Screening Education: Schools on Film in the People’s Republic of China

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Like many other national and/or semi-national cinemas today, contemporary Chinese film tends to be youth or teen-driven. Recent years have seen a plethora of youth films produced by Chinese filmmakers working in and outside the official studio system. Nevertheless, school film, i.e. those set on school campuses and focusing on education activities within the campus context, has not received sufficient attention despite its being a most “definable” subgenre of youth films. This paper aims to trace the development of school films in the People’s Republic of China since the 1950s. It also attempts to discuss some reasons why there has been a shortage of school films being made and why the filmic representation of teacher- and/or student-heroes is often stereotyped in the limited number of school films. The paper concludes with an in-depth study of a more recent school film *Thirteen Princess Trees* (Lu Yue, 2006), which displays some interesting departures from the existing tradition.

Keywords: school film, youth culture, Chinese cinema

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**Introduction**

Like other major cinemas in the world today, contemporary Chinese cinema caters strongly for young audiences, including teenagers. This phenomenon finds its expression in at least three respects: 1) the style or language of films, 2) More films about youth (attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle), and 3) The large proportion of the audience that is young. Images of youth have become very conspicuous on Chinese screens. Figures for recent years show that in 2004, 2005 and 2006, 46%, 40% and 44% of Chinese films produced within the official studio system were films about youth – not films necessarily targeted at youth but films with young people as subject matter. Out of the 212, 260 and 330 feature-length films for those years (including digital films and joint products with Hong Kong and Taiwan), 98, 102 and 144 had teenagers or children as protagonists.\(^1\) Over the same period of time, the core ticket-buying audience of the Chinese cinema consisted of teenagers and other young people.\(^2\)

Just as youth has been believed (allegedly at least) to play a pivotal role in Chinese society since the early twentieth century, often standing in the vanguard of social progress, teachers in traditional China were widely seen and respected as moral models for others, especially their students to emulate. The ideology of “honouring the teacher and revering his teachings” [\(\text{zunshi zhongdao}\)] had been
passed on from one generation to another as a traditional aspect of Chinese social development.

While school films constitute “the most definable subgenre of youth films,” only a limited number of school films have heretofore been produced in the Chinese context. Such films have also received little academic attention. In comparison, a large number of school films have been made in Hollywood in recent decades, partly in response to the counter-cultural trends emerging in post-World War Two American society and partly to lure young audiences back to the cinema. Some of the films focusing on school kids have become teen classics, such as The Breakfast Club (dir. John Hughes, 1985), Pretty in Pink (dir. Howard Deutch, 1986) and Dead Poet’s Society (dir. Peter Weir, 1989), etc. Such school films have also been substantially studied in academia. A number of definitions of the genre have been advanced, but there are common defining features such as the idea that a school film should have “its main plot actions focus on the setting of high school or junior high school campuses,” be “centrally concerned with some act of educational intervention, carried out either by a classroom teacher or by a school principal, within the context of a school,” and explore the central theme of “an ethic of individualism” in the process. As we shall see in this study, the comparative scarcity of such films in China may be attributed to the different political and ideological environment in which its film industry operates.

This study examines the films set on primary and secondary school campus in the People’s Republic of China since 1949. In particular, it looks at a more recent Chinese school film dealing with wild teens living in a commodity-oriented society, i.e. Thirteen Princess Trees (Shisanke paotong, Lu Yue, 2006). The main reason why this film is singled out is because of its drastic break with the primarily didactic and educational tradition of Chinese school films. To understand why Thirteen Princess Trees is so exceptional, it is necessary first to analyse earlier forms of the genre. Broadly speaking, the history of school film making in the People’s Republic of China can be divided into three periods: the revolutionary period (1950s to mid-1970s), the reform period (late-1970s to late-1990s), and the new millennial period (late 1990s to present). Three criteria have been applied in selecting the films for

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**Footnotes:**

1. China Film Yearbooks 2005, 2006, 2007, Beijing: China Film Yearbook Press, 2005, 2006, 2007, 62-126, 116-185, and 81-173. As for films made outside the official channel, i.e. the so-called underground films, an even higher percentage of them are about youth. For details, see Zhou Xuelin, 149-152.

