

From Youth to Midlife:  
The Historical Trajectory of Individual Life in Three Films Adapted from Wang Shuo's Novels

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis takes three films, *Kanshangqu henmei* 看上去很美 (Little Red Flowers, d. Zhang Yuan, 2006), *Yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子 (In the Heat of the Sun, d. Jiang Wen, 1994), and *Yuanjia fuzi* 冤家父子 (Papa, d. Wang Shuo, 1991), all adapted from Wang Shuo's works of fiction, as cases in which to explore the cinematic representation of individuals' lives. It deals with three different life stages: childhood, teenage years, and midlife, analyzing some complicated connections between the individual's daily life and Maoist/Post-Maoist historical discourse. Although much effort by scholars has been put into examining *In the Heat of the Sun* in isolation, barely any attention has been devoted to the films *Little Red Flowers* and *Papa*, and there is no discussion among scholars of these three films in conjunction with one another. This thesis contains a chapter each on *Little Red Flowers*, *In the Heat of the Sun*, and *Papa*, revisiting the particular status of the individual's life trajectory under different historical circumstances from the 1960s to the 1990s in China, and arguing that there are resonances among these three films.

Chapter One gives special attention to the disciplining of young children's bodies in kindergarten during the 1960s and how the filmmaker in *Little Red Flowers* disdains the attempt to utilize children's body for propagandistic display. Chapter Two reevaluates the narration of the coming-of-age experience and memory of the protagonist in *In the Heat of the Sun* set in the Cultural Revolution as a way of lifting the veil of nostalgia and revealing the fragility of memory, truth, and recorded history. Chapter Three ponders the interaction between a middle-aged father and his son via the affective lens of "shame," contending that the depiction of shame in *Papa* implies an attitude of reconciling with the father at the end of the twentieth century.

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## Introduction

The films *Kanshangqu henmei* 看上去很美 (Little Red Flowers, d. Zhang Yuan, 2006), *Yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子 (In the Heat of the Sun, d. Jiang Wen, 1994), and *Yuanjia fuzi* 冤家父子 (Papa, d. Wang Shuo, 1991) are three cinematic works adapted from Wang Shuo's (王朔, b.1958) novels *Kanshangqu henmei* 看上去很美 (Could be Beautiful, Wang Shuo, 1998), *Dongwu xiongmeng* 动物凶猛 (Wild Beast, 1991), and *Woshi Nibaba* 我是你爸爸 (I am Your Papa, 1991) respectively. In these films, three characteristically cinematic figures are established: a young child named Fang Qiangqiang (方枪枪); a near-feral teenager named Ma Xiaojun (马小军); and an exhausted middle-aged father named Ma Linsheng (马林生). Each of them represents a different life stage of a Chinese individual from the 1960s to 1990s. Wang Shuo is deft at depicting common folks and marginal people. In many interviews, he explained that his writing was based on a desire to express his own experience, and hence his novels possess a very strong tincture of “subjective sense” (自主性) and “sense of the times” (时代感).<sup>1</sup> As contemporaries of Wang Shuo, the filmmakers Jiang Wen (姜文, b.1963) and Zhang Yuan (张元, b.1963) uphold Wang Shuo's proclivities and at the same time insert their own observations, experiences, and critiques into the films. These two directors and Wang Shuo himself adapted the three novels into excellent films and created profound reflections on the

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Miao 王苗, “Dayuan: Wang Shuo de wenxue jiyi” 大院: 王朔的文学记忆 [The compound: Wang Shuo's literary memory], *Sohu* 搜狐, March 3, 2019, [http://www.sohu.com/a/300923609\\_260616](http://www.sohu.com/a/300923609_260616).

status of the individual's life trajectory in recent Chinese history.

## **Wang Shuo and the “Wang Shuo Craze” of the Late 1980s and Early 1990s**

Wang Shuo (王朔) is one of the most popular and controversial writers of contemporary Chinese fiction. He was born in Nanjing in 1958, then migrated to Beijing with his parents and grew up in a military compound as a privileged child of high-ranking party members (高干子弟). In 1965, he began school at Beijing Cuiwei Primary School and in his second year there the Cultural Revolution broke out. Thus, Wang Shuo spent his entire childhood in a politically chaotic and turbulent environment. As one of “the other Cultural Revolution generation,” in contrast to their older sisters and brothers who were idealistic and fanatical Red Guards, Wang Shuo and his contemporaries grew up in a dismissive rather than disillusioned mindset, “for many of them never believed the strident rhetoric at all.”<sup>2</sup> In 1976, Wang Shuo graduated from high school and enlisted in the People's Liberation Army Navy in the same year. Two years later, he published his first short story, “Dengdai” 等待 (Waiting)<sup>3</sup>. Since 1986, Wang Shuo has been publishing stories regularly. He shot to fame in the late 1980s and early 1990s as one of the most popular fiction writers in China of the age.

Wang Shuo's works sold in excess of 10 million copies in one decade, and more than

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<sup>2</sup> Geremie Barmé, “Wang Shuo and Liumang (‘Hooligan’) Culture,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 28, (1992): 23.

<sup>3</sup> The story Waiting was published in *Jiefangjun Wenyi* 解放军文艺 [People's Liberation Army Literature and Art], no. 11, (1978): 25-29. It tells the story of a depressed girl who longs for more freedom. However, her mother is worried about the daughter's safety, and she doesn't allow the girl to go out alone or read so-called “harmful” foreign literary books. At the end of the story, Wang Shuo implicitly criticizes the Culture Revolution which has thrown society into disarray.



twenty of his stories have been adapted into films or television series.<sup>4</sup> The year 1988 was even dubbed “The Year of Wang Shuo” (王朔年) in the Chinese film industry, as four of his works of fiction were adapted into movies in that single year.<sup>5</sup> From 1990 to 1991, Wang Shuo served as the screenwriter for two television series *Kewang* 渴望 (Yearning) and *Bianjibu de gushi* 编辑部的故事 (The story of the editorial office), which together garnered massive television ratings in China. These highly popular films and TV series consolidated Wang Shuo’s domestic literary reputation. In 1992, Wang Shuo’s four-volume set of fictional writers fueled a trend called the “Wang Shuo Craze” (王朔热) among readers.<sup>6</sup> Thus, relying on his acute powers of observation and skilled engagement with emerging modes of popular culture in China, Wang Shuo reaped huge success and profit from the growing market economy.

Nevertheless, Wang Shuo’s popularity distressed some in the critical elite and intellectual orthodoxy of the time. In a column entitled “A Discussion of Wang Shuo’s Films” (王朔电影讨论) in *China Film News* (中国电影报), the establishment film critic, Shao Mujun (邵牧君 b. 1928), the secretary of China Film Association (中国电影家协会), dismissed the characters in Wang Shuo’s movies as “Pizi” 痞子 (ruffian) who are less-educated, idle, and irresponsible people.<sup>7</sup> Since then, “Pizi” has become a label for Wang Shuo, and his writing has been referred

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<sup>4</sup> Yusheng Yao, “The Elite Class Background of Wang Shuo and His Hooligan Characters,” *Modern China* 30, no. 4 (2004): 432.

<sup>5</sup> These four movies are *Dachuanqi* 大喘气 (Deep breathing, Shenzhen Film Studio, 1988), adapted from *Wan de jiushi xintao* 玩的就是心跳 (No heartbeat, no play, Emei Film Studio, 1988); *Wanzhu* 顽主 (Master game, adapted from *Wanzhu*; *Lun hui* 轮回 (Samsara, Xi’an Film Studio, 1988), adapted from *Fuchu haimian* 浮出海面 (Floating Above the Sea); *Yiban shi haishui, yiban shi huoyan* 一半是海水, 一半是火焰 (Half is seawater, half is flame, Beijing Film Studio, 1988), adapted from the novel of the same name. Wang Shuo served as the screenwriter in all the four films.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Chen, “From Sentimental Trilogy to Gangster Trilogy: Moral Dilemmas in a Cultural Crisis,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 8, no.1 (2001): 58.

<sup>7</sup> Shao Mujun 邵牧君, “Wang Shuo dianyingre yuanhe erqi” 王朔电影热缘何而起 [The reasons for Wang Shuo film craze], *Zhongguo dianyingbao* 中国电影报, March 25, 1989.

to as “Liumang Wenxue” (hooligan literature).<sup>8</sup> In the nationwide intellectual debates on the “renwen jingshen” 人文精神 (humanistic spirit), Wang Shuo’s writing was fiercely interrogated and criticized.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Xu Lin (徐麟 b.1949) dismissed Wang Shuo’s fiction as a representation of “nihilism” (虚无主义)<sup>10</sup> and Zhu Xueqin (朱学勤 b.1952) attacked Wang Shuo’s writing for “annihilating the humanistic spirit” (消解人文精神).<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, there were also some literary critics and scholars that championed Wang Shuo. For example, Zhao Yuan (赵园 b.1945) praised the way that Wang Shuo creates “real people” in accord with Lu Xun’s expression “It’s hard to meet real people”;<sup>12</sup> Chen Sihe (陈思和 b. 1954) averred that Wang Shuo’s stories advance an important aspect of the values of freedom and liberation, noting “Everyone has the right to choose his own lifestyle.”<sup>13</sup> Although most intellectuals were aware of Wang Shuo, the lion’s share of his readership comprised urban youth including students, workers, and owners of small businesses. They even regarded Wang Shuo as

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<sup>8</sup> For more scholarship on Wang Shuo and “hooligan literature,” please see Geremie Barmé, “Wang Shuo and Liumang (‘Hooligan’) Culture,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 28, (1992): 23-64; Helen Chen, “From Sentimental Trilogy to Gangster Trilogy: Moral Dilemmas in a Cultural Crisis,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 8, no.1 (2001): 57-90; and Yusheng Yao, “The Elite Class Background of Wang Shuo and His Hooligan Characters,” *Modern China* 30, no. 4 (2004): 431-469.

<sup>9</sup> More studies on Wang Shuo and “humanistic spirit debates” see Huang Ping 黄平, “Meiyou xiaosheng de wenxueshi: yi Wang Shuo wei zhongxin” 没有笑声的文学史——以王朔为中心 [A literary history without laugh: focusing on Wang shuo], *Wenyi zhengmin* 文艺争鸣, no.4 (2014):15-25.

<sup>10</sup> Wang Xiaoming et al., 王晓明等, “Kuangyeshang de feixu: wenxue he renwenjingshen de weiji” 旷野上的废墟——文学和人文精神的危机 [Ruins on the wildness: the crisis of literature and humanistic spirit], *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文学, no. 6 (1993).

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Rulun et al., 张汝伦等, “Renwen jingshen: shifou keneng yu ruhe keneng” 人文精神：是否可能与如何可能 [Humanistic spirit: whether it is possible and how], *Dushu* 读书, no.3 (1994).

<sup>12</sup> Zhao Yuan 赵园, “‘Nanjian zhenderen’! Shishuo ‘Lunhui’ gaibian yuanzuo de deshi” “难见真的人!” 试说《轮回》改编原作的得失 [“It’s hard to meet real people”! A discussion on the pros and cons of the adaptation of *Aamsara*], *Dianying yishu* 电影艺术, no. 5(1989): 27-29.

<sup>13</sup> Chen Sihe 陈思和, “Heisede tuifei: du Wang Shuo xiaoshuo de zhaji” 黑色的颓废——读王朔小说的札记 [Black decadence: the reading notes on Wang Shuo’s novels], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论, no. 5(1989): 33-40.

“the idol of rebellion for the youth.”<sup>14</sup>

These positive comments by Wang Shuo’s partisans articulate the reasons why Wang Shuo enjoyed such popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One reason is that Wang Shuo gave voice to the desires of the masses for the “real” and “freedom” in the Post-Mao Era. Geremie Barmé indicates that we should recognize Wang Shuo’s critical role in presenting “the dysfunction of official ideology with the growth of individual economic, social, and intellectual spheres.”<sup>15</sup> Another reason lies in the manner in which Wang Shuo represented the viewpoint of ordinary people in his writing. Most characters in his fiction are common folk or even marginal figures who are cynical, playful, idle, and even anti-heroic. They can be regarded as “superfluous people,”<sup>16</sup> but they are “charming.”<sup>17</sup> Through the depiction of these characters, Wang Shuo’s writing appeals to ordinary readers who are weary and dismissive of the pervasive official rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, Wang Shuo offers us an endearing portrait of the ordinary and real individual in the midst of overwhelming historical events.

### **Three Films Adapted from Wang Shuo’s Novels and the Trajectory of Individual Life**

After being disparaged in the debates on “humanistic spirit,” Wang Shuo intended to give up his literary career and turned his energies toward the film industry. In 1993, he founded Good

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<sup>14</sup> Yusheng Yao, “The elite class background of Wang Shuo and his hooligan characters,” 432.

<sup>15</sup> Geremie Barmé, “The Apotheosis of the *Liumang*,” in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 63.

<sup>16</sup> For more about “superfluous people” in Wang Shuo’s fiction, see Geremie Barmé, “The Apotheosis of the *Liumang*,” in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 79-86.

<sup>17</sup> Yusheng Yao, “The elite class background of Wang Shuo and his hooligan characters,” 433.

Dream Pictures (好梦影视制作公司). On November 10, 1994, he published a journalistic piece entitled “Tuoli wenxue qishi” 脱离文学启事 (A notice renouncing literature) in *Xinmin News* (新民晚报). The same year, the film *In the Heat of the Sun* which is adapted from Wang Shuo novel *Wild Beast*, won the 51st Venice Film Festival's Best Actor Award. The lead actor Xia Yu (夏雨 b.1976) became the youngest recipient of the Best Actor award at Venice. Two years later, this film won six awards in the Golden Horse Film Awards in Taiwan. When released in mainland China, because of the celebrity status of Wang Shuo, who played a role as an actor in the film, and Jiang Wen, who turned from a screen icon into the director of the film, *In the Heat of the Sun* became a blockbuster. Dai Jinhua (戴锦华 b.1959) even contends that the phenomenon of *In the Heat of the Sun* signifies the revival of Chinese cinema in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup>

*In the Heat of the Sun* is set in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. It tells the story of a teenage boy privileged of party background (高干子弟), Ma Xiaojun, who lives in a military compound. The image of Ma Xiaojun somehow reflects an amalgam of Jiang Wen and Wang Shuo's youths: both of them grew up in military compounds in Beijing, enjoying the political and material privileges that such an upbringing affords. In 1991, Wang Shuo's *Wild Beast* was published in the magazine *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest). He gave a copy of the issue as a gift to his friend and neighbor Jiang Wen. Jiang Wen was immediately captivated by Wang Shuo's writing and after a myriad of discussions with the author, he embarked on adapting it into a film.

In addition to acting in films, Wang Shuo tried his hand at directing a film himself. In

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<sup>18</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing; zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化 1978-1998 [Landscape in the mist: the Chinese film culture from 1978 to 1998], (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 北京大学出版社, 2000), 446-447.

1996, Good Dream Pictures made the film *Papa* which is adapted from Wang Shuo's novel *I am Your Papa*. This film tells the story of a middle-aged father named Ma Linsheng who grew up in the Maoist Era and struggles in his interaction with his own son in the 1990s. However, the film was banned by the Chinese government until being released at the Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland in 2000. Besides *Papa*, some other films produced by Good Dream Pictures, such as *Yueliang beimian* 月亮背面 (Far Side of the Moon) and *Guozhe langbeibukan de shenghuo* 过着狼狈不堪的生活 (Living a life in a total fluster), were prohibited or suspended by the Chinese Government as well. From the middle of the 1990s, with the emergence of “real mass culture” and “suppression by traditional film systems and values,” Wang Shuo's film career took a downturn.<sup>19</sup>

In the later 1990s, Wang Shuo went to the United States, and in 1998, he returned to China and published his semi-autobiographical novel *Could Be Beautiful*. Using the first-person narrative, it tells the story of a young boy named Fang Qiangqiang and his childhood growing up in the Revolutionary Era from 1961 to 1966. In 2006, the renowned Chinese Sixth-generation director Zhang Yuan adapted this novel to the screen as *Little Red Flowers* in which Wang Shuo was one of the screenwriters. In the same year, the film won the award for Best Adapted Screenplay at the Golden Horse in Taiwan.

I have chosen these three films for my thesis because they all reflect ordinary Chinese individuals' real and quotidian lives which were typically neglected by the official recorded history. The primary figures in these three films—Fang Qiangqiang, the young troublemaker; Ma

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<sup>19</sup> For more about Wang Shuo's film career see Huang Ping 黄平, “Meiyou xiaosheng de wenxueshi: yi Wang Shuo wei zhongxin” 没有笑声的文学史——以王朔为中心 [A literary history without laugh: focusing on Wang shuo], *Wenyi zhengmin* 文艺争鸣, no.4 (2014):15-25.

Xiaojun, the mischievous teenager; and Ma Linsheng, the bewildered father—appear as the embodiment of the experience of many Chinese people who lived from the 1960s to the 1990s. When examining the coming-of-age films in the Post-Mao period, Xinmin Liu claims that the depictions of the quotidian “carve out an unusual enclave”<sup>20</sup> in the turmoil during the Maoist political era. Hence, the individual narrations of *Little Red Flowers*, *In the Heat of the Sun*, and *Papa* offer us a way to (re)interpret and (re)imagine the status of individuals’ lives hiding in an inconspicuous corner of history. Moreover, through these films, we can get a better understanding of the relations between individual and history and how historical events impact ordinary people’s lives. Finally, the most astonishing thing is the resonance among these three films: viewed in conjunction with one another, they collectively delineate a trajectory of individuals’ lives from youth to midlife. Therefore, these three films, as objects of research, provide a comprehensive view of what life might have been like for many ordinary people during these four decades.

### **The Filmmakers Zhang Yuan and Jiang Wen**

Zhang Yuan was born in Nanjing in 1963 and obtained his Bachelor of Arts in cinematography from Beijing Film Academy (北京电影学院) in 1989. At that time, the Chinese film industry was going through hard times: subject to national planning economics, it was shocked by the waves of commercialization and capitalization; profitability at the cinema box office went downward with the flourishing of TV series and videotapes; hence, many national

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<sup>20</sup> Xinmin Liu, “Retributive Memories: Self-Realization in the Post-Mao Era,” in *Signposts of Self-Realization: Evolution, Ethics and Sociality in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 227.

film studios went bankrupted.<sup>21</sup> In this context, Zhang Yuan declined a the state-allocated job offer from August First Film Studio (八一电影制片厂), which has the People's Liberation Army background, and instead opted for the unprecedented path of producing independent films. Rather than working for the national studio, Zhang Yuan sought funding on his own and build a production team by himself. He produced his first film *Mama* (妈妈) in 1990, which is regarded as “the first genuinely independent movie made in China since the communists took power.”<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to the Fifth Generation of filmmakers who had been established and enjoyed worldwide acclaim, Zhang Yuan and his contemporaries seemed not to be favored by the Chinese film industry environment from the late 1980s to early 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Thus, some of them changed career, and some joined in the groups of stray artists in Beijing and wandered at “the margins of the film circle.”<sup>24</sup> Zhang Yuan was one of the latter. As an independent filmmaker, he soon carved out a niche outside China. In 1991, without any governmental approval, he took *Mama* to Three Continents Festival in Nantes, France, and it won the Special Jury Prize. According to Dai Jinhua, *Mama* was presented at more than twenty international film festivals and Zhang Yuan became the third best-known filmmaker in the western, following the Fifth

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<sup>21</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing; zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化 1978-1998, 393-94.

<sup>22</sup> Berenice Reynaud, “Zhang Yuan’s Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese ‘Bastards’,” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the 21st Century*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 264.

<sup>23</sup> The Fifth Generation of filmmakers refer to the directors who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s. The representative figures include Zhang Yimou (张艺谋, b.1950), Chen Kaige (陈凯歌, b.1952), and Tian Zhuangzhuang (田壮壮, b.1952), etc. These directors’s films tend towards representing Chinese history and national allegory, such as *Huang tudi* 黄土地 (Yellow Earth, 1984) and *Hong Gaoliao* 红高粱 (Red Sorghum, 1988). The rise of the Fifth Generation brought Chinese films to the Western audience and the filmmakers won various awards in major international film festivals from the late 1980s to 1990s.

<sup>24</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing; zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化 1978-1998, 394.

Generation directors Zhang Yimou (张艺谋, b. 1950) and Chen Kaige (陈凯歌, b. 1952)<sup>25</sup>.

Therefore, Berenice Reynaud reads *Mama* as “the harbinger of a new cinematic movement, identified as the ‘Sixth Generation.’”<sup>26</sup> Dai Jinhua points to Zhang Yuan’s *Mama* as a breakthrough and the “first glimmer” of the Sixth Generation.<sup>27</sup> Since *Mama*, the Sixth Generation filmmakers have created a new mode: low cost of production; making the films underground; and showing the films in various international film festivals.<sup>28</sup>

*Mama* tells the story of the suffering and struggling of a mother of a mentally handicapped child. This theme typifies the works of the Sixth Generation directors: the films often focus on the urban marginal folks, for example, the disabled, the alcoholics, and the homeless, and at the same time, they represent their vexing and hopeless living conditions.<sup>29</sup> Following the same theme, Zhang Yuan produced his second independent film *Beijing zazhong* 北京杂种 (Beijing bastard) in 1993, which explores Beijing underground rock music groups and the urban youth subculture. This film won the Honorable Mention Award of Locarno International Film Festival in 1993 and the Special Jury Prize in the Singapore International Film Festival in 1994. The government became alarmed by the transgressive and ambiguous features

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<sup>25</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing; zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化 1978-1998, 397.

