



East  
Asian  
History

NUMBER 25/26 · JUNE/DECEMBER 2003

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Australian National University

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This is the combined twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth issue of *East Asian History*, printed in December 2004, in the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern History*. An externally refereed journal, it is published twice a year

Contributions to The Editor, *East Asian History*  
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Annual Subscription Australia A\$50 (including GST) Overseas US\$45 (GST free) (for two issues)

ISSN 1036-6008

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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover illustration A memorial from the chief eunuch Bian Dekui — “The Legal and Social Status of Theatrical Performers in Beijing During the Qing” by Ye Xiaoqing, see p.81.

## SUN-FACING COURTYARDS: URBAN COMMUNAL CULTURE IN MID-1970s' SHANGHAI

史 Nicole Huang 黄心村

Over the late spring and early summer of 1975, various architecturally dated and distinguished alleyway houses in the city of Shanghai, with their meticulously stylized three-syllable names engraved on the stone frames of the archways leading into the compounds, underwent an aesthetic transformation. One after another, old neighborhood compounds were renamed *xiangyang yuan* 向阳院, "sun-facing courtyard," a name meant to evoke a pledge of collective faith in the revered leader of the Chinese revolution, Mao Zedong 毛泽东. This name-change occurred just in time for the beginning of another summer season when thousands of school children went on holiday, free to roam the city's neighborhoods. Many of the pre-revolutionary engraved names that had survived even the city-wide violence and destruction characteristic of the early years of the Cultural Revolution era (c.1964–78) were now covered over and superseded by a distinctive system of references, one that amounted to a city-wide shift of gear towards a constant celebratory mode.

Other than this change of names, the outward appearance of communal sites was also scrutinized and revamped in this mid-1970s' spatial mobilization. Political posters, a powerful form of visual propaganda deployed throughout the history of the People's Republic, would become an important decorative feature that festooned the sun-facing courtyards. These images unequivocally highlighted the absolute power of the sun and symbolically articulated the vow of unconditional devotion on the part of the residents, be they adults, adolescents, or children, to the great leader, Mao.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the physical make-over of communal space, personal appearance was also monitored and altered: individuals residing in the communal environment were expected to conform to a collective sumptuary code and the courtyard community acted as a system of correction and enforcement.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to thank Edward Friedman, Megan Ferry, Zhang Xudong, Wang Ban, Rudolph Wagner, Andrew F. Jones, and Madeleine Yue Dong for their comments on an earlier version of the essay. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their input. My special gratitude goes to Geremie Barmé. The essay would not have been published in its present shape without his perceptive suggestions and editorial expertise.

<sup>1</sup> For a definitive study of Chinese propaganda posters, see Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, eds., *Picturing power in the People's Republic of China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> For a study of fashion of the Cultural Revolution, see Verity Wilson, "Dress and the Cultural Revolution," in *China chic: East meets West*, ed. Valerie Steele and John S. Major (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), pp.167–86.

<sup>3</sup> Zhang Zhen, in her memoir essay entitled "The production of senses in and out of the 'Everlasting Auspicious Lane,' Shanghai, 1966--1976," remembers her participation in a neighborhood amateur art troupe in the 1970s. See Zhong Xueping et al., eds., *Some of us: Chinese women growing up in the Mao era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp.163--8.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of the silence of the film industry during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, see Ian Mills, "Why did Chiang Ching close down Chinese film production? or, the Garden of Eden re-opened," *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 15--16 (1983): 34.

<sup>5</sup> 上海新闻报在1976年8月12日第12版刊登了一篇关于文汇报在永嘉太阳弄小区内开展活动的报道。

The mid-1970s' communal space also became a stage on which individuals regularly participated in a variety of public performances. Amateur artistic troupes representing individual courtyards and under the supervision of neighborhood committees performed excerpts from revolutionary model Beijing operas (*geming yangbanxi* 革命样板戏) and other works of revolutionary theater to audiences both large and small. Revolutionary songs were rehearsed in choruses made up of both adults and children, with the goal that everyone was to become a revolutionary artist in his or her own right—presaging the karaoke craze in late-twentieth century China.<sup>3</sup>

The communal space was also the venue for other cultural activities. Various verbal and visual media were channeled into the courtyard where the collective practices of reading, listening, and viewing were closely monitored. With the revival of feature film production in 1973, following a lengthy politically-induced hiatus, cinema-going was also enlisted as a different sort of communal political experience. Individual households were organized into study groups and marched off to local cinemas to watch recommended revolutionary feature films, and then, back in the courtyard, they discussed the central messages of the films and the "correct" or sanctioned way of learning from them, often under the supervision of a team of film reviewers and critics appointed by the local government.<sup>4</sup> Public reading rooms were set up in many courtyard compounds where revolutionary books and magazines were made available to residents, especially adolescents and children. Local factories, libraries, schools, and the municipal government often donated loads of books to such neighborhood collections. Sun-facing courtyards were thus defined as extended classrooms where the task of educating the next generations of revolutionaries continued out of school hours, hence the urgency to establish this expanded system of control before the two-month summer break.

