

## **The Youth Image in Chinese and American Youth Films**

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### **Abstract**

*Youth film is a kind of film that is very popular all over the world, which has developed very fast in China in recent years. The audience, especially teenagers, set off a wave to watch this kind of movies. But after watching high box-office youth films screened in the last two or three years, we find that Chinese youth films have a tendency to be homogenous, and they have an obvious style different from that from the United States. Films can reflect culture, and youth culture is an important part of any culture. Consequently, it is extremely important to know what the differences between Chinese and American youth film are and why is that. We examine this problem from a specific angle—the youth image in youth films. Significant differences are found in this comparative study.*

**Keywords:** Youth film, Youth image, Culture and society, China, USA

### **1. Introduction**

After nearly a century of development, although not on a par with some developed countries in the film industry, Chinese films have received awards in important film festivals over the world in recent years. A group of highly ambitious filmmakers appeared, contributing strongly to the development of Chinese film industry. Youth culture can reflect the essence of social change, and the youth films are an important part of the youth culture. Thus, youth images in youth films can reflect the culture and the society.

Since the “reform-and-opening up” movement starting in 1978, Chinese society has changed a lot. People have experienced the rapid changes of the country and were influenced by a mixture of native and foreign cultures; they wavered between abandonment and acceptance of the changes. In recent years, Chinese youth-film directors have focused on the life of the broad masses of youth, which could have the effect of lessening the young audience’s growth pain caused by society’s upheavals. The films focus on and record growing-up confusion, contradictions and choices experienced by the youths.

According to statistics, China’s current movie audiences ‘average age has declined from 25.7 year in 2009 to 21.7 year in 2013[Liu&Liu,2013].In recent years, youth films have attracted a large audience and been popular in China gradually but noticeably. American youth films have a much longer history than that in China and have a larger influence since it is distributed worldwide. In comparison with the American case, Chinese youth films are more homogenous both in the plots and in the youth images. It would be interesting to find out why.

Moreover, it seems that there is no research comparing the youth images in Chinese and American youth films. We therefore concentrate on studying the youth images in youth films from these two countries.

Three methods are used in this research:

1. *Textual analysis*. We watch each selected film and attempt to analyze the youth images: their characters, growth process, psychological activity, etc.
2. *Literature study*. We collect and organize related books, periodicals, newspapers and network data, to find out what have already been done in this topic and what aspects of the researches are.
3. *Comparative study*. (1) We watch three Chinese youth films and summarize the youth image. (2) We watch three American youth films and summarize the youth image. (3) We do comparative studies from the aspects of cultural tradition, social mainstream ideology, film production, etc.

Major works done in the past are summarized Section 2. Our findings are presented in Section 3. Section 4 concludes the paper.

## 2. Previous Studies

Presently, there is no precise definition of youth films. In relevant papers, articles and essays, different ideas are given; most of them define youth films according to the content. What they all mention is that the story is set in high schools or universities, and the heroes and heroines are always teenagers and youths. For our purpose, the definition given by Wu Qian<sup>1</sup> is most precise and appropriate. Wu says: Youth films are those in which the major characters are teenagers and youths, and are characterized by youth subculture. Youth films reflect the distinct living conditions, psychological features and worldview of youths in their transitional period from childhood to adulthood [Wu, 2013].

Chinese youth films can be traced back to the 1950s. Under the impact of the political environment, like the call for dedicating one's life to the realization of communism, and later during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), youth images in the films are always the representative of revolutionary ideals and the youths are shaped as heroes. Examples are: *Five Golden Flowers* (1959), *The Song of Youth* (1959), *The Younger Generation* (1965), etc. In 1978, market economy was introduced. Subsequently, in the 1980s, Chinese began to free their mind, concentrating on their own life and willing to accept some foreign culture. Consequently, youths in the films have been shaped as rebels and antiauthority teenagers, such as in *The Trouble Shooters* (1989), *Rock kids* (1988), *In the Heat of the Sun* (1995), etc.[Zhou, 2012]. In the films, the youths focus on their own life instead of the development of the country. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with further development of the market economy and consumerism, youth images in the film have somewhat changed [Yao, 2015].

In the United States, it is not until the 1950s that youth films have become a distinctive film genre and have attracted great attention in society [Shary, 1998]. After the Second World War, many classic films have been produced with the rebellious youth image, like *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) [Chen, 2000], and messages such as smoking, drinking, and drug use are sent to the teenagers like in the film *American Pie* (1999)[Stern, 2006]. But in recent years, the youth in the films has become more conservative and less rebellious; *Juno* is a typical example [Shen, 2011].

Some of these studies do discuss the youth image in youth films, but there is hardly any that compares the youth image in American and Chinese youth films.

