and unload their parental burden. For the son generation, dad only signifies a biological connection, while father has spiritual connotation of protection and guidance. As the film title suggests --- *I am Your Dad*, is dad, but not father. Both father and son know that to call or to be called father is too difficult.

The Cultural Revolution changed the life of the father’s generation, and the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake shook its nerve. However, political movements did not directly shake the nerve of the son’s generation, but rather came from the elder generation, in the form of parental pressure, impossibility of controlling his own life, and so on. The three films



discussed here provide distinctive visual expressions of individual memory of the Cultural Revolution and other historical events. Sixth Generation directors avoid directly criticizing conventional politics, but the ideological gap between generations presented in their films still alludes to the political cruelty that causes the incommunicability between father and son.

## **II. The Revolution on Farewell to Revolution in *The Making of Steel* (长大成人, 1997)**

In Sixth Generation filmmaking, youth is a recurrent theme, and there seems to be a commonality among Sixth Generation coming-of-age films: evading responsibility under the weight of one's societal pressures. Sixth Generation directors' growing trajectory made them enamored with the youth powerlessness and vulnerability in coming of age. Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lu Xuechang, Lou Ye and other Sixth Generation directors stay away from the state system of production, distribution and exhibition. It is the marginal and powerless status in the film world that makes these independent Sixth Generation filmmakers be so attracted by people with a marginal status in the real world. Sharing a similar situation, Sixth Generation directors are able to portray the lost hopefulness of youth in general so vividly and accurately.

### **(1) The Coming of Age Theme in Sixth Generation Filmmaking**

The leading figures of Sixth Generation directors have made films on their coming-of-age respectively. Jia Zhangke's epic *Platform* focalizes a troupe of young people and their journey spanning over a decade from the days just after the Cultural Revolution to the days after the 1989 Tiananmen incident. Wang Xiaoshuai's trilogy on coming-of-age consists of three films *Beijing Bicycle* (Shiqisui de danche, 十七岁的单车, 2001, its Chinese title literally means "seventeen-year-old's bicycle") is set in the early 1990s depicting the

conflict between two seventeen-year-old boys and their respectively bitter experience of turning from adolescence into adulthood; *Shanghai Dream* (Qinghong 青红, 2005, its alternate Chinese title is “I am nineteen-year-old”) is set in the early 1980s and follows a family of urban exiles’ return journey to Shanghai; *11 Flowers* (Wo 11 我 11, 2011, literally “I am eleven-year-old”) occurred between 1974 and 1976, the searing day of the Cultural Revolution. Similarly, Lou Ye’s *Summer Palace* (Yihe yuan 颐和园, 2006) tells the story of a young student’s struggle and disillusionment spanning the June 4th protest of 1989 to the 2000s. Lu Xuechang 路学长 even chose “coming of age” as the title of his film *The Making of Steel* (Zhangda chengren 长大成人, 1997, its Chinese title literally is “coming of age”). The film is about a young man’s painful journey of growing up through the 1970s to the 1990s and his nostalgia for revolution in the post-revolutionary era. In those films, the director’s nostalgic stories negotiate between the residual socialist past and the emergent capitalist present from the perspective of perception and affects.

The young protagonists’ inevitable pain in coming of age is concomitant with the throes of social reform. All these films depict how young people’s ideals and imagination of a beautiful new world turn into disillusionment. When young protagonists’ innocent expectations are opposite to the society’s demand for material development, these young protagonists’ appeal inextricably ends up with doomed disillusionment. By portraying this process, Sixth Generation directors probe into the social problems in modern China when it economically transits from socialism to capitalism, but is politically enshrouded in post-socialist promiscuity under loose socialist ideology. They also closely examine how young people lose their position in the post-socialist economic growth under a strong state-

control political system. Sixth Generation directors express their ambiguous doubt for the validity of the material development at the cost of demolition.

In Sixth Generation films, young protagonists' coming of age always entangles with the sentimental display of adolescent sexuality. In Wang Xiaoshuai's *11 Flowers*, when the boy Wang Han and his father take shelter from the rain in the fugitive's house, the fugitive's father confesses to Wang Han's father of the personal shame the Cultural Revolution has brought him. Wang Han's focus vacillates between the adults' conversation and the girl, who is changing her clothes in the room. This scene evokes Wang Han's subtle sexual awareness (see Figure 2.26). In another Wang Xiaoshuai's film *Beijing Bicycle*, the rural boy Gui peeps through a crack in the wall at the girl Qin wearing fashionable clothes. The appearance of urban woman impresses him, though later it turns out that Qin is also a rural girl who stealthily wears her employer's clothes. In the sexual scene within the frame of the crack, Gui is actually becomes aware of his own libidinal desire rather than simply realizing his sexual differentiation. However, is he enamored with the female body or the colorful clothes (the symbol of capitalist materialism) that mark the urban identity? (see Figure 2.27) At this point, the young protagonist's ambiguity can be associated with the whole Sixth Generation's ambiguity concerning social reform.



Fig. 2.26-27 Film stills of *11 Flowers* and *Beijing Bicycle*

Thematically speaking, sentimentalism and social critique are inseparable in Sixth Generation films. Coming of age is no less painful than the structural changes in society that are inflicted on people. In those films, young protagonists have experienced the disillusionment of their ideals. Their adolescent desires always end with failure. Young protagonists' sentimental longing and sexual desire parallel the country's thirst for money and material development. What is more, young people's innocence and primitive sexual maturity is set as a contrast or counterpart to the state's frenzy of economic development and anxiety to emulate the world.

Sixth Generation directors resort to voiceover and reminiscent point of view to create a nostalgic atmosphere in their coming-of-age films. Lu Xuechang's *The Making of Steel*, Wang Xiaoshuai's *11 Flowers* and Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* all use voiceover to manifest the inability to recuperate temporal or spatial construction. These Sixth Generation nostalgic coming-of-age stories hint at a state of drifting and rootlessness and express an elegiac lament for youthful ideals in contemporary society. Besides voiceover, Sixth Generation directors also use dialects to illustrate how rural accents and dialects are used as class markers against the dominant Mandarin. Sixth Generation directors deviate from the Mandarin that Fifth Generation usually adopted. Instead they use dialects to give voice to underrepresented subjects and highlight young people's nature of rebellion to defy the authorities.

As a generation who is active in the post-socialist period with the state's gradual involvement with globalization, Sixth Generation directors make a parallel between marginalized individuals' experience and China's repositioning in globalization. In *Platform*, Jia Zhangke's epic narrative is constructed through the detached observation of a

group of ordinary young people coming of age in remote towns. Wang Xiaoshuai depicts coming of age stories in major cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Wuhan to represent displacement and disillusionment in urban adventures. This juxtaposition of coming of age and China's self-integration into the global system is prominent in Sixth Generation films. Most of the young protagonists are migrant workers and street drifters. For example, Gui is a migrant worker in *Beijing Bicycle*, and Zhou Qing is a street drifter and guitar player in *The Making of Steel*. The films juxtapose the city of Beijing and the young protagonists' aimless adventures to create an imagery of both the lure and the illusiveness of urbanization and globalization.

## **(2) Revolution on Farewell to Revolution in *The Making of Steel***

Lu Xuechang's debut film *The Making of Steel* was inspired by Nicolai Ostrobsky's 1936 socialist realist novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*. The Soviet novel features the coming-of-age of a Bolshevik hero and had been a popular classic in China since the 1940s. It was extremely influential in the socialist period and impacted a whole generation of youth during the 1950s and 1960s. The director's choice to use the book's title as his film's title provides significant meanings at two levels. First of all, the film explicitly pays homage to revolutionary idealism and reveals how dominant and authoritative this socialist revolutionary ideology was in China, even though its influence is clearly on the wane in the post-socialist era. Second, the film offers a simulation to the revolutionary classic from a postmodern perspective. Film critic Dai Jinhua comments that people who were born in the 1960s undergo a ruptured and fragmented ideology of the post-revolutionary society and

culture, which leads to a kind of cultural scarcity and anxiety.<sup>87</sup> Influenced by this mentality, Sixth Generation directors return to their coming-of-age tales to suture the rupture of ideology and patch up their fragmented memories and ideals.

The film chronicles the life of a generation of urban youth who grew up with the dim socialist idealism of Ostrovsky's novel but became socially alienated in the era of post-socialist reform. Spanning two decades of Chinese history, from the repressed seventies to the money-worshipping present, the film shows the story of its young protagonist, Zhou Qing, from boiler stoker to frustrated rocker in Beijing. In the end, the protagonist develops a sort of nostalgia for the revolution through the memory of a social-realist text from his childhood, entitled *How the Steel Was Tempered*.

There is an intertextual relationship between the film *The Making of Steel* and the socialist novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*. The protagonist Zhou Qing seems to be another Pavel Korchagin in the post-revolutionary period. His spiritual mentor and boxing teacher Zhu Helai even has a name transliterated from Fyodor Zhukhrai, who is the socialist realist hero in the novel and teaches Korchagin boxing. The film time and again mentions the Soviet socialist novel, and the protagonist imagines himself as Korchagin, who had suffered imprisonment in Siberia, just like he suffers in the post-revolutionary China (see Figure 2.8-30). The film provides a postmodern nostalgia for socialism and revolutionary ideology. The significance of this imagination lies in its emancipation from the collective ideology on moulding the individual subject during the revolutionary period and the possibility of realizing individuality in the context of the post-revolutionary era.

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<sup>87</sup> Dai Jinhua, *Wuzhong Fengjing: Zhongguo dianying wenhua, 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化, 1978-1998. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006, 525.



Fig. 2.28-30 Film still of *The Making of Steel*

In Sixth Generation coming-of-age films, young protagonists often choose to run away from home to realize their pursuit of individuality but their escape result in failure or return. For example, Zhang Xiangyang in *Sunflower* is stopped by his father on the train when he wants to go with his friends to do business in the south; Zhou Qing in *The Making of Steel* returns from a spell in Germany to a fast-track, unfamiliar Beijing. Those failed and lost Pavel Korchagins in the post-revolution period have to face their devastated spiritual world and endure the shock of the economic revolution as well as the aftershock of previous revolution. The young protagonists' running away from family is driven by their craving for a spiritual mentor due to the absence and impotence of the biological father. In Sixth Generation coming-of-age films, the spiritual father spectrally appears in youth narrative, which symbolically represents the lingering socialist ideology of the post-socialist period.

### **The Impotence of the Biological Dad and the Absence of the Spiritual Father**

The three films *I Am Your Dad*, *Sunflower* and *The Making of Steel*, to some extent, reveal the impotence or the castration of biological father. Fathers were traumatized in the socialist political movement and became powerless under economic pressure in post-socialist society. In Sixth Generation films, the father is either absent or impotent, and is not as powerful as the heroic father in the socialist revolutionary films or the feudalistic

patriarch in Fifth Generation historical allegories. The absence or impotence of father in the post-socialist melodramas challenges the traditional familism, and indicates the destruction and collapse of family in the reforming era. The lack of the father drives the young protagonist to search for a spiritual mentor. The complex of the father in Sixth Generation films is not like traditional Oedipus complex, and the young protagonists do not reject the Lacanian name of father or the symbolic order. They seek a fatherly guider who can help them enter into the symbolic order. According to Lacan, the name of the father is a central signifier that refers to the legislative and prohibitive function of the father and is a vital element helping a subject to enter the symbolic order. The subject becomes the subject upon entering the symbolic order. In the subject's process of socialization, the function of the father is associated with the laws and restrictions that control desire and confer identity and position in the outside, cultural world—the symbolic order. In the film, the young protagonist's denial of his biological father but search for a spiritual father affirms his emotional identification with a spiritual father. Both *Sunflower* and *The Making of Steel* screen, the 1976 Tangshan earthquake was a metaphor for the death of the great helmsman Chairman Mao who guided and led the public mind. Mao's death marks the termination of socialist revolutionary era, and the earthquake symbolizes the violence of the economic revolution on the masses' nerves. As a revolutionary mentor, Mao is regarded by generations of young Chinese as the spiritual father. His death symbolizes the collapse of communist belief, and the young generation has to look around for a spiritual mentor to accomplish his coming-of-age.

In *The Making of Steel*, the young protagonist Zhou Qing meets Zhu Helai, a taciturn and Bolshevikish train driver. Zhu inspires the young kid, and imbues Zhou Qing with a



sense of purpose as he explains the novel subtext to develop an iron will to deal with life's hardships. The fatherly persona is embodied by the character Zhu Helai as a spiritual guider (see Figure 2.31-32). There is a connection and also a separation between Zhu Helai, Zhou Qing in the film, and Zhukhrai, Korchagin in the novel. In the novel, Zhukhrai guides Korchagin, and introduces him to the revolutionary cause. Zhukhrai is a teacher who trains Korchagin to become a revolutionary soldier. While in the film, Zhou Qing first imagines himself as Pavel Korchagin, and then in his way to becoming Korchagin, he needs Zhu Helai to be his Zhukhrai. That is to say, in Zhou Qing's self-imagination as Korchagin, Zhu Helai is a mirror to reflect Zhou Qing's heroic reveries. When Zhou Qing returns to Beijing from Berlin in the late 1980s, he finds that he is surrounded by people to whom he can no longer relate. Feeling a lack of direction and an absence of heroic figures in the post-revolution generation, Zhou Qing tries to track down his spiritual mentor Zhu Helai. The disappearance of Zhu Helai and Zhou Qing's search for him indicate the complicated relationship between older and younger post-revolution generations. The heroic father has disappeared, but he appears spectrally and haunts the young generation's imagination. The son's generation rejects the biological father, and starts out on a journey to find a spiritual father. The character Zhu Helai is played by Fifth Generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang; this might allude to a subtle apprentice connection between Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers.



Fig. 2.31-32 Film still of *The Making of Steel*

In conclusion, the post-socialist youth stories often fall into two categories: an imagination of the socialist past through nostalgia and an exploration of the post-socialist dilemma through family melodrama. Both of these two tracks utilize father-son tales. The former highlights the powerful fatherly guidance in the bygone socialist era, and emphasizes the present regime's inheritance of socialist revolutionary legacy and its legitimacy; while the latter presents the disempowered father in the post-socialist era as the result of social reform, and protrudes the incompatibility of socialist revolutionary ideology to the context of contemporary social development. Since the 1990s, Chinese society has stepped into a post-revolutionary period after undergoing different socialist revolutions. The grand historical narrative is gradually replaced by the individual narrative. The heroic figure in the socialist narratives has been diminished and trivialized. In the post-socialist coming-of-age films, the image of the father is either absent or impotent. The son's generation defies the biological father but seeks the spiritual father. This ambivalent feeling toward father reflects the public agitation and a sense of uprootedness in the post-socialist society. In the post-socialist coming-of-age films, the image of the father is either absent or impotent. The son's generation defies the biological

father but seeks the spiritual father. This ambivalent feeling toward father reflects the public agitation and a sense of uprootedness in the post-socialist society.

### Chapter 3—Nothing to My Name: Rupture and Rebellion in the New Generation Youth Stories

I have asked you endlessly, when will you go with me?  
But you always laugh at me with, nothing to my name  
I want to give you my dreams, and give you my freedom.  
But you always laugh at me with, nothing to my name.  
When will you go with me?  
The earth beneath my feet is moving. The river beside me is flowing.  
But you always laugh at me with, nothing to my name.  
Why do you always laugh at me so? Why don't I give up?  
Why do you see me as, forever having nothing to my name?  
Just go with me now!  
Listen - I've waited so long, so I'll make my final request.  
I want to grab you by the hands, and take you with me.  
Now your hands are trembling, now your tears are falling.  
Perhaps you are saying, you love me with nothing to my name  
Just go with me now.  
---Cui Jian 崔健 <Nothing to My Name > (一无所有)

The previous chapter has explored the ways in which father-son tales are imbricated with youth narratives in post-socialist China. It focuses mainly on the continuity and discontinuity between socialism and post-socialism in the broader discursive context of China's domestic social transformation in the reform era. This chapter, however, will discuss how youth narratives portray the spiritual and material worlds of young people in post-socialist China as it has been gradually encroached on by capitalist globalization. Since youth narratives have become independent from national and political discourse, they have begun to reflect the social tensions and conflicts caused by China's integration into the world, particularly young people's plights, struggles, displacement, peripheralization and alienation, as represented in post-socialist Chinese literature and film. I will scrutinize representative literary and cinematic representations of young people's illusions and disillusionment in the global age.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the absent father, or fatherlessness, is a dominant pattern in Sixth Generation films. The motif of the denunciation of the father and symbolic patriarchal authority finds its resonance in the young protagonist's rebellious adventure. However, behind the young protagonist's personal rebellion and resistance is the collective anxiety of losing the spiritual father and the repudiation of the biological father. Such anxiety is the kernel of the traitorous mentality of the young generation that drives this generation to struggle and strive to shake off parental control. In Sixth Generation films, the father has been regarded as the incarnation of hegemonic social power, which the young protagonist neither has the power to change nor wants to succumb to. The pervasive anxiety of coming-of-age in Sixth Generation films is externalized by young people's dissociation, perplexity and delirium, caused by losing the aegis of the father, namely spiritual guidance. The spiritual motherland has been destroyed, and young people have to start their wandering. The young protagonist's forced homelessness and his self-awareness as the "Other" in Sixth Generation coming-of-age films reveal the identity struggles of young people in the age of great social mobility. The youth impulse in the socialist period is towards collectivity, while the post-socialist youth impulse is towards individuality---detachment, loneliness and drifting. However, those individual actions are ignited by a shared orphan mentality, and are inextricably linked to the collectivity of the post-socialist epoch.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the first feature of the Chinese post-socialist condition, which is the entanglement between socialist residue and post-socialist culture. Here, I probe into the second feature of the Chinese post-socialist condition.