One element of mass propaganda entertainment that helped define this era as unique compared to the 1950s and 1960s was the introduction of television. In mid-1970s' Chinese cities, television became a new medium for organizing leisure. Many neighborhoods set up a TV room next to the reading room where repeated viewing of central news (that is, news broadcast from the authorities in Beijing, known as "the center" *zhongyang* 中央), model films, and revolutionary feature films was emphasized as another communal and educational experience. One of the avowed goals of the new urban communal life was to set up "one board and three rooms" (*yi bao san shi* 一报三室)—a blackboard, a reading room, an activity room, and a TV room—in every sun-facing courtyard.<sup>5</sup>

Sun-facing courtyards, then, became a distinctive urban unit of organization around which work and leisure functioned within the existing vernacular architectural layout of individual cities, in this case, the port-city of Shanghai. Like the model Beijing opera, the loyalty dance (*zhongzi wu* 忠字舞), big-character posters (*dazi bao* 大字报), and the fashion value of military uniforms, the sun-facing courtyard was very much the product of a certain

phase of the Chinese Cultural Revolution era. And, yet, unlike the model operas, the loyalty dance, or military uniforms, the sun-facing courtyard did not take shape until the last years of that turbulent time. To be sure—like so many other aspects of life in that era—residential compounds or public spaces named “Sun-facing courtyards” or “Large sun-facing courtyards” (*xiangyang dayuan* 向阳大院) had emerged in Chinese cities and towns in the years preceding the Cultural Revolution. But between 1975 and 1977, the term was applied as a generic expression, that is, it was no longer merely a proper noun. Numerous residential compounds in various Chinese cities were reinvented as sun-facing courtyards, and in order to distinguish between them, multi-syllabic words were prefixed to *xiangyang yuan* to create new labels. Sometimes the prefix was the name of the individual alleyway or neighborhood; in other instances, new denominations were invented, drawing upon words and images that expressed the latest political “fads,” such as “Spring Thunder” (*Chunlei* 春雷), “Red Rain” (*Hongyu* 红雨), “Destroying Capitalism” (*Mie zi* 灭资), and “Criticize Lin Biao and Denounce Confucius” (*Pi Lin pi Kong* 批林批孔). A list of these new labels and a relevant exegesis could potentially contribute to a keyword study of the culture of the last few years of the Cultural Revolution.

In the case of Shanghai, its spatial transformation in the mid-1970s indicates a process of revolutionary aestheticization that took place in both the public and the private arenas. The application of the word *xiangyang yuan* as a generic term went hand in hand with the adaptation of a new spatiality in grass-roots urban mobilization, and contributed to a changing scene of everyday life and a vibrant mass culture. Though late in its advent, the sun-facing courtyard swiftly transformed the appearance of the city and remains as a highlight of the last moments of the Cultural Revolution era. I regard the sun-facing courtyard as a rhetorical and spatial departure from Shanghai's own distinctive architectural history, a unique spatial construct that absorbed and exhibited words, images, sounds, and themes particular to the entire era, becoming a veritable window showcasing mutually informed media forms, an emblem of an accumulated cultural history of the Cultural Revolution up to that point, and a crucial means of access into the everyday life of an era that has been constantly remembered and reconstructed in the visual culture of post-Mao China.

The sun-facing courtyard signals the high-point of domesticated mass cultural movements in China, and, more importantly, it was a hotbed of various forces that led to the gradual demise of overtly politicized everyday life. The fall of the “Gang of Four” in 1976 and the official declaration of the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978 were not the reasons why this form of socialist urban culture reached its final stage. My study of Shanghai's sun-facing courtyards will, I hope, demonstrate that the reasons for their demise needs to be located within urban communal culture itself. I shall argue that as a final orchestrated display of public life during the Cultural Revolution, the sun-facing courtyards provide an important chapter in Shanghai's urban history and mark an end to the entire era.

### *Legends of the Courtyard*

<sup>6</sup> Hong Ying, *Daughter of the river*, translated by Howard Goldblatt (New York: Grove Press, 1997), p.20.

<sup>7</sup> For a social, economic, and cultural history of Shanghai's alleyway houses, see Lu Hanchao, *Beyond the neon lights: everyday Shanghai in the early twentieth century* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), pp.138–85.

The sun-facing courtyards were a reinvention of an existing urban vernacular architectural design. This, of course, is not unique to the city of Shanghai. Autobiographical literature and personal memoirs published in recent decades reflect how individual experiences of growing up and coming of age was a process parallel to the spatial transformations in Chinese cities and towns. In Hong Ying's 虹影 internationally-acclaimed autobiographical novel *Daughter of the River* (Ji'e de nǚ'er 饥饿的女儿), the female narrator recalls the political movement in the mid-1960s that threw an urban slum situated on the outskirts of Chongqing 重庆, a major city in the province of Sichuan 四川, into turmoil. Individual lives were turned upside down and the neighborhood went through a dramatic physical transformation. In one episode the narrator speaks of the metamorphosis of her courtyard dwelling:

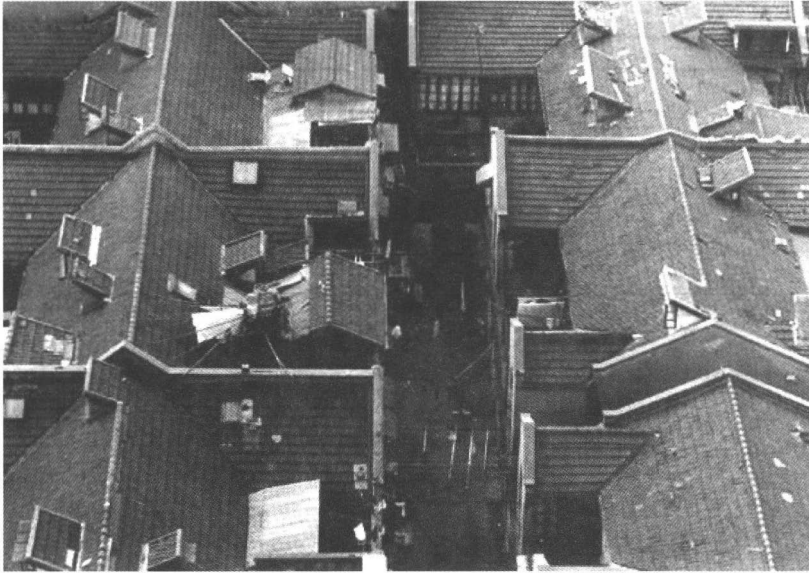
The biggest building in the area—once a teahouse—stood next to the corner store and could accommodate upwards of a hundred people. In the old days story-tellers mesmerized the patrons nightly with rhythmic tales from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Marsh Outlaws*, and *Exploits of Yang Warriors*, and the place was always packed. But sometime before I was born, it was converted into the Dining Hall of the People's Commune; then when I was four or five it was renamed Sun Compound [*xiangyang yuan*] to pledge fealty to Chairman Mao.<sup>6</sup>

From a pre-revolutionary teahouse that once served as a theater for storytelling and a place for the convergence of the struggling cultural life of a poverty-stricken working-class neighborhood, to a dining hall of the People's Commune—a façade of prosperity and a product of the Great Leap Forward (1958)—and finally to the renaming of the space as a sun-facing courtyard during the first two years of the Cultural Revolution, Hong Ying's narrative depicts the transformation of a public space that has served different functions in communal cultures over two decades.

