

Discipline and Rebellion—Spatial Construction and Theme Writing of China's Domestic Youth Films in the Last Decade

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Abstract: Youth films, as one of the important genres of China's current film industry, have presented a unique focus in recent decades, no matter genre expansions or the exploration of narrative themes. To be more specific, on spatial construction, China's domestic youth film gradually shifts its focus from the society to the campus; on theme writing, "emotion" continues to be the mainstream, but "sex", as the prominent expression of emotion, is portrayed and written in different forms. Generally speaking, domestic youth films in the past decade continue to promote the connection and confrontation between "discipline" and "rebellion" through the production of image space and the construction of narrative themes. Through these vivid stories about adolescence, the public cannot help but remind their youth time.

Keywords: Coming-of-age drama film, Campus, Discipline, Rebellion

1. Introduction

The origin of "youth film" or "coming-of-age drama film" in China can be traced back to the 1930s. Films such as *Crossroads* (1937) and *Street Angel* (1937), which demonstrate the feature of the society and the times through the stories of youth, have been known as the classics of early films.

As one of the most important genres in China's current film industry, "youth films" have created numerous box office myths and social topics since 2011. In 2011, *Love Is Not Blind* billed itself as "China's first chick film" and made 350 million yuan at the box office, being it a "dark horse" of the year. In the following five years from 2011 to 2016, Chinese youth films embraced a growth spurt, *You're the Apple of My Eye* (2011), *So Young* (2013), *Mark of Youth* (2013), *Tiny Times* (2013), *Young Style* (2013), *Fleet of Time* (2014), *The Left Ear* (2014), *Ever Since We Love* (2015), *Our Times* (2015), *Forever Young* (2015), *Yesterday Once More* (2016), *Never Gone* (2016)..... After 2016, although the number of youth-themed films is reaching plateau, there are still representative works coming to the fore every year, including *Us And Them* (2018), *With You* (2019), *Better Days* (2019), *Love You Forever* (2020), *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (2021), *My Love* (2021), etc..

The commercial value and unique artistic exploration of youth films in the past decade make it clear to find that, on content, youth films share some similarities with "China's first chick flick", films like which tend to be characterised by females as protagonists and males playing the supporting roles. The content is centered on urban love relationships with happy endings, such as the movies *You're the Apple of My Eye*, *Our Times* and so on.^[1] But this trend did not last long, as before long a variety of changes occurred. For example, campus gradually replaced urban spaces as the main stage for the stories of youth films. Youth films, as one of the important genres of China's current film industry, have presented a unique focus as time progresses, no matter genre expansions or the exploration of narrative themes. To be more specific, on spatial construction, China's domestic youth film gradually shifts its focus from the society to the campus; on theme writing, "emotion" continues to be the mainstream, but "sex", as the prominent expression of emotion, is portrayed and written in different forms. Generally speaking, domestic youth films in the past decade continue to promote the connection and confrontation between "discipline" and "rebellion" through the production of image space and the construction of narrative themes. Through these vivid stories about adolescence, the public cannot help but remind their youth time.

2. Triple Door and Discipline

“Xiang bowed his head and walked slowly to the classroom, looking at the three back-to-back stairways in the three neatly arranged teaching buildings, that is the the triple door.” From *Triple Door*

This is a line from the novel *Triple Door*. The author Han Han through the protagonist Lin Yuxiang's perspective, from his story, explained the meaning of “triple door”. The three buildings share the border with each other, and like other school buildings' design, have three doors to grade one, grade two, and grade three in high school. From the perspective of campus life, social life and family life, Han conveys his attitude towards current educational system. Therefore, “triple door” is also interpreted as "school gate", "family gate" and "society gate", which is also called "the three gates".

In Chinese youth films, the campus is generally portrayed as an oppressive space under authority, affecting the personality and growth of the youth. In many youth movies, we can find, for example, in *Better Days*, the school is like a huge well, with a small empty space in the middle, both like a stage and more like a Colosseum; in *Yesterday Once More*, what is common to see is rows of stacked desks and crowded dormitories; in *Our Times*, tedious lecturing of a boring teacher in a large-scale classes are often seen. As a matter of fact, space arrangements such as the dormitories, the rows and lines of desks, and the large-scale class teaching system as part of campus life in Chinese youth films are presented in different ways and have different image styles, but all converge on relatively consistent spatial metaphor and meaning expression. That is in the common image construction of campus, no matter in middle school or university, where students have stripped away the shackles of their family, there are still distinct rules, standards and restrictions. As Wu Zhiping said in *Space Theory and the Reemergence of Literature*, "Space itself is a kind of production, shaped by a variety of restrictions and human interference; and also a kind of force that, in turn, influences, guides and limits the possibilities of activity and the way in which human beings exist."^[2]