2. See Yin Hong, 33.


5. Shary, 26.

6. Chennault, 3.
this survey: a) they must be made and released in the People's Republic of China from the 1950s to the present; b) the film's story should take place in a primary or secondary school, with the teacher or and student as the protagonist; c) the film's narrative must be entirely devoted to teaching-and/or learning-related activities. These three factors exclude the following films: 1) co-joint products with Hong Kong, Taiwan and the diasporic Chinese community (e.g. My Career as a Teacher/Wo de jiaoshi shengya, Zheng Kehong, 2006; The Candlelight/Zhuguang, Wang Bing, 2002); 2) films with student or teacher protagonist merely serving as a backdrop for other plot concerns, such as the humanitarian intervention of intellectuals (e.g. Early Spring in February/Zaochun eryue, Xie Tieli, 1963); 3) films on pre-school education (e.g. Little Red Flowers/Kanshangqu henmei, dir. Zhang Yuan, 2006); 4) films on tertiary education (e.g. Breaking With the Old Idea/Jueli, Li Wenhua, 1975; The Dormitory of Female University Students/Nu daxuesheng sushe, Shi Shujun, 1983); and 5) films making only limited reference to campus life (e.g. In the Heat of the Sun/Yangguang canlan de rizi, Jiang Wen, 1994; Walking on the Wild Side (Lai xiaozhi, dir. Han Jie, 2006).

The Revolutionary Period (1950s to mid-1970s)
In traditional Chinese society, educators held a privileged position. Confucianism shaped the social function of educators “to cultivate personal life, regulate family, run the state in order, and maintain peace and harmony throughout the world.” [xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, pingtianxia] From a conventional point of view, Chinese educators (and the intelligentsia at large) were considered “the elite of society,” enjoying high respect in all walks of life. Nevertheless, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the societal status of educators began to change as the social hierarchy was transformed from “educators, peasants, workers and businessmen” to “workers, peasants, soldiers, educators and businessmen.” During the catastrophic decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese teachers were even labeled as the “stinking Number Nine” [choulaojiu] - the ninth category after landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, Rightists, renegades, enemy agents and “capitalist roaders.” During this period, the Party’s policy was clear – to “unite, educate (which can also be understood as to criticize, accuse and denounce) and reform.” On the other hand, the Chinese film industry over the same period of time was monitored by a highly centralized political establishment and extensively exploited as a propaganda tool. Lenin’s alleged remark – that when the film medium is in the hands of socialist cultural workers, it becomes one of the most powerful weapons for educating people and attacking the enemy – remained an important principle in the supervision of the Chinese film industry. It seems unsurprising, then, that out of the approximately 769 feature-length films made by Chinese filmmakers from 1949 to 1966, only 13 were about

7 Bulman, 19.
8 See Ma Debo, 4.
9 Ibid, 5.
intellectuals (2%), out of which 3 were set on a school campus. Only one extra school film was produced during the Cultural Revolution years. Such films were so scarce that it is worthwhile to take a close look at their contents.

*Flowers of Motherland* (Zuguo de huaduo, Yan Gong, 1955), the first school film in post-1949 China, features a Grade-5 class in a primary school in Beijing. The film's plot records how pupils of the class help each other to progress together. The thematic message of the film is conveyed in its opening sequence when brightly dressed school children parade through Tiananmen Square in unified steps. Four years later, the same director made his second, also the country's second, school film, *Morning Sunshine* (Zhaoxia, Yan Gong, 1959). Like *Flowers of Motherland*, this film is also set in a primary school but against a different social and political background – the Great Leap Forward Movement. The contending ideas that propel the film's simplistic narrative involve two types of educational process - classroom-based and society-oriented education. The film emphasises the need for the primary school children to acquire knowledge not from the old-timer teacher but from workers and peasants. The film details at length how the children of the class manage to overcome obstacles in the process of setting up a factory workshop for the sake of socialist construction. As in his previous film, the director used the establishing shot of the film - a morning sun rising against the golden background of what looks like a construction site – to resonate with the dominant ideological themes, summed up by Chairman Mao's household quote on youth. “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.”

As the 1960s got under way, two more school films were made by Chinese filmmakers. Like *Morning Sunshine*, *Peach and Plum Blossoms in Spring* (Chuncui taoli, Lin Yang, 1961) is set in a primary school during the period of the Great Leap Forward. A semi-illiterate housewife is designated at the start of the movie as the head teacher of the school. Much of the film's narrative revolves around this teacher's efforts and perseverance to update the thought of one of her two colleagues, a professional but old-style teacher, and to mould the pupils as successors to the proletarian revolutionary cause. The fourth school film is *Song of Teacher* (Yuanding zhige, dir. Sha Dan & Zheng Guoquan, 1973), a provincial opera that tells the tale of how a primary school teacher, through learning from workers, teaches children of working class families to study for the revolution and devote themselves to the grand project of socialist construction.

Taken as a whole, the four school films made and released during this revolutionary period share the common feature of being intimately linked with their social and political environment. Given that filmmaking was largely a tool to disseminate the Party and government policy in those years, school films reflected the Party's attitude towards the intelligentsia in general and educators in particular.

