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Contemporary Chinese Education on Screen: Representations of Chinese Educational Experience in Screen Media from the 1980s to the 2000s

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Abstract

During China's reform era from the 1980s to the 2000s, popular films addressed institutional transformations and the effects of change on Chinese people's ordinary lives. This included transformations in the sphere of education, including the impact of key policies such as the restoration of the university entrance exam, the Opening-Up policy, urban and rural educational policies, and study abroad policies. Throughout a key period of social, political and economic transition in China, this thesis investigates screen media works from the 1980s to the 2000s as a site for dramatizing the experience of educational policy change.

Using a case study approach, this thesis examines how screen representations negotiate cultural values around education in different periods of China's economic transformation. Examining socio-economic dynamics and policy contexts within key reform era decades, it argues that screen media becomes a site where divergent educational experiences are represented, and ideological negotiations of value and self are worked through. By analysing strategic pairings of Chinese popular film and television series from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s – illuminating different educational situations, school stages and policy settings – the thesis considers how Chinese cultural values of ambiguity, sacrifice, and the identity of self within interpersonal relationships, are used to represent different attitudes towards changes in Chinese education, which speak in turn to differing attitudes towards changes in China more broadly. In critical terms, the thesis demonstrates how institutional transformations, enacted through educational policy, are dramatized as individual stories and personalized experiences. In this way, the dissertation offers insights into the cultural and ideological work of popular screen media bridging official policy with everyday Chinese life.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the representation of Chinese education in popular screen media from the 1980s to the 2000s, and in doing so explores how screen representations negotiate shifts, transitions and values around education within different moments of China's economic transformation during this period. With this focus in mind, this thesis asks three research questions. First, how has the Chinese educational experience been represented in popular screen media from the 1980s to the 2000s? Second, how do socio-economic dynamics and policy contexts within key decades of the reform era shape these representations? Third, how do screen representations of education become a vehicle for representing cultural values, meanings, and identities for Chinese individuals, specifically as these relate to ideas of self, family, and society?

Historical Context

The historical period from the 1980s to the 2000s is one of significant social and economic transitions in China. During this time, China recalibrated its identity and economy with the world beyond the nation's mainland border, especially after a ten-year period of lockdown and internal disorder caused by the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution. The nature of this Cultural Revolution, in policy and cultural terms, was class struggle – more specifically, an attempt to eliminate class and regional differences by favouring the proletarian class, such as poor peasants and workers, and to overturn the bourgeoisie class, including intellectuals, entrepreneurs and landlords, by giving proletariats access to assets monopolized by the bourgeoisie. This revolutionary programme hindered the development of many areas of Chinese society, including education.

Starting in 1977, a set of governmental, economic and social strategies were put in place to re-establish and restructure the country. The Opening-Up Policy was one of the most prominent economic and social programmes of the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of the historical goals of this period was to build China into a modern socialist power. After being disrupted by the Cultural

Revolution, China's economic, social and educational systems began to gradually recover from the 1980s onwards. By the 1990s, we see a time of rapid economic, social and institutional transformation in China. In 1992, the 14th General Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established that the goal of China's economic restructuring was to switch from a planned economy, a centralized form of planning, to a market economy with a predominance of public ownership and state-owned enterprises, that included macro-regulation by the central government (Yeung 2015, p.376). Therefore, economic reform was deepened in the 1990s. Approximately ten years later, in 2001, China became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). This membership was considered essential to the future of the nation, especially in gaining access to overseas markets in the 2000s.

As such, from the beginning of the 1980s, due to Opening-Up Policy, China witnessed significant economic growth propelled by export expansion, and throughout the 1990s a switch to a market economy supported this economic growth, a trend that continued for China, particularly since joining the WTO at the beginning of the 2000s. This was a transitional era when many economic and social changes occurred in China. Those changes, particularly in policies, impacted economic, social, educational and geographical configuration in terms of China trying to modernize and internationalize in favour of Opening Up. Therefore, these three decades are vital to be the focus of this thesis.

This thesis places its end point in the 2000s because of developmental goal changes in China. From the beginning of the 2010s, the concept of the 'Chinese Dream' proposed by Chairman Xi Jinping (the paramount leader of China since 2012) accelerate China's prosperity and power – not a mere political goal but also a social one (Ferdinand 2016, p.943). The 'Chinese Dream' is not merely a slogan. It was followed by a period of establishment and the acceleration of the new state. As such, in my thesis, I investigate the period when China was undergoing a key set of transitions from the 1980s to the 2000s, before a later period from the 2010s when the Government sought to accelerate to claim China's positioning as a world superpower.

Education in Chinese Context

As in any period of historical transition, ideological negotiations occurred, such as changing values of identity and differing attitudes towards political, economic and social transformations. In this thesis, I look at ideological negotiations that take place through representations of education in popular screen media in China from the 1980s to the 2000s. Examining the representation of Chinese education in film and television is revealing because popular screen texts often represent people's mainstream, everyday interactions with educational systems and settings.

From the 1980s to the 2000s, a large number of changes happened that transformed Chinese cultural life. As education is linked to important changes in policy, it becomes a useful vehicle to trace some of these transitions and offers a means to examine how changes are manifested, experienced and *represented* in people's everyday lives. In cultural and ideological terms, I explore changes in educational experience during this transitional period through diverse prisms of value and identity: 1) relations between family, nation, and education; 2) the meaning of self in Chinese culture and educational philosophies; 3) cultural attitudes and politics around youth and adulthood; and 4) individuals' personal development and social hierarchy.

In China, the concept of education has been important since ancient times. Two thousand five hundred years ago, the famous Chinese educator and philosopher, Confucius, proposed the idea of 'civic education and learning for all', as he believed education was the only way 'to improve people's moral consciousness' so that 'society can reach peace and harmony' (Tjeldvoll and Liu 2014, p.11). Philosophically and culturally, Confucius remains an influential figure in China: notwithstanding cultural changes throughout history and the attempts to repress Confucianism and his educational ideas during the Cultural Revolution. Thus, the educational concept of Confucius — suggesting education as a tool to perfect people's morals, in order to improve the stability of society — has influenced China up to the present day.

In contemporary China, education also plays an important role. The structure and content of the educational system has been a historical site of ideological contention. After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government implemented the Opening-Up Policy, to keep up with changing global political and economic circumstances. The issue of China's Opening-Up Policy and the manner of its implementation have resulted in immense changes in Chinese society. From an educational aspect, from the 1980s the Chinese government initiated massive educational reforms to make educational institutions more efficient and responsive to economic development, which, as explained in the previous section, was the government's overall policy and social focus at the time. One of the most influential policies was the Law of Compulsory Education in 1986, which initiated the Nine-Year Compulsory Education system.

As a consequence, every Chinese child was entitled to receive a primary and middle school education by law. This is a radically different educational system from that during the Cultural Revolution from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s when education was a part of the class struggle, a tool used to denounce the bourgeoisie and support the proletariats. During the Cultural Revolution, education from teachers and textbooks was denounced as these people and materials were associated with the bourgeoisie. Students, especially students in the cities, were encouraged to dismiss education at school, and relocate to the countryside to learn practical skills from peasants and workers, the real proletariat.

Prior Academic Research on Chinese Educational Experience and Film

Academic discussions of Chinese educational experiences and their representation in screen media, such as film, have largely focused on the Republican China period (1912–1949) or the 2010s. Scholars such as Aoxue Peng (2009), Xingqing Shi (2014), Daw-Ming Lee (2018) and Kaiyi Li (2020) draw attention historically and socially towards education and films during Republican China. In relation to political and social contexts in China during Japanese and civil wartime, these scholarly investigations examine the historical and industrial development of educational film from 1918 to 1949

(Peng, 2009), and explore film case studies – cinematographer, Sun Mingjing, within the Republican China period, for instance (Shi, 2008). Through exploring education in film during the war period, researchers find that in the Republican China period, films representing education mainly functioned as a tool for propaganda (Lee, 2019; Li, 2020). As such, scholarly works regarding educational films in the Republic of China period are overtly concerned with its developmental history and political doctrines.

The other main research trend in the study of educational representations within Chinese screen media looks at issues of recollecting past schooling experiences. This engages, in particular, with a cycle of films produced in the 2010s about the education of the post-1980s generation in the 1990s or 2000s, seen through a lens of 'nostalgia'. Films that received high box office performances. Many of these films are labelled as 'nostalgic youth school films' by the Chinese audience, film market and critics. For example, *Fleet of Time* (2014), *Goodbye Mr Loser* (2015) and *Yesterday Once More* (2016). The film representation of nostalgic schooltime is so popular that Chinese film scholars have debated whether it is a genre of film in itself, or rather a theme (see Bloom, 2019).

In the 2010s, the words 'youth', 'nostalgia' and 'school' often appear together and are associated with each other in scholarly discussions on the film representations of education in this period. Scholars discuss how films with an increasing nostalgic trend in the Chinese-language film market display a clear nostalgic style, theme or sentiment, which portrays school life, or teen love stories (Lao, 2015; Sun, 2015; Wang and Chen, 2015). Therefore, the educational experience on screen in the 2010s has achieved cultural and academic visibility focused on examining the memory of past schooling experiences.

Ideological Negotiations Towards Sacrifice, Self and the Meaning of Self Through Education

However, few scholars to date have considered film and television representations of the Chinese educational experience produced from the 1980s to the 2000s, or their links to the transition that happened in Chinese society during this period. The ideological negotiations in these screen media, discussed in this dissertation, are not explicit propaganda films promoting ideologies, such as films produced during the war period and discussed by the scholars Xingdong Shi, Aoxue Peng, Daw-Ming Lee and Kaiyi Li. Nor do these films offer a nostalgic prism, through which to remember past educational experiences, such as films that proliferated about nostalgic schooling and youth in the 2010s.

In contrast, the screen media discussed in this thesis are commercial popular screen media products within a fast-developing social system between the 1980s to the 2000s. The way these film and television productions released in the 1980s to the 2000s negotiate meanings is different to the films produced during other periods, because of contemporaneous changes within this transitional era. Thus, they portray the popular meanings and values negotiated throughout their production period which reflect the status of society at that time, such as the link between family and education, opportunities and predicaments generated by education, the notion of sacrifice and relational hierarchies, and social stratification in education. Therefore, the films in discussion turn from a propaganda approach of explicit messaging, or a nostalgic approach longing for old times, to investigate ideological negotiations through educational experiences in contemporaneous commercial films.

Brought about by socio-political-economic transitions in China since the 1980s reform, opportunities and conflicts in education appear against a backdrop of policy change. One noticeable feature of all of my case studies is that structural transitions are rendered as personal stories. Educational conflicts from macro socio-historical and political levels are represented as personal dramas, seen as needing to be solved by individuals on a personal level.

In screen media playing out political issues as interpersonal dramas, different shapes of ideological negotiations take place. For instance, generational tension is influenced by different attitudes toward the same educational policy, or unequal educational dynamics between old and young, urban and rural, and male and female individuals, in different families, communities, and Chinese society in general.

Throughout the films and television series produced from the 1980s to the 2000s, interpersonal relationships, interpersonal sacrifice between oneself and others, as well as the value of self become repeating motifs in these media representations of education in the family, social community and the nation, through which these negotiations take place. To understand the ideological context in which representations of education are played out in these screen media case studies, it is useful to consider the significance of Confucian philosophy in terms of structuring the values of education, as in Chinese culture 'Confucian principles often appear as a deep cultural structure that citizens see as reasonable […] or even bedrock values' (Janoski 2014, p.368). In Confucianism, a core component of many Asian value systems, the individual should 'sacrifice oneself for the good of a larger entity, such as family and society' (Lau 1996, p.360). As such, personal sacrifice is expected within Chinese cultural ideology.

In this cultural context, a sacrifice bound to the morals of collective society: to be a 'good' citizen the needs of the collective are placed before oneself. As Yan Zhu notes while researching China's Confucian-collectivist, social-cultural values: 'people may feel a moral obligation to help in-group members' (2021, p.918). Thus, a collective orientation equates self-sacrifice to a moral disposition in which individuals are obliged to sacrifice themselves for collectivity. Collectiveness might be interpreted in the form of the nation and the family. Because of this cultural obligation of self-sacrifice, the boundaries of the self in Chinese understanding extend from one person to others in the same family or community.

Jack Barbalet draws the concept of the 'lesser self' and the 'greater self' from Confucius's philosophy of 'to sacrifice the lesser self, for completing the greater self'. Barbalet proposes that in either a family or society, the 'lesser self' needs to be subordinate to the 'greater self' which creates responsiveness towards others' needs and intentions (Barbalet, 2013). In this vein, Confucius's concept of the 'lesser self' and the 'greater self' reduces the sense of individual interests and integrates the significance of collectiveness in the form of two selves. The considered 'lesser self' in each relationship is obligated to prioritize the values and needs of the 'greater self' through self-sacrifice (Barbalet, 2013). As such, in various interpersonal relationships within Confucian Chinese culture, the concepts of 'sacrifice', 'lesser self' and 'greater self' are interwoven. In this vein, the concept of the individual or oneself is merged into a collective means.

This cultural sense and concept of self-sacrifice, 'greater self' and 'lesser self', are often mobilized in interpersonal stories related to educational experiences in screen media produced from the 1980s to the 2000s. Various manifestations in different films and television series reveal several Chinese cultural negotiations on self-sacrifice and the meaning of the self through education. In each interpersonal relationship related to education on screen, the 'lesser self' who needs to sacrifice for the 'greater self' might be dissimilar or understood divergently by individuals through representations within Chinese culture in different contexts and periods. Where interpersonal relations involve self-sacrifice related to education, the topic and conditions of education generate ambiguity and inequality between individuals, families, generations, genders, geographical locations or social classes, as people have been experiencing such socio-political-economic transitions in China since the 1980s reform.

Significant Chinese cultural values and ideological negotiations of self-sacrifice, the 'lesser self' and the 'greater self', profoundly penetrate the lives of Chinese people, including education and screen representations of the educational experience. This thesis will use emerging themes of attitudes towards education, sacrifice, 'greater self', 'lesser self' and the meaning of self

through education to examine Chinese films on individual educational experiences represented in five popular films and one television documentary.

Methodology and Chapter Structure

My research is primarily based on case studies via close readings of film texts. Case studies, like any other approach, have advantages and drawbacks, the most significant limitation of which is the difficulty in extracting general conclusions from a small number of cases. Nonetheless, the choice to explore case studies was prompted by the need to provide a more detailed and precise look at film and television practices that represent educational experiences.

When assessing representations of Chinese education in screen media, I consider five films: *Father and Son* (1986), *The September of Mine* (1990), *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* (1997), *Going to School with Father on My Back* (1998), and *Life Translated* (2005), and a television documentary series, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999). The selection of screen texts was not limited to cinematic forms. These texts were selected because they represent certain themes and tendencies regarding contemporaneous education experiences, opportunities or issues, especially concerning ideological negotiations at personal levels. For instance, the link between family and education, interactions between young people and people of authority related to education, educational practices in urban and rural areas, personal development through education, and the formation of social hierarchies within education.

Building on the case studies and close readings of screen texts focused on representations of Chinese education, this thesis analyzes the contemporaneous portrayal of primary, secondary, and higher education in Chinese popular screen media from the 1980s to the 2000s. The selection process of films and television series, guided by criteria in this and the above paragraphs, such as historical and educational period accuracy, and cultural and thematic relevance, ensures authentic thematic representation, enriches the analysis of educational portrayal in Chinese screen media, and focuses on texts adept at exploring ideological negotiations and individual agency within

educational settings. Initially, a wider range of screen texts was evaluated to ensure a wider examination of ideological negotiations within educational settings. While potential texts such as *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), which explores the educational experiences of teenagers during the Cultural Revolution through a nostalgic lens looking back from the 1990s—and *Little Red Flowers* (2006), depicting the kindergarten experiences of a four-year-old boy in a 2000s societal context, were considered, they were ultimately not selected, due to their less direct engagement with the study's core selection criteria – the contemporaneous educational experiences from primary to higher education in 1980s to 2000s. Instead, the chosen works noted for their mainstream concurrent nature, provide deep insights into the cultural meaning of self within educational contexts and contrast with independent works that might offer alternative perspectives.

The selected cases emphasize either/both visual and narrative elements of the chosen texts. Some films were selected for their visual markers, like imagery and cinematic techniques that emphasize ideological debates about the value of self around education, such as *Father and Son*, and *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* while others were chosen for their narratives that vividly capture the educational experiences shaped by economic, social, and cultural changes, such as *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*. This dual approach enables a nuanced examination of how education is depicted across different screen media formats, addressing the evolving socio-political landscape in China. The analysis aims to uncover visual and narrative elements that reveal the underlying culturally ideological meaning of self within broader educational trends.

The study recognizes the profound impact of censorship, overseen by the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT, 1986-1998) and its successor, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, 1998–2013), in shaping screen media content. While not focusing on the direct effects of censorship on screen representations, the thesis explores the strategic use of Confucianism within films produced by state-affiliated or state-owned

companies. This analysis investigates how Confucian values, integrated within screen works, support state ideologies and promote social harmony, subtly reinforcing the political status quo through cultural narratives. It critically analyzes how these selected mainstream films are limited in their capacity to challenge educational policies due to their production and approval contexts. Instead of addressing state accountability, these films emphasize personal responsibility and interpersonal relations as diversions from state culpability. The incorporation of Confucianism supports established power dynamics and redirects discussions away from state responsibilities, particularly in educational settings. Therefore, mainstream cinema, while conforming to officially recognized ideologies, tends to avoid direct critique of policies, focusing instead on individual adaptation within these constraints, thus producing sanitized representations that align with mainstream ideologies. The textual analysis of these film and television cases contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the complex interplay between screen media representations, cultural meanings of self and educational policy developments.

To deepen the analysis of the media produced in the period examined in each chapter, two different case studies are used comparatively in each chapter, from Chapters 2 to 4, to specifically explore the perception of these cultural and ideological debates in different educational settings. This thesis argues that education in films becomes a particular life stage and site for negotiating the changing attitude, value, meaning and identity, under the socio-political-economic changes in China since the 1978 reform. In particular, films, and other screen works between the 1980s to 2000s, become a means for debating the

understanding of ambiguities relating to opportunities and challenges, sacrifice, and the value of self that connected to individuals, families and the nation in the educational context.

The chapter structure is organized as follows. Chapter 1 is a contextual chapter on the development of the Chinese education system from 1949 to 1977, to provide insight into the social, economic and political backgrounds and the cinematic historical contexts that existed before the period in which education was experienced in the case studies. This chapter will also briefly discuss film representations, to show the meaning of self and education prior to the economic reform which builds a foundation for the transition of values and self-identity in education in the main analysis chapters. Fundamentally, Chapter 1 contextualises the educational and ideological transitions that will be examined in my case studies from Chapter 2 to Chapter 4.

Chapter 2 examines how films produced in the 1980s represent disparate attitudes towards educational changes, and the value and meaning of self between education, family and nation. It focuses on two national policies – the restoration of the university entrance exam and the Opening-Up Policy – and their impact under the educational policy against a domestic backdrop of a Chinese family as well as the meaning of self between education and nation under a specific historical moment for a primary school student. It begins with a contextual section on the educational background from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the beginning of the 1990s. Two film case studies follow, *Father and Son* (1986) and *The September of Mine* (1990). These case studies draw out some of the educational and ideological changes taking place in the education system from 1977 to 1990 – after the resumption of the entry exam to higher education and the issuing of the Opening-Up Policy. These case studies also help to tease out thematic issues, such as how film represents relations between family and education, and how film represents relations between children and the nation in educational sites during key collective events such as the Asian Games (1990, Beijing, China). Interactions between young people and authority figures allow the discovery of a dimension of

generational attitudes towards education and the meaning of self within the nation through the representation of education in this specific period.

Chapter 3 investigates the cultural, social and ideological transitions experienced by socially or economically peripheral individuals and their sacrifice in education as the economic reform deepens, and, specifically, maps onto the dynamics of urban and rural education in films made in the 1990s. Following a contextual section on the educational background in the 1990s, the chapter examines key themes of sacrifice in the films *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* (1997) and *Going to School with Father on My Back* (1998). This includes how these films represent social and domestic hierarchies developed within educational sites in terms of sacrifice, and what dynamics arise that are relevant to the representation of Chinese education in different moments during the 1990s, for example, in the urban and rural context for marginalized students.

Chapter 4 looks at the internationalization of China and what education means for individual overseas Chinese students. It examines screen media from 2001 to 2009, the period after China joined the WTO. This chapter begins with a contextual section on the educational background of the 2000s, and focuses on the screen texts *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999) and *Life Translated* (2005), examining portrayals of individuals' development as they undergo overseas education and the dynamics of self-identity as influenced by joining the WTO.

In summary, this thesis proposes employing the cultural and ideological transition of the attitudes towards education, the notion of the 'greater self' and the 'lesser self' in Chinese films in order to investigate screen themes of the meaning and identity of self and self-sacrifice in specific social and educational situations. Thereby, the thesis presents an in-depth examination of how Chinese screen media have implemented certain cultural connections to represent attitudes and self-identity, while engaging with educational, social and economic development in China from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Thus, the next chapter will serve as a starting point to better understand the educational context prior to the 1980s. It will also briefly introduce how the films represent education and the meaning of self, in the specific contexts from 1949, when the People's Republic of China (henceforth PRC or New China) was founded until 1977, the end of the Cultural Revolution. It will do so by describing improvements in literary and science education, to the gradual denouncement of academic education and the celebration of the proletariat (also represented in films produced in this period). To understand the nature of the representation of education, through which ideological negotiations happen, and what it means in the chosen educational, social and economic context from the 1980s to the 2000s, it is important to know the context of where the transition is from. Chapter 1 establishes what education and educational representation were prior to the economic reform era, in order to ascertain how they were understood in the pre-economic reform era (1949–1976) where the meaning of education was significantly different from the 1980s to 2000s context, the period of focus of this thesis.

Chapter 1: Chinese Education and Film Representation in the Pre-Reform Era, 1949–1976

This thesis focuses on contemporary China from the 1980s onwards, after the initiation of the Opening-Up Policy. To contextualise this period for my research, this chapter provides the background from 1949 to the end of the 1970s. I will first explore some key transitions from 1949 to 1976 in order to contextualise some of the movements that occurred from the inception of the PRC's educational policy and systems to the end of the Cultural Revolution. This background assists my examination of the educational and ideological transitions of my case studies from Chapters 2 to 4. Furthermore, to pave the way for the screen media analysis in the subsequent chapters, I will briefly analyse cinematic representations from 1949 to 1976 to investigate how the educational system and the value of self were portrayed on screen in this historical moment and setting.

Education at the Dawn of the New China (1949–1965)

In this section, I will explore education at the beginning of New China. New China is a widely used and adopted short name that refers to the PRC, which was founded in 1949 (Fan and Lu 2012, p.1). Understanding the educational situation of this period is important, as it supports the analysis of changes in the educational system, policies, and screen media narratives around educational experiences in the following chapters.

The PRC was founded in 1949, following the Second World War (WW2) and the Civil War in China (1927–1949). The foundation of the 'new' country was preceded by multiple difficulties, including educational challenges. One of the most predominant problems was the low literacy rate; a level of 70% to 80% illiteracy in 1949 (Pepper 1978, p.847). In addition, during the two wars aforementioned, 'many schools were demolished by bombing […] Apart from the damage of school facilities, teachers and students were turned into refugees, creating an immeasurable loss to education' (Xu 2001, p.24). This also

contributed to penurious educational circumstances and low education popularisation in the early days of the PRC's founding.

Nevertheless, with the founding of New China, the Chinese government set out to restore the economic and social order destroyed by the WW2 and Civil War, including education. Therefore, momentous changes occurred in China's educational system. As Yuxiao Wu observes:

> From the beginning of the communist regime in 1949, the Chinese government emphasized both economic development and social equality […] the government made a deliberate effort to dismantle the privileges of elites through providing more educational opportunities for children from working-class and peasant families […] As a result, educational opportunities expanded dramatically in this period, especially at the lower levels of education and for students with worker-peasant family backgrounds. (2008, p.206)

As can be drawn from Wu's observation, these changes in education and education policy were inextricably linked to issues of class, such as class stratification, socio-economic inequalities and social mobility. In this vein, one government action was to increase the number of primary and middle schools so as to boost universal access to education. Prior to this policy, 'China adopted an American-style school system, which was characterized as 6-3-3-4/5 structure – that is six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, three years of senior high school, and four years of college or university' (Deng and Treiman 1997, cited by Yuxiao Wu 2008, p.205). Post-1949, there was a deep concern to divest China's educational system of all traces of social or class stratification. The number of schools increased, and social equality, in theory, improved.

However, problems still existed. In 1957, R. F. Simpson tried to outline the challenges and possibilities of Chinese education based on the education

system from 1949 to 1957. This formative piece of scholarly work remains a useful point of reference. He states:

> Prior to 1949, primary education was available to no more than 40 per cent of school-age children. At present it is estimated 80 per cent receive some form of primary education, although the duration may be very short indeed. In the cities this figure of 80 per cent may well be correct, and the provision of primary education for all by the end of the Second Five-Year Plan [1958–1962] is still a possibility. But in the vast rural areas such a prospect much lie several decades ahead. (1957, p.84)

Although Simpson shows a doubling of the primary school population occurred from 1949 to 1957, his research finds considerable variations in the relationship between social origins and educational advancement. Urban areas tended to enjoy greater access to education, whilst for extensive rural areas access to primary education was much lower. It would take many decades for rural areas to reach a point where the attendance rate of primary schools was equal to that in the cities. The challenge thus became rural/urban access to education: to reduce the divide in education between well-supported urbanites and disadvantaged rural populations.

Though there was a clear improvement in primary education attendance at the beginning of New China, educational attainment was significantly reduced. Simpson further notes that 'only 8 per cent of primary school students ever get to a middle school and only one-sixth of these are in a senior middle school' (1957, p.85). Simpson's examination shows the student pool who continued to the next level of education was significantly limited. Therefore, the school attendance rate in New China for primary education in cities was nearly 40 percent higher than before New China was founded, but this rate dropped dramatically in further education. The attendance rate was also much lower in the countryside compared to the cities. Thus, a discrepancy remained between urban and rural access to education.

A national education system was implemented across Chinese regions, but different regional variations existed. According to Yuxiao Wu, 'State policies encouraged locally funded and managed schools and even placed the state-run schools under the management of local government. Consequently, many schools were opened that were locally controlled, used locally prepared textbooks, and placed a strong emphasis on expanding enrolment' (2008, p.205). Therefore, the Chinese educational system was cumulatively decentralized in the 1950s, as a vital tool for realizing the egalitarian educational ideal for more students to access education through local schools. However, educational resources were bonded with regional management and funding availability. Therefore, regional differences in education existed.

Regarding higher education in the newly founded China, student numbers grew, but subjects available for study remained limited. Simpson observes that 'whatever the influence of party policy on the courses and on university life in general, there has been a notable increase in the number of students attending higher education institutions' (1957, p.87). The number of students in primary education also increased, but this increase slowed when the students reached secondary education. Nonetheless, overall student numbers, including in higher education, sustained an upward trend.

With generally increasing student numbers, the subjects students could choose were confined, particularly at the higher education level. According to the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) on the State Council of People's Republic of China, the official government website of PRC – that a central task for the nation in the 1950s was industrial construction (The State Council of People's Republic of China, 2008). Therefore, during four to five years of college or university subjects on offer showed a utilitarian trend (Wu 2008, p.205). Education favoured practical subjects that would prepare students to contribute to China's ongoing industrialization. When Immanuel C. Y. Hsu began to consider the narrow selection of subjects offered at universities, he observes that higher education was known for its specialisation, training more scientific and technical personnel to realize industrialization and improve

China's global status (1964, p.128). At the dawn of the New China, higher education functioned as a utilitarian means to produce scientists and technicians. The curriculum was designed with a focus on science subjects, to reach a clear aim: industrialization.

Except for a focus on subjects, some scholars criticized the Chinese education system since it focused a great deal on propaganda. Theodore Hsi-En Chen notes that in the new country, many policies focused on propaganda, including education. He further reports that:

> The Common Program of the People's Republic stipulates in Article 42 that education shall prompt 'love of fatherland, love of the people, love of labor, love of science, and care of the public property'. These five traits have been called the 'five loves' that education must strive to cultivate […] and education must make direct contributes to the material and economic reconstruction of the nation. (1951, p.138)

For Chen:

> This means a utilitarian type of education and the inevitable neglect of studies which are known in the West as the liberal arts. The new regime aims to transform China as quickly as possible into an industrial nation, and expects the schools and colleges to produce the trained personnel needed for all phases of the industrialization programme. (1951, p.139)

Though the function of propaganda is not the focus of my thesis, it is important to acknowledge that propaganda is recognised as a part of education, even by the early 1950s, and that propaganda included an emphasis on science. In the proposed 'five loves', science was emphasized as part of modernization. Education at that stage was not only an academic education, but a moral education. Students' national identity was reinforced, and their duty to preserve the nation's political stability was reminded to them through

education. By this means, education by law (in Article 42) reinforced the political function of moral training.

At the dawn of the New China, the idea of education was a dual educational system – of egalitarian and utilitarian education. On the one hand, lower education, such as primary and secondary education in New China tended to focus on the improvement of literacy rates among citizens. The government applied policies to narrow the class gap in education. The number of schools and school attendance rate increased, but the urban-rural gap remained. On the other hand, higher education aimed to serve the political and economic interests of the country – to support rapid industrialization and to train elites to become experts in specific fields, such as science and engineering. The educational policies of 1950s China allowed the country to develop at a fast rate. This section has depicted the educational situation and developments upon which representations of education in the films produced during this period are founded on these changes, as discussed in the previous chapter. Characters are also represented that have experienced similar changes. Therefore, it is as equally important to understand changes in educational structure during the Cultural Revolution.

Education During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)

After the foundation of New China, the government issued policies, which attempted to reduce class differences in education and create an egalitarian education system. However, a regional social difference still existed between urban and rural areas. Meanwhile, university education focused on utilitarian, scientific education – to prompt intellectual elites to industrialize the country. During the Cultural Revolution, in a radical turn of events the utilitarian educational mode was abolished, and replaced by an ideological egalitarian form of education. Educational policies, the role of education and taught subjects were extended into an absolute egalitarian educational mode – an attempt to eliminate class and regional differences and to achieve absolute equality.

The Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, is a noteworthy chapter in Chinese history. The core ideology of policies during this time concentrated on class struggle (Wang, 2022). Policies favoured the proletarian class, such as poor peasants and workers, with an aim to overturn the bourgeoisie class, comprised of intellectuals, entrepreneurs and landlords who owned assets, by giving proletariats access to assets monopolized by the bourgeoisie (Wu, 2012). During the ten years of disorder that marked the Cultural Revolution, policy and legislation developments were interrupted, which impeded modernization in many areas of Chinese society, such as education, economics and politics.

Policies were issued to focus on the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, to create a Marxist utopia of a classless society (Thurston, 1987; Qian, 2014). This class struggle was also reflected in the education system. According to Kwong, Chairman Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the PRC (1949–1976), proposed radical educational reform:

> The teaching material should be thoroughly transformed, in some cases beginning with simplifying complicated material. While their main task is to study, students should also learn industrial work, farming, and military affairs, and take part in the struggles of the Cultural Revolution to criticize the bourgeoisie as these struggles occur. (Kwong 1974, p.19)

This ideological appeal requested a revision to many educational aspects, including the role of education, its status for and in the nation, admissions and curriculum. Education swiftly transformed. This education seemed only ideological, which created an unprecedented educational crisis as teachers became the prime target of purges. According to Hung-Ti Chu:

> At a meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in September, 1965, Chairman Mao Tse-tung pointed to the need to subject bourgeois ideology to criticism and renewed the call for class struggle against

> recalcitrant intellectual leaders and their influence on the educational system. (1970, p.165)

Education became a battleground of ideological shaping, and people related to education were involuntarily drawn into the class struggle. Intellectuals, such as teachers, professors, and researchers, were called into question. According to Yixin Chen, 'Mao denounced professors and experts as "bourgeois" in May 1966, having knowledge had become a sin' (1999, p.224). The trend was to denounce and criticize superior intellectual classes, in order to reach an egalitarian society. Thus, the status of teachers dropped sharply, as they were classified into the bourgeoisie camp, which was targeted in the class struggle.

With teachers under attack, schools could not run as usual. According to Xin Meng and R. G. Gregory:

> One of the largest interruptions to the usual China's educational process occurred during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when most schools in urban China ceased regular operation for 6 years. Universities ceased student recruitment for an even longer period of time. […] the Cultural Revolution […] affected education for a whole generation of young people. (2002, p.935)

As education was announced to be a part of the class struggle, the role and status of schools shifted. However, rather than it being the case that everyone was entitled to go to school to receive an education, the situation went in the opposite direction. Schools and universities were shut down. Opportunities for students to receive education from teachers and textbooks were disrupted.

During the Cultural Revolution, the gap between urban and rural education narrowed as policies were 'applied to insure that higher education is more readily available to areas and groups, which were previously somewhat deprived. Thus, higher education institutions were enjoined to pay particular attention to more remote and mountain areas and to national minorities' (Kwong 1974, p.22). Consequently, 'formal education virtually ceased in the

urban areas' (Kwong 1974, p.16) in favour of promoting communities that did not have access to education during the Cultural Revolution. Given this situation, the egalitarian principles in ideological education were only realized to the degree that education was dismissed in the cities for many years. As a result, education in urban areas was suspended.

Within the above context, an ideological emphasis on education was also evident in the admission system. 'Entrance to schools was to be based on recommendations by local government leaders and school teachers, with priority to the children of workers, poor and lower-middle peasants, and members of the state army' (Pepper 1978, 854, cited by Yuxiao Wu 2008, p.207). Admission was no longer based on academic performance; it depended on people's social class.

This ideological education was further reflected in the curriculum. The content of study increasingly focused on political ideology and practical training in how to be a proletariat, to increase the practical study from peasants, and workers, instead of teachers: 'Course materials were to be condensed, simplified, and revised to increase political study and practical training and to conform to the reduced length of schooling' (Pepper 1978, 854, cited by Yuxiao Wu 2008, p207). Policies stated that learning knowledge from textbooks and teachers carried the risk that China would return to feudalism or be lured into capitalism. To become a real proletarian in the class struggle, policies considered the good way was to be educated in life by the proletarians themselves rather than in class by teachers. Junsen Zhang, Pak-Wai Liu and Linda Yung state, 'the implementation of these policies and directives involved the reform of the education system throughout China to prompt the importance of education through hands-on experience in factories and fields. Thus, the normal educational curriculum was almost non-existent during this period' (2007, p.632). As such, while education aimed to create an equal society, these utopian dreams fell short as issues of class struggle overtook the system.

Under such an educational background, millions of urban school-age adolescents were forced to be sent to rural areas to become the Sent-Down

Youth. This group, of approximately 16 to 17 million urban junior or senior school graduates, were moved to rural regions during the Cultural Revolution to live and work with peasants in poverty, the real bourgeoisie class (Chen et al., 2020; Wang and Zhou, 2017; Zhou and Hou, 1999). Junsen Zhang, Pak-Wai Liu and Linda Yung state:

> A major goal of Mao's movement was to change the aspiration that young people had to move up the social hierarchy to obtain prestigious white-collar jobs and to leave manual labor behind. Instead, the idea was to mo[u]ld young people to become ordinary workers and peasants 'with both socialist consciousness and culture'. (2007, p.632)

Thus, students who graduated or desired to proceed to the next phase of education were forced into the Sent-Down Youth, to be educated and moulded into manual labourers, the 'real' proletarians. The Sent-Down Youth movement, according to Emily Honig and Xiaojian Zhao 'began in 1968 following Mao Zedong's call for urban youth to be re-educated by peasants and ultimately involved some 17 million young city residents who lived in rural areas for up to 12 years' (2015, p.500).

This movement has also been analysed by scholar Paul Clark. He argues that during the disordered Cultural Revolution:

> Order in the cities and the restoration of industrial production became more pressing priorities than indulging the young devotees of the chairman. Starting in the autumn, groups of tertiary and secondary students were dispatched from Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and other major cities to life in the countryside. The Cultural Revolution phase of the movement to go 'up to the mountains and down to the villages' (shangshanxiaxiang) saw millions of young people sent in what amounted to internal exile. (Clark 2012, p.27)

In this vein, issues of class, personal development of the youth and education are inextricably linked.

Another change in student configuration during the Cultural Revolution was that schooling-age adolescents were coaxed to join the Red Guards. Tsang observed:

> Rightly or wrongly, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China is associated with the *Hung Wei Ping* or the Red Guards. These Guards are principally boys and girls from twelve or thirteen to seventeen or eighteen, an age popularly known in the West as teenagers and adolescents. (1967 p.201)

Most of China's schools shut down as students were divided into antagonistic Red Guard factions in June 1966 (Blanchette, 2019).

Related to this educational philosophy of the Red Guards, the traditional teacher-student relationship in which teachers instruct students was twisted into a 'students denounce teachers' mode during the Cultural Revolution. In an article discussing the behaviours of the Red Guard, Luo Xu reflects:

> Young students verbally and often physically 'struggle against' the 'bad elements' of society. These could include 'class enemies,' such as former landlords, rich farmers, capitalists, and officials of the formal Nationalist Government; Party/State cadres accused of taking the 'capital road'; and even school principals and teachers. (2010, p.146)

Thus, the role of students transformed as students believed they should not only learn knowledge from books but also devote themselves to the great class struggle. Xu considers that the Red Guards not only fought this class struggle within their own geographical locations, but spread the dispute nationally:

> As early as June 10, Mao urged students from across the country to come to Beijing. What ensued was a nationwide 'great linkup' *[da chuanlian*]. Red Guards travelled throughout China to stir up revolutions, with provincial,

> municipal and local governments instructed to provide them with free food, accommodation, and transportation. (2010, p.146)

Backed by Chairman Mao's guidance, the Red Guards believed that 'to rebel [*zaofan*] is justified' (Xu 2010, p.144), radically transforming the statuses and configurations of student bodies. The students who joined the Red Guards discarded the old education system to demonstrate their critique of feudalism, and to prevent the potential influence of Western capitalism. They participated in political activities to fight their so-called 'class enemies', even their teachers. In doing so, they demonstrated their loyalty towards becoming proletarians. The Red Guards were keen to spread their influence and meet with comrades across China.