*Post-socialism vs. Post-socialism*, as Sheldon Lu has pointed out, was the transition of post-socialism from “the 1980s cautious reform and openness to the grandiose transnational capitalism in the 1990s and the present.”<sup>88</sup> Arif Dirlik states that, “Chinese society today is *post-socialist* because its claims to a socialist future no longer derive their force from socialism as an immanent idea, on the other hand, it is also *post-socialist* because socialism remains as a possible option to which it can return if circumstances so demand.”<sup>89</sup> Dirlik uses these terms to envision a duality of post-socialism that combines disillusionment with the socialist future with the possibility of returning to socialism if it is demanded. A different viewpoint might be to characterize China’s post-socialist condition as a shift from the socialist appendix (*post-socialism*) to self-positioning among other post-socialisms (*post-socialism*). This shift can be further broken into two categories. One is to compare post-socialism in China with that of other former socialist countries. Many former socialist countries in Eastern Europe willingly or forcedly abandoned socialism after the Revolutions of Eastern Europe in 1989. What is more, the early 1990s witnessed the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as previous socialist countries and regions gave up socialism and stepped into the post-socialist condition. In those countries, socialism officially lost its dominant position. However, in China, the socialist state never loses its authority, and socialism still exists, albeit as a symbolic ideology. Moreover, the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe economically and spiritually embraced capitalist democracy after giving up socialism. China established a market-oriented economy, but its spiritual policy still clings to socialism. The state’s choice makes the

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<sup>88</sup> Sheldon Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, p.210.

<sup>89</sup> Arif Dirlik, “Postsocialism? Reflections on ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’” In Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, eds., *Marxism and the Chinese Experience*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989, p.244.

Chinese post-socialist condition a unique and complicated case to analyze. The historical background might be that China's post-socialism witnessed a double disillusionment: 1) disillusionment with traditional socialism after the termination of the Cultural Revolution, 2) disillusionment with unrealistic freedom promised by neoliberal democracy after the June Fourth Incident.

The other approach to China's post-socialist shift is to compare post-socialism with postmodernism, post-colonialism and so on. For instance, many Chinese avant-garde writers claimed that they were deeply influenced by postmodernism in inventing their post-socialist stories. Such cultural phenomena are also driven by China's self-integration and re-positioning in the world arena of globalization. China's eagerness to link up with the world leads to ambiguity and anxiety in post-socialist cultural production as well. In Orientalism, the East is always imagined with a dual face: one is demonic, ignorant and backward, a reverse "Other" of the West that foregrounds the West's cultural and psychological superiority; the other is pure, serene and primitive, a positive "Other" that balances the contradictions within Western culture. No matter whether this face is demonic or angelic, it bears little connection to present China. Orientalist China is a fabricated virtual kingdom that allows imperialist societies to patronize their culturally inferior and belated colony.

The cultural logic of Orientalism has also been adopted by Eastern societies to imagine the West. In the Boxer Rebellion and the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, the West was imagined as heaven and hell, herald and bandit. Nowadays, in cultural globalization, Orientalism is not exclusively possessed by the West. It gradually permeates the East's self-imagination. In post-socialist China, "moving toward the world", "linking up

with the tracks of the world”, “cultural export”, “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and other mantras reveal the conspiracy between the post-socialist state and Orientalism under the lure of the global market economy. The post-socialist state is eager to integrate itself into the world, and more specifically, into the capitalist world. Therefore, the state makes the best of the oppressed subaltern imagination from the Eurocentric perspective of Orientalism to propagandize and reiterate the necessity of reforms. However, the cultural industry has a very mixed reaction to post-socialist reforms.

In the post-socialist film industry, Fifth Generation directors, although in an ideologically rigid but politically loose pre-postsocialist period (1976-1989), foresee the imminent arrival of social transformation and insist on rethinking socialist ideals in their films. Their works demonstrate obvious doubts about socialist ideology, and, moreover, foreground their certainty and determinacy about unsettled reforms. For instance, in *Yellow Earth*, the girl Cuiqiao crosses the Yellow River on a small boat. Her fate is unknown. This setting manifests Fifth Generation directors’ resolution to approach an unsettled future, no matter their failure or success. They are sure that great and radical change is coming. They embrace change even if its direction is still uncertain. Fifth Generation directors consider themselves to belong to or represent the societal mainstream. They have a sense of social ownership. Throughout their films, Fifth Generation directors criticize, but also cater to, state policy. In different periods, they closely attach themselves to the state system. On the contrary, Sixth Generation directors are working in an era known for its relatively flexible politics and ideology, and in which changes happen in a relatively settled direction, but Sixth Generation films are replete with ambiguity and manifest indetermination about the validity of reform. The sense of social ownership disappears in



Sixth Generation films, and is replaced by a marginal social consciousness and perspective on those with lower and underground social status. There is a centrifugal force animating Sixth Generation films as they move away from the political center. Sixth Generation directors focus on showing young people's living conditions and life experiences through the transformation from agrarian to urban culture, from state-controlled communism to state-sanctioned capitalism, the price of which is the tragic distortion of humanity and society.

### **Imagined Rebellion**

As a cohort of independent filmmakers, Sixth Generation directors started their cinematic experiment in the maelstrom of institutional film reform from state-monopolized entities to market-driven enterprises, which pushed them to the frontline of the market and also gave them more freedom from making propaganda. Inspired by the new documentary movement in China, Sixth Generation filmmakers were mesmerized by documenting the economic, environmental, and social transformations taking place in post-socialist China. Their independent artistic practice and trajectory of filmmaking paralleled the development of popular culture and youth culture in the 1990s.

Sixth Generation films demonstrate a different style from their precursors. First of all, they use popular music in their film narration. Music is always an important element in film. It draws a different narrative diegesis to drive the threads of the plot. In Fifth Generation films, music, particularly folkloric music, is largely employed to convey profound metaphoric messages as well as to project the vast, barren, primitive and mythical countryside of China. Good examples of this, the wine song in *Red Sorghum*, the enigmatic songs in *Life on A String* (Bianzou bianchang 边走边唱, dir. Chen Kaige, 1992),

and the folkloric songs called “acid tune” in *Yellow Earth*. But those songs are always carefully composed and exquisitely played by a symphony orchestra to create a magnificent ambience, as in the case of the acid tune sung by the heroine Cuiqiao in *Yellow Earth*. When she fetches water by the riverside, she sings the acid tune, accompanied by an orchestra. This unordinary representation of ordinary life activity drives the audience to contemplate the connotations and denotations of such a cinematic arrangement. Moreover, music also motivates the plot and “marks the emotional effects.”<sup>90</sup> Music, can thus be regarded as a supplement to the image, functioning as an echo of the visual narrative. For example, in *Life on A String*, each song and tone has a metaphorical significance, and together they achieve a kind of mystical intensity. Music also plays a role in constructing the subjectivity of the main characters through symbolism and affects the audience psychologically in an immediate and direct way. The male vocals in Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* manifest an optimistic masculinity, whereas the flute music and female choruses in *Raise the Red Lantern* enhance a victimized and helpless femininity.

With respect to traditional folkloric and contemporary popular cultures, Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers demonstrate different attitudes, which are manifested through the different ways in which the music in their films is adapted. Unlike the Fifth Generation’s fondness for inventing a national China through traditional folkloric elements, Sixth Generation directors draw attention to contemporary popular culture to capture the characteristics of transitional Chinese society. Their films foreground the extinction of tradition under the influence of social transformation. Karaoke clubs, video game halls, and rock and roll music constantly appear in their films. Sixth Generation directors adapt

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<sup>90</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,” in *Imitations of Life*, 1991, 350-380.

popular songs and mobile music in their films, which have a kind of thematic function and comprise independent narrative lines through their films. For example, popular songs and radio programs in Jia Zhangke's *Platform* pinpoint specific periods. Those popular songs tell stories of their own; moreover, they comprise an independent narrative that intertwines with the diegetic plot of the film. In Sixth Generation films, popular music, especially songs from Hong Kong and Taiwanese TV series, brings realism and foregrounds the hybrid and uncertain condition of post-socialist China as the country integrates itself into the global capitalist system at the cost of the destruction of buildings, mass displacement, and ecological problems. In *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren 三峡好人, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2007), the young laborer Brother Mark works in a demolition crew and spends his days tearing down buildings. The greatest impact of the Open-up policy on Chinese youth is the import of Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture. Like many young people in China at his time, Brother Mark worships the Hong Kong gangster films. He names and models himself after the original Mark, the character performed by Chow Yun-fat 周润发 in John Woo's 吴宇森 heroic gangster classic *A Better Tomorrow* (Yingxiong bense 英雄本色, 1986). Brother Mark mimics Chow's hand gesture and uses "Shanghai Bund" as the ringtone for his cellphone, which is the thematic song from a 1980 Hong Kong TV series *The Bund* 上海滩. This Hong Kong triad TV series represents the chaotic and wartime 1930-40s as the glory days of Shanghai modernity. Brother Mark believes that the past is the best and says that present-day society does not suit him because he is too nostalgic; this is none other than the line Chow Yun-fat said in the gangster classics. Jia Zhangke lets his character mimic and repeat the line in Hong Kong triad classics and adopt its thematic song as mobile music to explicitly ridicule nostalgia for a lost past that never ideally existed. In *Xiao Wu* (小武

武, dir. Jia Zhangke, 1997), the mundane forms of popular music, such as popular songs sung in karaoke parlors, unaccompanied singing, on-the-spot recording and the sounds of digital devices, which create an on-the-spot (*xianchang*) aesthetic opposing Fifth Generation well-composed music making. Jason McGrath argues that *Xiaowu* manifests many aesthetics of the domestic independent film movement in the 1990s. The most notable is the “post-socialist critical realism,” as opposed to both “socialist realism” and entertainment productions.<sup>91</sup> Jia’s cinematic style emphasizes “on-the-spot” spontaneity, immediacy, and documentary directness. In his films, the soundtracks drive the narrative diegesis and invite the audience to reflect on various newly emerging social issues in the reform era.

Beside popular songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan, rock and roll is another important signifier in Sixth Generation films. The caption of this chapter is a 1986 rock song by Cui Jian, who is generally recognized as the godfather of Chinese rock and roll. His “Nothing to My Name” is widely considered one of the most influential songs in the history of China. It even became an anthem for Chinese young protestors during the Tiananmen incident of 1989. In the lyrics, the singer speaks to a girl who mocks him because he has nothing. The song quickly evoked a sense of disillusionment and lack of individual freedom among the dispossessed young generation during the 1980s. After the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s, the Chinese government was rethinking Maoist socialism and promoting capitalist-oriented economic policies. Chinese society has stepped into the period of economic reform. Many Chinese young people were feeling disillusioned with the

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<sup>91</sup> Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford University, 2008.

government because it abandoned its promised ideals. Ironically, the rapid economic changes made many Chinese teens and students feel that they had no opportunity and no freedom. Against this background the Western rock music gained popularity in China by the late 1970s. Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones heavily influenced Cui Jian and his generation of Chinese singers. In the summer of 1986, Cui Jian first sang “Nothing to My Name” at the One Hundred Pop Stars concert at the Beijing Workers’ Stadium; both the song and his stage persona as an angry young musician immediately stirred up the country. Since then, rock music has been embraced by Chinese youth because of its unique status as politically and artistically subversive. Jeroen de Kloet notes that “rock music in China is an outlet for anger and frustration against the regime, an objectification of anti-reality feeling, and an opposition to the state hegemony as well as capitalist commercialism.”<sup>92</sup>

Rock music is enthusiastically favored by Sixth Generation young directors and they adopt rock music as a special trope to narrate their urban stories. The Western-originated rock music becomes a signifier of Sixth Generation’s identification. They project their self-imagination onto rock music. They appropriate the rebellious spirit of Western rock and roll and transplant it to the context of post-socialist China. Rock music becomes a mainstream artistic form in the marginal Sixth Generation filmmaking. It is ideologically interpreted as a symbolic act of rebellion and it is empowered as an imaginary subversive force. The direct relationship between youth characters and rock music is represented in a number of Sixth Generation films, such as *Beijing Bastards* (Beijing zazhong 北京杂种, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1992), *Dirt* (Tofa luanle 头发乱了, dir. Guan Hu, 1993), *The Making of Steel*

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<sup>92</sup> Jeroen de Kloet, “Marx or Market: Chinese Rock and the Sound of Fury,” in *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia*, ed. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003, p.28-52.

(Zhangda chengren 长大成人, dir. Lu Xuechang, 1995) and *Weekend Lover* (Zhoumo qingren 周末情人, dir. Lou Ye, 1995). In those youth films, rock music becomes a symptomatic text of youth rebellion, marginality, and sensibility. However, the “minority” Sixth Generation filmmakers are not inclined to speak more about rock music’s potential in both historical and social castration and subversion. In their nostalgia for their past youth, Sixth Generation directors narrate young characters’ rock music adventures, but this merely fabricates a narcissistic comfort. Sixth Generation directors do not intend to rebel against mainstream culture. Their films express the ambiguous social maladjustment of the young generation. They interrogate the formation of society and its validity.

In the socialist period, society is under the omnipresent control of the socialist state. There is no space for civil society in the dual structure of state ruling system and in the populace. Since the Open-up policy, when market is promoted by the market economy, the state power is gradually diminishing, and society comes above the surface. Previously, people and the state were connected through working units (*danwei* 单位). During the economic reform, many working units dismiss, and people are exposed to society. Society becomes the intangible enemy for Chinese young people to release their anger and disappointment, which was caused by the present situation and problems during the reforms. Marginalized identification and imagined rebellion permeate the film world of Sixth Generation, and are represented by migrant workers from the countryside, petty thieves, delinquent youngsters, and rock musician at the periphery of Chinese society. Those young characters search for identity in the backdrop of post-socialist urbanization and capitalist globalization. The explorations of self are heatedly discussed topics in Sixth Generation films. Paul Pickowicz concludes the independent filmmakers have an “imagined

“Occidentalism” preoccupation, and this highlights an ego-centered/individualist Western artistic taste.”<sup>93</sup> Imported from the West, rock music is treated by Chinese independent artists as a mirror to reflect their self-imagination. At this point, what they represent through rock music is a combination of their imagination and simulacra of reality.

Beside films, the Internet writing provides an innovative platform for contemporary Chinese young people to vent their imagination and disillusion toward the present. The online writing mode makes the novels special. In terms of the publication and circulation venues, the Internet publishing platform and readership create an immediate and intimate relationship between the author and the reader. This new author-reader dynamics enhances the spontaneity of writing, blurs the boundary between fiction and fact, and challenges the hegemonic mode of state narrative as well as elitist perspectives. Compared to the print media, Internet productions get much less severe censorship, and thus are able to discuss more sensitive topics and unsettling issues. The rapid developments of technology and the Internet’s cyber environment provide space to promote Internet writing, and further revolutionize the traditional way of writing by diminishing the distance between the virtual and the actual. For example, Murong Xuecun’s 慕容雪村 online-serialized novel *Leave Me Alone, Chengdu* (Chengdu jinye qingjiangwo yiwang 成都今夜请将我遗忘, 2002) tells the dark story of three young men’s struggles in Chengdu. After graduation, the protagonist Chen Zhong works as a sales manager for a motor oil and parts company. He is married to the girl he has loved since college but still regularly engages in bribery and adultery. He remains friend with two former classmates from his university

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<sup>93</sup> Paul Pickowicz, “Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China” in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Cultural in Contemporary China*. New York: Powman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006. p. 1-21.

days: Li Liang, who is a speculator in the stock market, and Big Head Wang, who is the head of the local police station. Despite their aspirations in the newly capitalist China, the young protagonists find their lives are beset by dead-end jobs, gambling, drugs, and cavorting with prostitutes in the booming cities. . Their lofty dreams of youth have been abandoned in their scramble to strike rich in the capitalist China. The hero Chen Zhong is reminiscent of Holden Caulfield<sup>94</sup> in his rebellion against the present China, but he is unavoidably captured by those he struggles to shake off. Underlying Chen's self-destructive journey is nostalgia for a stable past as contrasted with the uncertain present that has left a new generation of youth adrift in a culture that has paid a moral and spiritual price in its strive for prosperity. The novel uses racy, nihilistic and fatalist description to disclose the other side behind the prosperous façade of a provincial capital and the scandalous situation that is counter to the official propagandized spiritual socialist civilization since 1996. The city is not their utopia, but their dystopia. This Internet novel contains some edgy portrayals and critical messages; the undertone of this novel is very decadent and dark, but overall it is not as subversive as expected.

Since the 2000s, a group of Internet writers have written about the decadent life of contemporary urban youth. They focus on portraying the young middle class Chinese people's confusion and rebellion in the city. Their novels reveal the urban youngsters' inability to adapt to China's modernization, commercialization and consumerization under capitalist globalization. Those Internet writers favor displaying the difference between ideal and reality, and the conflict between traditional values and new social morals. The young protagonists in the Internet novels do not belong to the mainstream, and they

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<sup>94</sup> Holden Caulfield is the fictional teenage protagonist of J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, who becomes an icon for teenage rebellion and angst.



vacillate between real life and virtual dreams. Although writers write about social issues in contemporary China, explore themes such as corruption, business-government relations, and young people's general pressure and disillusionment over modern life, overall their novels are quite optimistic and positive toward life.

The reason for this counter effect is closely related to the two traits of Internet productions. On the one hand, the loose control of the Internet environment allows writers to touch upon unsettling topics, and convey dissensions as well as helpless and desperate emotions. On the other hand, a large portion of readers of the texts is urban youngsters; and as long as they strive to survive in the city, they need courage and hope; therefore, they usually ask for encouragement and happy endings in their immediate feedback to authors. As a result, the authors more or less take their needs into consideration and tailor the stories to what their readers expect. It might be fair to argue that the positive, optimistic or even propagandistic narrative style in the Internet novels results from a cooperative conspiracy between the authors and their readers. The participatory role of readers leads to the authors' thematic concern about survival. The Internet literature offers fascinating explorations of contemporary social issues through its audience-centered approach. The shifting style of Internet novels and the creative energies of Internet authors balance the multiple demands within a rapidly changing post-socialist Chinese society. In other words, online literary production can express the authors' imagination of rebellion and comfort in order to adjust to the market and the taste of its avid readers.

### **I. The Solitary/Bewildered Drifters on the Street and Post-socialist Realism in *Xiao Wu* (小武, 1997)**

In Sixth Generation films, socialist collectivity is no longer present on the stage, and is replaced by solitary individuality. In the post-revolution period, socialist social and

cultural relationships, which highlight sacrifice and devotion, disappeared and changed into other things like loneliness, melancholia, and plight of marginalized individuals. In the transition from traditional family values to new economic values, many things have been given up to fuel China's economic engine. In the 1980s, Fifth Generation directors launched their aesthetic reform of Chinese cinema. They used funds from the state to practice their cinematic experiments. Meanwhile, the state welcomed change and adjusted the system after ten-years of tight ideological control in the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the comparatively loose political system granted Fifth Generation directors space to exert their talent and skill and fulfill their film dreams. With the support of the state, those Fifth Generation directors did not need to consider production, distribution, exhibition, market, and even audience reception. It is a rare period in Chinese film history of pure artistic development with relaxed ideological control and abundant financial supply.