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10 Figures from Ma Debo, 13.
11 Mao Zedong, 288.
In these films, teachers who still embraced the educational tradition by hanging on to classroom- and textbook-based learning were unanimously criticized. They needed to be helped and reformed. The goal of education, as far as these films are concerned, was to integrate schooling with physical labour and to abolish the supposedly clichéd idea that “the pursuit of knowledge is superior to all other walks of life.” Questions posed in these films are related to Party concerns in the most straightforward way: How to educate children? What kind of people are they to be moulded into? The answers were: to launch a revolution in the field of education, to erase children’s individual personalities, and to mould them into people with a common character so that they could become “cultured labourers with socialist consciousness.”

The Reform Period (late 1970s to late 1990s)

By the time the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, education, like many other trades and professions of Chinese society, was in a state of stagnation. The reconstruction of education became an urgent priority. The next few years saw dramatic changes taking place in all aspects of society including education, science and technology. In 1977, in the Forum on Work in Science and Education held in Beijing, the Chinese Communist Party’s top leader Deng Xiaoping talked about the necessity of catching up with advanced countries and the key role that science and education would play in the process. In 1978, at the National Science Conference, Deng Xiaoping put forward the idea that Chinese intelligentsia could be seen as part of the working class and that the modernization of science and technology was the basis for the realization of the Four Modernizations. The overall conception of Chinese society changed from “class and class struggle” to “respect for knowledge and talented people.” In the same year, writer Xu Chi published his reportage The Goldbach’s Conjecture [Gedebahe caixiang], about mathematician Chen Jingrun. Xu’s work inspired and motivated a generation of high school students to become scientists. In this “spring of science and technology,” Chinese film also took on a new look by focusing its lens on youngsters, showing how members of the young generation were expending extra effort to make up for their “sacrificed youth” of previous years. For example, from the late-1970s to the early-1980s, a key character in the portrayal of mainstream youth on the silver screen was that of the “bookworm.”

In 1977, Deng Xiaoping, in the Forum on Work in Science and Education, stated that “primary and secondary education is of the greatest importance.” In this fresh context of “respecting knowledge and talented personnel,” a somewhat more dynamic image of teachers began to appear on Chinese screens. The first post-

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12 First introduced by Premier Zhou Enlai at the Fourth National people’s Congress in 1975, the Four Modernizations [si ge xian daihua] were designed to modernize China by the end of the twentieth century. In December 1978 at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, Deng Xiaoping announced the official launch of the Four-Modernization project, which is normally seen as formally marking the beginning of the reform period. The four modernizations refer to industry, agriculture, science and national defense.

13 Deng Xiaoping, 67.
Cultural Revolution school film was *Miao Miao: The Young Teacher* (Miao Miao, Wang Junzheng) in 1980. Set in a primary school, the film records how a young teacher achieves individual moral excellence when she is first assigned to teach the class. Miao Miao is imbued with passion and enthusiasm. Gradually, however, she feels annoyed with the mischievous behaviours of the children and, for a time, she even thinks of resigning. But the innocence and affection of her pupils persuade her to change her mind. Compared with the school films of the previous decades, *Miao Miao* is no longer merely a vehicle of government ideology. The filmic text does not emphasise struggles associated with social class. The teacher heroine is characterised in a more individual way. The narrative is advanced largely through her personal feelings and actions. At the end of the movie, *Miao Miao* makes a speech that sets a new tone: “I know it is hard to be a good teacher. The principal once told me that the secret (for being a good teacher) is the heart. Now I realize that it is a caring heart for children.” To a certain extent, *Miao Miao* establishes a new formula for making school films, particularly in the way the teacher is portrayed. In films such as *Ward 16* (Shiliuhao bingfang, Zhang Yuan & Yu Yanfu, 1983), *Her Smile through Candlelight* (Zhuguang li de weixiao, Wu Tianren, 1992), *Country Teachers* (Fenghuang qin, He Qun, 1993), *Not One Less* (Yige dou buneng shao, Zhang Yimou, 1999), and *Pretty Big Feet* (Meili de dajiao, Yang Yazhou, 2002), there is a self-cultivated and self-sacrificing teacher displaying spiritual and moral excellence, who “came with her heart in her hands and left without carrying a straw.”

A marked feature of the school films that have been examined so far is that they are invariably set in a primary school rather than a high school. This comparative neglect of teenage students in high schools is consciously or not-consistent with a cultural outlook deeply rooted in traditional Chinese society. For centuries, human life was thought to consist of two stages—childhood and adulthood—with the third one—adolescence—not yet acknowledged. Before children turned to adults, they were required to continue learning from their elders until they could teach others themselves. In the process, numerous moral models were set up for children to emulate. And the role of the teacher was one of the key ingredients.

