Changing Representations of Youth: “Youth Films” in the People’s Republic of China

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ABSTRACT

Youth culture is an indicator of social transformations. In a context where youth cultures have been shaped by globalization, contemporary world cinema increasingly becomes youth-oriented in terms of style, subject, and reception. The present paper aims to trace the development of “youth films” in the People’s Republic of China since the end of the 1940s within this global context. An examination of how “youth films” talk to and about young people—and how young people are seen in these films—is a particularly revealing way to explore the profound social and cultural changes that have been taking place in that society. It can also highlight the global-local interactions that have reshaped Chinese life and the ways in which certain developments and influences in youth culture have acquired a distinctive Chinese inflection.

Keywords: youth, youth film, Chinese youth film, Chinese society, social changes

Representations of Youth in Film

Just as the situation of Chinese youth has remained a generally obscure subject for much of the country’s history, the representation of young people in films has tended to remain below the radar of film scholars. A typical example of this negligence is the list of over forty reference topics suggested for presenters invited to the 2008 China Film Forum, an international symposium on the achievements of Chinese film over the past three decades (1978-2008). Those reference topics covered a wide range of areas, yet they did not include the theme of youth. This absence in academic contexts is in striking contrast to the strong youth emphasis in contemporary cinema, both in China and internationally. One reason for this absence has been the tendency in traditional Chinese culture to ignore youth as a transitional stage of human life, to think of young people as little adults and of old people as entering a second childhood (Sun 1983, 394). An advantage of this cultural outlook was that it skipped over the risky and rebellious teenage period, since individuals in China had to either look after others or be looked after by others, a situation which emphasized what the different age groups held in common. As young people grew up, role models of all kinds were set up for them to emulate, and the whole community was turned into an “exemplary society” in some scholars’ eyes (Bakken 2000). The concept of youth (in so far as there was one) was invariably associated with learning, especially from elders. In the course of that process, everything was arranged for the young—from lifestyle to leisure...
interests, from behaviour to belief, from employment to marriage.

The present paper looks at the films about youth in the People’s Republic of China as a touchstone to the dramatic changes that have occurred there since the late 1940s. Of course films are not merely a simple window on society, but provided we remain aware of the complex process of mediation involved in their production, the changes in terms of how youth are represented on the silver screen can be very revealing.

What then is “youth film”? As far as this paper is concerned, the phrase refers to those feature-length films that have young people as protagonists and represent various aspects of their life, thought, and behaviour. “Young people” are those situated in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. But immediately we must acknowledge that this category is context-dependent, and society’s understanding of it has changed historically. First of all, “youth” can be understood biologically as referring to people who are just entering sexual maturity. More generally, particular ages can be invoked to define the period of physical and social development as an individual moves from childhood to adulthood. During the International Year of Youth in 1985, the United Nations defined “youth” as all those between fifteen and twenty-five years of age. But age boundaries in some nations are wider or narrower than this. For example, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, “youth” is associated with young men and women from fifteen to thirty or even thirty-five years of age.

Secondly, the term “youth” can be understood sociologically as an intermediate phase of life during which an individual is in the process of constructing an autonomous personality and establishing a clear place in society. This definition can be linked to disposable income and changing social contexts in terms of recreation, education, employment, and even dietary preferences. Thirdly, the transition from youth to adulthood can vary significantly by class. Young people from middle- or upper-class backgrounds are more likely than their counterparts with low-income backgrounds to extend their period of “youth” until they have completed tertiary education, and in some cases even until after marriage. Fourthly, the transition from youth to adulthood may vary according to the socio-political environment. This particularly applies to the Chinese context, where Confucian values such as “respect for seniority” (zhangyou youxu) remain highly influential. A revealing example was seen in 1992, when Hu Jintao, the President of China (2003-2013), was introduced by his predecessor as a “young man” during his first public appearance as a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China. This “young man” was forty-eight years old.

Fifthly, the transition from youth to adulthood can vary by gender. A

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1 The author is thankful to Emeritus Professor Roger Horrocks for commenting on an earlier version of this paper. The author is also grateful to the editor, the manuscript editors and the two anonymous reviewers of Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies for their constructive comments and suggestions at different stages of writing this essay. The essay would not have been in its present shape without their careful attention and infinite patience. The author alone, of course, is responsible for all the errors that remain in the writing.
man's maturity may be linked with his perceived ability to take a leadership role
or to provide for a family, whereas responsible womanhood may be defined in
terms of childbearing. Societies construct gender in different ways, and in some
societies adulthood for females can now be seen in terms of a career rather than
motherhood. In these terms, young men from very low-income backgrounds
may find it more difficult than women of the same age to acquire the attributes of
responsibility because of their poverty and lack of employment, especially when
the women in their peer group have already become mothers.