In summary, the entire education configuration, status and roles of teachers, admissions, curriculum and students, were radically transformed during the Cultural Revolution. Education changed from a utilitarian basis, training in practical occupations, to become overtly ideological, with ideals of overturning the bourgeoisie. Teachers became the target of this transformation. Schools closed, teachers were taken to the streets and denounced; teenagers freely travelled around the country to meet 'comrades' and denounce the bourgeoisie, in the Red Guards, or were forced into the Sent-Down Youth away from their urban homes and books. The above analysis gives a picture of the radical transformations which preceded the period I am focusing on, and the representations of education in the case studies are shaped with these radical transformations in mind. As I will show in Chapter 2, some characters in 1980s films were exposed to the Cultural Revolution. The trajectory of their lives is represented as being affected by it. In addition, it is vital to understand the ways in which education was represented throughout the pre-economic reform period from 1949 to 1976, to perceive the contrastive impact of the 1978 educational and economic reform on Chinese individuals and families.

Representations of Education in Films at the Dawn of the New China (1949–1966)

This section will address films in this era as *socialist films,* emphasizing the perspective of socialist ideology. The period 1949 to 1966 is one that captures the vigorous development of Chinese films. As such this era is labelled from multiple perspectives by scholars illustrating that films from this era have garnered widespread scholarly study. Examining socialist cinema, for instance, Shuqin Cui 'refers to film production from 1949 to 1966, the period from the establishment of the PRC to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution' as the 'socialist film' period (2003, p.52). It has also been referred to by multiple scholars as the *seventeen-year* film period (Chan, 2019; Zhou, 2005; Zhong and Shu, 1995, 2018).

The socialist or seventeen-year film period was a thriving time for cinematic variety. Mao Zengdong, the Chairman of the PRC during that era, suggested in 1956 that Chinese films should be 'blooming like hundreds of varieties of flowers, with hundreds of schools of thought contending' (Zhong and Shu, 1995, p.90). With Mao's political influence in China, his suggestions promoted the growth of numerous genres and issues in Chinese films. As the Chinese film industry bloomed, several films that discussed or included education/educational moments were released. For instance, *The Life of Wu Xun* (1950), *The Profound Friendship* (1957), *The Song of Youth* (1959) and *February* (1963). These films are part of a wider set of examples representing education during this era. *The Life of Wu Xun* was produced by the private film studio, Shanghai Kunlun Pictures. *The Profound Friendship* was produced by the Shanghai Film Studio, which annexed Shanghai Kunlun Pictures from the 1950s: '[Shanghai] Kunlun Pictures was integrated into the state-owned studio in 1952, which marked it ending its history as a private own film studio' (Chu 2021, p.131). *The Song of Youth* and *February* were produced by the Beijing Film Studio which was also state-owned.

These Chinese films made between 1949 and 1966, whether they were made by private companies or state-owned studios, all depict education and

are infused with socialist revolutionary ideology. Take the film *The Life of Wu Xun* as an example. It was originally a historical tale of Wu Xun, an ordinary person who spent years begging for money to create a free school for impoverished school-aged children. According to Zhuoyi Wang's examination of this film, the historical narrative of Wu Xun's successful fundraising was transformed into a cinematic tragedy about his failure to help the poor access schooling (2011, p.17). Moreover, at the end of the film, a speech was added to the plot - a PRC teacher stated that working individually will never liberate the impoverished; only through socialist leadership can the Chinese people win ultimate liberty (2011, p.17). In this vein, a promotion of socialist guidelines through cinematic narratives, according to Wang (2011), supplemented the value of socialist collectivity into the film's educational narrative. The importance of the individual was degraded by emphasizing the need for collective action.

This same thread of socialist revolution as a solution to social and historical concerns also characterizes two other film examples: *The Song of Youth* and *February*. *The Song of Youth* (1959) tells the story of an educated woman, Lin Daojing, embarking on a revolutionary path after several tribulations in her life and work as a teacher. *February* (1963) features a young teacher Xiao Jianqiu, who arrives from Shanghai at a primary school in a small town in Zhejiang province in the 1920s. Through his teaching and personal life, Xiao Jianqiu gradually realizes a revolution is needed to change people's mentality in the town. He eventually leaves the town to devote himself to the socialist revolution. Both characters are teachers who comprehend that they cannot resolve society's ills to improve their own or others' living situations; so they eventually enter the socialist revolution.

Scholars have noticed this cinematic pattern of praising socialist reform as a solution in films of this era. In her exploration of Chinese revolutionary cinema, Jessica Ka Yee Chan finds that films from 1949 to 1966 'serve socialist ideals and win the hearts of its people' (2019, pp.3–4). Thus these films are playing an ideological function in society. Cinema has embraced the objective of shaping

Chinese people into subjects of the new socialism. Even without outright criticizing intellectuals or education from teachers or books, as illustrated in the previous section, some films from this era implicitly disregard information from books or schools. Yet they emphasize the socialist revolutionist's role in replacing literary education.

Films with educational representations in this period are used as a means to convey a revolutionary awakening, showing the limitations of textbooks and educational knowledge to relieve the misery of individuals or the masses. The power of oneself, such as teachers and students is downplayed in films. They are narrated, as in *The Song of Youth* and *February,* as too limited in power for creating social change. Ultimately, an ideology was borne in these narratives that only by embracing the socialist revolution will individuals ultimately help the masses and realize their particular worth as an individual. Thus, the value of the self has been integrated into this socialist revolution.

It is also notable that the perspective on education in the above films is the opposite of my case studies in the following chapters, which focus on films made during the 1980s to the 2000s. I find that my case study films focus on the experiences of students, while the characters in films from 1949 to 1967 are educators, not students. This demonstrates a changing trend in the focus of films about educational experiences.

Nevertheless, occasionally some films with settings related to education or intellectuals do not end with them joining the socialist revolution. *The Profound Friendship* (1957) narrates the camaraderie between two scientists, Hong Leiguang, director of the Institute of Microbiology, and Huang Weiwen, a bacteriologist. Interwoven with upheavals in their friendship, this film narrates how they develop a new antibiotic. This narrative in the film is consistent with the social and educational context of the dawn of the New China – to concentrate on science education towards attaining the goal of fast industrialization. While propaganda is acknowledged as a component of the educational curriculum, with a focus on science subjects from 1949 to the mid-1960s, this film specifically discusses sentiments in the scientists' work and

personal life. Cinematically, it avoids the traditional appeal of science education, regarding industrialization and national progress, and through a narrative of friendship depicts science as a field of conviviality and togetherness. Thereby framing science as an approachable subject to connect people towards a collective goal, for the scientific progress of the nation. As such, the socialist ideologies of this period were still constructed in this film despite it being a narrative unrelated to the revolution.

According to Shuqin Cui (2003), the socialist film era placed an ideological focus on using representations to develop a proletariat social identity, so that they could master their lives in the New China rather than continuing to be suppressed by the bourgeoisie as in the old regime. As such, the emphasis of socialist films was on the ideology of shared proletarian values. The collectiveness of values, identity and class struggle outweighed the value and meaning of individuals. The value of self or the value of the individual was not explicitly explored in films produced in this era (1949–1966), as it did not match this socialist ideology. Therefore, the socialist film era was a fruitful period for film diversity, but as outlined above these films meshed with socialist beliefs, to some extent.

Representations of Education in Films During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)

Despite socialist ideology being frequently integrated into film narratives, the film industry in China was diverse in terms of film genres and topics from 1949 to 1966 (Du, 2015; Lu, 2014; Zhou, 2016). However, this relatively liberal stage did not survive long as in 1966 the Cultural Revolution started which lasted until 1976. During this ten-year Cultural Revolution, China's social order and the democratic legal system were enormously damaged, as mentioned earlier. During the Cultural Revolution, the propaganda function of films appeared most dominantly in the Chinese film industry.

The dominance of propaganda in cultural and film works at this time significantly restrained the number of films being made and their contents. Film

production was mostly halted during this period (Zhou 2005, p.170). A great number of films produced during the *socialist films* period (1949–1966), were politically condemned, accused of vilifying workers, peasants, and soldiers, as well as slandering political leaders, beautifying the bourgeoisie, preaching the supremacy of love or various other political agendas (Zhou 2005, p.169). The screen, in the late 1960s, was ruled by revolutionary model operas, or *yangbanxi*, produced with guidance from politicians to shape the public's mindset, and thus influence Chinese society (Mittler 2003, p.54). Consequently, only revolutionary model operas were shown on screen from the mid-1960s to early 1970s, such as *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (1970), *The Red Lantern* (1970), *Sha Jia Bang* (1971); *Ode to the Dragon River* (1972) *and Seaport* (1972).

These revolutionary model operas usually articulated distinctive narratives of protagonists/heroes struggling against antagonists/enemies. For instance, in *Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *The Red Lantern* and *Sha Jia Bang*, the heroes are people with occupations such as soldiers, workers or peasants, being represented with positive images. These protagonists are framed as eventually defeating their enemies through personal traits, strategies or devotion to the cause of securing the communist revolution's success. According to Dafeng Zhong and Xiaoming Shu (1995) on film history in China, these revolutionary model operas were mostly shot under the direction of the Culture Revolution's 'three highlights' referring to three creative principles used to emphasize 1) positive attributes, 2) the heroes, and 3) the main heroes of the communist cause. With this principle, the fundamental task of moulding heroes of workers, peasants and soldiers, ran throughout all films (Zhong and Shu 1995, pp.131–133). Additionally, only two themes were authorized in these operas: the revolutionary historical narratives of class struggle and real-life topics concerning the Cultural Revolution (Zhou 2005, pp.168–172). As such, the Cultural Revolution permitted a limited set of themes to be used in films for propaganda purposes. Education was not included. Therefore, no representations of education were filmed during the Cultural Revolution.

This paucity of films and restrictions on film themes nearly annihilated the film industry during the Cultural Revolution, coupled with the lack of representations related to education or any representation of the value of self. As mentioned in a previous section, during the ten-year Cultural Revolution, education was banned, teachers were denounced, schools were suspended, and students were sent to the countryside to learn from peasants – the real proletarians. As such, neither the students nor teachers belong to the positive characters or heroes outlined in the creative principles ('three highlights') that could be represented in films. Even if films could potentially involve the theme of class struggle, the settings of films in this period were mainly focused on rural areas or other locations where these heroes (the peasants and workers) carried out their work, not in schools.

In summary, even though other forms of films, beyond the revolutionary opera, began to be produced in the early 1970s, these operas remained dominant on screen during the Cultural Revolution until 1976. Therefore, films during the Cultural Revolution were not depicting educational experiences. Furthermore, the uniformity of collective identity and value to be held by soldiers, peasants and workers, were moulded by these socio-political and cinematic contexts during the Cultural Revolution. These films served a unified goal, addressing the class struggle of this era. The exaggeration of class conflict and character categorizations of characters in films into heroes and enemies, left no space for any cinematic representation of the value of self. In contrast, screen media case studies produced after the Cultural Revolution often debate values or the meaning of the individual, either in relation to others, or to oneself, through an educational experience. Instead, during this Cultural Revolution period individual characters in films are utilised as positive hero images, to portray a message of revolutionary collectivity; that is, with togetherness, the proletarians will overcome their enemies (the bourgeois) and obstacles (the class struggle) to win the Cultural Revolution for the people.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that education experienced two different yet connected stages: the dawn of the New China (1949–1965) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Throughout both stages, education was implemented via a close interlocking of political contexts and goals. At the dawn of the New China, education worked towards egalitarian and utilitarian goals. Thus, on one hand, primary and secondary education focused on the improvement of literacy rates among citizens, with governmental policies intended to reduce an existing education-class disparity. Higher education, on the other hand, trained elites to become experts in science and engineering to support rapid industrialization. These educational policies of 1950s China, allowed the country to rapidly develop to meet its political and economic goals. However, the urban-rural educational gap remained, whereas education in urban areas was more accessible than in rural areas.

During the Cultural Revolution, education experienced a significant change. Economic goals set at the dawn of the New China, connected with utilitarian education and higher education for an industrialized nation were ignored. Instead, the political-ideological purpose of education to reduce the class gap became magnified. Class struggle in terms of making the bourgeoisie obsolete was the focus of education and Chinese society during this period. Education became the ultimate tool of the politically dominant ideology of class struggle. For example, through denouncing intellectuals, revising the educational curriculum, depriving urban youth of education opportunities, by closing urban schools and sending them to rural areas to learn from peasants.

Films during this historical period experienced two stages: 1) under the name of the socialist or seventeen-year film during the dawn of the New China, and 2) the revolutionary model opera during the Cultural Revolution. Some of these socialist films depicted education imbued with the ideology of the socialist revolution. The characters within the educational context in the films at this time were often educators who realized that the socialist revolution was the solution to social issues. This period was characterized by a flourishing

moment in the Chinese film industry in comparison to the Cultural Revolution. Not all socialist films engaging with education were about the socialist revolution, but the concept of collectivity was still endorsed in the films through depictions of interpersonal relations, instead of focusing on the individual.

During the Cultural Revolution, the propagandist role of films was prominently demonstrated. Because only certain topics regarding the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletarians were allowed in films for propaganda reasons, the film industry was almost destroyed. Similar to the changes occurring in Chinese society, film concepts did not centre on education. As a result, there was a lack of depictions of schooling at this time. One of the points that emerges from this overview is that in many cases, China did not produce films about education for a long time during the Cultural Revolution, but China did make films for social educational purposes; in other words, propaganda films.

However, with the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, a new stage of Chinese films commenced. According to scholar Zhou Xing, based on his reflections on the Cultural Revolution, people gradually form their own views towards history, conventions, society and reality (2005). Thus, out of the historical context of the Cultural Revolution, one of the significant features of films in Chinese film history arose: depicting the educational system. Film professionals began to offer critiques of society, history, the education system and educational experiences. This transition took viewers behind the curtain, as it were, rather than presenting them with only the desired educational content – for instance, as in the form of revolutionary model operas. Building on this context, Chapter 2 examines how films produced in the 1980s represent disparate attitudes towards educational changes, and the value and meaning of self in the context of education, family and nation.

Chapter 2: Representing Education in China in the Early Reform Era, 1977–1991: the Impact of the University Matriculation and Opening-Up Policies on Family and the Individual

In the context of this chapter's interests, popular Chinese films that draw on, and represent, educational experiences, negotiate our understanding of the social complexities and of people's personal values during a period of policy transition. In contrast to films made during the Cultural Revolution that represent education, tending to focus on class struggle, representations in many films from the late 1970s to the early 1990s focus on the consequences to individuals at the end of the Cultural Revolution. This is seen through the production of 'scar films', a genre that emerged in China during the late 1970s depicting the emotional traumas left by the Cultural Revolution. However, from the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, other social and economic changes were occurring in China at this time, and a number of films came to represent the social, educational and economic developments impacting the lives of the Chinese people. For instance, *Miao Miao* (1980), *Girl Students' Dormitory* (1983), *Girls in Red* (1984), *Father and Son* (1986), *In Their Teens* (1989) and *The September of Mine* (1990) all turn to Chinese educational experience as a marker to trace social, economic and policy change as well as the ideological negotiations that happened during this transformational period.

These films incorporated the effects of the reintroduction of the university matriculation exam and the Opening-Up Policy, as well as what these effects meant for different individuals. According to Graeme Turner, 'film itself [works] as a specific means of producing and reproducing cultural significance' (Turner 2006, p.60). As such, in many of the films listed above, the importance of social and cultural changes for different individuals is represented through educational experiences in 1980s China. Consequently, the individual film becomes a social practice and a site where the audience can access a fictional space to negotiate social complexities and ideological negotiations. Through mediated representations, changes in a culture or society, and the meaning of these changes for individuals are made manifest in films.

This chapter analyses films about the educational experience in China from 1977 to 1991, a significant transitional period after the Cultural Revolution. The first section begins with an analysis of the economic, educational and social contexts of China, from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the start of the 1990s, to provide a contextual background for discussing two case studies in the following two sections: *Father and Son* (1986) and *The September of Mine* (1990). These films respond to policy changes relating to education and also to broader policy changes impacting education in that period. Notably the resumption of the university matriculation exam and the effects of China's wider Opening-Up Policy. Further, this analysis will explore how these educational films engage with the explicit changes in these two policies and the underlying cultural attitudes of education during this transformative era.

Examining the cinematic representation of education in the context of policy change, and broader social and cultural transition in the 1980s, this chapter addresses three key questions related to the two case studies. First, how does the reintroduction of the university matriculation exam and Opening-Up Policy affect these representations, and the depiction of the Chinese educational experience in popular films during the period? Second, how has the attitude towards changing educational policy and the relationship between education and the self been represented? Third, how has the relationship between family and education and the more specific relationship between the 'greater self' and the 'lesser self' been represented in the family and the nation? Through these questions, this chapter will explore how these films use educational narratives as a lens to discuss broader cultural values and the evolving roles of individuals within the educational system, thereby linking the films directly to ongoing public debates about education reform and cultural identity in China.

By focusing on the two specific case studies, this chapter aims to illustrate how cinema during this period served as a vehicle for disseminating and critiquing the dominant educational ideologies influenced by significant policy shifts. This chapter does not claim to provide a comprehensive analysis of all films representing education in the 1980s. Instead, it selects two films that have

been explicit in foregrounding the resumption of the university entrance exam policy and the Opening-Up Policy as these are two significant policies that helped shaped Chinese education throughout this decade. While *Father and Son* is a comedy that locates educational experience within a family context, *The September of Mine* is a children's film set in a school context. Selecting these two case studies provides different perspectives concerning the social, cultural and political changes occurring in China in the 1980s that affected education. The choice of these films emphasizes their potential to provide insight into how education policies such as the university matriculation exam and the Opening-Up Policy were not only implemented but culturally interpreted and adapted in cinematic narratives, offering a screen dialogue to the broader socio-political context of the time. This chapter argues that both films represent the impact of wider social and economic policies on education through domestic and school settings. Educational policies have a bearing on, and are portrayed as, individual issues to be eventually solved within the family circle or by individuals. Educational challenges are thus depicted as an individual rather than a political issue.

Both films also demonstrate the Confucian ideology of the 'greater self' and the 'lesser self', played out in different ways in relation to a comedy film and a children's film. *Father and Son* represents a traditional Chinese family hierarchy where the father is the 'greater self' and the son is the 'lesser self'. However, through comic ambivalence, it shows, within the son's seeming obedience to the 'greater self', that children as the 'lesser self' can inwardly contravene the will of the 'greater self'. As a nationally sponsored children's film, *The September of Mine* depicts a child role model through a coming-of-age narrative, to demonstrate that children are foremost citizens of a nation. Placing the nation's interests as the 'greater self' and oneself as the 'lesser self' is a good child and this collective goal will also accelerate personal growth. Therefore, personal growth is depicted as an individual goal in the service of national goals.

Education and Education Policy in China (1977–1991)

The ten-year Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. In 1977, a series of political, economic and social policies were implemented to restore social order and reform the nation. One of the first policies introduced into education was reintroduction of the university entrance exam. According to the *Corpus of Party History*:

> In [the] autumn [of] 1977, the Chinese university entry system (*gaokao* in Chinese), which was abolished for ten years during the Cultural Revolution was resumed […] enrolment targets were workers, farmers, educated youth, demobilized soldiers, cadres and fresh graduates. For those with rich practical experience or expertise, the age could be extended to 30 years old. In the winter of 1977 and summer of 1978, when the national college entrance examination had just resumed, 11.6 million people took the exam, and a total of 680,000 new college students were admitted, with an actual enrolment ratio of 29:1. (2017 p.25)

As such, the Chinese educational system began to recover after being disordered by the Cultural Revolution. Firstly, the change in the admission ratio and enrolment expansion created conditions for a great number of educated young people to access university. Secondly, the relaxation of the enrolment age and the lifting of marriage restrictions enabled students the opportunity to study at university, especially older cohorts who were previously sent to learn more practical skills in the countryside. During this time, education admissions were no longer based on social class, as had been the case during the Cultural Revolution. Instead, admissions were based on academic performance, specifically a university entrance exam. The resumption of the exam (*gaokao)* marked Chinese education's recovery from its ideological turn during the Cultural Revolution and allowed people to receive an academic education.

Immediately following the termination of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government transitioned from politically-driven isolationism to economically-driven open-door policies – from a planned to a market economy. Essentially, this was to sustain changes in China's political and economic circumstances as well as China's global positioning. In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, one of the most influential economic and social policies was the Opening-Up Policy. This term refers to the Chinese economic reform that started in December 1978 at the third plenary session of the eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. This meeting pointed out that the party's goal in this new era was to build China into a modern socialist power. The meeting marked the beginning of socialist reform and Opening-Up. The economic reform introduced market principles to China and started the transition from a planned to a market economy. China also gradually allowed access (to travel in and out) to the world beyond the country's mainland border and has permitted the entry of foreign investment and entrepreneurs into China since then. According to Li Zhenghua, 'the thought of the whole Party was liberated from the bondage of left-leaning dogmatism [during the Cultural Revolution]. […] Deng was the first figure who proposed to shift the focus of the Party's work to economic development' (2008 p.75). The main task of different policies shifted from one of class struggle to economic development and modernization.

The challenges of China's Opening-Up Policy and its means of implementation have resulted in immense changes in Chinese society across several dimensions. In the educational sphere, throughout the late 1980s to the early 1990s the Chinese government initiated massive educational reforms to make schools more efficient and responsive to economic development. One of the most influential policies has been the Compulsory Education Law, issued in 1986. The 'Compulsory Education Law stipulates that each child must receive at least nine years of schooling' (Davey, Lian and Higgins 2007, p.387). Therefore, all Chinese citizens are entitled to receive basic education by law and attend school from the age of 6 or 7 until at least 15. Education practices

shifted from an ideological education during the Cultural Revolution to mass education in the 1980s. The former practice of education, which entailed models such as learning from proletarians such as peasants and workers in the countryside fields or factories, changed to an educational system guaranteed by judicial laws stipulating that every child was entitled to receive primary and middle school education based on at-school-learning from teachers. The implementation of the Compulsory Education Law drove reform in all aspects of education. The curriculum was revised to respond to socio-economic developments.

Educators and policymakers started to pay attention to the cultivation of students, enabling those students to adapt to social changes. The curriculum also focused on the outside world through subjects such as Western Culture and Society, and Western Politics and Philosophy, to meet the demand for economic reform and increasing globalization. The curriculum at this stage was unified in line with dominant political ideology but simultaneously started to develop alongside the nation's rapid open-door transition in the 1980s. With its policy of Opening Up to the world and economic reform, in the late 1970s, China experienced tremendous socio-economic changes. To catch up and compete with developed countries, the country's national objectives shifted profoundly from the traditional goal of moral inculcation (stressing cooperation) to the economic goal of modernization (emphasizing competition), and then to the more general goal of revitalizing China through education, science, and technology.

Both policies have been studied by numerous scholars (Pepper, 1980; Swetz and Chi, 1983; Wu, 2017). Suzanne Pepper (1980) investigates the political/ideological implications of the reintroduction of the university matriculation exam. She argues that the restoration of education should be taken as a pragmatic or moderate solution to China's educational problems, rather than a conservative challenge to the radical opposition. Frank Swetz and Albert Chi (1983) examine the format and content of selective papers for the Chinese University Entrance Examinations (1949–1981) following their reintroduction and raise some issues concerning the efficacy of the

examination process. Furthermore, Xiaogang Wu notes this policy's important implications for understanding the role of higher education in elite formation and social stratification in contemporary China (2017).

While the resumption of the university matriculation exam has also been examined through the lens of political ideology, educational policy, and social science (Pepper, 1980; Swetz and Chi, 1983; Wu, 2017), little detailed investigation of this phenomenon has occurred in terms of film representation. For the Opening-Up Policy, researchers have considered the role of this policy in relation to film and media representation. For instance, Jing Wu argues that since the reform and Opening-Up Policy of the 1980s, marketization and new media technologies have been important factors in shaping media operations and culture in contemporary China (2016). Junbing Cao (2018) studies the evolution of Chinese film directors of different generations over the past forty years after the reform and Opening-Up Policy. However, scholars have not directly addressed the reintroduction of the university entrance exam and the Opening-Up Policy's influence on cinematic representations of education. In the following sections, I use two films to explore how they represent these two significant policies. I will especially examine how these policies are represented in educational and social settings in Chinese films (comedy and children's film genres) through individual educational stories. In critical terms, this chapter demonstrates how ambivalences of educational transition in the early reform era are represented and revised in relation to family in *Father and Son* (1986) and the role of the individual, as a good citizen, in *The September of Mine* (1990).

Like Father, Not Like Son: Comic Ambivalence About Educational Policy Change Within Family Dynamics

Individual hopes and anxieties brought about by economic and social transition are frequently represented in films dealing with education, such as *Girl Students' Dormitory*, *The Girl in Red, In Their Teens,* and *Father and Son*. Among these films, *Father and Son* specifically represents the influence of educational policy change on family life in the 1980s. The film becomes a site for dramatizing the ambiguous experiences of educational policy change. Notably, between a father and son. While the father cherishes the opportunities afforded to his son by new educational policies, the son regards them as a burden and not worthy of serious consideration. *Father and Son* demonstrates how the political impact of policy change is experienced on a personal level. It uses comedy to show how the university matriculation exam and Opening-Up Policy play out within family dynamics.

Father and Son was released in China in January 1986 – nine years after the university entry exam was reintroduced and eight years after the issuing of the Opening-Up Policy. Starring actors Chen Qiang and Chen Peisi, who are father and son in real life, the film tells the story of a father, Old Kui (Chen Qiang), who urges his unemployed son, Erzi (Chen Peisi), to prepare for the university entrance examination. As analysed in the previous section, this representation is in line with the educational policy that relaxes the age restriction for students entering university in the 1980s – candidates before the age of thirty were considered. This amended policy provided more study opportunities to

candidates who desired higher education but were beyond school age, such as Erzi in the film.

Moreover, university admission was based on the entry exam rather than social class. Thus, candidates who tried to enrol in higher education needed to academically pass the entrance exam. As such, in the film, Erzi is depicted as a young adult in his twenties preparing for his university entrance exam. As he has completed school, his study takes place at home. However, the son does not want to study at all. He secretly hangs out with his girlfriend and friends and hides it from his father. This film uses comedy, through the love and conflict expressed between father and son, to represent mixed attitudes towards education in a Chinese family, and attitudes influenced by new policies issued under economic reform. Family hierarchy is also shown as the father is the 'greater self', who dominates in the family order, and the son is the 'lesser self', who needs to obey his father. However, through this comic ambivalence towards educational policy, the film also shows that the 'greater self' (the father) has no actual control over his son, and the 'lesser self' might have more power than is first apparent.

In this film, education is represented in the aftermath of the reintroduction of the university entrance exam. Yet it is experienced outside the immediate educational setting in a family context. Family is an unusual space to narrate education, as educational experiences are often represented in locations such as schools or universities in youth films. As Timothy Shary observes in the school and college settings of American youth films, 'With the rapid proliferation of multiple teen subgenres, the school film became only one avenue for representing teens, and […] tensions of the 1960s shifted to the college campuses' (2002, pp.27–28). As Shary observes, schools and colleges are the main locations in American films about education. It is a similar situation in Chinese films. These educational locations are major sites where youth study experience and socialisation take place in Chinese films. However, the individual academic and social developments of the student do not merely happen at school; they are also happening at home. *Father and Son* is such a

film about education, but it is not negotiated in an educational location. Instead, it is set in a domestic family home environment to represent the impacts of educational policy on individuals and families.

Most of the scenes in *Father and Son* are set in different rooms of the Chen family house, but the plots all involve education, to show that education policy is personalized. Social problems regarding education are resolved at the level of the Chen family. Erzi's mother is not highly featured in the film. As indicated by the film title, *Father and Son*, the father, Old Kui, and the son, Erzi, are the focus. From the beginning, this film represents Erzi's preparation for the university entrance exam at home. A few scenes feature Erzi reading books or learning English in his bedroom, his parents' room or the front garden on different days. The film also shows the father in different domestic spaces, to show how Old Kui supervises Erzi's home study and how the parents are concerned about Erzi's studies. As such, all plots in these domestic backdrops are closely connected with Erzi's education. If Erzi appears in any other location than his bedroom, Old Kui always takes Erzi back to Erzi's room to study. When Erzi tries to watch TV in the living room, for instance, he is soon interrupted by his father asking him to read books instead. Erzi tries to dance with his friend next door to get away from studying but is soon taken back home by his father.

Until the latter parts of the film, before the exam, Erzi is represented at home, reading books, listening to English tapes, reciting English vocabulary, or walking around his room too nervous or excited to fall asleep. His parents are worried that Erzi is not ready for the exam. The only classroom setting appears at the end of the film when Erzi attends his university entrance exam. As such, the entire film represents interactions between Erzi and his family members in different domestic backdrops regarding exam preparation. The common educational site and figures, such as the school, students and the teacher are absent from this film about education, until the exam at the very end of the film. In this fashion, the entire film represents education as even though the school setting is mostly not present Erzi's education is negotiated throughout

the domestic setting. In this vein, education is connected with policy change, but the politics of education is narrated at a personal and family level.

Pulling everything together, *Father and Son* asserts through conversations in the family household that the son's education is the Chen family's major goal. The family dialogues represented between Old Kui and Erzi even in non-study situations are mainly about studying and Erzi's future. In the first scene of the film, when they repair a bicycle, Old Kui does not mention anything about the bike but encourages Erzi to study hard to pass his university entrance exam: 'You need to work harder. Try to win credit. Clench your teeth. Stamp your feet. Bring the university certificate back'. When Erzi's friends visit him at home, Old Kui tells them that Erzi is busy studying and cannot be disturbed. His son is watching television, Old Kui assertively informs him, 'Erzi, you need to work harder. Don't watch. Didn't I say that? Before you take an examination at the university, there is no TV-watching'. He then politely apologises to Erzi's friends, 'Sorry everybody, wait for him to take an examination at the university, I'll invite everybody to come every day. Please go back'.

The mother, whose name is not revealed, is also brought into daily conversations about education. In a sequence in the middle of the film, when Old Kui is off work and staying at home due to his high blood pressure, he still checks Erzi's room to see if Erzi is studying. The mother comforts Old Kui that 'Old Kui, our Erzi, he's studying. You're in bad shape. Just relax'. As such, the dialogues introduce an ongoing, persuasive tension into family relations in an otherwise calm family setting. Film dialogue can symbolically contribute to representation. Christopher Beach contends that language in films has symbolic power and notes that 'the presence of spoken language in the film made possible the representation of the many forms of symbolic power and linguistic capital with which speech is invested' (2002, p.3). Like the narrative's emphasis overall, the film's father-son dialogue in this domestic backdrop overwhelmingly relates to Erzi's education.

The dialogues of other family members, such as the mother and school-aged younger sister, whenever they appear in a scene, are also constructed to

highlight Erzi's education – in terms of how Old Kui urges Erzi to study while Erzi does so reluctantly. Even though they do not appear in the film much, each time the mother and daughter are depicted, they either try to execute Old Kui's order to urge Erzi to read books, to suggest to Old Kui that maybe Erzi can take a break from his studying, or help Erzi avoid Old Kui's supervision. The film does not show family members discussing topics such as recreation and play, sports ability, chores around the house, or emotional states, such as happiness or stress caused by the parent-children relationship. The priority of the Chen family is obvious, and the nature of the father-son relationship is depicted as being strongly dependent on education and study. Thus, the family itself looks like a special training school for examination purposes, where social activities that are irrelevant to study do not take place, and education is a core ideology binding the family together.

The son is like a student whose main goal should be to study, supported by the family for that purpose, but who is disconnected from his interests and other life priorities. The father is depicted as a warden, an authority figure who controls his son's study agenda. Although the education setting is absent in most film scenes, it is hard to ignore that the narrative is centred on education in the Chen family. The family household in *Father and Son* is not merely a variable setting as in other films about education. Here the impact of educational policy is relayed through a family household setting which is a consolidated location for offering the individual a space to study, and the family a space to equip the son academically for his exam.

Father and Son represents the generational relations between father and son tightly centred in Erzi's education, in 1980s China. The father initiates most conversations and the son obeys; the father talks about the educational support the parents provide, and the son verbally agrees; the father shows his ambitions to guide his son towards education and the son reluctantly repeats although he is not ambitious himself. These depictions cinematically reverberate with father-son relations in 1980s Chinses society. As Beverley Hooper observes in the 1980s, 'the sense of family identity is still strong in China

[…]. [T]he acceptance of parental authority also derives from the importance of family influence and connections in obtaining a good job or even getting to university. As in traditional times, most parents will do all in their power to advance the interests of their offspring, regardless of tensions within the family' (1985, p.38). Hooper's examination discloses the traditional Chinese family concept: family relations built upon parental authority. With this authority, traditionally, parents have the absolute right to direct their children's educational futures. Through dialogue, the father in *Father and Son* is depicted as being strict with the son about education, and he does not allow him to express self-determination on this issue. In a way, these dialogues suggest the strong pull of education and breed an attitude in line with the traditional Chinese concept of family.

Beyond these dialogues of traditional Chinese domestic relations connected with education, *Father and Son* represents the ambivalent or even contradictory behaviours, of this father and son, regarding the opportunity created by the age relaxation for the higher education entrance exam. The film represents Old Kui as committed to grasping educational opportunities for his son through his seemingly patriarchal enforcement. When Erzi tries to study hard, Old Kui stands beside him, fanning his son and preventing mosquitoes from disturbing him. In addition, for his son to improve his exam result Old Kui spends a lot of money buying Erzi books and nutritious food. However, when Erzi tries to conduct activities other than study, Old Kui's hopes and optimism transform into worry and anxiety, as represented through his actions. For instance, Old Kui hides his son's shoes before leaving home where Erzi is studying so that Erzi cannot leave the house. When his son secretly goes to the cinema to avoid study, the father also goes to the cinema trying to catch his son. When there is a football match on TV, Old Kui tries to prevent his son from watching it. As such, Old Kui is represented doing nearly everything in his power to facilitate Erzi's study. These supportive or fretful physical behaviours represented in the film convey the hopes and anxieties that Old Kui has under the new educational policies. He longs for Erzi to grasp the opportunity

generated under these educational policies. As such, the father is represented as a traditional patriarchal father in this film. This father figure is in line with the Confucian family system in Chinese culture.

The representation of the relations between Old Kui and Erzi is concurrent with the social situation in the 1980s. As Beverley Hooper explains, in China the 'tightly structured Confucian family system prescribed absolute obedience to the father, enshrined in the concept of filial piety' (1985, p.33). In Chinese society and family, according to Hooper, 'the post-Mao's era […] tends to support parental criticism of the youth generation and even urges young people to return to the "fine traditions governing Chinese families for thousands of years"' (1985, p.34). This observation suggests a public focus on domestic relations and order in the 1980s. In line with these social circumstances, within the family Old Kui has a superior power over Erzi. Old Kui exercises his power in the domestic sphere, to preserve order and maintain structure in the family space in support of Erzi's educational opportunity. This narrative demonstrates that in 1980s China patriarchal parents played an important role in the educational decisions and choices of their offspring. Education was not an individual choice following the children's will. Instead, sometimes, as represented in this film, education was a path designed for their children by a patriarchal parent, or parents, following their interests or attitude towards education. Conforming to traditional Confucian values that were still endorsed in the 1980s, children were expected to embrace the decision made by their parents and respect this Confucian family tradition. Due to this patriarchal tradition, in *Father and Son,* Old Kui is not concerned with Erzi's interests, nor does he communicate his anxieties to his family, as Old Kui is at the top of the domestic hierarchy, in the household. This also reflects Chinese social life in the 1980s, when children needed to absolutely obey their parents' educational decisions, even if their well-being or opinions were neglected. In this vein, *Father and Son* seemingly represents the outright power of Old Kui, the patriarchal father over Erzi's education. Yet as the film narrative develops, his power is gradually reduced.

However, *Father and Son* does not deal with Old Kui's patriarchal behaviours through a serious and authoritarian narrative. It navigates ambivalences through comic expressions, especially indirect communication. Old Kui's hopes and anxieties, influenced by the policy, are represented through humorous narratives and physical actions. In the second half of the film, there is a scene where Old Kui catches Erzi in the cinema after escaping from his study. But Old Kui mistakes another young man, from the back, with the same hairstyle and T-shirt as Erzi. With a close-up from the camera, Old Kui frowns, his mouth turns down and he shakes his head in anger. His facial expressions are comically exaggerated to create humour as he runs as fast as he can to the auditorium, to pull at the man, with a loud shout, 'Well, there you are!' (Figure 2.1).



FIGURE 2.1 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. OLD KUI THOUGHT HE SAW ERZI IN THE CINEMA.

The man turns – he is not Erzi! The man starts to scold Old Kui for being rude. Old Kui immediately becomes embarrassed. He shrinks back, smiles at the man, and apologises. As such, an unexpected turn happens in this narrative (Figure 2.2).



FIGURE 2.2 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. OLD KUI REALIZES THE MAN IN THE CINEMA IS NOT ERZI.