This cultural outlook, however, began to be challenged by the early 1980s, a time that saw Chinese society open up to the outside world. By then the aims of secondary education had also been modified, from revolutionarily ideals to serving “the needs of socialist construction and modernization.”16 Chinese film began to

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14 Many of these primary school films with a noble self-sacrificing teacher hero can also be seen as a response to the “Hope Project” [xiwang gongcheng], a non-profit and non-governmental organization set up by China Youth Development Foundation in 1989. A primary goal of the project was to sponsor young drop-outs in poverty-stricken areas to complete, at the least, their primary education. Since its establishment, the Project has also helped to build “Hope Primary Schools,” the conditions of which are unfortunately very poor with their teachers underpaid.

15 Due to the significance of spiritual and moral models in maintaining societal orders, Chinese society has become an “exemplary society” in the eyes of some scholars. See, for example, Børge Bakken’s *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), particularly 83-210.

turn its camera on the educational activities on the high school campus. The first Chinese high school picture was Wu Yinxun’s *Spring Sunshine* (Chunhui) released in 1982. The film tells how a senior high school teacher works his heart out for the cause of education. He defies poverty and makes tremendous sacrifices (individual and family) in order to send his students to universities and other fields of endeavour, year after year. The closing scene of the film is a classic portrayal of the ideal teacher. On a sunny morning, those who have received university admission letters gather at their teacher’s home. Surrounded by his students, the grey-haired teacher takes out a thick photo album, opens it, reads aloud the names of previous students, and relates their stories of success.

A number of other films have since been made dealing with high schools. Nevertheless, unlike their American equivalents, the “blackboard” in these high school films never became symbolically a “jungle,” but continued to serve the needs of the state, from whose perspective the members of the younger generation were to be shaped as “successors to the proletarian revolutionary cause” and contributors to the realization of the “four modernization” project. The school campus, as such, was depicted by and large as a training ground to prepare youngsters for tertiary education. *Last Days of High School* (Nanwang zhongxue shiguang, dir. Yu Zhongxiao and Lu Jianhua, 1986) provides an example. This loosely and slowly narrated movie follows a group of high school students over the last few weeks that lead to national entrance examinations. The film contrasts two different types of youth, positive and negative. The former type, likened to seagulls who hover in a violent rainstorm over the surging waves, consists of those who study hard in order to go to university so that they can learn more and better serve their motherland. The second type, likened to penguins who take shelter from the wind and stay safely in the harbour, refers to those who are not interested in study and dream of going abroad with the help of family connections.

“Blue hills cannot stop water flowing, eastward the river keeps on going” [*Qingshan zhe buzhu, bijing dong liuqu*]. The teenage years as a distinct stage of human life with its own characteristics, began to receive attention from Chinese filmmakers by the mid-1980s. Although the filmic treatment of the teenager was still limited and somewhat superficial, it began to represent a separate stage of life with its own complexities and peculiarities, even if it did not yet embody the spirit of independence and rebellion seen in overseas films. *Girl in Red* (Hongyi shao, Lu Xiaoya, 1984) and *The Missing High School Student* (Shizong de nü zhongxuesheng, Shi Shujun, 1986) are two films that attempted to explore and comprehend the mental world of teenagers – albeit from an adult perspective. The central character

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17 The examination system was terminated in the Cultural Revolution and was reinstated in 1977 as “a necessary way of checking on the performance of students and teachers.” (Deng Xiaoping) Chinese film *Examination 1977* (Gaokao 1977, dir. Jiang Haiyang, 2009) gives a comprehensive depiction of the reinstatement of the system and its impact on, and encouragement of, members of the young generation.

18 Probably inspired and influenced by the Russian writer Maxim Gorky’s (1868-1936) essay “The Song of Seagull”, which was included in high school textbooks between 1960s and 1980s, the spirit of the seagull, with its determination and commitment, had been promoted by many generations of Chinese thinkers.
of *Girl in Red* is a sixteen-year-old high school student. Like most of her classmates, she studies hard and aims to make progress every day. Unlike them, however, she also likes to swim, play soccer, whistle popular songs, admire French actor Alain Delon19 and, above all, wear a buttonless red shirt on campus. Through reinforcing these features of her personality, particularly her insistence in wearing the red shirt despite opposition from parents and teachers and sarcastic remarks from classmates,20 the film tackles some sensitive teen issues such as trust and respect for difference. *The Missing High School Student* is a “teen film” as well as a “psychological film.”

Set in the present, the film’s narrative is a weave of two interrelated parts. Part one (with the title “Secret”) explores the inner experience of a fourteen-year-old high schoolgirl, who has a kind of platonic love for a music student. She makes many secret efforts to approach him, without any response from him. Worst of all, she comes to realize in due course that he already has a girlfriend. In her distress, she runs away from home. Part two, entitled “Concerns,” unfolds from the perspective of the schoolgirl’s sailor father, who sets out to look for his missing daughter. On the train, he comes across a group of high school students who are exchanging opinions on love at an early age. As the narrative develops, the father hears more about the disastrous consequences of teen romance. Unable to find his daughter, the deeply concerned father returns home only to see that she is already back. The first part of *The Missing High School Student* is unusual in its portray of a teenage girl’s mental activities in the light of her longing to communicate with friends of the opposite sex. Such platonic love is revealed in a “day-dreaming” scene where the girl leans against a big tree on the campus of a music conservatory and is lost in deep thoughts. In her imagination, she feels herself surrounded by fresh flowers and singing birds. The young man then appears and walks towards her. The implications of this scene are explained by the heroine herself: “They [adults] never realize that deep in our hearts we youngsters feel lonelier as we have to encounter more problems in our life.”