Because of the complex interaction between these various factors, a precise
definition of “youth” is not possible. This is particularly the case in the Chinese
context. Historically Chinese society has been one where Confucian values and
principles dominated many aspects of both public and private life. As we noted
earlier, the relationship between young people and their elders has been very much
coloured by attitudes to education. One way to show filial piety and respect for
one's parents was to study hard, especially when it involved overcoming hardship
and poverty and passing the imperial examination. This view is idealized in the
Confucian concept that “the pursuit of knowledge is superior to all other walks of
life” (Wanban jie xiapin, weiyou dushu gao). Parents would do all they could to help
their offspring to receive a good education in the belief that this was the main (or
only) way to improve one's status and such an emphasis could powerfully shape
personal identity. Not surprisingly, according to Confucius, one should “focus on
study [at the age of] fifteen and be established at thirty” (Shiyouwu er zhuyuxue,
sanshi erli), implying that the age of thirty was a turning point in human life.
Modern Chinese society has felt an urgent need to have some concept of this kind.
For demographic or administrative purposes, it became conventional to regard the
ages of fifteen and twenty-five as the beginning and end of this phase. In 1982 the
range was expanded to the period between fourteen and twenty-eight. For example,
the Eleventh National Congress of the Chinese Communist Youth League declared
that this was the official age range of Chinese “youths” who could be admitted
to the organization. Incidentally or not, that fifteen-year period from fourteen to
twenty-eight might be further divided along the lines of Margaret Mead's Culture
and Commitment, which speaks of three different cultural phases: the pre-youth
period (fourteen to seventeen), the co-youth period (eighteen to twenty-two) and
the post-youth period (twenty-three to twenty-eight) (1978, 13). Although the ages
of the young characters in the Chinese “youth films” described in the present paper
are never explicitly revealed, their background and inexperience suggest that they
fall mostly into the second phase of Mead's classification, arguably the central and
most distinctive phase of “youth.” Common to all contemporary definitions of the
concept is the sense that it describes an “in-between” period, a transitional time
that is fluid and exploratory. Other adjectives that crop up frequently in discussions
of youth and/or youth culture in countries such as the USA or UK include
marginalized, flexible, transient, spontaneous, hedonistic, subversive, and non-
conformist. As we shall see in the following pages, young people in Chinese films
have not been regularly described in those terms, although a mood of volatility and
rebellion has certainly become more evident.
Keeping all this in mind, for the sake of clarity, this paper will be divided into the following sections: 1) 1949-1976: youth films in a period of isolation; 2) 1977-1989: “rebellious” youth films; 3) 1990s to the present: mainstream youth films; 4) young peasant worker films; and 5) independent youth films.

1949-1976: Youth Films in a Period of Isolation

The two decades of 1950s and 1960s form a very eventful period in western society. The birth and rise of youth (sub-)cultures was a particularly important trend. As western societies became affluent, members of the younger generation rebelled against virtually all aspects of the Establishment. This period of time, however, saw China adopting a policy of isolation from western culture to a striking degree. Just as the 1960s was the time when youth culture was at its height and took its most radical forms in the west, the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was taking its most extreme form, and even “underground” access to western popular culture was impossible. Meng Liye notes that some influential film movements in world cinema of the time, such as Italian neo-realism (1942-1951) and French New Wave (1959-1964), did not cause any response within Chinese film circles (2011, 6-7). Instead, Chairman Mao’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” (1942) remained a key document to guide the creation of peasant-focused literary and artistic works. The determined implementation of an independent (duli zizhu) policy was expressed in a certain type of “youth film,” stamped with clear inward-looking characteristics. Over 800 feature films, including over 100 opera films, were produced between 1949 and 1978 (Braester and Chen 2011, 5). A large number of these feature young protagonists. In broad terms, the basic tone of these “youth” films was in accord with the following quotation of Chairman Mao: “The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you” (1966, 288). This statement presented “youth” as a period of preparation (i.e. as “leaders of tomorrow” or “the tomorrow of the nation”), not as the bearers of a culture with its own coherence. The films portrayed their young protagonists as vigorous, diligent, and self-sacrificing citizens, who integrated their individual lives within the grand socialist cause. Although they sometimes rebelled against a figure of authority—someone who lacked sufficient revolutionary ethos or was counter-revolutionary—they were also shown to be inexperienced, requiring education from a senior Party member or mentor. The ultimate purpose was to turn the young characters into committed Communists, ready to serve the interests of the masses and to carry on the revolution. In short, these films were less about the coming-of-age experience of the youngsters than about how the Party and the political movement it had launched could guide them as they grew up. In the process the young were never lacking for ideologically correct guidance from their elders, as illustrated by a 1965 feature film titled Young Generation (Nianqing de yidai). This film focuses on the importance of urban youth going to a provincial area to be re-educated by the local peasants. An adult character remarks earnestly: “How can we not worry about them [young people]?
We are all old now. Our hope is on their shoulders.\(^2\)

The Great Leap Forward (1957-1961)—the government’s lunge “toward modernization through mass mobilization” (Clark 2012, 46)—further influenced and changed society. The film industry was no exception and planned its own “leap forward” to increase the number of feature films, from thirty in 1957 to eighty in 1958 (Meng 2011, 233). The year 1959 marked the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China and a large number of celebratory projects were assigned to individual studios; more films were produced with an emphasis on youth.\(^3\) Among the “youth films” produced within this two-year period, Su Li’s Young People in Our Village (Women cunli de nianqingren) is perhaps closest to the literal definition of that term. The film focuses on youthful characters in a contemporary setting, but its approach is very much shaped by its time and place. It is set in a remote mountain village where people need to walk miles to carry water for daily use. A group of young people, led by a demobilized soldier (the central hero), decide to carve a five-mile-long canal through mountain rocks to bring fresh water to the village, defying opposition from the conservative head of the village and some short-sighted villagers. The film demonstrates “a great leap forward” in terms of the time required to complete the canal. When the film starts, we learn through the hero’s grandfather that generations of local villagers had dreamed of such a project for hundreds of years. When the young team leader announces his plan to complete the canal in five years, he is greeted with incredulity. As planning progresses, however, the time is reduced to three years. Finally, following the founding of a people’s commune (one of the goals of The Great Leap Forward), they successfully complete the canal in just three months.