Instead of scolding his son in the cinema, Old Kui himself is caught and blamed by a stranger. Similar behavioural exaggerations and surprises in the narrative appear in other scenes during the latter part of the film. In one, Old Kui tries the so-called nutritious food Erzi buys for him, to show caring and respect, and thinks it extremely hot. He runs into the rainy garden, taking his top off to cool down. His wife and son run after him, the wife holding an umbrella, and the son a raincoat. The camera captures the whole family chasing each other in the rain. Half-naked Old Kui waves his arms and runs excitedly shouting, 'It's burning me! Too hot!' (Figure 2.3).



FIGURE 2.3 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. THE FAMILY CHASING EACH OTHER IN THE RAIN AFTER OLD KUI EATS THE NUTRITIOUS FOOD ERZI BUYS FOR HIM.

These exaggerated actions are in contrast with the image of a strict father and the parental and generational authority represented in the first half of the film. The figure of Old Kui as a patriarch in the first half of the film is disintegrated at this moment through these comic performances.

Father and Son utilises indirect communication in the two scenes above. A few other scenes show Old Kui and his parental authority being challenged, as he is frustrated and eventually rejected through a series of exaggerated behaviours and surprises from the reversal narratives creating comic effects. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik analyse the term 'gag', which can be referred to as visual, physical actions in comedy; they state that different gags 'each constitute digressions or interruptions in the progress of a plot or a piece of purposive actions. They hence each tend also to involve a degree of surprise' (1990/1995, p.52). This section by no means defines whether the physical performance in *Father and Son* is categorized as a gag or a specific type of gag. However, according to Neale and Krutnik, an unexpected turn in the narrative with comic physical performance creates surprise, and these surprising variations or ambivalences generate humour out of indirect communication,

meaning that no direct emotion such as love or hatred is represented through specific lines of dialogue, but is left open to interpretation by the audience (1990/1995, p.53). Through these comic ambivalences, despite his earlier strictness Old Kui appears as a father who makes mistakes, and at whose embarrassment the audience can laugh at. The father's dreams of social climbing and his fear of failure are translated comically into farcical behaviours and facial expressions.

With the weakening of Old Kui's control over Erzi through comedy, *Father and Son* also depicts Erzi's contrasting behaviours indicating his attitude towards education and the entrance exam, to reveal that Old Kui has no power over Erzi regarding his education. Failing to meet his father's expectations, Erzi does not position education as a top priority in his life and is prepared to disobey his father. He does not like to study, nor is he like his father, seeing the benefits that study can potentially bring to him. Therefore, the film often represents Erzi pretending to study in front of Old Kui, but secretly going to parties, socializing with friends, or watching TV. Around Erzi, almost no one is studying or preparing to receive higher education. Instead, his friends are seizing opportunities presented by the Opening-Up Policy, enjoying free mobility by moving to a different city for work and becoming wealthy. They hang out at parties, go on dates, watch television, dance to music and start companies to create what Erzi and his neighbour Shunzi call the 'business road to wealth'. What Erzi does differs from the activities of his peer group, and in this vein, the film represents the different effects of the two policies in terms of the expectations and opportunities and horizons suggested to young people in their twenties.

Through his subversive behaviours, Erzi tries to reject parental authority and assert some self-independence separate from his father and his family circle. These cinematic representations are interwoven with the social factors of that period in China, in terms of generational relations. As previously stated, the 1980s was a period with considerable changes, including changes of inter-generational relations 'as in other countries, China's generation gap has been

most marked during periods of rapid social change when young people have been the first to respond to fresh ideas' (Hooper 1985, p.34). As Zhou Xuelin states, 'by the late 1980s, disaffiliated youth had learned to use the domestic sphere to express the process of their discontent. The extraordinary authority of the father began to totter, although the process of this transformation was contentious' (2007, p.64). As such, as a family situated within Chinese society undergoing fast social and economic changes in the 1980s, tensions between the father-son relationship are represented in *Father and Son*. While dreaming of an unfettered life, the influence and authority of the father are still felt, Erzi is not depicted as a rebellious youth. However, he is still shown as a young adult who inwardly avoids submitting to Old Kui's decisions, in his own passively defiant way he complains and subverts Old Kui's demands at home. All of Erzi's behaviours represented in the film coincide with resisting the ambitions of the university entrance by his father. The film represents a fundamental conflict between the two generations' educational philosophies through Old Kui and Erzi's respective actions.

Father and Son also uses comic imagery to represent Erzi's conflicted attitude toward education via domestic negotiation. The comic representations of generational conflicts in *Father and Son* are closely related to traditional Confucian thoughts. Despite the failed patriarchal depiction of the father, the film also draws a good deal of attention to Erzi pretending to study to deceive his father. Even though, as cited in the previous paragraphs, in 1980s Chinese society the young generation tried to react against parental authority, this resistance was within the family circle. Additionally, according to Zhou Xuelin, the representation of these generational relationships in Chinese cinema depicts that the father's 'influence, was still felt by the offspring' (2007, p.64) due to the deep permeation of traditional Confucian thoughts in China. In a traditional Confucian Chinese family, children respect their elders, ancestors are venerated, and adults protect children (Qiong, 2016). In the film, Erzi appears to agree with Old Kui; it is shown that although he has his own ideas, he demonstrates respect to his father by trying to follow his suggestions. This

behaviour is called 'filial piety' in Confucian thought. In an analysis of Confucianism, Qiong Wang outlines the relationship between self and family:

> The virtue of love from a Confucian child toward his or her parents is often called filiality or filial piety (xiao) in the Confucian context, which in particular means the fulfilment of filial obligations toward one's parents. Confucian filial obligations mainly include the obligation to respect and obey one's parents […] the parent-child relationship attracts the most emphasis and discussion in Confucian literature, and filial piety is considered one of the cardinal virtues in Confucian ethics. (2016, p.195)

In Confucian thought, a core component of many Asian value systems, filial piety is the foundation of humanity.

Therefore, in many scenes Erzi is represented through comic behaviour and dialogue pretending to study. However, his mischievous plans are always interrupted by Old Kui. When there is a football match on TV, the father forbids Erzi to watch the match so that the son can concentrate on his study. Erzi pretends to agree. While he sits at the desk and appears to be studying, secretly he watches football from the TV's reflection in the mirror on his desk. While following the progression of the game he gives himself away by frowning, shaking his head, excitedly pounding the desk a couple of times, shouting, and waving his arms (Figure 2.4).



FIGURE 2.4 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. ERZI WATCHES THE FOOTBALL GAME USING THE MIRROR ON HIS DESK AND WAVES HIS ARM EXCITEDLY.

As Erzi waves his arms excitedly. Old Kui's face suddenly appears in the mirror (Figure 2.5).



FIGURE 2.5 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. OLD KUI'S FACE SUDDENLY APPEARS IN THE MIRROR.

A startled Erzi turns around. Seeing his father, Erzi immediately opens his mouth, its corners pointing downwards, and a look of panic appears on his face (Figure 2.6).



FIGURE 2.6 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. SEEING OLD KUI'S FACE IN THE MIRROR, A STARTLED ERZI TURNS AROUND.

As such, Erzi's comic deception rebounds upon himself. These physical performances capturing deception and being interrupted are comically exaggerated. With the development of the film, these comic exaggerations are built up and developed through elaborate behaviours. Eventually, they play out conflicts in this family and defuse the tension between father and son. Nevertheless, surprising variations occur during such scenes, such as when Erzi happily watches the football match from the mirror and is interrupted. Erzi fails to escape from study in this situation.

Surprising interruptions are interspersed across the wider narrative span of the story. In a scene in the middle of the film, Erzi begs Shunzi to convince Old Kui to let him quit his studies and join Shunzi's business to earn money. Old Kui immediately refuses and tells Shunzi that he would rather point a gun at his son to make him go to university than allow him to get involved in Shunzi's business. Overhearing these words, Erzi immediately sits up in bed, with an expression of surprise. He forms his hand into a gun shape, points it at his head, and mischievously says, 'Simply use the gun to shoot me'. Then he puts on his

headphones. With a smile of cynicism, he says to Shunzi, 'Anyway, I cannot pass the university entrance examination, so it is better to listen to my father to stay at home wasting time rather than studying for the university entrance exam'. Erzi starts singing pop music with a triumphant smile on his face and shaking his head happily (Figure 2.7).



FIGURE 2.7 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. ERZI STARTS SINGING POP MUSIC WITH A TRIUMPHANT SMILE ON HIS FACE AFTER COMPLAINING TO HIS FRIEND ABOUT HOW HE WILL DESTROY HIS FATHER'S STUDY PLAN FOR HIM.

Though Erzi's words sound strong, his physical behaviours and exaggerated facial expressions create comic effects. Moreover, these comic effects bring relief from the tension and frustration between father and son. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik assert that physical actions in films 'are suited to the articulation of ineptitude and frustration because they are suited to the articulation of failure […] because of the potential of interruption' (1995, p.58). Physical comedy as a film technique can help the audience to visualize the characters' stresses and make them funny. With a series of such escalated scenes, a comedic effect is created in the film. From Erzi's study-avoiding behaviours and

the father's interrupted surprises, the conflicts between him and Old Kui decelerate, and a mixture of emotions is produced. From a social and cultural perspective, the film helps to dramatize and navigate life issues. These problems are mended through comedy. Thus, comedy is the way that family conflicts about education are navigated in *Father and Son*. In this film, the family can be a site of conflicts, but it can also be a site of humour.

Through comically treated behaviours, including non-verbal comedy, such as facial expressions, and situations, such as the football-and-mirror scene, *Father and Son* also represents the politics of education generated by the university exam policy at a personal level. Educational policy is experienced in the family, by individuals, and generationally. What the film shows to the audience is that the burden of managing policy is offloaded on the individual, and on the family. When Erzi tries to prepare for the exam, or fails to complete the exam, only family members are involved. The film does not depict any representative of the state – only by the consequences of state policy by how individuals and families experience some influences of educational policy in complex ways. Broader policy changes, such as the effect within education of China's wider Opening-Up Policy are also represented in this film. The whole film describes how the father, the son, and even the whole family are preparing for the university entrance examination, because of entrance requirement changes – the relaxed age policy and the reintroduction of this examination.

Political issues and changes can create impacts at a family level, from older to younger generations and vice versa. *Father and Son* depicts the different, even conflicted, ideologies with respect to education between two generations. Politics, which in this film refers to the educational policy connected to entering university, are felt in different ways by the father and the son. Thus, politics in the film are transformed into a family dynamic. There is no depiction, in most of the film scenes, about whether Erzi and his friends influence Old Kui's attitude, but the film represents that due to Old Kui's family hierarchy, politics (educational policy changes) are intersecting in a powerful way between these two characters in a domestic site. Educational values between these two

generations are affected by the relevance of this topic and differing motivations being represented for the father and the son. The policy is personalized, and the social problems regarding education are resolved at the level of the family. In all the discussions depicted, Erzi holds more positive attitudes towards opportunities from the Opening-Up Policy, but abandons study, while Old Kui does not allow much room to discuss this issue in most of the film. Therefore, the two policies are almost pulling two generations of father and son in different directions. The film shows no sense of the two political moves acting in the same direction, regarding making use of education to facilitate the opportunities presented by Opening Up.

In most of the film's representations, it cannot be seen that Erzi has influenced Old Kui's attitude; yet the ending of the film suggests that liberal young adults, represented by Erzi, are the ones who decide their own destiny, whereas parents, represented by Old Kui, eventually have to accept their children's behaviour, either voluntarily or passively. At the end of the film, Erzi studies all night and falls asleep in the examination room during the university entrance examination (Figure 2.8). As a result, Erzi cannot complete the university admission exam that his father, Old Kui, urged him to study for at home during the preceding year.



FIGURE 2.8 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. ERZI FALLS ASLEEP DURING THE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATION.

In this vein, even though Old Kui can control when and how frequently Erzi needs to study at home, he is unable to be by Erzi's side constantly. Erzi's behaviour is therefore uncontrollable when Old Kui is not present in the classroom where the exam takes place. In the classroom, where the educational site appears in the film for the first time, the patriarchal figure of Old Kui is eventually rejected by Erzi's falling asleep during the exam, as this site is beyond his domestic hierarchical power. In the last few scenes, although the father is eager for Erzi to go to university Old Kui carries his sleeping son away from the exam room in a wheelbarrow (Figure 2.9).



FIGURE 2.9 BINGLIN WANG, *FATHER AND SON,* 1986. FILM. OLD KUI CARRIES HIS SLEEPING SON AWAY FROM THE EXAM ROOM WITH A WHEELBARROW.

The seemingly controlling father Old Kui, thus, loses the battle with Erzi over Erzi's education. As depicted in the film's ending, Old Kui taking the asleep Erzi back home from the exam reveals that whether he likes it or not, as a parent, Old Kui has to accept the consequences of Erzi's decisions and the resulting outcome. In the end, the seemingly 'greater self', the father, and the 'lesser self', Erzi, exchange power in their domestic relations and a passive reconciliation, correspondingly, is achieved.

In summary, my first point is that in *Father and Son* a story about education under the reintroduction of the university entrance exam is narrated in a domestic family setting. The leading characters, Old Kui (the father) and Erzi (the son) are represented as holding ambivalent attitudes towards the impact of policy during a period of transition in the 1980s. The father tries his best to facilitate Erzi grasping this opportunity to pass the entrance exam, while Erzi does not prioritize education. Their contradictory attitudes and behaviours create family conflict. However, the film navigates this tension through comic effects (such as behaviours, facial expressions, and surprises), to resolve the influence of this educational policy at the familial level, the domestic site.

Conflicts are created throughout in this cinematic representation. However, Erzi falling asleep during the exam and Old Kui taking him back home at the end of *Father and Son* demonstrates that problems are eventually solved among family members. As such, as I have argued across this case study, these educational problems are navigated through having a family relationship that may involve conflicts, but also solidarity. By showing education as an activity that happens at home, the roles of the state and education infrastructure, such as school, teachers, classmates and classroom, are completely effaced.

With the national educational policy managed domestically, a father and son relationship is discussed in *Father and Son.* The father-son relationship relates to my second point, that an overturning of this relationship is possible. Through comic effects and the ambivalent behaviours of Old Kui and Erzi, the true nature of the parental relationship between Old Kui and Erzi is revealed. In the battle of who is the 'greater self' and who is the 'lesser self' in the family Old Kui is seemingly the 'greater self' of the household by making important decisions for Erzi's life and supervising Erzi to ensure he is following the paternal decision. However, Erzi quietly responds in opposition to this parental authority. As such, *Father and Son* shows that the 'greater self' may not be as determinative as it appears to be, and the 'lesser self' has more power over themselves than that being given by the traditional Chinese parental hierarchy. Erzi uses his passive defiant way to furtively protest against the supreme Old Kui.

Children of the Asian Games: Educational Experiences in *The September of Mine*

The two films examined in this chapter respond to wider developments and impacts on education in the way that China understood itself and its citizens through the education system. The first case study *Father and Son,* in the previous section, looked at the domestic effects of policy related to matriculation for university exams. In this section, I examine the second case study of *The September of Mine,* a children's film released in 1990. The focus of *The September of Mine* is on primary school, and therefore provides a different context for the examination of the impact of national policy in film

representations of education. In this case, it is a foreign rather than a domestic policy, in the form of the Opening-Up Policy. The content and the context of the Opening-Up Policy are examined as a means to consider how the foreign policy had domestic effects, including the experience of primary education in China at the end of the 1980s and the turn of the 1990s.

Specifically, in this case study, I consider how the Opening-Up Policy had positive effects on promoting regional and international sports events in China, such as the Asian Games, which had a bearing on domestic education, at the level of Chinese citizens' responsibilities, especially children's behaviours as represented in Chinese cinema at the time. Different from *Father and Son*, produced by a private film company, Changlong Film and Television Company, *The September of Mine* was produced by a national film studio, the China Children's Film Studio. In this context, I argue that the children's film *September of Mine* represents the idealized behaviours of Chinese children in the context of the 1990 Asian Games. Specifically, primary education is used as a vehicle to show that a good student/child prioritizes the nation over themselves. The educational story, in this film, happens in the form of martial arts training and is framed as a coming-of-age narrative, articulating values in personal behaviours, responsibility, physical mastery, and social relations.

The 1990 Beijing Asian Games, Children's Film and the China Children's Film Studio

The 1990 Beijing Asian Games are much less known and analysed by the public or in research in comparison to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. However, the 1990 Asian Games were the first major international sporting event held in China after the implementation of the Opening-Up Policy. This Opening-Up reform and policy enabled China to gradually catch up with the world beyond its mainland border in aspects such as economy, politics, and international sports events. In other words, this 1978 policy of restoring contact with the rest of the world outside mainland China paved the way for the 1990 Beijing Asian Games. The games are also a space where the Opening-Up Policy is celebrated in *The September of Mine*. Therefore, the 1990 Asian Games have a significant

ideological meaning for the Chinese nation and its citizens – as analysed in this subsection.

The 1990 Beijing Asian Games hold domestic ideological value for China's self-projection in front of the rest of the world. Evidencing this, after China was chosen in 1984 as the site of the 1990 Asian Games the games received regular coverage in China's newspapers. These continuous reports of holding the 1990 Beijing Asian Games were crucial to China, as 'sports is an unmistakable prism through which nation-states project their image to the world and their people […] In some instances, sport is critical to the process of independence and nation-building' (Mangan 2010, p.2334). Marcus Chu notices the 'high profile' given to 'publicise Beijing's victory', in being awarded the honour of hosting the event in China, and states in his analysis that 'it, together with the excellent performance of the Chinese athletes in international sports events, was interpreted as the evidence that China's status of an Asian strong power in sport had been confirmed' (Chu 2013, p.1051).

The above observations demonstrate the connection between a sporting event and a nation's power, which supports the significance of the Asian Games to China. A few other scholars also confirm the significance of the 1990 Beijing Asian Games to China and its function in projecting a positive image of China as a nation to the world. According to Lau Tuen-Yu, the 1990 Asian Games is China's 'orchestrated effort to restore its international image' (1990, p.50). Fan Hong argues that 'The Asian Games in September 1990 could be used as a window to show China's stability and to win back foreign investors, and as a metaphor to unite the disillusioned Chinese people under the banner of patriotism' (2005, p.488). The 1990 Beijing Asian Games received high attention to show China's new image to the world proceeding its economic reform. Within such a historical moment, the 1990 Beijing Asian Games, was 'the first major sporting event ever to take place in China' (Xu 2008, p.204) and the first Asian regional sporting event in China after its Opening Up, and thus became a stage to project the image of China from – to the external world and to its internal citizens.

The state-sponsored activities of personal donation and voluntary contribution to the Asian Games helped construct and project the ideal of a patriotic subject. As Fan Hong observes:

> Inspired by the patriotic 'Asian Games spirit', Beijing sped up construction for the games. […] The games cost 25 billion Renminbi Yuan in total, of which central government provided 10.5 billion; the Beijing government 6.5 billion; the lottery 4 billion and the rest from sponsorship and donations from people throughout the country. The Party also used the 'Asian Games spirit' to mobilize citizens in Beijing. More than 400,000 student citizens became voluntary workers before and during the games. (2005, p.489)

As such, with the contribution of its citizens, the contribution and preparation towards the games were discursively framed in patriotic terms as a patriotic activity. The ideology of the 'Asian Games spirit' shows that holding the Asian Games was a political way to project state image and national glory. Marcus Chu reports that:

> it [the Asian Games] can be regarded [as] a diplomatic battle by the Chinese government in which the host[ing] right was treated as a part of China's national interest […] Holding the 1990 AG [Asian Games] was highlighted as a wish of all the Chinese people […] Although the one billion Chinese did not act to support Beijing during the bid, they made a tremendous financial contribution to the games after hosting rights were given. (2013, p.1051)

Chu's analysis suggests that Chinese individuals financially supported the Asian Games to express their patriotism. Addressing the ideological relations between the individual and the nation in China, Lucian Pye states 'What is significant for state-individual relations is that the associations and societies did not advance the private interests of citizens, for that would be seen as

selfishness' (1991, p.452). Pye's observation shows that in China the individual is expected to serve the nation's interests. The responsibility for holding the Asian Games lay with the state, but the games were also the responsibility of Chinese citizens who were expected to support the state and society. Publicity of the Asian Games helped to prompt patriotic sentiments among Chinese citizens, including school activities. For instance, reports in *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China), cited at the beginning of this subsection, showed that Yan Haixia, a primary student, who first donated to this event was invited to watch the ceremony with the committee (Figure 2.10), and was issued a certificate of honour by the Beijing Asian Games Foundation office. These acknowledgements by the Asian Games Committee can be interpreted as an honour for the primary student. Such publicity and reward systems prompted patriotic sentiments among Chinese citizens. A spirit of national identity helped facilitate the Asian Games to gain strong support among the Chinese people, and to promote amongst the people the rise of China's status and influence in Asia.



FIGURE 2.10 YAN HAIXIA'S 1990 ASIAN GAMES REPRESENTATIVE CARD.

This ideological function of the Asian Games had a bearing on China's financial and social focus, and influenced educational activities in that it motivated Chinese students, along with other Chinese citizens, to financially support the Asian Games to show their contribution to China. With such international significance and domestic publicity, the Asian Games required a large amount of financial support. Much focus during preparation for the Asian Games was on financial contributions from the nation and its citizens. According to Wu Shaozu, the former director of the State Sports Commission and executive chairman of the 1990 Beijing Asian Games Organizing Committee, 'For the Asian Games, we spent a total of 2.37 billion yuan. [Of this amount,] 850 million was from the central government, a huge gap still existed financially. Tens of millions of people donated money' (*Beijing Evening News*, 2019).

Chinese citizens donated directly or bought Asian Games lottery tickets to contribute towards preparation and construction. 'According to the *People's Daily*, the Chinese citizens donated 600 million yuan (approximately US$ 126 million) to Beijing' (Chu 2013, p.1051). Thus, donations and student

contributions to the Asian Games were constantly praised and organized, to encourage schools and students to carry out a variety of activities to fund the Asian Games (Figure 2.11).



FIGURE 2.11 22ND FEBRUARY 1990, MORE THAN 30 PUPILS FROM BEIJING BAIWANZHUANG PRIMARY SCHOOL CAME TO THE ASIAN GAMES FUNDRAISING DEPARTMENT FOR DONATIONS.

Some scholars notice the link between the Asian Games and primary education in the promotion of this sports event. Fan Hong observes that students are involved in this national event: 'some 400,000 students and workers were trained to be fans. They were divided into 106 teams and assigned by the organizing committee to sit in stadiums to cheer every competition' (2005, p.489). Hong's observation shows that Chinese citizens, including students, are mobilized (trained to cheer teams) to support this sporting event. In this vein, donations and volunteer work in schools supported the activities of the Asian Games. As such, this sporting event became a symbolic means of merging educational contexts and political priorities with an impetus to establish a strong international image of China as part of the process of Opening Up.

With such support for the Asian Games, a children's film, *The September of Mine* was released in 1990. The China Children's Film Studio played an active role in the ideological message of the film (Figure 2.12).



FIGURE 2.12 LOGO OF THE CHINA CHILDREN'S FILM STUDIO.

According to the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China (2009), 'founded on June 1, 1981, China Children's Film Studio is the only Chinese film studio specializing in the production of children's film feature films'. Thus, the Ministry officially confirms the studio's production specialization. Stephanie Donald also analyses the China Children's Film Studio in her book *Little Friend*, which discusses children's films in China:

> The Beijing (later the China) Children's Film Studio (CCFS) was established […] in direct response to a call a few months earlier by the Central Committee 'for all society to pay heed to the healthy growth of the young' […] In principle then, Yu Lan's role in the 1980s as director of the new Studio was to implement a spiritually 'unpolluted' system of values to children, based on the four principles of adherence to the

> socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party, and Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought. (2005, p.26)

Donald's observation shows that in the 1980s, films produced by Children's Film Studio embed Chinese socialist ideology in their story, to act as role models for younger generations through film. Therefore, the film works the studio produced, represent 'the need to save children from corrupting influences […] [which] necessitated the construction of an internal system of values that are affective, rather than politically pragmatic but empty "basic principles"' (Donald 2005, p.27). Thus, film works in the studio intended to represent 'unpolluted' epitomes of children's role models for the audience, but they also addressed some practical issues appealing to the younger generation. For instance, the Asian Games experience narrated in *The September of Mine*, in the social context of the 1990s. As Donald further observes, 'some of the CCFS's films work very well, treading a line between moral purity and the real challenges facing real children' (2005, p.30). In this regard, as a state organization, the studio represents national values to the younger generation through films, but also addresses issues this generation was facing at the time.

Certain functions and narratives are often embedded in children's films. For instance, these films often convey positive values to the child audience. According to Noel Brown and Bruce Babington, 'distinctive textual features of the children's film include relatively simple syntax: the greater centrality of the child and the child's perspective […], [for the] learning of responsibility and the importance of friendship' (2015, p.6). Brown and Babington's observations show that children's films are often implanted with ideologies for the purpose of socially educating children. In addition, in many films, personal journeys are involved to show the development of the child characters. Ian Wojcik-Andrews finds, in the textual features of the children's film, that most protagonists embark on a journey and most film narratives 'begin with disruption, a physically or emotionally violent event that propels the child forward on a journey' (Wojcik-Andrews 2000, p.9). When Alistair Fox examines coming-of-

age in cinema, he observes that a process of change is often precipitated by 'an encounter with a difficult or threatening situation' and/or 'a desire to find meaning in life' (2017, p.5). In this vein, the coming-of-age narrative has some parallels with children's films depicting children going through life transitions. Therefore, some children's films, though not all, contain coming-of-age narratives. *The September of Mine,* which will be examined in the following section, is a film that mobilizes a coming-of-age narrative as a role model for children, through negotiating relations between the nation and the individual, under the specific context of the Asian Games.

Children of the Asian Games: Educational Experience in *The September of Mine*

The narrative of *The September of Mine* concerns year four primary school student, An Jianjun (Zhang Meng), and whether he can participate in the Asian Games' opening ceremony. In China, 'formal education includes up to three years of preschool education and nine years of compulsory or "basic" education. Basic education comprises six years of primary education usually starting at the age of six, and three years of junior high schooling until the age of fifteen' (Ryan 2019, p.50). Thus, An Jianjun is a nine- or ten-year-old boy. Nicknamed 'An, the Biggest Fool', An Jianjun is often ridiculed by his classmates, especially by student Liu Qinglai (Zhang Chen). The film reveals that students in An Jianjun's school will perform group gymnastics in the games' opening ceremony. However, because his martial art performance in daily practice is not good enough, An Jianjun is told that he can no longer participate in the performance. He is very disappointed. A new teacher Mr Gao (Zhang Guoli) encourages An Jianjun to think critically about his situation and to work hard towards his goal if he wants to rejoin the performance. Encouraged by Mr Gao, 'An, the Biggest Fool' starts to reconsider his attitude towards everything in life. After every day's martial arts practice, he finally re-joins the gymnastics team and attends the opening ceremony of the 1990 Asian Games.

The September of Mine shows the significant influence of the Asian Games on Chinese citizens, as a product of the Opening-Up Policy; especially primary

school students through the shifts of locations. In the first scene, for example, the teacher Mr Gao is in his office, An Jianjun is crying in front of this teacher after failing to be chosen for the martial arts performance. In classroom scenes, the students are often represented talking about the Asian Games or preparing their martial arts training for the games. In the school sports field, throughout the entire film, the students are practicing their martial arts under the supervision of a school coach. Outside the school, the Asian Games is also represented as being closely connected to students' lives. In the middle of the film, shots are shown of individual students practising their martial arts at home or in the park. At An Jianjun's home, beyond this physical location, in the media space, the TV also broadcast an Asian Games-related programme. As such, the Asian Games appear in various educational, domestic, social and media settings in the film which demonstrates this sports event's penetration of Chinese citizens' lives. These spaces, closely connected with each other by the students' lives, represent the high attention given to the 1990 Beijing Asian Games in an educational space during that period.

The September of Mine is also linked to the Asian Games through props. The mascot of the 1990 Asian Games frequently appears on the wall of the school's playground (Figure 2. 13) and on television screens when the students are at home (Figure 2.14).



FIGURE 2.13 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE,* 1990. FILM. THE MASCOT OF THE 1990 ASIAN GAMES, PAN PAN, THE PANDA APPEARS ON THE WALL OF THE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND.



FIGURE 2.14 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. TV SHOWS THE PROGRAMME CALLED 'LIGHT OF THE ASIAN GAMES' WHEN AN JIANJUN IS AT HOME.

Christine Sprengler discusses the cultural significance of props in the film that 'tend to be mobilized in conjunction with other cinematic strategies to serve distinct narrative ends, to say something about a place or to convince us of the authenticity of a particular historical period' (2009, p.96). This observation shows that props can accelerate cinema's historical context. In *The September of Mine,* these iconic props help to generate a sense of the Asian Game spirit throughout the film. Appearing in different settings and occasions, the significance of this sports event for Chinese citizens is, thus, frequently associated with these props. The continuity of the narrative under this specific historical period throughout the film is also seized.

Within the context of the significance of the Asian Games to Chinese citizens, *The September of Mine* represents patriotic sentiment and the construction of Chinese citizenship merged with primary education in the form of martial arts training. Since the beginning of the film, the students selected to participate in the martial arts performance are represented with a strong sense of honour as they practise their martial arts every day with motivation. The ones who do not pass the selection process are represented as disappointed. In his discussion of citizenship articulation, Robert Culp perceives that 'Citizenship is […] a form of active practice through direct participation in tasks vital to the community' (2007, p.103). Culp's observation shows the tight connection between an individual's participation in collective activities and the configuration of citizenship. Depictions in *The September of Mine* of students' active participation and motivation for their martial arts performance in the opening ceremony, and An Jianjun's disappointment when he cannot perform, link this collective martial arts activity with the ideology that participating in collective activity is an honour, a personal and collective honour. Therefore, this narration demonstrates the ideology in this film, which is to endorse citizenship formation to primary students through sports events.

The September of Mine frames the construction of citizenship through a narrative of An Jianjun's personal educational journey. In narrating An Jianjun's martial arts training, *The September of Mine* first represents that he encounters

a series of problems in various settings. The first school setting in the film appears in a 30-second shot of primary school students practising martial arts (Figure 2.15).



FIGURE 2.15 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS PRACTISE MARTIAL ARTS IN SCHOOL.

The camera spans over students performing martial arts moves. At the end of this scene, the sports teacher blames An Jianjun for incorrect movements and falling behind the beat. In the first classroom scene, An Jianjun is represented as being unable to answer the teacher's easy question. The whole class laugh at him, and two students call him 'stupid' loudly. In the first half of the film, even in the area where An Jianjun and Liu Qinglai live, Liu Qinglai, other children and some adults also often tease An Jianjun by calling him 'An, the biggest fool', or associating him with misbehaviours occurring in the neighbourhood. As such, An Jianjun encounters derision and contempt from peers and grown-ups across different spaces in the film (Figures 2. 16 and 2.17).



FIGURE 2.16 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. AN JIANJUN RECEIVES DERISION IN SCHOOL FROM HIS CLASSMATES. THE BOYS BEAT HIM UNDER THE GUISE OF PLAYING A GAME.



FIGURE 2.17 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. AN JIANJUN RECEIVES CONTEMPT WHEN NEIGHBOURS BLAME HIM FOR 'STEALING' EVEN THOUGH HE DOES NOT STEAL.

The teasing and disdain An Jianjun receives from other children and some grown-ups represented in *The September of Mine* are caused by his physical and academic ineptitude. Academic and physical aptitudes are both emphasized to a great extent in China, and are connected with social acceptance. To demonstrate the misassumption of academically poor children with behavioural problems, Chen et al. remark on the ideology of connections between academic performance and the perception of a child in Chinese culture 'Adults tend to associate academically weaker students with behavioral problems even when these children have not misbehaved' (2018, p.422). Thus, it is difficult for academically poorly performing students to be accepted socially.

On the other hand, physical education also has a secure position in the Chinese education curriculum. It is stated in an official document, the *Regulations on School Sports Work, March 1990* by the Chinese Ministry of Education that 'the work of physical education in schools shall be open to all students and actively promote national physical education and exercise standards […] Physical education is a subject for students' graduation and

entrance examination' (National Education Committee, 1990). Even though, according to the same document, there is no regulation to ensure the compulsory teaching of exercise or of martial arts, but Article 8 states:

> The physical and mental development of students shall be followed in the teaching of physical and mental education, and the teaching contents shall conform to the requirements of the syllabus, the age, gender characteristics of students and the geographical and climatic conditions of the area where the students are located. (National Education Council, 1990)

This document shows the significance of physical education within the curriculum. Within the Asian Games context, in *The September of Mine*, martial arts complies with physical education in An Jianjun's school, embedded in the curriculum under the particular historical moment. Failing this physical education, An Jianjun is again associated with poor performance at school. Combining both academic and physical weakness, two key aspects for a student. An Jianjun is represented at the bottom level of the social hierarchy and expectations, based on the criterion of being a good student at school.

However, *The September of Mine* immediately reveals its ideological position: that despite academic and physical aptitudes being important, the ultimate vital and idealized behaviour as a child is to put the nation's interests ahead of their own. In the first half of the film, though being marginalized at school, An Jianjun is narrated as supporting the Asian Games by buying lottery tickets (Figure 2.18).



FIGURE 2.18 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. AN JIANJUN BUYS ASIAN GAMES LOTTERY TICKETS.

After he wins, he immediately donates his earnings to the games which outweighs his temptation to buy ice cream. A local news reporter interviews An Jianjun about his good behaviour to support the nation. Although the news reporter mistakes Liu Qinglai as the one who donates the money, *The September of Mine* praises the donation behaviour. Additionally, in the middle of the film, in a school public meeting, the headmaster informs everyone that he read the newspaper about the report of the lottery donation, and gives a public compliment in front of the students and teachers that 'This selfless action earns a reputation for the school, and we all need to learn from this kind of behaviour', with an approving smile on his face. The headmaster leads the school to applaud the behaviour of Liu Qinglai.

The narration of this plot about lottery donation echoes the social context of the 1990 Asian Games, and affirms the relationship between a Chinese citizen and the nation, which connects the lottery donation of the 'lesser self' with the nation who holds the Asian-regional sports games as the 'greater self' – a collective concept presented in the Introduction. By representing An Jianjun putting a strong emphasis on the notion of a public good (before, and

independent of his desires and interests, to spend the bonus won from the lottery), a construction of citizenship is embedded in *The September of Mine*. As Robert Culp argues in his analysis, citizenship in China is about 'placing the collective interest above his own. At the same time, only active involvement in civic affairs of the community as a whole by cultivating in them the habits and outlook associated with group life' (2007, p.103). Culp's examination shows that citizenship involves a relation between the individuals and the nation; that an individual has the responsibility to devote themselves to the nation. This kind of personal sacrifice is linked to the ethical level, within collective society, which 'rests on the moral commitment of the individual to regulate himself and choose to serve the community' (Culp 2007, p.103).

Ultimately, Culp's examination of citizenship shows the strong ideological foundation in China of the submissive role of self to the nation. *The September of Mine* represents the 'lesser self' in An Jianjun's active participation as being of lesser significance to sustaining community life and to political-social community, that of projecting the Asian Games to the world stage, for the 'greater self', the nation. As such, An Jianjun is represented as a role model contributing towards collective life. The film represents the students using martial arts participation or lottery donation as a means to demonstrate their support for the nation, as a commendable behaviour where the 'lesser self' places the collective interests above individual interests. Therefore, the film establishes the ideology of the individual's role being to serve the community. The significance of non-curriculum martial arts training and lottery donation in primary education represented in *The September of Mine* endorses this ideology. The active contributions and the positive reactions from others present An Jianjun modelling the idealized behaviour of a young Chinese national citizen, and conveying the ideological message that what is fundamental goodness is moralised behaviour, which, in other words, is to consider national interests before self-interests.

In contrast to An Jianjun, *The September of Mine* mobilizes the characterization of Liu Qinglai to advance the paradigm of what a good child is.

The film first represents what a role model the child seemingly is, and the social privilege of an academically well-performing student. Liu Qinglai studies in the same primary school and lives in the same area as An Jianjun. Contrary to An Jianjun, Liu Qinglai performs well in his studies and sports and is very confident in front of people. He can always find the right moment to show off his charms. As mentioned before, the academic performances of Chinese children are often associated with the social acceptance of a child in Chinese culture. In their study of children in transnational Chinese cinema, Shih-Wen Sue Chen, Sin Wen Lau and Lennon Yao-hung Chang, note that:

> strong academic performance is, […] [in cinema], depicted as translating into proper behavior in the children, particularly in relation to acquiring adult sensibilities, emulating adult behavior, and understanding the need to contribute to their family and respective nations. (2018, p.422)

The examination of Chen et al. (2018) demonstrates that the educational hierarchy resulting in academic competence is not only shown in education but also in other school social affairs and social acceptance in Chinese cinematic representation. This privileged 'easier' social acceptance for the academically strong student Liu Qinglai echoes with this observation in *The September of Mine*. When An Jianjun wins the lottery for 50 yuan and donates this money to the Asian Games, Liu Qinglai is reported in the newspaper for the lottery donation and receives praise from the school principal in front of everyone at school, merely because Liu Qinglai talks more and behaves more confidently in the interview. The school, teachers, parents and students all accept this logic through common practice in the film. As such, the privilege of students with good academic performances is shown in *The September of Mine*. However, An Jianjun is still affected by this praise even though he does not receive it.