Nevertheless, despite these films’ attempt to approach and understand teenagers, they rarely do so through the perspective of the youngsters themselves. Rather, as the director of *Girl in Red* says, the film work is not just a teen movie but a youth allegory for adults. The film seems ultimately aimed at adults, who are encouraged to think about the importance of independent thought and personality in a rapidly transforming society.21 This adult perspective is particularly obvious in Part Two of *The Missing High School Student*. In contrast to the romantic and dreamlike mood of Part One, the second part, presented from the father’s point of view, is realistic, showing society’s attitudes towards teenagers and concerns about their behaviour and feelings. The film’s message is conveyed through a lengthy speech

19 The film that brought the French actor fame in China was a 1975 Italian spaghetti western, *Zorra* (dir. Duccio Tessari). The release of the film in China in the early 1980s turned Delon (who played the role of the film’s title protagonist) into a superstar admired by millions of Chinese viewers.

20 Based on a novella entitled “The Red Shirt without Buttons” [*Meiyou niukou de hongchenshan*], the film treats shirt as a central prop which symbolizes the young heroine’s unconventional attitude and independent personality.

21 Lu Xiaoya, 49.
by an older teacher (in a long flashback) to the teen-age father and his girlfriend when they had planned to run away from home:

I very much value your feelings. But the seed of love requires sunshine, air and rich soil that you do not possess at this stage. You're still too young, far from mature. You also have heavy learning tasks. So bury the love seed deep in your hearts. From time to time it will send out warm fragrance. It will make you feel the sweet smell of jasmine flowers in life; it will also temper your mind's will power.

In a sense, the lessons these high school films teach can be summarized by the title of another high school film of the time—Forever Young (Qingchun wansui, dir. Huang Shuqin, 1983), a story set in a Beijing girl high school in the early 1950s. The film features a group of teenage girls who are impetuously “longing for life and for flying in the sky.” The film, like others of the genre, sings a sugar-coated song that is composed of “youthful happiness and tears.”

A significant common feature in the school films of the Reform Period is the way teachers are portrayed. Nearly all of these films imply that the presence of teachers is an important factor in positive childhood outcomes. They are shown to be essential to healthy child development by imparting established knowledge, ideology and morality to their students, so as to turn them into people who hold “the future hope of the motherland.” Accordingly, the teaching profession is characterised as noble and self-sacrificing, with a lifelong dedication. The teachers are either “engineers of the human soul” or “gardeners of the motherland,” who labour conscientiously for a noble cause throughout their lives. Not infrequently, they are likened to a spring silkworm or a burning candle (as literally analogized in the film title Her Smile through Candlelight), heroes who spare no effort in delivering their duties. This exaltation of the teaching profession can be attributed to the widespread perception that 1) a knowledge of science and technology (via education) played a critical role in the “four modernizations” project; and 2) teaching called for sacrifice because it was an underpaid profession.

A further important source of inspiration in representing teachers in the Chinese cinema was a film imported from the former Soviet Union, A Village Teacher (aka The Teacher from Shatryj or The Village Teacher, dir. Mark Donskoy, 1947). The

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22 One exceptional case is the image of a head teacher in Girl in Red, who is portrayed as a shallow, narrow-minded and worldly-wise person. This negative treatment, upon the film’s public release, led to complaints from teachers who protested that she was not a representative figure and her image was distorted and prejudiced. For details, see Huang Shixian, 60. Another exception was Fifth-Generation director Chen Kaige’s King of Children (Haiziwang, 1987). Unlike other Chinese school films of the period that saw teaching as based on Confucian concepts, King of Children portrayed Taoist values in teaching.

23 This allusion derives from a poem by Li Shangyin (ca. 813-858) – “The spring silkworm will only end his thread when death befalls/The candle will drip with tears until it turns to ashes.” [Chuncan daosi si fang jin, laju chenghui lei shi gan]

24 It is interesting to note that Zhang Yimou’s Not One Less and The Road Home [Wo de fuqin muqin] can be seen as transitional school films that suggest an absence of conventional types of teachers and the presence of substitutes (the country teenage girl and the son from the city), who still attempt, though with difficulty and with different kinds of motivation, to embrace the legacy of their “fathers.”
film follows the journey of a young woman teacher from St. Petersburg to a remote village in Siberia, driven by the noble intention of enlightening people and devoting her life to the cause of teaching. The film was tremendously influential in China. Often, the Chinese film industry serves to perpetuate this image of teachers as people engaged in a profession of status and prestige (if not material reward), setting themselves up as a role model not only for their students but also for the general public.