<sup>26</sup> Berenice Reynaud, “Zhang Yuan’s Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese ‘Bastards,’” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the 21st Century*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 264. The Six Generation of filmmakers refer to the directors who were admitted to Beijing Film Academy in the late 1980s and started filmmaking from 1990s. The typical representative include Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke (贾樟柯, b.1970), Wang Xiaoshuai (王小帅, b.1966), Lou Ye (娄烨, b. 1965), etc.

<sup>27</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing; zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化 1978-1998, 394

<sup>28</sup> Zhan Shaoji 詹绍姬, “Tizhiwai” he “dixia” de duli zitai—cong “wanshengdai” zuojia he “diliudai daoyan” tanqi “体制外”和“地下”的独立姿态——从“晚生代”作家和“第六代导演”谈起 [The Independent Gesture of “Outside the System” and “Underground”—From Younger Generation Writers and the Sixth Generation Filmmakers], *Dianying pingjie* 电影评介, no. 15 (2012):7-9.

<sup>29</sup> For more information and description, see Deirdre Sabina Knight, “Madness and Disability in Contemporary Chinese Film,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 27, no. 2 (2006): 93-103.



of the films of the Sixth Generation, as well as the fact that the screening of their films in overseas film festivals was undertaken without government sanction. In March, 1994, the Ministry of Film, Television and Culture announced that Zhang Yuan and other six filmmakers and screenwriters, including Zhang Yuan's wife Ning Dai (宁岱, b.1958), the Sixth Generation directors Wang Xiaoshuai (王小帅, b. 1966) and He Jianjun (何建军, b.1960), and the Fifth Generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang (田壮壮, b. 1952), were prohibited from filmmaking. However, Zhang Yuan did not stop his cinematic production. Continuing his method of representing minorities living on the margins of society, in 1996 he directed the documentary film *Er zi* 儿子 (Sons) which focuses on the problem of alcoholism and how it destroys a family. In the same year, his feature film *Donggong, xigong* 东宫, 西宫 (East palace, west palace) was shot in China, and then smuggled to France for post-production. This film is viewed as the "first film with an overt gay theme" from mainland China.<sup>30</sup> *East Palace, West Palace* was screened on the international circuit and won three awards (Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Special Mention) at the Mar del Plata Film Festival in Argentina in 1996; one year latter, it was screened in the Un Certain Regard competition at the Cannes Film Festival.

In the late 1990s, China's film industry started to reform. Market mechanisms were introduced to the film production and undermined the prohibition and restriction on the Sixth Generation directors. In 1998, Zhang Yuan lifted the ban and cooperated with Xi'an Film Studio (西安电影制片厂) to produce *Guonian Huijia* 过年回家 (Seventeen years). It was the first film

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<sup>30</sup> Geremie Barmé, "Packaged Dissent" in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 196.

directed by Zhang Yuan that was allowed to be released in mainland Chinese theatres.<sup>31</sup> Because of this film, Zhang Yuan was dismissed by some critics for giving up his “Bad Boy” image as well as pioneering status, and surrendering to the aesthetic specifications of the Chinese authorities.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, it is interesting to learn how Zhang Yuan himself regards the relationship between himself and the authorities as revealed in an interview with Chris Berry. When Berry asked why the governmental prohibition in 1994 did not stop him, Zhang Yuan joked and used the characters in *East Palace, West Palace* as a metaphor to respond: “I love my country and I love the Party, just like A Lan [a gay man who is accused of criminal by the police] in my film loves that policeman.”<sup>33</sup> It seems that Zhang Yuan did not hate the authorities; on the contrary, he held complicated emotions toward them. Based on his description, we can speculate that Zhang Yuan did not view his underground filmmaking as a betrayal or revolution, but a helpless choice. In another interview with Qiu Huadong (邱华栋, b.1969), when talked about the subject turned to the situation he faced after *East Palace, West Palace* with it being banned in China, Zhang Yuan said, “I was upset because my films could not be shown to the Chinese audience.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Zhang Yuan entertained hopes of gaining access to the domestic audience and market. Therefore, it is not hard to understand his return to the official cultural system in 1998.

In fact, since the late 1990s, the majority of Sixth Generation directors began to move from the positions on the margin to the centers and worked on mainstream productions with the

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<sup>31</sup> Zhang Yuan, Michael Berry, “Zhang Yuan: Working up a Sweat in a Celluloid Sauna,” in *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*, ed. Michael Berry (NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 144.

<sup>32</sup> Derek Elley, “Seventeen Years Review,” *Variety*, September 13, 1999, <https://variety.com/1999/film/reviews/seventeen-years-1117752127/>

<sup>33</sup> Chris Berry, “East Palace, West Palace: Staging Gay Life in China,” *Jump Cut*, no.42 (1998): 84-98

<sup>34</sup> Qiu Huadong, Zhang Yuan 邱华栋, 张元, “Zhang Yuan: cong *Mama* dao *Dada*” 张元: 从《妈妈》到《达达》 [Zhang Yuan: from *Mama* to *Dada*] *Shouhuo* 收获, 2010 (3): 65-73.

national film studios. In this context, Wang Xiaoshuai claims that when he returned to the official system, “it was the first time that I felt like an absolute filmmaker.”<sup>35</sup> Since 2000, commercial films have occupied an important place in Zhang Yuan’s cinematic works and he started to collaborate with the popular fiction writer and screenwriter Wang Shuo. In 2002, Zhang Yuan’s film *Wo ai ni* 我爱你 (I love you), adapted from Wang Shuo’s *Guobayin jiusi* 过把瘾就死 (Die satisfied, 1992), became the year’s top-grossing movie. In 2006, he directed *Little Red Flowers* which was based on Wang Shuo’s semi-autobiographical novel *Could Be Beautiful*.

In the genealogy of the Chinese directors, Jiang Wen seems difficult to situate. He has his own film style and tendencies, neither belonging to the Fifth Generation directors’ introspection with respect to history, nor to the Sixth Generation directors’ focusing on the disadvantaged and marginal persons. Hence, some reviews consider him as a “6.5<sup>th</sup> generation film director.”<sup>36</sup> Before Jiang Wen became a director, he had been an accomplished and well-known actor. He was born in 1963 in Nanjing, with the name Jiang Xiaojun and a nickname Mahou (马猴, Big Monkey), the same name as Ma Xiaojun in *In the Heat of the Sun*. Jiang Wen’s father was a military officer traveling all over the country to work temporarily and until in 1973, his family finally settled down in Beijing. Jiang Wen grew up in a Beijing military compound as a privileged youth like Wang Shuo. In 1980, he was admitted to the Central Academy of Drama (中央戏剧学院). After graduation in 1984, he was assigned as an actor to China Youth Art

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<sup>35</sup> Zhan Shaoji 詹绍姬, “Tizhiwai” he “dixia” de duli zitai—cong “wanshengdai” zuojia he “diliudai daoyan” tanqi “体制外”和“地下”的独立姿态——从“晚生代”作家和“第六代导演”谈起 [The Independent Gesture of “Outside the System” and “Underground”—From Younger Generation Writers and the Sixth Generation Filmmakers], *Dianying pingjie* 电影评介, no. 15 (2012):7-9.

<sup>36</sup> Basai Dianying 巴塞电影, “Jiang Wen shuyu dijidai daoyan?” 姜文属于第几代导演? [What generation dose Jiang Wen belong to?], *Wukong*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.wukong.com/question/6433888677914476802/>.

Institute (中国青年艺术剧院). Next year, Jiang Wen made his cinematic debut in Chen Jialin's (陈家林, b.1934) *Modai huanghou* 末代皇后 (The last empress) by playing the role of the last Emperor of the Qing dynasty Puyi (溥仪, 1906-1967). In 1986, Jiang Wen starred in *Furong zhen* 芙蓉镇 (Hibiscus town) by the renowned filmmaker Xie Jin (谢晋, 1923-2008). For his performance in this film, Jiang Wen won the China's Hundred Flowers Awards for the Best Actor. In 1987, he was featured in Zhang Yimou's first film *Hong Gaoliang* 红高粱 (Red sorghum) which earned the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival in 1988. It is because of this film that the director Zhang Yimou, the actress Gong Li 巩俐 (b.1965), and the actor Jiang Wen drew international attention. After that, Jiang Wen starred in the productions for the small screen. In the early 1990s, he became popular nationwide for his role in the television series *Beijingren zai niuyue* 北京人在纽约 (Beijinger in New York) which garnered massive television ratings in China. In the same period, Jiang Wen's friend and neighbor Wang Shuo's novella *Wild Beast* was published in the magazine *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest). He gave a copy of the issue as a gift to Jiang Wen and the latter was instantly fascinated by the story. In 1992, Jiang Wen set out to adapt it into his first film *In the Heat of the Sun*.<sup>37</sup>

Since *In the Heat of the Sun*, Jiang Wen has a total of six films to his name as director. *In the Heat of the Sun* gave Jiang Wen the high profile he needed to establish his directorial career. Outside mainland China, the film was acclaimed in the Golden Horse Awards (Taiwan), the Venice Film Festival, Singapore and others; inside China, the film became a box office hit in 1994. The successful incorporation of the "sensitive topic," namely Cultural Revolution, in *In the*

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<sup>37</sup> For more descriptions and stories for the filming of *In the Heat of the Sun*, please see Jiang Wen, *Yibu dianying de dansheng* 一部电影的诞生 [How the film is produced], Shanghai: Changjiang Arts and Literature Publications 长江文艺出版社, 2005).

*Heat of the Sun*, encouraged Jiang Wen to take a bigger step in *Guzi laile* 鬼子来了 (Devils on the doorsteps, 2000), which is set during the War of Resistance Against Japan. However, it was hindered by censorship and Jiang Wen was banned by the government from directing.<sup>38</sup> In 2007, Jiang Wen was restored to his role as a filmmaker and brought to the audience his third work *Taiyang zhaochang shengqi* 太阳照常升起 (The sun also rises). However, the delirious and absurd aesthetic of the film proved too difficult for viewers to comprehend and appreciate, and hence it suffered a lukewarm commercial reception.<sup>39</sup> Three years later, Jiang Wen released his fourth film, also his first New Year's celebration commercial film: *Rang zidan fei* 让子弹飞 (Let the bullets fly), the first installment in his *Beiyang Trilogy* (北洋三部曲), which marked an impressive achievement on the box office. After only five days, *Let the Bullets Fly* had broken 200 million *yuan*.<sup>40</sup> In 2014 and 2018 respectively, Jiang Wen completed two other installments of the Trilogy: *Yibu zhiyao* 一步之遥 (Gone with the bullets) and *Xie bu ya zheng* 邪不压正 (The hidden man). Although these two films made fine box office performances, their controversy with the critics caused some reviewers to term them as “the decline of Jiang Wen.”<sup>41</sup>

Overall, in all six films directed by Jiang Wen, the most established and acclaimed one is *In the Heat of the Sun*. In an article analyzing *In the Heat of the Sun*, Liu Xinwu (刘心武, b. 1942) claimed that there are three different “worlds” in the Cultural Revolution: the first one is

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Gieselmann, “Chinese Cinema in the Post-Cold War Era and the Legacy of the Sino-Japanese War: Devils on the Doorstep and Purple Sunset,” in *Broken Narratives: Post-Cold War History and Identity in Europe and East Asia*, ed. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 57-84.

<sup>39</sup> Clifford Coonan, “Seventeen Years Review,” *Variety*, August 31, 2001, <https://variety.com/2007/film/features/wen-rises-with-sun-1117971198/>.

<sup>40</sup> Xiaoming Luo, “The Hopeless Bullet: On Let the Bullets Fly,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 7, no.3 (2013): 512-17.

<sup>41</sup> Qiang Liheng, 强立横, “Jiangshi ‘shiwei’—cong ‘Ye bu ya zheng’ de ‘moluo’ qiantankaiqu,” 姜氏“式微”——从《邪不压正》的“落寞”浅谈开去 [Jiang's decline: from the desolation of *The hidden man*], *Dazhong Wenyi* 大众文艺, 2018 (19): 163-64.

constructed by the advocates and activists who benefited from the political movement; the second one refers to the suppressed victims of the political persecution; and the third one belongs to the people who were forgotten or exiled from the former two worlds. Unquestionably, Jiang Wen and Wang Shuo are both from the third world. Wang Shuo provides a story of their youth and Jiang Wen suffuses the character Ma Xiaojun with the memories of his own youth. Liu Xinwu states, “After you watch *In the Heat of the Sun*, you will have a key to comprehend all Wang Shuo’s writings [...] these youth coming from the compound are fully fledged and impressive cultural phenomena.”<sup>42</sup>

## Overview of Existing Scholarship

Currently, the resonances that exist between the above three films adapted from Wang Shuo’s novels have not garnered the attention of any scholar, although some discuss the cinematic adaptations of Wang Shuo’s writing. For example, in “Filming Marginal Youth: The ‘Beyond’ Syndrome in the Post-Socialist City,” one chapter of *Lightness of Being in China: Adaptation and Discursive Figuration in Cinema and Theater*, Harry Kuoshu examines the compatibility of Wang Shuo’s writing and some filmmakers such as Jiang Wen and Mi Jishan (米家山 b.1947).<sup>43</sup> The combination of Wang Shuo’s defiant playfulness in writing and the “rebellious psyche” (叛逆心理) of both young urbanite cinema viewers and the Fifth Generation directors, according to Kuoshu, leads to their marketability. In keeping with Kuoshu’s thesis,

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<sup>42</sup> Liu Xinwu 刘心武, “‘Dayuan’ li de haizimen” “大院”里的孩子们 [The children in the “Compound”], *Dushu* 读书, 1995 (3): 124-130.

<sup>43</sup> Harry Kuoshu, “Filming Marginal Youth: The ‘Beyond’ Syndrome in the Post-Socialist City,” in *Lightness of Being In China: Adaptation and Discursive Figuration In Cinema and Theater* (New York: P. Lang, 1999) 123-152.

most of the scholarship discussing the adaptations of Wang Shuo's fiction focuses on the "rebellion" theme in these films and its place in the mass culture of the post-Mao period.

Between the three films, *In the Heat of the Sun* has drawn more attention than the other two and a number of scholars have already subjected it to close analysis. One of the most important themes addressed in some of these studies is how *In the Heat of the Sun* reflects and revisits the Cultural Revolution. In the chapter "Totalitarian Nostalgia" in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, Geremie Barmé draws an analogy between European "totalitarian nostalgia" and "Cultural Revolutionary nostalgia." He regards *In the Heat of the Sun* as a sign of "a nostalgia for a style of thought and public discourse" and also a memory of the "sense of lost innocence."<sup>44</sup> In his article "Memory at a Standstill: 'Street-Smart History' in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*," Yomi Braester takes issues with Barmé's conception of nostalgia, arguing that the film parodies Maoist discourse in the Cultural Revolution. Braester emphasizes how Jiang Wen uses the power of cinema to reshape the past. He explores the relations between cinematic narration and memories of the historical events in *In the Heat of the Sun*, observing that memory functions as "another form of myth-making" in this film. Braester calls the experience of Ma Xiaojun and his generation "street-smart history" which contests the grand rhetoric of "Maohistory."<sup>45</sup> Tonglin Lu is equally fascinated by the relationship between *In the Heat of the Sun* and the history of the Cultural Revolution. In "Fantasy and Ideology in a Chinese Film: A Žižekian Reading of the Cultural Revolution," Lu employs *In the Heat of the Sun* as a case study, borrowing and extending the theory of Slavoj Žižek to examine the

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<sup>44</sup> Geremie Barmé, "Totalitarian Nostalgia" in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 317-324.

<sup>45</sup> Yomi Braester, "Memory at A Standstill: 'Street-smart History' in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*." *Screen* 42, no. 4 (2001): 350-362.

persistence of collective frenzy in the Cultural Revolution.<sup>46</sup>

Louise Williams contends that *In the Heat of the Sun* detaches the filmmaker's youthful nostalgia and individual narrative from the official histories of the Cultural Revolution, reassessing the film from the perspective of gendered identity. In the article "Men in the Mirror: Questioning Masculine Identities in *In the Heat of the Sun*," Williams argues that this kind of detachment questions "masculine identities," and offers a close reading of Ma Xiaojun's actions in front of the mirror to explain how Jiang Wen deconstructs the heroic or masculine rhetoric in the film.<sup>47</sup> Wendy Larson in her chapter "Extracting Revolutionary Spirit: Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* and Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*" compares *In the Heat of the Sun* with Anchee Min's (闵安琪 b.1957) *Red Azalea*, an English language novel set in the Cultural Revolution as well, and highlighting the revolutionary spirit in both works. Jiang Wen's film creates an "emotional and spiritual intensity and future-oriented direction," Larson advances, which possibly "endlessly" repeats within the youth of the nation, while the conclusion to Anchee Min's story implies that revolutionary spirit is extricated from the fettered environment in China, becoming free to fly across the sea and root itself "outside of the national or cultural borders of China."<sup>48</sup>

In contrast to the above scholars, Ying Bao shifts the focus from the Cultural Revolution to the Tian'anmen Protests in 1989. Her view is that as a film of the post-1989 trauma period, *In the Heat of the Sun* is a powerful tool for affectively remembering and critically reflecting upon

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<sup>46</sup> Tonglin Lu, "Fantasy and Ideology in a Chinese Film: A Žižekian Reading of the Cultural Revolution," in *positions: east asia cultures critique* 12, no. 2 (2004): 539-564.

<sup>47</sup> Louise Williams, "Men in the Mirror: Questioning Masculine Identities in *In the Heat of the Sun*," *China Information* 17, no. 1 (2003): 92-106.

<sup>48</sup> Wendy Larson, "Extracting Revolutionary Spirit: Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* and Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*," in *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 155-196.



“the unspeakable and the invisible.”<sup>49</sup> In “Retributive Memories: Self-Realization in the Post-Mao Era,” one chapter of his *Signposts of Self-Realization: Evolution, Ethics and Sociality in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, Xinmin Liu stresses the “everyday” in films. He underscores the memories of the quotidian which “carve out an unusual enclave” for the youth in *In the Heat of the Sun*.<sup>50</sup> With a similar focus on the individual, Dai Jinhua’s argument illuminates the fact that *In the Heat of the Sun* gives voice to the narcissism, sorrow, and brutality of the youth in the revolutionary period.<sup>51</sup> Taking an art historian’s perspective, Jerome Silbergeld draws attention to the image of the body in *In the Heat of the Sun*. In his book *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen*, Silbergeld uses cinema and photography, political history, and Chinese rhetorical traditions to explain how Jiang Wen renders the bodies of Ma Xiaojun and his generation visible.<sup>52</sup>

It was not until recently that scholarship in English has turned its attention to *Little Red Flowers*. In his article “‘Little Red Flowers,’ or a Nightmare Gone Awry, a Coming of Age Movie for a New Generation in China,” Mahlon Meyer contends that *Little Red Flowers* reflects the childhood experience of the “abandoned generation” of the 40-plus [now 50-plus] people like Zhang Yuan. According to Meyer, the film reveals the coming of age of the “leftover” children in the kindergarten, when their parents, as banished intellectuals, were sent to the countryside. As a film that “bows to government demands for propaganda,” Meyer feels that *Little Red Flowers* represents nostalgic and fond images of the Maoist Era. With the emphasis on the children’s bare

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<sup>49</sup> Ying Bao, “Remembering the Invisible: Soundscape and Memory of 1989,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 3 (2013): 207-224.

<sup>50</sup> Xinmin Liu, “Retributive Memories: Self-Realization in the Post-Mao Era,” in *Signposts of Self-Realization: Evolution, Ethics and Sociality in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 224-261.

<sup>51</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing; zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998* 雾中风景: 中国电影文化 1978-1998, 446-451.

<sup>52</sup> Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 15-68.

bodies and disturbing behavior, the film betrays a subtle eroticism which implies some unsavory memories of the sexuality of the “abandoned generation.”<sup>53</sup> However, Meyer’s argument treating *Little Red Flowers* merely as propaganda is oversimplified. I suggest that Zhang Yuan criticizes the narrations in which children’s bodies are utilized for propagandistic display in the Maoist Era, rather than casting them as eroticism. There is one other English language article on this film by Kiu-wai Chu. In his article “Displacing Red Childhood: Representation of Childhood during Mao’s Era in *Little Red Flowers*,” Chu argues that the filmmakers of the Post-1960s Generation including Zhang Yuan depoliticize and romanticize childhood in their works to describe the more “universal conditions” that people experienced as children, such as conformity, alienation, and loneliness.<sup>54</sup>

Currently, there is even less scholarship on the film *Papa*, but there are some interesting Chinese articles that discuss the Wang Shuo’s novel *I am Your Papa*, which help provide a context for the film *Papa*. Ding Jin (丁进) in his article “Cong fucizixiao dao jiabian—Wang Wenxing de *Jiabian* yu Wang Shuo de *Wo shi ni baba zhi bijiao*”<sup>55</sup> 从“父慈子孝”到“家变”——王文兴“家变”与王朔“我是你爸爸”之比较 (From “the father is affectionate and the son is dutiful” to “family catastrophe”: a comparison between Wang Wenxing’s *Family Catastrophe* and Wang Shuo’s *I am Your Papa*) compares Wang Shuo’s novel with Wang Wenxing’s *Jiabian*

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<sup>53</sup> Mahlon D Meyer, “‘Little Red Flowers,’ or a Nightmare Gone Awry, a Coming of Age Movie for a New Generation in China,” *Asian Cinema* 17, no. 2 (2006): 182-185.