The September of Mine utilises the second half of the narrative to advance the ideology of altruism that a good child is one who prioritizes national interests, and this mental quality outweighs any personal academic and physical excellence. The film represents the construction of ideological

wrestling between An Jianjun and Liu Qinglai and problematizes model student Li Qinglai. In the first half of the film, Liu lies to avoid martial arts training to attend a family event and he takes the credit for An Jianjun's selfless donation to the Asian Games. At the end of the film, because of his lies, Liu Qinglai misses his martial arts training and cannot attend the ceremony performance. The camera shows a close-up of his face, Liu Qinglai displays an upset facial expression. He cries to his parents that he feels very disappointed that he cannot attend the martial arts performance (Figure 2.19).



FIGURE 2.19 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. LIU QINGLAI LOOKS DISAPPOINTED AFTER HIS FAMILY EVENT IS CANCELLED, AND HE REALIZES HE CANNOT ATTEND THE MARTIAL ARTS PERFORMANCE FOR THE ASIAN GAMES OPENING CEREMONY.

Liu Qinglai's regret shows his decision to prioritise his family over his martial arts training is imprudent. His actions are demonstrated as being reckless, which illustrates a cinematically ideological message that in terms of national interests, the nation is the 'greater self' and the family is the 'lesser self'. Placing self-interests first and being dishonest will eventually result in retribution. In this vein, Liu Qinglai is depicted as an egotist, who is self-centred and receives

mental punishment. In the examination of Chinese children's films, Stephanie Donald observes that 'implicit strands of socialization working throughout most media products for children across the world' (2005, p.61), show the wide existence of ideological values promotion in children's media products. Produced as a children's film by a national studio, *The September of Mine* tries to establish role models for promoting the socialization of Chinese youth. Through these represented clashes, this film explicitly denounces Liu Qinglai as placing himself as the 'greater self' and the nation as the 'lesser self'. At the end of the film, Liu Qinglai swallows the bitterness of not being able to attend the opening ceremony by thinking of his family reunion first, in doing so *The September of Mine* re-emphasizes its ideological message that it is vital to take the nation as the 'greater self' and the individual as the 'lesser self'. Otherwise, a self-centred child will eventually lose great opportunities in the form of social activities. Therefore, in its aims and execution, the ideological position of self and nation is set in the film's representations.

With the guiding ideological framework of placing national interests before individual needs, *The September of Mine* further utilises a coming-of-age narrative of An Jianjun to show that the process of contributing to the nation prompts a child to be a better self in terms of physical mastery. Being unable to attend the martial arts performance for the Asian Games ceremony compels An Jianjun to change. Alistair Fox examines that in cinema 'the process of change is often precipitated by […] an encounter with a difficult or threatening situation […] and/or a desire to find meaning in life' (2017, p.5). Fox's observation shows the significance of life purpose discovery for evoking the coming-of-age in films. *The September of Mine* positions re-joining the Asian Games performance as An Jianjun's goal. In the middle of the film, it starts representing An Jianjun practising his martial arts every day. It especially represents that An Jianjun even practices martial arts with his sister in the park on a Sunday to improve (Figure 2.20).



FIGURE 2.20 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. AN JIANJUN AND HIS SISTER PRACTISE MARTIAL ARTS AT A PARK.

This non-educational domestic setting emphasizes An Jianjun's determination in joining the martial arts performance is already strong enough to extend into his leisure time and space. Along with these scenes of martial arts practice, a melody of *Ode to the Motherland* is played in the background and accentuates the ideology that An Jianjun's attentiveness in martial arts practice is a sense of concern for his motherland, for him to make his contribution to the nation. At the end of the story, An Jianjun reaches the physical standard for the martial arts performance and re-joins the performance in the Asian Games. As such, An Jianjun's martial arts practice is linked with his personal physical transition, but also more with the collective goal of the motherland, for projecting the national image in the Asian-Pacific sports event in front of other nations.

Along with An Jianjun's physical improvement, *The September of Mine* narrates how this goal facilitates his coming-of-age in other aspects of his life. In the film's first half, in classroom scenes such as the Chinese writing class An Jianjun is represented talking passionately that he wants to write is the Asian

Games opening ceremony. He wishes that the performance can accommodate every student. In the second half of the film, when his peers again call him by the nickname ‘An, the biggest fool’, An Jianjun argues back and asserts, ‘Don’t call me that. Am I silly?! Am I silly?!’. At home, An Jianjun is also depicted diligently writing his homework, so that he can go to the martial arts practice afterwards. After An Jianjun is announced to be able to join the performance, his acceptance at school and among his neighbours are also boosted (Figures 2.21 to 2.23).



FIGURE 2.21 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. WITH THE GOAL OF RE-JOINING THE MARTIAL ARTS PERFORMANCE, AN JIANJUN’S ACADEMIC AND PHYSICAL PERFORMANCES IMPROVE. HE IS AT THE MARTIAL ARTS PERFORMANCE RE-SELECTION AND ALL OTHER CHILDREN CHEER HIM FOR HIS PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS.



FIGURE 2.22 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. AN JIANJUN RECEIVES A LOT OF COMPLIMENTS FROM NEIGHBOURS AND HE HAPPILY SMILES.



FIGURE 2.23 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. AN JIANJUN IS SURROUNDED BY HIS NEIGHBOURS WITH PRAISE AFTER THEY HEAR THAT AN JIANJUN RE-JOINS THE MARTIAL ARTS PERFORMANCE FOR THE ASIAN GAMES OPENING CEREMONY.

As such, the whole martial arts preparation process is narrated to transform An Jianjun from a mentally, academically and socially incompetent boy to someone with certain mastery of its demands in these qualities. Consequently, *The September of Mine* implies the personal growth and social acceptance of An Jianjun are gained through his pursuit of contributing to the nation by the form of preparing and joining the martial arts performance in the Asian Games ceremony. Ideologically, this setting proclaims the position of the 'great self', national interests, before that of the child. The film also manifests that placing national interests as the 'greater self' can motivate the 'lesser self', the individual child, to achieve a better self and that this effort will proliferate in all aspects of life and education, such as academic and physical performance, personal behaviours, and social relations.

In An Jianjun's coming-of-age, *The September of Mine* not only uses the role of children to represent what the right ideology is but also uses the role of the teacher to represent the positive impact a good teacher can have on the mental growth of students. From the beginning of the film, Mr Gao is depicted treating An Jianjun equally as a friend. In all scenes when Mr Gao meets An Jianjun he talks with him gently and with a friendly smile (Figure 2.24).



FIGURE 2.24 LI YIN, *THE SEPTEMBER OF MINE*, 1990. FILM. MR GAO TALKS WITH AN JIANJUN EQUALLY, GENTLY, AND WITH A FRIENDLY SMILE. THIS SCREENSHOT IS SELECTED AS AN EXAMPLE OF MR GAO'S IMAGE.

In the first half of the film, after An Jianjun is informed that he cannot continue his martial arts training at school, Mr Gao visits An Jianjun's home to encourage and comfort him and his family. During the visit, Mr Gao asks Jianjun to call himself 'Gao, the second fool' to match An Jianjun's nickname 'An, the biggest fool', and says to Jianjun 'We are friends. Who says that teachers can't be friends with their students?' When An Jianjun is encouraged by Liu Qinglai to hide another classmate's martial arts training clothes, and thus receives public blame, Mr Gao shares his experiences when he was a child, and tells Jianjun 'friends don't just flatter each other. What you should do and what you should not do, you should have a principle in mind'. Mr Gao lends An Jianjun a book on the philosophy of growing up. He also agrees with An Jianjun that if either of them encounters problems and needs help they will send each other a friendship symbol known only to them. Through these interactions, Mr Gao is narrated not merely as a teacher, but as an educator and a mentor to An Jianjun's mental enlightenment and coming-of-age. Encouraged by Mr Gao, An Jianjun gradually goes through his coming-of-age and re-joins the Asian Games ceremony performance.

However, considering the supporting role of grown-up characters in children's films Noel Brown and Bruce Babington contend that the genre contains 'distinctive textual features' of 'the marginalization of adult figures' (2015, p.6). In *The September of Mine*, An Jianjun's parents do not play many positive roles in his personal development. His parents are narrated to only provide him with food and shelter. The father has a bad temper and only knows how to scold his children. The mother is too quiet to communicate with An Jianjun apart from daily discussions about food and drink. An Jianjun's friends mainly tease him, steal his spotlight or encourage Jianjun to play pranks on others. Therefore, Mr Gao becomes An Jianjun's surrogate parent and friend. Accordingly, Mr Gao is not a main character but is peripherally represented in comparison to the children. Every time Mr Gao appears it is in his teacher-student relationship with An Jianjun. Thus, *The September of Mine* emphasizes the interior lives of the children, not of adults, showing adults only when the children encounter them. His function in the film is to facilitate An Jianjun's independent thinking and personal development through the teacher-student-friend relationship.

As a character positioned to accelerate An Jianjun's coming-of-age, Mr Gao exhibits some new characteristics among the films produced during the same period in China, but mainly his role is in line with the characterization of teachers in Chinese films in the late 20th century. Xuelin Zhou observes that in many Chinese contemporary children's films in the 1980s and 1990s, 'there is always a self-sacrificing teacher, a model of moral perfection, who "came with his heart in hands and left without carrying a straw"' (2002, p.120, quoting a Chinese saying used at this time to describe a morally perfect teacher). Zhou's examination shows the selfless quality of teachers that were promoted in late 20th century Chinese cinema. In *The September of Mine*, Mr Gao is represented as a good teacher, but not as a typical sacrificing figure as in other films in the same period, such as *Miao Miao* (1980), *Chunhui* (1982) or *Her Smile Through Candle Lights* (1991). These films represent teachers who sacrifice their own career choices, their children's education or even their lives for student

education. No explicit emphasis in *The September of Mine* is placed on the depiction of Mr Gao sacrificing his or his family's life or future, for the sake of his students. There are also no scenes of Mr Gao educating the students in collective solidarity. Instead, Mr Gao is represented as a teacher with his own inspirations and teaching philosophies – equally as a friend and an enlightening mentor to the students. Therefore, Mr Gao's image is narrated as a surrogate friend role, rather than an authority figure who is an agent of political policies, a collective representative, or a self-devoting moral model. Nevertheless, aspects of how Mr Gao is portrayed align with teachers' images in films of the late 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, such as *Miao Miao*. For instance, as a supporting character, Mr Gao is a moral role model who is enthusiastic about teaching. He is in addition caring to his students, as seen from his dialogue and interaction with An Jianjun. As a supporting character in the narrative about An Jianjun's coming-of-age, the teacher is also represented as a positive catalyst for advancing An Jianjun's physical and behavioural transition.

Overall, *The September of Mine* explicitly negotiates the collectivist concept between the 'greater self' and the 'lesser self' between a primary school student, An Jianjun, and the nation during the historical moment of the 1990 Asian Games. The above analysis showed how the Opening-Up Policy permeated primary education and influenced individual students' lives – via primary students participating in the opening ceremony of the Asian Games. By narrating the impact of the Opening-Up Policy through the personal transition of a nine-year-old child, the film establishes an idealized role model which highlights the significance of the hierarchical relationship between oneself, the 'lesser self', and the nation, the 'greater self'. Ultimately, a child is first and foremost a citizen of their country, and should always contribute towards the nation and place national interests first. The child can excel in school and life by pursuing this collective aim, while putting oneself before the country will obscure any other personal brilliance, and result in a bad citizen that will lose all of their accomplishments.

Conclusion

To answer the three questions established at the start of this chapter, I have analysed the educational situations and film representations after the end of the Cultural Revolution, until the beginning of the 1990s looking specifically at the educational experiences within two films that address different educational contexts, settings and dynamics. During this time, a great deal of social and economic changes occurred. Changing policies had broad impacts on many sectors of society, including the education field. The two case studies in this chapter are the films *Father and Son* (1986) and *The September of Mine (1990),* which represent different educational experiences as a consequence of different educational settings.

Both films represent the impacts of these policies on ordinary people in China. They engage with and animate transitions in Chinese culture during the Reform Era, while incorporating how these transitions can be experienced and lived through in representational terms. For instance, challenging family traditions and ideologies through ambivalences between father and son in *Father and Son*, and reinforcing the ideological needs of the nation as China 'opens up' in *The September of Mine*. On these terms, education becomes a key context and site for negotiating meaning, value and identity in Chinese culture. Generational relations between the father and the son, and individual citizens' relationship with the nation, are revealed in these two films as an ideology surrounding the relations between the self and others. Namely, that children need to obey their parents and contribute to the nation. The ideological 'greater self' and 'lesser self' are played out in the case studies via greater- and lesser-self dynamics that relate to key policies, in different educational contexts.

The first case study, *Father and Son,* portrays the new university entrance policy in the 1980s in its narratives in a domestic setting. Through relational wrestling between the father and son in the Chen family educational changes are negotiated. Through the comic ambivalences of the father, Old Kui, and the son, Erzi, the potential challenges and benefits of the educational policy are represented. The age relaxation to take the university entrance exam brings

more educational opportunities to people beyond the previously allowed school age, and with this policy change educational hope for families. As shown through the father character, Old Kui would love his son to seize this opportunity. However, parental wishes can also clash with young people's real interests and priorities at their life stage, as shown via the son character. Erzi would rather work for money and live a relaxing life than study hard in his twenties. As such, negotiating within a domestic site, *Father and Son* captures the matriculation examination policy's double-sided influence on an ordinary family in Beijing. It also shows that educational policies are managed at the level of the family.

Furthermore, *Father and Son* conveys the traditional Confucian family relationship in a cinematic educational dialogue against a domestic backdrop. By enforcing that Erzi study's diligently for the university exam via the power of a patriarchal figure in the home, it is shown to the audience that the father is the 'greater self' in this family relationship and the son is the 'lesser self'. The son needs to obey his father, and respect his father and the absolute power of the family. However, as the narrative and comic performances develop in the film the authority of Old Kui is defused cinematically. Instead, comedy effects are generated during the educational battle between father and son. Nevertheless, the film's ending where Erzi sleeps during the exam and has to be taken back home by Old Kui in a wheelbarrow, conveys two messages. Firstly, that the educational policy, opportunities, conflicts and results, are all eventually handled in the family. Secondly, within traditional family relations which seemingly are under absolute patriarchal control, children resist their parents, even through passive confrontation. Consequently, the children may seem like a 'lesser self' facing their parents, but they are still their 'greater self'.

The second case study, *The September of Mine* represents a coming-of-age narrative for primary school student An Jianjun prior to the 1990 Asian Games. This narrative focuses on educational changes during China's socio-economic transition. Through the personal transition of a nine-year-old child in a specific historical moment, this film illustrates how the Opening-Up Policy penetrated

primary education. The film uses martial arts as a way to explicitly celebrate citizenship education and promote the dominant ideology of prioritizing the common good over oneself. Therefore, *The September of Mine* constructs an ideological wrestling between the 'greater self' and 'lesser self' of students An Jianjun and Liu Qinglai. As An Jianjun transforms from a mediocre student to a more accomplished person in his journey to contribute towards China's national interest, the collective martial arts performance in the Asian Games ceremony. While 'good' student Liu Qinglai puts himself and his family first, and loses his chance to perform and his reputation due to this mentality. Therefore, through this construction this children's film demonstrates that to be a good child and a good Chinese citizen the individual is a 'lesser self' to the family, but the family becomes a 'lesser self' to the nation, the ultimate 'greater self' within Chinese collective ideology.

Thus, both these two Chinese films reflect changing government policies, and even explicitly promote in the second case study, dominant Chinese ideologies of their time periods. Educational and political-economic policies are narrated as influencing people's personal lives, either at home through parental and children relations, or at school through peer or teacher-student relations. The commercial film *Father and Son* shows that normative ideology is for children to follow parental instruction, especially the patriarchal father. However, it also reveals that a father does not have actual power over his children, as children can stealthily pursue the lifestyle they prefer in seeming obedience to their father's supervision. The children's film *The September of Mine* focuses more on the ideal of being a good child in the historical context of the Asian Games. It shows that a good child is a good citizen, who aims to contribute towards the nation and always places national interests first, and that this goal can help the child to achieve excellence in other aspects of school and life. In contrast, prioritizing oneself before the nation will negate any personal achievements and make one a bad citizen. Thus, a selfish child such as Liu Qinglai will eventually lose all praise that they used to have. Therefore, in different educational settings, these two films address the issues arising from

changing policies as individual issues and endorse a collectivist ideology. However, while *Father and Son* exposes the divergent possibilities of this hierarchical father-son relationship through a comic narrative, *The September of Mine* chooses an idealized role model to demonstrate the importance of hierarchical relationships for a child, who is firstly a citizen of the nation.

Chapter 3: Representing Education in the Move to Deepening Economic Reform China, 1991–2000: the Predicaments of Student Experience in Urban and Rural Contexts

In 1986, Compulsory Education Law within the PRC was issued to legitimatise education as a lawful right for children. It legally ensured that every child was entitled to receive nine years of basic education – primary and lower secondary education from the age of six (Yang and Guo 2020, p.612). However, while compulsory education was implemented, problems still existed. The educational experience was shaped in distinct ways in the 1990s by deepening economic policy reforms that often engendered social and regional inequalities. One consequence was the polarization between rural and urban areas in terms of educational access and resources. In this historical context, many screen media produced in the 1990s – such as *Campus Pioneer* (1996), *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* (1997), *Seventeen No Cry* (1998), and *Going to School with Father on My Back* (1998) – began to represent the effect of the economic reform on the educational experiences of individuals.

Some of these works focus on the impacts of the disparate challenges families and individual students faced in the urban and rural educational experience. In this chapter, I utilise two film case studies: *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* and *Going to School with Father on My Back*. In these films, deepening reform policy affects students' studies and personal lives, in the city and countryside. Through examining these films' representation of shifts in the characters' life trajectories, this chapter asks: how do these films represent the educational experience of urban migrant students (in the Special Economic Zone, Shenzhen, China) and rural students, with China undergoing Chinese reforms, and changing educational policies in the 1990s? By investigating this question, I argue that both *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* and *Going to School with Father on My Back* praise personal traits, such as persistence, being kind to others and especially self-sacrifice, through the personal coming-of-age narrative of an internal migrant student, Xie Xinran and the rural children Shi Wa and Shi Wa's sister.

Through how Xinran and Shi Wa's sister give up educational opportunities, these films individualize educational problems to perpetuate an understanding of the educational difficulties of urban migrant and rural students as individual challenges, and therefore not as collective or political problems. These two films exemplify how economic reform resulted in inequality, in terms of individual access to learning resources, educational mobility, and social hierarchy in Chinese schools. Both films reflect on the tensions, opportunities, and challenges between compulsory education and further economic reform in 1990s China. This chapter focuses on the educational experiences of urban and rural children, in China during this time period, by discussing economic reform and migrants' educational access in turn after a summary of the historical context.

Deepening Economic Reform in Shenzhen

Blossom Season, Rainy Season sets its narrative in Shenzhen. The city has played a significant role in economic reform in China since the 1970s to the present day. From the late 1970s into the 1980s, one of the most influential economic and social policies in China was the Opening-Up Policy. The Opening-Up Policy refers to Chinese economic reform which commenced in December 1978 under China's Communist Party. The task of this party in the new era was to build China into a modern socialist power, marking the beginning of socialist reform. Economic reform introduced market principles to China which started its transition from a planned economy, a centralized form of economy, to a market economy. The country gradually authorized cross-border travel and the entry of foreign investment and entrepreneurs into China. As discussed in Chapter 2, different policies shifted China's emphasis from one of class struggle to economic development and modernization.

This economic policy reform foregrounds the social and political context of films made in the 1990s. The reform 'led to the inevitable decline of central authority, as economic decision-making and power devolved to the regional and local leadership, especially coastal export-oriented provinces' (Kotarski 2015, p.29). Affected by various policies that differed geographically, the

economy between different cities and provinces experienced dissimilar rates of growth. For instance, in 1978, Shenzhen – along with the three port cities, Shantou, Zhuhai and Xiamen – was selected as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

According to Connelly and Zheng, 'the 1990s marked an unprecedented period of rapid economic, social and institutional change throughout China' (2009, p.81). In early 1992, Deng Xiaoping – China's paramount leader from 1978 to 1989 who remained influential – suggested that Shenzhen, amongst other cities, should lead further economic reform (Brødsgaard and Rutten 2017, p.96). In the same year, the governmental policy established that the goal of China's economic restructuring was to switch from a planned economy, a centralized form of planning, to a market economy with a predominance of public ownership and state-owned enterprises, including macro-regulation by the central government.

Deng remarked:

> Securities, stock markets, are they good or evil? Are they dangerous or safe? Are they unique to capitalism or also applicable to socialism? Let's try and see. Let's try for one or two years; if it goes well, we can relax controls; if it goes badly, we can correct or close it. Even if we have to close it, we may do it quickly, or slowly, or partly. What are we afraid of? If we maintain this attitude, then we will not make big mistakes. (Cited in Yeung 2015, p.376)

Deng's speech answered concerns about the ideological relations between a capital market within a socialist economy. It also confirmed the initial experimental nature of this deepening economic reform in the 1990s. In another of Deng's important speeches, previously mentioned above, he talked about the significance of economic reform and named Shenzhen as a role model for reform.

With this economically and politically significant speech taking place in Shenzhen, the city received more economically favoured attention in years to

come. By 2000, Shenzhen became 'the first and largest Special Economic Zone in South China' (Hung et al. 2000, p.456). And according to Chen and Kenney, 'Shenzhen grew rapidly as a center for assembly manufacturing for export. The policy was a massive success and the city grew rapidly. For instance, since 1979, Shenzhen's GDP has grown at an average rate of 30% per annum' (2007, p.1068). Shenzhen has been favoured by its location and its reform policies, among other factors, and, thus, its economic development accelerated quickly and surpassed other cities. Mok et al.'s focus on entrepreneurship and policy observes that 'Even before China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, Shenzhen ranked fourth in China's city-level GDP (after Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou)' (2020, p.197). This unparalleled increase in Shenzhen's economy proves that the SEZ has been a successful strategy for economic development in China. It grew Shenzhen from a poor fishing village to one of China's leading cities following economic reform in 1978, and its economy significantly accelerated after the deepening economic reforms of the 1990s and 2000s.

Chen and Kenney's assessment of governmental policy suggests that 'Shenzhen's success is the result of favorable policies, geographic advantages, visionary planning, deliberate development of a strong industrial structure, and an entrepreneurial institutional and organizational framework […] These factors allowed Shenzhen to attract talented personnel from throughout China' (2007, p.1068). This observation demonstrates that Shenzhen is an appealing city with leverage across multiple political, geographical, and economic aspects, designed to draw the attention of internal migrants. Furthermore, according to data from the China Education Panel Survey – a national, longitudinal survey of junior high school students in China – 'The establishment of a semicapitalist market system in 1991 further encouraged the flow of labor' (Guo and Zhao 2019, p.342), to reveal market economy as one of the drives of labour mobility. As such, because the city was earmarked for economic reform in China in the 1990s, Shenzhen attracted personnel from less-developed areas, who migrated for work.

Various migrants' identities appear in Shenzhen's increased migration flow, like Yang et al. note in their research about migrants' identity:

> The city of Shenzhen has been the prime destination for migrants since the start of China's economic reform in the 1980s. […] The diversity of the economic structure has attracted a broad array of migrants, ranging from low-skilled to high-skilled and highly educated. (2018, p.3)

In their analysis of Chinese migrants' destination choices, Liu and Xu define 'highly skilled migrants (with a college education or above or in a managerial/professional occupation) and low-skilled migrants (with junior high education or below or in an industrial/commercial occupation)' (2017, p.13). Therefore, high-skilled migrants are mostly educated or professional migrants, while low-skilled migrants are labour workers. Some scholars also address these two categories of migrants as 'skilled migrants' and 'labour migrants/workers' (Cui et al., 2015). In the following analysis, the first case study of this chapter will address the entire body of internal migrants as 'migrant workers', high-skilled migrants as 'skilled professional/migrants', and low-skilled workers as 'labour workers/migrants'.

Many skilled or labour migrants who came to work in Shenzhen brought their children and families. In the early 1990s, Chen and Feng note that 'a large number of children [were] migrating with their parents and living in cities' (2013, p.77). However, not all children from these migrant families in Shenzhen were entitled to the same access to primary and secondary education as local children. This was due to the household registration system: the *Hukou* system. Cindy Fan states that 'the hukou [*Hukou*] system, which was implemented in the late 1950s […] is a household record of an individual's (1) registration classification and (2) registration location, and is usually passed from one generation to the next' (2002, p.106). In addition, 'registration place and status were inherited from a person's mother until a very new policy announced in 1998' (Chan and Zhang 1999, p.822). As such, a household registration record's purpose is to formally designate a person as a permanent resident of a certain

region, and categorizes citizens as either urban or rural. Therefore, to some extent, individuals are legally tied to their birthplace by *Hukou*.

Relocating to areas beyond a citizen's *Hukou*, for either work or residence, was restricted due to those household registration regulations. Before 1988, Chinese citizens were tied to their birthplaces. Changing their *Hukou* identity outside of their birthplace was possible only by passing a university's matriculation exam or by joining the army. After 1988, this policy loosened which allowed more mobility for rural *Hukou* Chinese. However, while inter-area mobility had flexibility, limited access to geographical amenities arose. Thus, since the 1980s, the practice of *Hukou* has strengthened regional inequality and 'led to a divergence in benefit levels' attached to it (Chen and Feng 2013, p.76). While this system played a significant role in the fast economic growth of China in the 1990s, to some extent it also promoted and aggravated social stratification. *Hukou* within relatively developed cities – such as the largest Special Economic Zone, Shenzhen – has been particularly favoured due to the resources these cities provide, which are unavailable in other regions.

Hence, children from labour or skilled migrant families without a local *Hukou* likely faced difficulties in their educational experience in the 1990s. Chen and Feng note that 'Because migrant children do not have local HuKou [*Hukou*] in the place they live, they are not entitled to access public-school education stipulated by Chinese laws' (2013, p.76). Chen and Feng's observation shows that, to be admitted to public schools, students must reside within the school district and possess a local *Hukou* to register themselves locally. Otherwise, considering the limited spaces in public schools, they are charged 'out-of-district' fees (2013, pp.76–77). In Shenzhen, migrant students without a Shenzhen *Hukou* will be charged additional admission fees to access public educational resources, and this acts as a barrier preventing school-aged children from migrant families from having the same school experiences as local children.

In the mid-1990s, policies were launched to address migrant children's educational difficulties; significantly, in 1996 Shenzhen and five other cities became testing grounds (Mok et al., 2011). Therefore, the schooling of migrant children seemed to be taking a promising path. However, Chen and Liang argue that since then, 'little attention has been paid to this legislation at the local level […] neither the sending nor the host areas have strong incentives to incur costs associated with migrant children's education' (2007, p.119). Efforts and values associated with migrant education and their related policies have not been enacted locally, at least not in-depth. Subsequently, the problem of migrant children's education persists in Shenzhen and other Chinese cities.

Given such a complex social situation, problems persisted in migrant students' schooling experiences throughout the 1990s. Central aspects of this complexity were fees and their ensuing socio-economic disadvantage. First, fees created barriers. Even if granted admission 'to public schools, their parents are required to pay high educational fees' (Koo 2012, p.547). Thus, for the same public education, the admission fee differed for people with and without local *Hukou* as a means to prioritize educational resources for locals. Second, deeply rooted socio-economic factors in education produced discrimination and segregation. Peng (2019, p.175) observes that as a result of the rural-urban divide, the urban education system becomes a tool for class reproduction, as migrant children face cultural segregation and discrimination in the school's social hierarchies, especially if the students came from a less-developed area in public school. Thereby, even when accessing public education, a series of *Hukou*-related problems could potentially be triggered at school, which resulted in a different educational experience from the locals.

In summary, Shenzhen's economic boost in the 1990s attracted skilled and labour migrants. Many school-aged children arrived with their families in the city. However, public primary and secondary education were difficult to access for some of these migrant students due to the *Hukou* system. Despite this issue being addressed by the central government from the mid-1990s, public education was experienced differently by migrant children without a Shenzhen

Hukou, compared to local children. As such, a Shenzhen *Hukou* was especially valuable as it offered educational and life opportunities that smaller cities did not have, due to the status of Shenzhen as a SEZ.

The Implementation of Compulsory Education in 1990s China

The Compulsory Education Law was implemented on July 1, 1986 (Chen and Zhang, 2020; Lin and Zhang, 2006; Tang, Zhao and Zhao, 2019; Yang and Guo, 2020). Yuping Yang and Xiaodong Guo, in the examination of compulsory education in rural areas, find this law:

> includes the following features: (1) 9 years of basic education, including primary and lower secondary education, are compulsory nationally; (2) children who reach the age of six shall enrol in school in principal [principle]; (3) compulsory education is free of charge; (4) the government and parents or guardians should ensure that school-age children will receive compulsory education, and no organization or individual shall employ school-age children. (2020, p.612)

As such, the Compulsory Education Law secures the basic education of all children from age six to fifteen. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, school-aged children are legally required to attend primary school and receive nine years of compulsory education to achieve universal basic literacy. The legislation of this basic social service enables equal educational access and opportunities for children across the nation to build core capabilities. However, senior high education (its equivalent being high school/secondary education across the UK) falls outside of the cited range of compulsory education above, and thus ensures that student admission is not required by law.

Geographically, in terms of the law's implementation, 'with the passing of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986, by 1987, compulsory education had been implemented in 19 provinces, and by 1991 compulsory education had been implemented nationwide (Huang 2016)' (cited in Yongwei Chen and Ying Zhang 2020, p.80). Since 1991, the goal of this law was to secure the overall

national educational level. Yet, these previous scholars may have overestimated the speed of this law's national implementation rate because, in their investigation of educational expansion, Jing Lin and Yu Zhang find:

> The law stipulates that students aged from 6 to 15 are to receive nine years of compulsory education for free. Taking account of the uneven development of education in different regions of the country, the Chinese government planned for the partial implementation of the law during the 1980s and early 1990s, and full implementation of the law in the whole country by the end of the twentieth century. (2006, p.256)

Correspondingly, the government's planning processes indicate that the full implementation of this law was anticipated before 1999, which is a longer roll out than previously suggested by Huang (2016), or Chen and Zhang (2020). What is more, the law not only regulated basic education, but freed access to education for school-aged children. It aimed, in principle, to significantly help students from families experiencing vulnerability and poverty in order to potentially elevate human capital accumulation.

In addition, tuition fees raised another problem. Can Tang, Liqiu Zhao and Zhong Zhao explored the free compulsory education reform in 2006, and noted in the Compulsory Education Law:

> Although the bill authorized tuition-free education for the 9-year compulsory education (Article 10), the law was never strictly enforced. On the contrary, the financial burden of compulsory education was substantially borne by households, especially after the financial reform of basic education in 1985, which gave local governments full responsibility for the provision and financing of basic education. (2019, p.604)

As such, related to tuition-free education Article 10 in the 1986 Law on Compulsory Education was not fully enacted. Education remained a financial burden for poor and rural households until the free compulsory education

reform of 2006. For example, 'Rural families with an average household income of 1,000–3,000 yuan a year, are often short of the necessary cash to send their children to a junior or a senior high school' (Lin and Zhang, 2006, p.267). As compulsory education has been legitimised since 1986, its lack of free tuition fee enforcement resulted in financial dilemmas for some geographical areas or families. For instance, while looking into compulsory education finance in China, Wen Wang and Zhirong Jerry Zhao find that:

> the provision of nine-year compulsory education in China since 1985 has been very decentralized, with major responsibility for its financing resting with lower levels of government such as cities and districts in urban areas or townships, and villages in rural areas […] compulsory education encountered significant financial difficulties in many poor areas, and there were substantial and widening education fiscal disparities across locations. These deficiencies persisted and even intensified through the 1990s. (2012, p.136)

This finding shows that as the main cost of providing compulsory education was carried by local governments poorer areas faced underfunding, and thus educational resources in richer and poorer areas diverged. As a result, different local governments implemented the Compulsory Education Law at a varying pace. According to Yongwei Chen and Ying Zhang's findings about free compulsory education in rural China, after the 1986 law was issued 'tuition charged by the schools was to be raised by local governments instead of families so that provinces could determine the specific time and steps necessary to implement compulsory education, based on their economic and cultural development' (2020, p.80). Therefore, if the local government in poorer areas chose to implement free compulsory education at a slow pace, school-aged children in these places were not guaranteed to have access to basic education. Consequently, the implementation of the 1986 Educational

Law was uneven, and children in certain areas did not have equal access to compulsory education.

In 1990s China, the development between rural and urban areas was significantly uneven – economically and educationally, rural areas were much less developed than urban ones. In an investigation of educational expansion and shortages, Jing Lin and Yu Zhang find that 'Historically, there have been huge gaps between rural and urban areas, especially in terms of the provision of education and quality of education' (2006, p.267), and 'The economic reform and opening has not empowered rural peasants educationally. Instead, all decision-making powers on education still reside in the central government, and rural peasants are passive participants in the implementation of educational policies' (2006, p.264).

Substandard rural education has a long history in China, and this was not improved much by the issue of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986. Rural areas of poverty suffered from a lack of schools, and this educational situation fell short of the goal of the Compulsory Education Law. Lin and Zhang further notice that 'in rural villages (formerly called 'communes') […] every village had a primary school, every three to five villages (formed as a brigade) operated a junior high school cooperatively, and every commune (formed of three to eight brigades) had a senior high school' (2006, p.262). Lin and Zhang also observe, 'It is not unusual for a region with 100,000–300,000 rural villagers to have only between two and five junior high schools that can house only 500–800 students each, and a senior high school that can admit only 1,000 students' (2006, p.262). As such, there was a significant shortage of schools in rural areas to support the implementation of the Compulsory Education Law for basic education, not to mention high schools. Therefore, some rural children were not shielded by this Educational Law.

Furthermore, financial burdens remained for households in economically less-developed areas. From the 1980s to the 2000s:

> Students who attend senior high schools usually have to live away from home, and pay for room and board on their own. Rural families with an average household income of 1,000–3,000 yuan a year, are often short of the necessary cash to send their children to a junior or a senior high school. […] Besides the lack of schools, dropout has been a serious problem haunting secondary schools in China, mainly in rural areas. (Lin and Zhang 2006, p.267)

In this vein, poor financial status had a significant negative impact on the education of poor rural families. Rural areas and households created many educational problems compared to urban areas, such as disproportionate school numbers, students' geographical relocation for attainment, and a lack of income and financial support. As a result, the rural levels of education and access to basic education were low. As such, the national educational level of the country and human resource qualities were uneven. As David Goodman observes, 'education now moved on to a user-pays system, which essentially […] undermined attendance at schools' (2014, p.42). Therefore, rural areas were far from meeting the requirements of the centrally issued Compulsory Education Law.

The lack of funds to send children to school and the need for labour in exchange for more income created a vicious cycle in rural areas in China. As Jing Lin and Yu Zhang consent, 'the slim chance of students moving up to another level of schooling, have been a big turn-off for parents and students. Further, as China's market economy booms, young people in rural areas are leaving school early to search for jobs in cities and more developed areas' (2006, p.267). In poor rural areas, the lack of direct and rapid links between education and class mobility, as well as the rapid cash transfer that can be achieved by labour in developed cities in a market economy, demotivated school enrolment and encouraged school drop-offs in the 1990s.

When a household in a rural area could not afford tuition and other school-related fees, it becomes more likely that school-aged children will be kept away

from education and instead conduct economic activities or labour to bring a quick financial boost to their families. However, according to Can Tang, Liqiu Zhao and Zhong Zhao in their analysis of relations between education and child labour, 'Children's participation in economic activities may have adverse effects on their education' (2019, p.602). In this way, a vicious circle is created for poor, rural families between education and labour in exchange for quick wages. Compulsory law had not fully reduced children's participation in economic activities or completely improved their school enrolment in these areas. This presents another example of how the 1986 nine-year Compulsory Education Law was unevenly implemented in urban and rural areas in the 1990s. Improvements still needed to be made during the 1990s, to address this uneven implementation of education in rural areas as well as the educational problems of children from migrant families in China's cities. Educational problems connected to a lack of local implementation, and educational and financial barriers can also be found in Chinese cinematic presentations during the same period.

The rest of this chapter analyses the case study films (*Blossom Season, Rainy Season* and *Going to School with Father on My Back*) representing the challenges of urban migrants and of rural education connected to deepening reform and the uneven implementation of the Compulsory Education Law in 1990s China.

Blossom Season, Rainy Season's **Portrayal of *Hukou*, Education and Self-Sacrifice**

Blossom Season, Rainy Season (1997) is adapted from a book, of the same name, by author Yu Xiu. As it was written by a Chinese writer, the book includes certain cultural ideological values, but it does not emphasize any overt ideological position. Instead, it focuses on the school experiences of a group of high school students in Shenzhen, showing how these children develop into grown-ups through a series of rite-of-passage events. According to David Rudd's (2020) study of coming-of-age films, these events appear to be universally shared features. One distinctive feature of the coming-of-age narrative in *Blossom*

Season, Rainy Season is that it meshes the social issue of *Hukou* with the educational experiences of Xinran, a migrant student. When analysing films, Wong identifies that 'unlike most narratives in the tradition of the Western *Bildungsroman*, the Hong Kong versions normally focus to a much greater degree on the protagonists' social situation' (2009, p.144). Wong's observation of Hong Kong cinema also fits the films produced in mainland China. The coming-of-age narrative in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* is interwoven with the social context of 1990s China. While fictional, this film represents the educational experiences and mental growth of migrant workers' children in the 1990s.