Thanks to the relatively loose coupling in university, the campus there has become a place for the depressed young people to enjoy themselves. To a certain extent, it has also become a symbol of freedom and a paradise on earth. In *So Young*, girls like Zheng Wei can speak freely in class, play games freely in dormitory; *Fleet of Time* follows the lives of a group of young people in the 1980s from high school to college. These youngsters experienced the pre-millennium period and the SARS epidemic, acquired knowledge in Beijing and gained a remarkable career; they enjoy an ever-lasting friendship which can unite them decades later; they meet the love of their life on campus and also lost love here. The young people of this era presented in the film are free and romantic. On the contrary, in reality, in the life of primary and secondary schools, the campus is still the epitome of the social system in many cases. The school and classroom are a symbol of order, a tightly knit pace of life and regular space, which clearly limits the activity time, scope of action and norms of behavior of the teenagers.

“Triple Door” in Han Han's book is itself a perfect spatial metaphor. For one thing, what the protagonist Lin Yuxiang wants to escape is not the three doors in the novel which served to divide the school into blocks and obstruct contact between students from different grades. For another, at a deeper level, the three doors also represent the three thresholds in every ordinary Chinese youth's life, namely, high school, university and society. Students are constantly learning how to excel under a unified discipline. Films like *Cry Me a Sad River* and *Better Days* strike an echo with *Triple Door*, based on the secondary school campus and life as the main setting, where students' "highest goal" is to enter a prestigious university. Secondary schools pursue enrollment rate of universities, therefore, indulging the never-changing values of life and success to students, namely, their life will be a smooth road after being admitted to their famous university, and the college entrance examination is the last challenge of nirvana of phoenix.

Therefore, a review of many youth films and videos in the past decade shows that although campus is an ideal place for young people to achieve their success and grow up, it is also often accompanied by suppression, depression, hypocrisy and violence. The bleak and sad growth in the campus, through the restriction and punishment of the campus, form the shackle and discipline of the teenagers. For instance, the film *Better Days* begins its story with a girl's suicide, which happened in a middle school where the students all wore school uniforms, the hallways were cramped, and the teaching buildings were shot using wide angle lens so that they gave out a sense of extreme oppressiveness. In the film *Cry Me A Sad River*, school bullying and middle school teachers who were not at all empathetic were to blame for students' psychological problems. The university, on the other hand, is constructed as a diametrically opposite kind of space in which freedom is excessive for young people. In *Ever Since We Love* and *So Young*, this excessive freedom often leads the protagonist to acting contrary to China's social and cultural norms. For example, in *Ever Since We Love*, the hero had many affairs with the heroines of different

backgrounds. The film *So Young* also revolves around the romantic relationships between a man and several women. In both films, the male dormitory was the witness of this series of events. The dorm administrators and teachers, though inflexible, did not pose any threat to the protagonist's own freedom. What's more, in *So Young*, the teacher himself was involved in these dubious relationships.

Obviously, society is a public space, serving as the background of domestic youth films in a relatively distant and miniature form. And society, as in *Ever Since We Love*, is represented by a very amorous female character. On the one hand, it is extremely sexually attractive; on the other hand, it is also extremely dangerous. The danger is often seen as a form of disciplinary education for young people in China.

In this fashion, the campus, as an educational institution, replaced the usual site for disciplines, ie. the society, and became the main setting of youth films. No one can be immune from crossing "triple door", in this process, campus on the one hand is an important place for education and discipline, and on the other hand, it also becomes a special position where youth wants to escape and transgress.

3. Sex as Threats and Rebellion

According to the definition in *Cihai*, a large-scale dictionary and encyclopedia of Standard Mandarin Chinese, youth is to describe those who are about 15, 16 years old to 30 years old. The concept of 'youth film', in terms of age and subject matter, refers to films that reflect young people and their life, love, psychological needs and spiritual outlook.^[3] Therefore, youth films, no matter in which country in the world, locate youngsters in a state of transition to growth rather than dependent children nor self-reliant adults.^[4]

Therefore, looking back at the development trend of youth and group discourse constructed by China's domestic youth films in the last decade, it is not difficult to find the confusion and rash of youth growth, the secret and fear of personal experience, the growth of the body. Centering on the themes of youth, life, freedom, growth and lust, domestic youth films have formed their own unique ways of emotional expression, among which, the ignorance and confusion of emotion and love, the impulse and loss of sex and love are not only often mentioned, but also to a certain extent realize the transgression and rebellion of the adult world.^[5]