The case of Shanghai, however, highlights an urban transformation of a different sort, and one on a different scale. In mid-1970s' Shanghai, the movement of spatial rectification spread to the private quarters of families. Indeed the process could be viewed as a way of invasion, with the public sneaking into the private, reorganizing and reconnecting the private, renaming the arena in which people had once made their homes, thereby redefining the meanings and boundaries of home, street, alley, gate, walls, neighborhood, and of course, the city itself.

Urban vernacular architecture in Shanghai is distinguished by row upon row of *shikumen* 石库门 houses, which are individual homes built of brick, wood, and cement with small courtyards called *tianjing* 天井 or “sky wells”. These row-houses are framed by crisscrossing *longtang* 弄堂 or *lilong* 里弄, alleyways that serve as both divisions and connections within a neighborhood. Finally there are walls that encircle houses and alleyways that define the boundaries of neighborhood compounds (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> Such



**Figure 1**

*An aerial view of Shanghai alleyways and alleyway houses. From Luo Xiaowei and Wu Jiang, eds., Shanghai Alleyways (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1997)*

an architectural layout was ideal for forging a bustling communal culture throughout the 1970s. The word *yuan* or courtyard, as in the compound word *xiangyang yuan*, would come to define multiple public spaces, including the small courtyards integral to individual *shikumen* houses, the alleyways where people in the neighborhood bustled, mingled and dispersed, and other public meeting grounds, such as activity rooms run by neighborhood committees. It was these public spaces that were to be utilized, occupied, and transformed through the creation of the new sun-facing courtyards to generate highly politicized sites that would potentially infiltrate and organize the private world of individuals.

Such spatial transformations were preceded by the manufactured legends of the *xiangyang yuan*; in other words, tales of the courtyard prefigured the actual adoption of the concept as an integral part of urban mobilization. In 1973, what would become a representative work in revolutionary children's literature appeared on the barren bookshelves of the city. It was *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard* (*Xiangyang yuan de gushi* 向阳院的故事), written by an author named Xu Ying 徐瑛. The novel depicts a group of elementary school children who are under the leadership of a boy named Tiezhu 铁柱 ("Iron Pillar"). In the beginning of the novel, the children get together and discuss how they can spend their summer break "meaningfully." They decide to help in the construction of a major highway for the region and through that participate actively in the "grand cause of socialist construction." This group of children are in thrall to the teachings of an old model worker called Grandpa Shitou 石头 ("Rock")—the personification of proletarian power and sagacity. Throughout the summer, the children enhance their revolutionary awareness and uncover a class enemy who has been hiding in their midst.

<sup>8</sup> Xu Ying, *Xiangyangyuan de gushi* [Stories from a sun-facing courtyard] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1973), p.1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp.189–90.

<sup>10</sup> Yu Lan, “Ertong dianying sanshiwu nian xunli” [An historical overview of thirty-five years of children’s cinema], in *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo dianying shiye sanshiwu nian, 1949–1984* [Thirty-five years of film production in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1984] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1985), pp.224–35.

The novel opens with a description of the physical setting of the town and the courtyard:

Inside the East Gate of Bozhou city, there is a courtyard compound with greenish-blue roof tiles. Everybody calls it the “Sun-facing Courtyard.” A seventy-three-year-old woman lives in the three east-facing rooms and she has a precious grandson called Tiezhu.<sup>8</sup>

Here the tone is imitative of a fairy-tale. No specific time is mentioned and the actual location of the courtyard is not important either. Bozhou 亳州 is like any other typical small city or township of China. The courtyard depicted in the novel comes to represent a prototype of communal space that points to the readers’ own experience of their immediate environment. By the end of the novel, the highway has been built, the villain has been identified and condemned, and the students are back at school at the start of a new academic year. Children from the courtyard are putting on a play based on true events from the past summer. When asked how the story ends and what it is called, a girl responds:

“How can stories from the sun-facing courtyard ever come to an end? Today we have told you these stories, but tomorrow we will have created more stories that are even fresher and more beautiful. Therefore, hmm ..... this play should be called *A Never-Ending Story*!”

Her “intelligent” response elicits laughter from the crowd and wins compliments from her teacher:

“Hey! This little classmate knows how to apply dialectical thinking!”<sup>9</sup>

The final message that “stories from the sun-facing courtyard are endless” is dressed up as a success story, one that indicates even children can learn how to apply Marxist dialectics and Mao’s theories on continuing revolution in their everyday life. As banal as the novelistic world might seem, the concluding message is, however, metafictional. If the communal model of the sun-facing courtyard can be duplicated or regenerated over and over, the stories told in the novel can also be multiplied in an endless fashion. The fact that the story will never end suggests the possibility, or more precisely, the imperative to narrate the same kind of tales again and again. The novel provides its young readers “good reading” and mobilizes them to recognize the novelistic order as an established model that is to be propagated and reproduced in their daily practices.