High school student Xie Xinran (Yan Danchen) and her classmates mostly come to Shenzhen from different cities. Many of them face issues in their high school studies or teen lives. Xie Xinran is the class president, studies well and is popular among her peers. Without showing how other migrant students possess a local Shenzhen *Hukou*, Xinran is constructed as the only student in the class without one, and therefore pays different tuition fees, and in other administrative aspects is classified differently than her classmates. To provide several examples, student Chen Ming (Zhang Chao) is a local from Shenzhen. He dreams of going to Tsinghua University, Beijing, one of the best universities in China. However, this would mean giving up his Shenzhen *Hukou* which his family does not support. Another student, Liu Xia (Yangzi Baiyu) is worried about tensions between her parents, as they argue since moving to Shenzhen. Wang Xiaotian (Li Chen) enjoys his life but finds that he sometimes upsets friends unintentionally. While Liu Qing (Han Dongxue) and Yu Fa's (Liu Yin) problems revolve around how to improve their studies. Liu Qing's parents want her to go abroad, so the only subject she cares about is English. Yu Fa's father wishes Yu Fa to study hard, but the son is only motivated to create his own business and earn money. Thus, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* narrates different educational experiences through teenhood, to show how gradually these students perceive life and study from different perspectives.

Many of the film's main characters are 16-year-old high school students who have emigrated to Shenzhen with skilled professional parents from other cities. Following the opening narration, conversations at school and home provide background information. Xie Xinran's family, for instance, moved from Hunan. Her father is a construction engineer involved in developing Shenzhen. Wang Xiaotian's family moved from Beijing. His father is an officer who works for the Shenzhen government. School conversations between two other characters Liu Xia and Liu Qing show their families also moved from another city to Shenzhen, and that Liu Xia's father is a wealthy businessman. Therefore, the main characters are not depicted as labour migrants engaged in unskilled physical activities but, rather, are introduced as educated skilled migrants as part of the general movement of labour within China. The focus of this film is on individual issues these internal migrant students face in their education and family lives, rather than survival problems.

Among these issues for migrant students, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* represents Xinran's educational difficulties related to her lacking a Shenzhen *Hukou*. The film uses *mise en scène* related to the city landscape to render Xinran's *Hukou* predicaments via her educational journey. To capture Xinran's mood swings, in the first few scenes of this film Shenzhen's bright sky and tall buildings demonstrate this is a desirable and exciting city to live in. However, after these shots of the vibrant metropolis, skyscrapers are depicted with a gloomy sky in the background.



FIGURE 3.1 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. A SKYSCRAPER IN SHENZHEN, SHOT FROM GROUND LEVEL.



FIGURE 3.2 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. A SIMILAR VIEW OF ANOTHER SKYSCRAPER IN SHENZHEN.



FIGURE 3.3 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. A SKYSCRAPER IN SHENZHEN.

Through low camera angles and a slow pan from one building to another, the film generates an oppressive, boxed-in atmosphere. Additionally, Xie Xinran, says in a slow-paced and low-pitched narration: 'I am 16 years old, the same age as this city. The 16-year-old city is beautiful. But 16-year-old life, in addition to the beautiful flowering season, is also accompanied by a rainy season'. This combination of skyscraper images and voice-over establishes a tone that conveys Shenzhen as a city of mixed and bittersweet feelings for migrant students like Xinran. The repetition of the words '16 years old' in Xinran's voice-over draws our attention to the teen experience and teen issues. It also anthropomorphises the city: the city is a teenager. For Xinran, the city invites feelings of joy and opportunity (the blossoms of the film's title), but also obstacles (the rainy season). The skyscrapers which signal wealth and ambition are at odds with the foreboding low angle of these buildings, and the sentiments expressed by Xinran's voice-over. From the outset, the film navigates a visual metaphor of sharp emotional contrast. This contrast provides an ambivalent framing tone for migrant students' complex teen experiences. As such, from the beginning of *Blossom Season, Rainy Season*, the tone of the film represents Xinran's educational predicaments related to Shenzhen and to the emotional ups and downs of puberty.

After the first few scenes of skyscrapers under a gloomy sky, along with Xinran's bittersweet teen voiceover, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* immediately demonstrates a positive image of Shenzhen as a place to live and receive an education. As shown in Figure 3.4, the film continues with long shots of skyscrapers and landmarks which are symbols of a modernizing city.



FIGURE 3.4 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. THE MODERN CITY SHENZHEN.

In the middle of the film, further modernization of the city is portrayed by shots of busy streets, relaxing cafés and bustling restaurants, providing transitions in location when the students conduct activities outside school.



FIGURE 3.5 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. INSIDE A CAFÉ IN SHENZHEN.



FIGURE 3.6 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. THE ENTRANCE OF A SHOPPING MALL IN SHENZHEN.

The film moves between images of education and the classroom, and broader open spaces in the city. The clean classroom, modernized computers, and the well-established sports ground in the school show the availability of various activities and facilities, that the school is financially well supported, and offers its students a pleasant educational experience. In this vein, Shenzhen becomes an attractive beacon for migrants in 1990s China as its citizens are entitled to

access privileged social, economic and educational resources. Fundamentally, within the visualization of the city, the film presents Shenzhen as a desirable and residentially attainable city, to inhabit, and to receive an education. Recall, however, that at the beginning of the film Shenzhen was represented ambivalently for Xinran. Therefore, Shenzhen might appear as an appealing city generally, but individuals might have different experiences or feelings towards this city.



FIGURE 3.7 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. CLASSROOM.



FIGURE 3.8 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. THE COMPUTER ROOM IN THE LIBRARY.



FIGURE 3.9 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. LAWN.



FIGURE 3.10 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. ASSEMBLY ROOM.



FIGURE 3.11 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. BASKETBALL COURT.

After presenting a modern and attractive Shenzhen, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* focuses on *Hukou* as a feature of students' education in this seemingly desirable city. Before unfolding the protagonist Xinran's educational issue related to *Hukou*, the film represents local student, Chen Ming and his *Hukou* concerns in his educational journey, to show the tight connection between *Hukou* and education. Chen Ming's family is worried he might lose his local Shenzhen *Hukou* by applying for one of the top universities in China – Tsinghua University, in Beijing. As we know from the earlier section in this chapter, in the 1990s entering university was one way to change *Hukou* status. Going to the top university in Beijing means Chen Ming's Shenzhen *Hukou* will be changed to a Beijing *Hukou*. In this way, he will no longer be granted access to the developed social, economic and educational resources and amenities in Shenzhen.

In one beginning scene, at the home of Chen Ming, his father invites his teacher there to persuade Chen Ming not to leave this great city. Chen's father says, 'if you leave Shenzhen, your *Hukou* cannot return with you'. As such, Chen Ming's father persuades Chen Ming not to apply to this Chinese Oxbridge-type university, in Beijing, and to keep his local Shenzhen *Hukou* instead. This

narration demonstrates the significance of obtaining a local *Hukou* to people in Shenzhen, and its tight connection with education in the city due to Shenzhen's advanced economic status. It is a relevant part of education, and some people weigh it more significantly than receiving a better-quality education. With his Shenzhen *Hukou,* Chen Ming can live in a more developed city, and access better public amenities allocated by the Shenzhen government, including education.

Blossom Season, Rainy Season further represents the marginalization of migrant students in education without a Shenzhen *Hukou* through the protagonist Xie Xinran's experiences. As mentioned in the previous section, regulations regarding internal migration in China were relaxed in the 1980s. Nonetheless, being without a local *Hukou* created difficulties in accessing local provisions and amenities, such as education or other social services, including the opportunity to attend the same schools or pay the same tuition fees as local students. In the middle of the film, when the teacher is counting the resident population of the classroom for administration fees, Xinran raises her hand to let the teacher know she does not have a local *Hukou*. The rest of the class looks at her and begins whispering. Noticing this attention, Xinran quickly looks around, slightly bows her head, hesitates for a few seconds, and raises her head. This narrative shows that tiered education exists between migrant and local students in Shenzhen created by *Hukou*. Such a context generates educational micro-segregation and marginalization, regardless of the stratification of skilled and labour migrants within the internal migration community itself. Xinran's change of attitude and behaviour demonstrate that without a local *Hukou*, migrant students face indirect forms of educational predicaments in public schools regardless of whether they come from skilled migrant or labour migrant families. In this way, *Hukou* is portrayed as an obstacle to education for migrant children from skilled professional families.

Blossom Season, Rainy Season addresses the significant and wide impact *Hukou* brings, through the representation of Xinran's difficulties extending from school to domestic spaces. At the beginning and the middle of the film at

Xinran's home, her parents frequently argue because her father's workplace has a quota for one individual to apply for a Shenzhen *Hukou* for themselves and their family. Xinran's father is qualified to apply, but he decides to give this opportunity to his physically less-abled colleague. The scenes soon move to another colleague's home, showing that Xinran accompanies and witnesses how her father pleads for a solution to her family's *Hukou* situation to the head of a relevant bureau. Xinran finds out the head is the father of her classmate, Wang Xiaotian, and begins to feel embarrassed in front of her classmate. Moving between these educational and domestic settings directs attention to the impact of *Hukou* on the family and school life of migrant students. These spaces are closely interlinked across the film, to demonstrate the tight interweaving of *Hukou* and education with the migrant student, their family, and social relations.

Within this significant and complex *Hukou* context for one migrant student's, Xinran's, education, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* also sets *Hukou* as a domestic and interpersonal problem for her. The film first praises the father's decision of giving up *Hukou* through cinematic techniques and music, to emphasize the father's assistance to his colleague over his daughter is positive behaviour (Figure 3.12).



FIGURE 3.12 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. XINRAN'S FATHER EXPLAINS WHY HE GIVES HIS *HUKOU* ALLOCATION TO HIS COLLEAGUE.

With a piece of tuneful and powerful piano music, Xinran's father narrates, to the top right of the screen, why he gives his Shenzhen *Hukou* allocation to his colleague, Lao Li: 'Lao Li becomes disabled because of his [dedication to] work. The management people at work discussed with me that Lao Li had no chance anymore [for applying for a Shenzhen *Hukou* due to his physical status]. What do you think I [should do]'? Accompanying this narration, the camera only captures the father in this close-up shot. He looks patiently, kindly, and righteously towards the right top of the camera. The compelling piano music indicates the cogency of the father's words: that it is right to give his *Hukou* allocation to Lao Li rather than his own family.

Additionally, the direction of the father's gaze as it appears on screen, could be interpreted as addressing his daughter Xinran, to who he is speaking. Or it could be interpreted slightly indirectly as addressing the viewers. This camera technique creates an ambivalent yet deep emotional connection between the father and Xinran as well as to the audience as if the father is talking to both his daughter and the audience. Soft sunshine is seen behind the father in the shots, a warm tone indicating that this father's sacrifice is a heart-warming behaviour. In these shots when the father is speaking, without justifying why Lao Li's work injury is caused, why Lao Li's disability leads to the loss of applying for a Shenzhen *Hukou*, or how the work will compensate Lao Li, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* mobilizes the father's words to show that Lao Li's work injury and *Hukou* is an inter-personal matter. That *Hukou* is a matter between colleagues, at the same workplace, which can be solved via self-sacrifice, rather than a matter that needs to be addressed and solved by the work of an upper-level institution that controls and allocates local *Hukou*.

This film represents the father's behaviour as idolized because it is closely connected with collective and Confucian values in Chinese society. In Confucianism, a core component of many Asian value systems, the individual should 'sacrifice oneself for the good of a larger entity, such as family and

society' (Lau 1996, p.360). As such, personal sacrifice is expected within the cultural ideology of China, and it is interwoven with the moral level of the collective society. Like Yan Zhu notes while looking into China's Confucian-collectivist, social-cultural values: 'people may feel a moral obligation to help in-group members' (2021, p.918). Thus, a collective orientation equates to a moral disposition within the collective norm, and the boundaries of the self in Chinese form extend from an individual, the 'lesser self' to others in the same family or community, the 'greater self'. Either in a family or society, the 'lesser self' needs to be subordinate to the 'greater self' (Barbalet, 2013). Besides, Johnson and Wang (2012, p.447) state 'there is a hierarchy' in Chinese domestic and social relationships. One of these relational hierarchies is the 'precedence of the old over the young' (Mencius 2004, p.60). This sets the hierarchal order in the Chinese home and society. In this way, the younger individual is a 'lesser self' in the 'greater self' of the family.

However, when facing the wider society, the family becomes a relatively 'lesser self', who needs to devote themselves to Chinese society, the even 'greater self'. As such, the relational hierarchy in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* is prominent/manifest in the community, which is represented through the father's colleague, then by the father, the older member of the family, and finally by Xinran, a younger member of the family. Thus, giving away *Hukou* allocation, despite it being key for his daughter's education, is depicted as acting within the cultural convention, because the father conforms to a morality of collectiveness, by sacrificing himself and his family, the 'lesser self' for another member of the wider community, the 'greater self'. In other words, when it comes to migrants' educational difficulties over educational policy in 1990s China, this representation of giving away social status by self-willingness shows *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* endorses collective moral obligation, self-sacrifice for the wider community, and inter-personal relationships. The film's narrative normalizes inequality in the educational policy of connecting *Hukou* to migrant education. Migrant students' individual educational needs are represented as subordinate to family and wider community relations.

With *Hukou* tied to collective moral obligation, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* frames Xinran's hope of receiving a Shenzhen *Hukou* for her education through a journey of personal, rebellious teen behaviour, rather than an educational issue that should be resolved collectively at the level of educational policy. When Xinran expresses anger and frustration about feeling like a second-class citizen at school without a Shenzhen *Hukou*, and criticizes her father for giving up their local *Hukou*, her usually loving and gentle mother raises her voice to stop Xinran criticizing her father's kindness, 'You are not allowed to say like this about your dad!' Xinran continues to voice her disappointment with her father's behaviour and personality. The next second, the mother slaps Xinran shouting, 'shut up!' (Figures 3.13, 3.14, 3.15). These depictions of the conflict between Xinran and her mother shift the focus from *Hukou*'s educational impact on a migrant student to personal temperament within family relations. By emphasizing her attitude against the righteousness of family filial piety, Xinran is represented as rebellious, confronting her parents about *Hukou* after she feels marginalized at school and embarrassed in front of her classmates.



FIGURE 3.13 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. XINRAN'S MOTHER BEGINS TO SLAP XINRAN.



FIGURE 3.14 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. XINRAN'S MOTHER SLAPS XINRAN.



FIGURE 3.15 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. AFTER XINRAN'S MOTHER SLAPS XINRAN.

This is a particularly important scene regarding the undisputed significance of the value of self-sacrifice in Chinese culture and relationships. Figure 3.13 shows the angry facial expression of Xinran's mother when she begins to slap Xinran. Focusing the camera on the face of the mother, the lighting is dim to draw attention to her face, emphasizing her anger towards her daughter. In

Figure 3.14, the mother slaps Xinran's face. The volume of the slap is captured in the scene loud and clear. The mother is represented as almost jumping towards Xinran with a quickly slapping hand. As such, the mother's body is captured responding to show her fury toward Xinran's attitude when talking about her father, her *Hukou* and her education. After the slap, Xinran and her mother are represented in shocked tears. The whole scene immediately becomes quiet. The camera again captures the mother's face, a sad and sorry look with tears in her eyes, with the sound of Xinran crying softly in the background (Figure 3.15).

The depiction of Xinran's mother in this plot is dramatically different to her image in other scenes. The characterization of the mother in the film is as a calm and caring parent, who is always talking gently and looking after Xinran. With the setting up of the mother's gentle and calm personality, this sudden contrasting behaviour gives the slap a greater significance. This slap indicates the climax of Xinran's educational *Hukou* issue – the mother cannot bear Xinran's unacceptable, rebellious words which disagree with the moral decision of self-sacrificing the 'lesser self' from their family to the 'greater self' of her father's work colleague, nor Xinran's challenging of her father's higher hierarchical status within the family. Thus, Xinran's yearning for *Hukou* in the film is connected to domestic order and social relationships. Her desire for a local *Hukou* conflicts with obeying and understanding her parents. That local *Hukou* is a barrier that creates a tiered educational experience for migrant students is neglected in the film.

The structure of framing a teen rebel is found in other coming-of-age films. This trope has been observed in Hollywood films by Timothy Shary when he talks about teen rebels in American cinema being portrayed as such due to the result of social tension within the school community: 'most youth rebellion in school films is founded on an angst generated by the social and/or physical tensions of being in school' (2002, p.50). Despite *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* being a Chinese film, this structure of framing a teen rebel parallels this Western trope observed by Shary. Xinran's endeavour to obtain a particular

category of *Hukou* accentuates her rebelliousness in the climax of the film, which shows *Hukou* creating conflicts within the migrant family; yet the young migrant student's personal sentiments, educational, and social needs caused by *Hukou* are placed secondary to family filial piety.

Building from teens' perspectives, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* shows the predicaments that *Hukou* brings to migrants' schooling as an insignificant issue. One way the film does this is by contrasting *Hukou* with hardship in rural education, and it proposes domestic sacrifice as a solution to educational issues. The second half of the film uses camera techniques, music, props and narrative to construct an upsetting rural educational condition that Xinran's school takes the students to visit, and suggests the sacrifice among rural families for educational struggle (Figures 3.16 to 3.19).



FIGURE 3.16 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. THE RURAL CLASSROOM.



FIGURE 3.17 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. THE RURAL SISTER WHO SELF-SACRIFICES FOR HER BROTHER'S EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES.



FIGURE 3.18 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON*, 1997. FILM. OTHER STUDENTS IN THE RURAL SCHOOL.



FIGURE 3.19 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON*, 1997. FILM. THE PENCIL RURAL SCHOOL STUDENTS USE.

In a sequence in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* when Xinran visits a rural school with her teacher and classmates, the classroom is shot in a way that highlights its small size, shabbiness and gloominess (Figure 3.16). The only light is from the ray of sunshine coming off the window. This rural classroom contrasts with the clean and spacious classroom and facilities in Shenzhen (see Figures 3.7 to 3.11). This cinematic scene depicts the disparity in educational financing and resources between a rural school and an urban Shenzhen school. A crucial moment in Xinran's coming-of-age story occurs when she witnesses a rural school boy reading his writing aloud to his class. The rural boy reads that his sister sacrificed her own study for him so he can attend school because his family cannot afford to pay for two tuition fees. The camera cuts to the rural boy's sister, who listens to the lesson outside the classroom from the window (Figure 3.17). Along with the boy's voiceover of how his sister was an excellent student and how she compromised her education so that he could attend school, the camera focuses on the sister's face, with tears gently streaming down her eyes. This storyline demonstrates that the rural sister is loath to give up her education, but she does so for the purpose of her sibling's education and to alleviate the rural educational poverty in her family. In this narrative, melodic

and slow violin music plays in the background to create a melancholy atmosphere. As a consequence, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* evokes a sad yet sympathetic sensation to highlight the rural school's low educational standards and the sacrifice the rural sister makes for her brother in such a challenging position.

The camera then pans to other students and their stationery In the rural classroom. The two rural pupils in Figure 3.18 are dressed in filthy, worn clothes, in contrast to Xinran and the students from the Shenzhen school, who are dressed in fresh, clean clothes. A pencil in the old pencil box in Figure 3.19 is almost worn out, yet the rural pupil continues to use it. *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* exploits these rural educational difficulties as a trigger to promote Xinran's mental development, she realizes what true struggle is and the importance of self-sacrifice. While listening to this narrative and observing the sister's educational difficulties and self-sacrifice, the camera shifts to Xinran and focuses on her facial reactions (Figure 3.20). Along with the slow, sorrowful background violin music, Xinran stares at the sister, glances around the classroom, and finally drops her head in serious concentration. This scene is designed to show the mental process that Xinran is going through after witnessing these rural educational difficulties and the sister's compromise.



FIGURE 3.20 *JIAN QI, BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON*, 1997. FILM. XINRAN LOWERS HER HEAD WHILE LISTENING TO THE SELF-SACRIFICE STORY.

The following scene depicts Xinran sitting with her schoolmates in a circle next to a bonfire, exchanging their thoughts after witnessing the hardships of this deprived rural school. 'We live in a wonderful period and have never suffered from true adversity', Xinran's voiceover says, with a profoundly thoughtful expression on her and her classmates' faces, 'When we encounter difficulties in life, we believe we are the unluckiest person on the planet. But when compared to this [countryside] sister, our tiny problem is nothing.' This cinematic narration follows Xinran and her classmates as they return to the metropolis of Shenzhen, where they individually put cash in a donation box to send to this remote school to help the students there. This didactic monologue and narrative, again, draws the attention of the film to the ideology of self-sacrifice between individuals and others, and diminishes Xinran's educational predicaments. As a result, Xinran's migrant educational problem is compared not only to a domestic issue but also to other educational challenges on a personal and domestic level.

Eventually, the film focuses on the individual and family as a remedy to educational difficulties, without neglecting the policies launched in the mid-1990s to alleviate migrant children's scholastic issues, as detailed in the preceding contextual section. The educational experience of the rural brother and sister and the donation from the Shenzhen school to the rural school expresses the belief that educational transformation is the responsibility of individual members of the family and society. *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* also develops a narrative in which tiered education is common and migrant students' education is not placed at the bottom level of educational hierarchies. Urban students need to comprehend that their educational standing is privileged in comparison to dispossessed rural children; they should learn to sacrifice for one another since they have access to resources that others do not. In this vein, the film indicates the insignificance of predicaments in migrant students' education, but also draws attention to the ideological disposition that

individual acts of self-sacrifice are moral and necessary to solve educational problems within a family or community, rather than a state effort to improve educational policy. As a consequence, this approach circularly promotes self-sacrifice created by Confucius' idea of 'lesser self' and 'greater self'. When faced with hardships, the individual is always the 'lesser self', who must commit self-sacrifice for others in the same family or community.

With the mental maturation process unfolding throughout *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* a crowning moment arrives praising self-sacrifice in the form of Xinran's public speech. It is her coming-of-age moment. At the end of the film, Xinran gives a public speech at the school's Outstanding Students Election. She has decided to return to her hometown to study, as she feels she is more mature after the turbulence of school and life. This is done so that her parents do not need to worry about her Shenzhen *Hukou* anymore. This narration is an addition to the book's narrative that the film is adapted from. The book mainly narrates the school lives of students in the SEZ of Shenzhen. The book does not focus on self-sacrifice, even though a few paragraphs in the book's last chapter involve the value of one character's self-sacrifice. However, this ideology of self-sacrifice is particularly emphasized in the film adaption. The film positions Xinran's speech as a considerably significant sign of mental maturity, after the conflicts of educational *Hukou* with her parents and witnessing rural educational hardship. When Alistair Fox examines some typical situations in coming-of-age films, he finds that coming-of-age happens through 'the encounter with repressive cultural codes and values' and 'the experience of marginalization on account of one's personality' (2017, p.5). In films, characters often undergo transitions caused by encountering obstacles or difficulties in their lives. Therefore, in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season*, following conflicts between *Hukou*, social, and domestic relationships, as well as personal, urban, and rural education, Xinran's speech is represented as a symbol of her mental awakening to realize that self-sacrifice within the family and being subordinate to one's parents, respecting them, is what truly matters.

The moment when Xinran gives her public speech she is giving up her education in Shenzhen to return to her hometown for the rest of her school education. She has made this decision so that her parents no longer need to solve the Shenzhen *Hukou* issue for her education in Shenzhen. This is the moment in which the ideological stance of the film is most obvious for the cultural representation of migrant children's education in China. This self-sacrifice to parents as a coming-of-age solution to education is depicted in a positive light in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season*, through lighting, camera techniques and music (Figures 3.21 and 3.22).



FIGURE 3.21 *JIAN QI, BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON, 1997.* FILM. XINRAN'S PUBLIC SPEECH.



FIGURE 3.22 *JIAN QI, BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON, 1997.* FILM. XINRAN IS UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT FOR HER PUBLIC SPEECH.

Xinran's face, her gentle smile, and the firm gaze in her eyes become the emphasis of the scene as the camera gradually zooms in from the bottom up. The camera's horizon runs parallel to the bottom of the view and looks up to Xinran. This strategy creates an admirable feeling for Xinran's speech. Meanwhile, during Xinran's speech, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* shines a glowing light on her, as illustrated in Figure 3.22. While the audience, below the stage, is in the dark, only Xinran is under the spotlight, as the focal point of the scene, with a bright yet gentle warm light all around her. This lighting contrast has a positive effect on Xinran's statement and increases its significance. Figures 3.21 and 3.22 illustrate the creation of a pleasant atmosphere surrounding Xinran, accompanied by enchanting orchestral music. The slow, calm, but also uplifting premier violin, above other brass instruments, underlies the intended strength of Xinran's speech, emphasizing Xinran's willingness to self-sacrifice is potent and decent.

Blossom Season, Rainy Season subtly idolizes Xinran's decision to self-sacrifice through various cinematic techniques during Xinran's public speech. Wide, reaction shots of Xinran's peers and parents denote the key groups in which the film takes an interest (Figures 3.23 and 3.24).



FIGURE 3.23 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. PEERS APPLAUD XINRAN'S DECISION IN HER SPEECH.



FIGURE 3.24 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. PARENTS APPLAUD XINRAN'S DECISION IN HER SPEECH.

In Figures 3.23 and 3.24, the audience of this public speech look to the left with matching eyelines, rather than looking at each other. Such cinematic technical arrangements are used to reinforce the togetherness of the family and the students. Thus, the film suggests that Xinran's schoolmates and parents appreciate her decision, and her peers are called upon to become mature in

this way too, by being considerate of their parents. Xinran's parents' give applause for her decision, which has not been discussed with them yet, also showing her parents' approval of it. Behind her parents' applause is the underlying concept of a Chinese family's love.

According to some adult children interviewed by He et al., in the Chinese family 'love should not be named but rather be shown in deeds, reflect the action/practice orientedness element' (2021, pp.10–11). This cultural observation shows that Chinese culture, family love, and care for each other, do not need to be spoken but shown through actions. In a discussion of self-sacrifice in the Chinese family, Russell Jeung et al. notice descendants in the Chinese family are expected to provide 'caring on an emotional level, besides providing physical care' (2019, p.99). This finding reveals expected family relations in Chinese culture. The ideology of emotional caring for parents is shown through Xinran's unconsulted decision, about giving up her education in Shenzhen due to the lack of a local *Hukou*. Xinran also admits desiring an alternative *Hukou* to the one she possesses due to the fact she has moved with her parents to Shenzhen as an act of inconsiderate rebellion related to her parents' feelings and their difficulties in life. The determined effort Xinran makes at the film's end conveys self-introspection. In this fashion, the decision shows Xinran uses her concrete action to love and care for her parents, so that her parents no longer need to find a solution for her *Hukou*. The fact that Xinran's parents are skilled workers, as introduced at the beginning of the film, rather than internal migrant labourers, has disappeared from the scenes of Xinran's public speech in the film. Therefore, the film shows that the parents' social status is not as important in internal migrants' education.

Through her self-reflection and processing, Xinran's decision is depicted as a sign of growing up. This behaviour also engages with the ideology discussed earlier, of self-sacrifice as a moral obligation from the 'lesser self' to the 'greater self'. Xinran's educational sacrifice to reduce the tensions *Hukou* brings to her parents conforms to this ideal of self-sacrifice, and fulfils her conduct towards her family, from the 'lesser self' to the 'greater self'. Therefore, the public

speech becomes Xinran's symbolic coming-of-age as she faces the *Hukou* issue. It also reveals the expectation in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* for young migrant students to prioritize their interpersonal relations with seniority in the family over their personal sentiments, and educational and social needs.

Eventually, the film focuses on solving educational difficulties through family love and personal subordination. In the last few scenes, immediately after Xinran's public speech, Xinran states in a voice-over that 'unexpectedly, the *Hukou* of my family is solved […] I love this city and have become a member of this city, I am definitely very happy, but this happiness is different from before'. There is a subsequent cut to the seaside, where the students play and laugh with uplifting music in the background.



FIGURE 3.25 JIAN QI, *BLOSSOM SEASON, RAINY SEASON,* 1997. FILM. THE BEACH IN SHENZHEN.

The beach can be interpreted as symbolic of Xinran's change and renewal, but it is also symbolic of return as the waves take people away but also bring them back. Therefore, this seaside landscape potentially produces a double symbolism: it implies Xinran's moving forward in her life mentally, and it suggests her eternal return to Shenzhen. As such, without a detailed representation of how the *Hukou* conflict is solved, ultimately the happiness of family and friendship is represented in the last few scenes, as shown in Figure

3.25. Thus, the film links Xinran's sense of maturity through her understanding of her parents' difficulties to the solution of educational *Hukou* for migrant students in Shenzhen.

In this way, problems arising from Xinran's educational experience are cinematically ascribed to ambiguous family interaction and the process of growing up. The social causes and potential social actions to counter the marginalization of migrant students in education in the city are ignored to instead depict family love and self-growth. Thereby, the film withholds addressing how to deal with the educational policy of *Hukou*'s impact on migrant education from a socio-political perspective, and this cinematic representation further forecloses the possibility of an institutional *Hukou* solution, the household registration system for migrant education in Shenzhen.

In summary, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* centralizes self-sacrifice from the 'lesser self' to the 'greater self' through a personal coming-of-age story depicting Xie Xinran's school-related difficulty related to *Hukou.* It concentrates on predicaments for migrant students, such as marginalization at school and parental tensions, generated by *Hukou*. It does so in the SEZ of Shenzhen, an attractive, fast-developing city in China, that offered resources and opportunities that other cities could not in the 1990s. The film represents Xinran's wish to obtain a local Shenzhen *Hukou* placing her in certain difficulties within the educational and domestic context. The film's *Hukou* solution is through a coming-of-age narrative when Xinran self-sacrifices her educational opportunity in the SEZ to safeguard her parents' feelings. Thus, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season*, presents an essential ideological position that educational problems are an individual issue in China; that is, dealt with through domestic relations rather than educational policy, and that a student/teen must deal with it within the context of being subservient to the collective 'greater self'.

Even though *Hukou* plays a crucial role, as a type of cultural and identity integration in Shenzhen's local educational experiences, overall *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* depicts the education-*Hukou* clash as a personal issue, which affects school and family relationships and needs to be solved through

these relationships. In the film, Xinran's longing for a Shenzhen *Hukou* is framed as an act of rebellion that hurts her parents' feelings. This action is to show Xinran's mental immaturity: firstly, due to her inconsideration of the higher hierarchical family and community, in the context of domestic and social relations, and, secondly, her lack of gratitude for her educational privilege. To assist Xinran's mental metamorphosis, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* employs a cinematic contrast between Xinran's migrant schooling woes connected to *Hukou*, and the rural educational difficulties caused by a lack of financial support.

Demonstrating the rural sister's selflessness as a family's response to scholastic adversity, the film exemplifies that migrant educational predicaments in urban areas are not a major concern. The rural school system faces more severe educational problems. As a result, students who do not have to worry about tuition expenses in the cities should be appreciative of their educational advantages. Furthermore, the best approach to dealing with educational dilemmas demonstrates another significant ideological standpoint embedded in the film which suggests families sacrifice for each other's needs. For instance, the rural sister who is at the bottom of the national education hierarchy gives up her future prospects and educational opportunities for her brother. Xinran's local *Hukou* educational struggles are positioned in comparison to this sister's sacrifice.

Overall, the film delves into acts of self-sacrificing behaviour and supports caring about the feelings of parents and others, domestically and socially, for solving schooling issues at the interpersonal level. The film acknowledges hardship and inequality in migrant students' education. Yet its narrative is built around collective ideological narratives, rather than challenging inequalities in the *Hukou* system and China's educational policies. Thus, the focus is placed on personal traits such as self-subordination to show respect to family and society. The film hints through its narratives and characterization that if a person is considerate and tries to compassionately help others in the family and wider community, these personal qualities will ease their difficulties. In this way,

educational hardship for migrant students is depicted as a noble milestone for the protagonist, Xinran, to overcome and reach her coming-of-age status where she solves her educational problems through self-sacrifice.

The character Xinran, and the migrant students who are born without a Shenzhen *Hukou*, deserve to have equal opportunities for educational access and social acceptance in the city. However, *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* depicts the responsibilities of an individual's coming-of-age journey over the unfair educational and house registration policies that we could argue should take accountability for lifting the students out of an unequal education situation, and the social marginalization that they experience. On one hand, the film expresses a social consciousness by addressing relations between *Hukou* and education in Shenzhen. On the other hand, it praises Xinran's subordination and self-sacrifice to her parents rather than further discussing the inequality that exists in educational policy for migrant students. Hence, this narrative constructs migrant students' educational difficulties as an individualized story about sacrificing the 'lesser self' for the 'greater self'.

Education of Children in Poverty-Stricken Rural Areas in *Going to School with Father on My Back*

This section explores the cinematic representation of the education of impoverished children from rural areas in *Going to School with Father on My Back* (1998), with a focus on two questions. The first question is, how does the film represent poverty and social imbalance in education? Specifically, how does an explicitly prosocial film *admit* the existence or possibility of social imbalances in education? The second question is, how do the narrative conventions facilitate attention to poverty and social imbalances but limit the possibility of critique? Through the above questions, this section looks into how *Going to School with Father on My Back* connects or distinguishes rural education and compulsory education in the 1990s, especially as experienced by children in poverty. In this section, I argue *Going to School with Father on My Back* (1998) draws attention to the educational hardship caused by poverty in China's rural areas. It represents poverty's effects on the family and education

in rural China in the 1990s and views hardship as a positive drive that builds a strong will and ability to work hard. It also reveals the unavailability of the Compulsory Law to families and children from poor rural areas. At the same time, it presents the educational hardships that are solved through prosocial personal traits that 'help humans connect with others' (Fogarty 2020, p.314), which in this film is through family unity, family members' self-sacrifice and self-persistence.

Going to School with Father on My Back represents poverty's effects on Shi Wa's education and family in rural China in the 1990s. It narrates the struggles and loves of a rural boy in China, Shi Wa (Zhao Qiang), and his sister (Yan Danchen), and father's (Jiang Hualin) experience of educational hardship caused by poverty in China's rural areas and the unavailability of the Compulsory Education Law to families and children from poor rural areas. Due to the poverty-stricken status in a rural family, Shi Wa's father can only afford one child to receive an education. Besides, many other education-related difficulties arise in their rural life – the school is located remotely on the other side of a wide river. With the family lacking financial support to continue Shi Wa's education, Shi Wa's sister marries to obtain money to relieve some of the family's financial burden. Shi Wa's father becomes paralysed due to an accident. As shown in the film title, Shi Wa carries his father on his back to school so that he can look after his father as well as continue his education.

Going to School with Father on My Back represents poverty as a situation to be endured, and thus it cannot be easily changed by the children. While discussing childhood poverty in contemporary Latin American cinema, Ana Rodriguez Navas suggests that:

> These films propose that for the children they portray, and by extension for all those on the economic periphery, life goes by in a series of immediate, local and urgent struggles. Denied a broader view of the forces causing their condition, those caught up in the hardships generated and perpetuated by

> poverty cannot resolve their problems from within their communities. (2017, p.80)

Navas' observation demonstrates that poverty is an enduring situation rather than something that can be easily escaped. The features depicting children in poverty in Latin American cinema also exist in Chinese cinema while representing similar subjects. In this sense, *Going to School with Father on My Back* represents rural people on an economic periphery, in terms of where they live (in enduring poverty) and in terms of where cultural and economic power resides. In this chapter, I compare the contrasting case studies of *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* and *Going to School with Father on My Back*. In the former film, migrant status does not translate into hardship in the same way as in the latter film. The characters in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* attain agency as they come from a skilled migrant family and live in an urban context. As such, they live around the periphery to some extent. However, rural life in *Going to School with Father on My Back* goes by in a series of immediate local, urgent struggles, and is entrenched in the economic periphery.

From the beginning of the film, *Going to School with Father on My Back* represents economically peripheral individuals in a rural context, and admits the existence of social imbalances in rural education. Shi Wa's father tells Shi Wa and his sister that due to the financial difficulties of their family, only one out of the two children can proceed to their education. Shi Wa's school is also depicted in a poor condition, with no windows. Shi Wa himself is represented as one of the poorest children in this poverty-stricken village.



FIGURE 3.26 YOUZHAO ZHOU, *GOING TO SCHOOL WITH FATHER ON MY BACK.* SHI WA'S FATHER DECIDES IF SHI WA OR SHI WA'S SISTER CONTINUES IN THEIR EDUCATION BY ROTATING A LADLE.



FIGURE 3.27 YOUZHAO ZHOU, *GOING TO SCHOOL WITH FATHER ON MY BACK.* SHI WA AND HIS CLASSMATES IN THE CLASSROOM.



FIGURE 3.28 YOUZHAO ZHOU, *GOING TO SCHOOL WITH FATHER ON MY BACK.* SHI WA'S CLASSMATE FINDS A BIG HOLE IN SHI WA'S TROUSERS.

Figures 3.26 to 3.28 show the poverty present in Shi Wa's family and his school, as well as the difficulties of accessing education. Staging the characters in these shots, the family members and the students are centred. However, on the sides of the frame, the lighting assists the visual storytelling. It is used to set the tone of the film. In Figure 3.26, a soft overhead light shines from the window through the wooden framed paper-covered windows in the house and in Figure 3.27, a ray of stronger but very narrow sunshine shines through the side narrow window and onto the old, uneven, unpainted brick sidewall in the classroom. Therefore, the film uses a gloomy light to emphasize the poverty in Shi Wa and his sister's home, as well as at school.

This differs to the bright lights of Shenzhen in the earlier case study *Blossom Season Rainy Season*, so a different creation of mood and atmosphere is generated in *Going to School with Father on My Back* through lighting which subtly depicts the shabby condition of the household and the educational environment of these rural children. For example, the film shows the lack of electricity as an infrastructural feature of the poverty these rural children live. This contrasts with urban settings in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* that are abundantly electrified. Further, it shows the difficulties Shi Wa, his sister, and other students experience related to education. In Figure 3.28, another student is looking at a big hole in Shi Wa's trousers. The film further narrates that Shi Wa's trousers are like this because his family is too poor to buy any new ones, and the father and sister are too busy with the fieldwork to sew and mend. These scenes also convey a message that Shi Wa's family is one of the poorest in this village. As such, it shows that even in poor areas, there are different degrees of poverty.