In the 1990s, Sixth Generation directors graduated from the prestigious Beijing Film Academy, and the situation they confronted was not stable and the future they expected was unpredictable. The Tiananmen incident in 1989 made the state tighten its ideology and concentrate all funds to economic developments. The government stopped assigning jobs to college graduates. Sixth Generation directors lost the state-assigned jobs when they stepped out of school. They have had to find outside sources to support their film career. The urgent survival issue hangs over their heads.

Sixth Generation directors, as a cohort of participants and witnesses, have been constantly thrown into different societal changes and political turmoil. They started making films without state support and audience applause because most of their films cannot be viewed by domestic audiences. Contrarily, Sixth Generation directors have to run

around to find private investments and overseas funding to support their film production, distribution and exhibition at the risk of a film-making ban. The underground and marginal status in the Chinese film industry enabled Sixth Generation directors to create a new formalism that is different from old socialist formalism and Fifth Generation formalism. This new formalism includes the direct address of quotidian life instead of dramatic plot, on-the-spot spontaneity, abundant usage of the long-take and freeze-frames due to limit funds, voiceover narration, unusual camera angles and movements. Sixth Generation formalism highlights the disorder of contemporary society and represents the oppressed living environment of marginal people. Their work speaks to a vision of authentic Chinese life featuring predicament, alienation and disorientation. Sixth Generation directors make films outside of the main Chinese film system and play mostly on the international film festival circuit. Their films are well accepted among Western audiences. Chinese film critic Dai Jinhua interprets the reception of Sixth Generation films in the West as having been treated as “other” by the Western liberal intellectuals to make up their expectation of Chinese cultural landscape in the 1990s, and as a mirror to reflect the Western liberalists’ imagination about Chinese democratic process, resistance, civil society and the portraits of marginal people.<sup>95</sup> In the 1990s, two decades of reform and commercialization have brought dramatic social changes in China, which are reflected in a growing documentary movement. Wu Wenguang’s 吴文光 *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (流浪北京, 1990) is considered as one of the first work of the Chinese New Documentary Movement (新纪录片运动). These new documentary films promote a realistic style as the movement’s

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<sup>95</sup> Dai Jinhua, *Wuzhong Fengjing: Zhongguo dianying wenhua, 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化, 1978-1998. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006, p.407.

slogan declares: “my camera doesn’t lie.” The movement paved the way for the emergence of Sixth Generation films; the latter blurs the line between documentary and fictional film.

### **The tradition of Realism and Post-socialist Realism**

The domestic underground and independent film movement in the early 1990s incubated the unique cinematic aesthetics of Sixth Generation. Many Sixth Generation directors adopt the post-socialist critical realism, as opposed to socialist realism and entertainment productions. Realism has been regarded as the most dominant mode of the twentieth century Chinese cinemas. The concept of realism in China is enmeshed with modernization, modernity and modernism. Furthermore, it is ideologically tied to the discourse of nationalism. Historically, it helps shape Chinese people’s views on national crisis, survival and transformation. The Leftist social realism not only highlights overtly nationalist modes but also features a dichotomy format, i.e. subsistence vs. revolution or backwardness vs. modernization, and it manifests a highly melodramatic feature by setting up a family-home-nation trope. The socialist realism in the 1950s and 1960s, which was modeled on the Soviet Union mode, creates stereotyped class heroes and heroines, and emphasizes social changes and individuals’ development. The healthy realism that prevailed in Taiwan from 1950s to 1960s is very similar to the socialist realism in Mainland China, except for the class analysis. The Hong Kong New Wave in the 1980s is much less engaged with political agendas. Its realist style was embodied in Hong Kong’s position as a cosmopolitan capital in a global age. In China, Fifth Generation critical realism, unlike the socialist realism, does not necessarily convey positive messages, but still adopts a revolutionary framework and tells stories in a more liberating and unorthodox approach. Sixth Generation post-socialist critical realism, which I will discuss below in specific

cinematic texts, strips away the ideological truth that is claimed by Maoist revolutionary realism and professes a return to original life conditions by revealing raw and underlying reality.<sup>96</sup> Stylistically, it creates the “on-the-spot” realism by using handheld cameras, giving ordinary people a direct voice and establishing an observational style. In addition, Sixth Generation filmmakers employ a novel cinema language: “nonlinear narrative, jostling camera movement, jump cuts, discontinuous editing, and noir-style lighting and mise-en-scene.”<sup>97</sup> In terms of cinematography, Sixth Generation directors favor Italian neorealism, and often use long takes and ambient sound to create the style of *cinéma vérité*. However, the recent Sixth Generation films depart from the previous ones in terms of realist aesthetics and the traditions of documentary and fictional filmmaking in the early 1990s, and are more aligned to the tradition of international art films. The spontaneous and immediate style evolves into a more carefully crafted combination of long shots, long takes and manipulation of mis-en-scene. The use of time ellipsis and minimalist cause-and-effect narrative make “aestheticized realist” films.

The rise of Fifth Generation directors brought increased attention to Chinese cinema abroad, especially among Western audiences and critics. Most of Fifth Generation directors passively participate in the Cultural Revolution as red guards and then became rusticated youth, but they actively launched another cultural revolution in the cinema domain after the Cultural Revolution. On the contrary Sixth Generation directors were passively involved in the economic revolution since the 1990s. Having been harshly treated by the party and

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<sup>96</sup> Jason McGrath, “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Post-socialist Realism to Transnational Aesthetic” in Zhang Zhen ed, *Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. Duke University Press, 2007, p. 83-84.

<sup>97</sup> Zhang Zhen, “Urban Dreamscape: Phantom Sisters, and the Identity of an Emergent Art Cinema” in *Urban Generation, Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. Duke University Press, 2007, p. 345.

having experienced enchantment and disenchantment, Fifth Generation directors are never disappointed at the party. There is an enormous sense of mission and collectivity underpinning their films, which makes Fifth Generation directors have a craving for authority and a willingness to enter the state system. Sixth Generation directors are like abandoned children because when they graduated, the state could not provide financial support for their film production. Furthermore, the grand social environment of the 1990s and a shifting cultural trend towards a commercial oriented direction both pushed Sixth Generation directors to a different way to practice their cinematic career. They now have to first stay away from the state system of production, distribution and exhibition, second shun away from historical issues and politically sensitive topics, and lastly, focus mainly on contemporary life. Fifth and Sixth generation directors' different attitudes towards authority make them choose different ways to tell their film stories. In terms of narrative mode, Fifth Generation directors inherit a long established narrative tradition of "speaking bitterness" (suku, 诉苦) or the narrative mode of suffering (kunan xushi, 苦难叙事). The narrative strategy of speaking bitterness does not emphasize the darkness of the society, instead, it resorts to the "endurance-survival" ideology to creates strong, tough and dignified protagonists' arduous journeys. The worship of suffering and sacrifice has been deeply rooted in Chinese culture, which becomes one's capital in order to obtain discourse power. The acknowledged Fifth Generation directors spent their adolescence in remote and harsh places during the Cultural Revolution. This experience ensures them enough capital to turn themselves into the representatives of Chinese elite politics. Fifth Generation film discourse was regarded as a signifier for national-cultural allegories and was warmly embraced by domestic and international film critics. Fifth Generation directors' bitter

sufferings are recognized as badges and honors to validate their criticism of the country in their films.

Things become different when the young urbanite Sixth Generation directors compose their film discourse. Their anger and anxiety toward contemporary society does not obtain equal concern from audiences as well as critics. Each generation has its sufferings, and there is not nobleness or lowliness between Fugui's bitter experience in *To Live* and Xiao Wu's helplessness in *Xiao Wu*; the generational traumas in *The Blue Kite* (蓝风筝, 1994) and *Summer Palace* (颐和园, 2006) are also worth equal consideration and contemplation. Sixth Generation's cinematic allegories on contemporality should be treated equally as Fifth Generation's national and historical allegories. Sixth Generation directors refuse to poeticize their protagonists' bitter experience, instead they focus on portraying harshness and a crude appearance of the on-the-spot feeling. The so-called Sixth Generation directors put humanistic concern on the singularity of the mundane world. They mainly concentrate on screening the daily life of ordinary people and especially respecting marginal groups that are isolated and on the periphery of the mainstream society. Sixth Generation has come to be regarded as representing underground/independent film in China with willful self-marginalization in order to promote their cinematic products to the global market. Sixth Generation directors offer their personal accounts of adolescent experiences and create many goal-bereft protagonists with the art cinema narration of fragmented structure and less dramatic plot. Their work radically differs from their predecessors, the world-renowned Fifth Generation directors. However, like Fifth Generation directors, whose films are often adapted from

literature, Sixth Generation directors' collective emergence in the 1990s also has a deep connection to a literary movement called "Rupture."

### **Rupture Generation and Solitary Drifter**

Stepping into the new millennium, the new market economy and the impact of commercial methods on literary production had made it possible for Chinese millionaire writers to appear on the cultural stage. Market mechanisms in literary production have not only offered writers financial independence but have also let them break away from the state cultural establishment. For the first time in Chinese literary history, writers were able to reject state employment, state-sponsored literary journals, literary critics and official literary awards—and they were also able to resist being controlled by the Writers Association. This newfound freedom granted Chinese writers the possibility to live by their lucrative writing and let them be emancipated from ideological control. It led to a chain of reactions, and among those was Rupture, which greatly impacted the independence and diversity of the new generation Chinese writers and film directors.

In May 1998, two Nanjing writers Zhu Wen and Han Dong sent out a questionnaire of thirteen questions to 70 contemporary Chinese writers. They received 56 responses. The purposes of this questionnaire was to determine the public's view of institutionalized state literary agencies such as literary journals, literary criticism, academia and writers' organizations. It also questioned whether Lu Xun should be regarded as the paragon of Chinese writers, as well as questioning whether Chinese authors should be familiar with Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, and other Western philosophy and literary theories that flooded into China at that time. This survey marked the origin of the Rupture Movement that attempted to voice dissatisfaction with the literary establishment, although its results



were controversial. It revealed young writers' eagerness to break away from the official literary order and their refusal to be manipulated by the state. The survey itself can be regarded as a manifesto of a group of freelance writers including Lin Bai, Zhu Wen, Han Dong, Wei Hui and Mian Mian, who have been considered as the New Generation writers (xin shengdai 新生代). They freed themselves from "state control, both financially and spiritually."<sup>98</sup> Some of those new generation writers quitted their state-employed jobs, and lived on selling their literary works as well as other kinds of writing such as television and film scripts, and articles for newspaper columns. With the market reforms, Chinese writers have been released to become cultural workers. These writers break away from the politically oppressive state "father", and throw themselves into the embrace of the commercial "friend" cultural market.

After overtly breaking from the state cultural establishment, the new generation writers concentrate their writing on daily life and living spaces of ordinary people, and have a close cooperation with Sixth Generation directors. Zhu Wen wrote script for Zhang Ming's *Rain Clouds over Wushan* (巫山云雨, 1996) and Zhang Yuan's *Seventeen Years* (过年回家, 1999), which are two representative works of Sixth Generation films. Moreover, Zhu Wen is also considered a member of Sixth Generation directors with his directorial work *South of the Clouds* (云的南方, 2003). Both the new generation writers and Sixth Generation directors focus on mundane things in contemporary society. They reject the mainstream predilection and are inclined to position themselves as marginal and ally with marginal groups. Compared with their predecessor Fifth Generation directors, Sixth

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<sup>98</sup> Kong Shuyu, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China*, Stanford UP, 2004, p.34.

Generation directors were considered as marginal in the matters of film production, distribution and exhibition. However, graduated from the prestigious Beijing Film Academy, Sixth Generation directors have received the same or even more unconstrained professional training. They belong to the social elite. Their marginal position is most likely an imagined subaltern to help them fabricate their provincial allegory as a contrast to the socialist-realistic tradition established by Xie Jin and the work of Fifth Generation filmmakers.

Most Sixth Generation directors identify themselves as independent/underground filmmakers. Therefore, in Sixth Generation films, the narrative identity is always controversial. Their narrative objects are lower class, laid-off workers and young delinquents who are drifters lacking identity and long-term outsiders to mainstream society. Sixth Generation directors restlessly film those groups and seek or create identity for them. It reveals the existence of a mutual rejection: society rejects the identities those groups are inclined to have, and those groups also reject the identities that society assigns to them. Sixth Generation directors situate their narrative subjects in a dilemma of identity anxiety. The directors regard themselves as others, which discloses their absence of identity. Meanwhile, they reject the identity of the “other” or the “marginal” for the sake of being treated equally as members of the mainstream by the mainstream. Stuart Hall points out:

“Our cultural identity reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes...cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and cultural. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made not fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return...It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the

unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture.”<sup>99</sup>

“Identity as a production are never unified and complete, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation...identity are therefore constituted within, not outside representation.”<sup>100</sup>

Identity is a narrative of the self; it is the story about the self. According to Hall, we need to situate the debates about identity within historically specific developments and practices, which vary with different populations and cultures. The most important structure of the contextualization of identity and reconceptualization of the self is in relation to difference. Therefore, in order to understand Sixth Generation directors’ obsession and anxiety with identity, it is necessary to take a look at their narrative objects: the relatively “settled” character of the solitary drifter that has been employed in Sixth Generation films is a unique ideological writing tool for those young directors.

The most representative character of the solitary drifter in Sixth Generation films is Xiao Wu, a pickpocket of Jia Zhangke’s provincial story. Shot in twenty-one days, *Xiao Wu* is Jia Zhangke’s graduation work shown by the the film’s opening credits: “Beijing Film Academy Student Film.” Although *Xiao Wu* was banned in China, the film introduced Jia Zhangke as a rising and promising cinematic talent to international art film festivals. *Xiao Wu* was completed with low-budget 16mm film and non-professional actors. Its setting is Fenyang, the hometown of Jia Zhangke. The protagonist Xiao Wu is a pickpocket roaming on the street, and he is upset when he is not invited to his one-time best friend Xiao Yong’s

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<sup>99</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds. Wiley, 2000. p. 705-707.

<sup>100</sup> Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who needs Identity?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds. Sage Publications, 1996. p.4.

wedding. At a karaoke bar, Xiao Wu meets a singsong girl Mei Mei. The two are on the brink of a relationship, but it fails when Mei Mei departs without a notice. Xiao Wu returns to his native village to see his parents, where he is condemned by his father and is banished from the house. In the end, Xiao Wu is captured in the midst of a pickpocketing attempt. His inability to reconcile his relationships leads to his loss of all of them: friendship, love, and family connection. The original title of *Xiao Wu* has a long subtitle: Jin Xiaoyong's Buddy, Hu Meimei's Patron, and Liang Changyou's Son. It clearly points out all three social relationships of Xiao Wu. The whole film can be divided into three episodes according to these relationships: the betrayed friendship, the unfulfilled romance, and the broken family connection (see figure 3.1-3.3). As a protagonist, Xiao Wu has very fragile personal relations; his complicated social identities as the subtitle indicates are momentary and exist only in name. Xiaoyong's cruelty, Meimei's departure, and the father's violence consist of Xiao Wu's living experience, which is drifting and uprooted both bodily and spiritually.



Fig. 3.1-3.3 Xiao Wu's three human relationships with his friend, his lover, and his family

In Chinese society, a person's identity is always defined in the context of his relationships with others. He is someone's friend, someone's husband, and someone's son. But who is he himself? It is a question without a direct answer. The whole narrative structure of the film is about Xiao Wu's breaking away with his friends, lovers, and family. The film strips away layer after layer of Xiao Wu's social relations until he has been left

utterly “naked” and exposed to the masses. The first layer of his relationships to peel off is with Xiaoyong, who was Xiao Wu’s childhood best friend and he was once a petty thief. After earning enough money from the inglorious job, Xiaoyong starts a new business of cigarette trafficking and runs karaoke clubs featuring various degrees of sexual services. In the social context of praising economic development and profit making, Xiaoyong has been recognized as a model entrepreneur and considered as a legitimate businessman. The criminality inherent in Xiaoyong’s dealings has been varnished, cigarette trafficking is euphemized as free trade, and karaoke brothels are glossed over to be entertainment service. Having had his crimes whitewashed, Xiaoyong’s present social status made him unfit to have any connection with a petty criminal like Xiao Wu. Contemporary China is in the midst of great change, with so many things disappearing, but Xiao Wu obstinately keeps his promise to Xiaoyong that he would give him money on his wedding day. People like Xiaoyong are easy to cross their moral baseline. He not only rejects Xiao Wu to attend his wedding, but also refuses to accept Xiao Wu’s gift, which he regards as dirty money. He also regards their brotherhood as dirty. Who is more terrifying? The anti-hero Xiao Wu or the nouveau riche Xiaoyong?

Throughout the film, we hear the soundtrack from radio and other forms of mass media repeatedly reporting the nationwide campaign of “clamping down criminal activities.” It was at the end of 1990s that the Open-up policy brought booming economic growth accompanied by a high incidence of crime. Xiao Wu’s “craft activity” petty theft is the target of the cracking down campaign, while Xiaoyong’s dealings that harbor criminality are reported as serious business. When the entire society is moving ahead, Xiao Wu’s method of stealing and pickpocketing is relatively traditional and obsolete, while

Xiaoyong's cigarette trafficking and exploitations of club girls are no longer seen as crimes. In the context of the large-scale societal changes of economic reform, people have lots of euphemisms to whitewash what they are doing and make it legal.

In the second part of the film, Xiao Wu meets Meimei, a karaoke bar girl, with whom he develops a tentative sort of love. He visits Meimei on her sickbed and brings her a bottle of hot water to alleviate her discomfort. For this very moment, Meimei leans on Xiao Wu's knee and they embrace. This quasi-romantic relationship exposes Xiao Wu's awkwardness in accommodating the new social order. However, it also changes Xiao Wu; he begins to smile and open himself up to the surrounding environment, and even purchases a pager at Meimei's suggestion so that she can keep in touch with him. But all of a sudden, Meimei abandons him and leaves with a wealthy businessman without any notice. This failed love relationship makes the protagonist more desperate. The pager even leads to his arrest when it sounds off in the midst of a pickpocketing action.

Meimei's departure moves the film to the third layer of Xiao Wu's human relationships this time with his family. He returns home to see his parents only to find that the ring he gave to his mother is worn by his sister-in-law. He reacts vehemently and is then driven out of the house by his father. This last human connection of Xiao Wu is thus cut off.