The subplot of the film concerns an impractical high school graduate who aspires to an urban lifestyle by using his family’s connections to find him a job in the city. He becomes a laughing stock and is also jilted by his fiancée. He is eventually brought round to change his attitude in the wave of socialist construction. When a job offer comes from the city toward the end of the film, he refuses to accept it as he has already decided, like all the other young people in the village, to commit himself to building the new socialist countryside. This young man’s change of mind is another defining feature of “youth” films of the 1950s and 1960s, based on the assumption that young people should reject the attractions of the city and instead put down roots in the countryside (zhagen nongcun). The youth films show young peasants “daring to rearrange mountains and rivers.” They are driven by revolutionary passion to study science and technology in order to

\(^{2}\) In the remake of this film in 1975, these words were changed to the following: “How can we not worry about them? They are all successors to the Revolution. The future of the Revolution lies on their shoulders.” Such changes in tone and content reveal how the (interior) meanings and (exterior) expectations of “youth” have shifted according to the changing political climate in China.

improve traditional methods of cultivating land and increasing food production. The films do not depict rural life as unchanging since the characters are eager to embrace some aspects of modernization; but in general terms the protagonists remain loyal to the countryside and their aim is simply to improve life there. There is an obvious contrast between these films and the urban youth culture depicted in Anglo-American films of the 1960s, though there is a curious connection with the enthusiasm for rural communes that became a significant strand of hippie culture. The American “back to the land” movement tended to centre, however, not on Maoist communism but on anarchism, drugs, and free love (as in the 1969 film *Easy Rider*).

**1977-1989: “Rebellious” Youth Films**

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Chinese society entered a new era. The government abandoned the previous ideology of isolation and initiated a reform program and an open-door policy. Economic growth became the central task of the nation. The program of economic reform was officially justified by the “theory of the initial stage of socialism,” which was given authoritative expression at the Party’s Thirteenth National Congress in 1987. This shift of focus led to a comparatively wealthy society and an increase in living standards; the new version of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” had the general effect of encouraging a more materialistic outlook. The program of reform introduced more political, social, and cultural diversity and young people became more aware of the economic affluence of some capitalist countries. As the open-door policy widened the economic door, it also opened eyes and minds. The lifestyle and values that had been condemned as “bourgeois” and “counter-revolutionary” were picked up especially by the youth. For example, the lifestyle of “hard work and plain living” (*jianku pusu*) and “being thrifty and industrious” (*qinjian jieyue*) promoted in the previous decades lost its appeal. Youth now had the capacity to consume what affluence brought to the market. Some would frequent entertainment and recreation centres such as dance halls, poolrooms, video game arcades, discos, and karaoke bars, all of which provided a dynamic urban culture. Meanwhile, popular culture elements such as pop music and romance fiction from Hong Kong and Taiwan began to bombard mainland young Chinese readers. This was soon followed by the influx of concepts and cultural products from the west. Youth sub-cultures with distinctive forms of music, clothing, and rebellion had been prominent in the west since the 1950s, and the relaxation of import restrictions allowed this material to become available. Short skirts, bell-bottomed trousers, long hair, and sunglasses posed a defiant contrast to the sombre and conformist attire

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4 “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*) was first used by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) to endorse the country’s discarding of the centrally-planned economy and the implementation of a market-oriented one in the late 1970s. The meaning of the phrase has been expanded by the Chinese government in various situations in the subsequent decades. The phrase has also been picked up by some scholars in their discussion of China’s reform program of the 1980s. For example, Arif Dirlik states that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” suggests “a loss of faith in it [socialism] as a social and political metatheory with a coherent present and a certain future” (1989, 374).
of the Cultural Revolution. The albums of Michael Jackson were displayed on shop shelves alongside *The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (Zhou 2007). In this wave of western influences, the philosophy of existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and the idea of “the death of God” of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) were particularly influential. The translated versions of their works were not only visible in the state-operated bookshops but also made rapid inroads into private book stores. By the late 1980s, the government-initiated reform program had deepened, contributing to a more affluent society but also corruption among government departments, which motivated many youngsters, in particular young university students, to take to the streets to proactively participate in the anti-corruption and pro-democracy demonstrations. Nevertheless, the government crackdown on the student democratic protests on Tian’anmen Square in the summer of 1989 brought disillusion to the passion and enthusiasm of the young generation. In this context, many young people lost interest in politics; some becoming confused about the present and the future while others turned to hedonism and materialism. All these factors “created a substantial level of disaffection with the CCP and by extension with the socialist system itself, as well as deviations from socialist values and behaviour” (Hooper 1985, 229). Such changes in the nation’s cultural, economic, and socio-political landscapes stimulated the production of new types of “youth film” closer to those made in recent decades in western countries.

