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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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