Following the success of the novel, the stories of sun-facing courtyards were propagated in other forms of the mass media. Next came a 1974 film based on the novel, starring some of the most familiar faces in Chinese cinema such as Pu Ke 浦克 and Liang Yin 梁音. The film was screened in cinemas throughout the year and repeatedly broadcast on both radio and television.<sup>10</sup> Local schools typically organized children to go to the movie theaters and watch the film together, and, when back in the classroom, they were organized into various forums or group meetings so that they could

discuss how they might learn from the little heroes in the film and apply the awareness gleaned from the film to their immediate realities. Compared with the novel, the villain in the film is portrayed as being even more culpable. Many school-age children could recite and re-enact some of the scenes and sing the tunes of the film, deriving great pleasure from imitating the characters in it, in particular, the villain. He is a candy peddler who corrupts the minds of children, and his every appearance is accompanied by the chant of a doggerel rhyme, which, for many children who watched the film repeatedly, was the most memorable scene:

Candy is sweet, candy smells nice. Eat and play, what a joy.

Learning is a pain, learning keeps you busy. What use is there, trying to learn?<sup>11</sup>

糖儿甜, 糖儿香 吃吃玩玩喜洋洋  
读书哭, 读书忙 读书有个啥用处

Words and images from this fictional world were to be echoed and recreated over the radio waves as well. Many pre-school and elementary-school children of the time would later recall rushing home in the afternoon to catch a daily children's program called "Mini Loudspeaker" (*Xiao laba* 小喇叭), produced by the People's Central Radio Station (*Zhongyang renmin guangbo diantai* 中央人民广播电台).<sup>12</sup> One of the program's most popular features was a story-telling column called "Stories Told by Uncle Cao Can" (*Cao Can shushu jiang de gushi* 曹灿叔叔讲的故事). Uncle Cao Can's on-going story-telling was a highlight of childhood experiences for those who grew up in the 1970s. In 1974, Uncle Cao Can kept his young and curious listeners from all over the country mesmerized in front of radios by supplying them, little by little, segment by segment, with a vivid reenactment of the novel *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard*. This kind of radio broadcast was called the "serialized radio novel" (*xiaoshuo lianbo* 小说连播). Cao Can belonged to a generation of Chinese artists who championed, propagated, refined, and personified the craftsmanship of radio broadcasting and turned radio into the single most important medium—that is, before television assumed a more dominant position in mass entertainment in individual households.<sup>13</sup>

In 1976, a Shanghai artist named Gu Bingxin 顾炳鑫 renowned for his Shanghai-style comics (*lianbuanhua* 连环画 or "linked-picture books", otherwise known colloquially as *xiaorensu* 小人书 or "little-people's books") and active in the official agit-prop art scene since the 1950s, created a storybook to propagate the tales of the courtyard among smaller (pre-school) children. The pocket-sized picture book, produced in the most popular format 12.7 cm x 9.2 cm, was printed by the largest publisher of the genre, the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publisher (*Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe* 上海人民美术出版社), and read by millions of young adults, teenagers, and children alike.<sup>14</sup>

The cover of Gu's version of the courtyard story featured Grandpa Shitou, situated in the center surrounded by a group of children from the courtyard,

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Zhang Yuanshan, "Fawei de yingxiong he youqu de huaidan" [Boring heroes and interesting villains], *Shuwu* 6 (1998): 4–7. Zhang comments: "The filmmakers' original intention was to instruct children to 'study hard and make progress everyday,' and not to fall in the trap set up by the villains. But things turned out to be just the contrary. All children memorized the verse. Even I, a 'good student,' remembered the verse as a 'fascinating' song for children."

<sup>12</sup> "Mini Loudspeaker" was inaugurated in September 1956.

<sup>13</sup> For decades voice artists like Cao Can worked behind the scene. The audience got to see some of them for the first time in recent years. See Tong Wen, "Guangbo mingjia jinwan liangxiang Baoli Juyuan; Xiaoshuo lianbo banshang wutai" [Famed broadcast artists appearing in person at Baoli Theater tonight; serialized radio novels performed on a real stage], *Renmin ribao*, 30 March 2001. In addition to his versatile voice, Cao Can is known for his resemblance to Deng Xiaoping, which makes him the much sought-after impersonator of the Chinese leader in many recent films and television programs. See "Rang weiren xingxiang huo zai guanzhong xin zhong: Tamen banyan le Deng Xiaoping" [Let the image of a great man live on in the mind of an audience: they played Deng Xiaoping], *Zhongguo qingnian bao*, 22 June 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Gu Bingxin, *Xiangyangyuan degushi* [Stories from a sun-facing courtyard] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1976). For background reading, see Julia Andrews, "Literature in line: picture stories in the People's Republic of China," *Inks: Cartoon and Comic Art Studies* 3 (1997): 17–32.