As early as in 1981, Teng Wenji directed *Awakening* (*Suxing*), which attempted to reflect the thought and life of young people of the time. To quote Teng, the film aimed “to throb with the pulse of the 1980s youth, to reflect their state of mind accurately, and to explore the issues they feel are most urgent” (1981, 6). Unlike the youth films of the previous three decades, *Awakening* does not show young people making enthusiastic and unremitting efforts to improve themselves or dedicate themselves to socialist construction. Rather, the film offered a more downbeat picture, representing a generation that had grown up during the Cultural Revolution when their elders were being humiliated, dismissed, or purged. Though they received plenty of ideological advice, their coming-of-age journey had not been closely supervised. While some of them had enjoyed “days of sunshine,”5 others had become sceptical of authority and had developed a critical attitude towards society by the time the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976. As Teng’s film title indicates, they were “waking up” from a ten-year national nightmare, although they did not have a clear idea of their new destination. These narrative elements and thematic motifs, alongside the innovative style (e. g., use of flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness, etc.) made young audiences, especially urban ones, “show great interest in the film, as they think it reflects their mental outlook, their feelings, their hopes and their frustrations” (Ding 1982, 5).

The youth of the early 1980s (like those portrayed in *Awakening*) were beginning to look for a meaning of life different from that idealized by the

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5 “Days of sunshine” 阳光灿烂的日子 is the literal translation of the title of a popular Chinese film that takes a retrospective and sentimental look at the teenage experience of the generation in the Cultural Revolution. The official English title of the film is *In the Heat of the Sun* (dir. Jiang Wen 姜文, 1994).
authorities. This impulse grew more intense over the course of the decade, and
Chinese cinema came to produce “youth films” as anarchic as those made in
Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s—“rebel without (or with) a cause” movies.
Angry and alienated young urbanities, adopting a hedonist attitude and living a
freewheeling life, became the protagonists of a cluster of movies in the late 1980s
(Zhou 2007). Ye Daying’s Out of Breath (Dachuanqi) is one such movie. Adapted
from popular writer Wang Shuo’s novella “Rubber Man” (Xiangpi ren), the film
traces a group of profiteers from Beijing, searching for opportunities to turn
quick and lucrative profits by (legally or illegally) riding the tide of consumerism.
The film opens impressively with a two-minute-long scene of a motorcycle gang
speeding through an urban landscape. Like those in The Wild One (dir. Laslo
Benedek, 1953), the Chinese “motor-bike boys and girls” are in black leather with
metal studs. As they ride their chrome and steel stallions “to the loud thumping
of the motor-bike engines” (Willis 1978, 57), they seem to proclaim that the times
are changing and that they are establishing a culture of their own. Riding along
the streets shrouded in the growing shades of dusk, they defied the ideology of
home-centeredness, an idea that had been valued in Chinese society where young
people’s daily life was made up of work and family, with their leisure time spent in
two areas: the home and the immediate neighbourhood. This joy-riding montage is
then followed by six minutes of a discothèque carnival. A series of long shots show
this get-together of young people bustling with noise and excitement, with music
blasting from stereo speakers hung on the wall. As the camera zooms in to focus on
individual dancers, the mood subtly shifts to coldness and detachment. A crowd of
youth participate in the party yet everyone is oblivious of everyone else. The film
conveys the energy of the new youth culture but also shows alienation as a negative
consequence of a society increasingly dominated by consumerism.

The significance of youth films like Out of Breath lies in their efforts to
explore the lifestyles, emotions, and attitudes of free-wheeling young urbanities.
Conventional protagonists of youth films, such as workers, peasants, soldiers, are
replaced by angry and alienated young men and women living on the periphery of
mainstream society. This new type of hero (or rather anti-hero) refuses to accept
the existing social order or orthodox morality, and instead adopts a hedonistic,
highly individual attitude toward life, seeking sensual and material pleasures, and
behaving in a reckless or even delinquent manner.

The films do not present this new culture uncritically—to do so would have
been too great a challenge to government censorship—but they were certainly
an eye-opener for young viewers. The production and distribution of these rebel
films was a striking phenomenon in a society that had traditionally held age and
socialist values in the highest respect. Virtually no serious effort had been made
on film to explore the lives of troubled or rebellious young people, except as
negative characters. These films could be seen as the coming of something like
the “Beat Generation” to Chinese cinema. Western influences (or parallels) were
obvious. They included a shift of emphasis to modern urban lifestyles and values,
and to affluence and consumerism, emphasizing cultural products targeted at
young people. Above all, there was a growing recognition of the years of youth as
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a distinctive stage of life. Although the making of such films came to an abrupt end in 1989 due to a change in the political environment, these films had created a wealth of images of socially and culturally marginalized youngsters.

The 1990s to the Present: Mainstream Youth Films

In the post-1989 context, Chinese youth culture has continued generally to develop as society has become more urbanized. The Chinese film industry became more plural and dynamic with regard to financing channels and production methods. Private film companies were allowed to appear and compete with state-run studios for a market that strengthened its emphasis on youth. Today the silver screen swarms with films that feature youthful protagonists and stories. There remain, however, significant differences between films produced through official channels and independent or private companies.