Within this context of rural poverty, *Going to School with Father on My Back* also dramatizes the immediate and urgent local struggles Shi Wa and his rural fellow students encounter related to their education and life. A few scenes at the beginning of the film, show Shi Wa needing to wade across a wide river to attend school (Figure 3.29).



FIGURE 3.29 YOUZHAO ZHOU, *GOING TO SCHOOL WITH FATHER ON MY BACK.* SHI WA CROSSES THE BIG RIVER TO ATTEND SCHOOL DAILY.



FIGURE 3.30 YOUZHAO ZHOU, *GOING TO SCHOOL WITH FATHER ON MY BACK.* SHI WA AND HIS CLASSMATE CROSS THE BIG RIVER TO SCHOOL ON A STORMY DAY.

Long takes run for half a minute while Shi Wa crosses the river by himself and together with a girl classmate. They enter the camera space and walk slowly from the foreground to the background. Both children are situated in the middle of the frame because that is where our attention is needed (Figure 3.30). The camera pans to the left, situating Shi Wa and his classmate, the girl in red with a yellow umbrella, on each side of the frame while leaving the centre of the shot empty except for the river. The film deliberately plays with cinematic space and experiments with composition and staging to create a sense that the river is large and wide, and is difficult for young children to walk through. However, the river is the only pathway to access school.

The plot also advances the predicament of accessing school, as the next few scenes of both children crossing the river in stormy weather include a close shot of an umbrella floating on the river, and then a funeral for the girl. The classmate, the girl, has fallen and drowned. As such, the dreadful result of crossing this river is shown to the audience. Therefore, the obvious mobility difficulty and one consequence of accessing education for rural children is represented in *Going to School with Father on My Back*, as an urgent, life-threatening struggle that is a part of their daily experience to access education.

Even with such a vital life-related issue being prominent for accessing rural education, *Going to School with Father on My Back* depicts difficulties as milestones to enrich and improve Shi Wa's persistence in pursuing education, rather than focusing on the need to resolve the immediate crisis related to life and education. This value can be initially seen from the interviews of the film scriptwriter and producer, Wang Zhebin. Wang Zhebin shares her ideas about endorsing the hardships depicted in this film in different interviews. Bingshu Gu writes in his article about Wang Zhebin and the film *Going to School with Father on My Back* that:

> Wang Zhebin, is the scriptwriter as well as the producer [of] the film *Going to School with Father on My Back*. [… She] once read a short article in the *Chinese Youth* newspaper named *Going to School with Father on My Back*, […which is] about a [poor] rural child, [… who] sold his household to pay for the tuition fee and […] to go to school while working part-time to look after his [cripple] father. This story reminds her of her own child and the urban children who luckily grow up in the more advantaged situation. […] She believes it is necessary to tell people a mental principle, to let the next generation know what hardship is and what love is. (Gu 1997, p.59)

As such, Wang Zhebin, with the creative power as a scriptwriter and with the decision-making power as producer, had a great deal of creative control over this film. She shares what she would like to express in this film script: 'I would

like to write about how hardships temper people. It is not a shame to be in hardships or poverty, the key is how to face them. […] I would like to write about how to pull yourselves up and be persistent in hardships. […] I would like to write about the shifts in life – the family love between father and son' (Wang 1998, p.20). The director is also selected by her because 'Director Shi Youzhao is the most suitable person for this film. He spent his childhood as well in rural areas, which had some similarities with the protagonist, Shi Wa' (Gu 1997, p.60). As such, with her position in this film's writing and production, Wang Zhebin's perspectives of appreciating the hardships and the focus on father-son love show throughout the entire film. In this vein, *Going to School with Father on My Back* is framed as one of persistence against adversity rather than as the result of social and structural inequities. There is an aspect of sacrifice, being willing to give even one's life up for education.

Therefore, despite presenting the difficulties of equal attendance or access to education/schools, *Going to School with Father on My Back* uses its narrative to praise, to begin with, Shi Wa's individual persistence through all educational and life hardships with a disregard for structural inequality. The national structural changes that could solve educational predicaments are not discussed in the film. Instead, as discussed earlier on, though Shi Wa is the most dispossessed child in the impoverished rural village, the film demonstrates how he overcomes such predicaments in his life. After the girl classmate is drowned to death while crossing the river, Shi Wa is too frightened to cross the river by himself, his father says to him that 'As a boy, for everything you do, there needs to be a result [achieved]'. Highlighting the gender differences in expected personal traits, which will be discussed later in this section, these words and scenes can be interpreted as a symbolic dimension of the film that to cross a wide river is to overcome the difficulty of reaching one's goal. Shi Wa's father takes Shi Wa on his back to cross the river. This action is represented as Shi Wa having overcome his fear as a child with support from his father.

One of the main themes of this film is Shi Wa's courage, determination and persistence through the hardships he goes through as a rural student whose

family is extremely poor. As a teenager, at school, Shi Wa is represented eating dried buns as his daily food, which have to be dipped into hot water to soften while studying, or he has to study while looking after his father, who broke his legs while working. Nevertheless, the film constructs Shi Wa as never withdrawn or neglecting his education and still as the top student, winning many prizes in his class. Shots show the walls at Shi Wa's house are decorated with many academic prizes that he wins. A few cuts also show that Shi Wa sits in the classroom focusing on listening. While he listens to the class, there is a smile on his face while sunshine beams in. In this fashion, a positive mood is created by the light. The sunshine in this scene, which conveys the hope and joy brought to Shi Wa by education, contrasts with the dim lighting from Shi Wa's impoverished home.

As a character, Shi Wa mobilizes the audience's empathy. Karen Lury writes concerning war films, 'tears and emotions erupt when the innocent – dumb animals, little children – are seen to suffer. Animals and children are "perfect victims", since they are blameless' (Lury 2010, pp.105–106). Poverty generates suffering that is not equivalent to war, but in *Going to School with Father on My Back* similarly, poverty generates an urgent struggle for little children to suffer through and the audience to empathize with. Through its cinematic narrative and constructions, this film places the innocent but mentally strong child Shi Wa into extreme situations of poverty. The film portrays Shi Wa as a 'good' poor person, one who is blameless in his situation and thus innocent. By constructing an impoverished yet mentally persistent child, and, in addition, by highlighting moments of academic achievements accomplished despite poverty, the film develops an accessible experience of Shi Wa's childhood and permeates it with an emotional charge that appeals to one's emotions.

In this vein, *Going to School with Father on My Back* weakens the support from the local government. When the local rural government decides to support Shi Wa's family, as his father is paralysed, and would like to pay the tuition fee for Shi Wa to attend his high school in town, Shi Wa declines the financial help, as he decides not to bring troubles to the local government. This

representation tries to delimit the beneficent support from the local government while endorsing Shi Wa's perseverance, through how he aims to solve all problems by taking them on his own shoulders. Shi Wa is saintly, has no complaints about the education system failing him, and does not ask for any help outside of his own family or even from his family.

As introduced in the previous section, living and educational conditions in rural China in the 1990s were much less advantaged or financially supported than in urban China, but in the film dramatizes these hardships through constructing various educational and domestic conflicts for Shi Wa and his family, such as the extreme poor domestic situation and the sacrifice of the sister. As aforementioned, high schools for rural areas in the 1990s were often located in town, which made it difficult for village students to access them. Therefore, after declining the local government's offer, Shi Wa sells all household goods and takes his father to the town for his high school education. As such, it shows that while Shi Wa faces a hardship, torn between his education and his familial duty, some governmental is help provided, but to emphasize Shi Wa's independence, persistence, goodness and sacrifice, the film constructs him declining it, and thus self-sufficiency and persistence are condoned as commendable behaviours while facing difficulties. Therefore, through educational hardship *Going to School with Father on My Back* represents, to some extent, the inequalities in rural education, by focusing on the personal traits that can overcome educational difficulties by worthy individuals through persistence.

With the decline of help from the local village government, the immediate educational crisis cannot be solved within the village community. Instead, *Going to School with Father on My Back* represents that this urgent educational crisis is solved through the sacrifice within the family, which is also the way to celebrate the family's love in an impoverished condition. For instance, Shi Wa's father tries to commit suicide, after becoming paralysed, so that he will not become a burden on Shi Wa's education and life. Not only receiving sacrifices from his family members, Shi Wa also tries to quit his education to save his

sister from marrying for money and to have more time to take care of his less-abled father. Through these sacrifices, it shows that it is ordinary for family members to sacrifice for one another, and it is narrated as a way to express love and support within the family. This value is connected with family love and filial piety in the deeply influential Confucianism in Chinese society. Longtao He et al. in their exploration of filial piety in family care find that there is a 'perception related to a reciprocal concept of parental sacrifice which was pivotal in creating a mechanism for continued filial piety in the changing social context of China' (2021, p.10). This concept of family love and a reciprocal family relation are shown in *Going to School with Father on My Back.* The film title expresses that Shi Wa brings his father to school to look after him, which echoes the plot introduced previously that while Shi Wa was a kid, his father took him on the back to cross the river for school. This is represented as a circle of reciprocal domestic care and support, within family relations, in Shi Wa's family.

As a family, each member is represented to sacrifice themselves to support each other to resolve and ideologically reconcile their hardships, individually through Shi Wa's persistence and self-sufficiency; and collaboratively, from the entire family's sacrifice to each other to show love. This self-sacrifice representation also engages with the social value of what family love is in Chinese society. According to some of the adult children interviewed by He et al., 'providing care to one's ill parents […] enabled them to enact their respect toward their parents […] love should not be named but rather be shown in deeds, reflect the action/practice orientedness element' (2021, pp.10–11). As such, the focus of the film is drawn to this family love concept for solving educational difficulties. However, it lacks a critical perspective to view Shi Wa, or rural children's education presented through Shi Wa. According to Tao Liu and Li Sun, China has not developed a comprehensive social welfare system for older people, especially for older people in rural areas (2016, pp.19–20). It can be seen in this film that in this rural village, the support for Shi Wa's paralysed father is not focused too much. Instead, *Going to School with Father on My Back* constructs many of the domestic sacrifices required for education as a way to

endorse family love and to invite empathy for those lacking educational access. The welfare system for rural citizens in the 1990s is not discussed.

In *Going to School with Father on My Back* the cinematic depictions of impoverished children focus on the protagonist Shi Wa. His older sister is also depicted throughout the film. She is not depicted with a name but is called 'Older Sister' (*Jiejie* in Chinese). The film emphasizes that her sacrifices for Shi Wa's education represent her love for the family and her siblings. When Shi Wa's sister loses her educational opportunities, through their father rotating the ladle to decide which child would continue their education, she then sacrifices herself by quitting education and marrying to earn some betrothal gifts so that Shi Wa can continue his education. From the beginning of the film, Older Sister quits school and does all the chores at home to look after Shi Wa and the family. When Shi Wa cannot pay his tuition fee, it is always his sister who solves his financial difficulties and assists him with life's struggles. Through these means, the film represents Older Sister's sacrifices as commonly occurring and endorses her actions as an expression of love for one's family.

Xiaorong Gu discusses the meaning of sacrifice and indebtedness for Chinese rural families and finds that:

> Culturally, a sense of indebtedness to one's parents for one's birth and nurturance has long been inculcated as a basic ethic in child socialization in Chinese society […] through articulating their indebtedness to reciprocate parents' sacrifices, children perform their duty and reaffirm their commitments to the family contract. (2022, p.522)

Having sought new strategies with which to frame the experiences of impoverished children through Older Sister, *Going to School with Father on My Back* represents the lived experiences of the young and the dispossessed Old Sister from the perspective of family love. However, in the reciprocal sacrifice for her parents and younger brother, Older Sister's individual identity and fundamental rights are denied via her lack of agency and innocence. She

becomes a passive supporting character, with invisible education and life needs. She exists to support her brother in his schooling and to prompt the development of the film plot. Unlike the father, there is no reciprocity received by Older Sister from the family.

Furthermore, Older Sister's female identity is utilised in *Going to School with Father on My Back*, merely for establishing the continuity of the narration. For instance, the narration shows Older Sister dropping school due to her luck of not winning the ladle rotating at home. However, she is represented in outdated female gender roles sewing Shi Wa's clothes, preparing Shi Wa's meals and getting married to support Shi Wa's education. In this way, her gender works as a catalyst and as Shi Wa's main financial and life support to continue his education. Although the ladle seems to mean that either son or daughter could have gone to school, the film replicates gender assumptions by setting up a situation where sending the boy or girl to school seems determined by 'luck'. The male wins and the female character is depicted as holding the family together.

Sylvia Walby observes that in collective nation-building, the female gender is used 'in the construction, reproduction and transformation' (1997, p.176-177) of practice in ethnic and national progress. The gender's construction is not only functional in these three aspects of nation-building from the social science perspective, but it also works in family building – considering the family as a collective unity from a cinematic perspective – as is the case in *Going to School with Father on My Back.* Older Sister's womanhood is symbolically supporting her brother's agency and constructing familyhood, the family's collective identity. However, despite all the sacrifices the sister makes, she has no agency herself to solve her educational and life hardships. The girl classmate who is drowned while crossing the river to access school also works in the same symbolic function in the film. Both female characters only appear as Shi Wa's sister and Shi Wa's classmate on screen. They are women with no other name.

This positioning of female characters shows the insignificance and neglect of their female identities and situations in the construction of *Going to School with*

Father on My Back. By representing the sister and the girl as having no control or choice over their lives, one of the only purposes of these characters is to prompt the film's narrative development and drive sympathetic emotion from the viewers based on the impoverished predicaments of Shi Wa's rural family. If the film endorses that perseverance enriches people through hardships, Older Sister and the girl who dies due to these hardships are neither enriched in these difficulties nor are they included in the film's 'reaching goal through adversity' focus. Therefore, these two characters are not dealt with as individuals but work as devices for others to rely on for overcoming predicaments or drawing experiences.

Conclusion

Differences in the agency of the female characters in these educational contexts have become apparent throughout this chapter. In the urban context of *Blossom Season, Rainy Season*, the female character Xie Xinran faces challenges as a migrant student, but she is from skilled families, and receives education in an urban developed city. Xinran's pursuit of a local Shenzhen *Hukou* places her in certain difficulties within the educational context. However, fundamentally, she has the agency to define her choices in her life. She is empowered. In contrast, in *Going to School with Father on My Back*, the same actress who plays the role of Xinran now plays the Older Sister character. However, in this second film that explores education, the agency of the sister is represented very differently. For these deserving poor in *Going to School with Father on My Back*, Older Sister is depicted as a supporting character to sacrifice herself for her brother to overcome educational hardship through personal perseverance.

The structural, fractured nature of politics remains unexplored in either of the films in this chapter. In *Blossom Season, Rainy Season*, Xinran's educational difficulties as a migrant student without a local *Hukou* are dealt with as a coming-of-age issue. Without showing how Xinran's *Hukou* is solved to clear the way for her education, the predicaments brought by household registration is depicted as a teen issue to facilitate her understanding of not adding to her

parents' troubles. And in the second case study, the hardworking poor (one could label them as 'deserving') in *Going to School with Father on My Back* are moral and innocent. The film delves into acts of kindness to other individuals, at the inter-personal level. Therefore, the film acknowledges the hardship and inequality prevalent in rural education. But the film's narrative is built around prosocial narratives, rather than structural inequalities. The focus is placed on personal traits such as persistence and kindness as the film hints, through narratives and characterization, that if a person is kind and tries to compassionately help others, they will get through their difficulties. In this way, educational hardship is depicted as a noble milestone for protagonists to overcome to reach coming-of-age status or to solve educational problems. The characters Shi Wa, his sister and the rural children are born in poverty and deserve to be encouraged and helped. However, *Going to School with Father on My Back* pulls the responsibility for their fate, by depicting how perseverant they perform in their poverty, rather than the state having the responsibility to lift them out of the impoverishment.

Through textual analysis of films, this chapter finds the ideological position that these two films express. The first case study *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* is narrated as a coming-of-age story, and the second case study *Going to School with Father on My Back* is a prosocial story. Both stories are about building character, through the sense of building inner strengths or being wise, or changing as a person. However, these narratives are constructed as individualized stories. The main characters from both films have marginalized status to a certain extent. Xie Xinran and Liu Xia in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* are on the edge of the urban world due to their migrant identity. Shi Wa in *Going to School with Father on My Back* is in a more marginalized status, in poverty in a rural area. These are very different portrayals of life in relation to education, in terms of urban prosperity and rural poverty. But both films represent, from a key perspective, that these characters try to understand the experience of education through their individual stories, be that coming-of-age, noble persistence in the face of hardship, or gender and family sacrifice. Thus,

this chapter argues that at the core of the points of view presented in both of these films, an essential and similar ideological position arises, which is that educational difficulties are an individual issue.

To summarise, both films in this chapter represent education and educational difficulties and challenges as one individual issue rather than collective systematic challenges. The coming-of-age story in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* is fundamentally about how the individual experiences a life transition. It is not about the whole experience of the migrant population in the education system, which might present its systematic challenges. And because of the way the narrative is set up in *Going to School with Father on My Back,* it is about the quality of being persistent and the prosocial kindness of a son and his father, rather than a structural, precious, counter-bearer in the educational system.

Chapter 4: Representing Education Beyond China, 2000–2010: Mentalities of International Education and the Experiences of Overseas Chinese Students

Since 1978's Opening-Up Policy, trade and communication with the world outside mainland China have been more relaxed and outward-facing than during the Cultural Revolution period. Consequently, a substantial number of students have travelled outside mainland China for education, accelerating in the 1980s. In the 2000s, overseas study reached a peak since the introduction of the Opening-Up Policy. This increase in the number of Chinese students studying abroad was stimulated by the new educational policy introduced in the late 1990s, which will be detailed in the next section. Alongside the other chapters in this thesis, this chapter provides a decade-focused lens on the relation between the Chinese educational experience and its on-screen representation: in this case, looking at the blooming overseas education for Chinese students from the late 1990s into the 2000s. It examines how overseas educational experiences during this period are represented on contemporaneous screen media, under shifts in educational policy that enhanced the mobility of Chinese students and changed broader attitudes toward global education and international exposure.

Studying abroad has a long history in China. After the PRC was founded in 1949, one of the predominant educational models in China was inherited from the Soviet Union. As Janette Ryan observes in her book about the education of Chinese students in other countries other than China, 'in the 1950s, the students were mainly sent to the Soviet Union or Soviet-led socialist countries. In the 1970s, China began sending students to Japan and Western countries, but initially, they were only government-sponsored students in a narrow range of disciplines' (2019, p.189). This observation confirms that, along with the Opening-Up Policy in 1978, other relevant policies, such as educational policies about overseas study, were relaxed to permit more communication with societies outside mainland China. Ryan notices that 'the numbers of students going abroad to study tripled in the decade from 2008 to 2018' (2019, p.189). As such, diverse study abroad destinations became increasingly available to

Chinese students beginning in the 1970s, with the number of overseas students growing steadily in the 1980s and 1990s, and accelerating in the 2000s. In this context, many television and cinematic works produced in the late 1990s and the 2000s – such as *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999) and *Life Translated* (2005) – represent the educational experiences of overseas Chinese students.

The analysis in this chapter will link these two cinematic and television representations to specific policy reforms related to overseas education. This includes examining how policy changes influenced the portrayal of the opportunities and challenges faced by Chinese students abroad, thereby embedding these screen works within the larger discourse on China's educational strategies. By contextualizing the stories of Chinese students in foreign educational settings, this chapter will illustrate how screen media interweave with the evolving educational policies and cultural perceptions, showing film and television as mediated dialogues of China's aspirations and challenges in integrating with the global educational arena. In these screen works, the impact of educational policies promoting international studies is visible. They serve as cultural artefacts that depict personal experiences and discuss the broader implications of China's educational reforms and their influence on individual life paths.

The documentary *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* and the autobiographical film *Life Translated*, are relevant case studies to examine how overseas study experiences and lives are represented in the late 1990s into the 2000s. The former shows the primary education and higher education experiences of Chinese students in Japan, and the latter represents the secondary educational experiences of a student from China in the UK. Through examining the representations of characters' life trajectories in these two film texts, this chapter asks how these media works represent the overseas educational experiences of Chinese students studying outside mainland China in the late 1990s and 2000s. And how do these narratives of personal experience connect to China's relations with the international world order?

By investigating these questions, I argue that both case studies use narrations of personal educational experiences to represent, at the turn of the 2000s and into the decade, how China was increasingly trying to recalibrate its relationship with the international world order, in terms of culture and economy, by inviting its citizens to think about international travel and opportunities to become more productive as a nation. These personal narratives become a vehicle for the ideological shifts of selfhood taking place and reveal transnational social class differences. This chapter includes three sections. To provide historical context, the first section focuses on a general introduction of the WTO and the policy in China regarding overseas education at the turn of the 2000s. The second section discusses the representation of differing higher and primary educational experiences in the documentary *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999), and the third section examines the cinematic representation of a girl's secondary educational experience in the film *Life Translated* (2005).

WTO, Overseas Education and Overseas Educational Policy in China in the 2000s

China joined the WTO in late 2001 and this accession held significant implications for the country's future (Fewsmith 2001, p.573). The academic journal *World Economy and China* believes that China becoming a member of the WTO:

> was […] an outcome [that] would be in accord with its so far extremely successful open-door policy. To sustain its rapid growth China still stood in need of foreign investment and advanced technology. To pay for this in the long run - and to defend its own currency in the meantime - it also required greater access to foreign markets. Given its high skills and low labor costs, negotiating trade agreements and joining the WTO looked like a sensible objective. (2001, p1)

As observed, the advantages of China entering the WTO were diverse for China, especially related to the economy. Faqin Lin and Cheryl Long note that 'China has experienced rapid economic growth driven by export expansion since the late 1970s, especially after its WTO accession in late 2001' (2020, p.820). This acceleration of economic growth impacted individual families and their educational choices. According to Ding et al.:

> Following entry into the WTO, the significant growth of household incomes fuelled by China's rapid economic development and concomitant growth in demand for the exploitation of its education market by overseas institutions, and the demand for overseas study by the Chinese population have also developed in leaps and bounds. (2009, p.9)

In this vein, the historical, social and economic context of China joining the WTO potentially shaped policy and aspiration concerning the talent and educational skills the nation wanted, and needed, to foster at this moment, for example,

providing Chinese citizens with new skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enabled China to function in a global marketplace. Thus, the significance of Chinese citizens' internationalization of education is foregrounded in the context of China's ambition at the turn of the 2000s.

With hope grounded in the importance of the internationalization of education, the number of Chinese students studying overseas was significantly boosted at the end of the 1990s, and the early 2000s. Based on data from the Ministry of Education, 'from 1978 to the end of 2003, the total number of students studying abroad in China reached 700,200 [...] In 2003, the total number of students studying abroad from China was 117,300, including 3,002 studying abroad with national sponsorship; 5,144 studying abroad with their work organization's sponsorship; and 109,200 studying abroad at their own expense' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2004). As such, overseas student numbers in 2003 outnumbered the previous 25 years, and all self-funded overseas study in the 2000s comprised the majority of Chinese international education. Furthermore, compared with statistics from 2003 to 2010, the number of students studying abroad increased dramatically to 167,400 within seven years (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2004). These figures demonstrate that since the beginning of the 2000s, the number of Chinese overseas students expanded rapidly.

Some prior research studies indicate that the Chinese state was the initial engine for Chinese students' study abroad (Lloyd-Damnjanovic and Bowe, 2020). In 2006, according to the Central People's Government of the PRC's official study, the Ministry of Education introduced funding for the initiative of Chinese students studying abroad:

> After the reform and opening up of the state work is proposed in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping, as an important measure to implement the reform and opening up policy, the central finance allocated funds to study abroad, before the establishment of the study fund committee. […] In 1996, with the approval of the Chinese Central Organization Office, the

> National Overseas Study Fund Management Committee was officially established. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2004)

As such, as introduced in Chapter 2, Opening Up paves the way for economic, social development, and educational changes with the support of the state, including promoting educational mobility. In the announcement of *Key Work Points of the Ministry of Education in 2000*, Article 6 states that a vital point for national educational work is to 'strengthen educational exchanges and cooperation such as study abroad, take various measures to support study abroad, encourage the return to China for services, and work hard to create a group of academic leaders and top talents standing at the forefront of the world in science and technology' (Ministry of Education of the Peoples Republic of China, 2000). This central policy document/guideline shows the supportive attitude of the state towards studying abroad and explicitly states its support for education abroad. It also shows that the purpose of studying abroad was to return to create an expert knowledge base in China.

The Ministry of Education of the PRC does not specify in articles what level of education it addresses, but the discussion of the national sponsorship of overseas education initiatives, clearly shows support for the university education level and above. Zhang Xiuqin, Secretary-General of the National Overseas Study Fund Administration Council, introduces the characteristics of the National Overseas Study Fund Management Committee regarding overseas higher education for students from China, as follows:

> The destination level of study abroad destinations has been significantly improved with many top universities around the world. […] The committee established the priority of seven independent disciplines for funding students abroad: Information and Communications Technology, agricultural high and new technology, life science and population health, material science and new materials, energy and environment, engineering science, applied sociology and WTO-related

> disciplines. […] After China entered the WTO, a talent training project in the financial industry is set up, alleviating China's participation in the long-term development of domestic financial industry talents in the WTO. […] A special project is set up for talent training in the Western region. […] There is also cooperation with domestic and foreign institutions as a means of different joint funding and tuition reduction. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2006)

Thus, various means were established by the National Overseas Study Fund Management Committee to guide Chinese students towards overseas universities. Highlighting that the focus of the committee's work sprung directly from the post-socialist developments of the 1990s to the contemporary sense of internationalization with China's accession to the WTO. Study abroad work has been incorporated into a strategic system of training financial talents that shows China aspired to foster its economy with experts in this field to help the nation become an outward-facing international power from the 2000s. To support study overseas, for instance, the committee expanded study abroad funds, to a certain extent. It can be said, therefore, that the nation has played a positive role in promoting Chinese students' study overseas in particular areas such as economically prioritized knowledge via this committee. Even though governmental policy focused on university-level education and skills, the popularity of international study increased due to access to the WTO. This mentality of international education extended to lower educational levels, such as primary and secondary education.

However, as the above statistics demonstrate, self-funded Chinese overseas students largely outnumbered national-funded students in the 2000s. Based on information from the Ministry of Education of the PRC (2004) from 1978 to the end of 2003, the vast majority of overseas students and returnees studying abroad did so at their own expense, followed by work-sponsored and nation-sponsored study abroad. As such, from the perspective of structure, types of overseas students vary. Le Lin observing the reasons behind study-abroad

surges and the international mobility of Chinese students, notices 'The shift of focus of these studies corresponds to the changed characteristics of Chinese overseas students: after 2000, the percentage of self-sponsored and self-financed students increased dramatically, and their growth was accompanied with the increased percentage of undergraduate students and the growing popularity of British Commonwealth countries as destinations' (2020, p.262). This proportional change in self-funded education shows that most overseas Chinese students choose to study abroad due to their own choices or motivations under China's supportive and flexible overseas study policies.

Even with state-funded students, a tie with the state or funding committees was not rigid. While the Ministry of Education introduced funding for Chinese students studying abroad in the 2000s, since the establishment of the Overseas Study Fund Committee in 1996, the policy has been:

> supporting overseas study, encouraging return to China and the freedom to come and go' […] After the reform in 1996, […] adopted the method of signing contracts to clarify the responsibilities and obligations of the state and individuals, with the practice of 'individual application, expert evaluation, equal competition, selective admission, contract assignment and compensation for breach of contract'. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2006)

Therefore, contracts bound the student and the state when students applied to a national fund for supporting their study abroad. However, room was provided for them to break this contract. To do so, a compensation fee needed to be paid. This funding agreement provided more flexibility for students from less-affluent backgrounds to support their study abroad. There is no such regulation required for self-funded students.

With this supportive attitude from the nation, Chinese overseas students soon became one of the largest groups enrolled in many countries. In Ryan

Kellogg's study of China's attitudes and plans towards overseas Chinese students in the US, he observes:

> Of the foreign born graduate students in the US, the second largest group, behind only India, comes from the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the 2009-10 academic year, nearly 128,000 PRC students were attending American universities – a record enrollment that represented a full recovery from the post-9/11 drop caused by more stringent student visa restrictions. Chinese students represent the single largest source of foreign born doctorate-level scientists and engineers (National Science Board 2006). (2012, p.84)

Apart from the US, a large number of Chinese students also study in other English-speaking destinations. As Lei Zhu and Peter Reeves observe about Chinese students' decisions to undertake postgraduate study overseas, 'China has been the most important source country for international students to English speaking countries like the UK, the USA and Australia in recent years' (2019, p.999). In this vein, developed English-speaking countries are one of the most popular destinations for Chinese students when choosing outward mobility options. Nevertheless, many other countries also attract Chinese students. Though his focus is on the study choice of Hong Kong for mainland Chinese students, Peter Bodycott notices for Chinese overseas students, there are 'traditionally favored destinations such as Japan, the UK and the USA' (2009, p.350). This popularity shows that Chinese students prefer certain host countries for their overseas study plans.

The popularity of these destination countries is affected by many influences. In his paper on how mainland Chinese students and their families choose higher education study abroad destinations, Peter Bodycott (2009, p.354) suggests that '10 common pull factors' influence the choice of a study destination. He lists these as:

(1) Knowledge and awareness of the institution, its reputation, and general knowledge of the destination country.

(2) Positive attitude toward supporting international education in the destination country.

(3) Recommendations and the influence of relatives, parents and friends.

(4) Tuition fees, living expenses, travel cost and social cost.

(5) Environment considerations including climate, lifestyle, crime, safety and racial discrimination.

(6) Geographical proximity to mainland China.

(7) Social or educational links to family or friends living in the destination country, or family or friends studying there.

(8) Immigration prospects after graduation.

(9) Perceived higher standards of education and employment prospects.

(10) Availability of scholarships for study. (Bodycott 2009, p.354)

Within this long list of reasons for why and where Chinese students would like to study abroad, the prestige of the host country's education systems, the currency of English-speaking, and other drivers are substantiated. In contrast to the goal of the Overseas Study Fund Committee, for Chinese students to bring economically and scientifically prioritized knowledge back to China, Chinese students mostly consider cultural exchange, global experience or self-actualization through their international education.

Essentially, the goals of the state are not the sole determinant for international study. The recalibration towards a more productive state, as mentioned earlier in this section, may be a motivating factor for flexible

educational policies around studying abroad, but policy change has also invited a new mentality for Chinese students, such as the cultural exchange and self-realization opportunities that are not purely linked with science and technology skills. The focus has shifted from the Overseas Study Fund Committee's national collective goal of fostering China in an international context to the idea of education abroad as a cultural adventure or pursuit towards self-realization, which can be seen as more individualistic and related to personal aspiration. However, this possibility of self-realization is only available for self-funding students with the liberty of options – so there are, in a sense, two parallel tracks here, with parallel ideologies, experiences, and identities connected to international education.

From the 10 influential factors regarding Chinese students' overseas educational choices, a key influence relates to a student's and their family's circumstances and perceptions. Additionally, factors also exist related to the host country and institutions that are affecting Chinese students' overseas study decisions. In this vein, when choosing self-funded overseas study – as most Chinese students have chosen since the 2000s, as suggested from the above data provided by the Ministry of Education of the PRC and Le Lin – financially affluent families can support applicants to fulfil their sense of cultural adventure, boost their employability, and improve their language skill goals. However, as the 10 influences (especially the third and fourth reasons) point out, studying overseas for Chinese students can be an ordinary choice only for the families capable of providing financial support. This choice is especially enhanced by the influence of family, friends, teachers, or society, such as the education agency.

However, clear social stratification occurs between students who cannot study abroad and between those who can afford overseas fees. As indicated by the tenth influence (the availability of scholarships), stratifications also occur among overseas students. Some students choose to be self-funded to pursue academic and overseas experiences. For instance, education to them is a cultural adventure, one that offers exotic experiences and knowledge related

to their study interests (Lei Zhu and Peter Reeves 2019, p.1003). Some others can study abroad only with funding provided.

Yingyi Ma divides Chinese overseas students in the US into two categories – the academic elites and the economic elites – while observing the diversification of Chinese international students in general. She observes that:

> With the increasing proportion of upper middle-class families in today's China, more and more Chinese students do not have to rely on American scholarships to study at American institutions. The recent history of Chinese students' dependency on full American scholarships to study abroad was merely a reflection of the economic deprivation and limited education opportunities of the country at that time. […] Their capacity to pay for the overseas education has often obscured their socio-economic diversity, the parental sacrifices, and their own academic and social challenges and struggles. (2020, pp.xxiii–xxiv)

Ma's examination of the decrease in Chinese students' dependence on American scholarship shows that with the economic growth of China after joining the WTO, self-funded international education increased. However, the micro-influence factors for this phenomenon are underexplored, from domestic, inter-personal, and social-economic class perspectives. Though Chinese overseas students cannot be simply categorized or classified into two types, this observation discusses economic diversities within families connected to their overseas study choices. Therefore, it reflects a financial and social stratification between middle-class and working-class students. The paper was published in 2020, yet two different financial backgrounds can also be seen in Chinese overseas students in the 2000s.

Previously while overseas study was fully dependent on scholarships, only the best academic students had this option. But with economic development, middle-class families also have self-funding options. I do not mean to say that

middle-class students are not high performing, but that this financial situation provides a new path for students who are not at the top of their class, or who are not as competitive academically. Financial and social stratification in overseas study choices is also linked to the University Entrance Exam, the Gaokao system, in China. Studying abroad becomes an alternative option for students who cannot get into their desired universities or courses in China but are financially affluent and can afford international higher education tuition fees. Therefore, some Chinese students overseas are perceived as affluent students who have in some way circumvented the system.

One noticeable trend among Chinese students studying overseas is their increasingly young age. Concerning the late 1990s and early 2000s, Du Guanghui (2001) researching the phenomenon of self-funded Chinese students going abroad for primary and secondary education finds that:

> Investigations by relevant departments show that most of our country's middle and primary school students who go abroad to study originate in a number of regions that are economically well off. […] Key schools produce the highest concentration of middle and primary school students who go abroad to study. In 1997 and 1998, fifty students at the Shenzhen Middle School applied to study abroad, and from autumn 1998 until now, more than 90 people have applied. (Du 2001, p.40)

As well as national and regional prosperity influencing overseas education, he also emphasizes the rising numbers caused by the loosening of policy restrictions:

> A person in charge at the Higher Education Bureau of Guangdong Province told me that the number of people going abroad to study has risen sharply from 200 persons annually a few years ago to 6,000 persons today, and the proportion of middle and primary school students among

> them has risen from less than 30 percent in the past to around 50 percent. (Du 2001, p.40)

With financial support for studying abroad not being limited to government sponsorship but incorporating self-funding, education abroad is extended to lower education.

The proportion of Chinese overseas students for primary and secondary education has grown dramatically, but with high tuition fees and the maintenance costs. As Du observes, students whose families can afford such expenses are usually from affluent families in China, or based in economically more developed regions, such as Shenzhen, Shanghai or Beijing. Researching middle schools in Beijing, Aiai Fan and Baoyan Cheng discover in their study about social stratification and studying overseas that 'In 2009, China became the No. 1 sending country of international high school students to the U.S., surpassing South Korea' (2018, p.12). The rapid changes in China's social class structure are linked to the growing number of young students who leave China for education abroad.

With deepening globalization, since the 2000s in China after it joined the WTO, education for Chinese students has also been undergoing fast internationalization. This internationalization is demonstrated by the increased flow of students to overseas destinations. Students are outflowing in remarkable numbers for different levels of education. As demonstrated by governmental documents (Ministry of Education of the Peoples Republic of China, 2006), the government's financial support for students' overseas education is currently focused on higher education, but not on primary and secondary education. Therefore, primary and secondary education abroad is a matter of self-funding. Nevertheless, as the largest sending country of international students, China has witnessed a rapid increase of students crossing borders.

The growing number of overseas students boosts the economy of destination countries, as 'the consumption of education constitutes a huge

market in the developed countries. Recruiting students from the developing countries and charging them expensive tuition fees is a profitable business' (Du 2001, p.42). In this way, reciprocal relations between overseas students and educational institutions have formed. While students go abroad to receive a different education from their home country and to experience a different culture, educational institutes in the destination countries boost their finances. Related to study abroad and international study fees, the two parallel ways of studying abroad, state/scholarship funded and self-funded, possibly generate different mentalities. International education for state-funded Chinese students has a relation to economically-focused imperatives for state-making. Self-funded students have no bond with the state goal of bringing knowledge back home through educational policy. Therefore, it is possible to anticipate these latter students' cultural attitudes or mindsets about overseas education will be more focused on the idea of being an internationally mobile citizen, or the cultural experience as promoted by Opening Up, which is also expressed through the availability of educational opportunities at the turn of 2000s with access to the WTO. In this vein, Chinese people were invited by educational policy and the social-economic circumstances of the 2000s to think about themselves as mobile, or international citizens through education.

Given the above overseas educational context alongside China's economic context, this chapter, in the first case study, will examine the overseas educational experience related to higher and primary education. In the second case study, this chapter will provide a significant, but often overlooked, way of understanding the Chinese overseas student experience in secondary education. In China 'primary education' refers to the first level of schooling where students are aged 6 to 12, 'secondary education' follows this until students proceed to 'higher education' at 18.