**Figure 2**

*Cover of Gu Bingxin, Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1976)*

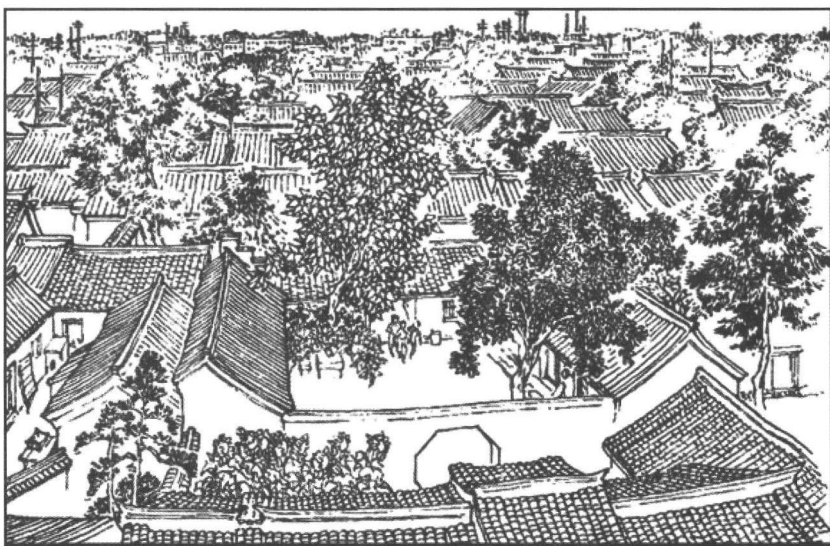


each of whom is carrying a hoe on his or her shoulder, and all displaying brilliant smiles to the imagined reader. The child leader Tiezhu, dressed in a white shirt and a pair of army-green pants, is positioned next to the little girl mentioned earlier who has mastered the language of revolutionary dialectics. She is dressed in a pair of brown pants and a bright purple shirt with white dots. To their right is the small boy who was, at one point, corrupted by the villainous candy peddler, but now even he smiles confidently, wearing his signature navy-blue striped shirt, apparently having safely rejoined the ranks of “good children.” The backdrop against which the group is set is a field of radiant golden sunflowers. Their red scarves, broad smiles, pink cheeks, white teeth, and colorful clothes give added vibrancy to an already unreal picture. The title of the book is written in bright green strokes across the bottom portion of the picture. In this design, “facing the sun” as a central theme in the story has been reinforced by several visual elements. As in most comic-books of the time, the style of the cover is consistent with that of political posters, and as such this cover can be seen as a miniature poster, a form of stylized public display (Figure 2).

On page one of the pocket-sized book, there is an aerial view of the courtyard seen in the midst of endless rows of other courtyards that make up the small city itself. Lines of old roof tiles are drawn in steady and rhythmic strokes, occasionally interrupted by lofty and lush trees, both testifying to the long course of history underlying the contemporary cityscape. In the distance a few large chimneys can be seen on the horizon, suggesting a

**Figure 3**

*Page 1 of Gu Bingxin, Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1976)*



process of industrialization and the omnipresence of proletarian power that define the borders of the city. Indeed the courtyard in question is but one of the millions and millions of courtyards throughout similar towns and cities in China. And the story to be told is but one of the countless tales of daily struggles. Here in both the cover illustration and the page one of the book, the theme and the universal applicability of the story have been established in the form of a visual statement (Figure 3).

Apart from the novel, the film, radio broadcasts, and the comic book, there emerged spin-off productions that told endless tales centered on a sun-facing courtyard. It was this style of derivative narratives that produced regional variations of the original story. Between 1975 and 1977, *Wenhui bao* 文汇报 (Wenhui Daily), Shanghai's main newspaper, featured some occasional drawings by Zhang Leping 张乐平, one of China's most important cartoonists. Zhang is best known as the creator of the comic hero Sanmao 三毛 ("Three Hairs"), a perpetual adolescent and vagrant, a little beggar boy who roamed around Shanghai and witnessed, experienced, and miraculously survived a succession of calamities from the 1930s to the end of the Civil War in the late 1940s.<sup>15</sup> Zhang's 1970s' works published in *Wenhui bao* were also entitled "Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard," and featured another little boy. Unlike Sanmao, who was depicted with exaggerated features and facial expressions that evoke larger-than-life comic and tragic moments, the portrayal of the 1970s' Shanghai boy is far more bland. The young hero, a Shanghai Tiezhu, is presented as an average boy, a knowable figure, whose only accessory is a red scarf around his neck, which, instead of marking him apart as the hero, enables him to mingle with his fellow "little red soldiers" (*hongxiaobing* 红小兵) (Figure 4). If Sanmao, with his tortured and deeply-scarred persona packed into a humorous and resilient little boy's body, was an extraordinary commentary on those violent decades, the Shanghai Tiezhu in his courtyard merely reinforces a pre-existent prototype of revolutionary universality. He seems to be lifted straight out of Gu

<sup>15</sup> See Zhang Leping, *Adventures of Sanmao the orphan*, translated by W. J. F. Jenner and C. M. Chan (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1981). For a study of Zhang Leping as the creator of Sanmao, see Mary Ann Farquhar, "Sanmao: classic cartoons and Chinese popular culture," in *Asian popular culture*, ed. John Lent (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1995), pp.139–58.