The majority of the youth films produced within the state-regulated system restrict themselves to the “positive” aspects of youth as viewed from the official perspective. Also, these films tend to avoid some of the favourite ingredients of overseas youth films, such as sexuality, rebellion, drugs, and street or gang fights. A quick look at the youth films made in 2006—the year that saw the centenary of Chinese cinema—demonstrates this moralistic slant. Out of the 330 feature-length projects registered with the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China (this includes joint productions with Hong Kong and Taiwan and 110 digital titles), approximately 44% were youth films (inclusive of children films). Though they were not necessarily targeted at youth, they featured youthful protagonists (Yu 2007, 81-173). 144 out of 330 films is a high proportion. To break this category down further, there were:

- 41 “aspiration fulfilling” movies (“coming-of-age” movies with Chinese characteristics)—about how young people can develop their personalities and vision of life under the moral guidance of elders
- 39 romances—emphasizing the importance of taking the “right” attitude towards love and marriage
- 33 dramas—on the work and daily life of youthful characters
- 17 films about children—focusing on friendships and/or the experience of acquiring knowledge
- 5 peasant worker films
- 4 thrillers
- 2 fantasy movies

In contrast to the youth films of the late 1980s, a concerted effort is clearly being made here to keep youthful energies flowing in the “right” direction. Nevertheless, tame as they are, the emphasis on youth found in almost half of these movies is

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6 Although the films produced through official channels enjoy distribution advantages, not all of them can be publicly distributed due to a limited number of screens and cinema theatres; only a minority of them had this privilege. The rest would be purchased by the CCTV Movie Channel and other, provincial television stations.
a striking development. It is a trend yet to receive thorough attention from the academic world. In a survey article on 2006 Chinese film industry (Ying and Zhan 2007, 10), four types of movies are highlighted—“mainstream melody” movies and children movies (financed by central/provincial governments and state-run institutions), big-budget commercially viable movies (Chinese blockbusters targeting an international audience), commercial movies (including martial arts, romance, cop-gangster, comedy, youth, costume/period drama, etc.) and art-house movies (small-budget films with a realistic touch). Such analyses are interesting but largely overlook the theme of youth.

**Young Peasant Worker Films**

Out of the 330 films of 2006, five are young peasant worker films, a distinctive genre that focuses on the social mobility of young migrant peasants settling in the city. Although this is a small group, it is in some respects unique to China, and is very interesting in terms of the social tensions it reveals. Literally speaking, “peasant worker” (nongmingong) combines “peasant” (nongmin) and “worker” (gongren). The coining of the phrase has to be seen in the wider social context. When the government refocused its agrarian policy in the late 1970s, it also brought changes to the household registration (hukou) system, a system enforced to separate the city population from those who dwelled in the country. This system was imposed in 1958 and limited population mobility and thus fundamentally shaped China's class order and structure, which was strictly divided into urban hukou and rural hukou. The former provided the basis for all the advantages that urban dwellers enjoyed, such as medical and housing benefits. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, peasants who dared to move to the city for employment opportunities were variously labelled, according to the ideological context of the time, as vagrants, floaters, or transients, and would be taken to a custody and repatriation centre (qianfan zhongxin) before being sent back to the place they had come from. The barriers that divided the city and the countryside began to crumble as the reform program advanced, and population movement from the country to the city became more acceptable. The factors that eventually propelled large-scale mobility came from both ends of the spectrum. From a rural perspective, the dismantling of collective communes and the contracting of land to the individual household increased agricultural production and created surplus labour. From an urban perspective, the urban reforms of 1984 generated an economic and industrial expansion which brought more employment opportunities. The surplus subsequently gave way to labour shortage. In this context, the cheap labour force in the countryside and their willingness to undertake work that urbanites refused to do gave rise to the conspicuous phenomenon of peasant workers.

Two generations of peasant workers emerged in China between the early 1980s and the turn of the twenty-first century. The first generation consists chiefly

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7 This system was terminated by the Chinese government in 2003 following the extensive media attention given to the death of a 27-year old university graduate who was beaten to death in a custody and repatriation centre in Guangzhou. For details on the case and its aftermath, see Xu 2007, 67-69.
of those who were born in the 1960s or 1970s and went to the city to seek better economic opportunities in the late 1980s or early 1990s. The second generation consists of those born in the 1980s or early 1990s and who headed for the city from the late 1990s on. Nearly 200 million peasants—mostly between the ages of 15 and 25—left their birthplaces and settled in the city (Wang 2005, 21). The annual number continued to increase. For example, in 2004, 61% of them were below the age of thirty, and 45% between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five (Guowuyuan Yanjiushi 2006, 71). In discussing the new (perhaps temporary) urban occupations of peasant workers, Hein Mallee classifies them into three main groups: construction workers (mostly young males organized into teams, often according to place of origin), industrial workers (many of them young migrant women in industries such as textiles and electronics), and self-employed migrants and those working in small enterprises and households (2003, 153). The films that feature the young peasant workers are full of ambiguities which reflect the contradictions involved in making youth films in China generally. Social problems are revealed, but ultimately softened by being given a moralistic or sentimental slant.

Within the narratives, the young peasant workers are engaged in non-agricultural work but still maintain their rural registration which prevents them from being counted as urban citizens. They contribute to the cities but their life is not protected by the country’s social security system because of their rural roots. Nevertheless, despite the discrimination and the economic hardship they experience, these country kids seldom want to return to their village, continuing to yearn for the opportunities the city appears to offer. The filmmakers have a complex but often contradictory attitude to their protagonists. On the one hand, these young peasant workers of the second generation are shown to be different from their elders, particularly in not thinking of their stay in the city as temporary. And some of their problems they face are acknowledged. But on the other hand, the filmmakers strongly suggest that the most important thing for these country youngsters is to retain the traditional values of peasant life, such as diligence, honesty, and straightforwardness. They are warned that their morality should not be “fashioned around the excess of the marketplace and consumer culture” (Mallan and Pearce 2003, xiii). But advising them not to immerse themselves fully in urban life is a superficial, short-term solution. The more serious problem they face is being treated as social and cultural outsiders. They suffer from low pay, long hours of work, a dirty environment, and insecurity; they also long to have more access to consumer culture. The films about these young people seem to lack the complexity and intensity of an inside perspective.