The Representation of International Education in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999)

This section explores the documentary representation of Chinese students' overseas education in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999), with a focus on

the following research questions: 1) How does this documentary invite people in China to consider overseas education?, and 2) What does international education mean for Chinese overseas students through the representation, in the context of internationally mobile Chinese culture, in the late 1990s and early 2000s? To answer these two questions, I argue that through personal cultural experiences, this documentary represents overseas educational opportunity and the charms of Japan. Such representations invite Chinese citizens to move internationally to increase skills, and to explore the potential of self-realization/personal growth as well as to adapt to a new kind of Chinese identity – an outward mobile identity; that of a world citizen. Essentially, changing perspectives portrayed in this documentary invite a new mode of being an outwardly facing Chinese national in order to increase China's internationalization in the 1990s and 2000s when China becomes a part of the international community.

Our Study of Life – Life in Japan shows how in the 1990s, after Opening Up, generations of Chinese people crossed the sea eastward to the island nation of Japan for self-funded study. A Chinese overseas student, Liling Zhang, directed and produced this documentary series. This documentary was supported by the Japanese *Fuji TV* station and the Chinese *Beijing TV* station, representing how overseas Chinese students experienced upheavals in life and education while studying in Japan in the late 1990s. This co-produced documentary series was broadcast in China and Japan, with slightly different contents shown in the Chinese and the Japanese versions (Table 4.1).

TABLE 4.1 *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN* EPISODE LIST

Episodes broadcast in China	Episodes broadcast in Japan
第 1 集：初来乍到（上） Episode 1: 'New arrival (1/2)' Characters: Han Song, Wang Ermin Episode contents: The new arrival of the young students Han Song and Wang Ermin in Japan.	1「小さな留学生」 Episode 1. 'Young international students' Characters: Zhang Su Episode contents: The 9-year-old Beijing girl, Zhang Su's primary education experience in Japan.

第 2 集：初来乍到（下） Episode 2: ‘New arrival (2/2)’ Characters: Han Song, Wang Ermin Episode contents: The new arrival of students Han Song and Wang Ermin in Japan.	2「小さな留学生 1996~2000 秋」 Episode 2. ‘Young international students 1996–2000 autumn’ Characters: Zhang Su Episode contents: the aftermath of the Chinese overseas student Zhang Su’s life in Beijing after returning from Japan.
第 3 集：彼岸的青春（上） Episode 3: ‘Youth on the other side (1/2)’ Characters: Liu Lin, Chen Chen, Chen Qi, Ye Min, Li Fang Episode contents: various Chinese university students’ lives in Japan.	3「若者たち」 Episode 3. ‘Young people’ Characters: Han Song, Wang Ermin Episode contents: the new arrival of students Han Song and Wang Ermin in Japan.
第 4 集：彼岸的青春（下） Episode 4: ‘Youth on the other side (2/2)’ Characters: Liu Lin, Chen Chen, Chen Qi, Ye Min, Li Fang Episode contents: various Chinese university students’ lives in Japan.	4「私の太阳」 Episode 4. ‘My Sun’ Characters: Li Zhongsheng Episode contents: nearly 50-year-old PhD student, Li Zhongsheng and his family’s educational and life experience in Japan.
第 5 集：家在我心中 Episode 5: ‘Home is in my heart’ Characters: Ding Shangbiao Episode contents: 48-year-old Ding Shangbiao’s life in Japan surrounding his daughter’s education.	5「中国からの贈り物」 Episode 5. ‘Gifts from China’ Characters: Zhang Liling, the producer of this documentary series Episode contents: the story of how the director and the team shot the documentary.
第 6 集：角落里的人 Episode 6: ‘People in the corner’ Episode contents: illegal immigrants’ lives in Japan.	6「泣きながら生きて」 Episode 6. ‘Live by crying’ Characters: Ding Shangbiao Episode contents: 48-year-old Ding Shangbiao’s life in Japan for his daughter’s education and the following up story of what happened after Ding Shangbiao leaves Japan.
第 7 集：小留学生（上） Episode 7: ‘Young international students (1/2)’	

Characters: Zhang Su Episode contents: 9-year-old Beijing girl, Zhang Su's primary education experience in Japan.	
第 8 集：小留学生（下） Episode 8: 'Young international students (2/2)' Characters: Zhang Su Episode contents: 9-year-old Beijing girl, Zhang Su's primary education experience in Japan.	
第 9 集：我的太阳（上 Episode 9: 'My Sun (1/2)' Characters: Li Zhongsheng Episode contents: nearly 50-year-old PhD student, Li Zhongsheng and his family's educational and life experience in Japan.	
第 10 集：我的太阳（下） Episode 10: 'My Sun (2/2)' Characters: Li Zhongsheng Episode contents: nearly 50-year-old PhD student, Li Zhongsheng and his family's educational and life experience in Japan.	
续集: 含泪活着(上) Sequel: 'To Live in Tears (1/2)' Characters: Ding Shangbiao Episode contents: Follow-up stories for Episode 5: Home is in my heart. What happened after Ding Shangbiao leaves Japan.	
续集: 含泪活着(下) Sequel: 'To Live in Tears (2/2)' Characters: Ding Shangbiao Episode contents: Follow-up stories for Episode 5: Home is in my heart. The	

following up story of what happened after Ding Shangbiao leaves Japan.	

As this dissertation discusses the screen representation in China, this discussion is not concerned with comparing how similar themes/contents are framed across nations or TV stations, so it will only focus on the episodes broadcast on the Chinese TV station. However, it is worth noticing a few stories in this documentary series are represented on the Chinese *and* Japanese station. For instance, narratives about Han Song and Wang Ermin (episodes 1 and 2 in China and 3 in Japan), Ding Shangbiao (episode 5 and China's sequels, episode 6 in Japan), Zhang Su (episodes 7 and 8 in China, and 1 to 2 in Japan), and Li Zhongsheng (episodes 9 to 10 in China and 4 in Japan). The way these individual educational experiences overlap demonstrates the appeal of these themes in both countries.

It is noticeable that *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* was a co-production between China and Japan. In China, it began broadcasting on Beijing TV, each day in the evening before 10 p.m. As well as being the capital, Beijing is one of the economically most developed cities in China. Beijing TV is a mainstream public channel in China, primarily for people in Beijing, so by broadcasting this documentary daily during the early evening, the target audience of this documentary was the urban, middle-class group. This audience has the capacity of time, economic means, and interest in cultural adventure in the wider world and studying abroad. As mentioned in the previous section, Chinese overseas educational policy supports people going abroad via government sponsorship. People also self-finance study abroad. The broadcast channel and airing time indicate an intersection between the target audience and the fact that this documentary focuses on one type of studying abroad: self-funded, instead of state-funded. In other words, individuals and their families who have the means to consider a cultural adventure outside of China. Therefore, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* attracts Chinese middle-class citizens imagining new horizons.

Accordingly, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* highlights the consumption of education to the audience who watch this documentary on Beijing TV who are

already potential consumers of international education in the market. The individual educational experiences and the people in this documentary are portrayed by positive narratives, to invite these potential consumers into a more internationalized market. With this intention of the documentary, the following section will look into what themes in education are represented in these overlapped series in the Chinese documentary about the Chinese students' educational experience in 1990s Japan, to encourage Chinese citizens to move internationally for education and to increase Chinese citizen's skills and temperaments, in the recalibration for China's international outlook, in the 1990s and 2000s. In this documentary, three different perspectives on international mobility are represented: self-realization and family sacrifice, cultural adventure and coming-of-age, parental sacrifice, and friendship.

Self-Realization and Family Sacrifice in Overseas Education in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*

Our Study of Life – Life in Japan represents international education as providing opportunities for realizing a personal goal. Episodes 9 and 10 tell the story of a father, Li Zhongsheng, who has been studying hard in Japan for ten years to obtain an education. In the documentary, Li Zhongsheng explains that he undertook a PhD in his middle age because he could not access education during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (see Chapter 1). After the Cultural Revolution, as introduced in Chapter 2, in the 1980s and 1990s, only people under 30 were able to take the university entrance exam. In this vein, Li Zhongsheng's educational journey in China reached a dead end because of the Cultural Revolution and subsequently when his age exceeds 30. Only two choices were available for people like him: to accept their destiny and live without an undergraduate education or seek self-funded educational opportunities abroad, which allow students to join at any age. Li Zhongsheng chooses the latter path to realize his academic ambition. As such, the documentary provides this overseas study opportunity for people who are in similar situations, to consider another route for realizing individual personal

goals. Therefore, this documentary represents one positive reason for Chinese people mobilizing abroad for self-funded education.

Li Zhongsheng's academic self-realization requires a great deal of sacrifice by family members. Li Zhongsheng focuses on his education, not on family life, financial maintenance, or communication with family at all. He encounters many problems throughout his study. Nevertheless, he still focuses only on his study. With Li Zhongsheng's self-commitment to academia, his wife and daughter have to always support him while Li pursues his dream. The wife works different jobs to support the entire family and the daughter refrains from speaking to her father so he can dedicate his time to completing his PhD. As we discussed already in the previous chapter, in the core component of many Asian value systems, Confucianism, personal sacrifice is expected within China's cultural ideology (Lau 1996). Under this concept, the boundaries of the self extend from an individual, the 'lesser self' to others in the same family or community, the 'greater self' – either in a family or society, the 'lesser self' needs to be subordinate to the 'greater self' (Barbalet, 2013). In Li Zhongsheng's story, the entire Li family agrees to sacrifice for his dream of a PhD. The sacrifices of Li's wife and daughter are portrayed through their finances, education and life quality, which shows this family situates Li Zhongsheng's pursuit as the 'greater self', and the wife and daughter are the 'lesser self' of the family. This relationship between Li Zhongsheng, his wife and daughter, shows the patriarchal dynamic in this family.

Additionally, while the family works as a unit the sacrifice shown by Li Zhongsheng's family includes a significant proportion of marital sacrifice from his wife. Fu-Mei Chen and Tsui-Shan Li examine spousal contribution and sacrifices in Chinese marriages, where they consider the relations between spouses in the wider cultural context as:

> [A]cts in which individuals give up something in the interest of enhancing their relationship or their spouse's well-being, even when the acts are in conflict with their own immediate self-interest. Although he did not use the term sacrifice, Yang

> (2003) stated that Chinese people are generally willing to subordinate their personal goals, interests, and welfare for the sake of their families' existence, harmony, solidarity, glory, prosperity, and prolongation. […] The degree of contribution and sacrifice that an individual makes in a marriage may reflect the person's or the culture's values with respect to individualism and collectivism. […] If a society has strong collectivist tendencies, then societal beliefs can interfere with individual rights, such as women's rights to pursue careers and educational opportunities. (2007, p.396)

The above observation, regarding marital sacrifice in Chinese families, demonstrates the existence of sacrifice in marital relationships. The documentary shows the sacrifices of Li Zhongsheng's wife, for Li's education. As suggested in the literature, the right of Li's wife for life, education and career are diminished or exploited, despite her consent towards supporting her husband's educational dream.

On his part, Li Zhongsheng admits he owes his wife for her commitment and sacrifice, but promises to compensate her by spending more time with her after he completes his entire education. In this fashion, the documentary emotes his passion and determination towards his education, as well as the love and kindness his wife provides to him and the family. However, Li Zhongsheng's pursuit of academic ambition shows Li's normalisation of marital sacrifice in the process of his educational journey.

Therefore, through Li Zhongsheng and his family *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* represents a traditional, collective and patriarchal perspective which supports international education. Li Zhongsheng believes, expressed in dialogue, that education in Japan will enable him to bring key knowledge back to China, in service to the country. This shows a collective tendency to place Li as the 'lesser self' when facing the nation, to contribute to, the 'greater self'. This representation captures a national drive of citizens going abroad to study to bring knowledge back, despite being a self-funded goal for some people.

However, Li Zhongsheng's pursuit of a PhD ultimately is about self-realization. He has a stable life in China and does not necessarily need an education. His focused devotion to education and his lesser attention to his family essentially is to fulfil his personal dream, or to have a potentially better quality of life in the future. The tensions in Li's family during his education, show what Li Zhongsheng does is socially exceptional, and it requires a lot of sacrifices from other family members to support him. Therefore, Li needs to socially justify the reason for his unconventional pursuit of an educational dream at such a great cost. In the middle of episode 9, Li Zhongsheng tells the camera 'For China's development, the most important thing is education. Education requires a lot of human talents. I hope to be a member of them'. At the beginning of episode 10, Li further confirms to the camera, 'I think only in this way I can prove myself worthy of my mother [bringing me to the world] and can prove myself worthy of my wife and child ['s love and support]. Moreover, only in this way, I can prove myself worthy of the nation'. Through Li Zhongsheng's words, he manages the tension between individual goals, the love of his family and the collective development of the nation.

Pursuing education to live up to family's expectations and long-term development, and bringing knowledge back to China is a justification which raises his pursuit of a personal goal to a moral level. As aforementioned, personal sacrifice is expected within China's cultural ideology, in line with morals within collective society 'people may feel a moral obligation to help in-group members' (Zhu 2021, p.918). As such, Li Zhongsheng sublimates his pursuit of a personal goal to the collective orientation with a moral nature, to build Chinese people's knowledge over the long run. However, Li Zhongsheng automatically places himself as the family representative, indicating that he is the 'greater self' and his wife and daughter are the 'lesser self' subordinate to him. This automatic classification shows, in essence, Li's ideology of patriarchy: his wife and daughter need to follow and make sacrifices for the father figure in a family.

The traditional Chinese family relationship under the impact of Confucianism shows tendencies towards hierarchy and patriarchy. In Confucianism, 'there is a hierarchy' (Johnson and Wang 2012, p.447) in Chinese domestic and social relationships. Two of these relational hierarchies are husband and wife, and old over the young (Mencius 2004, p.60). This dogmatism shows a typical patriarchal family relationship in the traditional Chinese culture. In this vein, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* shows a patriarchal attitude regarding family and education. The documentary does so through a male PhD student, nearly 50 years old, who thinks in a traditional patriarchal way. He expects his family to sacrifice for him, to support him to pursue his academic ambition, even in the new context of China's growing international education opportunities.

Cultural Adventure and Coming-of-Age through Overseas Education in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*

Apart from Li Zhongsheng's traditional, collective and patriarchal attitude toward international education*, Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* also represents another motivation for overseas study: to be a world citizen. The documentary does so by showing how study abroad provides a cultural adventure. In episode 1, the new arrival, 26-year-old Han Song lands in Japan from China. He tells the camera that he would like to see the outside world and achieve an undergraduate education in Japan. Han Song expresses to the camera that he is from a good family in his province, which enables him to afford the initial fees abroad. John Tomlinson observes that 'globalization promotes much more physical mobility than ever before' (2007, p29), which shows the transnational human capital flow generated by internationalization. In China, in preparing for joining WTO, globalization is emphasized to its citizens. The representation of Han Song's move to Japan is an instance of a Chinese citizen pursuing a cultural adventure within this historical context.

Our Study of Life – Life in Japan conveys Han Son's first impression of Japan which represents Japan as a suitable location for a cultural adventure. Concurrent with the narration 'Many fellow Chinese citizens come to the

metropolis, Tokyo […] with their own aspirations', and some slow and melodious music, the camera looks down from the sky at the bustling streets of Tokyo, a vast city crammed with running cars and bright neon lights, showing the activity and prosperity of the city. Then the camera looks up at the skyscrapers and colourful neon signs from a looking-up angle to show the height of these modern buildings (Figure 4.1).



FIGURE 4.1 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. THE TOKYO METROPOLITAN VIEW.

The soundtrack fills with distant street and car-engine sounds, while the camera captures Han Song, simply dressed in the bustling crowd. During a close-up of his face, Han looks around while he talks to the camera, 'Japan is really a heaven, like how it's shown on TV! It is true! Everything is true. It's full of tall buildings that I have not seen. Even Shanghai doesn't look like that' (Figure 4.2).



FIGURE 4.2 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. HAN SONG LOOKS AROUND METROPOLITAN VIEWS OF TOKYO WHILE TALKING TO THE CAMERA.

Han Song's emphasis on the city being 'full of tall buildings' indicates the metropolitan scale of Tokyo, while his expressions about heaven-like Japan shows his admiration for this developed urban life. In this vein, with the use of language, camera angles and soundtrack, Japan is represented as an attractive place for a cultural adventure through the representation of Han Song's first impressions of the nature of urban modernity.

While analysing cultural cosmopolitanism in a globalization context, John Tomlinson (2007) notices that 'the cultural experience of globalization […] for most people […] is felt in staying at home' (p.150), through, for example, '"mediated quasi-interaction" [, which is] the communication of the mass media' (p.159). In addition, the audience of this mediated communication can be 'active in the interpretation of the communication and the construction of meaning' (p.159). Thus, Tomlinson's observation connects cultural globalization to mass media, such as television. He notices that most audiences experience international culture through how this culture is represented on

television. Twenty-six-year-old Han Song finds that Japan in the 1990s is much more developed than China, even the metropolitan Shanghai. Via Han Song, this documentary hints to the Chinese audience that positive cultural experiences can be found in Japan. It indicates what opportunities (education) and adventures (eye-opening cultural experiences) Japan offers. In this vein, the documentary shows one student's personal aspirations and encourages the idea of being individualistic and more internationally minded, as well as materially minded. Han Song's initial experience in Japan is based a great deal on the favourable material conditions in Japan. As such, within China's internationalization mindset *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* shows new motivations for outwardly mobile Chinese citizens. These motivations include education, for broadening their horizons, as well as enriching personal experiences.

In the becoming of the world citizens and enriching personal experiences, predicaments brought by this international mobility are also represented in *Our Study of Life - Life in Japan*. The documentary shows hardship through overseas education being an impetus for young citizens to mature by creating a 'better' self. The documentary, for instance, first represents the suited Han Song spending money on an expensive afternoon tea. The narrator states it is rare for the overseas students to eat out having just arrived in Japan, while the camera zooms in on the menu prices and displays the customers dressed in deluxe suits or dresses, to emphasize the rareness of new arrivals going to this luxurious coffee room (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).



FIGURE 4.3 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. HAN SONG AT A LUXURIOUS COFFEE ROOM.



FIGURE 4.4 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. ANOTHER CUSTOMER AT THE LUXURIOUS COFFEE ROOM.

This representation indicates a disapproving attitude of the documentary toward Han Song's behaviour. Then half a year after Han Song arrives in Japan, the documentary shows that he cleans dishes to pay for his maintenance and tuition fees. When the camera captures his food this time it is a plain bowl of rice, from leftover dishes, after a 12-hour shift. Han Song adds sauce to his rice to finish every single grain. Though looking much thinner than when he had just arrived in Japan, Han Song tells the camera that in China he was very picky about food, but since moving to Japan he understands life from a better perspective and cherishes food and is getting even healthier (Figure 4.5).



FIGURE 4.5 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. HAN SONG EATS LEFTOVER RICE AT THE KITCHEN HE WORKS FOR.

This time, the narrator does not comment or show the surroundings of the kitchen where Han Song works. The camera only focuses on Han Song's face, capturing his smile, which indicates Han Song's behaviour and attitude seem to be accepted by the documentary. In this way, the documentary shows how Han

Song transforms from a person uninformed of life's difficulties to a person who can bear hardships and hard work with a mature attitude concerning how to live his life.

Our Study of Life – Life in Japan deals with Han Song's attitude transition as a coming-of-age experience, caused by his international move. When Alistair Fox talks about typical 'stories of emergence' depicted in coming-of-age films, he introduces 'life-changing events' (2017, p.5) as a technique for evoking coming-of-age in films. The dramatic events encountered by protagonists often cause transitions. Even though *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* is a documentary, Han Song's experience in a foreign country away from his home country is a life-changing event. His enjoyment of life in Japan is criticized, but his embracing of hardship is endorsed in the documentary as a mental awakening. What triggers the transition of Han Song's attitude to life is the predicaments he encounters in his international move to Japan, which is framed as a positive testimony of his mental matureness. With this mental maturity, Han Song is represented being capable of living life with his feet on the ground, thanks to moving to Japan to pursue a cultural adventure. Thus, overseas experience and education are depicted in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* as a helpful experience for recognising the nature of life, and taking one step further towards becoming a better world citizen.

Our Study of Life – Life in Japan further emphasizes personal diligence and persistence as keys to coming-of-age experiences, and to overcome difficulties encountered internationally. Also in episode 1, Wang Ermin, a 19-year-old girl, comes to Japan for preparatory courses to pass her Japanese university entrance exam. She is captured in tears in the documentary in due to her inability to communicate in Japanese and being surrounded by an unfamiliar society and culture. These actions convey Wang Ermin's frustration and embarrassment caused by lacking language proficiency in her host country.

Moving to a different country that speaks a completely different language is a life-changing event. The cultural, social and linguistical change is depicted as an obstacle triggering coming-of-age. Following in the end of episodes 1 and

throughout episode 2 in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*, the documentary records Wang Ermin wiping her tears, spending time improving her language skills, and getting involved in Japanese society. Wang Ermin, for instance, finds a part-time job in a local store to earn her tuition fees as well as to practice Japanese with local people. She also studies Japanese at the language school and in all her spare time. Soon Wang Ermin achieves her next level of education in Japan, by being accepted by a well-known Japanese university and can communicate with her Japanese classmates and teacher fluently. As such, the documentary depicts her mental awakening through her diligence and determination when encountering a life-changing situation. Personal determination and persistence when encountering difficulties are therefore shown through this individual. The documentary renders these personal traits as key elements for the transformation that develops Wang Ermin's coming-of-age in Japan, and as a remedy to overcome certain issues caused by international mobility.

Parental Sacrifice in Overseas Education in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*

Aside from self-realization and maturation to conquer difficulties brought about by international education, while representing Wang Ermin and other students' outward move, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* also praises family support. The documentary spends half of Wang Ermin's story in episode 2 on her parents. They explain to the camera with tears that they miss their daughter, but going abroad is helpful for children's independence and to obtain a better future than their parents. Their hopes for her study abroad are that Wang Ermin can live a good life with more choices than they had.

The documentary also uses most of episode 5 to narrate Ding Shangbiao's sacrifice for his daughter Ding Ling. Who is a student, living in Shanghai with her mother. Ding Shangbiao is 43 years old and from Shanghai. He has lived in Japan for eight years to earn money with the hope of sending his daughter to a world-class university in the US. This strong desire for a US education, means that for eight years Ding Shangbiao had not taken a day off or returned to China once, as he explains: 'I work an extra hour more in Japan, and my daughter can

study for an extra hour'. As such, the documentary sentimentalizes family sacrifice in episodes 2 and 5. In both sequels, the documentary further endorses Ding Shangbiao's sacrifice for his family, by zooming in on a respectful salute from a border customs officer after listening to Ding's story. The officer also lets him go back to China despite Ding Shangbiao's visa having expired years ago. In this vein, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* represents Ding Shangbiao, as a father, and Wang Ermin's parents sacrificing their personal sentiments (because it is a sacrifice to miss their children), to send their children for international education to become world citizens.

Thus, in a new internationally open and mobile Chinese society *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* represents a shift of roles through family sacrifice. As mentioned previously, personal sacrifice is expected within Chinese family and culture from the 'lesser self' to the 'greater self'. For instance, in Li Zhongsheng's patriarchal family relations the father/husband figure is at the top of the family hierarchy as the 'greater self', while the 'lesser self' is the younger family/female member who needs to subordinate themselves to male or older generations. In Wang Ermin and Ding Shangbiao's families, the classification of the traditional 'lesser self' and the 'greater self' is reversed. The documentary representation of Wang Ermin and Ding Shangbiao's families shows how their parents sacrifice themselves for their offspring's development, so that the father or both parents devote their 'lesser self' to their children's education. Therefore, the father/husband-oriented model present in some Chinese families transitions to a children/youth-oriented model in a context of the internationalization of education.

The gender dimension is also less salient in the internationalization of education for some Chinese families. This is shown in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* via the sacrifice of Wang Ermin's parents and Ding Shangbiao's sacrifice also. As such, the documentary shows two types of family coexisting within Chinese society. First, the reduction of patriarchal ideology with traditional Confucian family values, but the collective hierarchical family relationship remains where a husband/father is prioritized over his wife and daughter in the

case of Li Zhongsheng. However, for some families such as Wang Ermin's parents prioritize their children, regardless of their gender.

Yet, although Wang and Ding's family break the traditional Confucius norms of family hierarchy, their model of a family relationship still follows the traditional collective Chinese ideology of all family members' bonds being in unity. In her paper about parental sacrifice and adolescents' development in poor Chinese families, Janet T. Y. Leung finds that:

> Chinese parents focus more on the educational achievement of their children than parents in Western society (Chao, 2001; Chao & Sue, 1996), and Chinese parents are socialized to subordinate their personal interests for the welfare and honor of the family as a whole […] In Chinese culture, parental sacrifice is a distinctive feature of children's socialization (Chao & Kaeochinda, 2010). Parenthood, in the Chinese connotation, involves a strong sense of responsibility for fostering one's children and making sacrifices for their development (Lam, 2005). Parental sacrifice is defined as a family process by which parents fulfil the needs and development of their offspring at the expense of their personal needs and interests (Leung & Shek, 2016). (2017, p.521)

Leung's finding reveals the perception of parents in Chinese families regarding children's education and socialization. Parents expect their efforts to contribute towards a nurturing environment for their children's development. As such, family investment aims to better allocate family resources to their offspring, as Leung further explains in the same paper:

> While family investment emphasizes the allocation of family resources to their offspring, parental sacrifice focuses on the submission of parents' interests for their children's development […] parental sacrifice is particularly important

> to families experiencing economic disadvantage, where family resources are scarce. (2017, p.521)

In this vein, parental sacrifice is more obvious in the economically disadvantaged family, or, in a broader sense, the economically disadvantaged country. For instance, one representation of family self-sacrifice is of Ding choosing to leave his family, sacrificing his personal life and family time to create a financial opportunity for his daughter to study overseas. Ding and his wife's sacrifice as parents foresee the academic achievement, competence, and motivation of their daughter. Therefore, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* shows the significant position of international education for some Chinese families, like Ding's. It also shows a model for Chinese society as a whole as it develops – the older generation sacrifices so that the younger generation will experience better lives as the country continues to develop.

Friendship in Overseas Education in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*

Our Study of Life – Life in Japan also represents friendship and love caused by international education, for instance, through the representation of a 9-year-old Chinese primary student from Beijing. In episodes 7 and 8, Zhang Su, follows her parents to Japan. They move for her father's job. In a Japanese primary school, Zhang is represented receiving constant help from classmates, teachers, and the school. Her peers share their textbooks with her, accompany her to school every morning, and the teacher invites Zhang Su's family for a home meal (Figures 4.6 to 4.8).



FIGURE 4.6 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. JAPANESE TEACHER HELPS ZHANG SU TO STUDY IN A JAPANESE PRIMARY SCHOOL.



FIGURE 4.7 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. JAPANESE CLASSMATE HELPS ZHANG SU TO STUDY IN A JAPANESE PRIMARY SCHOOL.



FIGURE 4.8 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. JAPANESE CLASSMATES HELP ZHANG SU TO STUDY IN A JAPANESE PRIMARY SCHOOL.

The school hires an interpreter for Zhang Su during her first month, so that Zhang Su can communicate with others. Zhang Su introduces herself to the school by saying that she hopes new generations in China and Japan can hold up the dove, symbolising peace, and that she would like to become friends with her schoolmates. The friendship between schoolmates and staff in the school in the documentary demonstrates a friendly and tolerant atmosphere. This collective stance potentially prompts an affectionate sentiment from the audience that new generations of Chinese and Japanese children endorse the friendship between these two countries and people. This representation can be closely tied with the nature of this co-production between China and Japan, conveying a message to the audience that Japan is a friendly nation and will welcome Chinese friends.

With such a tone set, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* exemplifies how Zhang Su's international citizen identity helps construct and maintain transnational friendships. The friendship and love received from her local Japanese school facilitates Zhang Su's settlement in her new country. Yet these connections do not fade after Zhang Su returns to China. In episode 8 of Zhang Su's story, Zhang's family needs to return to China. On her last visit to her Japanese school, the teachers, headmaster, and other staff meet Zhang's parents and donate musical instruments to Zhang Su's school in Beijing as an indication of their friendship, her classmates give her farewell cards, and wave to her while someone shouts 'remember to come back!' (Figures 4.9 to 4.11).



FIGURE 4.9 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. THE HEADMASTER AND TEACHERS IN THE JAPANESE PRIMARY SCHOOL PLAY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS TO SAY FAREWELL TO ZHANG SU'S PARENTS.



FIGURE 4.10 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. ZHANG SU'S CLASSMATES IN JAPAN HOLD A CLASS PARTY AND TAKE A PHOTO WITH HER BEFORE SHE GOES BACK TO CHINA.



FIGURE 4.11 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. ZHANG SU'S CLASSMATES IN JAPAN WAVE TO HER WHILE SOMEONE SHOUTS 'REMEMBER TO COME BACK!'.

These farewell scenes occur in slow motion, with a matching slow-paced narration, to demonstrate this is a valuable and cherished experience as she says farewell to the teacher and each student individually. In the second half of episode 8 (Figures 4.12 to 4.13), the documentary represents Zhang Su demonstrating to her Chinese classmates in Beijing how to use the musical instruments donated by the Japanese school, and she sings Japanese songs to introduce Japanese culture to her Beijing peers. The documentary ends by showing Zhang's family going to the airport in Beijing to pick up her Japanese teacher's family. The teacher tells the camera, that she and Zhang Su's family became good friends during their time in Japan, and now she comes to visit Zhang's family as a friend.



FIGURE 4.12 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. ZHANG SU DEMONSTRATES TO HER CHINESE CLASSMATES IN BEIJING HOW TO USE THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS DONATED BY THE JAPANESE SCHOOL.



FIGURE 4.13 LILING ZHANG, *OUR STUDY OF LIFE – LIFE IN JAPAN,* 1999. DOCUMENTARY. ZHANG SU'S FAMILY PICK UP HER JAPANESE TEACHER'S FAMILY FROM BEIJING AIRPORT.

In this way, the narration, camera and soundtrack work together to represent the friendship which began between Zhang Su and her family in Japan is continued in China. Zhang Su becomes a cultural ambassador in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* to promote the culture and friendship between China and Japan. As such, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* shows that the long-lasting friendship and the international citizen's identity gained by an educational experience outside China are not limited by time and space. Zhang Su's educational experiences and friendships are always connected to her, even after her return to China. In this vein, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* represents how these international experiences construct Zhang Su as a world citizen.

Expanding Cultural Horizons for Chinese Citizens in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*

To summarize the findings of this section, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* focuses on the personal educational experiences of Chinese people in Japan, at the turn of the 2000s, in a narrative that invites the Chinese audience to see

the potential overseas education possibilities. The documentary presents their individual educational experiences, adventures, academic ambitions, friendships, loves and tears. Three different perspectives on international mobility have been discussed above: self-realization and family sacrifice, cultural adventure and coming-of-age, parental sacrifice and friendship.

First, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* uses different episodes to show individual students' or families' motivation for studying overseas. Either for realizing a personal academic or adventurous goal, for bringing the knowledge back to China, or for creating more future possibilities in life. Therefore, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* shows that overseas education is a complex issue. On the one hand, there is a national drive to study and return with knowledge. But on the other hand, there is the consequence of learning and experiencing the international world, creating a new identity, and becoming world citizens. Therefore, there are two drives for Chinese overseas students' education. One that is explicitly collective, to bring back knowledge to China. And another is more implicit, which is to become more globally oriented and potentially consumer-oriented Chinese world citizen. The individualistic goal is subsumed within the national goal.

Second, throughout different representations of education, the traditional collective cultural ideology of sacrificing the 'lesser self' for the 'greater self' within a Chinese family plays a significant role in students' international education choices and world citizen identity. However, along with China's development with the WTO historical context, internationalization provides a new mechanism for some Chinese families to realize different definitions of 'self-hood'. A distinction arises between the way the documentary portrays the education of the older international student, Li Zhongsheng, and the education of younger international students, Wang Ermin and Han Song. A tension exists between Li Zhongsheng's education and family life, which is for his wife and daughter to make sacrifices for him. But in Wang Ermin's generation, gender and age dimensions are less weighted in the connection between education and family sacrifice. The whole family sacrifices for the younger generation, so

that she can have a better future. Different to the case studies discussed in previous chapters, in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*, the 'greater self' shifts in an internationally open and mobile Chinese society. There is the patriarchal Li Zhongsheng model, but also the children-oriented, or youth-oriented Wang Ermin model. As such, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* places this 'greater self' on the family to help and promote the younger generation's educational aspirations, so that they can develop themselves as world citizens complementing the development of China. As such, the recognition of the identity that youth as an independent and valuable family member, not merely a subordination to their parents, begin to emerge in the documentary representation.

Additionally, alongside the shift in selfhood, signs of individualism emerge in the representation of individual overseas students, such as Han Song, who pursues his personal aspirations through overseas education. However, collectiveness and hierarchical relations still occupy the Chinese family relationship. Parents are willing to sacrifice themselves for their offspring's development while still following the core of family collective ideology – that the family works in unity. Like Ding Shangbiao's family, the daughter's education needs are prioritized within the family hierarchal ladder. However, the parents' needs and well-being are subordinate to the daughter's education – the priority of their family. Nevertheless, the younger generation is subordinate to the parents' decision to some extent, as the daughter's (Ding Ling's) preparation for international education is a parental decision to facilitate their daughter's establishment in China's new international context. The future of the child is the future of the family as a whole, under Confucius collectivism.

Third, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* also conveys friendship in Zhang Su's story to promote the long-lasting effect of the world citizen obtained from international education. Through the representation of the Japanese teacher to China, for visiting Zhang Su, the documentary sends the signal that wherever Chinese citizens live, they are world citizens after receiving an international

education. The connections established during international education are going to last.

In the process of encouraging Chinese citizens to go abroad for either self-realization or world citizenship, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* represents each individual's pursuit of education as one that brings certain difficulties but also opportunities. Within these educational and domestic contexts, the friendships, family and spousal supports are presented as the ultimate solutions to students' educational predicaments in their host country. In *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*, the educational difficulties for a few different individuals as overseas students are dealt with as a coming-of-age issue. However, the reasons or predicaments that trigger the coming-of-age experience and what a coming-of-age is in this case study are different from the case studies in Chapter 3. In the current case study, the predicaments brought by the foreign land and the Japanese education are being depicted as issues that facilitate the creation of horizon-open, academic opportunities and friendship. Its narrative is built around personal enrichment and growth, to show a positive image of the educational experience in Japan. In this way, overseas education is depicted as an additional resource for these Chinese individuals in Japan, to overcome difficulties and reach higher goals in their life. These individual students who study in Japan are depicted as encountering predicaments, but these difficulties are represented as a cornerstone to enhance their persistence, self-maturity, or the world citizen identity.

As such, even with the hardships each Chinese individual experiences in their educational journey, as a form of cultural and identity enrichment or adventure, overall *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* depicts overseas education from the perspective of inter-relationships with people within a family, or those encountered during education, as well as self-growth and personal traits. And through this narrative, the documentary uses overseas education as an agent for Chinese students' overseas educational journey through which they can make their academic or domestic dreams come true. Cultural changes also inform these Chinese students' experience in the new foreign circumstance in

which they find themselves. By pursuing academic study, these individuals realize self-enrichment in different ways. This reveals a multicultural outlook involving education with the possibility of obtaining more opportunities or options in life. The conflicts and the difficulties represented in the documentary work as reflections of Chinese students' mental improvement. It invites citizens to think about international travel and opportunities. The documentary expresses an intention of new educational and cultural horizons opening for Chinese citizens, and through that it recalibrates the nation's relationship with the international world order in terms of culture and economy.

Overall, through textual analysis of films, this chapter finds the ideological position in *Our Study of Life - Life in Japan* expressed. This documentary case study is narrated as individual dream-pursuit or coming-of-age stories, which is about building these Chinese students, through the sense of building inner strengths or dreaming high to create more life opportunities. The main individuals represented in *Our Study of Life - Life in Japan* all encounter difficulties to a certain extent, in Japan during their self-realization or world identity pursuit process. This documentary represents from a key perspective that these individuals try to understand the experience of education through their individual experiences, be that coming-of-age, or family sacrifice in the face of hardship. Thus, this section argues that at the core of the points of view presented in *Our Study of Life - Life in Japan*, there is an essential ideological position, which is that these individual stories, show the nation is trying to recalibrate itself with the international world, by encouraging its citizens to study abroad for the pursuit of individual improvement, goals and the world citizen identity. More importantly, the documentary is not simply an expression of the overt ideological ambition of China as a nation-state, but about the mentality that comes with the international recalibration. This is, of course, ideological in its own way but also suggests some different inflections and consequences from the Opening-Up moment of the 1990s and 2000s – towards training citizens with skills and imparting knowledge by studying abroad, but

also, as a consequence, feeding ambitions for cultural adventure and self-realization.

The Establishment of Chineseness in *Life Translated* (2005)*:* Being a Chinese Student in the British Education System

The two films examined in this chapter both respond to the general research question this chapter asks, which is, 'How does the representation of international education at the turn of the 2000s address negotiations of Chinese identity in a global world?' The first case study *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999) considered the mentality of Chinese overseas students during a period when China sought to recalibrate its international role around the beginning of the 2000s. Through training Chinese citizens with skills and imparting knowledge by studying abroad, ambitions for international cultural adventure and a mental attitude toward international citizenship were developed. In this section, I examine the second case study: *Life Translated* (2005). As a youth romance film, *Life Translated* focuses on a Chinese student's educational experience at a private British secondary school. Therefore, it provides a different context, in terms of country, educational level and economic status, from the first case study for the examination of international education in film representations. In this case, due to the nature and cost of international secondary education in a private school, *Life Translated* looks at the educational experience of Chinese students from a different economic status in a different continent than the Chinese students in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*. The content and the context of international education for Chinese are examined as a means to consider how China's international calibration impacted Chinese overseas students' mentality, including the experience of primary and higher education in Japan and secondary education in the UK at the end of the 1990s and the turn of the 2000s.