Fig. 3.4-3.5 Xiao Wu gazes at the crowd and the crowd stare at him.

Xiao Wu's ties with friend, lover and family disappear. In the final scene, Xiao Wu is left handcuffed to the side of the road as a criminal. A crowd gathers and stares at him (see fig. 3.4-3.5). This moment of nakedness is the most astonishing sequence so far. During the whole film, Xiao Wu loses his friendship, tentative romance, and family connection one by one. In the last scene he becomes a public spectacle as a criminal, which makes him lose the fourth and final connection: the relationship with society. In the same point of view, Xiao Wu gazes up at the crowd of onlookers and they gawk at the criminal Xiao Wu. This mutual gaze brings an act of spectatorship within the spectacle. The camera swings between Xiao Wu and the crowd, so that they become a spectacle to each other. The societal change is the centrifugal force to Xiao Wu that drives him out of society. During the film, Xiao Wu continues to lose all his connections and finally becomes a superfluous man, yet he is undoubtedly the center of each relationship. Xiao Wu is a passive dominator who negotiates through layers of shifting relationships in a whirlpool of social, cultural and economic changes. The anti-hero Xiao Wu's experience reveals that in present China, everyone is an independent individual and also submissive to society. This incompatible duplicity makes contemporary Chinese youth accumulate implosion through rupture and

disillusionment from societal change and upheaval. This sort of implosion is accompanied by an explosion of violence that I will discuss in the next section.

## **II. Violence, Post-socialist Space and the Incommunicability Between Human and Time in *Summer Palace* (颐和园, 2006)**

*Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.*<sup>101</sup>

Among Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke is fond of documentary style and Wang Xiaoshuai shows more effort on telling melodramatic stories, while another important figure of Sixth Generation directors Lou Ye concentrates on formalistic style in order to explore the psychological world of protagonists. In his film, he gives characters many inner voices. Almost every Sixth Generation director has a youth complex, and Lou Ye's adolescence might be the longest since he has an everlasting affection for the despair, desolation and disillusionment of young people. The 2006 film *Summer Palace* becomes his most representative and controversial film of the youth complex.

*Summer Palace* tells a story of Yu Hong spanning 15 years from 1988 to 2003 over the cause of her adolescence. The narration of this film is mainly based on Yu Hong's diary, monologue, and voiceover. The heroine Yu Hong is a girl from the border town Tumen close to North Korea. In 1987, She goes to Beiqing University, a phonetic pun of Peking University and Tsinghua University, where she meets her lover Zhou Wei and her best friend Li Ti. The life in Beijing at the end of the 1980s brings country girl Yu Hong to a liberal new world with tumultuous sexual freedom and spiritual collision. This emotional and sexual upheaval ends with the violent suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations

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<sup>101</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 2001, pp. 121-176.



in 1989. As the protests collapse, Yu Hong drops out from the university and first goes to Chongqing and then Wuhan. Zhou Wei flees his country to Berlin with Li Ti. But in Germany, social agitation is mounting as the Berlin Wall crashes down. On a street protest, Li Ti suddenly commits suicide by jumping from the top of a building. After that, Zhou Wei returns to China and finds Yu Hong, who now works in Beidaihe. They reunite in a gas station next to a freeway, only to find themselves as two changed souls in a changed world.

In *Summer Palace*, Lou Ye portrays the struggle for individual liberty in the grand epoch in order to pay his homage to a generation of liberal idealists. The whole of the 1980s witnesses a huge economic and political opening up in China. The summer of 1989 marks the violent suppression and disillusionment of it. After the repression, the economic growth becomes even more prosperous. What about the spiritual world of Chinese young people afterward? Since the film was released, film critics and scholars indulge in an elaboration of its candor about political taboos or male and female frontal nudity in its sexual scenes. But according to the director Lou Ye, “[1989] was a year of great impulsiveness...in my story, I tried to show that it is easier to change the outside than the inside. The pain caused in the 80s continued to be felt in the 90s and beyond. The confusion in people’s hearts is not given enough attention when we weigh up social change...it was like falling in love, and then after 89, people felt like they had lost something, like they had broken up with a lover.”<sup>102</sup> This movie is first and foremost a love story that is set against a special historical and political background. Film critics mainly focus on the Tiananmen event and sexual scene but ignore “what is going on inside the characters, this is a journey

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<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Watts, “Camera Obscured,” In *The Guardian*, 2006  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/sep/09/comment.china>>

of the soul of a female Chinese intellectual, such a trip could only happen here.”<sup>103</sup> Instead of restlessly chattering about this film’s conflict with censorship, I want to discuss how it represents an era and reflects the psychology of the generation of young people in politically socialist but economically capitalist China.

*Summer Palace* elegiacally narrates a group of Chinese young people’s love and disillusionment through a period of cultural and social transition from the later 1980s into the 2000s. The historical trauma retreats into a background in order to foreground the young people’s bewilderment in a confusing decade. The delirious scenes of sex convey more narrative and psychological meaning than just sensation. Those are embodiments of individual agony, and such an agony has unknown symptoms and complicated causes. How to relieve such pain? Traumatic events provide a stage for the exhibition of young people’s anger and anguish. Sex and violence then become carnal carnivals under the heavy spiritual stress in a revolution backdrop. Any external factor may trigger the secret anguish hidden in one’s feeling. In this film, the Tiananmen incident, the crashing down of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Soviet Union time and again probe the protagonists’ pain nerve. What is the origin of this agony? It comes from the incommunicability between people and their times. The protagonists’ behaviors in large part are driven by the impossibility and incapability of communication and understanding between themselves and also between them and the era they are situated in. On the eve of Tiananmen incident, Yu Hong wants to break up with Zhou Wei because she finds that she can’t leave him. Zhou Wei can’t confront the status quo after the movement; he flees the country and his memories of Yu Hong. When he finally comes back, he finds a new country beyond his recognition. Li Ti fears

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

hurting anyone, and she prevents anyone loving her because love is like a wound in the heart: when it heals, love disappears or never exists. She commits suicide to make love a permanent wound. The protagonists' behaviors and consequences contradict their original intentions. Their actions are greatly driven by the incapability of confronting what the times assign to them and the impossibility of understanding what the times display to them.

After 1989, Zhou Wei and Li Ti depart for Berlin, and Yu Hong goes back to Tumen. For the next decade, the three protagonists travel endlessly: Tuman, Shenzhen, Chongqing, Wuhan, Berlin, and Beidaihe. In their exhausted global escape, Beijing is present everywhere. They cross over the geographic boundaries between countries, but all the places are phantasms of Beijing, and the sense of *déjà vu* is hallucination. In Berlin, Zhou Wei meets a Polish girl who comes from Warsaw. After a party, the two walk into a ruined park. They smoke, quietly exchanging questions of what is Warsaw and Beijing like. The only answer they can provide is "it is okay." The Polish girl then asks "where are we right now?" She murmurs with uncertainty, "in Berlin?" (see Fig. 3.6-3.7). Zhou Wei and the Polish girl come from previous socialist countries. They are laden with many historical and emotional burdens coming to Berlin, which is another socialist-turned-capitalist place. As post-socialist loyalists, Zhou Wei and the Polish girl are haunted by their memories of Beijing and Warsaw, and perhaps now Berlin. Those previous socialist places, but present post-socialist and capitalist places disorient Zhou Wei, Li Ti and the Polish girl, who possess a clear and fuzzy memory of their socialist hometowns. In a fundamentally chaotic and forever changing world, those post-socialist places embody what Deleuze terms "any-space-whatever":

Any-space-whatever is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is,

the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible.<sup>104</sup>

Any-space-whatever is an infinite space, it can be an anonymous space, and it embodies the space of possibility. It is a homogenous and de-singularizing space, where the relationship between environment and characters can be reconfigured. An any-space-whatever is a spatial fragment whose identity remains part of an indeterminate multiplicity. This indeterminate multiplicity of fragmentary “can be fitted together in an infinite number of ways and, because they are not oriented in relation to each other, constitute the set of singularities which are combined in the any-space-whatever.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, any-space-whatever is also a space for the emergence of uniqueness and singularities. In *Summer Palace*, the post-socialist period has generated the situations, which the protagonists no longer know how to react to, and also the post-socialist spaces, which they used to know but cannot describe with any certainty. Those spaces now are inhabited by a new race of characters with blank memories. In the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, many Chinese intellectuals chose to flee the country. They were compelled by the sense of strangeness in the space they used to be familiar with but no longer see. They drift between countries, between cities and spaces. The places they traveled become locus of their post-socialist imagination. In this film, Berlin, Chongqing, and Wuhan are no longer particular determined spaces. It expresses the quality of deterritorialization and indeterminacy. It is the simulacrum of the post-socialist cities Beijing and Warsaw. It has become any-space-whatever.

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<sup>104</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, Minnesota UP, 1986, p.109.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.111.



Fig. 3.6-3.7 Zhou Wei and the Poland girl in Berlin

All the representations are ideological. *Summer Palace* represents a transition and a vanishing moment in China's history with strong nostalgic sentiment when the country and its people undergo rapid economic and social change. The director Lou Ye has experienced the turbulent social transition, but his representation of the 1980s and 90s is largely based on his "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."<sup>106</sup> Lou Ye chose to depict lives of two college girls Yu Hong and Li Ti. In the film, they wear the same shirt, singing and dancing together (see fig. 3.8-3.9). They project their inner spiritual world onto each other. The two girls form a mirror image, like Mudan and Meimei in Lou Ye's 2000 film *Suzhou River*, the latter is even played by the same actress Zhou Xun. The splitting and doubling structure of individual characters embodies what Althusser calls "the duplicate mirror-structure."

The structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject is specular, i.e. a mirror-structure, and doubly specular: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning... ideology in general, the duplicate mirror-structure of ideology ensures simultaneously: the interpellation of 'individual' as subjects; their subjection to the Subject; the mutual recognition of subjects

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<sup>106</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press, 1971, p.165.

and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself.<sup>107</sup>



Fig. 3.8-3.9 Mirror image of Yu Hong and Li Ti wearing the same shirt

Althusser's understanding of how ideology functions in society is based on the constitution of the subject as Subject. The concrete individual is subjected as a subject through the process of interpellation or hailing. The duplicate mirror structure interpellates individuals as subjects in the name of an ideal Subject to which subjects can identify themselves. In the film, Yu Hong and Li Ti compare and identify themselves through the existence of each other. They are subjects to an absolute Subject. They mutually identify each other as the ideal Subject. Their subjection to the ideal Subject is ensured through the duplicate mirror-structure of ideology; here is the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other.

*Summer Palace* touches upon the absently existed historical trauma of Sixth Generation films that is the Tiananmen incident. Following the narrative perspective favored by Fifth Generation directors, *Summer Palace* approaches the historical through the personal. Sex and violence are parts of personal memories, and are rituals of resistance and rebellion. This ritual-based resistance and rebellion is symbolic and performative. In the post-socialist youth narrative, rebellion is a recurrent theme; underlying young

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 180.

people's rebellion is cruelty and frustration with post-socialist reality that will be scrutinized in my analysis of Li Yu's *Buddha Mountain*.

### **III. Cruel Youth, Generational Pain, and the Dis-continued History in *Buddha Mountain* (观音山, 2011)**

*All history is contemporary history. ---Benedetto Croce<sup>108</sup>*

*What is important is not the epoch that discourse tells, but the epoch in which discourse is told.---Michel Foucault*

2008 was a peculiar year in China. It witnessed both the Wenchuan earthquake and the Beijing Olympics: an extremely tragic catastrophe and a triumphant moment that happened in tandem. Chinese filmmakers quickly responded to this bittersweet situation. Some of them represented the disaster by articulating Chinese generational tragedies, such as the male director Feng Xiaogang's film *Aftershock* (唐山大地震, 2010), which was about the 1976 Tangshan earthquake. Others chose to represent the 2008 Sichuan earthquake as a metaphor for the crisis of belief, the mental condition of contemporary Chinese people, in addition to generational social upheavals. The film *Buddha Mountain* (2010) explores those themes.

*Buddha Mountain* is set in the city Chengdu after the 2008 earthquake. It tells the story of three young people and their apartment landlady. The director Li Yu is a young female art house film director and this is her fourth film.<sup>109</sup> In *Buddha Mountain*, Li Yu draws attention to young people. As a marginalized group in a patriarchal society, young

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<sup>108</sup> Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, trans, Sylvia Sprigge, New York: W.W.Norton, 1941, 19: the practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of "contemporary history" because, however remote in time events there recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate.

<sup>109</sup> Li Yu's four fictional films are *Fish and Elephant* (2001), *Damn Street* (2005), *Lost in Beijing* (2007), and *Buddha Mountain* (2011)

people struggle for subjectivity and identity under the shadow of the father's control.

Young people have to rely on the dominant discourse to constitute their own discourse for self-expression, while accumulating the power of subversion. In terms of the correlation between youth and the older generation, and youth narrative and the dominant discourse, I analyze *Buddha Mountain* from three aspects: the cruelty of youth, generational pain, and dis-continued history. The discussion will resemble peeling onion layers off, not concerning itself with a concrete center or conclusion like the ending of this film. *Buddha Mountain* merely proffers the audience an imagined comfort and the conclusion of the film, like an onion, is centerless.

- **Cruel Youth, Generational Pain and the Dis-continuum of History**

It is difficult to summarize the exact characteristics of Chinese youth. In 1957, Mao Zedong offered the following at a meeting with Chinese students in Moscow: "You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you."<sup>110</sup> Youth has also been defined as "when people are initiated as full members of society and make eligible to enter structures of conjugality and family."<sup>111</sup> There are numerous descriptions and definitions of youth. However, no matter which style or which aspect is used to define youth, they all point to it as the initial stage of adulthood.

The primitivity of youth is characterized by its instability and impressionability. Being mentally children but physically adults, young people poses a potently violent and

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<sup>110</sup> Mao Zedong, "Talk at a meeting with Chinese students and trainees in Moscow", November 17, 1957. <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch30.htm>>

<sup>111</sup> Zhang Zhen, "Mediating Time: The Rice Bowl of Youth in Fin de Siècle Urban China" in *Globalization*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, pp 133.



undisciplined power, which is undomesticated but easy to control. Like many political veterans and sophisticated revolutionaries in totalitarian countries, Mao incisively noticed a truth from observing and participating in political movements: young people harbor the potential and immense power of political subversion. Their potential and uncontrollable forces always burst out in ferocious violence. Therefore, young people are ideal political tools but never decision-makers because of this peculiarity.

If history could be read with a search engine allowing us to key in on some famous political incidents and revolutionary movements, we might find that the active participants and advocates of those movements were always young people. For instance, Waffen-SS and SA in Nazi Germany, the Communist Youth League in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era, student protestors and the Red Guards in China, and Western New Leftists in the 1960s all consisted of young people. If we continued searching for still more key words about those movements, we would always get the following results: youth, furor, collectivity, rampage, and violence. Young people pursue individuality by hiding in collectivity. They express rebellion by fighting for or against disguised totalitarianism and extremism. They resort to ideals through violence, but behind young people's sonorous slogans and frenetic activities is their selective silence and acquiescence. That is to say, when they oppose or support the ruling class and its ruling ideology, they, at the same time, choose to keep silent about other things such as sacrifice, atrocity and injustice that occur in the progress of their activities. Such silence reflects a truism among young people, which is the absence of rationality, the rebellion without cause, the lack of individual awareness, and their acquiescence to the ruling class and the ruling ideas.

This unintentional silence of youth is exactly what the ruling class would like to see and take advantage of before and after it substituted the predecessor. Marx points out that the class making a revolution comes forward from the very start, if only because it is opposed to class, not as a class but as its representation of the whole of society, as a collective society confronting the ruling class. This is how every new ruling class achieves domination.<sup>112</sup> After declaring the founding of a new regime, how does the ruling class rule? Gramsci continues Marx's idea of the ruling class by discovering hegemony. For Gramsci, the modern ruling class strengthens its ruling power mainly by means of a consented coercion making sure the dominated or subordinate classes accept its ideology and cultural value as commonsense.<sup>113</sup> From Marxist class struggle to Gramsci's hegemonic dominance, we can track the operation of the silence and acquiescence of youth. For Marx, every new class declares itself to be representing and speaking for the whole of society. Yet, it seems reticent about other things such as the violence of revolution, its problematic logic of devastation prior to construction, and the likely inhumanity in the process of violent revolution. Gramsci's consented coercion in hegemony is directly based on silence. The subordinate class acquiesces to the ruling class's hegemonic discipline because the ultimate goal of hegemony is to neutralize opposition. Young people as ideal political tools can proffer the most efficacious silence to ruling class, but at the same time they can be controlled by that very silence. Even if they oppose the ruling class, they still appeal to it for attention and the acknowledgement of their position. The ruling class permits young

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<sup>112</sup> See *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 5, translated by Richard Dixon, New York: International Publishers, 1976, pp 48-9 and 52-3.

<sup>113</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

people a certain independence but only with its help, the ruling class will not allow young people to gain independence by their own power. Therefore, youth becomes the loyal adversarial accomplice of the ruling class.

Are young people satisfied with this granted quasi-independence? Are they content to be the auxiliaries of the ruling class? As a political force carrying power, how do young people position themselves in the grand narration and historical discourse? How do they struggle with the Lacanian discourse of the master? There are various answers to these questions, but I am not inclined to delve into them. What I am interested in is to discuss the choice of youth narratives on cruelty and trauma. In the case of the youth narratives, young protagonist is to play the role as the victim of silence and blindness. Once young people are stamped as victimized survivors, their behavior is spontaneously granted a reason as being therapies of trauma. On trauma, Cathy Caruth cites Freud and discovers that trauma does not arise immediately after the occurrence of a certain event. It appears during the numbing period after the event, and the latency of trauma lies in this belated period.<sup>114</sup> The numbing period, or belatedness can be viewed as a transformed silence, which incubates and also prolongs trauma. For instance, some holocaust survivors keep silent about their traumatic experience to their descendants. Their children imagine the traumatic past through its absent presence in their ancestors' silence. Yet, trauma is still passed on through this silence.

In the context of contemporary Chinese society, each generation has undergone different traumatic events, from the frenetic Cultural Revolution, to the June 4<sup>th</sup> incident of 1989 that was accompanied by a complete loss of faith, then to the period characterized by

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<sup>114</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," pp3-11.

the intentionally impoverished mental condition and the irrationally advocated money worship in the current post-socialist commodity economy. Each generation in each epoch fully absorbs its suffering and nothing else. Its self-absorption paves the way for the silence to incubate trauma. Meanwhile, it implicates the state political strategy of superficializing traumatic events to recast memory and history, and to eventually efface them.