<sup>54</sup> Kiu-wai Chu, “Displaying Red Childhood: Representation of Childhood during Mao’s Era in *Little Red Flowers*,” in *Lost and Othered Children in Contemporary Cinema*, eds. Debbie Olson and Andrew Scahill (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 175-197.

<sup>55</sup> Ding Jin 丁进, “Cong fucizixiao dao jiabian: Wang Wenxing de *Jiabian* yu Wang Shuo de *wo shi ni baba zhi bijiao*” 从“父慈子孝”到“家变”——王文兴《家变》与王朔《我是你爸爸》之比较 [From “the father is affectionate and the son is dutiful” to “family catastrophe”: a comparison between Wang Wenxing’s *Family Catastrophe* and Wang Shuo’s *I am Your Papa*], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论, no.2 (1995): 119-123.

家变 (Family catastrophe). Ding reveals how both works express the betrayal of traditional Chinese family values and promote a modern system of values, although he sees Wang Shuo as milder in tone, and Wang Wenxing the more radical of the two. In addition, in his article “Zai hei’an de zhamen houmian” 在黑暗的闸门后面 [Behind the dark gate], Tang Xiaobing (唐小兵) relates *I am Your Papa* to the work of Lu Xun and the Chinese New Cultural Movement in the early twentieth century. He pays special attention to the “heroic dream” and other mental activities of the father in Wang Shuo’s writing, maintaining that in contrast to Lu Xun’s expectations for modernization, the disillusionment of the father-son relationship demonstrates the dystopian underside modernization in the 1990s.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵, “Zai hei’an de zhamen houmian” 在黑暗的闸门后面 [Behind the dark gate], *Dushu* 读书, no. 9 (1992): 24-28.

## Chapter One

### Disciplining the Child's Body in *Little Red Flowers*

Many generations of Chinese people are familiar with the phrase “flowers of the motherland” (祖国的花朵), a metaphorical description of children flourishing in communist China. However, the director Zhang Yuan (b.1963) uses flower imagery in a less positive manner in the title of his 2006 black-comedy film *Little Red Flowers*. The film tells the story of the daily life of a four-year-old boy, Fang Qiangqiang, and his interactions with his kindergarten teacher and classmates. Unlike other films with the same theme, *Little Red Flowers* chooses children's bodies as a special entry to represent the lives of children and the overall status of childhood in the Revolutionary Era.

*Little Red Flowers* is adapted from Wang Shuo's semiautobiographical novel, *Kan shang qu hen mei* (看上去很美, Could be beautiful), which Zhang Yuan characterizes as “displaying a child world through the view of a child.” Zhang Yuan further says of his film: “Everyone goes through their childhood, but not everyone can remember it. Even if we can remember it, in most cases, the memory is fragmentary. Wang Shuo helps us recall childhood [in his novel], and I hope to trace those fading memories through my film.”<sup>57</sup> Hence, some scholars have considered *Little Red Flowers* a “smiling” or happy film that takes a “humorous and nostalgic look at the past,”<sup>58</sup> and that Zhang Yuan intends to “depoliticize” and “romanticize” the lost childhood of

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<sup>57</sup> Zhang Yuan 张元 and Huang Bing 黄斌, “*Kan shangqu henmei* daoyan Zhang Yuan: yong haizi de shijiao kanshijie” “看上去很美” 导演张元：用孩子的视角看世界 [*Little Red Flowers*: observing the world from the viewpoint of children], Sina 新浪, May 31, 2005, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2004-05-31/0802403811.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Mahlon D Meyer, “‘Little Red Flowers,’ or a Nightmare Gone Awry, a Coming of Age Movie for a New Generation in China,” *Asian Cinema* 17, no. 2 (2006): 182-184.

the Post-1960s Generation.<sup>59</sup>

I argue that it is an oversimplification to treat *Little Red Flowers* as merely a nostalgic depiction of children and childhood during the Revolutionary Era. It cannot be regarded as a “children’s film,” due in part to its use of idiosyncratic music, disturbing color tones, and distorting close-up shots. Instead, it is a film that represents the experience of children or childhood to adults. Furthermore, in comparison to other films produced in the Maoist Era which represent the lives of children at that time, it is clearly the case that Zhang Yuan rethinks and casts doubts on child-rearing and childhood in the Revolutionary period, particularly the use of physical discipline on children’s bodies.

The social analysis of Michel Foucault illuminates us the way Zhang Yuan carries out his critique of child-rearing in the Maoist Era. While Foucault takes the ideal figure of the soldiers in the early seventeenth century in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) as a prime example for his analysis of discipline, Zhang Yuan depicts the ideal figures of kindergarten children in the early years of the Communist era in *Little Red Flowers* with special attention to the discipline of youth at this time. Focusing on the phenomenon of disciplining children’s bodies, in this chapter I explore Zhang Yuan’s film *Little Red Flowers* from three main perspectives: (1) how the disciplinary system works in the kindergarten; (2) how the children’s body is displayed for propagandistic and nationalistic purposes in the film produced in Maoist Era, and how Zhang Yuan disdains this kind of display; (3) and, finally, how the children view and react against the disciplinary system.

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<sup>59</sup> Kiu-wai Chu, “Displaying Red Childhood: Representation of Childhood during Mao’s Era in *Little Red Flowers*,” 178.

## ***Little Red Flowers: A System of Discipline***

At the beginning of the film, four-year-old Fang Qiangqiang (方枪枪) is left by his father at a boarding kindergarten. Against the background of Qiangqiang's loud crying, his father explains to the headteacher, Miss Li, that Qiangqiang's mother is working at a government office outside Beijing and he is working as an air force pilot, and therefore they are too busy to take care of their son Qiangqiang. Qiangqiang has to be sent to this boarding kindergarten where he remains even on weekends. During the conversation, the camera turns from Qiangqiang's crying face to the classroom in which dozens of noisy young children are playing. In the next sequence, the camera shows the exterior of the kindergarten: a noble red-walled enclosed complex reminiscent of the Forbidden City. The tall walls isolate the young children from the outside world, and the kindergarten becomes a closed field. Compared to the kindergarten's ancient noble imperial architecture, the children inside seem young and insignificant. Qiangqiang is positioned in such a way within the enclosure as to personify Foucault's characterization of the environmental conditions required for discipline. Foucault regards this kind of enclosure, which includes schools and military camps, as "the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony."<sup>60</sup>

The disciplining starts with Qiangqiang's body. Miss Li cuts off Qiangqiang's pigtail, justifying this by saying: "This is how a clean and tidy boy should look!" and "What I am doing is for your benefit!" When Qiangqiang runs away out of unwillingness and fear, Miss Li encourages all of the children to chase and catch him. At this time, the camera shifts to a close-up shot of Miss Li's large pair of scissors, creating tension in the viewer and marking the first

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<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 74.

time in the film that discipline is embodied in a physical object. On the one hand, the scissors are a tool to regulate people's appearance; on the other hand, they are also a threat of violence against the human's body. All the children in the class are required to have the same haircut: girls wear their hair in braids; boys wear short hair. These sanctioned haircuts represent a sense of order and stability in such an enclosure, while other hairstyles are regarded as "deviant, anti-mainstream, and immoral."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, cutting off Qiangqiang's pigtail means removing his heterogeneity, ensuring the uniformity of himself and his body with all the other children, and signifying that he has become a recruit in this collective.

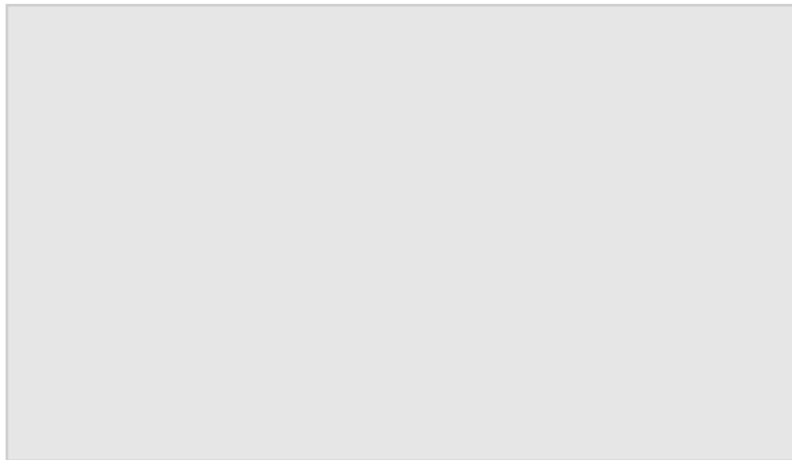


Figure 1.1: Miss Li holds a large pair of scissors to cut off Fang Qiangqiang's pigtail.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 00:04:42)

After Miss Li cuts off Qiangqiang's pigtail, another teacher, Miss Tang, gives him a little red flower made from paper in order to console the crying boy. This is the second instance of a material embodiment of discipline. However, in this case, the little red flower is not only a

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<sup>61</sup> Wang Minan 汪民安, *Shenti kongjian yu houxian daixing* 身体, 空间与后现代性 [Body, space, and postmodernity], (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 江苏人民出版社: 2005), 74.

metaphor but part of a reward system meant to regulate the children’s behavior at the kindergarten. The teachers assign five daily tasks to the children every day, such as dressing themselves in the morning or washing hands before meals. After fulfilling each task, the child is awarded one little red flower. If a child receives five flowers each day for a week, he/she will be appointed as the class leader for the following week. The children are sorted into a “hierarchic”<sup>62</sup> formation based on the number of little red flowers each one earns for completing various tasks.

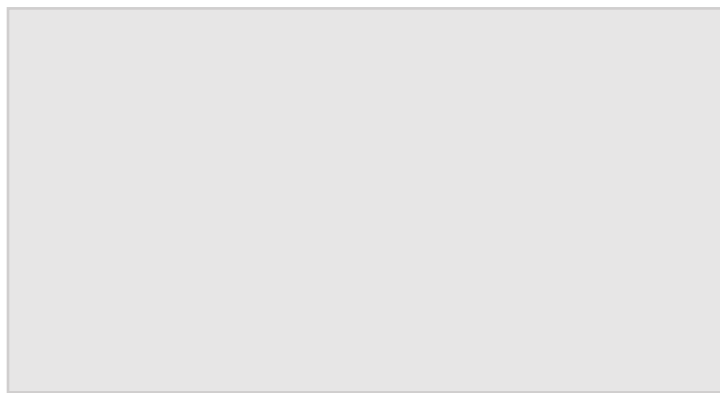


Figure 1.2: A table on the white board recording the little red flowers earned by the children.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 00:15:27)

A table on the whiteboard records the number of little red flowers earned by each child, and calculates the children’s merits and demerits in order to assess their performance. The table depicts a hierarchical structure with the well-performing children at the top, followed by the average children, and the under-performing children at the bottom. Foucault describes discipline as an art of ranking that “individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations.”<sup>63</sup> The little red

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<sup>62</sup> Kiu-wai Chu, “Displaying Red Childhood: Representation of Childhood during Mao’s Era in *Little Red Flowers*,” 185.

<sup>63</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 145.



flower system encourages the children to adapt their behavior to school regulations so that they may ascend to a higher position; however, it also boosts competition among the children and leads to them informing on each other. Other students loudly report Qiangqiang's misbehavior five times during the film, including such examples as "Miss! Fang Qiangqiang wet his bed again!" or "Miss! Fang Qiangqiang doesn't wash his hand before eating!" As a result, Qiangqiang is deprived of several opportunities to earn little red flowers.

At first, Qiangqiang is confused by the prohibitions and constraints at the kindergarten. At supper on his first day, Qiangqiang seems baffled when Miss Li tells the children that they should raise their left hands if they want more rice or their right hands for more soup. Qiangqiang leaves the group of children and sits alone at a distance from them to observe the teacher admonishing a boy, Fafa, for urinating during the meal, and deducting a little red flower from him. Gradually, Qiangqiang familiarizes himself with the rules of the little red flower reward system, and tries to adapt to those rules. Once after the bathroom training in the morning, Qiangqiang persists in using the toilet when all the other children have left. As Miss Li asks him what he was doing, Qiangqiang murmurs in response: "I haven't pooped yet.... Will you take back my little red flower?" To Qiangqiang's surprise, Miss Li does not punish him, and even promises that if he moves his bowels successfully tomorrow, she will award him a little red flower. As he returns to his seat in the classroom, he stares at the whiteboard and imagines, with a smile, five little red flowers appearing under his name.

Nevertheless, Qiangqiang gradually realizes that no matter how hard he works, he still cannot meet the teachers' expectations or earn little red flowers. In the classroom, he asks with chagrin his teachers twice "Why do I not have any little red flowers?" To assuage his disappointment, the gentle Miss Tang suggests to Miss Li, "Since Fang Qiangqiang has already

made some progress, why don't we give him a little red flower?" However, the strict Miss Li refuses, insisting "No, we do not want to spoil him." A few days later, Qiangqiang picks up a little red flower outside the classroom by chance. Recognizing the value of the little red flower, he gives it to the little girl he likes. However, she refuses it, casts it aside, and leaves him alone. Lonely and confused, he picks the little red flower up from the ground.

What further confuses Qiangqiang is that he suddenly realizes that the rules for obtaining little red flowers are not fixed, illustrating the irony and fragility of the kindergarten disciplinary system in the face of the hierarchy of the adult world. One afternoon, Wang Ruohai's father visits the kindergarten and wants to pick up his son. Miss Li does not grant his request until Principal Kong introduces him to the teacher as the Head of Logistics, an eminent military rank. Her expressionless demeanor abruptly switches to a smile and she begins to praise Ruohai's intelligence profusely. When Ruohai's father notices that his son and another child, Fang Qiangqiang have the fewest little red flowers on the whiteboard, Miss Li prevaricates and responds that each of the two boys will receive a little red flower later for their good behavior that day. Thus, Qiangqiang is awarded the first little red flower in his life.

As the worst-performing child in the kindergarten, Qiangqiang is criticized by the teachers and has trouble integrating with any group of children. Gradually, he is ignored and becomes an outcast. In order to gain attention, he becomes a troublemaker, wetting his bed, hitting his classmates, destroying toy blocks, and even cursing Miss Tang. As punishment, Qiangqiang is kept in dark confinement by the teachers and isolated from all the other children, who treat him as if he were invisible. He continues to cause trouble just to attract other people's attention, such as intentionally stepping out of line and asking the others, "Go report to the teachers that I am out of line!" No one responds to him, and the children just continue walking,

indifferent to him. In this scene, Qiangqiang finally becomes a complete loner in the collective.

### **The Child's Body as Propaganda: Display in the Revolutionary Era**

In *Little Red Flowers*, one of Fang Qiangqiang's greatest challenges is learning how to dress and undress himself. Miss Li arranges for some students to stand in front of the room to model this task. The first child to do this is Yu Qianqian, the teachers' favorite, who has earned the most little red flowers. She is asked to stand in the middle of all the children and demonstrate to Fang Qiangqiang how to take off his clothes. She is eager to perform perfectly, but her eagerness causes her to make a mess of the effort, prompting the others to giggle at her. The second is Qiangqiang, whom Miss Li directs to provide a negative example. Qiangqiang tries hard to take off his pullover, which is apparently too small for the circumference of his head. The children watch his clumsy actions and break out in a riot of laughter while Miss Li just stands idly by and tells him, "No one will help you." The teachers ignore his frustration and helplessness, not caring why he cannot undress himself but forcing him to do so anyway. Qianqian's and Qiangqiang's bodies become sites of the results of discipline, with Qianqian setting a positive example and Qiangqiang a negative one.

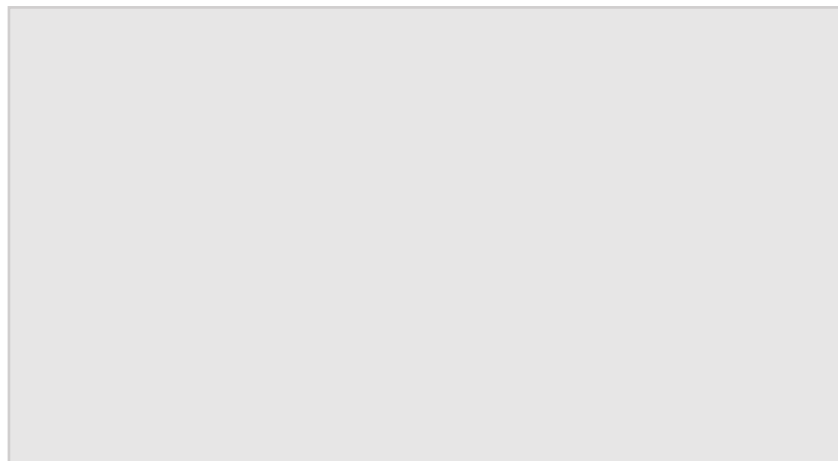


Figure 1.3: Yu Qianqian (the girl on the right) is asked to model proper undressing.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 00:21:20)

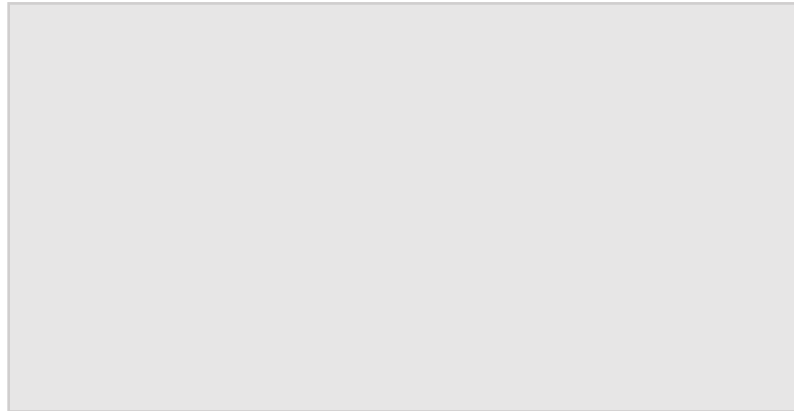


Figure 1.4: Fang Qiangqiang stands in the middle and practices undressing under the gaze of all the children, the teachers, and the film audience.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 00:23:02)

In addition to developing each child's self-managing skills, the requirement for dressing/undressing oneself promotes the value of "labor" (劳动) and the ethics of "do my affairs by myself" (自己的事自己做), both of which were widely propagated during the revolutionary era. During the wartime era, children were required to work on the basis of their age and not rely too much on the adults who were preoccupied with military campaigns, as discussed in Xu Lanjun's article "Laodong yu Jiaoyu: 'Xiangcun Ertong' de Faxian he Zhanshi Bianqu Haitong de Kangzhan Xuanchuan Shijian 劳动与教育: "乡村儿童" 的发现和战时边区孩童的抗战宣传实践 [Labour and Education: The Discovery of "Countryside Children" and the Propaganda of Children in the Border Area during Wartime]. Xu Lanjun produces considerable research on the

relations between the children's work and education in the communist area during the war. For example, she points out that Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* depicts children who take care of themselves and work as grooms or orderlies in Yan'an.<sup>64</sup> According to Xu's research, labor was one of the most important values instilled in children, because it could help them to develop a collective consciousness as "red children" (红色儿童). Through working, the children could develop both physically and mentally, and acquire "thoughtful minds and industrious hands."<sup>65</sup>

The idea of promoting labor among children is also reflected in many cultural artifacts produced during the Revolutionary Period, such as the Maoist coming-of-age film *Xiangyangyuan de gushi* 向阳院的故事 (The story of the Sunny-yard),<sup>66</sup> which illustrates the core value proposed by Mao, "Education must serve the proletariat and at the same time, combine with labor and production."<sup>67</sup> The film tells the story of four pupils living in a Sunny-yard, who are organized by Grandpa Shi, a member of the Chinese Communist Party, to work voluntarily on a road construction site during their summer vacation in 1964. An undercover bourgeois enemy, Hu Shouli, plans to undermine their activities by interfering with the children's work ethic and indoctrinating them with bourgeois ideas. Grandpa Shi encourages the children to become involved in collective manual labor with the masses, while Hu goads the

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<sup>64</sup> Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China: The Classic Account of the birth of Chinese Communism* (Atlantic Books, 2017), 190.

<sup>65</sup> Xu Lanjun 徐兰君, "Laodong yu jiaoyu: 'xiangcun ertong' de faxian he zhanshi bianqu haitong de kangzhan xuanchuan shijian," 劳动与教育: "乡村儿童"的发现和战时边区孩童的抗战宣传实践 [Labour and education: the discovery of "countryside children" and the propaganda of children in the border area during wartime]," in *Ertong yu zhanzheng: guozu, jiaoyu ji dazhong wenhua* 儿童与战争: 国族、教育及大众文化 [Children and war: nation, education, and mass culture], (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 北京: 北京大学出版社: 2015), 64.

<sup>66</sup> *The Story of the Sunny-yard* is a film directed by Yuan Naichen (袁乃晨, 1919-2015), adapted from Xu Ying's (徐瑛 b.1939-) novel of the same name, and produced by Changchun Film Studio (长春电影制片厂) in 1974.

<sup>67</sup> Mao Zengdong 毛泽东, "Wuchan jieji zhuanzheng de lishi jiaoxun" 无产阶级专政的历史教训 [The history lessons of the dictatorship of the proletariat], *Marxists*, accessed April 6, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/1968/5-098.htm>.

children into focusing on their personal affairs such as studying at home. Both Grandpa Shi and Hu Shouli use the children's bodies as sites to promote their goals, and in so doing teach the audience the right and wrong ways to use their own bodies: devote them either to the national revolutionary cause, or to their individual self-development. At the end of the story, Grandpa Shi and the children crush Hu's conspiracy, as the children's spirits are sublimated through manual labor.