## 3. Choosing Films

Choosing films is an essential part in our study. Among a large number of Chinese and American youth films, only some are typical. To make our research more accurate, three standards are introduced; our choice is based on the following considerations.

### 1. Box office

There is no doubt that box office is one of the standards of whether a film is popular. Every film, before being produced, has its major designated audience which could be children, youth, old people or others, or a combination of these. Sometimes, the audience may not be exactly the one the film aims at.

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese names in this paper are in pinyin and written with family name first, except that those in the authors list are having family name last.

Yet, the high number of box office implies that the film does satisfy the audience's needs. The higher box office is the more influence it has.

A list of Chinese *youth* films with the highest box office in recent years is given in Table 1. Similarly, American youth films are shown in Table 2.

**Table 1. Five Chinese youth films with the highest box office in recent years.**  
Data source: www.cbooo.cn (July 15, 2015).

Chinese Youth Films		
Film Name	Release Time	Box Office (yuan)
<i>So Young</i>	2013	71,914
<i>Fleet of Time</i>	2014	58,874
<i>The Left Ear</i>	2015	48,514
<i>My Old Classmate</i>	2014	45,558
<i>You are My Sunshine</i>	2015	35,346

**Table 2. A brief list of American youth films with the highest box office.**  
Data source: www.cbooo.cn (July 15, 2015).

American Youth Films		
Film Name	Release Time	Box Office(USD)
<i>Princess Diaries</i>	2001-2004 (series)	20,939(sum of two films)
<i>Juno</i>	2007	14,349
<i>Mean Girls</i>	2004-2009 (series)	8,605 (only the second film)
<i>High School Musical</i>	2006-2008 (series)	9,056 (only the third film)
<i>Napoleon Dynamite</i>	2004	4,454

## 2. Release time

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Chinese film industry has developed very rapidly, and youth films have been a big influence. And since we are more familiar with this period of time we choose recent youth films to study. Furthermore, society keeps developing, so are youths and films. The youth films released earlier, whose content, technique of expression and style differ from those of recent ones, do not represent realistically all the life and image of today's youngsters. Therefore, the release time is our second standard in choosing films. Accordingly, we choose youth films with recent release times, which are indicated in Tables 1 and 2.

## 3. Content

Although youth films' major audiences are teens and youths, there are detailed differences in content among them. About characters, some films focus on youths still in schools and universities while others focus on those who just graduated and are starting their careers. About themes, some choose love as the subject and some attach importance to personal dreams. In high schools, teenagers still live with their parents but they begin to have independent minds—a difficult period called the “teenage period”. In universities, teenagers live independently but are not yet completely in the “adult” world. Both periods are transitional periods from childhood to adulthood, which are important periods for a person. So we choose those films with stories happening in high schools or universities which focus on development in love, study, dreams or other important things in life.

Six films were chosen according to these three criteria; Chinese films: *So Young* (2013), *Fleet of Time* (2014) and *My Old Classmate* (2014); American films: *Juno* (2007), *High School Musical* (2006-2008, series) and *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004).

## 4. Characteristics in Content

The three selected Chinese films have these five common points in content:

1. Focusing on pure love
2. Induced abortion appears in the plot
3. Facing the choice between keeping the love and studying abroad
4. Compromising to restrictive reality or not
5. Chinese college entrance examination

For many people, these five points may have been experienced in their lives which could be recalled easily with the help of the films. That is why the audience may include these people, quite large in number, as a matter of fact. For teenagers and youths, maybe they are in the process of experiencing them, keenly and intensely, and these films will be very attractive to them.

The three American films chosen have these four common points in content:

1. Focusing on pure love
2. Thinking about dreams or achievements
3. Trying to find self-worthiness or be responsible for oneself
4. Paying attention to friendship or teamwork

These four points are an important part of the Western value system. Naturally they reflect youths' reality in the US.

### 5. *The Youth Image: Sketch and Comparison*

In these six films, we could see some obvious differences between Chinese and American youth images, which are sketched in Table 3.