It is in its departures from general social, ideological and industrial contexts that lie the significance of Lü Yue’s Thirteen Princess Trees. The remaining pages of this essay will consider the film’s novel approach to the portrayal of teachers and students, and the relevance of those changes to an increasingly commodity-centred society.

**The New Millennial Period (late 1990s to the present)**

The reform program implemented in the late-1970s brought earth-shaking changes to Chinese society over a period of thirty years. One of these changes has been the launching of a consumer revolution and the blooming of a commodity culture. As far as education is concerned, the unprecedented emphasis on making money has had two problematic results: the erosion of belief by young people in the official ideology, and the industrialization of the education system. The loss of traditional belief exerts a profound influence on youth, reshaping their values and morals. By the late 1990s, a “moral crisis” [daode weiji] of Chinese youth had attracted nationwide concern. And the industrialization of education had undercut the social status of educators, removing the special aura that had once surrounded them.

**Thirteen Princess Trees** is a school film that sets to reflect this decline in the education system and the values of the teaching staff. Unlike previous Chinese school films, it offers a bleak view of the teaching profession in the new millennium. In somewhat the same way that Blackboard Jungle (Richard Brookes, 1955) exposed the problems of the American education system (and by extension American society) in the 1950s, Thirteen Princess Trees “touched upon concerns, fears, attitudes, and preoccupations that went well beyond the boundaries of the schoolyard and spilled out into the wider society beyond.”

Based on the novel by He Dac ao and directed by Lü Yue, a cinematographer-cum-director, Thirteen Princess Trees features a group of high school students (Princess Tree High School, or P.T.S.Z.X. -the abbreviation for Princess Tree High School in Chinese pinyin) in a provincial capital in southwest China. Feng, a short-haired tomboy, always carries two knife blades in her school bag. She falls for Tao, a classmate, who has earned a reputation both on and beyond the campus by means of his fists. Tao’s status in the ring is threatened by the arrival of Bao from

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26 For some discussion on the value changes of Chinese youth in the 1990s, see Xu Luo, 2005; Wang Yan, 2006.

27 David Considine, 114.
Tibet. Bao’s sophistication and outspokenness, plus the unwise response from Tao, win over Feng’s affection. Tao subsequently conspires with the female teacher in charge of their class. Together, they plot to have Feng and Bao penalized for missing an examination. After being expelled from school, Bao attempts to kidnap a classmate but gets shot by the police. The class graduates and leaves the school. In a gesture that somewhat symbolizes a reconciliation with the adult society, Feng throws away the two blades in her school bag. The film ends ambiguously with Feng leaving the provincial capital city on a bus that is heading towards a minority area – presumably to join Zhu Zhu, a former female classmate who has been caring for her throughout their school years.

Like their counterparts in other school films at home and abroad, the young protagonists of *Thirteen Princess Trees*, male and female, are presented through their relationships with school and family, but here, these relationships are negative. The teachers and the administrator can no longer establish their intellectual superiority. The curriculum and the academic program are disregarded not only by the students but also by the teachers themselves. For the first time on China’s screens, high school and its educators are scorned, insulted, and attacked.

Conventionally, the school principal in a school film would be an authority figure of intelligence and morality, who has the absolute power to fulfill his duties of guidance when, for example, a (newly arrived) teacher becomes impatient with the profession or when some naughty students start to go slightly astray. In *Thirteen Princess Trees*, Jiang, the principal, never physically appears, but he is frequently heard delivering speeches or making announcements through the school public loudspeaker. On the first occasion, he makes a dry and abstract speech about Chinese politics:

> Entering the World Trade Organization, the WTO, not only represents the surging growth of our Chinese nation like a lion awakening in front of the whole world, it also means that the endeavours of Chinese people for the past five thousand years have been recognized by the world. It indicates that the economy of our country will entirely abandon the state planning model and move towards a market economy. This change will exert profound impacts upon our economy. In this context, we cannot help but asking “What should we do as students of the Princess Tree High School?” I think you all know the answer better than I do.

During this speech, ironic panning shots show that the class is engaged in doing everything but listening to him. Apart for the class monitor’s futile attempt to keep the class in order, everyone else is busy with their own conversations.