Out of the five peasant worker films produced in 2006, Yang Yazhou’s 
Loach Is Fish Too (Niqiu yeshiyu) is an ambitious one, attempting to present a
comprehensive picture of the situation of the peasant workers. Set in Beijing, the film follows a group of peasants who move to the capital city in the hope of better employment options. Its title likens these peasant workers to loaches, a type of fish good at searching for stray food and known for its watchfulness and adaptability. To reflect those features, the style of the film is marked by an extensive use of mobile camera work, engendering a sense of chaotic energy and disordered dynamics, often giving a bird’s-eye view of a large number of peasant workers in movement. Although the film’s aspirations to realism are sometimes compromised by its melodramatic elements, it succeeds in capturing many aspects of the life and labour of the peasant workers. Because they are from the countryside, the migrants have access only to the secondary job market, to work that is irregular, uncertain, and badly paid, such as construction, sanitation, and underground digging. In addition, their labour is not protected by contract and their well-being not secured by any welfare system. The film dramatizes such issues as appalling work conditions, delayed wages, lack of medical insurance, social insecurity as well as (a very light touch of) sexual frustration. Denied any civic or legal status, these “loaches” cannot enjoy the air and sunshine above the water but live underneath in darkness, struggling to survive. Their persistence is remarkable.

Peasant worker films such as Loach Is Fish Too reflect the fact that an increasing number of young people have been able to migrate to the city but are still not fully integrated. They contribute to urban development but are denied a full range of social entitlements or political rights. Their own personal identity remains confused—a mixture of country and city. They no longer identify with their ancestral village but neither are they fully accepted into the urban community. They distance themselves from their elders, yet struggle to find an alternative. They are lost in a chaos of competing discourses—the discourse of ancient village and family values, the ideology of Communism, the greed and cynicism of the city streets, and the fantasies of global consumer capitalism. How to create a clear sense of identity out of these contradictions? This question applies not merely to the young peasant workers but also, in many senses, to a Chinese society experiencing a transitional period.

Independent Youth Films
Following the nationalization of all film production companies in 1953, filmmaking in China was a state-operated business. There was no such thing as “independent film” (duli dianying) production in China until 1990 (Mcgrath 2007, 83). As a new mode of filmmaking that is an alternative to the official system—in terms of production, distribution and exhibition—independent film has sometimes been referred to as “underground film” (dixia dianying), “new-born generation film” (xinshengdai dianying) or “sixth generation film” (diliudai dianying) by critics and scholars (Chen and Xiao 2006).

In general terms, youth films made independently outside the state-regulated system tend to be more dynamic in their range of content and tackle youth-related issues more directly and in more complex ways. The young heroes and heroines of the independent youth films are often those sibling-less “little emperors” who were
born following the implementation of the government’s one-child policy in the late 1970s. In contrast to films made within the official system, the young characters are shown from a less orthodox perspective.

Some of these films are set in a county-town (xiancheng). The county-town is a link between the city and the countryside, occupying a special place in China’s administrative divisions. It serves the function of a “transfer station” (Xi 2004, 76) or gateway. By the last decade of the twentieth century, the county-town, a conventional embodiment of traditional and conservative culture, had become exposed to international influences, which in turn affected the thoughts and conduct of young residents. The director who creates the most precise and sustained exploration of county-town youth is Jia Zhangke, an important figure in the independent film movement. An “ordinary director who comes from the lower ranks of Chinese society” (Zhang 2007, 16), Jia was born in a county-town called Fenyang in Shanxi Province, which later provided the main setting for his renowned “hometown trilogy” Xiao Wu (1998), Platform (Zhantai, 2000), and Unknown Pleasures (Renxiaoyao, 2002). Jia turns the camera to his birth county-town not merely to reflect its conventional features (such as one-story buildings, ancient walls, provincial opera performances, propagandistic broadcasts from loudspeakers, etc.), but also to use it as a microcosm of Chinese society undergoing drastic transformation partly as a result of outside influences. Overseas popular culture (from the West and some Asian countries, such as South Korea) in the form of film, music, and fashion (hairstyle, costume, etc.) is embraced by the local youngsters and affects their interpersonal relationships. Aspects of this development are treated with poetic subtlety in Jia’s Unknown Pleasures. Co-produced by a Japanese company, the film traces two 19-year-old high school dropouts, Chicken and Bin, narrating their coming of age story against the bleak urban landscape of the provincial city of Datong. In order to get close to the young women they fall for—a dancer and a high school student—Chicken attempts to live a small-time gangster life while Bin aspires to enlist in the army. Both fail to fulfil their hopes. Inspired by what Pumpkin and Yolanda do in Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction (1994), Chicken and Bin decide to rob a bank. They fail again; Bin is captured on the spot. The film ends with Chicken abandoning his motorcycle on the road. Through his signature utilization of long takes and deep depth of field, Jia quietly shows the boredom, frustration, and suffocating desperation of the two adolescent protagonists living in a provincial city. An extended three-minute scene (in one take) captures this. Chicken struggles to ride his scooter up a barren slope but the engine cuts off repeatedly no matter how many times he restarts it. Living in an environment they find absurd and frustrating, the adolescents become infatuated with imported pop culture and yearn to live a fast life (“What’s the point of living a long life! Thirty years will be enough!” as Bin tells his girlfriend). They long for “unrestrained” and “unlimited” freedom, as the film’s Chinese title implies (borrowing the title of a popular song from Taiwan). But a gulf exists between the dream and the reality. The film’s sarcastic ending captures the contradictions: after being humiliated by a police officer, Bin is then asked to sing a song. Handcuffed, he leans against the wall and offers an emotionless rendition of the title song: “You
can let me feel sad and regretful, but I only wish that God will understand me. You can make me cry or exhaust me, so long as I can fly with the wind.”