After her extended period of labor in the construction site, Snowflake, a girl from Sunny-yard, develops blisters on her hand. Grandpa Shi praises her hard work and encourages her to continue by saying, "You will become accustomed to the conditions! It will feel better when those blisters turn into calluses." Snowflake regards the blisters on her hand as an emblem of her labor, and refuses to allow her mother to disinfect them with mercurochrome. She is extremely hopeful that one day the blisters will turn into calluses, because then she will complete the transition to "a qualified successor to the revolutionary cause" (合格的社会主义接班人). To Snowflake, the suffering and pain of her body is a coming-of-age ritual that prepares her body for devotion to the nation as she grows from a child into a full-fledged member of the nation. Foucault describes such "exercise for the body" as a disciplinary "ceremony," a regulatory art of the human body that includes a calculated manipulation of its elements, gestures, and behaviors. The product of discipline is bodies that are "subjected and practiced," or what he calls "docile bodies."<sup>68</sup> Snowflake's callused hands illustrate the fact that her body is produced as a docile one, and her hands, functioning as a reward, demonstrate her fidelity to the nation, much like Fang Qiangqiang's little red flowers in the kindergarten.

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<sup>68</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

A line from *The Story of the Sunny-yard* can explain why children, and their bodies, must endure such challenges and suffering. When Snowflake's mother tries to prohibit her daughter from working on the road construction site because she is worried about her daughter's safety and thinks she should spend more time on studying, an old communist cadre criticizes her by saying, "Is Snowflake your private property? No! She is the successor of the revolution!" This scene suggests that the children (and their bodies) do not belong to the family but to the nation; they are a human resource as part of the reservoir of national capital, and therefore should be or must be what the nation needs them to be. The children's bodies are represented as signifiers for the national discourse, through which we can easily find a collective national feeling of optimism and pride, even as the children's individual affects are obscured.

On the same road construction site, with the children's chorus *Genzhe Maozhuxi Yongyuan Gangeming* 跟着毛主席, 永远干革命 ( Following Chairman Mao, struggling for revolution forever) inserted as diegetic music, the children work actively and passionately, as the leading boy Tiezhu takes off his shirt, exposing his upper body, in a close-up shot. This action shows that Tiezhu overcomes the challenge of heat in the outdoor summer workplace while implying how dutifully he works. With the inspiring song as backdrop, Tiezhu's confident, positive, and youthful body becomes a site in which to display his revolutionary enthusiasm and dedication, and his physical exhibition of labor.

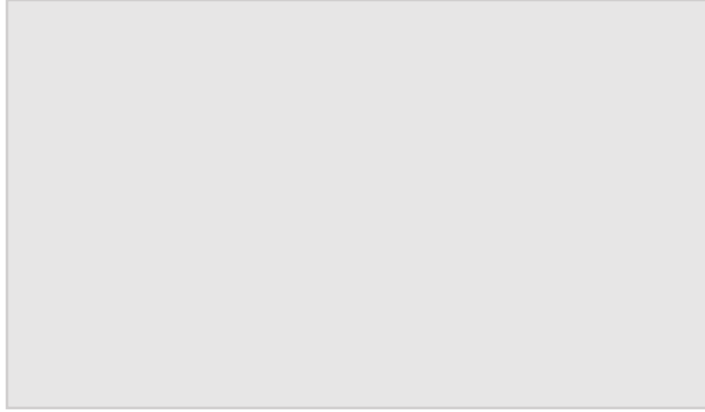


Figure 1.5: Tiezhu removes his shirt and shows off his devoted body in order to display his hard work in the revolutionary cause.

(Film Title: *Story of the Sunny-yard*, Time Code: 00:25:53)

Like Tiezhu, Qiangqiang in *Little Red Flowers* carries out the same act of removing his shirt in public, although he is forced by the teacher and cannot comprehend why he has to do so. He tries to remove his shirt, but it is a futile effort. In contrast to the obscuring of Tiezhu's private emotions, the presentation of Qiangqiang's body underscores his passiveness, helplessness, and fearfulness. Under the gaze of the teachers and other children, Qiangqiang grumbles to the teacher, "I dressed myself this morning, I washed my hands before meals, and I tried to poop, but why can't I get a little red flower?" Through Qiangqiang's discomfort and doubt, the filmmaker Zhang Yuan questions the legitimacy of displaying the child's body.

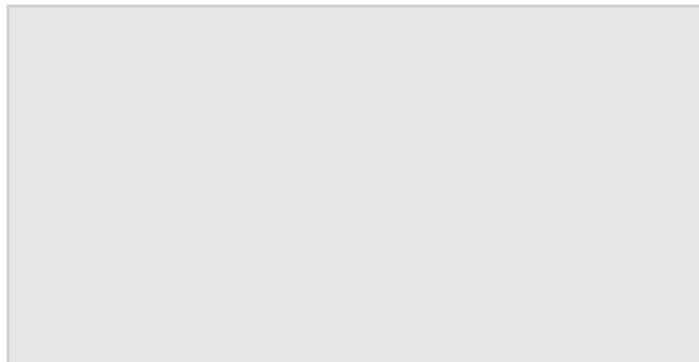




Figure 1.6: Fang Qiangqiang futilely tries to remove his shirt.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 00:22:47)

Lanjuan Xu discusses the use of children as wartime propaganda and explores the political symbolism of child labor for the communist revolutionaries. She offers a close reading of Xiao Hong's (萧红, 1911-1942) short story "Haizi de yanjiang" 孩子的演讲 (The child's speech, 1938) in which a child who is forced by adults to give a speech is frightened by the interaction with the adult audience and suddenly develops aphonia, a temporary loss of hearing. Xu states that, unlike other mainstream writers' depictions of children, such as Ding Ling's (丁玲, 1904-1986) short story "Yike weichutang de zidan" 一颗未出膛的子弹 (A bullet not shot, 1937), Xiao Hong observes the suspicion and confusion of the child as a subject who is oppressed by the great historical proposition of "salvation" (救亡).<sup>69</sup>

If Xiao Hong's short story reveals her apprehension about the subjectivity of children who are forced into adult rhetoric, then Zhang Yuan's film restores the child's body to its original corporeal state from its functional status as a site of propaganda. If the experience of suffering to bodies leads to the sublimation of the child's spirits in the films produced in the Maoist Era, to Fang Qiangqiang, by contrast, the suffering to his body is the origin of his fear as he responds to the big scissor and dark solitary confinement with crying and screaming. Considered this way, Zhang Yuan questions and disdains the legitimacy of displaying the child's body as propaganda.

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<sup>69</sup> Xu Lanjuan 徐兰君, "Laodong yu jiaoyu: 'xiangcun ertong' de faxian he zhanshi bianqu haitong de kangzhan xuanchuan shijian," 84.

## Teachers as Monsters: Depicting Discipline from a Child's Viewpoint

When examining the childhood of Tietou, the protagonist of the film *Lanfengzheng* 蓝风筝 (The bluekite, 1993), Xinmin Liu argues that the political tension of the Cultural Revolution “robs him of the caring and guidance he deserves from his parents.”<sup>70</sup> Liu’s discussion of the absence of parents also applies to *Little Red Flowers*. Fang Qiangqiang’s mother is never seen, and his father appears only in the first scene when he leaves his son at the kindergarten and talks to the head teacher, Miss Li. The camera shows only the lower half of his body, giving the audience the perspective of the four-year-old Qiangqiang who looks up to his father from a low angle and can see only his legs. By suffusing the screen with what the child sees, the film reminds the audience of their own childhood experiences in which they cannot see the whole picture of the adult world, only a partial image. By contrast, the teachers’ whole bodies are visible, including close-up shots of their faces.

The most striking example of the film’s views of the teachers’ faces occurs in the interactive “guess the animal” game between the teacher and the students. In this game, the children imitate various animals such as peacocks and rabbits, while Miss Li mimics a scary gorilla. Her vivid facial expression and gestures make the children grow silent with terror. The camera focuses on her exaggerated facial action and it seems that the audience is drawn into the children’s positions and share their feelings of fear. Staring at Miss Li, Fang Qiangqiang begins to believe that she is a child-eating monster in the disguise of a teacher. He starts a rumor among the other children that Miss Li is a monster and that once a child is bitten by Miss Li, he or she will become a little monster as well, so that everyone in the kindergarten class becomes insecure.

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<sup>70</sup> Xinmin Liu, “Retributive Memories: Self-Realization in the Post-Mao Era,” 233.

In the washroom, another child, Chen Nanyan, takes off her pants in order to convince Fang Qiangqiang that she has no tail, and therefore, she is not a little monster. This incident prompts a secret campaign in which every child in the class removes his or her pants so that the others can see they have no tails. All children are immersed in their fantasy world where they perceive Miss Li as wandering around with a tiger tail.

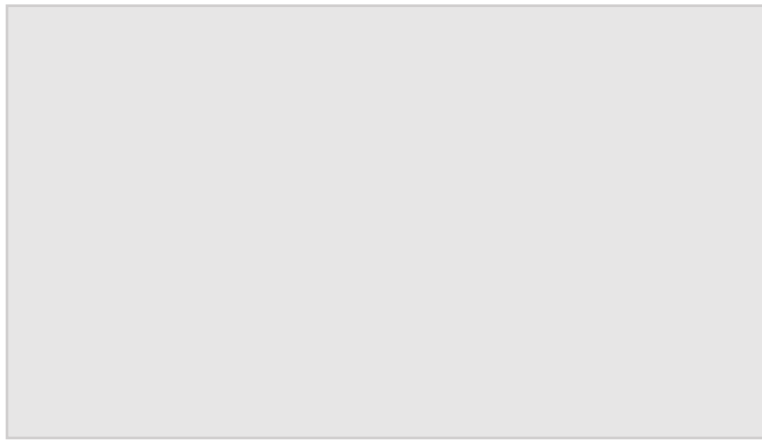


Figure 1.7: Fang Qiangqiang sees Miss Li walking with a tiger tail.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 01:02:07)

The children finally instigate a revolt against the perceived monster, Miss Li, when a boy suggests, “If we tie up Miss Li, she will be not able to eat us.” They make a long rope by tying several children’s shoelaces together. Then the audience is presented with the “most striking image”<sup>71</sup> in the film: a flock of children crawling “like a swarm of locusts” to Miss Li’s dormitory where she is sleeping. Miss Li is suddenly wakened up by the children’s actions, and then the children run away screaming. The other teachers and the principal come to the dormitory to find out what was happening; they ask a crying girl, who sobs, “There is a

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<sup>71</sup> Derek Elley, “*Little Red Flowers*,” 402, no.2 (2006): 35.

monster.” When the teachers ask who the monster is, the girl points to Miss Li. All the teachers laugh out loud, except for Miss Li, who is irritated by the children’s ridiculous behavior.

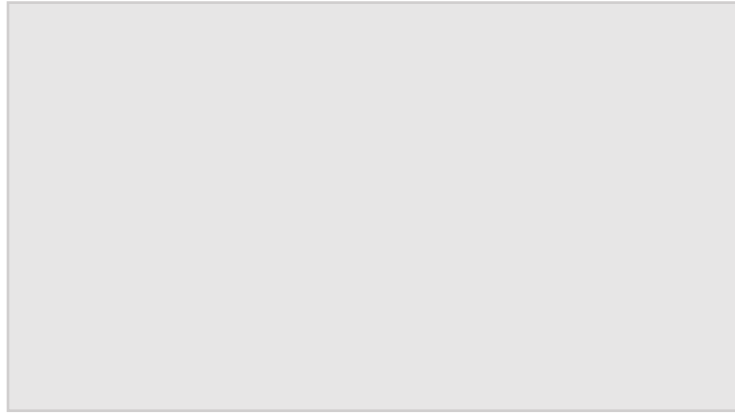


Figure 1.8: The children swarm into Miss Li’s dormitory and try to tie her up on bed.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 01:06:23)

Fang Qiangqiang telling the other children that Miss Li is not a monster may not be simply a rumor, but a sincere result of his fear of her. When Miss Li walks by, Fang Qiangqiang hides under the bed, and in order to protect Nanyan from getting hurt, he dissuades her from fighting with Miss Li. Thus, the reason why he imagines his teacher as a child-eating monster and why his classmates believe him may well be that they share his fear. The children can feel her strictness, her rigor, and her power over them with the little red flowers.

The image of the human-eating monster is not unique in the tradition of modern Chinese literature. For example, Madman, the protagonist of Lu Xun’s short story “Kuangren riji” 狂人日记 (Diary of a Madman), sees green-faced monsters all around him and imagines the doctor, his neighbors, and even his brothers staring at him like wolves. He soon discovers that the Chinese characters “Eat people!” (吃人) are recorded between the lines of a history book,

conditioning every adult to become a cannibal.<sup>72</sup> According to Xiaobing Tang, cannibalism is a metaphor for feudalism, and at the end of the story, the madman, the “bearer of a full critical consciousness,” cries out “Save the children.”<sup>73</sup> Madman’s plea has a double-layer meaning: he wants to protect the children from being eaten by the adults, and he also fears the possibility of the children becoming cannibals like the adults.

It is not hard to recognize the similarity between the monster imagined by Fang Qiangqiang and the cannibals pictured by Lu Xun’s Madman. Fang Qiangqiang regards Miss Li, a stern disciplinarian, as a monster, with the monster becoming an incarnation of her discipline in the minds of the children. Fang Qiangqiang’s fear of being eaten by the monster and then turning into a little monster can be understood as his fear of being assimilated into the disciplinary system. When facing discipline, tying up the “monster” Miss Li is an act of resistance that ultimately fails. In both “Diary of a Madman” and *Little Red Flowers*, the images of the monster represent that not only feudalism but disciplinary will consume people.

Fang Qiangqiang offers a solution to the risk of being “eaten”: growing up. When he is allowed to leave solitary confinement, he tells his teachers, “I hate living in this kindergarten. I want to go to primary school.” Principal Kong smiles at Fang Qiangqiang and replies, “Leaving kindergarten is not supposed to be amusement. In fact, the time you spend in kindergarten is the most insouciant and happy time in your life.” However, Qiangqiang does not trust the principal, and looks forward to growing up. At the end of the film, Fang Qiangqiang escapes the walls of the school and wanders happily on the streets until he sees a group of adults marching in uniforms adorned with large red paper flowers on their chests. He stares without expression at

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<sup>72</sup> Lu Xun 鲁迅. *Diary of a madman and other stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1990), 29-41.

<sup>73</sup> Xiaobing Tang, “Lu Xun’s ‘Diary of a Madman’ and a Chinese Modernism,” in *PLMA* 107, no. 5 (1992): 1222-1234.

the flowers, and while the audience does not know what is going through his mind, they may feel sad and hopeless for him, because just as he appears to have escaped the control of the red flowers, he finds them again.

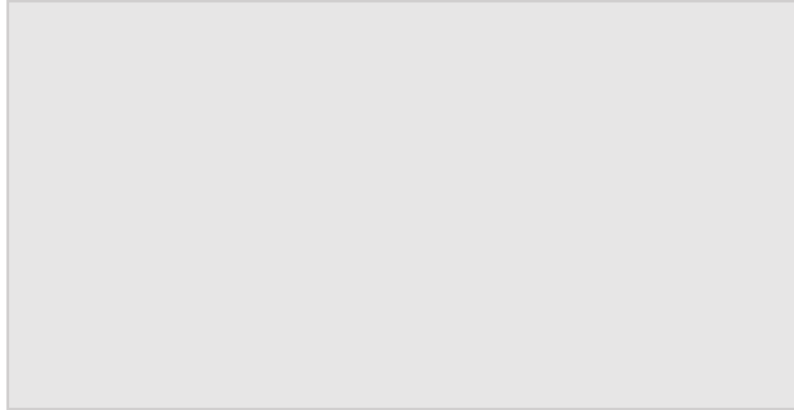


Figure 1.9: After his escape from the school, Fang Qiangqiang sees a group of adults wearing red flowers on their chests.

(Film Title: *Little Red Flowers*, Time Code: 01:23:55)

### **Conclusion: When Does the Loneliness of a Person Begin?**

In 1923, Lu Xun gave a lecture on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, “Nuola zouhou zenyang” 娜拉走后怎样 (What Happens after Nora Walks Out), to the Literature and Arts Society at Beijing Women's Normal College (北京高等女子师范学校文艺会), in which he asserted, “The most painful thing in life is to wake from a dream and find there is no way out. People who dream are fortunate. If there isn't a way out in sight, it is important not to wake

them.”<sup>74</sup> He says of Ibsen’s protagonist Nora’s decision to leave her husband and home in search of freedom, “And yet once Nora had awakened, it was not easy for her to return to dreamland, so her only recourse was to leave; but after she’d left, she soon faced the inevitable choice between degradation and returning home.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, the conclusion of the film *Little Red Flowers* leaves the viewer wondering what will happen once Fang Qiangqiang walks out.

Unquestionably, as a four-year-old child, he has no choice but to return to his school. However, after seeing the large red flowers on the adults’ chests, he may well feel disappointed that even becoming an adult will not free him from the discipline represented by the little red flowers.

This chapter demonstrates the use of discipline in Fang Qiangqiang’s kindergarten class and the students’ attempts to resist that discipline. Moreover, although Zhang Yuan disdain the narrations in which children’s bodies are utilized for propagandistic display in the Maoist Era, the end of *Little Red Flowers* expresses a pessimistic view that no one can break free from the regime of the little red flowers. When asked about the premise of the film, Zhang Yuan observed, “Children are primary. They just touch the world and are full of curiosity. More important, kindergarten is the very beginning of the loneliness of a person.”<sup>76</sup> The experience of Fang Qiangqiang shows that the process of discipline creates the condition of loneliness, particularly for individuals who fail to adhere to the norms enforced by that discipline.

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<sup>74</sup> Lu Xun, “What Happens after Nora Walks Out,” trans. Bonnie McDougall, in *Jottings Under Lamplight*, ed. Eileen Cheng and Kirk Denton (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 257.

<sup>75</sup> Lu Xun, “What Happens after Nora Walks Out,” 258.

<sup>76</sup> Zhang Yuan and Huang Bing 张元 黄斌, “*Kan shangqu henmei daoyan Zhang Yuan: yong haizi de shijiao kanshijie*” “看上去很美” 张元: 用孩子的视角看世界 [*Little Red Flowers* Zhang Yuan: see the world from the perspective of the children], Sina, May 31, 2004, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2004-05-31/0802403811.html>

## Chapter Two

### Coming-of-age and Memory in *In the Heat of the Sun*:

#### A Rhizomatic Reading

From the late-1980s to the 1990s, China witnessed modernization and commercialization on an unprecedented scale. On the one hand, people enjoyed the rapid economic development of the Reform Era. At the same time, they were eager to reintroduce the concept of “individual” and reembrace the so-called Euro-American “enlightenment discourse” as the ideological cornerstone to the post-Mao period. On the other hand, an increasing number of problems came to light, such as the negative ramifications of urbanization, environmental degradation, and the culture of avarice. These problems produced anxiety among the Chinese intelligentsia who undertook nationwide debates on the “humanistic spirit” (人文精神) from 1993 to 1995. In this context, a tincture of nostalgia infused the cultural products (novels, poems, films, etc.) of the intellectuals. According to Dai Jinhua, the emergence of nostalgia can be regarded as an answer to cultural or affective, as well as marketplace, needs —“elegant nostalgia quickly becomes precisely one of the most marketable cultural commodities.”<sup>77</sup> In 1995, filmmaker Jiang Wen (姜文 b.1963) released *Yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子 (In the heat of the sun), the box-office leader which also swept the Golden Horse Film Awards in 1996. At first *In the Heat of the Sun* seems like a trendy film tailored to popular taste, but under the nostalgic veil the film questions and deconstructs the recorded history as well as individual memory of the past in a thought-provoking way.

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<sup>77</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, “Imagined Nostalgia.” trans. Judy Chen. in *boundary 2* 24, no. 3 (1997): 143-161.



*In the Heat of the Sun* is a loose adaptation of Wang Shuo's novel *Dongwu xiongmeng* 动物凶猛 (Wild Beast) in which the filmmaker Jiang Wen adds many of his own autobiographical details. Set in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, it is told from the perspective of the protagonist Ma Xiaojun, a teenage boy privileged of party background, who lives in a military compound.<sup>78</sup> The image of Ma Xiaojun somehow reflects an amalgam of Jiang Wen and Wang Shuo's youths: both of them grew up in military compounds in Beijing, enjoying the political and material privileges. *In the Heat of the Sun* starts with a voice-over in which the middle-aged Ma Xiaojun is reminiscing over the past twenty years:

Beijing has changed so fast. It took 20 years for her to become a modern city in which I can barely find anything related to my memories. In fact, this change has wrecked my memories. I cannot tell the difference between illusion and reality. My stories always took place in summer when people had to expose more of themselves in the heat and, hence, it was harder for them to cover up their desires.