Sex, as a prominent expression of the emotional theme in domestic youth films, not only carries emotional and commonplace youth rhetoric, but also, to a certain extent, as a "threat" power, has become one of the countermeasures of education and discipline. The reason also stems from the Chinese traditional social culture, the Chinese people have been maintaining the attitude of "sex" repression and tolerance. According to sociologists, people's attitudes about sex are related to historical times: the disorganization of sex poses a fundamental threat to a highly organized society.^[6] Therefore, in early China, the control of "sex" was not removed by the new government along with the "three mountains (imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism)", but was regarded as a threat. Meanwhile, with the complex emotion of "talking about sex" in traditional culture, it was always shrouded by "dark clouds". Chinese society's attitude towards sex has changed fundamentally since China entered into the process of globalisation. By 2010, 71.4% of the respondents had premarital sex, according to Pan's Chinese Feelings of Sexual Health report (2012). This is a significant increase of 30% over 1994. Only 20 percent of respondents disapproved of premarital sex. What can be seen from nearly ten years of youth films and videos is that, "sex" performance is no longer veiled as a secret. In *You're The Apple of My Eye*, boys gather to masturbate; In *So Young*, Cheng Zheng moves from his bed to Su Yunjin's bed. After they begin to kiss, a cutaway to a new day; and *Tiny Times* series show the complicated relationship between Nan Xiang and Xi Cheng. There are more films like *The Ark Of Mr. Chow*, *My Original Dream*, *What's In The Darkness* and so on, which directly take "sex and desire" as the main topic of narrative instead of "youth growth" motif.

Nevertheless, regardless of the multiple presentation and disclosure of sex in youth films, sex is still suppressed or even under siege in the mainstream culture of China, which is why it is understood as a symbol of rebellion and has to be incorporated and rationalised in a variety of ways in youth films. Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis interprets the operation of the Oedipus complex as, on the one hand, the superego's suppression of "the biologically inadequate object that desire's first maturation proposes to desire". On the other hand, it is also the rationalisation through the ego ideal's imaginary identification which "will orient the choice toward the biologically adequate object of pubescent maturation". In this sense, Imaginary identification can be regarded as similar to a discipline mechanism in Foucault's sense.^[7] As genre films, youth films are intended to provide mass culture with a temporary solution to

conflicts.

Therefore, sex, as a "threat", has been disintegrated by the emergence of other youth phenomena -- such as abortion trends for youth-- in the rebellious writing of Chinese youth films in the past decade.^[8] Abortion, for example, is itself a form of violence inflicted on the woman's body, which is the same as the metaphor of sex. In Chinese culture, women who have had an abortion are seen as being no longer pure. In films such as *Fleet of Time* and *So Young*, abortion is a common method to resolve dramatic conflicts, and is often seen as the waking moment of the protagonist. In *Fleet of Time*, Fang Hui punished herself by carrying out abortion without anesthetic; in *My Old Classmate*, Zhou Xiaozhi suffered from haemorrhage caused by surgical abortion; in *So Young*, Ruan Guan aborted in memory of her lost love; and in *Ever Since We Love*, Bai Lu even deconstructs the emotional departure of youth's freedom through vigorous physical activities such as running and leg lifts. Through such display of abortion, truancy, bullying, and its attendant violence, Chinese youth films have successfully neutralised the threat of rebellion in sex, showing the lost and anxious experiences, so as to achieve the disenchantment of deviant youngsters and their mainstream values.

It needs to be noted that in stark contrast to the setting of universities and society, youth films set in high school are so keen to display puppy love that the censorship office even used to introduce a ban on it.^[9] Puppy love, which is considered a threat to high school teaching, is also a stigmatisation of early teenagers' sexual consciousness. In *Love Will Tear Us Apart*, Lu Qinyang, the leading actor, was publicly criticized by his teacher for writing love letters, and in *Cry Me a Sad River* and in *My Old Classmate*, the lovers have never even formed a genuine romantic relationship due to exterior pressure. The failure of puppy love after a series of obstructions is often attributed to the protagonists' own immaturity. Although apparently this is in tune with the youth's rebellious mindset, it is in essence a form of discipline imposed on the youth by the dominant elders. For example, in *My Love*, the bitter pill falls on the failure of the hero's swimming career.^[10] In that sense, the films act on the discipline mechanism of the whole society just like the censorship department.

4. Conclusion

From what has been analysed, Chinese youth films attribute all the rebellious forces to the confrontation between the sexual impulse brought about by freedom and the repressive social atmosphere. At the same time, on emotional themes, the deployment of topics such as abortion and puppy love successfully completed the stigmatisation and discipline of this series of resistance forces. It can be seen that excellent youth films not only explore the possibility of genre narrative space expansion and compose a magnificent feast about youth, but also expose a hidden and meaning world for us, showing the relationship between youth and reality, individual and mechanism, and human and society.

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