Since “rethinking history” became the dominant cultural critique and social ethos among Chinese intellectuals in the late 1980s and early 1990s much like that of the May Fourth period, it is necessary to evaluate how history intervenes in our discussion about contemporary Chinese social phenomena here. On history, Marx wrote:

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity. This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history.<sup>115</sup>

Each past era has unfulfilled expectations for later era. These unfulfilled expectations are nothing more than imagined future vis-à-vis later history. Marx observes that earlier history exercises its influence on later history through a linear connection, by tracing the real process of material production, which is a ceaseless activity. Therefore, in the eye of Marxist historical materialists, history is consecutive by a sequence of events, whose core is the profit circulation driven by the process of material production. However, when a single event happens, how do we know which sequential line it belongs to? Moreover, besides the imagined

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<sup>115</sup> Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” pp11.

influence from earlier history, what else does later history gain from this linear succession?

Benjamin's observation on history proffers a different hypothesis for Marxist historical lineage. He explains history with the concept of history as "constellation":

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments of history. But no state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one. It becomes this, posthumously, through eventualities which may be separated from it by millennia. The historian who starts from this, ceases to permit the consequences of eventualities to run through the fingers like the beads of a rosary. He records the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. He thereby establishes a concept of the present as that of the here-and-now, in which splinters of messianic time are shot through.<sup>116</sup>

From Benjamin's idea we know that this constellation of earlier historical events by later history functions as a compass for later history to establish a coordinate in order to position itself. When later historians confront unprecedented situations, they need this historical constellation for self-identification. According to Benjamin, the true past consists of nebulous events: it is a flocculent structure. But the historical materialism of later epochs steadfastly draws a trajectory among these discontinuous events, and turns history into a systematized network for locating contemporary epoch.

Contemporary Chinese society is in such an unprecedented situation because China has moved from a socialist planned economy to a post-socialist market economy since the late 1990s, and the profit motive became the driving force behind everything happening in society. State politics and its mainstream media urge people to compete for material wealth and to create an economic miracle. Meanwhile, they unanimously keep silent about what may be sacrificed and what may be lost in the social ethos of money worship. Chinese

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<sup>116</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt.

intellectuals in the 1980s repetitively underwent self-reorientation and each new orientation established connections to and collisions between different European and some American thought. In the last year of the 1980s, a turbulent incident suddenly terminated the flourishing age of Chinese culture and thought. Since then, the ruling class has endeavored to brush off all dissension and make economic development the basic state policy. “Plunging into the risky business ocean” and “departing from the country” are two themes that perhaps best captured the fin de siècle frenzy of the market economy and consumerist China. They directly lead to the crisis in moral convictions and people’s---especially young people’s---suffering because of the loss of a moral compass.

Cinema, as an artistic form of representing human society and history as Ann Cvetkovich remarks, provides an archive of feelings, especially public feelings.<sup>117</sup> Cinema indeed hoards feelings, but more significantly, it assembles public feelings and exposes them together on screen in front of the masses. In *Buddha Mountain*, the director represents young people’s confusion when they confront an incomprehensible present and an unpredictable future. The film shows how people’s mental world drifts in drastic social transformation and the director tries to arouse public introspection of contemporary Chinese poignant social problems that are faced not only by young people. But compared to adults, young people’s reactions are more direct and highly prominent. The director articulates the cause of such unease and traumatic history through a series of metaphoric images in her film.

*Buddha Mountain* tells the story of three young people and their middle-aged landlady in Chengdu after the 2008 earthquake. The three rebellious young people are two

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<sup>117</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke UP, 2003.

urban boys, Dingbo and Feizao, and a migrant girl named Nanfeng (see fig. 3.10). Due to conflicts with their parents, each runs away from home and lives on their own. When the three have to vacate their soon-to-be demolished apartment, they rent rooms from Chang Yueqin, who is a retired opera actress.

The generation gap, different lifestyles, and the conflict between traditional and modern values among the four people result in friction. While living in her apartment, Dingbo, Feizao, and Nanfeng find that Chang is an eccentric person. With curiosity, they pry into Chang's secret garage where she stores a damaged car. This garage is Chang's prohibited area where she secretly laments her bitter past (see fig. 3.11). The young people's intrusion into the garage uncovers Chang's secret, which makes her despair for her life. Eventually they are astonished to learn that Chang lost her only son in a car crash. As a consequence of this episode, the four people start understanding each other, and gradually become closer. They act as surrogate family members for each other.



Fig. 3.10 the three youngsters wander along railway.



Fig. 3.11 the grieving mother Chang Yueqin gazes through a shattered windshield of the damaged car, and mourns for her dead son.

Towards the end of this film: the united foursome goes to Buddha Mountain, where they help to rebuild a small Buddhist temple that was demolished by the 2008 earthquake. The temple is a metaphor for their destroyed spiritual world. During the process of reconstructing the temple, they all find mental peace. Eventually, Chang chooses to fade into the mountains (a purely metaphysical ending of self-emancipation from pain) and the young people mature.

*Buddha Mountain* presents the quandary of contemporary Chinese society and alienation between people. Traumatic history is a “structuring absence” in this film; however, this is not to say that the director is unwilling to address it. In fact, she alludes to it indirectly in several sequences. This film focuses mainly on contemporary daily life, which allows traumatic history to retreat into an indiscernible background. Economic growth under a strong state controlled political system, the growing polarization between rich and poor in that rapid economic development, the crisis of faith, the rebellious and delinquent youth, the drifting population, the broken connection between generations, and



so on all disclose the trauma of history and reform. Moreover, the film's contemporary diegesis alludes to the traumatic past. In doing so, it records a Benjaminian constellation, as discussed in previous paragraph, in which its own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one in order to construct a concept of the present.

Stylistically, the film adopts an "on-the-spot realism" by using handheld cameras, ambient sound, and a nonlinear narrative to establish an observational style. Moreover, it inserts the actual documentary footage of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (also shot by hand-held DV) to expand its realistic dimension and allegorical signification. During the sequence, the four protagonists contemplate and imagine the horror of the moment while they are standing among the earthquakes ruins. The shots switch between them and the DV footage of the earthquake, creating a haunting sense of desolation. The diegetic plot is haunted by the actual disaster, which unfolds another haunting; in other words, the present is haunted by the past.

Consequently, a duality arises: the problematic present and the traumatic past. Contemporary daily life becomes the fictional stage of the film, which intertwines with the actual traumatic event. The traumatic disaster is foregrounded by the virtual cinematic story in the sense of silencing and haunting. The film manifests this duality through the following dichotomies.

- ***The Rebellious Son vs. The Collapsed Father***

In a traditional patriarchal society, even if it is a socialist modern society, the father is always a strong and authoritative figure. His rebellious children fight against his power but at the same they acknowledge the dominating power of the father. To the contrary, in *Buddha Mountain*, the father as a symbolic figure is trivialized and deprecated. The father,

as the once puissant, patriarchal target is not powerful any more. The father is undermined by the supreme state, ruling power, and becomes a weak adversary. Confronting the collapse of the father, the son undergoes a loss of self-identification. Both of them are the victims of the era.

Thematically, *Buddha Mountain* focalizes on generational collision. The conflict between father and child is prominent throughout the film, which in turn implies other profound conflicts: for example the conflict between the country's unimaginable past poverty and unbelievable present prosperity; the collision between old and new social and cultural values; and the conflict between the individual and the societal system. The film highlights each of these conflicts vis-à-vis confrontations between fathers and children: Dingbo spoils the remarriage ceremony of his train driver father; Nanfeng personally humiliates her alcoholic father; and Feizao complains about his gambler father.

Dingbo resents his father because when Ding's mother was dying, his father did not have money to pay her medical bills, to save her. This misfortune twists the son's understanding of success and happiness, and leads him to utter "only if a man possesses lots of things, can he have the woman he really loves." But the son is confused about what exactly "lots of things" (*henduo dongxi*) means (see fig. 3.12-3.13). Dingbo's anger alludes to the state economic-driven policy, which disseminates the ideology that only economic improvement can bring someone happiness. Due to this social and political ethos, numerous societal problems and inequalities have gradually appeared, and money becomes a means of guaranteeing happiness. Yet the state ascribes such problems to the dearth of raw materials and manufactured products. It exhorts its citizens to create more economic miracles. The authoritative state silences diversified and dissident voices toward

different social problems and praises its own economic policy. Consequently, each of the fathers depicted in the film always remains silent. They neither oppose nor support the state's harmonious voice. They keep silent on their suffering and on misunderstandings with their children. Their silence conceals conformity and dissidence toward state ideology. When Dingbo discovers his father's unspeakable helplessness, he knows that his father has become the victim of the social transition. Also in silence, Dingbo understands his father and his pain, through this plot, the director leaves a question to the audience: who should take responsibility for this tragedy?



Fig.3.12-3.13 Dingbo and his father, the father in his son's eyes.



Fig. 3.14-3.15 Nanfeng and her alcoholic father

Nanfeng disdains her alcoholic father, who often abuses her mother when he is drunk. Her father is a pathetic figure, who escapes from his own cruel reality only by

drinking. When the father confronts the daughter's humiliation, his only reaction is nothing but loud crying (see fig. 3.14-3.15). The tear-filled scene signifies the collapse of the masculine father. The father's sobs are a transformation of silence. Confronting the unspeakable situation, he chooses instead to seal them in sobs. Here, silence and crying are equivalent. Both are their fathers' responses to the unspeakable.

Feizao introduces his unseen father as a worker laid-off because of reforms in state-owned enterprises.<sup>118</sup> After losing the iron rice bowl (the assigned job from the state), he opens a small noodle shop, and becomes comfortably affluent. But the family's fate changes when he starts gambling. The son has to run away from home to avoid being beaten by his father when he loses money. The pitiful story of Feizao reflects the dearth of a spiritual life among many who have gained affluence, and implies the crisis of faith after the full collapse of belief in the communist state and the unsuccessful attempt at democracy.

These generational tragedies have deep roots. The state frenzy for economic miracles makes money the only criteria for safety and happiness. The neglect of the mental world under the social ethos of money worship results in a crisis of belief. Rapid economic development and rampant consumerism alienate people, and furthermore silence precludes communication. The fathers, who grew up in the socialist period were taught to believe that "each individual is a screw of the state machine."<sup>119</sup> As youth, they witnessed and lived through the Cultural Revolution. They were sent up to the mountains and down to the countryside as rusticated youth to receive re-education from poor peasants. They

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<sup>118</sup> Starting from 1978, in order to lessen the state economic burden, the Chinese government began to change the socialist state-owned enterprises into privately owned corporations. Such corporations after this reform rely on self-financing, voluntary integration, independent management, and are solely responsible for profits and losses. Many previous workers in state-owned factories and companies lost their jobs during this reform.

<sup>119</sup> An oft-quoted slogan during socialist period "做社会主义的螺丝钉"

devoted their youth to the socialist revolution and construction as the role of a silent screw in the state machine. Stepping into the 1980s, Chinese society was permeated with the sentiment “farewell to revolution.” And, when frenetic and revolutionary passion encountered fanatical and economic zeal, the former was pacified into silence. In the post-socialist market economy, fathers witness the disintegration of collectivity. They lose their jobs in the reforms of state-owned enterprises. They discover their material poverty. They find themselves to be rusty screws, which are useless to the state machine. All of these feelings are passed down to the sons through the fathers’ silence.

- ***The Desolate Railway vs. The Damaged Automobile***



Fig 3.16-3.17 The trio wander along the desolate railway (left), and they take the crash-damaged car for a drive (right).

In *Buddha Mountain*, vehicles (in particular cars and trains), significantly suggest a state of drifting and rootlessness, and reveal the effects of massive social transformation in China. Substantial portions of the film are shot on trains and along railways. Specifically the sequences are lyrical montages, which depict Dingbo, Feizao, and Nanfeng walking aimlessly along train tracks, lying down on the rails, and the three of them joyfully riding on a train (see fig. 3.16). In the Western discourse, trains are often interpreted as an

emblem of industrial technology, modernization, and forced modernization by colonialism; however, in socialist China, trains symbolize the socialist collectivism. Socialist China completed its transformation from an agricultural society to an industrial one by mainly relying on its own internal labor force. There was not any outside capital investment,<sup>120</sup> capital exploitation, or any bloody and greedy colonization seeking to accumulate labor and capital. The socialist state only relied on its people to accomplish the shift. Consequently, the emphasis on the importance of collectivity that was all-conquering became the nationwide propaganda. Collectivism was the distinguishing feature of the socialist period from 1949-1978, and industrial modernization was the dominant theme. Naturally, films of the era and films about the era always use images of trains and railways as metonyms for collective, socialist China. A recurrent scene in those films is protagonists climbing aboard a train along with a swarming crowd, which is a typical metaphor of individual spontaneous or reluctant submission to collectivity. However in *Buddha Mountain*, the train is not a passenger train, it is now a freight train. The railway is not crowded, but desolate. This shift indicates the collapse of socialist collectivity during China's societal transition since 1978.

Along with the fall of collectivity there is the rise of individuality and capitalist democracy, which is represented by a wrecked automobile in the film. In capitalist, consumer culture of visibility and mobility, the automobile is always seen as a consumer product connoting freedom and consumer mobility. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright argue that during the postwar and Cold War periods, the automobile was promoted as the symbol of individualism, freedom, and democracy.<sup>121</sup> Chinese people have been deeply

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<sup>120</sup> The Sino-Soviet split in 1960s, so the Soviet Union stopped providing assistance to China.

<sup>121</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Advertising, Consumer Cultures and Desire. in *Practices of looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford, 2009. pp 265-289.

influenced by this Cold War mentality even in the post-Cold War period, and once regarded automobile as a symbol of capitalist liberalism, but now is a consumer product to prove one's wealth. In the film, Chang's son died in a car crash that happened while he drove with his girlfriend to a romantic dinner. The mother ascribes her son's death to the romantic dinner, for which she hysterically blames his girlfriend. This scene alludes to China's unsuccessful practice in realizing capitalist democracy: a young man drives an automobile to fulfill his romantic ideals, but when the car crashes and the young man dies, his ideals become the failed practice of romanticism. As I discussed in the previous section, the June 4<sup>th</sup> incident retreats into an indiscernible background of the post-socialist cinema. In this film, the car signifies the capitalist democracy, which summons young people to participate in and strive to realize it. But when such movement is violently stopped by a crash, the young people are left either dead or deformed, and the damaged car fuels the mother's pitiful laments. In this film, the collective train is discarded and the democratic automobile is damaged (see fig. 3.17), such plot arrangement evokes a historical consideration of contemporary China. Moreover, it alludes to an alternative way as a hope for China's future due to the failures of socialist collectivism and capitalist democracy.

- ***The Disaster vs. The Interrupted History***

In his essay, "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin writes that "the true picture of the past *whizzes* by. Only as a picture, which flashes its final farewell in the moment of its recognizability, is the past to be held fast."<sup>122</sup> In *Buddha Mountain*, the true picture arises in the recollection of the past connecting the past and the present. When the four protagonists visit the earthquake ruins, they imagine the disaster and glimpse of the

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<sup>122</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt.

true picture of the past through their imaginations (see fig. 3.18). The ruins evoke the true disaster, which only appears in the form of a moment captured by a survivor. Since for the protagonists the true picture is imagined, we should ask ourselves what do the moments captured by individual who witnesses the scene of the true disaster evoke? If the ruins are evocative of the true disaster, then those images of the true disaster may imply something more profound, which can be trauma in Chinese history. The ruins of the physical family allude to the ruins of people's mental world. The demolished buildings by the earthquake offer a metaphor for China's contemporary status quo that confronts many challenges in its earlier and later history.



Fig. 3.18 the four visits the ruin of Sichuan Earthquake.

This film discloses the conflict between China's present and past. In the 1970s and earlier 1980s, the Chinese bade farewell to the revolutionary idea of "class struggle", a concept which would remind them of Maoism, violent revolution, and the proletarian dictatorship. In time, class struggle gradually disappeared from social discourse. In the socialist era, the overemphasized class system and class struggle were the necessities of the ruling ideology for the sake of protecting the fruits of victory. However, after undergoing turbulent revolutions, both the state and its people need stability not antagonism or



another revolution. As a result, in the 1990s, the state policy changed to support economic development in order to revive the nation and further secure national stability. The social discourse changing from overemphasis to underemphasis on class struggle becomes a phenomenon in post-socialist China. Confronting the increasing social friction, the state quieted the discussion of class struggle and other dissident voices by obliterating historical connection. People lost the historical “constellation” to record and locate the present, and eventually became aphasic to the present. The masses’ aphasia shows the success of the state political strategy in cutting off connections between generations and history. These severings or avulsions in turn deprive the masses of the ability to capture a true picture of the past, leaving them without a “constellation” for self-identification. The interrupted history makes the past unable to touch, and future is so dim. Therefore, people can only live with the ephemeral, endless, and dismal present. In this film, the conflict between sons and fathers as well as the friction between young people and society, all disclose the traumatic effects of losing self-identification.

#### **IV. Imagined Comfort and Imagined Conclusion**

Toward the end of this film, as the four protagonists help rebuild a destroyed temple in Buddha Mountain, the mother Chang Yueqin disappears into the mountains. This scene expresses a warm-sentimentality (*wenqing* 温情). The audience sees the liberation of the mother’s exhausted soul: a bittersweet happy ending to this heartbreaking story. However, the pain is real and comfort is illusive. In the process of rebuilding the temple, the mother gains imagined comfort and releases herself from a painful past, which she had not yet overcome. This plot arrangement also gives the audience an imagined comfort, and terminates the conflicts in this film. The conclusion of this film is very nihilistic and illusive:

everything is temporary, and life is ephemeral; neither happiness nor loneliness will last forever; and the traumatic moment will eventually end.

Are things really proceeding according to plan? History provides a certain answer. More than 30 years ago, Chinese people stepped out of the totalitarian and socialist period, and entered in the post-socialist epoch that is characterized by individual self-guarantee. In the socialist period, revolution substituted collectivity and party organization for the bonds of traditional family and clan. In the post-socialist period, such bonds have been replaced by money. Consequently, Chinese people are living in a dilemma: the state no longer provides shelter and an iron rice bowl to its people as it used to do, but it still maintains surveillance and interferes in the people's lives.