北京, 变得这么快。20 年的功夫, 她已经变成了一个现代化的城市。我几乎从中找不到任何记忆里的东西。事实上, 这种变化已经破坏了我的记忆, 使我分不清幻觉和真实。我的故事总是发生在夏天。炎热的气候使人们裸露的更多, 也更难掩饰心中的欲望。

This voice-over informs us that the film is about the narrator Ma Xiaojun's reflections on the memory of the "summer days" twenty years ago, namely the Cultural Revolution. However, rather than offering a dependable record of history, Jiang Wen uses "the power of cinema to reconfigure of the past"<sup>79</sup> through the story of Ma Xiaojun's coming-of-age. For the purpose of this study, we must pay particular attention to how Ma Xiaojun's coming-of-age experience is

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<sup>78</sup> The middle-aged Ma Xiaojun is played by the director Jiang Wen himself, while the young Ma Xiaojun is played by Xia Yu (夏雨) who had a nickname as "little Jiang Wen," because he resembled young Jiang Wen in appearance. Due to his excellent interpretation of Ma Xiaojun, Xia Yu won the 51st Venice Film Festival's Best Actor Award as the youngest recipient of the award. Wendy Larson states that Xia Yu "portrays [Ma Xiaojun] as charmingly shy and mischievous in social relationships yet forceful and engaging in his emotions." See her *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*. (Stanford University Press, 2008), 174.

<sup>79</sup> Yomi Braester, "Memory at A Standstill: 'Street-smart History' in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*," *Screen* 42, no. 4 (2001): 350-362.

represented and how Jiang Wen restores his own memory to (re)imagine and (re)locate himself and his generation in history. I will borrow and expand the theory of “Rhizome” from Deleuze and Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*<sup>80</sup> to examine the film.

Deleuze and Guattari claim that there are two modes of understanding the world: “root-tree” and “rhizome.” A root-tree is a mimetic figure of a hierarchical system emphasizing the center, while a rhizome is a network “not subject to centralized control or structure.”<sup>81</sup> I contend that Ma Xiaojun’s coming-of-age in *In the Heat of the Sun* is a “rhizomatic coming-of-age” which parodies and deconstructs the root-tree mode that dominated the film aesthetic of the Maoist Period; at the same time, the narration of memory represents the status of “becoming” emblematic of the rhizome. I will examine three main plot lines: Ma Xiaojun’s street fights; Ma Xiaojun’s daily life of mischief; and the depiction of his first crush on the girl Mi Lan (played by Ning Jing 宁静) as a means of exploring how *In the Heat of the Sun* reformulates the recorded history and individual memory of the Maoist Era.

## **Ma Xiaojun’s Rhizomatic Coming-of-age: Challenging the Hegemony of the Root**

The beginning of the film opens with crowds of people singing and dancing in a square under a huge statue of Mao accompanied by the song *Maozhuxi, geming zhanshi zhunin wanshouwujiang* 毛主席，革命战士祝您万寿无疆 (Chairman Mao, the revolutionary soldiers

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<sup>80</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>81</sup> Vincent Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, (WW Norton & Company, 2010), 1595.

wish you may live forever). The scene shows a cheerful farewell ceremony after which Ma Xiaojun's father, an army representative, will be sent to Guizhou (a remote province in Southern China) on a military mission. Next, in a suggestive shot, the camera slowly pans from top to bottom and captures the cheering crowd in a downward point-of-view from behind the Mao statue. It seems as if Mao is gazing at the people from the perspective of God, and more interestingly, this image simulates the scene in which Mao is reviewing the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution.

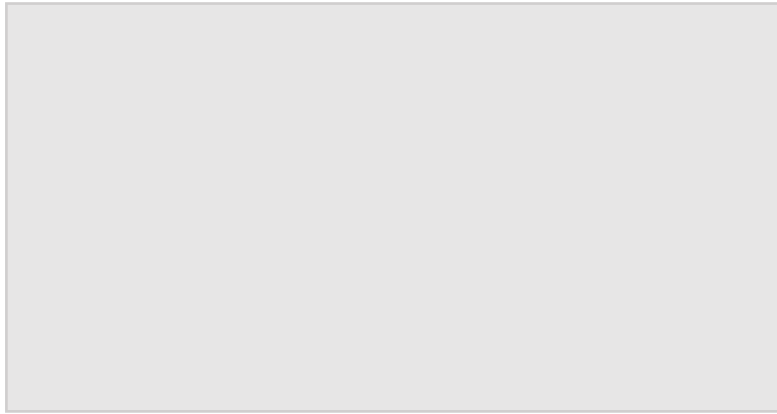


Figure 2.1: Cheering crowd holding a sending off ceremony for army representatives under the visage of a huge statue of Mao.

(Film Title: *In the Heat of the Sun*, Time Code: 00:01:33)

When analyzing the root-tree formula, Deleuze and Guattari point out that Mao strategically developed the “law” of the root-tree: “the One that becomes two, then of the two that become four.”<sup>82</sup> This law highlights the importance of a center principal unity which is implied through the framing of the statue of Mao in the aforementioned shot. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the root-tree mode fixes a starting point (root), devises an order, and then

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<sup>82</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 5.

expands by dichotomy like Chomsky's linguistic tree<sup>83</sup>. At the same time, the root is not only "a syntactic marker" but "a marker of power."<sup>84</sup> Originating from the root, a system of filiation or hierarchy is established. In *In the Heat of the Sun*, on the one hand, Jiang Wen demonstrates the trace of root-tree in the Revolutionary Period; on the other hand, he distorts and deconstructs it through the coming-of-age experience and the memory of Ma Xiaojun.

During the Cultural Revolution, there is no doubt that Mao functioned as the principal root in the state. Chairman Mao was the center of power, the most beloved figure, and an essential signifier in China. In the widespread song *Maozhuxi shi women xinzhong de hongtaiyang* 毛主席是我们心中的红太阳 (Chairman Mao is the red sun in our heart), he is compared to the sun. According to the memoir of Liu Xiaoqing (刘晓庆 b.1955), a famous actress and also the producer of *In the Heat of the Sun* who used to be a member of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution, people were fanatic about Mao: "We would have given anything to protect Chairman Mao, including our very lives. [...] We would have happily died doing so just like [the revolutionary martyr] Dong Cunrui [董存瑞, 1925-1948 KIA]."<sup>85</sup> In *In the Heat of the Sun*, one can find many traces of this worship of Mao. For example, the statue of Mao and the portrait of Mao on the wall. In other words, Ma Xiaojun comes of age under the absolute power of Mao as well as during a period in which Mao was fanatically worshiped.

Admittedly, the Cultural Revolution reinforces Mao's status as the root, but the chaos during that time provides privileged teenagers like Ma Xiaojun an environment in which they could grow up wildly. When the parents of the privileged teenagers were preoccupied by military

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<sup>83</sup> Also known as "phrase structure rules" which break sentences down into constituents. This process is often represented as tree structures. See Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility. Based on Conversations with Mitsou Ronat*, trans. John Vietrel (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 53-55.

<sup>84</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 7

<sup>85</sup> Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 171.

missions, the teachers were deprived of their prestige and dignity, and the elder teenagers were sent to the army or to the countryside as rusticated youth, for all intents and purposes, Beijing belonged to Ma Xiaojun and his peers. These youths formed various gangs. Due to the absence of authority in their lives, Ma Xiaojun and his cohort roamed idly around the city like unmoored ships. Ma Xiaojun's unfettered and near-feral coming-of-age parodies the root (Mao) as a marker of power.

As one of the typical privileged teenage boy growing up in that period, Ma Xiaojun reveals that he harbors the dream to become a hero. He expects the Sino-Soviet War to break out and that then he will have the chance to become a legendary war hero. When his parents are away from home, Ma Xiaojun affixes his father's military badges onto his own shirt and admires himself in the mirror narcissistically. Soon afterwards, the unruly boy finds his substitute battleground in street fighting. When he and his hoodlum friends are told that one of their gang members has been beaten by some other boys, they are listening to the radio broadcast of "the Great Vietnamese people defeating the United States and winning the National Liberation War in Vietnam." In the next scene, with the majestic soundtrack of *The Internationale* overlaid in a non-diegetic fashion, Ma Xiaojun and his clique of hooligans fight with another gang in an alley. It is extremely ironic that one of the most sacred revolutionary songs in the communist world becomes the background music for a street fight between two gangs of boys. Why does the filmmaker choose this potent music to accompany the sequence? It is because these boys who are immersed in the violent pleasure of street fighting believe that what they do is for revenge in an effort to fashion themselves as fearless heroes who are worthy of *The Internationale*. At the same time, the hallowed music serves as a counterpoint to the intensity of the violence and destructiveness of the youth.

In midst of this fighting, Ma Xiaojun cracks the skull of a boy with a brick and puts him in the hospital for a month. As a result, the group of boys decides to exact revenge upon Ma Xiaojun. One day, the two gangs arrange a confrontation involving hundreds of boys, but due to the mediation of a well-known gang leader in Beijing named Xiao Huaidan 小坏蛋 (Little Badass, played by Wang Shuo), the clash never transpires. Instead, all the boys gather at the Old Moscow Restaurant and celebrate. Little Badass stands in the center of the frame, proudly receiving the roar of applause from all the boys. (Here, Jiang Wen arranges the Soviet revolutionary song *Katyusha* as the non-diegetic music overlay. This song eulogizes the brave young Russian soldiers who sacrificed themselves in the patriotic war.) It is interesting that there is a huge portrait of Mao hanging behind him. In that picture, Mao is like the sun shining brightly and under him is a crowd of cheering people. It is easy for the audience to imagine that the scene in the restaurant is a simulation of the picture on the wall, but compared to the giant visage of Mao in the center, which ironically gazes down on the crowd in the restaurant, it is a teenage leader of the hooligans that stands at the center of the restaurant itself. We cannot regard this sequence of events only as an unselfconscious reproduction of Maoist valor; actually, it is best understood as a parody which Jiang Wen uses to subvert the sacred status of Mao as a signifier. It is what Deleuze and Guattari call the: “play of images shakes loose, challenging the hegemony of the signifier.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 15.

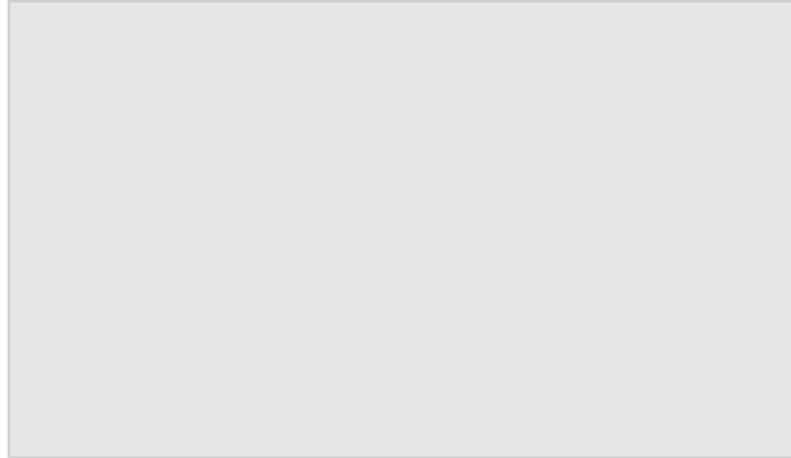


Figure 2.2: Little Badass stands proudly and is saluted in the center of his cohort in the fashion of the great revolutionary leader Mao.

(Film Title: *In the Heat of the Sun*, Time Code: 00:59:33)

Soon afterwards, Little Badass who stands above the fray of inter-gang violence is unexpectedly stabbed to death by several boys who want to succeed him. It is interesting to note that in this film Mao is figuratively replaced by Little Badass in an implicit and ironic manner, while Little Badass is subsequently replaced by some unknown gang members. Here, Ma Xiaojun's story of the gang fighting ends. Jiang Wen uses parody to explicate how unstable and fragile the root is, casting doubt upon the hegemony of Mao as the paramount signifier and ultimately to interrogate the root-tree diagram. In Ma Xiaojun's life, the principle of the world is more like some fungal rhizome — "a network of threads that can send up new growths anywhere along their length, not subject to centralized control or structure."<sup>87</sup> Diametrically opposed to the root-tree mode, the rhizome is an "assemblage" which Deleuze and Guattari contend subtracts

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<sup>87</sup> Vincent Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, (WW Norton & Company, 2010), 1595.

the unique or root from the system, and in this system, any point of it can be connected to any other.<sup>88</sup>

### **Disabling the Revolutionary Genealogy: A Comparison of *Sparkling Red Star* and *In the Heat of the Sun***

Deleuze and Guattari believe that “all of the tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction.”<sup>89</sup> In the context of the Cultural Revolution, reproduction and imitation were encouraged, and in fact, they were the only sanctioned way for people to behave. For example, people watched and reproduced the fixed eight Revolutionary Model Operas (革命样板戏). In the social context of the Cultural Revolution, children became adept at simulating. As successors to the revolutionary cause, children played an important role in the revolutionary genealogy. Through the simulation of adults and ideological models, children studied the rules of the social order, or more precisely, “submission to the rules of respect for the established order,”<sup>90</sup> as Louis Althusser states. In order to analyze the “root-tree” and “rhizome” more specifically, I will introduce another coming-of-age film *Shanshan de hongxing* 闪闪的红星 (Sparkling red star, 1974) and compare the father-son filiation between the two films.

*Sparkling Red Star* was produced by August Frist Film Studio (八一电影制片厂) as one of the few films produced in China during the Cultural Revolution. It starred Zhu Xinyun (祝新运 b.1962) and was co-directed by two filmmakers: Li Jun (李俊) and Li Ang (李昂). It tells the

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<sup>88</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 2.

<sup>90</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Trade, 2014), 51.



story of the coming-of-age of Pan Dongzi (潘冬子), the son of a Red Army soldier, and how he becomes a teenage hero. When he is a child, his father is away from home on military missions and leaves him with a red star. In order to protect Pan Dongzi and other guerrilla fighters, Pan Dongzi's mother sacrifices herself and is burned to death by the despotic landlord Hu Hansan. Pan Dongzi leaves his home and village, joins the guerrilla force, and finally avenges his mother by killing Hu Hansan. When he eventually reunites with his father, he is inducted into the official Red Army as a teenage hero.

*Sparkling Red Star* is a classic example of seeking the father as the “root.” At the beginning of the film, the seven-year-old Pan Dongzi has already been situated into the revolutionary genealogy. When his father is leaving, he entrusts the child to his mother and says: “As I am away from home, you are the only one that the boy can rely on. The child is the bud of the revolution. You must lead him on the path to revolution and guarantee that he grows up in the service of the revolution.” He leaves the young boy with a red star which is a metaphor for the revolution: it is passed on from the heroic father to the son. As the son of a hero, he is supposed to be, and must become, a hero as a successor. At the end of the film, Pan Dongzi successfully and predictably goes through a trial of class struggle, killing the enemy Hu Hansan. It is a revolutionary filiation—from the father to the son we see a reproduction of the hero.

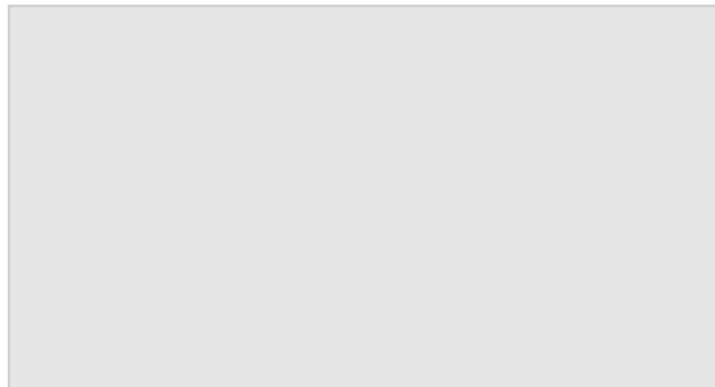


Figure 2.3: Pan Dongzi finally reunites with his father as a new Red Army soldier and a teenage hero.

(Film Title: *Sparkling Red Star*, Time Code: 01:37:38)

Similar to Pan Dongzi who was born into a heroic family, in *In the Heat of the Sun* Ma Xiaojun is not only of a soldier family background but has a higher pedigree than Pan Dongzi: he is the son of Chief of Staff Ma, a hero of the Korean War in the 1950s with remarkable battle achievements. During the Korean War, Ma Xiaojun's father was a self-taught bomb disposer and disabled countless bombs from the United States Army. Ma Xiaojun inherits his father's astuteness but only applies it to lockpicking his own home and those of his neighbors. He enjoys the thrill when opening a neighbor's door without permission. The voice-over tells the audience: "This is a feeling that only the Soviet Army capturing Berlin in WWII could feel." If the father represents intelligence and courage in wartime, the son's behavior can only be treated as mischief and foul play. Moreover, what Ma Xiaojun does in the following scenes is a complete deconstruction of the sublime heroic filiation.

When he has already learned how to copy keys, he unlocks a drawer at home belonging to his parents and rifles through their secret things. What draws his attention in the drawer is a condom. He blows it up like a balloon and carelessly punctures it when batting it around the room. Before his parents return home, he puts it back into the drawer. It is this behavior that leads to his mother's accidental pregnancy. Months later, Ma Xiaojun's pregnant mother (played by Siqin Gaowa 斯琴高娃 b.1950) is irritated by his misbehavior at school so she beats him. However, the mother's irritation results in her premature delivery. It is ironic that the second son of Chief of Staff Ma, the successor to the revolution is born in such an accidental way. This

sequence reminds us of Liu Xiaoqing's utterance of her purest love for Mao in her memoir: "I worshipped and loved Chairman Mao so utterly that there was absolutely nothing extraneous or impure in my feelings for him. When I grew a bit older and learned the secret of how men and women made babies, I had the most shocking realization: Could Chairman Mao possibly do that as well"?<sup>91</sup> It seems that Jiang Wen answers this question in *In Heat of the Sun*. Mao Xiaojun's mischief deflates the enchantment of the heroes and transforms them into ordinary human beings.

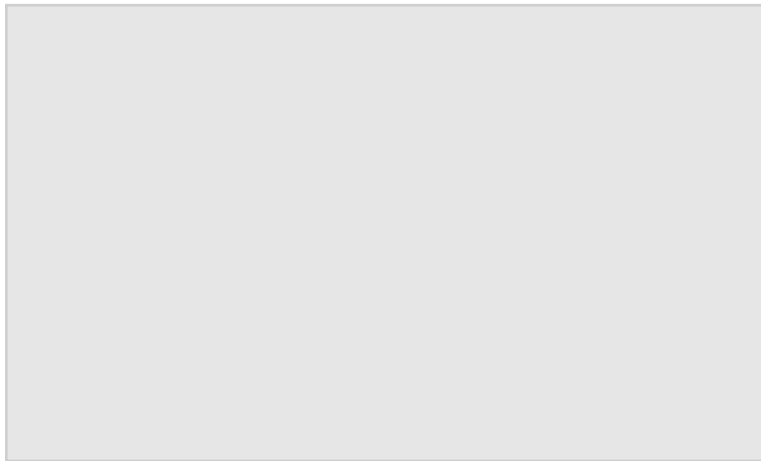


Figure 2.4: Ma Xiaojun rifles through his parent's secret belongings and breaks their condom.

(Film Title: *In the Heat of the Sun*, Time Code: 00:14:05)

In addition, this film reveals the hypocrisy of authority through irony. When other children and ordinary people are watching the classic revolutionary film *Hongse niangzi jun* 红色娘子军 (Red detachment of women) and *Lie ning zai 1918* 列宁在1918 (Lenin in 1918) in an open-air cinema, Ma Xiaojun and his friends sneak into an indoor cinema and watch another film

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<sup>91</sup> Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, 171.

specially screened for the elderly cadres. When the teenagers are admiring the nude body of a white woman on the screen, they are discovered by the doorman. The film has to be stopped which spoils the elderly cadres' fun. Then a senior high-ranking official and his young, beautiful female partner stand up and rebuke them: "This film is under criticism and it is extremely poisonous. Children could be led astray by it to commit major crimes." When discussing this scene, Jerome Silbergeld asserts, "This is not a *trivial* event: here the narrative finger points to the source of its own deceptions —straight from Party sources comes the Original Lie. The cadres might as well have told the children, 'This woman isn't naked.'"<sup>92</sup> In other words, in addition to demonstrating the common sexual needs of the hero and satirizing the heroic father-son filiation, Jiang Wen reveals the sexual hypocrisy of the CCP authority as the principal root.

Situated in the patricentric root-tree diagram, the "mother" figure represents different things in each film. In *Sparkling Red Star*, Pan Dongzi's mother is in the subordinate position and her function is to help her son become the successor of the father, as well as of the revolutionary cause. It is her duty to protect the filiation of the father-son and revolution-revolutionary. During the whole progress, she is compliant and adheres to the Three Cardinal Guides (三纲) dictated by traditional Chinese filiality: "Ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife." (君为臣纲, 父为子纲, 夫为妻纲). She functions a sign and we never learn her name, she is simply referred to as "the mom of Dongzi" (东子妈). When the son (or the filiation) is threatened, what she must do is sacrifice herself without hesitation. However, by contrast, Mao Xiaojun's mother in *In the Heat of the Sun* represents a totally different attitude towards the father and son. When receiving a warning letter from the school, she beats Ma

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<sup>92</sup> Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), 49.

Xiaojun on the head and scolds him: “You really are your father’s son! He is never at home, and neither are you! You two treat this place as a hotel and me as a maid! ...There is no one good in your Ma family. You are the same as your damn father!” It is fair to say that the mother takes out her anger and disappointment toward the father on Ma Xiaojun, demonstrating how upset and disgruntled she feels as a wife. The anger from Ma Xiaojun’s mother reveals the bitterness and depression of women in a male dominant filiation or root-tree system.