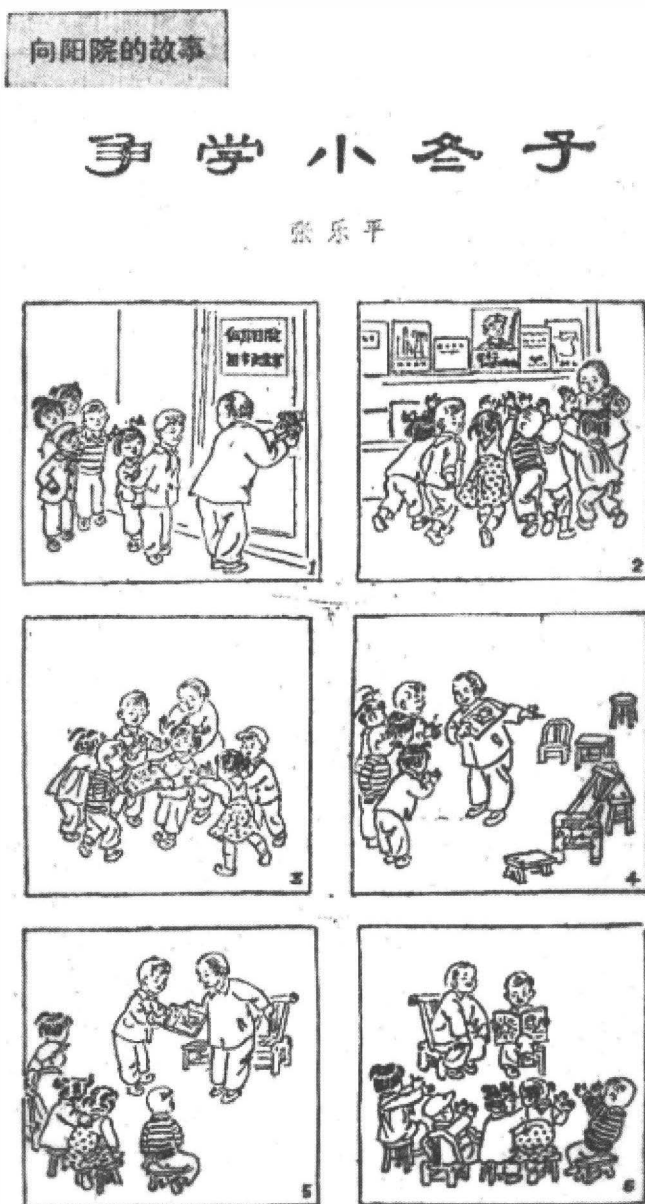


Figure 4

Zhang Leping, "Compete to Learn from Xiao Dongzi" (Zheng xue Xiao Dongzi), *Wenhui bao*, 25 October 1975

Bingxin's comic book. These 1970s' cartoons, although uncharacteristic of the unique talent of the artist, enriched the stories of the nascent courtyards by highlighting the true protagonists of the tales—children.

### *Children of the Courtyard*

<sup>16</sup> The first official document on birth control was issued in 1971 under the auspices of the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, entitled "Guanyu zuohao jihua shengyu gongzuo de baogao" [A report on effectively carrying out birth control policies]. The first central government meeting on birth control was held in 1973, where a slogan of "Late, far-apart, and few" (晚, 稀, 少) was raised. The actual one-child policy did not take effect until 1980. See Susan Greenhalgh, "Controlling births in a 'bodies in village China,'" *American Ethnology*, 21.1 (1994): 3–30.

Children, like women, have been studied as an important discursive category in the history of twentieth-century China. The rhetorics used to discuss the situation of Chinese women can often be used to define that of children, and vice versa. At different times in the twentieth-century, women and children were spoken of as needing to be correctly shaped, fostered, and regulated. It was not until the mid-1970s that there appeared to be a more pronounced emphasis on discourses of children and childhood. Although the one-child policy was not formally put into effect until 1979, by the early 1970s birth control and the "quality" of the population had already emerged as issues. In propaganda posters promoting the early 1970s' birth control policies, children were often featured together with women. "Carry out birth control for the revolutionary cause" (*wei geming shixing jibua shengyu* 为革命实行计划生育) and "Benefit the physical health of women and children" (*youli yu funü ertong de shenti jiankang* 有利于妇女儿童的身体健) increasingly became slogans in the visual propaganda of the time (Figure 5).<sup>16</sup> Children and experiences of childhood became a contested ground where

**Figure 5**

A 1974 political poster entitled "Carry out birth control for the revolutionary cause." Children are featured together with women (Image courtest of Stefan Landsberger, <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/>)



regulations had to be enforced to ensure that the little ones were provided with just the right kind of environment and were being pointed in the politically correct direction.

Stephanie Donald's study of the representation of children and childhood in Chinese political posters from the 1960s and 70s contains a convincing argument that children served as "political messengers" both literally and figuratively. On the literal level, in revolutionary narratives children typically served as message-bearers and liaisons between adults. On the symbolic level, themes of succession and nationhood are conveyed through visual representations of healthy, strong, and happy youngsters.<sup>17</sup> But by the mid-1970s, representations of children and childhood in the context of a vibrant courtyard culture delivered different messages.

On 4 July, 1975, *Wenhui bao* reported that a neighborhood organization in the Hongkou 虹口 District had launched a competition among its residents, and they were encouraged to use their own deeds to define a "new alleyway". It was suggested by the news report that such a redefinition should be carried out at this very moment. The spaces of individual courtyards and the alleyways were to be turned into a new "battleground," that is, a local communal front in the nation-wide "Summer Patriotic Hygienic Movement" (*xiaji aiguo weisheng yundong* 夏季爱国卫生运动). A seasonal campaign like this served to organize different spaces and bring people together, and it was this enhanced collectivity that helped define *lilong* in a new way. Written in the dry and predictably banal propagandistic language characteristic of the era, the report did transmit a sense of pride in Shanghai's own spatial history, the fact that *shikumen* houses and the alleyways that connected them provided just the right conditions for the successful realization of such mass mobilization campaigns. The social and political controls that were already in place worked perfectly to generate enthusiasm and ensure participation by individuals.

This campaign, however, was portrayed as being an extraordinary occasion, the key to which was the involvement of small children. Neighborhood committees reportedly defined their central strategy as being the successful motivation of "little friends" so as to make them compete with each other to become "dynamic members of the hygiene movement" (*weisheng jiji fenzi* 卫生积极分子). These small children, who had just been let out of schools for the summer holidays, were to be enlisted like some mock army, but a rather unusual army. It was dubbed as "a youthful and vigorous new hygiene army from the alleyways" (*lilong zhong yizhi zhaoqi pengbo de weisheng xin jun* 里弄中一支朝气蓬勃的卫生新军).<sup>18</sup>

While appearing dry and banal at first glance, the rhetoric in this news report generated new meanings for the time. To be sure, neologisms from the Cultural Revolution, when examined, are often nothing particularly new and can be viewed as but the crystallization of ideas originating in a series of discursive movements from throughout the twentieth-century. This case is no exception. If one was to compile a list of keywords from socialist

<sup>17</sup> See Stephanie Donald, "Children as political messengers: art, childhood, and continuity," in Evans and Donald, *Picturing power in the People's Republic of China*, pp.79–100.

<sup>18</sup> *Wenhui bao*, 4 July 1975.