This leads to another dilemma: the individual gains a margin of freedom but only at the expense of connections with community, family, and ethical morality. Meanwhile, this freedom does not include free self-expression and criticism. State censorship scrutinizes public behavior, and it restricts the ability of intellectuals to freely express themselves. From another point of view, the state censorship proves that the government cares about what people would say. Many film directors resist state censorship, but to resist does not mean to reject. They negotiate with the state censorship in order to express their concerns and criticism to the society. For Sixth Generation film directors, the unspeakable and unrepresentable Tiananmen incident is the central pivot and the indiscernible structural core of their films. In Sixth Generation films, the characters' social engagement is represented through rupture and rebellion, they are always trapped by what they strive to escape. Such is the case in films like *Xiao Wu*, *Summer Palace*, and *Buddha Mountain*, those films vividly portray the inner world of contemporary Chinese young people behind their

violent and rebellious behaviors and make audiences contemplate the connection between ordinary people, the society they live in, and the history they pass through.

#### Chapter 4—My Zone My Way: *Balinghou* Youth Literature and Youth Narratives in the New Millennium

Entering the new millennium, youth narratives experience unprecedented and profound changes. The rising of youth literature by *Balinghou*<sup>123</sup> writers and the spread of Internet writing challenge the traditional literary domain and reconfigure paper-based literary publication and circulation. The fast development of technology and the explosion of information have caused major shifts in the modes and mores of the public's consumption of cultural products. Generally speaking, those changes focus on two questions: how to write and how to read. The formation of the cultural market and cultural products rely on the appearance of media, traditionally newspapers, journals, magazines, and nowadays Internet. The so-called traditional literature, or more narrowly, literary work published on paper-based media, has long been deemed as an elite activity until the upsurge of Internet writing. In the history of 20th century Chinese literature and literary works, fiction in particular, have been instructed to conform to particular social and political aims for the sake of educating and cultivating the masses. Cultural workers were unanimously writing under a shared denominator (*gongming* 共名)<sup>124</sup> of "obsession with China"<sup>125</sup> in chaotic wartime and dance under the shackles of revolutionary ideology in the socialist period. Youth narratives witnessed and participated in this shift. In the early reform period of the 1980s, youth literature was still under strict ideological control so as to repel spiritual pollution. Changes happened along with the gradual encroachment of

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<sup>123</sup> *Balinghou* (post-80 generation 80 后) refers to people who were born between 1980 and 1989 in mainland China.

<sup>124</sup> *Gongming* refers to works sharing grand and unified themes that are granted by the time, while *wuming* as opposed to *gongming*, basically means that in the relatively open era without a grand theme, works demonstrate independent individuality and multiple values. Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng* 中国当代文学史教程, 336.

<sup>125</sup> C.T. Hsia, "Obsession with China: the Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," in *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 533-536.

commercialization and the globalization of capital. Multifold and unprecedented social phenomenon emerged in tandem with economic miracles, and all these stretched in front of literary workers. The state, under the formidable mission “linking with the world,” loosed its ideological control, which paved the way for literary workers to practice under unshared denominator (*wuming* 无名).<sup>126</sup> Youth literature once again became the front line of restructuring.

The collective rising of *Balinghou* writers and the rapid development of Internet and Internet writing manifest the new character of post-socialism in China, and that is the last piece of my post-socialism jigsaw puzzle. ***Post-socialism vs. globalization***, internationally, globalization has encroached on the world. China has become the manufacturing factory of the world. Many ethical, environmental, and humanistic issues had emerged. Independent cultural workers address these topics in order to join the international conversation of globalization. They actively engaged in discussions on issues of social inequality, conflicts of generations, problems caused during massive internal migration, gaps between urban and rural areas, and unfair distribution of social resources, which are intricately intertwined with sensitive and edgy topics such as poverty, prostitution, and social polarization. Chinese mainstream media do not touch upon these topics, therefore, discrepancies between state discourse and civil discourse were automatically formed. *Balinghou* youth literature as a commercial product with its unneglectable commercial success bridges the bifurcation between mainstream elitist discourse and civil discourse. It is widely believed that *Balinghou* youth literature and its counterpart Internet literature

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<sup>126</sup> *Gongming* refers to works sharing grand and unified themes that is granted by the time, while *wuming* as opposed to *gongming*, basically means that in the relatively open era without grand theme, works demonstrate independent individuality and multiple values. Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng* 中国当代文学史教程, 336.

challenge literary conventions and hierarchies, and what I think is that they form a cooperative conspiracy between the authors, the readers, and literary conventions. The aim of *Balinghou* youth literature and Internet writing is not to overthrow the paper-based printed writing, but to innovate the traditional way of publication and circulation and to provide for a possibility of literary creation. In the following paragraphs, I will look at *Balinghou* youth literature and Internet literature separately to discuss the impact of *Balinghou* writing and new media on the reading and writing practices of youth narratives.

### **I. *Balinghou* Youth Literature**

Youth is “when people are initiated as full members of society and made eligible to enter structures of conjugality and family,”<sup>127</sup> and it is often awkwardly situated between childhood and adulthood, which confronts the evanescence of childhood innocence and the vague intelligence of adulthood. In literature and its cinematic adaptations, youthhood always associates with cruelty, perplexity, melancholy, and nostalgia and has distinct generational characteristics. May Fourth intelligentsia purports to arouse young people’s rebellion against the obsolete feudal and patriarchal society; rusticated youth literature after the Cultural Revolution is obsessed with retroactive discussions about trauma, conflicts between individual and collective, distorted ideals, and human natures; 60s and 70s generation intellectuals flounder in clashes between Western thoughts and Chinese ideologies, oppressive governmentality, unrealistic democracy, and the collapses of belief. What about contemporary Chinese youth, such as *Balinghou* who are the progeny of the one-child policy? What are the characteristics of this generation? How do people of *Balinghou* represent themselves in their literary and visual works? How are they evaluated

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<sup>127</sup> Zhang Zhen, “Mediating Time: The ‘Rice Bowl of Youth’ in Fin de Siècle Urban China,” in *Globalization*, 133.

by their older generations? What is *Balinghou* youth literature (qingchun wenxue 青春文学)? What are the motifs of *Balinghou* youth literature? How does *Balinghou* youth narrative distinguish itself from other generations? What are their attitudes toward history and memory in their ongoing growth and reminiscence? What kind of social reality and futurity are reflected and predicted in *Balinghou* youth literature and film? What is the *Balinghou* youth reaction to globalization? How do they choose between nationalism and globalism? How do they operate their literary and cinematic works in the market of urban mass culture? These are questions I would like to explore in this section.

The demographical definition of *Balinghou* (八零后, post-80's generation) refers to people who were born in the 1980s in mainland China under the intensive One-child policy. The term was first introduced in literature by a group of *Balinghou* writers, which is the first time in Chinese literature that writers are defined by the years of their birth generation. Gradually, this generation division expands to other cultural domains, and becomes a sociological term. When the shared characteristics of *Balinghou* such as fragile sentiments, rebellion, loneliness, and melancholia become a phenomenon pervasive in many social aspects including *Balinghou* consumption, *Balinghou* employment, *Balinghou* literature, and so on, generational division and its derivative cultural phenomena have generated new research fields. This made Chinese intellectuals start to trace back previous generations such as *Wulinghou* (post-50), *Liulinghou* (post-60), and *Qilinghou* (post-70). Post-50's generation grew up in the chaotic Cultural Revolution period, and most of them were rusticated youth who were sent up to the mountains and down to the countryside to learn from the workers and farmers there. They hold firm beliefs in socialism, and revolutionary romantic ideals pervade their works. They regard hardships as their life

treasures, and practice a “we endure and we survive” mentality. Their attitude toward reform and diminished social inequality is based on tolerance and understanding, not radical, aggressive ambition. Post-60’s and 70’s generations experienced the collapse of belief in the Tiananmen Incident; their growth histories are tied up with traumas of social upheavals. They were disillusioned with the party and fastened their intimacy with nihilism, which were expressed in the Sixth Generation films and the writings of the Rupture Generation.

*Balinghou* generation, as a cohort of progeny of the one-child policy since 1978, are nurtured by convergent loves from their parents and relatives. They grew up in the environment of the country’s booming economic development and social reform. They are cultivated by the rigorous “quality education” standard, having access to all sorts of digital medias, high technology, the Internet, and information in different languages. *Balinghou* is often regarded as the barometer to predict China’s future in the increasingly globalizing world. *Balinghou* young people confront different thoughts, values, and ideologies before they have enough time to foster discernibility. The whole social environment of the 1980s and 90s neglected education on faith and enlightenment, and directed attention to economic and material development. This growth environment affects *Balinghou* and they are largely criticized by a mainstream society that is dominated by the older generations as flowers in the greenhouse, fragile to hardship, barren mental world, and vulnerable to impacts from patriotic nationalism, individualism, consumerism, modernization, globalization, and so forth. However, it is hard to deny that *Balinghou* and their growth history refract the social, political, economic, and cultural shifts in China since the 1980s, which was a relatively quiet and peaceful period with less chaos and violence than previous



generations, but the changes they experience are tremendous and feature an electronic and digital technology revolution, information explosion, and the advent of the Internet era. Young people in Europe at the turn of the eighteenth century were impacted by the industrial revolution, which challenged the traditional way of living and made it impossible for them to follow the parental generation's life and career path in the new era. The old way of literary expression and description could not satisfy the new paradigm. Young people needed their own discourse, hence the narrative of *Bildungsroman* arose at this historic moment. *Balinghou* in China confront the third industrial revolution, which also requires a new narrative, and young people practice their new narrative in *Balinghou* youth literature.

*Balinghou* is a unique generation, they experienced the country's blocking and opening, and lived through deficiency and abundance. They received socialist education, but also soak in capitalist baptism; they know Pavel Korchagin and also read Harry Potter. In terms of subjectivity, *Balinghou* is also different from their predecessors in that the previous generations' primary pursuit is to separate the individual from the collective, and to part singular from plural; while *Balinghou* was born to be a single individual, their subjectivity has to cluster individual and extract.

*Balinghou* is the direct progeny of the one-child policy and grew up in a society replete with one-child families, where things are restructured and reorganized to conform to the new social order since the enactment of the One-child policy. In this newly structured society, a single child becomes the center and all the other family members move around him, which leads to some social symptoms, such as self-pity, self-sympathy, and self-

centeredness that become the life feature of *Balinghou*, and to some extent, also apply to contemporary China.

*Balinghou* grew up in the market-economy and consumerist China captured by the mantra “linking up with the tracks of the world.” They are indulged by their older generations with wealth that their parents accumulated in the national frenetic activity—*xiahai* 下海 (plunging into the business world) at the fin de siècle. People of *Balinghou* are distinguished by their plentiful material lives, excessive love from parents and relatives, and inexperience of collective trauma, which also become the targets of the criticism from elder generations: *Balinghou* young people are spoiled children; they are selfish and vulnerable. Their parental generation took advantage of national economic policy to make a huge fortune overnight. The sudden wealth caused a lot of family problems that meant that many *Balinghou* young people grew up in divorced families. They are rich in love and material possessions, but poor in understanding from elder generations and even their peers. On the one hand they are besieged by love and at the same time loaded down with too much expectation without understanding; on the other hand, they are blamed by the older generations for their vulnerability, caprice, and lack of persistence. *Balinghou* young people are surrounded by cares and concerns from their parental generation in the name of love, but those loves are seldom concerned about their psychological conditions, which means they are never truly understood and accepted by those who give them love. *Balinghou* young people are in a plight of when they were children, they grew up in profuse love. They have been deeply loved and been harshly criticized at the same time, by the same people. Once *Balinghou* become youth they confront their childhood trauma and exorcise the pain.

*Balinghou* young people are beneficiaries but also victims of the one-child society. Those young people are surrounded and are also circumscribed by love and concern from family members; they are loved and are intruded on by love from parents. They are growing up in this warped society where each family only has one child, therefore sibling relationships have been forced to disappear, and *Balinghou* strive to establish their self-protection against the invasion of others especially parents in the name of love. Thanks to the development of the Internet and other mass media that provide new venues of literary publication and distribution, *Balinghou* youth are able to write about their ongoing coming of age stories, that is recognized today as *Balinghou* youth literature (80后青春文学) and attracts considerable attention as well as huge commercial success. In *Balinghou* youth literature, they write about cruel stories of their troubled childhood and youthhood. They are always cynical with the question of how can their parents love them but not understand them. The conditional love from parents prescribe what *Balinghou* should follow in their growth, such as the alleged “quality education” but essentially “exam-oriented” educational system. Ironically, *Balinghou* young people feel pain just in the love from their older generations. It is love that turns love into trauma. In his essay “Girls of Shanghai” (上海的少女), Lu Xun 鲁迅 depicted those child-women in Shanghai, “they are mentally adults but physically children.” *Balinghou* young people, to some extent, as Lu Xun described, are mentally adults but physically youth or vice versa.

### **(1) Virtualize Reality and Consume Youthhood**

Starting in 2000, a group of young writers stepped into the literature domain by participating in a writing competition, and all of them were born in the 1980s. This group of *Balinghou* writers write about their life experience and fantasies of the ongoing

youthhood mostly in the metropolitan areas with little historical burden or obligation. The depth of history disappears in *Balinghou* writing, and instead history is superficialized and consists of a series of events, for instance, the 2010 film *Heaven Eternal, Earth Everlasting* (80 后) directed by *Balinghou* director Li Fangfang 李芳芳 convergently screens the life of *Balinghou* over past 30 years. The whole film is a survey-like exhibition of *Balinghou* growth history including the 1997 Hong Kong Handover, Beijing's winning bid for the 2008 Olympics, SARS, the Sichuan earthquake, and the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. It parallels the nation's contemporary history and development. There are many vintage symbols in the life of *Balinghou* youth throughout the film, such as cassettes, tape recorders, and colored pencils. Those substantial objects load the nostalgia of *Balinghou* youthhood. In this film, the director reveals the dilemma of *Balinghou*: rebel without a cause, resist and persist without a target; they are desperate to love, but do not know how to love. Love and pain are the recurrent themes haunting the mind of *Balinghou* youth. Previous generations' young people always associate their retrospection of youthhood and individual failures with the discussion of history and great social vicissitudes. *Balinghou* people ascribe their loss and frustrations to family factors and impossible communication between the parent and child generations. In *Balinghou* youth literature, the great time gives way to *Balinghou's* tiny time, and the complicated social reality is simplified to the focus of the tortured psyches and melancholy of their adolescent characters. *Balinghou* novels situate themselves in contemporary urban settings, and are closer to the reality of teenage readers' lives than the harsh countryside of China's modern classics. *Balinghou* writers write about urban life with sarcastic and glamorous language, and emancipate the heavy spiritual burden from the May Fourth legacy. That has drawn harsh criticism,

especially for their lack of social conscience, their reliance on overblown fantasy elements, and their replication and reproduction of the youthhood myth that disregards reality but magnifies innocence and cruelty of adolescent pain.

Those who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s have strong collective memories that were shaped by political and historical events, but *Balinghou* don't have similar shared experiences. This is one reason that they focus more on themselves and disregard conventions and reality. Previous generations just accept the rules of this world, but *Balinghou* regard themselves as the ones who make the rules.

In a commercial and consumer society, *Balinghou* literature is acknowledged for its accurate capture of young people's reading habits and psychology, but is also criticized for its writing that cares too much about market and profit, which is blamed for leading to the fall of pure literature. Literary critics regard *Balinghou* literature as merely a commercial product within which diverse causes and factors of social conflicts are wiped out. However, from another perspective, *Balinghou* youth literature sutures the gap between elitist state discourse and civil discourse in the following aspects: first, *Balinghou* literature has a large population of readers and achieves huge commercial success, therefore it conforms to the social ideals of the new China---commercialism and apolitical individualism---and it actively responds to the state discourse and conspires with state ideology, as Lydia Liu said, "they don't pose any threat, they collaborate."<sup>128</sup> Second, *Balinghou* writing discloses the conflicts and misunderstandings between parents and children within family and school, and the aftermath of the educational system, but it doesn't aim to criticize state policy. While the Chinese government frequently jails or forcefully exiles dissident writers,

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<sup>128</sup> Aventurina King, "China's Pop Fiction." *New York Times*. May 4, 2008.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/books/review/King-t.html?pagewanted=all>. html.

it mostly ignores the antics of other *Balinghou* writers, even *Balinghou* leading figure Han Han 韩寒, who dropped out of high school and derided China's inefficient educational policy.

Before the appearance of *Balinghou* youth literature, the Chinese literature market was roughly divided into children stories and adult writings according to the age of writers and readers. There is an obvious gap in the literature market that is youth who have leisure time and money. Book merchants and publishers carefully package *Balinghou* youth literature to fill the blank between children's literature and adult literature. *Balinghou* young writers possess high commercial value because many young people read their work. The young generation of writers writes directly for the market and separates themselves from the previous socialist literature system. A new ideology has been formed during this transformation of literature production: they rebel against their imagined authority and express freely without touching the boundary of state censorship. Capital functions actively in *Balinghou* writing and leads to a dual consumption of youthhood and fantasy. *Balinghou* literature emphasizes the biological age of writers and readers, and moreover, it capitalizes youthhood, which is a biological period but now has been packaged as a good for consumption. *Balinghou* literature focuses mostly on fantasy and imagination, which together are in contrast to traditional socialist realism. It mainly concerns the "tiny times" of *Balinghou* people and excludes the big times that the writers, characters, and audiences actually live in. *Balinghou* idol writer Guo Jingming 郭敬明 expresses the *Balinghou*'s attitude of resistance in his *Tiny Times* series, which is to resist anything that stops *Balinghou* youth from being themselves. This attitude is representative of the *Balinghou* generation, which is often questioned, criticized, and regarded as a hopeless and self-

absorbed generation in China. *Balinghou* is often judged for being too self-centered and rebellious. *Balinghou* young people are very different from any other generation, especially their parents and grandparents. Born and growing up in the world of high speed technology development and of information that is pouring into the new open China, *Balinghou* are more confident, independent, active, and outgoing. Praise and criticism both load on *Balinghou*, but both reveal one aspect of the characteristics of the *Balinghou* generation. Next I will take a close examination at *Balinghou* writers and the path of their literature careers.