One can find the characters like Pan Dongzi in almost all of the works in the Maoist Era because his coming-of-age is reproduced on the basis of the root-tree model. However, Ma Xiaojun is unique. In his story, the power and effect of the principal root is constantly weakened, even deconstructed, and at the same time, the myth of the revolutionary filiation is undermined. Ma Xiaojun’s coming-of-age does not follow any pattern, but like what Deleuze and Guattari regard as the rhizome —“it evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil.”<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari take the child as an example to describe the characteristic of the rhizome: “In the case of the child, gestural, mimetic, ludic, and other semiotic systems regain their freedom and extricate themselves from the ‘tracing,’ that is, from the dominant competence of the teacher’s language—a microscopic event upsets the local balance of power.”<sup>94</sup> In *In the Heat of the Sun*, Ma Xiaojun rhizomatically extricates himself from the dominance of the father’s language, or the root-tree diagram in the revolutionary root-tree rhetoric.

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<sup>93</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 15.

## Sunny Days: (Re)imagining Memory in the Cultural Revolution

When exploring the film *Lanfengzheng* 蓝风筝 (Blue kite), Wang Ban claims that generally the films in the post-Mao period attempt to eliminate the nightmare of the trauma of history by establishing binary opposites such as past versus present, tradition versus modernization, etc. Repudiating the former and celebrating the latter, the filmmakers endeavored to overcome the painful memory of the Cultural Revolution and paint contemporary China in a hopeful hue.<sup>95</sup> By contrast, *In the Heat of the Sun* runs counter to these mainstream representations of the Cultural Revolution that appear in most films. Dai Jinhua suggests that it is easy for the contemporaries of Wang Shuo or Jiang Wen to trace their individual coming-of-age experiences in *In Heat of the Sun*, resonating with it; while on the other hand, older or younger audience members tend to feel uncomfortable with the film because it challenges their “common knowledge” of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, through the film, the viewer can clearly perceive the filmmaker’s wistful yearning for his youth in the “summer” in which it was set, a feeling shared by those of his age group. Interestingly, however, the memory provided by the narrator in this film is unreliable, and the spectator might feel deceived by his narration to some extent. For example, in the sequence where Ma Xiaojun gives the girl, Mi Lan with whom he is infatuated, a ride back to work the narrator says: “I remember the pleasant smell of burning weeds in the air.” He immediately corrects himself, though, by confessing, “But it was summer. No one would burn weeds in the summer.” This voice-over bestows a dreamlike nostalgic atmosphere onto the audience through olfactory sensation, but at the same time reveals the fallibility of his memory and implies that the narration of his memory could have been

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<sup>95</sup> Ban Wang, “Trauma and History in Chinese Film: Reading ‘The Blue Kite’ against Melodrama.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 126.

<sup>96</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing; zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998*, 449.

manufactured or at least manipulated by the filmmaker.

In the voice-over prologue to *In the Heat of the Sun*, the narrator Ma Xiaojun expresses his feelings toward the past: “It seemed like it was summer forever. The sun always accompanied us. The sunlight was so relentless, so bright that our eyes were washed in waves of blackness.” By contrast, in the epilogue of *In the Heat of the Sun*, the timeline turns to Ma Xiaojun’s present in the 1990s. The middle-aged Ma Xiaojun and his gang friends in his youth celebrate their reunion in a fancy stretch-limousine in a seemingly warm-hearted but actually awkward atmosphere. The limousine is driving along the streets in the modernized and recently rebuilt city of Beijing. Through the car window, they spy a familiar figure outside on the street— a mentally disabled man who used to be their neighbor during their childhood. They elatedly call to him “Gulunmu” (古伦木), but instead of answering “Ooba” (欧巴) as he always did as a boy in the past, the man yells at them “idiot”! All the scenes in time-present are presented in black and white in contrast to the washed-out, sunny, and colorful images of the bygone days. Reflecting on this contrast, Xinmin Liu states that “If this is a rejection of Beijing’s **Now**, how does the director recollect the world of **Then** bathed in bright sunny days? What makes his take on the history of the Cultural Revolution intriguing is his turn towards a fuzzy, gullible and playful memory of their adolescence to recollect those stirring times.”<sup>97</sup>

The third plotline relates to the girl named Mi Lan, Ma Xiaojun’s first crush. I will now turn to an examination of the events surrounding Mi Lan’s photograph as a way to comprehend the significance of Ma Xiaojun’s narrative recollection of Mi Lan in the film. The first time Ma Xiaojun sees Mi Lan is in a photograph hanging on the wall in her bedroom. That day, he randomly picks the lock of Mi Lan’s home and sneaks into her bedroom. He immediately

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<sup>97</sup> Xinmin Liu, “Retributive Memories: Self-Realization in the Post-Mao Era,” 240.

becomes enamored with the strange girl in the picture who wears a red swimsuit with a bright smile. From that point on, Ma Xiaojun is desperate to meet her in person. He hides in Mi Lan's bedroom, lying on her bed, looking up at her photograph for a long time, and lingers round Mi Lan's home to wait for her. In these sequences, the non-diegetic music is *Cavalleria Rusticana: Preludio*<sup>98</sup> laden with melancholic tones that reflect Ma Xiaojun's feelings of loneliness. Fortunately, he meets Mi Lan on the road and after much cultivation becomes friends with her. When Ma Xiaojun eventually gains legitimate entry into her bedroom for the first time, however, he finds nothing on the wall. He beseeches Mi Lan to show him the photo that used to be on the wall. Yet when Mi Lan is persuaded to take it out of an album in a drawer, he only sees a black and white picture in which Mi Lan does not wear a red swimsuit but a plain white blouse without a smile. When Ma Xiaojun looks at the photograph that Mi Lan shows him, he is confused and disappointed.

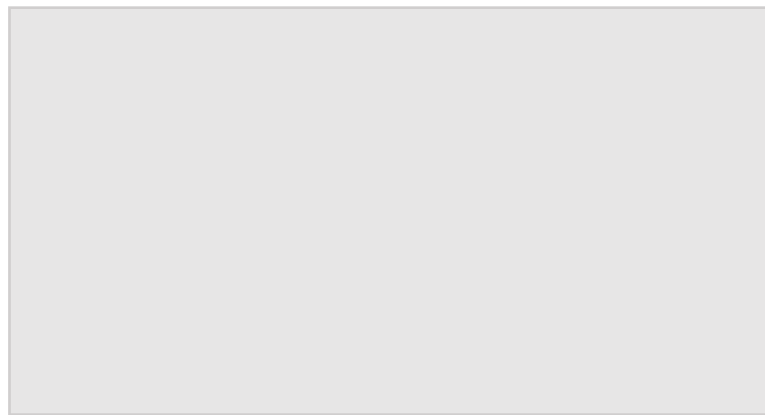


Figure 2.5: The first time Ma Xiaojun sees Mi Lan wearing a red swimsuit in a photo.

(Film Title: *In the Heat of the Sun*, Time Code: 00:31:18)

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<sup>98</sup> *Cavalleria rusticana* is an opera in one act by Pietro Mascagni to an Italian libretto by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci, adapted from an 1880 short story of the same name. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cavalleria\\_rusticana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cavalleria_rusticana). According Jiang Wen, *In the Heat of the Sun* is inspired by the music of *Cavalleria Rusticana: Preludio*. See <https://kknews.cc/entertainment/repob3o.html>.



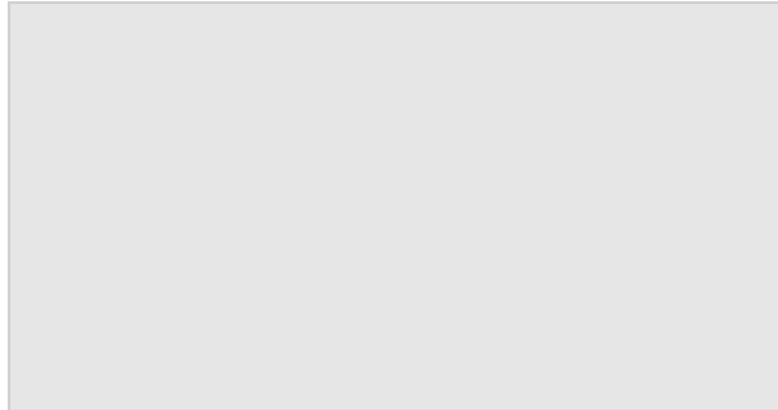


Figure 2.6: The real photograph that Mi Lan shows to Ma Xiaojun.

(Film Title: *In the Heat of the Sun*, Time Code: 01:07:43)

Ma Xiaojun gradually falls in love with Mi Lan. What drives Ma Xiaojun crazy is that he tries to show his masculinity to Mi Lan and prove he is not much younger than her, while Mi Lan treats him like an immature boy. What makes Ma Xiaojun feel even worse is that it seems that Mi Lan gets close to Liu Yiku, the oldest and most handsome leader of Ma Xiaojun's gang. Finally, Ma Xiaojun's suppressed feelings of jealousy and depression erupt during his joint birthday party with Liu Yiku, and Ma Xiaojun verbally assaults Mi Lan and attacks Li Yiku with a broken wine bottle. People begin screaming and the restaurant turns into chaos. As he repeatedly stabs Liu Yiku in the stomach a total of 25 times, surprisingly, the look on Liu Yiku's face turns from pain to doubt. The image is frozen and then the spectator finally comes to realize that this sequence is problematic and illogical. Even Liu Yiku himself takes a puzzled look down at his uninjured belly. Thus, Ma Xiaojun of time-present comments in the narrative voice-over: "Haha! Don't believe any of it. I never did anything so heroic (壮烈) in my whole life. I keep promising to tell the story truthfully, but no matter how hard I try to tell the truth, it gets

disrupted by all sorts of thing. I sadly have come to realize that I can never restore the reality of the situation.” Then all the images are shown in reverse and the voice-over re-narrates the events: “Well, let me continue to tell my story and please don’t worry if it is true.” According to the re-narration, no violence happened and they all enjoyed an exciting and inebriating birthday party. That night, Ma Xiaojun runs to Mi Lan’s home in heavy rain and cries her name. Ma Xiaojun tells Mi Lan that he likes her and Mi Lan rushes to him and holds him tight. However, the next day when Ma Xiaojun tries to remind Mi Lan what happened in the rain night, Mi Lan has no response.

These series of events make the narrator Ma Xiaojun begin to question the existence of Mi Lan. He speculates that he may have invented the experience that he met Mi Lan in person on the road that day. He keeps asking himself whether Mi Lan is the girl in the photo, or if he confuses her with another girl named Yu Beipei (于蓓培). Thus, in a series of questions, the memory of Ma Xiaojun becomes an assemblage made of differently formed matters rather than an “organic whole.” In this assemblage, elements are continually extracted while new ones are inserted into it. This process of changing is what Deleuze and Guattari regard as “becoming” which describes the process of change, flight, or movement within an assemblage. In other words, Ma Xiaojun of the present puts forth his memory in an obscure and mutable state of becoming. According to Deleuze and Guattari, rhizome “promotes becoming, not being.”<sup>99</sup> Here, my question is why? Instead of narrating the historical events or experience simply, why does the filmmaker represent his story in such a way of “becoming”?

In his book *Cinema 2: The Time-image*, Deleuze carefully analyzes the dream-images and fantasy which suggest that “the actual and the virtual [...] tend ultimately to become

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<sup>99</sup> Vincent Leitch et al., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1639.

confused by slipping into the same point of indiscernibility.” He argues that in films, the disturbances of memory and the failures of recognition will provide more information:

“Attentive recognition informs us to a much greater degree when it fails than when it succeeds. When we cannot remember, sensory-motor extension remains suspended, and the actual image, the present optical perception, does not link up with either a motor image or a recollection-image which would re-establish contact. It rather enters into relation with genuinely virtual elements, feelings of déjà vu or past ‘in general’ (I must have seen that man somewhere ...), dream-images (I have the feeling that I saw him in a dream ...), fantasies or theatre scenes (he seems to play a role that I am familiar with ...). In short, it is not the recollection-image or attentive recognition which gives us the proper equivalent of the optical-sound image, it is rather the disturbances of memory and the failures of recognition.”<sup>100</sup>

As for Ma Xiaojun’s chaotic memory of the birthday party, Yomi Braester points out that “His sudden turn away from violence in itself signals the narrator's reluctance to deal with the painful past.”<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Ma Xiaojun’s paradoxical narrations of Mi Lan imply the disorder and confusion in his memory related to Mi Lan in the subconscious. He fails to deal with intimate relationship in adolescence; thus, he wants to escape from this painful feeling of failure and cast doubt on the existence of Mi Lan when he reminisces about his youth. He has no idea how to face his first sexual fantasy, so he imagines the photograph of Mi Lan in a red swimsuit. He has no idea how to deal with the relationship with the object of his infatuation, so “the

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<sup>100</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 54-55.

<sup>101</sup> Yomi Braester, “Memory at A Standstill: ‘Street-smart History’ in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*,” *Screen* 42, no. 4 (2001): 353.

longing for affectionate intimacy can now only be approximated through intimate violence.”<sup>102</sup>

Even for the grown-up Ma Xiaojun, when he revisits his time of youth, he still has no way to address his coming-of-age crisis but to (re)formulate and (re)imagine his memory.

### **Conclusion: The Helplessness and Cruelty of Youth in the “Summer Day” of *In the Heat of the Sun***

Deleuze and Guattari use the map as a metaphor for the rhizome. The map is open, connectable in all dimensions, reversible, and “one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways.”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, *In the Heat of the Sun* is an unstable, complex, and open assemblage where memories, history, personal testimony, imagination, and hallucination are blended and mediated. On the one hand, Ma Xiaojun’s daily life of mischief and his gang experience deconstruct the root-tree diagram; on the other hand, his memory of Mi Lan represents the sort of becoming emblematic of the rhizome. Dai Jinhua claims that although Ma Xiaojun and his gang of friends from the privileged class live in a carefree and safe haven outside the reach of the cruel environment of the Cultural Revolution, their ignorance, perplexity, and violence betray another kind of cruelty in that period beyond political persecution.<sup>104</sup>

In the seemingly sunny and nostalgic narrations of the coming-of-age in the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Wen represents a dual question in a rhizomatic way. One is on the authoritative power or root, and through parody, Jiang Wen undermines the legitimacy of the

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<sup>102</sup> Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese films by Director Jiang Wen*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>103</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 12.

<sup>104</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Wuzhong fengjing: zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998*, 451-452.

root-tree diagram; the other is on the memory of the past that is concealed by Jiang Wen's nostalgic and passionate narratives. There is the cruelty and despair of the coming-of-age of Ma Xiaojun's generation. Furthermore, we can reexamine this film from a broader standpoint: Ma Xiaojun's garbled recollection-image in *In the Heat of the Sun* reveals the fragility of memory, truth, and even officially recorded history.

## Chapter Three

### *Papa: Three Shades of Shame*

In coming-of-age films set during the Cultural Revolution, father figures frequently play marginal roles in their children's lives. Sometimes, they are preoccupied by work and do not have time to be involved in their children's lives (for example, the fathers as military officers in *Red Little Flowers* and *In the Heat of the Sun*). In other situations, by contrast, they are deprived of the rights of fatherhood and end up in prison or die as a result of political persecution, such as the fathers in *Lanfengzheng* 蓝风筝 (The blue kite, 1993). Discussing the coming-of-age experience of the protagonist Tietou in *The Blue Kite*, Xinmin Liu states, "Tietou's memory of the past is triggered repeatedly by ruptures of losing a father."<sup>105</sup> In other words, the children in these films must grow up without fathers in a turbulent time.

Given the difficulty in father-son relationships that was all too common during the Cultural Revolution, one may ask: when those boys growing up in the Cultural Revolution become adults in the 1990s, how can they, as fathers, insert themselves in their own children's lives in an effort to recast their intergenerational relationships in a new and more positive light? On the one hand, these fathers did not have serviceable models of fatherhood in their early lives; on the other hand, their children are a new generation growing up in unprecedented times, namely the post-Mao market-oriented society of the 1990s. These fathers must face many new problems that cannot be solved by their old methods of social interaction. To this conundrum,

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<sup>105</sup> Xinmin Liu, "Retributive Memories: Self-Realization in the Post-Mao Era," 231.

Wang Shuo provides some possible answers in his novel *Wo shi ni baba* 我是你爸爸 (I am your papa, 1991).

Ma Linsheng, the father in Wang Shuo's novel, is confused and struggling to raise his only son Ma Rui. However, when observing the interaction pattern between Ma Linsheng and Ma Rui in *I am Your Papa*, it is surprising to notice that the most frequent emotion they present is *shame*. Wang Shuo uses the word “shame” (the English word “shame” can be translated to “羞愧” “羞耻” or “耻辱” in Chinese) twelve times, and describes physical expressions of shame, such as “flushing due to shame” (in Chinese, they are “面红耳赤”, “不禁脸红了” and “羞愧地涨红了脸”) nineteen times. Hence, the word “shame” suffuses *I am Your Papa* and becomes the dominant emotion in the interaction between father and son.

In 2000, Wang Shuo adapted this novel into a film script, *Yuanjia fuzi* 冤家父子 (Papa) and directed the film himself. In “Yuanjia fuzi daoyan zishu” “冤家父子” 导演自述 (The director's statement of Papa), Wang Shuo describes the relationship between the father and son:

The father is like the indispensable sunshine around us, although sometimes we have to dodge the sunshine. The importance of the father ranks second only to the mother and is only paralleled with one's spouse. However, you can choose your spouse and you can never choose your father [...] The time for the tensest and irreconcilable conflicts occurring between the father and son probably is the time when the son is a teenager [...] The two who are supposed to be closest in the world become bitterest enemies. The harm that the father and son heap onto each other exceed all troubles caused by other people. Therefore, the greatest and most commendable part of human affection becomes the root of inextricable misery and despair.

父亲犹如阳光是我们无时不需，有时却又要小心躲避的东西，他的重要性仅次于母亲，惟有配偶堪与相提并论，配偶可以选择而父亲则无法选择 [...] 矛盾最尖锐、最难以调和的年龄段应该是儿子的少年时代 [...] 两个本来是世界

上最亲的人成了世界上两个最大的仇敌。父子间相互带来的伤害远超过一般人所能造成的烦恼。人类情感中最伟大、最值得赞美的那一部分一跃变为无法摆脱的痛苦以及绝望的根源。<sup>106</sup>

Wang Shuo regards the father-son relationship as the most commendable, but also the most despairing relationship among humans. However, why does shame become the most frequent affective mode in depicting the interaction between the father and son? How does shame function in Wang Shuo's novel and film? To answer these questions, I will explore three different shades of the word "shame" in both versions of *Papa* from three perspectives: (1) How do the father's feelings of shame produce; (2) As a mechanism "rooted in familial and cultural contexts," how does shame work to maintain the collective order; (3) How does shame mediate the father-son interactions. Finally, I conclude that Wang Shuo's depiction of shame in *Papa* helps us to understand intergenerational relationships in 1990s China.

## Domestic Violence and the Disillusioned Father

*Papa* tells the story of the mediocre daily life of Ma Linsheng and how he strives to live up to being a decent father. According to Wang Shuo, Ma Linsheng is "the one who cudgels his brains to maintain a superficial intellectual image, struggling under the pressure of aging and finance."<sup>107</sup> Actor and filmmaker Feng Xiaogang (冯小刚 b.1958), a friend of Wang Shuo's, brought the role to life on the screen. The middle-aged Feng took advantage of his own emaciated and slumping frame to portray Ma Linsheng in a similarly uninviting posture. In

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<sup>106</sup> Wang Shuo 王朔, "Yuanjia fuzi daoyan zishu" "冤家父子"导演自述 [The director's statement of *Papa*], in *Wang Shuo wenji* 王朔文集 [the collected works of Wang Shuo], (Kunming: Yunnan People's Publications 云南人民出版社, 2003), 32.

<sup>107</sup> "那种在年龄和经济的双重压力下挣扎着, 熬费苦心保持的类知识分子形象." Wang Shuo 王朔, *Wo shi ni papa* 我是你爸爸 [I Am Your Papa], (Beijing: Beijing October Arts Press 北京十月文艺出版社, 2012), 1. My translation.



*Papa*, Ma Linsheng's plucking his grey hairs while looking at a mirror implies that he is going through a midlife crisis. Realizing the temporal limits of his life, Ma Linsheng seeks to discover something to demonstrate that his life has value, an effort that proves futile. At work, he is in a dispensable position and his colleagues treat him as he is invisible; at home, he feels as though he is "a foreigner living in Beijing," because he has no viable marriage, no friends, nor any hobbies. Hence, his son called Ma Che in the film and Ma Rui in the novel, becomes the only means of support and source of consolation in his life.

By contrast, the teenager Ma Che is independent and somewhat mature beyond his age owing to the fact that his mother left him at an early age and his father is unreliable. The film presents the image of the father in the son's eyes in an adroit way. After Ma Linsheng gets home from work, he takes off his clothes and wipes himself with a towel. The camera is hidden behind Ma Linsheng in the darkness, and it seems like Ma Linsheng and his actions are being gazed at through a fissure. A half-naked, skinny, and exhausted middle-aged man is presented to the audience. Suddenly, Ma Linsheng abruptly turns around, hastens to a closet behind himself, and opens it to find his son Ma Che inside, revealing that the image that the audience sees on the screen is through Ma Che's eyes. In response to the father's harsh query: "What are you doing here?" the son murmurs with a timid and complaisant smile: "I am just playing."