An incompetent and ineffectual bureaucrat, Jiang sits at the top, unaware of the feelings and thoughts of the students and staff around him. What he is concerned about is that students should follow the school regulations and obey the staff’s instructions. There is no doubt about his intention to control the students’ lives and to decide their fates. In one of the film’s most skilfully made scenes, the students, neatly arranged in ranks on the sports ground, are just about to start the morning exercise. A smiling Feng and brightly dressed Bao (the only one not in school
uniform, who is in an orange T-shirt, a gift from Feng) exchange affectionate glances. The session is then interrupted by Jiang, who makes the announcement to expel Bao from school and to warn Feng that she is also close to expulsion. In a subsequent scene when Feng, asked by Bao to plead with the principal on his behalf, walks inside the school’s administration building, a high-angle shot of the interior staircase places her at the bottom corner of the screen like a tiny dot, climbing up the stairs with great caution. The grey, damp looking corridor is dark, dirty and deserted. An abrupt, loud sneeze scares her and makes her run downstairs and out of the “haunted” building like a frightened rabbit. This is a sinister vision of school.

The film also deviates from the mainstream treatment of teachers. Whereas nearly all previous school films depict teachers as people with a caring heart, *Thirteen Princess Trees* portrays them as figures of hypocrisy and even charlatanism. For example, the head teacher, Song, is an imposing, hypocritical presence in her English class, taking delight in abusing her power. Behind her stern expression, she is selfish and unjust. She seduces Tao and settles personal scores for him by having Bao expelled from school. Like Song, Teacher Ren has a cynical attitude towards his job. He delights in using the classroom as an opportunity to relieve his personal depression and disillusionment. After being tempted to molest Feng in his office one night, he hangs himself in the school toilet. Through such a portrayal of teachers, *Thirteen Princess Trees* subverts traditional respect for the classroom. Teachers are no longer heroes who help students to find themselves or to usher them into adulthood. Instead, over the course of the film, we see the students attempting to discover their own identities.

The morality that the school imposes on its students requires the wilful suppression of individual personality in favour of a strict regimen and power structure. The school is portrayed as “a corner forsaken by love,” or even a detention centre with gates, high walls and security guards. One shot shows a congestion of students waiting behind the school’s locked gate, like prison inmates waiting for their exercise break. The fact that the students have “P.T.S.Z.X.” across the back of their school uniforms makes them look even more like inmates.28

This anti-school feeling should not just be read simply as the direct reflection of a new generation’s feelings; it is also the product of all the social and economic changes that have been transforming Chinese society, and, with it, the situation of the educator. The commodification of society on one hand and the industrialization of the education system on the other have created a gulf between what is taught in class and what the students see in the world at large. In the past, school-age children and adolescents “resided” in a world that had been carefully “filtered” by adults. In that world, “snow white” was good and “the queen” wicked. But with the rapid advancement of mass media, particularly mobile phone and internet, this “protective screen” has collapsed and the school gate can no longer keep the world at a distance. This makes the content of their lessons seem empty and irrelevant.

Students can get little of what they need either from school or from their

family. Parent figures are either absent or flawed. In that sense, the film suspends an adult perspective by keeping families in the background and the young people in the foreground. Joseph Reed, in discussing the high school films of Hollywood, sees this youthful perspective as a defining feature of the genre. “In High School Pictures parents are always just leaving home, or nowhere to be seen, or idiots, or mad.”

In *Thirteen Princess Trees*, Bao’s father is absent, Feng’s has deserted, and Tao’s has been arrested. There is also an anonymous father who attempts to steal cables from a state factory in order to pay his daughter’s tuition fees. All in all, the “father” no longer plays a model role; neither can he assert authority within the family. Both parents and teachers play only a very limited part in the process of their children’s search for identity.

The young characters’ coming-of-age journey becomes a case of “nobody in the driver’s seat.” They have considerable freedom to pursue an active social life that mainly consists of hanging out with peers, having barbecues, and dating. Unlike their elders who were once left to their own devices as teenagers during the Cultural Revolution years, members of the post-1980 one-child generation do not experience “days of sunshine” by not having authority figures interfere in their private lives. Rather, these youngsters come to view their existence as a struggle, a fight in the school jungle with no holds barred. This sense of school life is emphasised by the repeated playing in the background of a popular song from a Hong Kong martial arts film, celebrating *jianghu*. A high school is also a microcosm of society. As Ralph Keys has summed it up: “What high school has become in fact and in memory is a self-contained community, a tribe with its own special rituals and status symbols, a tribal gathering where teenage Americans act out their puberty rights and wrongs.”

The niche world “created” by the high school students in *Thirteen Princess Trees* is a *jianghu*, in which student characters are pitted in a struggle against the educators and against other students. In this world, the high school students speak their own language and foster their own value system, which are all in a sense at odds with those of adult society. They care more about what they want and feel than about what their elders expect them to be.