## **(2) Writers of *Balinghou***

In the year 1998, in order to break the new stereotyped “eight-legged essay” writing that was formed in the “exam-oriented education” (应试教育), the first “New Concept Writing Competition” (新概念作文大赛) was organized by the once well-known but now at-risk state-owned literature magazine *Sprouts* (*Mengya* 萌芽). The catchphrase of the competition is “new thought, new expression, and real experience.” The contestants were to be junior and senior high school students or any youth under the age of 30. *Sprouts* magazine hosted the competition with the intention to increase its sales volume and rescue the magazine from closure. It co-sponsored the writing competition with seven prestigious universities, promising that winners would be admitted into those universities without taking a college entrance exam (高考). The competition received a wide range of social and media attention and achieved remarkable success. A particular contribution of the competition was that it discovered a group of young writers born in the 1980s, including Han Han 韩寒, Guo Jingming 郭敬明, and Zhang Yueran 张悦然. Later, they all become the

leading figures of *Balinghou* writers. Although the protagonists of *Balinghou* youth literature and children's literature are teenage youth, *Balinghou* youth literature is different from children's literature—which is mostly written by adults—and claims, “we write our own stories instead of having them write our stories.” *Balinghou* stories are about school life, coming of age pain, friendship, and love, with sentiments such as cruelty, betrayal, melancholy, pain, perplexity and so forth. In their works, *Balinghou* writers depict the lives of *Balinghou* young people and the traumas they undergo as a result of the misunderstanding of their parents, the society, and even their peers. Their ongoing adolescence portrayed in their stories is often cruel and melancholic. In modern Chinese literature, the cruel and melancholic stories of youth are not new narratives. May Fourth writers produced a large sum of literary works on youthhood melancholia. Rusticated youth literature and scar literature after the Cultural Revolution also targeted youthhood cruelty in this special period. In the early 1990s, 16 year-old Yu Xiu 郁秀 wrote *Flower and Raining Season* (花季雨季) about the lives of high school students in the open coastline city Shenzhen, and Wang Shuo 王朔 published the novel *Wild Beast* (动物凶猛) to recollect his brilliant and unbridled youthhood during the Cultural Revolution. Youth narratives have been polarized into two modes: one is advocated for the social mainstream and is imbued with youthful vigor and vitality, warmth and ardor; the other is alternative, marginalized, coarse, and is permeated with imprudence, violence, anger, cruelty, and dissipation. These two modes represent two narrative directions. Yu Xiu portrays the ongoing youthhood, whereas Wang Shuo depicts the past adolescence from retrospection.

*Balinghou* youth literature is close to Yu Xiu's ongoing youthhood, but not as bright and positive as Yu Xiu's writing. When Han Han published his first book *Triple Doors* (三重



门) in 2000, he was an 18-year old high school student from Shanghai. The novel describes the life and psychological condition of contemporary Chinese high school students, and was attributed as criticism of the Chinese exam-oriented educational system. In his first year of high school, Han Han won first prize in the abovementioned writing competition. However, he failed to pass seven subjects in the school exams including math, physics, and chemistry. He was retained for a year in school but failed more subjects, so he quit school. This incident was reported in the media and aroused a heated debate about Chinese educational policy, and how to implement holistic learning in schools. After dropping out of school, Han declined offer from some universities, and his decision not only set himself as a hero who defied the state educational system, but also provided the publishing house and media a good way to promote his books. He has since become a professional rally driver and popular blogger, has opened his online bookstore and magazine, and directs film, all of which make him an icon of rebellious *Balinghou* youth who deviated from the regular road but was still successful.

The other iconic figure of *Balinghou* writers abreast of Han Han is Guo Jingming, and these two take different life roads and are therefore always compared to each other by the media and the public. Guo comes from a remote small town in Sichuan. After winning the writing competition, he accepted the offer of Shanghai University and came to Shanghai. Han Han was born and grew up in Shanghai, and his father is a writer and close friend to the chief editor of *Sprouts* magazine. However, without many connections and mostly relying on careful and skillful self-operation and management, Guo has made himself a prolific and commercially successful young writer, a businessperson of Entertainment

Company, a teen pop idol, a film director adapting his own novels, and a popular celebrity figure.

Guo's first novel *City of Fantasy* (幻城, 2003) tells a story about a fanciful world, where a 350-year-old prince of an ice kingdom is forced to kill his younger brother to protect the throne. All the affections of the characters are simple and pure without worldly deceit. The novel's fabrication of pure beauty and of the emotions like love is greatly appreciated by his young readers. Guo said this story is dedicated to the lonely children of China's one-child generation. His second novel *Never Flowers in Never Dream* (梦里花落知多少, 2004) is a story of a love triangle between the second generation of the nouveau rich (富二代) and the second generation of the officials (官二代) in Beijing. Guo is not satisfied only with success in writing, and started his writing studio to select writers and works with commercial value. In addition, he turned his focus to the film industry and adapted his *Tiny Times* series into a series of four films that achieved great commercial success. As exemplaries of the *Balinghou* generation, Han and Guo never lack criticism and controversial news. Han was suspected of ghostwriting, and Guo was even accused of plagiarism; however, these negative reports did not affect the support of their fans. Their books, musical albums, and films still sell very well. They think that the people who criticize them never read their books or understood what they write, so they would not pay any attention to those false judgments.

Besides male writers, *Balinghou* female writers are also active. Zhang Yueran's *Daffodils Took Carp and Went Away* (水仙已乘鲤鱼去, 2005) tells a story of a bulimic girl who fails in love with her stepfather, and is mistreated by her mother, finally is sent off to

boarding school. Chun Shu 春树 has been regarded by many Asian and Western medias as the leader of cruel youth, the group inspired by movies, books, and rock music of the West. Her book *Beijing Doll* (北京娃娃, 2002) radically and rebelliously exposes young people's dissatisfaction with school, family, and lastly, the disease of normalcy. Her work is received by the West as the "voice of a new generation."<sup>129</sup> The voice in Chun's book is a lost soul, feeling misunderstood, unappreciated, and bored, searching for who she is and who she wants to be. She wrote about sex, going from one partner to another, admitting that the only time she was in control of a situation was when she said good-bye. Most *Balinghou* writers choose an autobiographical style that is the general characteristic of *Balinghou* youth literature. Cruelty of youth is the recurrent motif of *Balinghou* writers' books. It manifests from their desire to cut themselves off from the entrenched criteria established by their older generations, but what is hidden behind their cruel stories is naiveté and immaturity. Therefore, *Balinghou* youth literature is often perceived by the mainstream as teenage subculture.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, *Balinghou* people, growing up with various TV programs and the Internet expansion, have stepped into their thirties. They are in light of Confucianism, where "at thirty, one should stand firm" (三十而立). To alleviate *Balinghou's* collective middle age anxiety and depression, nostalgia has become the prominent theme in *Balinghou* books and films in recent years. In *Balinghou's* nostalgia, history retreats and diminishes, resulting in the evanescence of historical profundity. Audiences do not need to have a historical background to enjoy and consume those cultural

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<sup>129</sup> Antoaneta Bezlova, "China's New Female Writers Captivate World." *Asia Times*. January 16, 2003. <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/EA16Ad01.html>.

products. *Balinghou* nostalgia is constructed on the prevailing cultural consumption of history. It is always sentimental and melancholic, harking back to an invisible pain that is mixed with the blankness of belief. The enchantment of nostalgia is in its possibility of fabrication. It makes up a false history based on real images and things. In the process of nostalgia, humans magnify the happiness of older time, and diminish the unhappy factors of the past. Nostalgia is a hallucinogen used to escape reality. In the current trend of nostalgia, *Balinghou* young people are obsessed with nostalgia, the same as they are traumatized by the absence of trauma.

As I mentioned above, the *Balinghou* growth history parallels Chinese development during the past 30 years. One key word of this period is the “socialist market economy”, more specifically, “market”. *Balinghou* generation has grown up along with China’s opening-up, confronting the explosion of information. They have various outlets to present and express themselves, including literary magazines and publishing houses (some of which are even founded by *Balinghou* writers), digital video recordings, blogs and microblogs, BBS, online forums, and so forth. *Balinghou* young writers know how to operate the market but also inevitably are manipulated by the market. *Balinghou* writers write and film whatever the market needs. Most of their audiences are *Balinghou* and *Jiulinghou* young people, who are the newly emerging middle classes of China with money and undecided tastes. *Balinghou* film works are very different from the Fifth and Sixth generation filmmaking. Fifth generation produced their representative allegorical films when the Chinese film industry was in the period of state-owned studios. At that time, the state supported film production and distribution, and audiences had to follow and watch whatever the state allowed to be released. The role of market was not important, so film

directors did not need to consider it when they produced films. Censorship of Fifth generation filmmaking seemed looser than in later years. Sixth generation makes independent films, demonstrating an underground resistance in order to reflect their thinking of the period they live in. Sixth generation makes films outside the state system, so their films are seldom released in domestic theatres; they get attention and support from overseas film festivals by selling overseas film copyrights, and obtaining funding from international investors. Sixth generation is self-financing without relying on the domestic film market. *Balinhou* generation dedicates itself to the market and has accurate grasp of the market. *Balinhou* has been influenced by western culture since childhood, and many *Balinhou* directors receive professional training from foreign film institutes, therefore Western film theories and narrative techniques are adopted into their storytelling of China.

Another distinctive feature of *Balinhou* films is their focus on urban life. *Balinhou* is the urban generation. The majority of them grew up in cities or towns because of nationwide urbanization. They go to metropolis for college, and work there, but their efforts are far from enough to afford living in the big cities, and most of *Balinhou* young people have to squeeze in the rural-urban fringe areas (城乡结合部) of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. In China, they are called “ant tribe” (蚁族) as the contrary to the second generation of the nouveau rich. The term refers to *Balinhou* young people who received higher education and now try to make a living in big cities, but confront the relentless competition from their peers and surroundings. They have low income and live in a compact community on the outskirts of big cities, and are the new marginalized people in urban China together with migrant workers and laid-off workers. The situations of those marginal people reflect the realities and problems that happened in and were even caused

by China's rapid economic ascent, the progress of urbanization, and the transformation of the Chinese labor market in the age of globalization. The stories of marginal people are favored by writers and film directors, for instance, migrant workers are frequent protagonists of Sixth generation films because their marginal status and neglect by society echoes Sixth generation directors underground position relative to the mainstream. Migrant workers are the main characters of the stories written by others, while *Balinghou* young people of "ant tribe" have the power of discourse. They know how to express themselves and are able to do it. They are the main characters of stories written by themselves, though their power of discourse to some extent is guaranteed under the cap of a superior discourse and is within the tolerance of the state dominant ideology. *Balinghou* writers write about true-life struggles of their own generation, they seldom use allegory, and they are enamored with their tiny time that mirrors the grand time. In *Balinghou* literature, the conflict between the global urban vs. the national rural becomes salient not just through the absence of rural countryside, but more in the reveal of unfairness and harshness of city life. Their work reflects reality in their own ways.

The national frenzy of marketization and commercialization are the two mainstream ideologies that greatly influence *Balinghou* writers. Many of them make successful commercial profits, and become cultural entrepreneurs by having their personal cultural industry. Han Han has founded magazine *Hechangtuan* (Choir 合唱团), while Guo Jingming owns the teenage magazine *Zui xiaoshuo* (Zuibook 最小说) in addition to his entertainment company. The huge coverage of Internet and various Internet programs additionally provide new venues of literary circulation and distribution. Many *Balinghou* writers choose to serialize their works first on online literary forums. In doing this, their

works attract and accumulate a certain amount of readers before their publication into paper and adaptation into film. In a different sense, serializing literary works online tests the reception and popularity of the work before its completion, which guarantees profitability of future publication, cinematic adaptation, and further possible investment.

## II. Kaleidoscope: Youth Narratives in Internet Literature

The appearance of Internet literature blurs the boundary between elitist discourse and civil discourse, and also unifies the distinction between literature and cultural products. Literary creation has long been dominated by the established writers in the print-based system who are referred to as authors (*zuojia* 作家) in elitist discourse, while the Internet provides platforms for those actively engaged in literature production who are known as writers (*xieshou* 写手). The prevalence of the Internet makes more and more people enter the profession of writing, which loosens the literary creation threshold and breaks the single mode of circulation. Previously, literary works could only be read by and accessible to the masses through an editor's selection and then could only get published in literature journals and magazines. The Internet has ignited a revolution in China's literature production and publishing industry by allowing a diversity of voices to bloom. Websites such as *Rongshuxia* (the oldest literature website in China), *Jinjiang* (the biggest literature website for female readers in China), and *Qidian* (the biggest literature website for fantasy novels and martial arts fiction) are particularly influential, and have excavated writers including Guo Jingming, Annie Baobei 安妮宝贝, Ning Caishen 宁财神, Murong Xuecun 慕容雪村, Feiwo Sicun 匪我思存, Xin Yiwu 辛夷坞, Tong Hua 桐华 etc. Their works have all been adapted for the screen.

These Internet writers explore different genres, but romance remains crucial in their web-based works. The female Internet writers in particular produce popular romance novels to entertain female readers. “Warm hurt” (暖伤) and “tortured love by fate” (虐恋) are the two most common themes in Internet youth literature represented by Feiwo Sicun and Xin Yiwu’s works. In *To Our Youth That To Fading Away* (致我们终将逝去的青春, 2007), Xin Yiwu tells a story about the love, joy, and pain of a group of young students in their college days, their harsh confrontation with reality, and is a lament on the loss of youthhood to adulthood. The novel is a lyrical ode to youth and a memoir of a generation of young people whose optimism of the past gives way to the compromise of the present and the misery of adulthood, which is interpreted by the writer as the unavoidable path of growing up. In Xin Yiwu’s novels, hurt and pain are constitutive components of youth, but they are not as harsh and brutal as cruel youth stories. In the “warm hurt” youth literature, those failures and unfulfillments of youth become warm and intelligible in the characters’ reminiscences.

Another recurrent theme of Internet youth literature is “tortured love by fate”, which is not sadism masochism as in the Western culture. It refers to plots featuring misfortune, tragedy, twisted fates, and entangled emotions that attract readers and arouse their sympathy and resonance for the characters. “Tortured love by fate” is a popular theme among Asian countries. Its predecessors include Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki’s *Shunkinsho* (A Portrait of Shunkin 春琴抄, 1976), a melancholic romantic relationship between a blind koto teacher and her trainee who blinds himself in order to completely enter into her world; the *Akai* series, especially *Akai Giwaku* (Red Suspicion 血疑, 1975), in which a young girl got leukemia after exposure to radiation in her father’s



hospital and then discovers she was actually adopted and her boyfriend is really her half brother; the South Korean season-themed tetralogy *Endless Love* drama series such as *Autumn in My Heart* (蓝色生死恋, 2000) and *Winter Sonata* (冬季恋歌, 2002), which both feature complex, melodramatic family circumstances with hidden adoption, mistaken identity, illness such as leukemia and blindness, and traffic accidents. Back to the “tortured love” theme in Chinese Internet youth literature, Feiwo Sicun is the leading writer of this theme, and her representative works *Too Late to Say I love You* (来不及说我爱你, 2006) and *Romantic Holidays Like Dreams* (佳期如梦, 2007) contain all the aforementioned elements. The characters always confront life misfortunes with steadfastness and optimism, and their unrequited love, unconditional love, and endless love comfort female readers’ loneliness and satisfy their female audiences’ psychological appetite that is dreaming for true love in reality.

The popularity of Internet literature does not lead to the demise of paper-based media. Internet literature and traditional literature are not two opposite poles. On the contrary, they are complementary mechanisms. For instance, one important component of Internet literature is the electronic traditional literature, such as the digital version of four classics, the complete collection of Lu Xun’s works, and many other literary masterpieces that were previously only available in paper print books and now can be accessed through the Internet. Internet literature will never overthrow or completely replace paper-based media because of people’s pro-paper book reading habits and the limitation of Internet literature itself, including network coverage, battery sustainability of electronic book readers, and the limited availability of digitalized paper books. As an innovative media, Internet literature brings resources and vitality to traditional media in that publishing

houses can spot new talents and buy the rights of their works for print editions. In addition, Internet literature still strives to obtain wide recognition through paper-based publication. When the virtual digital version becomes the actual printed version, many online writers regard this publication of their works as the acceptance of mainstream culture that is the formal beginning of their professional career as authors. Meanwhile, publishing in a paper book gives the writer a chance to reorganize and edit the novel because one noticeable flaw of the Internet novel is its loose and fragmented structure due to the daily serial mode. Michel Hockx thinks that the only formal distinction between novels and online novels is that the latter had originally been published on the Internet.<sup>130</sup> His opinion is a generalization of the distinct features and unique distribution model of Internet literature. The common operation for an Internet novel is first to serialize previous chapters online for free, and then when click-through rate is high, the remaining chapters become available for VIP readers who pay to read. Sometimes a novel will be selected by a publishing house before its completion, and in that case --based on the contract--the writer has to slow down the online updating and the ending chapters must be posted several months after the print version's release in order to guarantee the profit of paper books.

Usually the online ending of the novel is different from its printed version, and the writer will add several tens of thousands of words as a bonus for the paper book that is known as *fanwai* (spin-off 番外). These are chapters that tell the story from the perspective of a character's internal monologue, revealing the other side of the story, or extend the story beyond its ending chapter. Using *fanwai*, the writer creates unique reading effects by allowing readers to see the other side of the story, appeasing readers' different appetites

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<sup>130</sup> Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, p.5.

toward the main story and its main characters, and attracting readers to participate in the online discussion and comments of the novel. *Fanwai* makes the boundaries between writers and readers increasingly fluid. Readers actively discuss the hints and clues of *fanwai* chapters in their commentaries, suggest future developments of the main story, and some even turn *fanwai* into a fan fiction. Readers willingly collaborate with writers in the creation of the text and their spontaneous comments on the latest plot developments get spontaneous responses from the writer, who will adjust and move the plot in certain directions according to readers' requests. This interactive mode in the domain of Internet literature integrates the roles of writers as producers and readers as consumers.

According to a *New York Times* report, by the year of 2008, Chinese Internet users have reached about 253 million, ahead of the United States as the world's biggest Internet market. The powerful surge in Internet adoption is particularly prominent among teenagers.<sup>131</sup> These numbers indicate the existence of an emerging and huge consumer market with enormous potential business opportunities. In spite of political content that is heavily censored on Chinese websites and foreign sites that have faced restrictions, online blogs, social networking, and entertainment sites are extremely popular among young people in China. The Internet's popularity and the prosperity of Internet culture often pose serious challenges to the government. Online videos of protests, netizens' unregulated comments on sensitive topics, even online rumors on critical issues and inside stories, all reveal the Internet as a double-edged sword. The Internet can be used to defend nationalist campaigns and the state propagandas, but on the other hand, it can also dissolve mainstream ideologies and crack down on what the government upholds.