**Table 3: Sketch of youth images in Chinese and American films.**

Film Name	Major Character	Youth Image
<i>The Fleet of Time</i>	Chen Xun	A boy who is open and capricious, willing to sacrifice for love.
	Fang Hui	A girl who is introverted, elegant and stubborn.
	Qiao Ran	A bookish boy who is cautious in love.
	Zhao Ye	A bold arrogant boy, very brave and persistent when pursuing a girl.
	Lin Jia-Mo	A tough girl, lively and very kind.
<i>So Young</i>	Zheng Wei	She is an outgoing girl, very cute and attractive, but very brave and independent.
	Chen Xiao-Zheng	A young ambitious man with an unusually calm control.
	Lin Jing	A quiet gentleman, with deep thinking.
	Ruan Guan	A girl who is gentle and considerate, obsessed with love; repeatedly makes concessions in love matters.
<i>My Old Classmate</i>	Zhou Xiao-Zhi	A gentle, smart girl.
	Lin Yi	A bold, creative boy.
<i>High School Musical</i>	Troy Bolton	He is in high school's Wildcat basketball team; but in a singing contest, he discovers there are other things for him to be crazy about.
	Gabriella Montez	A smart girl in science club, but after she sings with Troy, she finds a new interest in music and a new self; she breaks her original plan by starting a different life.
	Sharpay Evans	A beautiful, mighty girl; plays a lead role in high school's opera club.
<i>Juno</i>	Juno Macguff	A high school girl, a straightforward person; through pregnancy and giving birth to a baby, she understands gradually the meaning of love, sex, family, motherhood and life.
	Paulie Bleeker	Juno's boyfriend, the father of Juno's baby; handsome but lack of sense of responsibility; grows up after Juno's pregnancy, too.
	Leah	Juno's friend, a pretty and accommodating girl.
<i>Napoleon Dynamite</i>	Napoleon Dynamite	A normal senior high school student, with a mop of red hair; he is in adolescence crazy confusion and very annoying; because he has no special skills and no smart ideas, he feels himself inferior; but finally, he finds himself.
	Pedro	A wealthy guy, who is difficult to make friends because of scanty of words; he has unexpected charisma.
	Deb	A poor girl, gentle and quiet; has a normal appearance and a unique aesthetic vision.

By comparing the youth image in Chinese and American youth films, we find that Chinese youth images tend to be homogeneous.<sup>2</sup> Boys are bold and girls are quiet, or the opposite. They attract each other in high school, but because of the regulations from school and pressure from parents, their relationship cannot be in the open.

For example, in *The Fleet of Time* and *My old Classmate*, once their relationship was exposed to teachers and parents, they cut off their contact and study hard. However, for those few who fall in love, even in secret, their love is deep and very emotional.

On the contrary, teenagers or youths in American films have multifarious personalities. Because of the tolerable attitude to puppy love in American culture, they do not have to worry about their love relationship. The most confusing thing in their life is how to improve themselves (like the leading man in *Napoleon Dynamite*), how to solve their personal problems (like Juno in *Juno*), or how to show their true selves despite constraints coming from others (like Troy and Gabriella in *High School Musical*).

## 6. Discussion

Artistic creation is not always the reflection of reality. Youth images in these films are not necessarily the portraits of real teenagers, in both China and the US. Film production tradition and culture of a society can make differences in a film's content, elaborated below.

Firstly, culture has big influence on films. Chinese culture stigmatizes these young people who fall in love with each other in junior and high schools. But the existence of puppy love in Chinese films is also an indisputable fact. The reason for this apparent contradiction is that Chinese youth films in recent years deliberately focus on love stories to satisfy young audience's need which is hard to realize in reality. But in American culture, teenagers' love is not in violation of the provisions of the school. What is most important for them is to be independent. That is the reason for those characters in American films to have a common aim and ending: finding themselves.

Secondly, film production traditions are different in these two countries. Youth films in the US are used to show the characters' growth when they are in high school, and tend to bring a happy ending. Chinese youth films in recent years tend to use the "two-stage" framework to tell the story by covering the leading characters in high school and then in college. These films usually start the story in the 1980s or 1990s because the film directors are relatively young and are more familiar with this period. Also, they have a sad ending to satisfy young audience's nostalgia complex, which can relieve the tension between young adults and the society [Chen, 2000, p. 52].

## 7. Summary

In summary, youth films mainly refer to youths' life. Based on the huge popularity and large box-office sales, youth films have been an important research subject in recent years.<sup>3</sup> This paper compares Chinese and American youth films in order to find out the differences of the youth image appearing in youth films. Our study finds that Chinese youth images tend to be homogeneous; in contrast, young male and female characters in American films have multifarious personalities. The reasons behind this phenomenon are that culture has a lot of influence on films, and film history and traditions are different in these two countries.

The youth image in youth films will change as a society changes. We thus recommend that researches will pay continuous attention to the youth image of different types appearing in new youth films. Moreover, they could expand the scope of the study to cover other countries such as Japan and Korea.

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<sup>2</sup>"Homogenous" means that heroes or heroines are similar in characters, and they all have sad endings. Note that Chinese youth films use similar backgrounds.

<sup>3</sup>Apart from the references quoted above, see [Benton et al, 2010; Chen, 2015; Chen, 2009; Ding, 2015; Jin, 2002; Liu, 2014; Moseley, 2010; Qi, 2013; Shen, 2007; Shen & Zhang, 2003; Wu, 2011].

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