Jia is very aware of global links:

From Fenyang to Beijing, and from Beijing to the world, I feel that the lives of people are so similar. Even though there are some differences between the culture, food, and tradition, all the people of the world have to face some of the same problems, such as birth, age, sickness, and death. Everyone has parents, children, and a wife, and they have to face time and bear the same feeling towards life. So I believe that the stories in my work are not just the unique phenomena that happen in a remote small town in Shanxi. (Sun 2005, 16)

Today, one of the problems that “all the people of the world have to face” is accelerated change. Conventional morality is being de-stabilized by consumerism, yet the world offers no new code as a replacement. In Jia's county-town films, the adolescent protagonists are squeezed between tradition and modernity. They are isolated “anachronists,” either drifting aimlessly or becoming lost in the waves of change. Just as Jia's films demonstrate a sense of open texture in narrative and stylistic terms, his adolescent characters display the complexities of a society transforming rapidly from a rural economy to an urban one. It is this uncertainty and loss of bearings that endow Jia's films with global relevance.

If the cinematic portrayal of county-town “registers the scale and intensity of the urbanizing process” (Zhang 2007, 6), it is the city itself that has borne the brunt of the economic, political and socio-cultural changes. One change of attitude—towards gender and sexuality—on the silver screen reflects this. For many years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, one central principle regulating cinematic treatment has been “No sex please, we are Chinese!” (Zhou 2001). Nevertheless, by the turn of the new millennium a sexual revolution has taken place. “[S]ex issues such as one night stands, extramarital affairs, prostitution, cohabitation, contraception, and abortion have already become part of Chinese people’s lives” (Zhao 2005). A group of young women writers and journalists are exploring this kind of intimate subject matter. The new motto seems to be “Sex, Please—We’re Young and Chinese” (Beech 2005). In 2003, Mu Zi Mei, a Guangzhou-based journalist in her twenties, became a celebrity because her blogs candidly described her sexual encounters with a number of men. There were precedents in print for this kind of writing. Back in the late 1990s a group of “pretty woman” writers (meinü zuojia), such as Hong Ying, Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Wei Hui, and Mian Mian, started producing “decadent” (tuifei) literature to explore “youth hedonistic themes of sex, drugs, violence, ennui, generation gaps, and promiscuity within a broad social framework of cultural identity” (Weber 2002, 348). Out of these, Wei Hui’s Shanghai Baby (Shanghai baobei, 1999) gained national attention. Its explicit sexual descriptions led to an official ban and the burning of 40,000 copies in public. Shanghai Baby had a serious dimension in its sensitive treatment of profound loneliness caused by a lack of love and an excessive desire experienced by urban young people and their inability to deal with their feelings. When the story was made into a German-financed motion picture with a German director
(Berengar Pfahl) in 2007, much of the power and subtlety of the original work was lost. The film concentrated on the sensuality of the female protagonist played by the American-Chinese actress Bai Ling.

In contrast, Chen Yusú’s (also known as Andrew YS Cheng) Shanghai Panic (Women haipa, 2001) adapted from Mian Mian’s novel of the same title, retains much of the original spirit. The film portrays an urban youth culture by focusing on four characters on the fringes of the metropolitan city of Shanghai. A twentyish ballet dancer is scared that he has contracted AIDS in the course of his loose sexual activities. He reveals his fear to three close friends, who, like him, have a dysfunctional family background. Having no idea what to do, the four turn to drugs, computer games, KTV rooms, and more casual sex. What is stressed throughout the narrative is their “panic” about life and death, darkness, and loneliness. The atmosphere is heightened by an extensive use of jerky hand-held cameras and non-continuity editing. To convey the sense of alienation in a bustling crowd, the director uses “step printing,” a technique of shooting at half speed or less and then doubling the rate during the printing process, to create a “special fluidity.” This adds to the nervous, disoriented feel. The young characters in this film (as in many others of the type) may be reasonably secure in material terms but feel alienated from their environment and spiritually dispossessed. They are engaged in a quest for some unknown experience that will bring meaning to their lives such as love or religion. (One can think of precedents in European cinema, such as the art films of the 1960s which were influenced by Existentialism.)

The young ballet dancer in Shanghai Panic is also in panic because of his gay identity. Until the 1990s, homosexuality was a taboo topic for Chinese scholars, writers, and artists alike. As Eric Wat has said: “For most Asian parents, being Asian and being gay are mutually exclusive. More significantly, there is not a need to talk about ‘it’ because it is only a problem for white people: ‘it is a white disease’” (quoted in Chiang 2002, 276). In this situation of repression and denial, gay and lesbian identity remained a forbidden subject in Chinese cinema. By the 1990s, “gay,” “queer,” or “LGBT” culture had already developed strongly in the West, and some of the related books and films had become available in China (through underground if not official channels), and they set a powerful precedent.