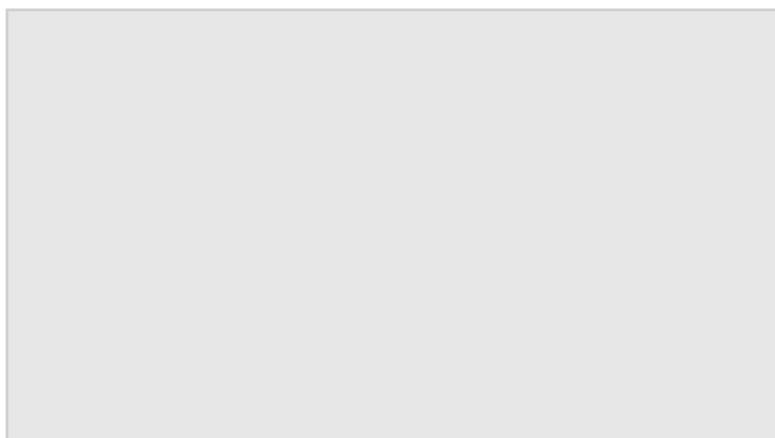


Figure 3.1: The audience and the son gaze at Ma Linsheng through a fissure.

(Film Title: *Papa*, Time Code: 00:04:07)

We gain an appreciation for Ma Che's timidity, as Wang Shuo narrates in his novel, "In Ma Che's life, of all the violence he has suffered, except a scant amount among his peers, the most painful and humiliating punches are delivered by his father." ("儿子从小到大所经受的暴力袭击, 除了一小部分发生在同伴之间, 最悲惨最屈辱的几乎全来自他这个父亲。")<sup>108</sup> As a weak and invisible person in the public world, violence is a weapon for Ma Linsheng to assert his masculinity and illustrate his paternal power in the domestic space. However, in fact, his behavior is incompatible with his intentions. Ma Linsheng is so desperate for his son's attention and affection that he even pretends to be sick just to persuade his son to stay home with him. In addition, he is eager to involve himself in every aspect of Ma Che's life, from his schoolwork to his hobbies, and even his peers. But Ma Che, as an independent teenage boy, is reluctant to accommodate his father's social needs. Ma Che's resistance usually makes Ma Linsheng feel ashamed of his own inappropriate actions, and his shame manifests itself as anger and physical violence against his son.

The film features two scenes in which Ma Linsheng inflicts physical violence upon Ma Che. In the first instance, Ma Linsheng slaps Ma Che on the face because he refuses to apologize to his teachers and to hand in the melodramatic self-criticism written by his father to school (we will discuss this plot later). The second instance occurs after Ma Linsheng just made a proposal

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<sup>108</sup> Wang Shuo, *Wo shi ni baba*, 16.

to his son that they should “establish a new, equal, mutually respectful and friend-like father-son relationship.” However, several days later, Ma Linsheng is caught by his son when rummaging through Ma Che’s pockets. Ma Linsheng blushes because his disturbing behavior is witnessed by the son and thus, he tries to hide his embarrassment by distracting Ma Che’s attention. He asks: “Why did you come home so quickly?”

As Sara Ahmed asserts, shame, one of the primary “negative affects,” begins with one’s realization of one’s failure when it is revealed to others.<sup>109</sup> In other words, shame is triggered when the subject’s failure is witnessed by another (whether a real one or an imagined one). A natural reaction for the subject in such a situation is an attempt to hide, as Charles Darwin points out in “The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals”: “Under a keen sense of shame, there is a strong desire for concealment. We turn away the whole body, more especially the shame, which we endeavor in some manner to hide. An ashamed person can hardly endure to meet the gaze of those present.”<sup>110</sup> In order to deter this embarrassing witness, and attempt to avoid feeling ashamed, Ma Linsheng shouts: “What’s the matter? I am your papa! What’s the matter with me inspecting your belongings?” In reaction to the boy’s contemptuous gaze, Ma Linsheng’s feelings of shame generate anger and aggression: he picks the lock of Ma Che’s desk drawer and examines everything inside it in order to flaunt his power. In defiance of his father, Ma Che refuses to eat and sneers at Ma Linsheng in protest against the invasion of his privacy and violation of his “human rights.” Finally, the irritated father furiously presses his son’s head down into the bowl of noodles in an effort to force-feed him.

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<sup>109</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Shame Before Others,” in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 103-05.

<sup>110</sup> Charles Darwin, “The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals,” *Darwin Online*, updated February 2008, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?pageseq=1&itemID=F1142&viewtype=text>.

Why does Ma Linsheng's shame turn so abruptly into violence against his son? What is the relation between shame and violent behavior? According to a psychological study of jail inmates in the United States, shame may inhibit recidivism due to its destructive potential.<sup>111</sup> The emotional pain caused by shame and by blame from others may produce a desire to unleash one's anger and aggression; thus, most domestic violence originates in shame.<sup>112</sup> Ma Linsheng's actions are not only born out of the emotional pain of feeling ashamed and being blamed by his son but are habitual behaviors and subconscious reactions to new and unfamiliar situations. In other words, he does not know how to respond to Ma Che's demand for privacy and human rights which were unprecedented in father-son relationships in his own generation, or at any point in the Maoist Era. By contrast, domestic violence against children was all too common in Ma Linsheng's childhood; according to the novel, every time the young Ma Linsheng was beaten by his own father, he always swore to himself while sobbing, "I will never beat my son if I become a father someday!" However, ironically, when he did become a father, he treated his son the same way his father had treated him.

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<sup>111</sup> In a longitudinal study of 476 prison inmates, the psychologists assessed participants' shame proneness, guilt proneness, and externalization of blame. They interviewed participants one year after they were set free into the community and accessed their official arrest records. This study suggests that shame directly influenced the chances of reoffending. See J. Tangney, Jeffrey Stuewig, and A. Martinez, "Two Faces of Shame: The Roles of Shame and Guilt in Predicting Recidivism," *Psychological Science* 25 (no.4, 2014): 799–805.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Stearns, *Shame: A Brief History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 5.

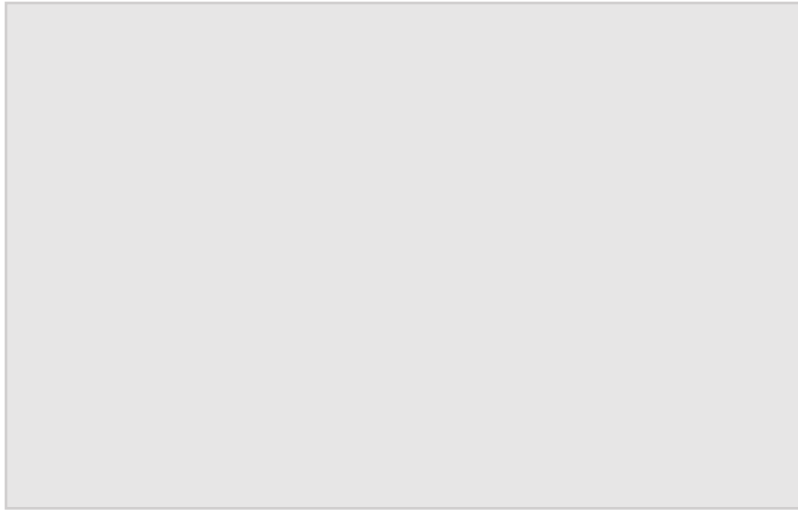


Figure 3.2: Ma Linsheng is ashamed when he is caught rummaging through his son's pockets.

(Film Title: *Papa*, Time Code: 00:59:24)

In light of this analysis, in fact, every time Ma Linsheng inflicts violence upon his son, he himself is suffering from “a kind of indistinct shame and more depression” (“感到了一种隐隐的羞愧和更大的沮丧。”)<sup>113</sup> This sense of shame results in Ma Linsheng crying after the first time he beats his son. After the second instance, he gets drunk and then wanders the streets aimlessly. In the novel, when Ma Linsheng is submerged in depression and shame, he cannot help but recall the moment he had just become a father, and laid his eyes on his newborn son for the first time:

He [Ma Linsheng] was excited and stimulated as never before; at the same time, he felt a heavy sense of responsibility. As he found himself in tears, he seemed to hear a gunshot in the frenzied sounds of his own hallucination. He kept staring at the delicate infant and solemnly vowed to himself without any impulse: “I will make this child happy, no matter what the cost. As long as I live, I will never let him experience starvation, suffering, or injustice. I will never let him go through

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<sup>113</sup> Wang Shuo, *Wo shi ni baba*, 80.

what I went through ——even if it costs my life!”

他感到自己正在体验一种前所未有的激动，一种亢奋，类似慷慨赴义的悲壮；一份深沉，顿感任重道远的毅然决绝。当他发现泪水涌上了他眼眶，他蓦地冷来犹如在愤怒狂乱中听到了一声枪响。他继续看着这个娇小的婴儿，几乎在不带任何感情冲动地对自己发下了一个誓言：“我一定要让这个孩子幸福，哪怕为此我要受尽辱，饱尝痛苦。只要我活着，我就永远不让他知道人间有饥馁、苦难和种种不平。我不许，决不让我曾经受的一切在他身上重演——哪怕为断送自己！”<sup>114</sup>

In this monologue, the young Ma Linsheng regards the role of the father as a hero who sacrifices himself for the future of the next generation. This hopeful and heroic vow brings to mind one of Lu Xun's essays, “Women zenyang zuo fu qin” 我们现在怎样做父亲 (How we should do as a father), published in the journal *New Youth* (新青年) in November 1919:

We [as fathers] carry the remaining heavy burden, shoulder the dark gate and let them [the children] go to the spacious and luminous place; therefore, they can live happily and reasonably afterwards. It is not only an urgent and great cause, but an extremely arduous task.

自己背着因袭的重担，肩住了黑暗的闸门，放他们到宽阔光明的地方去；此后幸福的度日，合理的做人。这是一件极伟大的要紧的事，也是一件极困苦艰难的事。<sup>115</sup>

Xiaobing Tang argues in “Zai hei'an de zhamen houmian” 在黑暗的闸门后面 (Behind the dark gate) that the ideal father “shoulders the dark gate” that Lu Xun describes as “a pledge of a hero.”<sup>116</sup> Needless to say, in *Papa*, the young Ma Linsheng had the same heroic dream as that

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<sup>114</sup> Wang Shuo, *Wo shi ni baba*, 203.

<sup>115</sup> Lu Xun 鲁迅, “Women xianzai yinggai zenyang zuo fuqin” 我们现在应该怎样做父亲 [How we should do as a father now], in *Lu Xun quanji (di yi juan)* 鲁迅全集 (第一卷) [The complete works of Lu Xun, volume 1], (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 人民文学出版社, 1981), 140.

<sup>116</sup> Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵, “Zai hei'an de zhamen houmian” 在黑暗的闸门后面 [Behind the dark gate], *Dushu* 读书, no. 9 (1992): 24-28.

expressed in Lu Xun's essay: to become a great father. However, on actually becoming a father, Ma Linsheng seems to have forgotten his pledge. Every time the middle-aged Ma Linsheng reflects on his youth after harming his son, the imagined view of his young and heroic self witnesses his failure to become a great father. As a feeling of "being against itself" in contrast to other negative emotions such as fear or disgust, shame is directed at the subject itself and negatively affects the self-recognition of the subject, as Ahmed states, "I am ashamed of what I am. Shame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself."<sup>117</sup> Ma Linsheng's shame engenders a negative self-recognition because he fails to live up to the "ideal self" that he envisions.

A later incident forces Ma Linsheng into a more serious crisis of self-perception. When Ma Linsheng sees Ma Che coming home with a bruised head after he had been robbed in an alley, he becomes enraged and decides to avenge his son. In his overconfidence, the father disregards his neighbors' advice, seizes a coal briquette as a weapon, charges out the door and into the alley with his son in tow. When the hooligans see the injured Ma Che returning with his father, they stop playing billiards and stand up watchfully. However, Ma Linsheng walks past them without a glance. The hooligans burst into laughter and call the father and son cowards. Ma Che, ashamed and irritated, tries to snatch the briquette from his father, shouting "Let me fight them!" Ma Linsheng heads off Ma Che and throws the briquette on the ground, declaring "Che, we cannot defeat them! Che, we've got no chance!" In a close-up shot, the father squats alone with his lips trembling and head hanging in humiliation and shame, demonstrating his failure to protect his son and exposing his pathetic self to the hooligans and neighbors, his disappointed son, and the imagined heroic self of his memory.

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<sup>117</sup> Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 103-105.

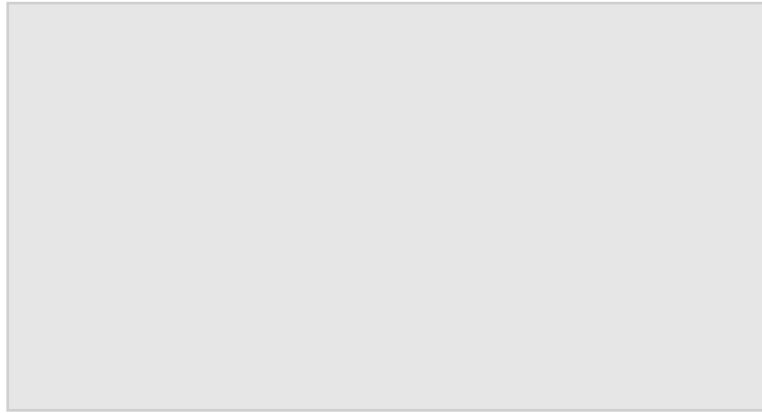


Figure 3.3: A shameful father squats on the floor, bearing the hooligans teased witness and his son's disappointed witness.

(Film Title: *Papa*, Time Code: 00:26:03)

At this moment, the middle-aged father is disillusioned when he realizes the impotence of his masculinity and ability as a father to protect his son. Donald L Nathanson out that “shame implies that some quality of the self has been brought into question,”<sup>118</sup> and when Ma Linsheng's status as a father is thrown into question, his sense of self-worth is undermined. He soon remarries and moves out of the home to live with his new wife, Qi Huaiyuan, renouncing his identity as Ma Che's father. Pointing his finger in his son's face, Ma Linsheng demands of him, “Don't call me papa. I am not worthy to be your papa and I quit.” After that, Ma Linsheng wears a pair of sunglasses day and night; in a metaphorical shot, we see him sitting with the pair of sunglasses under the light at his new home. Qi asks him, “Why are you always wearing a pair of sunglasses at home?” Ma Linsheng's only answer to her question is silence. He uses the sunglasses to isolate himself from the outside world, as he renounces his rights and responsibilities as a father due to his unrelenting shame. The sunglasses are a symbol of his

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<sup>118</sup> Donald L Nathanson, *The Many Faces of Shame*, (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 4.



rejection of any external witness as well as his self-reflection, cutting himself off from his young heroic ideal.

### **Individual Shame and the Collective Identity**

In “Shame Before Others,” a chapter in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explores how a nation expresses its shame and transforms that shame into the people’s national identity.<sup>119</sup> Ahmed specifically discusses shame and national identity from a postcolonial perspective, which, though it does not match the Chinese situation exactly, is still useful for a reading of *Papa*, because Ahmed’s chapter advances the idea that shame is bound up in the community and plays an essential role in mediating the relationships between the individual and the collective. She uses the Australian report *Bring Them Home*<sup>120</sup> as an example to argue that “shame requires a witness, one who ‘catches out’ the failure of the individual to live up to an ego idea. [...] individual shame is bound up with community precisely because the ideals that have been failed are the ones that ‘stick’ others together.”<sup>121</sup> According to Ahmed, shame provides a external individual from breaking social norms.

How to become part of a collective is a salient concern for teenagers, while helping one’s children become socialized is a key responsibility of parents; these processes play important roles in father-son interaction. In *Papa*, however, this interaction becomes the spark that ignites another crisis between Ma Linsheng and Ma Che and results in the final breakdown of their relationship. It also lays bare the core problem of their relationship: whether, and how, the father

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<sup>119</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Shame Before Others,” 101-121.

<sup>120</sup> *Bringing Them Home, Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Australian Federal Parliament, 1997, concerns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were affected by government-ordered forced removal. See <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>

<sup>121</sup> Ahmed, “Shame Before Others,” 108.

should use his experience to influence and cultivate the next generation.

In a classroom, as his teacher is reading to the class, Ma Che raises his hand to ask a mischievous question. The teacher has no idea how to answer the question but scolds Ma Che for his “cockiness.” Ma Che responds sarcastically, cheered on by his classmates, and the class falls into disorder. Thus, the principal calls Ma Linsheng to school to deal with his son’s behavior. As he is on his way to the principal’s office, the camera is positioned at Ma Linsheng’s back. In this shot, Ma Linsheng’s figure is insignificant, and isolated compared to the huge building. He is alone, walking through a dark tunnel, creating the impression that he must go through a period of dark history (and memory) to get his son.

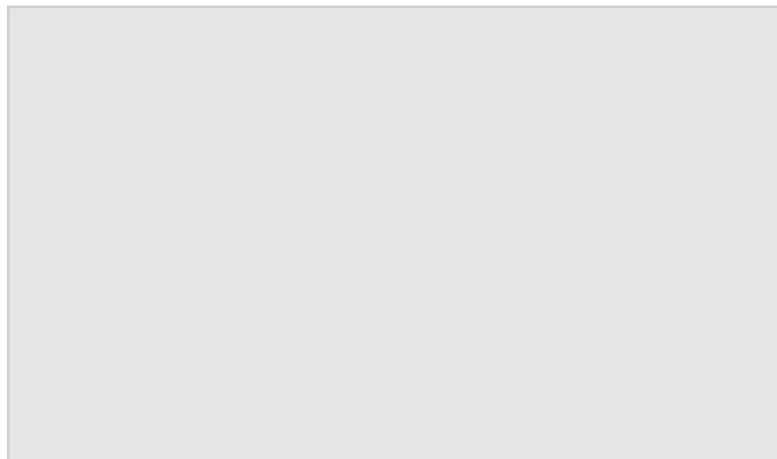


Figure 3.4: Ma Linsheng is going through a dark tunnel to get his son.

(Film Title: *Papa*, Time Code: 00:10:15)

After apologizing and bowing to the teachers, Ma Linsheng is allowed to take Ma Che home and supervises Ma Che as he writes a self-critical essay of his bad behaviour. That night, Ma Linsheng writes the essay, which he calls a “masterpiece,” for his son. He is seated before a bust of Mao, and immersed in the process of writing with Ernest Golden’s *Exodus* soundtrack

playing in the background. He waves his hands like a conductor conducting an orchestra. However, when he looks into the mirror occasionally and finds his son is gazing at him, Ma Linsheng drops his pen and turns off the music with dampened passion. The next afternoon, he completes the self-critical essay and rehearses it in a dramatic tone (every audience member who knows the Model Operas from the Cultural Revolution will be familiar with this tone). On the other side of the room, Ma Che watches his father's performance indifferently as Ma Linsheng reads the self-critical essay:

What I have done is not an accident. It is due to my constant scorn for ideological remolding, my neglect of moral and spiritual cultivation, and the fact that I could not resist the onslaught of bourgeois ideology. It is also the inevitable result of the malignant spread of individualism. It will lead to grave consequences: not only breaking the norms of educational order but hurting the feelings of Ms. Liu and the other teachers, parents, leaders, workers, peasants, intellectuals and the members of the liberation army. The lesson for me is unforgettable, deeply painful and profoundly thought-provoking. I should caution myself, "Ma Che, you are dangerous!"

我这样做不是偶然的，是自己一贯不注意思想改造，忽视了精神文明建设，不能自觉抵制资产阶级思想的侵袭，个人主义恶性膨胀所导致的必然结果，后果是严重的，不但破坏了正常的教学秩序，也伤害了辛勤培育我们的刘老师，和广大教职员工，家长，领导，以及全社会对我们寄予殷切期望的工人、农民、知识分子和解放军们的感情。教训是深刻的，也是沉痛的、发人深省的。我要对自己大喝一声：马车同学，你危险了！

After hearing this passage, Ma Che starts to cry: "Why do you describe me like that? Do I resemble the person you describe?" Ma Linsheng looks disappointed because Ma Che does not show any respect for or give any compliment to his work. The dialogue between father and son in the novel is as follows:

**Father:** The self-criticism must be solemn like this.

**Son:** What do you mean by "solemn"? You almost say I am not a human!

**Father:** Forget your pride. You cannot afford it now! What you are supposed to do is not to treat yourself as a human. Now transcribe my self-criticism and hand

it to your teachers tomorrow.

**Son (staring at his father):** I am not willing to do this. I cannot *shame* myself for the sake of others' forgiveness.

Ma Linsheng and Ma Che disagree intensely on the contents of the self-critical essay, and the son throws it on the floor out of pique. The father is irritated by his son's disrespectful attitude. He punches his son, slaps him on the face and kicks him out of the room. Ma Che bursts into tears and finally yields to his father's violence. At school the next day, he reads his father's essay in front of everyone at a public assembly. The teachers are satisfied by Ma Che's expression of how shameful he is. The most interesting thing is that Wang Shuo has both father and son read the same essay, and so at the school assembly, Ma Che repeats what his father has said: "my behavior hurts the hearts of teachers, parents, leaders, workers, and thousands of peasants, intellectuals, and the members of the liberation army." This indictment might be too cruel for Ma Che, a teenage boy who cries when hearing it from his father for the first time, but for the audience, it is unnecessarily exaggerated, dramatic, and sarcastic. The sequence is also amusing because even though Ma Che cannot read the passage smoothly, he still attempts to use its big words, such as "bourgeois ideology," which he may not even comprehend. The shot in which Ma Che stands at the platform to read the essay resembles that in which Ma Linsheng goes through the dark tunnel to reach his son (Figure 4). This resemblance expresses a feeling of "historical recurrence" which implies that for two generations, the father and son still have to chart the same course somehow.