<sup>19</sup> See *Mao zhuxi zai Sulian de yanlun* [Chairman Mao's speeches in the Soviet Union] (Beijing: Renmin Ribao Chubanshe), pp.14–5. *MorningSun* (2003), a documentary film produced and directed by Carma Hinton, Geremie R. Barmé, and Richard Gordon, features and takes its title from this important quotation of Mao. Focusing their lens on the high-school generation, the filmmakers have crafted an “inner” or “psychological history” of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Dikötter, *Sex, culture, and modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), pp.123–5. Also see Ruth Rogaski, “Hygienic modernity in Tianjin,” in *Remaking the Chinese city: modernity and national identity, 1900–1950*, ed. Joseph Esherick (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), pp.30–46.

daily life in China, the expression “youthful and vigorous” (*zhaoli pengbo* 朝气蓬勃) would occupy a special position. It was originally used by Mao Zedong in a speech he made to Chinese students studying in Moscow during his historic visit of the Soviet Union in 1957:

The world is yours, and ours too. But in the end it is yours. You young people are full of *youthful vigor and vitality*, and are in the heyday of life, like the rising sun at eight or nine o'clock in the morning. You are shouldering our hope. ... The world belongs to you, the future of China belongs to you.<sup>19</sup>

Here, the same vigor and vitality that were identified, channeled, misguided, abused, and ultimately crushed during the early years of the Cultural Revolution became a feature of movements involving socialist youth and children all over again, in particular in the context of the 1970s' creation of sun-facing courtyards. But the immediate goal of this particular movement was specific: hygiene, both personal and environmental, was the focus.

This, of course, was not new either. The history behind the concept and socio-cultural prominence of hygiene extended even further back. The 1970s' mass mobilization to clean up the immediate environment recalls the earlier twentieth-century's fascination with health, hygiene, and beauty. Frank Dikötter, for instance, analyzes the concept of hygiene in connection to body politics in early Republican China. Dikötter also situates the implementation of the concept of hygiene in the transformation of urban culture in the first few decades of the twentieth-century. He delineates the spread of “public hygiene” (*gonggong weisheng* 公共卫生) as a social practice. And a central mechanism that served to carry the message of social practice was the system of public education. Children's textbooks were important in that they illustrated how hygiene, both personal and public, played an integral part in shaping new generations of clean, healthy, and strong citizens. A clean body was figured as being a victorious “battlefield”, the same as a sanitary environment, where many “struggles” took place on a daily basis.<sup>20</sup>

What distinguished the renewed concern over personal and public hygiene in the mid-1970s was that children came to be the champions of the cause. In other words, the mid-1970s' invention of courtyard culture became the converging ground where theories about continuing revolution, discourses relating to children and child-rearing, the conceptualization of hygiene, and the fascination with war and war stories in popular culture came together to shape a new mass campaign. Instead of adults/intellectuals fighting for the welfare of the next generation, children themselves were portrayed as fighting a mock war. They were certainly more than messengers by now; more precisely, they were made the protagonists. Here, combat analogies were used as a strategy of mobilization. A war was being waged among small children on a most basic level. Flies, mosquitoes, cockroaches, and other bugs and parasites were identified as the immediate enemies. The rhetoric—and praxis—of class struggle was being applied to insects. For small children, this was the first test of their revolutionary consciousness and, compared to the villains in story books, their immediate enemies were certainly quite tangible.



A disease-free environment was said to be the goal. Leisure life, especially during the long summer months, was the space to be utilized in improving the “quality” of children and ensuring that they would grow up healthy and strong in a hygienically suitable environment.

The goal of such national campaigns was by no means limited to the creation of a cleaner environment. Ann Anagnost, in her elegant book on contemporary Chinese media culture as a politically contested field, uses the concept of “national past-times” to address the space of organized leisure in which “the nation becomes an object of contemplative reflection, whether in the hidden spaces of everyday life or as a commodified space of leisure activity.”<sup>21</sup> But little work has been done to show how leisure was organized during the pre-Reform era, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. One needs first to challenge the presumption that the leisure and the needs of individuals to be entertained outside their work places are only a feature of the Reform era. By the mid-1970s, central and local governments designated leisure as a newly-found arena for social mobilization. The main purpose of this mobilization was to organize the leisure life of children, to occupy all time outside the classroom and the previously unregulated summer seasons, and to make that space an extension of basic education. And the new hygiene movement was the central scheme in extending this pedagogical project in the courtyard compounds of the urban areas. In other words, the established sun-facing courtyards were places where not only was the environment controlled, but children’s minds were melded in an ideologically acceptable manner.

Over two summers in a row from 1975 to 1976, the Shanghai media consistently reported how model workers sent out by different work units had taken leadership roles in facilitating and sustaining *xiangyang yuan* organizations.<sup>22</sup> Control over individual courtyards was also apparent in a city-wide mobilization to create, reinvent, transmit, and supply propaganda materials, mostly revolutionary songs, choreographed dances, short plays, revolutionary poetry, and pictorials, to individual courtyards. The slogan used was to “deliver revolutionary literature and arts to the sun-facing courtyards.”<sup>23</sup> Every district in the city of Shanghai was equipped with a “children’s palace” (*shaonian gong* 少年宫) and a “cultural center” (*wenhuaguan* 文化馆), which also shouldered the task of training and fostering artistic talents among the youngsters who were seen as main players in socialist daily life.<sup>24</sup>

Children in the courtyards were also organized around the act of reading. Books and other reading materials were donated by bookstores, work unit libraries, and individuals to help each courtyard set up its own reading room.<sup>25</sup> Children’s dress was also closely monitored. “Bad influences” were to be curbed from the outset. For instance, bell-bottom trousers were regarded as an imported exotic artifact emerging from as early as the mid-1970s. This was perhaps a byproduct of China’s renewed contact with the United States following a period of ping-pong diplomacy and President Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit. There was a popular misconception that a young man wearing

<sup>21</sup> Ann Anagnost, *National past-times: narrative, representation, and power in modern China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p.1.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, a 3 February 1976 report in *Wenhui bao* entitled “Xiangyangyuan de rexin ren” [A warm-hearted person in a sun-facing courtyard].