The first serious history of homosexuality published in China (written by Li Yinhe) appeared in 1993. Although recent years have seen an openly gay and lesbian community emerging in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, homosexuality is still regarded by many as a problem and gay people are subjected to discrimination. While it is rare to see a straightforward treatment of the subject in an officially produced film, a few independent projects have dared to explore it. The first Chinese film to present an explicitly queer voice was Zhang Yuan’s East Palace West Palace (Donggong xigong, 1996). Another important figure among Chinese independent filmmakers, Zhang Yuan liked to feature marginalized figures, such as the disabled (Mama, a 1990 motion picture that marked the start of Chinese independent filmmaking), addicts (Beijing Bastards/Beijing zazhong 1993), alcoholics and the unemployed (Sons/Erzi, 1995), trans-gendered people (Miss Jin Xing/Jinxing xiaojie, 2000), and gays (East Palace, West Palace). Set mostly in an
inner city park of Beijing during the night time, *East Palace, West Palace* features a young gay man and his “masochistic infatuation” with one of the policemen whose job is to harass suspected gay people after night falls and take them to the police station for questioning (Berry 1998, 84). Other directors soon joined Zhang and a “new queer Chinese cinema” subsequently came into being (Lim 2006; Martin 2010; Leung 2012).

These same-sex films have received some political readings. For example, in writing about *East Palace West Palace*, Helen Hok-Sze Leung argues that “queer spaces—as yet unassimilated by mainstream cinema—are affiliated with other outlawed and marginalized pockets of a society that has left its revolutionary history behind. As China veers away from the political path of third Worldist radicalism, thus eclipsing the climate once favourable to Third Cinema practices, queer cinema arrives on the scene to become the new icon of rebellion” (2004, 165). We may not accept all of Leung’s political assumptions, but we can certainly agree that it has taken much courage for filmmakers and actors to enter this “outlawed and marginalized” territory. Public attitudes to privacy are certainly changing in China as in Western countries where Facebook has become part of everyday life. Despite internet censorship, young people in China are growing up in a more international and more networked age, and they seem less concerned about what society thinks of them. They are inclined to take individualism, consumerism and materialism for granted. As the protagonist of *Shanghai Baby* proclaims: “I am different. I want to show it to the whole world.”

The title of Zhang Yuan’s film refers to the two public toilets on each side of the Forbidden City on the north edge of Tiananmen Square. As Berry poignantly notes, “if gay men in the United States construct themselves by coming out of the closet, Cui’s Chinese gay men find each other by going into the (water) closet” (2004, 197). A water closet (or WC) is a place where public meets private, and it symbolizes the marginality of gay identity in Chinese society. This location also appears in another gay film, *The Pros and Cons of the WC*. This 20-minute-long gay film was directed by Cui Zi’en (“Cui” in Berry’s quote), a gay filmmaker and professor of Beijing Film Academy. The series of experimental and ideologically challenging films directed and written by Cui have contributed significantly to the shaping of the new gay Chinese cinema. Such films circulate through international “queer film markets” (Yue 2012, 97).

**Conclusions**

The present study has sketched a two-sided picture of the evolution of youth filmmaking in the People’s Republic of China. On the one hand, youth culture on China’s big screen has not yet been developed to a scale or intensity comparable with that projected by Anglo-Saxon cinema. There are numerous films about youth but only a minority explore the distinctive nature of this phase of life.

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9 For example, *Enter the Clowns* 走 马 上 场 (2002); *The Old Testament* 旧 约 (2002); *Feeding Boys, Ayaya 且 呢 呢, 去 哺 乳* (2003); *My Fair Son* 我 如 花 似 玉 的 儿 子 (2005); *Withered in a Blooming Season* 少 年 花 草 黄 (2005); *Queer China, “Comrade” China* 志 同 志 (documentary, 2008).
or the cultures associated with it. To a large extent, the subject has also been neglected, consciously or unconsciously, by mainstream film studies. Although recent years see more attention paid by filmmakers, in particular by the newly emerged unofficial or underground film culture, the subject has yet to receive a thorough presentation and treatment on a national level. As Chinese society links increasingly with the outside world, and as the global cinema industry (including Hollywood) becomes more conscious of this market (by adding Chinese elements to films), it would be interesting to track the direction taken by Chinese filmmaking in the future. Meanwhile, the analysis of youth films made in previous periods can highlight the changes taking place in Chinese society and what might be called the country’s coming of age journey to integrate itself into the international community.

Director Jia Zhangke saw the setting of his film *The World* (*Shijie*)—a Theme Park (“The World Window”) on the outskirts of the capital city of Beijing—as “a microcosm of Chinese society” (Lu 2008, 170), and his treatment of the young peasant workers as a way to reveal “a new kind of human interrelationship in a society undergoing tremendous changes” (Zhang and Ma 2005, 87). Many of the films discussed here show similarly how the stories of young people can serve as vivid metaphors for social change. As David Considine points out in his seminal *The Cinema of Adolescence*, “in looking at images of adolescence we are looking at much more than the way one particular medium chose to reflect one social group at a given moment in time. By looking at young people we are afforded a means by which we may view ourselves and our major social institutions” (1985, 11). As if to re-work Chairman Mao’s 1957 quotation, Timothy Shary says that the youth holds the key to a nation’s future and “youth media can serve as a bridge between the past and present … it may well lay the foundations for our future” (2002, xi). Youth culture in its various forms provides a particularly interesting example of global influences at work. It is significant that this development has come late to China (and because it has been slowed by censorship, it seems likely that its development is not finished yet); and it is also clear that it has interacted with the field of forces within the local culture, and its unique political history, in distinctive ways.
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