Exploring the cinematic representation of the secondary school education of a 16-year-old girl from China in a British private school in *Life Translated*, this section seeks to answer two questions. The first question is, how is global Chinese identity represented in *Life Translated* through the educational

experiences of being Chinese in a global world? The second question is, how does economic status inflect the sense of Chinese identity in global education in *Life Translated*? Through these questions, I will examine how *Life Translated* represents a privileged, British private educational experience for a 16-year-old female student from China in Chinese cinema. I argue that *Life Translated* shows the social stratification in Chinese social class through overseas education in the 2000s and portrays Chinese international students from upper economic status in China as embracing the advantages international education brings to them, but in the educational process are more inclined to resist international culture by insisting on their Chineseness.

Life Translated represents the privileged British private school educational experience of Jen, from mainland China in the 2000s. It tells about Jen, a 16-year-old Chinese girl, who goes to the UK to study alone. The school sends a Hong Kong student, DJ, to collect Jen at the airport. Jen faces predicaments at school due to her cultural and linguistic differences from local students and teachers. Due to her innocence of the school's culture, for instance, she volunteers as the logistics manager of the school's rugby team, which brings more trouble for her at school with some schoolmates but also wins the hearts of the rugby team leader (a British boy called Tom), and DJ. Jen's optimism and diligence finally reverse her schoolmates' attitudes and she begins to enjoy studying and living in Britain with the friendship and love of DJ and Tom.

Initially, the production and cast of *Life Translated* reveal the Chinese social class divide created through overseas education in the 2000s. As the film is based on autobiographic fiction by Li Qianni, the actress and primary stakeholder in the film, it is necessary to explore the context of the film's production**.** *Life Translated* was produced by Shenzhen Visionary Film, founded in 1997, with a registered capital of 10 million yuan. Its first shareholder is Li Qianni, who invested 1.5 million yuan – equivalent to an investment proportion of 15% of the production company's value (Zeng, 2004). Li Qianni performs as the heroine Jen in *Life Translated*. Li Qianni's father is the Deputy Secretary of the CPC Municipal Committee of the largest Special Economic Zone in China,

Shenzhen, one of the economically most developed cities in China (Li, 2004). The interwoven relationships of the leading female character, her production company, her father's political position, and her educational experiences (attending a private British secondary school) demonstrate Li Qianni's unusually high social and economic status in China in the 2000s, in comparison to other overseas students. The autobiographic nature of the film sets the tone for this film to represent upper-class Chinese international students' overseas educational experiences. As such, the film's production demonstrates existing social stratification in China in the 2000s, especially in comparison to *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan,* a documentary that was produced and funded by a collaboration between Chinese and Japanese national television channels.

Moreover, the settings and narrative of Jen's international education in *Life Translated* represent an upper-class Chinese student's education – private international education, which is available only to a small affluent class. The Chinese teen girl, Jen's, secondary educational experience is set in a British private boarding school. The end of the film narrates that Jen has relocated to the US for her undergraduate education. As such, in *Life Translated,* the educational trajectory of Jen, seeking secondary and higher education internationally demonstrates her upper-class status in China.

When discussing cosmopolitanism as cultural capital in education, Igarashi and Saito find 'only the families with sufficient volumes of economic capital can afford to send their children to international schools and universities outside of their home countries because these types of education are costly' (2014, p.230). Igarashi and Saito's remark shows that members of the highest socio-economic groups, such as multinational capitalists and high-income families, have privileged access to educational options compared to other social classes. In addition, Jen attends a private British boarding school, the cost of which is extortionate even for British locals. This narrative further reveals the affluent upper-class milieux Jen is from in China, as accessing a boarding school in another country, on a different continent, requires a large amount of financial support. Thus, children, such as Jen, DJ, and other Chinese students at the

British boarding school, from affluent upper-class families are represented pursuing an international education, and gaining cultural capital, with the support of their families' financial capital. In this vein, Jen's social status in *Life Translated* is revealed to be affluent Chinese through her access to private international education in Britain.

Comparison of the educational experiences of Jen in *Life Translated* and other Chinese students in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* further demonstrates the social stratification of Chinese overseas students. Jen's educational approach is unaffordable for many other Chinese overseas students and their families, as illustrated in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*. In the documentary, all the Chinese students attend public schools or universities and are from working- or middle-class families. No student's family work as deputy secretaries or officers in Chinese metropolitans, nor are they self-sponsored to attend private school. These teens or grown-up students and their families need to work to finance their education. Affluent students are absent throughout the documentary. Thus, in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*, despite being filmed during the same time period, at the turn of the 2000s, the Chinese upper class is excluded from this representation of Chinese international students. International education is therefore portrayed as attainable with hard work. This case study comparison reveals that international education, in terms of its duration, attainment and location, is distributed unequally among Chinese students. As a result, such social stratification among Chinese overseas students is disclosed through *Life Translated* and *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*.

Nevertheless, the predicaments represented via Jen's international education deemphasize Chinese upper-class students' educational privilege through their overseas experiences in the 2000s. In his examinations of rich teens in television dramas, Evan Cooper finds that 'the tendency to present the top strata of the upper middle class as "normal" and even, at times, as relatively disadvantaged on rich teen soaps also serves to obfuscate class privilege […] it is extremely rare to hear the rich teen characters refer to themselves as privileged' (2015, p.740). This observation demonstrates that distinctions in

social class are underplayed or obscured in screen representations of upper-class youth. Despite being a film, with a different type of screen representation and context from the documentary case study, *Life Translated* also shares this similarity in its representation of rich and privileged students. With the obfuscation of elite education which should practically only be available for financially able Chinese upper-class families, *Life Translated* does not represent any financial difficulties encountered by student Jen or her fellow boarding school peers.

In comparison, Chinese overseas students and their families in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* are facing various financial difficulties. They need to work part-time to earn maintenance and tuition fees, and eating out as a new arrival in a Japanese café is criticized in the documentary. As such, the circumstances in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* involve certain financial maintenance. However, the predicaments faced by the student characters in *Life Translated* are elite dilemmas. Students in the British boarding school are endowed with a special talent, such as mastering a musical instrument, like DJ who is accomplished in music and sport; being an excellent sports elite, like Tom, to reach a higher position in the sports field; or multi-cultured, like Jen, who arrives from an Asian nation with the financial support of an affluent family, to look for her peers' social acceptance in a different Western culture. In this vein, *Life Translated* reduces these students' dependence on their affluent families, and what privilege these boarding school students have, but only depicts their educational achievements. However, Jen's self-sufficient status as an international student, and the fact that no upward social mobility is needed for all students in the school in *Life Translated*, reveal the social stratification of Chinese overseas students, to extend, their Chinese families' social and economic stratifications in China, who sponsor these students to study abroad.

In this fashion, *Life Translated* soothes the presence of upper-class educational privilege with a teen narrative. The film's predicaments are mostly teen problems, such as how to participate in a new community and how to navigate a young romance between two popular boys, for Jen; how to find time

to play rugby for the talented pianist DJ; how to win a rugby national school competition for British student, and team captain, Tom. In addition, DJ and Tom are figuring out how to win Jen's heart. In this vein, *Life Translated* constructs a youth romance through the representations of these teen characters' educational difficulties. It emphasizes the affluent young characters' eventual successes through social dynamics within educational contexts by neglecting the tremendous amounts of wealth that their parents invest in their education and, consequently, all the class upsides that lead.

Nevertheless, *Life Translated* still acknowledges that as a Chinese overseas student, Jen encounters difficulties after she arrives in the UK and the school. But the film does so by narrating how these predicaments pave the way for her coming-of-age. Jen is represented on arrival as speaking broken English and behaving dissimilar from local British students at the boarding school, such as carrying a stuffed toy on arrival, dressing in colourful clothes and taking pictures wherever she goes (Figures 4.14 and 4.15).



FIGURE 4.14 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED,* 2005. FILM. JEN CARRIES A STUFFED TOY ON ARRIVAL, DRESSED IN COLOURFUL CLOTHES, TO MARK HER APART FROM OTHER STUDENTS AT THE BRITISH BOARDING SCHOOL.



FIGURE 4.15 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. JEN TAKES PICTURES WHEREVER SHE GOES.

These distinctive cultural differences and the language barrier attract satirization and bullying from her school peers, especially her British roommate, Joanna, and Joanna's friends. They use Jen's ignorance of the school's policies to punish her for breaking school rules. Even worse, they also take off Jen's clothes and push her outside in view of a group of students to experience public humiliation (Figures 4.16 and 4.17).



FIGURE 4.16 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. JOANNA AND JOANNA'S FRIENDS TAKE OFF JEN'S CLOTHES AND PUSH HER IN VIEW OF A GROUP OF STUDENTS, LOCKING THE DOOR BEHIND HER.



FIGURE 4.17 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. BRITISH MALE STUDENTS LAUGH AT JEN WHEN SHE IS BEING BULLIED BY JOANNA.

Soon after depicting these predicaments, *Life Translated* conveys the satirizations and bullying Jen receives as the drive behind her coming-of-age experience in international education. The response of the film to Joanna and her friends' bullying tactics is not to punish Jen's oppressors but to show Jen earning their respect through her sincerity and hard-working attitude at the school rugby society. *Life Translated*'s narration follows typical 'stories of emergence' (2019, p.5) that Alistair Fox discusses being associated with the coming-of-age film. As discussed in earlier chapters, Fox notices in such films, 'the process of change is often precipitated by […] an encounter with a difficult or threatening situation, the impact of life-changing events' (2019, p.5). In *Life Translated,* Jen's coming-of-age experience is triggered by moving from the East to the West as a teenager, the resulting culture shock and bullying at school. These situations perfectly fit into this narrative framework of challenging circumstances in a substantial way of altering Jen's life.

Through Jen's coming-of-age process, *Life Translated* also represents the sense of self-recognition for Jen and other overseas Chinese students. In the first half of the film, when Jen is punished by the school after being tricked by her British roommate, Joanna, she is required to write an essay to reflect on her misconduct. In the shot, Jen sits with other Chinese students in the canteen as these are the only people who welcome her when she enters. Chatting over the meal, after hearing about Jen's struggles, DJ begins to write a famous poem in Chinese on Jen's essay paper. After finishing this poem, he raises his hand and shouts in Chinese 'I'm from Hong Kong', to show where he is from in China. The camera captures the essay paper being passed from one Chinese student to another, everyone writes the same Chinese poem on the paper also, and then shout out the name of their hometown. A light yet delightful melody plays in the film's background music (Figure 4.18).



FIGURE 4.18 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. THE ESSAY PAPER IS PASSED FROM ONE CHINESE STUDENT TO ANOTHER, EVERYONE WRITES DOWN THE SAME CHINESE POEM, AND SHOUTS WHAT HOMETOWN THEY ARE FROM.

Thus, Jen's punishment is transformed into mischief. The Chinese teens use it to fight against the discriminatory British Student Union president, who is also Jen's roommate Joanna. Through this narration, *Life Translated* constructs Jen and the other Chinese students' Chinese cultural identity, their 'Chineseness', through their solidarity. Qijun Han negotiates different definitions of Chineseness and suggests that one aspect shows the tight connection with overseas Chinese individuals' identities. In this way, Chineseness is 'associated with the ethnic identity of the overseas Chinese. It is expressed as one's ethnicity, as cultural norms represented in one's everyday life, and as one's ancestral background, past, and heritage' (2017, p.60). Particularly, one becomes 'consciously' Chinese outside of China.

Life Translated explores how identity construction, for the film's Chinese characters, is generated when encountering non-Chinese culture and people, especially through difficult situations related to the new space and culture. The

Chineseness of Jen and her other Chinese peers is constituted and evoked by the bullying Jen receives from the British local students. In other words, Jen and the other Chinese overseas students are on the periphery in this UK context. As such, the greater world outside China, is represented shaping their ethnicity, specifically as part of their identity that is pushed against, and is a part of themselves to be proud of. Jen and her Chinese schoolmates are not casually Chinese. They are Chinese despite opposition – a rejection of being shamed by a different culture and a rejection of assimilation in this British boarding school.

Life Translated further accentuates Jen's Chinese cultural identity during her international education. As a consequence of Jen's disciplinary essay, after the mischief created by the Chinese students writing a Chinese poem instead, the film represents Jen's roommate, the Student Union president, Joanna, reading the essay with a Chinese dictionary to understand the content of Jen's essay. Jen's school chastisement created by Joanna, is, thus, resolved through Joanna's cultural incompetence (Figure 4.19).

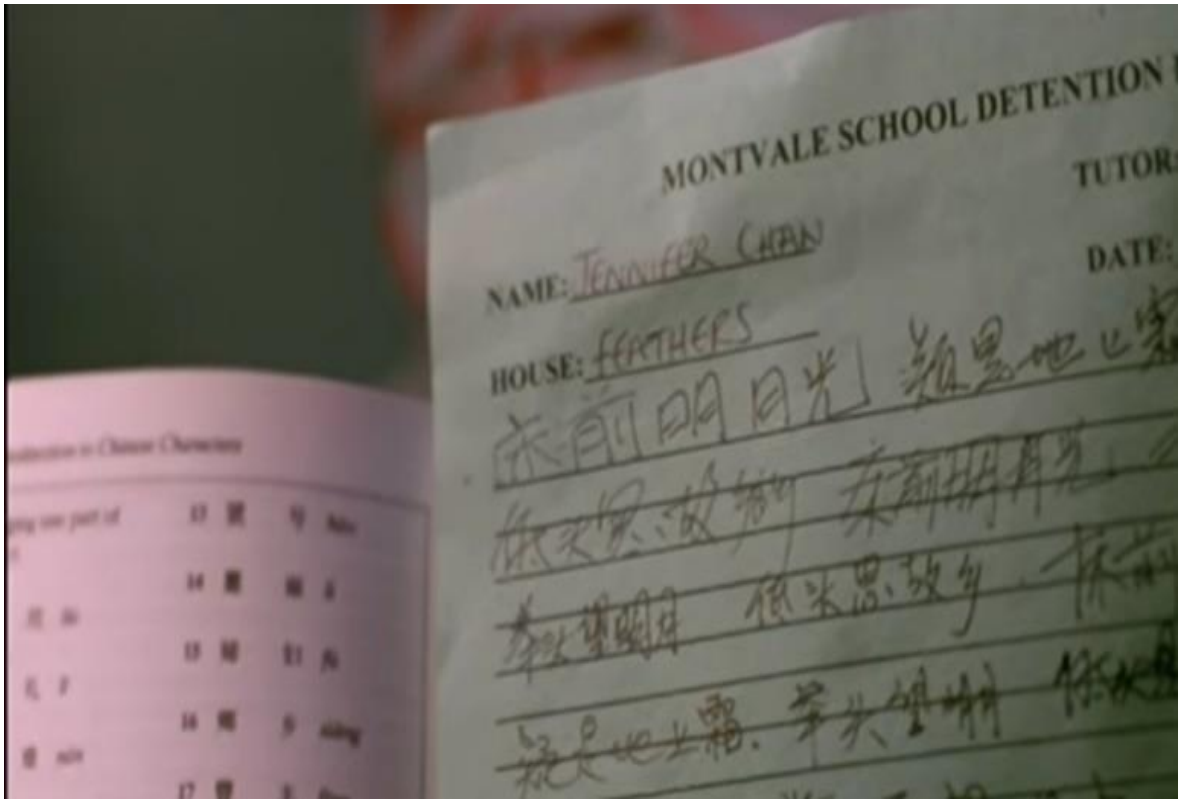


FIGURE 4.19 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. THE CHINESE POEM ON THE DISCIPLINARY ESSAY AND, JOANNA'S CHINESE DICTIONARY BEHIND JEN'S CHINESE ESSAY.

Jen's Chineseness as a solution to her problems in education is also represented in the middle of the film. In literature class, when Jen tries to narrate Shakespeare in English, most of her British peers laugh at Jen's strong foreign accent (Figures 4.20 and 4.21).



FIGURE 4.20 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. JEN'S BRITISH PEERS LAUGH AT JEN'S STRONG FOREIGN ACCENT.



FIGURE 4.21 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. JEN'S BRITISH PEERS LAUGH AT JEN'S STRONG FOREIGN ACCENT AS SHE SPEAKS ENGLISH.

After noticing the class's reaction, Jen immediately narrates the same lines of Shakespeare in Chinese, with a determined look in her eyes. At this moment, the whole class stops laughing and listens to Jen carefully with respect, by all turning to Jen and looking at her eyes attentively (Figure 4.22).



FIGURE 4.22 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. JEN NARRATES LINES OF SHAKESPEARE IN CHINESE, WITH A DETERMINED LOOK IN HER EYES. THE CLASS STOP LAUGHING AND LISTEN ATTENTIVELY TO JEN.

In this vein, *Life Translated* dramatizes Jen's Chineseness as a solution to her educational predicaments and demonstrates a cultural reversal – Jen's Chineseness at first depicted as 'otherness', then as a 'superior' characteristic to be envied by her British peers.

As such, the film represents Jen's growing understanding of how cultural and ethnic performance works. Jen uses the difficulties caused by international study to instead create a new forum to promote Chinese culture and her Chineseness. In Jen's initial experiences in the UK, the educational environment is depicted as more hostile than welcoming. She encounters racism and isolation, so chooses to bond with other Chinese students. However, this midpoint narrative of putting hands up saying where they are from in China and reciting Shakespeare in Chinese approves the value of Chineseness in *Life Translated.* Jen's bonding with the other Chinese students gives her the pride and confidence to stand up to her English peers in literature class when being

mocked. In class when Jen tries to write and speak in English she cannot complete the task like her British peers and assimilate herself. However, when she uses her Chinese culture, speaking Shakespeare in Chinese, Jen chooses not to assimilate but to assert her Chinese culture, then *Life Translated* shows everyone in the educational setting is impressed and convinced of her intellect.

Jen's experiences of moving between two different cultures and identities are reflected in the title *Life Translated.* In another film *Lost in Translation*, the word 'translation' refers to cultural differences and cultural othering encountered by protagonists from the West in the East. 'Translation' in the context of *Life Translated* is a positive way for Chinese student Jen to navigate, understand, and own her identity, during her British boarding school education. *Life Translated* frames international and intercultural encounters between China and Britain as triggers that translate Jen's cultural otherness into self-reflexivity. Through this process of translation, she learns that her Chineseness is a solution to educational conflicts. Through her efforts, Jen is projected as a representative of 'the other' who wins respect through her cultural otherness, instead of being perceived as a 'prudent' Chinese female who understands that the bullying she experiences arises from cultural differences, and looks at herself for assimilation into the British culture for the ease at school.

Life Translated constructs Jen's response to the UK, the culture, and environment and not just the people in a similar assertive way to her Chineseness. At the beginning of the film, Jen is represented as taking a lot of selfies to record her mood. For instance, she takes a photo when she is upset at the airport when DJ is late to welcome her arrival, or of the places she visits, such as at the school's sports field, she asks DJ to take a photo of herself and the school field. When DJ introduces the accommodation building, Jen only shows interest in the decorated bell from China (Figure 4.23).



FIGURE 4.23 AH GAN, *LIFE TRANSLATED*, 2005. FILM. JEN SHOWS INTEREST IN THE DECORATIVE BELL FROM CHINA.

In this vein, Jen is not portrayed as being amazed by the new culture and her arrival in the UK is not much different to her experiences in China. This representation shows an obvious difference from the amazement shown in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* by Han Song when he first arrives in Japan. Jen's depictions show that although attempting to pursue some cultural dialogue, Jen mainly sees her trip to the UK for education as something as ordinary as attending a school in her homeland. In other words, this British educational journey for her is merely an educational journey that is comparable to any other school, in any other country. The core of this education is to enable Jen's cosmopolitan future and to become a better self, but not to seek cultural adventure or amazement, which paves the way for the realization of Jen's Chineseness later when she encounters bullying from Joanna and Joanna's friends.

Through the assertion of Jen's Chinese identity in a British educational context, *Life Translated* reveals the mentality that international education is

being used as a way to maintain class privilege. International education is a privileged and valuable life path that Jen needs to complete, in a utilitarian way, to fulfil the requirement of becoming a global citizen. Through Jen's international education, *Life Translated* shows that the upper classes took advantage of China's access to the WTO and globalization in the 2000s as a means of transnational class formation, to safeguard the privileges of their social group.

A discussion of internationalization and elite schools by Kenway et al. (2017) proposes that 'elite schools are becoming involved in such transnational class-making and the ways in which other relationships of power are implicated […] most [of these international elite schools] are best resourced to take advantage of emerging forms of global circulation and relations' (p.8). This observation demonstrates that the privileged class locates itself in shifting global integrations and capitalizes on education in transnational spaces. As evidenced in *Life Translated*, Jen travels globally for her private secondary education and higher education. Projecting Chineseness into the film and its scenes shows how economic status determines whether international students choose to assimilate, to be amazed by their host culture, or resist the host culture. It shows that despite integrating into a transnational upper-class environment, privileged Chinese students retain a Chinese identity. This attitude may reflect the confidence of the upper class, and China's ambition of the Opening-Up Policy benefiting China's economic positioning, although these aspects are hinted at through a romantic teen narrative in an international education context. These representations connect with the context of China's shifting status in the world around the start of the millennium – a transformation highlighted by China's long-term economic progress and the gradual elevation in the self-confidence of its citizens, especially for upper-class citizens, like Jen. Even though Jen adapts to an English name, in nature, she is not convinced by English culture, nor amazed by it.

Conclusion

Summarizing these findings, differences arise in students' represented cultural and educational experiences in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* and *Life Translated*. The comparison of the case studies in this chapter discloses three distinctive educational and social experiences that are present in both representations. The students in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* are welcomed throughout their education and life in Japan, while Jen in *Life Translated* encounters hostility and racism at her British boarding school. In their social connections, the students in the documentary have solitary experiences while their significant bonds are with their family or with Japanese friends, but Jen bonds with other Chinese international students. Furthermore, regarding the educational path, the students in the first case study either return to China with their overseas qualifications or are unclear about what they will choose after their international education is over. However, in the second case study, Jen's orientation is not toward coming back to China after a cultural adventure, but toward continuing to live abroad in a global world.

These saliently different educational experiences demonstrate the mentality of what international education means for different overseas students from China in the educational contexts of the two case studies. In *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*, for the Chinese overseas students Han Song, Wang Ermin and Zhang Su, international education means cultural adventure and global identity. Overseas study in Japan brings them opportunities to see the world outside of mainland China, and positive experiences come with international education, such as becoming a more mature self through cultural assimilation, learning a new culture and language, or building friendships beyond the border of nations. For Li Zhongsheng, the education in Japan is for his self-realization, to compensate for his missed education during the Cultural Revolution in his youth. Therefore, in a way, the international students in the documentary embrace the global opportunities and identities brought by overseas education. However, in *Life Translated* a different attitude towards international education is represented. Chinese student Jen is not as amazed as the students

in Japan by the international culture overseas education brings to her. Instead, she perceives her secondary education in a British private boarding school as a tool in her life. International education is a part of her journey of realizing the cultural capital created from this privileged education, for her maintenance of the transnational class building.

Social class stratifications are demonstrated from these two representations of educational experiences in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* and *Life Translated.* In the former, all students attend public schools and universities. The documentary spends plenty of narratives representing how these Chinese students work hard in Japan alongside their studies to earn the maintenance and tuition fees needed to support their education. In the latter, the Chinese student Jen, who is from an upper-class family in China, and her peers at boarding school are not represented with any financial difficulties. The focus of the film's representation is on Jen's coming-of-age and her romance. As a result, the setting of the private boarding school is concealed to merely be a backdrop for youth romance. The teen romance is similar to the British boarding school for Jen. DJ and Tom both take a part in Jen's journey of growth and bring joy or other sentiments for her. However, eventually in the film, Jen chooses neither of the boys. Thus, the international education and the two boys are simply a part of Jen's experiences of her transnational class construction. As such, the representations from both case studies, from the perspective of the consumption of international education, show the social stratifications among Chinese overseas students. Youth from higher socio-economic level homes, or families with high levels of capital, in social, cultural, or economic aspects, like Jen, have an advantage in choosing educational paths linked with high levels of cosmopolitanism.

Both case studies produced in the period examined in this chapter mobilize a coming-of-age narrative through representations of education. *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* portrays a large proportion of parental and marital sacrifices in the education journey across different episodes to show the changes of relations in different families, at a time of embracing internationalization in

China. However, in *Life Translated,* Jen's parents only appear at the beginning, for half a minute, as cartoon characters in the mini cartoon narrating what happens in the airport in China before Jen's trip to the UK. Jen's mother cries, she is worried about Jen going abroad for her education, and Jen's father reassures the mother. This depiction shows that despite the family's love, Jen's parents still prioritize Jen's international education. But the relations of who is more important, within domestic inter-personal relationships are not emphasized as much. Instead, the film builds Jen's coming-of-age around her assertion of her Chineseness through her British education. Thus, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* and *Life Translated* also show the various mentalities towards international education that are held in different social classes. Through a textual analysis of the two cases, in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan,* the middle class and working class, come to Japan and are impressed by the country. There is a significant appreciation of this foreign culture. In *Life Translated,* Jen, an upper-class student from China, through her international education experience, shows more appreciation for her own culture and utilises her international education merely as a means and as a cultural capital to maintain her social class and future social and economic capital.

Conclusion

This thesis examines screen media to scrutinise people's lived experiences of educational policy transformation at a critical moment of social, political, and economic transition from the 1980s to the 2000s in China. During this period – following ten years of internal turmoil produced by the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, disrupting the development of many aspects of Chinese society, including education (as discussed in Chapter 1) – China was reconsidering its identity and reconnecting its economy with the world beyond its borders. The six case studies of this thesis exemplify varied contemporaneous educational experiences and cultural values surrounding education in commercial popular screen media. Examining socio-economic dynamics and policy contexts within key reform era decades, this thesis demonstrates how screen media becomes a site where divergent educational experiences are represented, and ideological negotiations of value and self are revised.

In any period of historical transition, ideological negotiations in response to political, economic, and social transformation occur and are conveyed through artistic representations. In this instance, I examined Chinese representations of education in popular screen media in six case studies across Chapters 2 to 4.

Chapter 2 investigated two case studies, *Father and Son* (1986) and *The September of Mine* (1990), and examined how these films represent attitudes towards educational changes in the early reform era, and the value and meaning of self as it relates to education, family and nation. Focusing on two national policies (the restoration of the university entrance exam and Opening-Up) and on generational attitudes towards education and the meaning of self, the chapter argued that both films represent the impact of wider social and economic policies on the attitudes of, and decisions taken by, families and individuals concerning education. The impacts and consequences caused by systemic educational policies are worked through and eventually solved as domestic and individual stories.

Value questions are thrown into relief through screen media representations of education. Chapter 2 demonstrated the initial negotiation of who is the 'greater self', and who is the 'lesser self' in films, a positioning which was fixed in previous representations during the Cultural Revolution. However, with the Opening-Up reform beginning from the late 1970s, the distinctions between these two selves became complex, as different types of films, such as children's films versus comedy suggested different possibilities. In *Father and Son*, Old Kui and Erzi held irreconcilable life-stage perspectives towards education. However, the boundaries between the 'greater' and 'lesser self' within the culturally normative hierarchical parental-child relationship were blurred through ambiguous generational attitudes towards changing educational policies and additional educational opportunities. Erzi stealthily pursues the lifestyle he prefers with seeming obedience to his father's, Old Kui's, supervision. Thus, Old Kui does not have actual 'greater self' power over Erzi, the seemingly 'lesser self'. In comparison, *The September of Mine* predominately illuminated the Chinese cultural value of collectivism between the 'greater self' and the 'lesser self'. In the protagonist An Jianjun the film establishes an idealized role model to highlight the significance of the hierarchical relationship between oneself, the 'lesser self', and the nation, the 'greater self'. A child is first and foremost a citizen, who should contribute to the nation and always place national interests first. The child can excel in school and life by pursuing this collective aim, while putting oneself before the country will obscure any other personal brilliance, and result in a bad citizen who will lose all of their accomplishments.

Moving onto films produced in the 1990s, Chapter 3 explored the cultural, social and ideological transitions experienced by socially or economically peripheral individuals, and their educational sacrifices as the economic reform deepens; specifically the dynamics of urban and rural education for marginalized students. Key themes of sacrifice in the films *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* (1997) and *Going to School with Father on My Back* (1998), include representations of social and domestic hierarchies within educational

sites in terms of sacrifice. Both films praise self-sacrifice through the personalised narratives of marginalised students. Examples include internal migrant student, Xie Xinran in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season*, and the rural children Shi Wa and his sister in *Going to School with Father on My Back*. These films individualize problems of access to education through how Xinran and Shi Wa's sister relinquish their educational opportunities. The educational difficulties of peripheral students are related to individual *Hukou* or finance, neither collective nor political problems. These two films exemplify how economic reform resulted in inequality relating to individual access to learning resources, educational mobility, and social hierarchy in Chinese schools. Both films reflect on the tensions, opportunities, and challenges between compulsory education and further economic and educational reform in 1990s China. My film analysis revealed that the proposed solution to these educational difficulties was self-sacrifice. Both films praised the sacrifice of individual educational opportunities for family relations, to highlight that the 'lesser self' needs to conform to the 'greater self'.

Examining screen media from 2001 to 2009, after China joined the WTO, Chapter 4 considered China's internationalization and what education means for individual overseas Chinese students. This chapter focused on *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* (1999) and *Life Translated* (2005) and how the development of individuals undergoing overseas education was portrayed, including dynamics of self-identity. Both case studies use narrations of personal educational experiences to represent how China was increasingly trying to make itself more productive as a nation by recalibrating its relationship with the international world order, in terms of culture and economy, and by inviting its citizens to think about international travel and educational opportunities. These personal education narratives become a vehicle for ideological shifts in self-worth revealing what Kenway et al. (2017, p.8) call 'transnational class-making'. Both films also show the various mentalities different social classes have towards international education. In *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*, middle and working-class students came to Japan and were impressed by this

foreign society and the educational experiences they had there. In *Life Translated*, Jen, an upper-class student from China, shows greater appreciation for her own culture following her international education experience. Moreover, she utilises her international education as a form of cultural capital to maintain her social class and future social and economic status in China.

One distinguishing characteristic of these six divergent case studies is that they investigate how macro socio-historical and political structural transformations are rendered as personal educational narratives. In Chapter 2, the two 1980s case studies captured the restoration of the university entrance exam and the Opening-Up Policy's impacts on a Chinese family and during the historical moment of the Asian Games for a primary school student; Chapter 3 discussed deepening economic reform and how these structural impacts were felt in the educational experiences of peripheral students and families in urban and rural contexts; while Chapter 4 demonstrated the self-development of individual students and their families undergoing overseas education, under the influence of China joining the WTO. With this focus, these chapters answered the three research questions of this thesis. First, how has the Chinese educational experience from the 1980s through the 2000s been portrayed in popular screen media? Second, how do socio-economic dynamics and policy environments bear on these representations during critical reform era decades? Finally, how can screen representations of schooling become a vehicle for conveying Chinese individuals' cultural values, meanings, and identities, particularly as they connect to conceptions of self, family, and society?

Therefore, in cultural and ideological terms I investigated changes in educational experience during this transitional period through multiple value and identity prisms, such as the relations between family, nation, and education; the meaning of self in Chinese culture and educational philosophies; cultural attitudes and politics surrounding youth and adulthood; and individuals' personal development and social hierarchy. Discussions of educational attitudes, mentioned above, regarding sacrifice, 'greater self' and 'lesser self',

and the meaning of self via education became reoccurring themes in the selected screen media.

In Chapters 2 to 4, education worked as a site that triggered some ambivalence under China's socio-economic development and policy changes through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Educational and political-economic policies were narrated via film to influence people's personal lives, either at home (through parent and child or marital relations), or at school (through peer or teacher-student relations). In this vein, education in the screen media examined in this thesis was mainly used as a site to negotiate inter-personal relations tied to Confucian cultural values of self-sacrifice and the 'greater' and 'lesser self'.

The case studies represent different types of sacrifice and who counts as the 'greater self' and 'lesser self'. In the films explored in Chapters 2 and 3, education and educational difficulties are represented as individual issues to be resolved within interpersonal relations: namely, as a life transition experienced by the individual rather than as a collective systematic challenge. In these chapters, ambiguities are emphasized in the films about a collective future between obeying one's parents in contrast to self-needs, such as in *Father and Son*, and about glorifying the nation, such as in *The September of Mine*, or working hard and/or sacrificing self-needs to provide support for the family, such as both case studies in Chapter 3. Thus, personal traits, such as prosocial kindness (behaviour that benefits others) in *Blossom Season, Rainy Season* and persistence in *Going to School with Father on My Back*, are shown as solutions for educational issues. These films do not discuss Xinran or Shi Wa's self-fulfilment, nor their self-realization. They focus more on securing the family's inter-personal integrity or the continuation of the family. Even *Going to School with Father on My Back* shows that Shi Wa's rural family expect him to obtain an education, but the film stated no clear reason why education was significant.

Any possible self-realization through education is implicit in China's filmic educational representations in the 1990s. These films ignore national structural

changes that could solve educational predicaments; instead, much focus was placed on sacrifice and individual subjects being positioned as the 'lesser self' in front of others, the collective 'greater self'. In Chapter, 4, however, education becomes a path of self-realization – seeing the world and realizing one's dreams – and there is a lot more focus on an individual's development. Recall, even with the patriarchal Li Zhongsheng's family in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan*, the overseas education was about realizing his dream, instead of providing a better life for his family. Therefore, these film themes demonstrate that at the turn of the 2000s an ideological transition occurs from promoting collective values to individual values of self-actualisation through education.

From the 2000s, as part of an outward-looking China, diverse ideological values appeared on screen related to education and educational experiences. While the films in the 1980s and 1990s still reflected a self-sacrificing collectivist and hierarchical ideology, screen media of the 2000s engaged with individualist ideological values, such as education's potential to support self-realization in *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* and *Life Translated* (see Chapter 4). *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* depicted, over several episodes, how different families faced parental and marital sacrifices in their education journey at a time when China embraced internationalization. For example, Li Zhongsheng's wife and daughter sacrificed leisure time and financial resources to support him through his doctoral studies. Similarly, Ding Shangbiao relinquished his quality of life to work in Japan for eight years without returning home to fund his daughter's foreign education – reversing the general trend for the 'lesser self' sacrificing for the 'greater self', such as parents, family and nation (as discussed in Chapters 2 to 3). In general, *Our Study of Life – Life in Japan* conveys how international students and their families feel about pursuing education or exploring the world outside mainland China. Han Song and Wang Ermin, for instance, went to Japan for a cultural experience, and Zhang Su benefited from an international friendship. Whereas, *Life Translated* also focuses on individual experience building Jen's story around her assertion of her Chineseness throughout her private British secondary education experience.

Another way that ideological values have shifted in Chinese films over time is related to class. For Chinese students abroad, international education presents different opportunities and brings different values or attitudes depending on class. In Chapters 2 to 3, class differences existed in the portrayal of marginalized urban migrants and rural students. In Chapter 4, rural education became invisible, as the focus of the two screen media texts was on the students whose families could afford to study abroad. The theme of the hardship of rural children's education from earlier films, along with their sacrifices, became less predominant in the 2000s when the general focus shifted to a different social class, and educational context – the upper-class girl, Jen, who attended an overseas boarding school in an internationally-minded China. Throughout Chapters 2 to 4, students are from different social classes, which, however, were invisible or not the focus of Chapters 2-3, as Chapters 2-3 focused on sacrifice and ambiguity. In Chapter 4, dealing with the chapter was about internationalization, the notion of identity has been shifted because China was at a different stage of internationalization, and opening out. The class differences became more explicit and aspirational in comparison to the previous two decades, as the emphasis in the screen media representation is more on what the upper class can achieve. Thus, the ideological values have been shifted and worked out differently through educational representations over time journeys, almost worked out as how China worked itself out recalibrating with the international world.

In this thesis, coming-of-age is a recurring narrative theme that is concluded in different ways. In Chapters 2 and 3, coming-of-age means being mature enough to appreciate your parents and other relationships through self-sacrifice, and to place the 'greater self' before oneself. Or in the case of *The September of Mine*, coming-of-age is about the individual growing into being a better person within the community. Whereas in Chapter 4 a better person refers to an individual being better equipped through educational opportunities which spark self-realization. This is another noteworthy aspect because this again shows how the overarching theme of translating policies to

individual stories places the emphasis on individual sacrifice rather than systematic changes. Because this is what a coming-of-age story is: it is an individual story about personal change, that one person is undergoing.

Previous scholarship on Chinese educational experiences and their representation in screen media, such as film, have largely focused on the Republican China period (1912–1949) or the post-2010s. Academic work on instructional films produced during the Republican China period is concerned with China's developmental history and political-ideological goals, while research on the films of the post-2010s has a tendency to examine education through a nostalgic prism. However, this thesis adds a critical voice to the existing literature by examining the three decades from the 1980s to the 2000s, a period when China's cultural socio-economic transitions and policy changes had acute bearing on the Chinese educational system and, with it, students' educational experience. The six screen representations examined throughout this study explore how contemporaneous screen representations capture the lived experience of education in different contexts and conjunctures across the period in question. In each case, personal narratives provide a vehicle for demonstrating negotiations of ideological value, meaning and identity brought about by national political and socioeconomic changes. As this conclusion has summarized, collectivist values, such as self-sacrifice for others, dominated screen media in the 1980s and 1990s, but individualistic values, such as self-realization through education, emerged as a key theme of educational experience in the 2000s. Specifically, these representations occur during the transition of economic reform in China, from an ideologically-inclined planned economy to a more internationally-connected market economy, which in addition to underpinning Chinese educational policies also experienced educational changes.

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