Money constitutes a major theme in this world of *jianghu*. As shown in the film, money regulates many of the students’ social relations with one another. The theme is strongly associated with the character Bao. Born of a poor working-class family, Bao has little prospect of wealth, and he attaches much value and importance to money. The first conflict between him and Tao occurs when Bao invites the whole class to a barbecue during the lunch break but ends up with having a fellow student

29 Joseph Reed, 138.

30 *jianghu* (literal meaning: “river and lake”), in the Chinese language, refers to an alternative world other than the authoritative/mainstream one. Somewhat untranslatable, *jianghu* indicates a world in opposition to the normal society. It is a world made up of individuals and their relationships, rather than the collective and the government. These relationships can exist entirely outside of the law. In literary and artistic works, loyalty and honour are key principles valued in this world. It is a world where people of all kinds (usually of lower social and economic status) attempt to make a living by wondering from place to place. The meaning of *jianghu* has been extended boundlessly in popular and daily discourse.

Li pay the bill. Li is from a wealthy family, and many developments in the film revolve around the allocation or giving-away of his pocket money, the control of which seems symbolic of a way of life or/and status. A classmate with a provincial and financially disadvantaged background becomes Li’s bodyguard immediately after graduation. The catalyst for Bao’s desperate behaviour is partly his hostility to Li, who would (he believes) loan money to others of the class instead of him. The film implies a mixture of disdain for the corrupting influence of money and an acknowledgement of its importance in a society primarily driven by a consumer culture. Money may not be necessarily related to merit, but without money... as a modern saying goes... one is as good as impotent. [Qian bushi wannengde, dan meiyou qian shi wanwan bunengde]

The potential of a new generation is thus corrupted by the material values of a commodity-oriented society. The beauty and innocence that are so often associated with adolescence in popular Chinese literary and artistic works are shown here as out-of-date illusions. Arguably this situation is an unavoidable consequence of the moral crisis that began in the mid-1980s following the opening up of Chinese society and the collapse of the system of values and morality that had functioned between the 1950s and 1970s.

Although the film does not turn directly moralistic as most youth films have done, Thirteen Princess Trees does suggest towards the end of its narrative a restoration of order, with Bao’s arrest, the youngsters’ compromise (Feng throwing her blades away), and their acceptance of social norms (going to university). In fact, the students in the film never effectively stand up to their teachers or to their parents. None of them explicitly expresses their opposition to a society to which they do not belong. In most cases, whether conformists or nonconformists, they keep their attention focused on the fulfilment of their own personal ideals.

Nevertheless, Thirteen Princess Trees does signal the widespread unrest across the nation, and speaks to some central issues of contemporary Chinese society in relation to education and the moral vacuum of youth. Since the film so far stands alone in Chinese cinema, it would be erroneous to give too much weight to it; but the novel ways in which it inflects its genre does seem very revealing in terms of the contemporary social environment.32

Conclusion
To conclude, despite the emphasis given to education in Chinese society, the national film industry has been far from thorough or convincing in its representation of the school campus. In most of the dozens of school films produced over the past half century, both teacher and student characters are often stereotyped, with the former being portrayed as self-sacrificing moral models and the latter as either “the sun at

32 Another film that partly deals with the “nobody in the driver’s seat” state of school life in contemporary Chinese society is Han Jie’s Walking on the Wild Side. In one of the two scenes set in a high school, three unemployed youth break into a class and beat a student nearly to death. One teacher attempts to stop this but he is pushed onto the ground. The main setting of the film is, however, not a campus, and its primary characters are not students and/or teachers, so it is not strictly a school film and therefore lies outside the present study.
eight or nine o’clock in the morning” or “flowers of the motherland.” In either case, they teach or learn not for themselves but for a cause, for the future of the country. In the films of teacher-heroes, only the professional life of teachers is represented, with hardly any personal dimension. Films with student-heroes are mostly about collectiveness and conformity; and the main characters seldom express individual autonomy or personal ambition. Throughout the education process, teachers assert and maintain control, serving to legitimatize dominant institutions and reinforce established values, as they fulfil their duties as professional guides dedicated to ushering their students into adulthood. Often, the school films end happily where students achieve academic success or assert their identity according to the expectations of the adult world. Not surprisingly, school films of this kind rarely modify an adult perspective, nor do they aim to speak primarily to a young audience. Such films are in many ways reflections of their historical periods. Similarly, Thirteen Princess Trees can be seen as an expression of the problems that have emerged over the last two decades.

Considering that young people now make up the primary audience of Chinese cinema, there seems great potential for school films to play a bigger role in the industry’s efforts to cater to the interests of young viewers. Given the important role that education plays in the country’s efforts to modernize, the world of the school is big enough, physically and metaphorically, to provide a broad canvas for the exploration of major themes. It is a rich field that awaits sustained cinematic exploration. The genre also deserves closer academic attention because of the clear and direct ways it has reflected fundamental changes in Chinese society.

GLOSSARY

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