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<sup>131</sup> David Barboza, "China Surpasses U.S. in Number of Internet Users." *New York Times*, July 26, 2008. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/business/worldbusiness/26internet.html?\\_r=0.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/business/worldbusiness/26internet.html?_r=0.html).

## **Epilogue: IP Adaption--the Integration of Internet Literature and Film Industry**

In its early days, Internet literature was underestimated and looked down upon by the mainstream, and was not even regarded as literature. Since the 2010s, Internet fiction has been largely adapted for the screen, which witnesses the integration of Internet and film industry in the form of IP adaptation.

IP is the latest buzzword of the Chinese entertainment industry; it is the abbreviation of intellectual property. In the context of Chinese, it generally refers to literary works with a large group of existing readers and audiences who will follow as the novels are retold across different media platforms. Screenwriters have coined the term “IP movie” to describe the trend of adapting popular youth fiction. IP adaptation indicates the unique cooperation between literature and the film industry under the impact of fan culture. Literary adaptation is not a new concept and phenomenon for Chinese filmmakers; almost all Fifth generation films are adapted from literary works.<sup>132</sup> These unrewarded fictions were excavated by Fifth generation directors and became well known to audiences through their cinematic adaptation. The difference and uniqueness of IP adaptation in the 2010s is that IP works have already accumulated considerable popularity before their adaptation, in other words, it is because of their existing popularity that they are selected for the screen. IP adaption can lower investment risk, and the fan effect promises investors profits before the public release of a film or TV series. By the year 2013, the majority of films have all

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<sup>132</sup> Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* and *Farewell My Concubine* are adapted from Ke Lan's essay and Li Bihua's novel; Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, *To Live*, and *Raise the Red Lantern* are based on Mo Yan, Yu Hua, and Su Tong's novels.

been adapted from existing IP. By the end of 2014, there were 114 Internet novels licensed for film and TV adaptation.<sup>133</sup>

Internet fiction has become a key source of IP adaptation. Popular romance novels associating with the rise of popular culture and with a female consumer base in China are the most popular IP works made into various popular TV series and films. The aforementioned online novel *To Our Youth That To Fading Away* written by Xin Yiwu has been adapted into the film *So Young* (the film title alludes to the song by the British rock band Suede), which is the debut film directed by the renowned Chinese actress Zhao Wei. The novel has a large readership, and the actress-turned-director has a large number of fans. The film thus has an assured large number of prospective audiences even before its official release.

Another successful commercial example of IP adaptation is Guo Jingming's *Tiny Times*, which is written by Guo and made into films also by him. The novel already has an existing fan base and is very popular among young urbanites, and its large fan base offers guaranteed consumers for the film. IP adaptation provides an easy way for film producers to make use of a fan base. Profit-hungry investors are buying the fan base rather than the novel. In the case of the *Tiny Times* tetralogy, the film adaptation shares some of the top young film stars who have their respective fan base, and together with the novel's large readership, locks in success in the box office.

The current Chinese film industry is filled with IP adaptation, which creates huge box office miracles, while the imbalance between IP adaptation and original film creation leads to the dearth of originality and creativity and has become a new problem for the

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<sup>133</sup> Wang Sharon, "Adaptations Lead the Chinese Film Industry." *Beijing Today*, May 20, 2015. <https://beijngtoday.com.cn/2015/05/adaptations-lead-the-chinese-film-industry/>

industry. Presently, the Chinese entertainment industry confronts a shortage, not of investment, but of creativity and originality due to the excessive use of IP adaptation as a resource. On the one hand, the Internet provides greater freedom from censorship that is not much allowed in the traditional media. Internet novels infuse new blood in youth literature by incorporating different genres such as fantasy fiction, time-travel, grave-robbing adventure plus the supernatural, and alternative history into youth literature. Those Internet novels not only cater to female readers but also satisfy the needs of male consumers. In addition, those Internet novels expand the scope of youth literature by introducing and describing traditional folkloric culture such as geomancy and traditional Chinese medicine in their plots, and the representative works include the grave-robbing adventures *Ghost Blows Out the Light* (鬼吹灯, 2006), *Grave Robbers' Chronicles* (盗墓笔记, 2007), and palace novel *Empresses in the Palace* (甄嬛传, 2007). On the other hand, the film industry's excessive dependence on IP adaptation has aroused wide concern and debate. Internet literature and its IP adaptation have novelty and complexity, and is a booming cultural industry that is largely unique to China because of the huge online reading market. Internet IP adaptation will be a signpost of present and future Chinese cultural study, which as a new research field deserves separate and serious consideration and examination.

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## Appendix A

### Filmography

1. 黄土地 (Yellow Earth) (Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, 1984)
2. 马路天使 (Street Angel) (Yuan Muzhi 袁牧之, 1937)
3. 十字街头 (Crossroads) (Shen Xiling 沈西苓, 1937)
4. 我们村的年轻人 (Youth in Our Village) (Su Li 苏里, 1959)
5. 青春祭 (Sacrifice of Youth) (Zhang Nuanxin 张暖忻, 1985)
6. 北京你早 (Good Morning, Beijing) (Zhang Nuanxin 张暖忻, 1985)
7. 老井 (Old Well) (Wu Tianming 吴天明, 1986)
8. 孩子王 (King of the Children) (Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, 1987)
9. 北京杂种 (Beijing Bastards) (Zhang Yuan 张元, 1993)
10. 阳光灿烂的日子 (In the Heat of the Sun) (Jiang Wen 姜文, 1994)
11. 小武 (Xiao Wu) (Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 1997)
12. 长大成人 (Making of Steel) (Lu Xuechang 路学长, 1997)
13. 花季雨季 (Flower and Raining Season) (Qi Jian 戚健, 1997)
14. 网络时代的爱情 (Love in the Internet Age) (Jin Chen 金琛, 1998)
15. 过年回家 (Seventeen Years) (Zhang Yuan 张元, 1999)
16. 我的父亲母亲 (The Road Home) (Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 1999)
17. 月蚀 (Lunar Eclipse) (Wang Quan'an 王全安, 1999)
18. 扁担姑娘 (So Close to Paradise) (Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, 1999)
19. 我是你爸爸 (I Am Your Father) (Wang Shuo 王朔, 2000)
20. 站台 (Platform) (Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 2000)
21. 十七岁的单车 (Beijing Bicycle) (Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, 2000)
22. 那时花开 (Where Have All the Flowers Gone) (Gao Xiaosong 高晓松, 2000)
23. 任逍遥 (Unknown Pleasure) (Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 2002)
24. 盲井 (Blind Shaft) (Li Yang 李杨, 2002)
25. 像鸡毛一样飞 (Chicken Poets) (Meng Jinghui 孟京辉, 2002)
26. 天下无贼 (A World Without Thieves) (Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, 2004)
27. 恋爱中的宝贝 (Baobei in Love) (Li Shaohong 李少红, 2004)
28. 向日葵 (Sunflower) (Zhang Yang 张杨, 2005)
29. 青红 (Shanghai Dreams) (Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, 2005)
30. 颐和园 (The Summer Palace) (Lou Ye 娄烨, 2006)
31. 奋斗 (Struggle, TV serial) (Zhao Baogang 赵宝刚, 2007)
32. 青年 (Youth) (Geng Jun 耿军, 2008)
33. 日照重庆 (Chongqing Blues) (Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, 2010)
34. 80后 (Heaven Eternal, Earth Everlasting) (Li Fangfang 李芳芳, 2010)
35. 观音山 (Buddha Mountain) (Li Yu 李玉, 2011)
36. 钢的琴 (The Piano in a Factory) (Zhang Meng 张猛, 2011)
37. Hello, 树先生 (Mr. Tree) (Han Jie 韩杰, 2011)

38. 我 11 (11 Flowers) (Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, 2011)
39. 小时代 (Tiny Times) (Guo Jingming 郭敬明, 2013)
40. 致青春 (So Young) (Zhao Wei 赵薇, 2013)

#### **Films on Youth in Taiwan and Hong Kong**

41. 小毕的故事 (Growing Up) (Chen Kunhou 陈坤厚, 1983)
42. 风柜来的人 (The Boys from Fenggui) (Hou Hsiao-Hsien 侯孝贤, 1983)
43. 恋恋风尘 (Dust in the Wind) (Hou Hsiao-Hsien 侯孝贤, 1986)
44. 牯岭街少年杀人事件 (A Brighter Summer Day) (Edward Yang 杨德昌, 1991)
45. 青少年哪吒 (Rebels of the Neon God) (Tsai Mingliang 蔡明亮, 1993)
46. 麻将 (Mahjong) (Edward Yang 杨德昌, 1996)
47. 香港制造 (Made in Hong Kong) (Fruit Chan 陈果, 1997)
48. 细路祥 (Little Cheung) (Fruit Chan 陈果, 1999)
49. 九降风 (Winds of September) (Tom Lin 林书宇, 2008)

## Appendix B

### Detailed Chapter Outline

#### Chapter 1--- From “New Men” to “New New Humanities”: A Historical Reflection on Youth Narratives

- *Overview*

This chapter starts with a brief presentation of contemporary attentions to youth in literature and cinematic realms, and point out that the prominence of youth narrative reveals a hidden (neglected) narrative tradition in modern Chinese cultural history. My research is to excavate this narrative mode and explore its contemporality.

Then it goes on with an analytical discussion to trace the tradition of young people’s coming of age stories in the twentieth century Chinese literature and film, probing into some key themes and motifs, which recur in contemporary representations. In this part, some of the core concepts in my research such as “youth narrative,” “post-socialist nostalgia” as well as “Post-80 generation” are clarified. In addition, some of the related terms and ideas, such as “modern” and “globalization” are also defined as examined.

- *Main points*

In order to demonstrate the existence of youth narrative tradition, a brief chronological examination of cultural texts about young people’s coming of age in different periods in modern Chinese literary and cinematic history are given. The outline is as followed.

##### 1.1 A century journey for coming of age in China

a. **The May Fourth period:** La Jeunesse (New Youth, 新青年) advocated “New Man” in a modern nation; youth narrative was treated as a national discourse focusing on “obsession

with China.” Lu Xun: “Hometown” (故乡, 1921, short story), “Lament for the past” (伤逝, short story, 1925), Yu Dafu: “Sinking” (沉沦, 1921, short story), decadence and moral burden of young people, concern for the individual and the nation, the effeminate body serves as a metaphor for the weak and sickly nation. Cinematic representation: *Street Angel* (马路天使, dir. Yuan Muzhi, 1937), *Crossroads* (十字街头, dir. Shen Xiling, 1937).

b. **The Maoist period:** youth narrative as a revolutionary discourse was replete with idealism, heroism, and revolutionary romanticism, *Song of Youth* 青春之歌 (Yang Mo, 1958) (Novel), *Forever Young* 青春万岁 (Wang Meng, 1953) (Novel, written when the author was 19 years old), and *Youth in Our Village* 我们村的年轻人 (Su Li, film, 1959)

c. **The Early post-Mao period:** “Scar literature,” “educated youth literature,” “reflective literature,” highlighted the retroactive mode, such as *Sacrifice of Youth* (青春祭, Zhang Nuanxin, film, 1985), and *A Storm is Coming Tonight* (今夜有暴风雪, Liang Xiaosheng, novel, 1984).

d. **In the 1990s:** separate and rebel in the transitional society, the rising individuality and conflicts between ideal and reality, such as *Beijing Bastards* (北京杂种, Zhang Yuan, film, 1993), *Xiaowu* (小武, Jia Zhangke, film, 1997)

e. **In the new millennium from 2000s to 2010s:** consumer and commercial oriented youth literature, and the upsurge in Internet writing.

## 1.2 Youth narrative in the post-socialist and globalizing age

(1) One-child policy was applied from 1979 in order to alleviate social, economic, and environmental problems. The post-80 generation young people were born under this policy. It leads to unfair distribution of social resources and issues concerning

biopolitics in China.

(2) The expansion of internet writing, digital media, and massive consumerism along with China's self integration into the world bring new features to youth literature.

1.3 Many themes of classic texts recur in the contemporary representations of young people in literature and cinema: such as old vs. new, traditional vs. modern, individual vs. collective, violence, rebellion, alienation in coming of age.

## **Chapter 2---Balls Under The Red Flag: Father and Son Tales in the Post-socialist Nostalgia**

- *Overview*

This chapter focuses on the question of how post-socialist youth stories reimagine the socialist period through nostalgia. As descendants of socialism, how young people inherit and disconnect with socialist ideology. It offers close readings of the representative works that reimagine the socialist coming of age stories in the post-socialist period.

- *Main points*

### 2.1 Post-socialist nostalgia in the global era

Father and Son (the weak father and the rebel son): in the 1990s and 2000s, those rewritten and reimagination of coming of age in the socialist or early post-Mao period shared some common features: 1) using a retroactive mode to complete such reimagination and reconstruction, and reinventing history; 2) highlighting conflicts between father and son. Duo to the decline of socialist ideology and chilling down of revolutionary frenzy, those young people grew up with the lack of an authoritative or heroic father (for previous generations, the authoritative father always consolidates with the name of revolution), whom they rebel against but still have to succumb to. Without

such fatherly guidance, during their growing history, those socialist vestiges syncretize in the image of father who lost his position as guidance and leadership in the post-socialist era.

## 2.2 The revolution on farewell to revolution in *Making of Steel*

The postmodernist way of rewriting revolutionary ideal in a post-revolutionary period, the realization of individual idiosyncrasy, the symbolic “run away” from family, the ruptured and fragmentized ideology refracts some kinds of cultural dearth and anxiety.

Texts to be discussed

Year	Title	Genre	Author/director	Themes
2000	<i>I Am Your Farther</i> 我是你爸爸	Comedy and melodrama	Adapted from Wang Shuo's novel and directed by the author himself.	It depicts the conflict between the father, a petty cadre in government, and his rebellious son. From the son's viewpoint, the father is weak and powerless at work but still tries to uphold an authoritative patriarchal status in front of the son.
2005	<i>Sunflower</i> 向日葵	Melodrama	Zhang Yang	The tension relationship between a father and a son over the course of 30 years from the end of Cultural Revolution to 1999. The sunflower is as an emblem throughout the film.
2011	<i>11 Flowers</i> 我 11	Independent film	Wang Xiaoshuai	The story is about a teenage boy grown up in a factory in a third-tier city in the final days of Culture Revolution, who encounters a murder. It displays the impact of the state and special epoch on the daily life of ordinary Chinese through the eyes of the boy.
1997	<i>Making of Steel</i> 长大成人	Independent film	Lu Xuechang	It portrays young people's psychological wandering and the process of reconstructing their ideal from the early days of post-Cultural Revolution to the first half of 1990s, which manifest young people's anxiety for a spiritual mentor. The theme is “searching.”



## **Chapter 3---Nothing to My Name: Rupture and Rebellion in the New Generation**

### **Youth Stories**

- *Overview*

This chapter discusses how youth narrative depicts the spiritual and material world of young people in the post-socialist state. When youth narrative has been independent from national and political discourse, how it is impacted and reflects the social tensions and conflicts caused in the post-socialist society, particularly, the displacement, precarity and alienation. It closely looks into various literary and cinematic representations of young people's frustration and disillusionment in the transitional society.

- *Main points*

#### 3.1 The solitary/bewildered drifter on the street

The socialist collective is completely out of the stage, and the solitary individual drifts on the street. The dis-appearance of relationships, primitive passions, and the re-appearance into something else passions, liveness, melancholia, the bewildered young people, the drifting individual after separation.

#### 3.2 Cruel youthhood, violence and unfulfilled urban dream

Cruelty and violence are recurrent themes in post-socialist youth narrative, those themes refract the frustration that young people encounter in reality, dilemma such as: young people's lost expectations, the vulnerable adolescence, the specter of father, the unfulfilled urban dream, their coming of age is concomitant with China's massive urbanization.

Texts to be discussed

Year	Title	Genre	Director	Themes
1997	<i>Xiaowu</i> 小武	Independent film	Jia Zhangke	A pickpocket drifts around, having difficult relationships with friends, family, seeming lover, etc.
2002	<i>Chengdu, Please Forget me tonight</i> 成都，今夜请将我遗忘	Novel	Murong Xuecun	The debauched life of young graduates, their struggles between career, emotion, reality, etc.
2006	<i>Summer Palace</i> 颐和园	Independent film	Lou Ye	Two university students' struggle for love and life against the backdrop of collective struggle for individual liberty in the grand epoch.
2011	<i>Buddha Mountain</i> 观音山	Independent film	Li Yu	It chronicles the lives of three youths, and their search for redemption. It explores themes of teenage confusion, angst, rebellion and the impermanence of life.

## Chapter 4---My Zone My Way: *Balinghou* Youth Literature and Youth Narratives in the New Millennium

### ● Overview

This chapter focuses on the youth literature written by the post-80 generation writers, the influence of Internet writing and new media on youth narrative since 2000s. It discusses how youth literature becomes a market with huge commercial success, and the cultural profundity of such transformation.

### ● Main points

#### 4.1 *Balinghou* Youth Literature

##### 4.1.1 Virtualize Reality and Consume Youthhood

##### 4.1.2 Writers of *Balinghou*

Year	Title	Genre	Author
2000	<i>Triple</i>	Novel	Han Han

	<i>Doors</i> 三重门		
2008	<i>Tiny Times</i> 小时代	Novel	Guo Jingming
2005	<i>Daffodils Took Carp and Went Away</i> 水仙已乘鲤鱼去	Novel	Zhang Yueran
2002	<i>Beijing Doll</i> 北京娃娃	Novel	Chun Shu

#### 4.2 Kaleidoscope: Youth narratives in Internet Literature

Year	Title	Genre	Author/director	Themes
2007	<i>So Young</i> 致我们终将逝去的青春	Internet Novel	Xin Yiwu Adapted into film directed by Zhao Wei	Representative work of “Warm hurt” youth literature 暖伤青春文学
2006	<i>Too Late to Say I love You</i> 来不及说我爱你	Internet Novel	Feiwo Sicun Adapted into TV series	Representative work of “tortured love by fate” fiction 虐心小说

#### Epilogue: IP Adaption--the Integration of Internet Literature and Film Industry