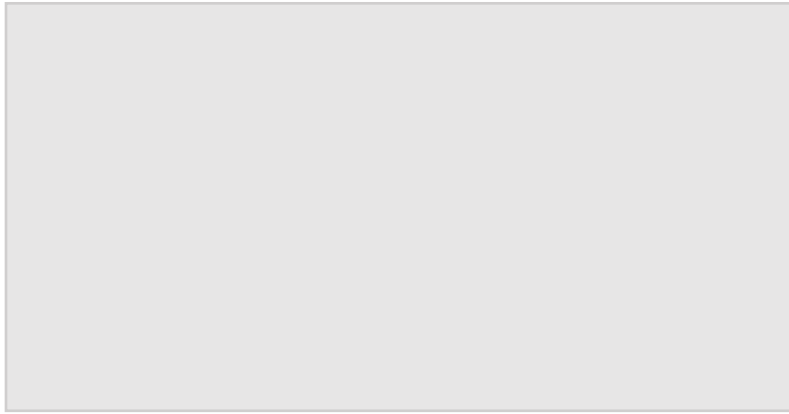


Figure 3.5: The son reads the father's self-criticism in the public.

(Film Title: *Papa*, Time Code: 00:21:02)

During his dispute with his father, Ma Che points out that his father's key method of solving the problem is to shame himself for the sake of others' forgiveness. Ma Linsheng is adept at writing a self-critical essay that satisfies the teachers because he is familiar with the "shame-forgiveness" mode of discourse which was typical in the cultural interactions of the Maoist Era. One of the most famous Maoist coming-of-age stories, *Xiaobing Zhang Ga* 小兵张嘎 (Zhang Ga the soldier boy, 1958)<sup>122</sup> demonstrates the stereotypical notion that shame helps a teenager grow up to become a full-fledged member of the community. The title character of *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* narrates how the protagonist, Zhang Ga, turns from a mischievous boy to a mature little hero during the War of Resistance to the Japanese. As a child, Zhang Ga used to fight with a peasant boy, Hei Pang; he refused to apologize and even insulted Hei Pang and his father Uncle Man. Several years later, Zhang Ga becomes an energetic teenager and is recruited

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<sup>122</sup> *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* is a coming-of-age novel written by Xu Guangyao (徐光耀 b. 1925) in 1958. This story was adapted into a film of the same name directed by Cui Wei (崔嵬, 1912-1979) and Ouyang Hongying (欧阳红樱, 1920-1985), produced by Beijing Film Studio in 1963.

as an unofficial member of the communist guerrilla forces. During a Japanese attack, Uncle Man stands up for Zhang Ga without hesitation and protects him from the Japanese soldiers. This “returning good for evil” action makes Zhang Ga recognize and feel ashamed for his past behavior. He blushes and falls into Uncle Man’s arms with tears on his cheeks. He says, “Uncle Man, I am sorry for what I did to you! I will never do that to you again!” Zhang Ga confesses his guilt, expresses his shame, and finally earns Uncle Man’s forgiveness and affection. This process marks Zhang Ga’s progression from an immature boy to a bona fide young Red Army soldier who acquires the love and support of the peasantry as represented by Uncle Man.

Zhang Ga restores his pride and (re)claims a legitimate identity in the community of communist soldiers and the peasantry, after the process of having failed to live up to the standards of an ideal self, enduring a painful incident, recognizing his failure, and feeling ashamed. He bears the witness of other community members, confesses to his failure and shame, earns their forgiveness, becomes reconciled with himself, and secures his identity in the community. Ahmed describes such a process as “[r]estoring a pride that is threatened in the moment of recognition, and then regained in the capacity to bear witness.”<sup>123</sup> In this ritual process, shame prevents the individual from violating social norms by generating feelings of external and internal blame. At the same time, according to Ahmed, shame must be temporary, in order to provide the chance for the individual to self-correct and help them re-enter the community.<sup>124</sup> This process is what Ma Linsheng expects as he attempts to help Ma Che earn others’ (i.e. the teachers’) forgiveness by demonstrating his shame to re-enter the community/school.

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<sup>123</sup> Ahmed, “Shame Before Others,” 109.

<sup>124</sup> Ahmed, “Shame Before Others,” 109-110.

Ma Linsheng's strategy did work in the Maoist Era, and enabled many people to survive through the Cultural Revolution. He learned this strategy from the political movement he experienced and the literature he read. Ma Linsheng is sincerely eager to help his son get through his teacher-student relationship crisis at school. However, his exaggerated and dramatic style of expression distorts Ma Che's apology to the level of parody. It is possible that even if Ma Che is willing to apologize for his mischievous behavior in the classroom, he might not know the appropriate manner of expression, other than in the words of his father.

### **A Confirmation of Love**

In the first three-quarters of the film *Papa*, Ma Che's sense of shame mainly results from his father Ma Linsheng's embarrassing actions which underscore his failure to be a decent father, as witnessed by Ma Che's friends. Ma Che yearns for private space both physically and mentally, but his father is intent upon inserting himself into every aspect of his son's life, especially when Ma Che gathers with his peers.

On the night of the opening ceremony of the Asian Games held in Beijing in 1990, Ma Che invites his friends to have supper and watch the ceremony on TV at his home. Ma Linsheng wedges himself into the circle of teenagers, telling them to treat him as though he is invisible. However, he continuously makes annoying comments about the ceremony broadcast on TV and asks inappropriate questions, such as "Are the 'Miss Etiquettes' beautiful?" For example, he gazes at a girl named Xia Qing and says, "The figure of these 'Miss Etiquettes' is not good. Xia Qing's figure is much better than theirs, right?" The girl picks up a teacup to hide her embarrassment, and the teenagers around the table fall into silence. Ma Che rolls his eyes at his father surreptitiously. Ma Linsheng persists by asking a boy sitting next to him, "You look

familiar to me. What's your name? Who is your father? Are you living in the residence building?" Ma Che is humiliated by his father's bizarre behavior and cannot endure anymore. He tugs at Ma Linsheng's shoulder and pulls him out of the living room, and persuades him to leave them alone. While everyone else is enjoying the ceremony, Ma Linsheng walks the streets, lonely and depressed.

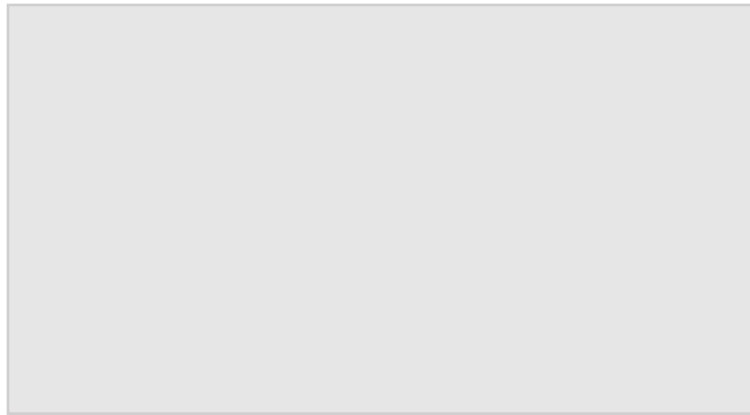


Figure 3.6: Ma Linsheng is asking Ma Che's friends annoying questions, which humiliates his son.

(Film Title: *In the Heat of the Sun*, Time Code: 00:43:37)

Both Ma Linsheng and Ma Che suffer from their unhealthy relationship. When the tension between them comes to a head, Ma Linsheng renounces his responsibility as a father and leaves the home. After Ma Linsheng moves out, Ma Che appears to have achieved his ideal life of private space and freedom. However, he is soon faced with a greater problem: he has been constantly harassed by the hooligans who throw rocks at him, insult him, and continue to rob him. The helpless Ma Che decides to defend himself by resorting to violence and ultimately finds a chance to crack the skull of one of the hooligans with a brick. His rash behavior brings unexpected disaster to his father.



That night, the injured hooligan breaks into Ma Linsheng's new home with his companions, intent on revenge. Ma Linsheng's new wife, Qi Huaiyuan, shouts, "You should go find the one who hurt you. He [Ma Linsheng] is not living with his son now. Get out of my home!" The hooligans break a vase and ask Ma Linsheng, "Are you his father? Is he your son? If you say no, we will leave immediately. Anyway, we can catch your son." Ma Linsheng hesitates to answer and remains silent when facing the violent threat, but when the hooligans are about to leave in search of Ma Che, he confesses, "Yes, I am his father." Upon his admission, they bludgeon him and demolish his home, instead of seeking revenge on Ma Che.

The next day, Ma Che is informed of his father's situation and brought to the hospital by the police. Ma Che is distraught on seeing his father; Ma Linsheng gives him a thumbs-up, and they embrace as Ma Che continues to sob. This is the most touching and significant moment in all their interactions, indicating a move towards reconciliation. Ma Che regrets his imprudent behavior that resulted in harm to his father and recognizes his father's act of self-sacrifice on his behalf. On the other hand, Ma Linsheng finally becomes the hero he had always imagined he would someday become, a realization that allows him to reconcile with himself. Wang Shuo ends the novel with Ma Linsheng confessing his selfishness to his son:

Son, you are allowed to be selfish, because you are young and fragile [...] But I am in a different situation. As a father, I should take the responsibility for taking care of you, as you told me before; otherwise, it should be regarded as a crime. It is what's right. How could I be selfish when I bear this responsibility? How could I be considered as a human, if I am selfish when being a father?

可这不一样，孩子，你可以自私，你还小，你还脆弱。[……]我不同，我对你有责任有义务，你讲过的，否则就是犯罪！这道理是对的，肩负这种责任怎么还能自私？自私还能算个人么……<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Wang Shuo, *Wo shi ni baba*, 276.

After hearing his father's admission, Ma Che "wants to have a loud cry" and "feels ashamed of himself. He feels that he was hypocritical in the way he treated his father who loves him unconditionally" ("马锐真想放声恸哭，感到羞愧。他觉得自己是在用虚伪的态度来对待这个毫无保留爱着他的人。")<sup>126</sup> At this moment, Ma Che is no longer ashamed of his father, but of himself. This transition of the object of shame from the father to the self suggests that Ma Che comprehends his father's love; it also confirms his own love for his father. This demonstrates Ahmed's observation that "shame is not a purely negative relation to another: shame is ambivalent."<sup>127</sup> A re-examination of the shame felt by Ma Linsheng and Ma Che illustrates that their shame originates from the love between them. It is because of love that Ma Linsheng discovers his heroic ideal self; he feels shame when he cannot prove that he is able to live up to the expectations of being a great father, as Ahmed states: "What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love."<sup>128</sup>

At the end of the film, Wang Shuo adapts the conversation from his novel as explicated above into a scene set in the Beijing railway Station. A train arrives, and an old man steps out. Ma Linsheng runs through the crowd to greet him, saying "Pa! Welcome!" and taking his luggage. Only at this point does the audience realize that the old man is Ma Linsheng's father and Ma Che's grandfather. Three generations of the Ma family are reunited and walk side by side towards the camera. This shot illustrates the tension in the family dissolving as the three generations coexist in harmony.

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<sup>126</sup> "马锐真想放声恸哭，感到羞愧。他觉得自己是在用虚伪的态度来对待这个毫无保留爱着他的人。" Wang Shuo, *Wo shi ni baba*, 276. My translation.

<sup>127</sup> Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 105.

<sup>128</sup> Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," 106.

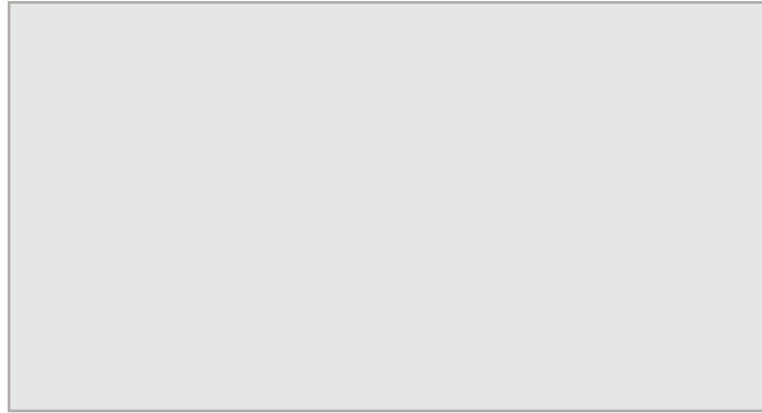


Figure 3.7: Three generations of the Ma family walk home together.

(Film Title: *In the Heat of the Sun*, Time Code: 01:23:36)

### **Conclusion: Reconciliation with the Father**

In both the novel and the film adaptation of *Papa*, Wang Shuo focuses on the figure of the father and the father-son relationship, both of which are important themes in modern Chinese literature and culture. Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua regard the May Fourth Movement<sup>129</sup> of the early twentieth century as “the most massive and influential metaphorical patricide” (一场规模大、效果显著的象征性弑父行为) in the history of China. Examining the national crisis that is perceived as China’s weakness in the face of Western imperialism, China’s so-called failure is attributed to the metaphorical “father,” considered as the reason for the nation’s ignorance,

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<sup>129</sup> The May Fourth Movement (Wusi yundong, 五四运动) was a political movement launched by student participants in Beijing on May 4, 1919 as a resistance against imperialism. See Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

backwardness, and isolation.<sup>130</sup> After a series of attacks the “old father,” Chinese intellectuals placed high expectations on the image of a “new father,” as demonstrated in works such as Lu Xun’s “How We Should Be a Father.” In this polemical essay, Lu Xun asserts that the modern new father should be independent, well-versed, gracious, and willing to sacrifice himself for the future of the next generation.<sup>131</sup> Xiaobing Tang argues that this image of the heroic father reflects the “utopian modernist complex” of the May Fourth Movement.<sup>132</sup> By contrast, in the 1990s, Ma Linsheng in Wang Shuo’s novel and film *Papa* embodies the disappearance of the heroism of the New Culture Movement in the post-revolutionary period. The novel and film raise an important question: What if a father cannot live up to Lu Xun’s ideal of the new father?

In *Little Red Flowers*, the answer to this question might be “neglecting the invisible father,” while in *In the Heat of the Sun*, the answer might be “mocking the hypocritical father.” However, in *Papa*, Wang Shuo gives us a completely different answer. The image of the father is no longer marginalized but is positioned in the spotlight. The image of Ma Linsheng is far from perfect, and Wang Shuo uses “shame” as an instrument to showcase the discrepancy between Ma Linsheng’s heroic ideal and his trivial daily life. I analyze three different shades of shame in Wang Shuo’s work: (1) Shame occurs when Ma Linsheng realizes his inability and failure to be a decent father to his son and to live up to his idealized self-image; (2) although shame can help to maintain collective order, when it is overstated it can be used as a satirical tool against authority figures such as teachers, administrator, etc; (3) Shame can also be considered a confirmation of

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<sup>130</sup> Meng Yue 孟悦 and Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu* 浮出历史地表: 现代妇女文学研究 [Emerging from the historical horizon: a study of modern women’s literature] (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 河南人民出版社: 1989), 4.

<sup>131</sup> Lu Xun 鲁迅, “Women xianzai yinggai zenyang zuo fuqin,” 134.

<sup>132</sup> Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵, “Zai hei’an de zhamen houmian” 在黑暗的闸门后面 [Behind the dark gate], *Dushu* 读书, no. 9 (1992): 24-28.

love. Ma Linsheng's shame originates from his love for his son, and ultimately Ma Che comprehends his father by feeling ashamed of himself. Wang Shuo's conflation of shame with love leads to a positive ending indicating his desire to reconcile with the father, despite the fact that the father is imperfect.

## Conclusion

### The Person Crossing the Square

Where does the square of a bygone era  
begin? Where does it end?  
Some cross in an hour, others spend  
a life in the crossing:  
children in the morning, at evening old men.  
How long must they walk on into the sunset  
before they can rest?

我不知道一个过去年代的广场  
从何而始，从何而终  
有的人用一小时穿过广场  
有的人用一生——  
早晨是孩子，傍晚已是垂暮之人  
我不知道还要在夕光中走出多远  
才能停住脚步？<sup>133</sup>

In 1990, Ouyang Jianghe (欧阳江河, b. 1956) wrote the poem “Bangwan chuanguo guangchang” 傍晚穿过广场 (Crossing the square at dusk). He states in an interview in 2007 that “Although there have been earth-shattering changes over the past seventeen years, I still hold that people today can enter history through this poem. Moreover, they should be guided by this poem to think and feel the passing of the era.”<sup>134</sup> In Chinese history after 1949, the Square has become an important space for people’s political lives, and also a term loaded with revolutionary

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<sup>133</sup> For the whole poem in Chinese and English, see Ouyang Jianghe, “Crossing the Square at Dusk,” in *Double Shadows: Selected Poetry of Ouyang Jianghe*, trans. Austin Woerner, (Mass: Zephyr Press, 2012), 34-45.

<sup>134</sup> Li Dewu 李德武 and Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, “Qianru women etou de guangchang: Li Dewu & Ouyang Jianghe guanyu ‘bangwan chuanguo guangchang’ de jiaotan” 嵌入我们额头的广场 李德武 欧阳江河: 关于 “傍晚穿过广场” 的交谈 [The square implanted in our forehead Li Dewu and Ouyang Jianghe: A discussion of “Crossing the Square at Dusk”]. *Shilin* 诗林, 2007(4):12-24.

and ideological implications. In other words, as the witness of many historical events, the Square becomes a signifier of history. Ouyang Jianghe uses the action of a person's crossing the Square as a metaphor for the intertwining trajectories of an individual's life and of history. On a literal level, it takes one hour for a person to cross the Square; on a metaphorical level, a person might spend a lifetime crossing the history-laden Square. In the poem, the Square is stationary while the person's age changes: "children in the morning, at evening old men." Hence, Ouyang Jianghe's poem offers us an image of how history affects individual lives and how the individual lives are interwoven with history. In this respect, the writer/director Wang Shuo and the other two filmmakers Jiang Wen and Zhang Yuan transform "the person" in Ouyang Jianghe's poem from an abstract concept into a flesh-and-blood character, bestowing narrative detail on the one who spends half a lifetime crossing the square.

At four years old, the person is Fang Qiangqiang who was metaphorically sent to the Square, specifically the kindergarten in *Little Red Flowers* in the 1960s. From that point on, his body was disciplined under the regime of the little red flowers, and it was then that his lonely life began. As a teenager growing up in the Cultural Revolution, the person is Ma Xiaojun who spent his youth in a rhizomatic way. On the one hand, he parodied and undermined the authoritative power or root-tree mode of the Revolutionary Era; on the other hand, he was caught in the coming-of-age crisis and had to reformulate and reimagine his memory. As an exhausted father raising his own child in the 1990s, the person is Ma Linsheng, who has spent decades of years crossing the Square. When stepping onto the midlife stage, Ma Linsheng tried his best to live up to the heroic father image that he had envisioned, but his effort proves futile. The disillusioned father is ashamed of himself, yet at the end of the story he peacefully reconciles with his son and with himself.

In various stages of life, the person reacts differently to the Square. The young child attempts to escape after he is forced to enter the Square; the near-feral teenager dismisses the Square as an object of parody and deconstruction; the middle-aged father, however, is able to gaze at the Square and reminisced about his youth and the first half of his life in the Square in tranquillity, recalling Ouyang Jianghe's poem:

I see faces: those who once,  
on a bright and beautiful morning, crossed the Square —  
in rearview mirrors, they flash  
and disappear.  
At dusk, they get in their cars and leave.  
那些曾在一個明媚早晨穿過廣場的人  
我從汽車的後視鏡看見過他們一閃而逝  
的面孔。  
傍晚他們乘車離去<sup>135</sup>

In my own experience of living in China, I have felt the effects of overarching historical discourses, such as the heritage of the revolutionary era, in every aspect of my daily life. In other words, the Square is everywhere. For example, the first lesson in my primary school was patriotism, and we learned a number of stories of the martyrs, and their sacrifice of their lives to save the nation and the Communist Party. Another example is the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. We, the students, were told it was the most magnificent event for the nation and every Chinese person should be proud of it. Indeed, people were in the ecstasy caused by the significant national event and in unity to share the same emotions like proud, excitement, sublime, and hatred when someone intended to disrupt the Beijing Olympic Games. We sang the Olympic songs, drew the Olympic-themed pictures and held a lecture competition to share our

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<sup>135</sup> Ouyang Jianghe, "Crossing the Square at Dusk," 34.



Olympic dreams. Like most ordinary Chinese people, I take it for granted that individuals should be integrated into national narratives. However, after I entered the university and took some courses in literature, history, sociology, and other subjects, I began to feel more and more confused and distant from the national emotions. I became gradually aware of the huge gap between the official historical record and our everyday lives, and I constantly wondered about how my individual life is presented and where I should be located in the historical site. My thesis was inspired by a viewing of the film *Papa*, particularly the scene in which everyone is gathered at the national stadium, or at home with friends and family, to watch the opening ceremony of the Beijing Asian Games in 1990, while Ma Linsheng is expelled from his home by his son. Unlike the happy crowds, he wanders in an empty square, depressed, aimless, and lonely. This scene touched my heart and triggered off the thesis.

*Little Red Flowers*, *In the Heat of the Sun*, and *Papa* collectively delineate a trajectory of individuals' lives from youth to midlife. They are the mirrors in which many Chinese people who crossed the Square between the 1960s and the 1990s can find reflections of themselves. How can an individual deal with the relationship between history (the Square) and his/her own self? These three films provide with possible answers in conjunction with one another: resist, disdian, and reconcile. The films correlate the individual's various emotions connected to aging with the feelings of isolation on the Square, always hidden under the gloss of great historical narratives.

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