<sup>23</sup> See *Wenhui bao*, 27 July 1975.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, a 23 August 1975 report in *Wenhui bao* entitled “Wei xiangyang yuan bianxie wenyi xuanchuan cailiao” [To create and compile literary and artistic propaganda material for sun-facing courtyards].

<sup>25</sup> See a 27 July 1975 report in *Wenhui bao* on how a work unit library donated thousands of books and journals to a sun-facing courtyard.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, several 30 July 1976 reports in *Wenhui bao* about the importance of controlling what young people wore. Writers asserted that there were “class struggles” even in the choice of everyday attire.

bell-bottoms and cruising down the street with a cassette player was a trademark of the economically relaxed and culturally transformed Reform era. In mid-1970s' Shanghai, however, the sight of urban youth wearing bell-bottoms already caused serious concern within the walls of sun-facing courtyards, so much so that it became necessary to mobilize residents to re-educate those wayward young people and to establish an unwritten policy to curtail the trend towards “strange clothing and outlandish outfits” (*qizhuang yifu* 奇装异服). The goal was not to let these “older children” affect their impressionable juniors.<sup>26</sup>

### Communal Film Culture

<sup>27</sup> Xie Tieli, a filmmaker from the Yan'an generation acclaimed for pre-1966 works such as *Early Spring in February* (Zaochun eryue, 1963), became a target of criticism when the Cultural Revolution started. He was then commissioned by Jiang Qing to work on three film versions of model operas: *On the Harbor* (Haigang, 1972, co-directed with Xie Jin), *Songs of the Dragon River* (Longjiang song, 1972), and *Azalea Mountain* (Dujuan shan, 1974). His 1975 film *Haixia*, produced by the Beijing Film Studios, was his first feature film after he returned to work. See Di Jian-nong, *Hongsewangshi: 1966-1976 nian de Zhongguo dianying* [Reminiscences in Red: Chinese films from 1966 to 1976] (Beijing: Taihai Chubanshe, 2001), pp.307-400.

<sup>28</sup> For an account of the production of the film, see Di Jiannong, “Hongxing shengqi de suiye,” [Years of the Rising Red Star], in *Hongse wangshi*, pp.258-85.

<sup>29</sup> See *Wenhui bao*, 25 October 1975.

<sup>30</sup> See a series of reports entitled “Guo yi ge geminghua de shujia” (Have a revolutionized summer break) in *Wenhui bao*, 29 July 1975.

The most important and powerful cultural technologies insinuated into organized leisure time were cinema, television, and radio. After being shut down during the first years of the Cultural Revolution (except for the cinematic production of model Beijing operas), the feature film industry showed signs of revival from around 1972. Veteran filmmakers such as Xie Tieli 谢铁骊 were redeployed to make feature films in response to popular demand and the political necessity for the creation of a wider variety of visual entertainment.<sup>27</sup> Feature films made during the last years of the Cultural Revolution era are important cultural artifacts whose creation and dissemination played a key role in organizing leisure activities in sun-facing courtyards.

Important feature films made between 1974 and '76 include *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard* (Xiangyangyuan de gushi, 1974), *Twinkling Red Star* (Shanshan de hongxing 闪闪的红星, 1974), *The Pioneers* (Chuangye 创业, 1974), *The Golden Way* (Jinguang dadao 金光大道, 1975), *Spring Sprouts* (Chunmiao 春苗, 1975), *Red Rain* (Hongyu 红雨, 1975), and *Breaking* (Juelie 决裂, 1975). The 1974 film *Twinkling Red Star* was a landmark production in this last stage of Cultural Revolution cinema, signaling for many the popular revival of China's film industry.<sup>28</sup> Individual courtyards organized children to discuss how to “learn from Xiao Dongzi,” the little hero in the film. One of Zhang Leping's *xiangyang yuan* cartoons was even entitled “Compete to Learn from Xiao Dongzi” (*Zheng xue Xiao Dongzi* 争学小冬子), and in it the Shanghai Tiezhu takes the initiative to assemble all the children from the courtyard for a revolutionary book-reading session in the courtyard's reading room; the featured book is a pictorial version of *Twinkling Red Star* (Figure 4).<sup>29</sup> News reports from the period typically portray a reporter questioning a small child from one of the courtyards about his or her favorite movie. The cheerful response is invariably: “*Twinkling Red Star*!” This is followed by the child's naïve yet coherent explanation of why the film—one set in the civil war of the 1920s—is relevant to contemporary daily life.<sup>30</sup>

How do we account for this film's manufactured popularity, especially among the younger generation? The media at the time devoted more space to arguing for the relevance of the film to the contemporary world than addressing the actual import of the film, so much so that even children were

able to provide scripted answers when placed in the spotlight. The issue of the film's relevance was consistently defended and highlighted. From the narrative prototype of *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard* and its many spin-off tales discussed in the above, to *Twinkling Red Star* and the voluminous discussions surrounding it, as well as model Beijing operas and their cinematic renditions, the entire audio-visual range of revolutionary educational material highlighted the basic themes of revolution, class struggle, sacrifice, succession, war, heroism, and political consciousness. The modern media—film, picture books, posters, cartoons—were used with great effect to allude to, reinforce, recycle, and multiply familiar images. The political messages in this body of cultural products were circulated from one “text” to another, and from one image to another, cross-referencing and rearticulating key themes and topics in the context of a particular form of pedagogical intertextuality.

That children of the 1970s would come to recite lines and themes from a handful of feature films like *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard* and *Twinkling Red Star* had much to do with the fact that the cinematic culture of that period was intertwined with the audio culture of radio broadcasting. In fact, the popularity of feature films in the mid-1970s relied to a great extent on the omnipresence of Central People's Radio. Throughout the decade, the soundtracks of a select handful of feature films were edited specifically for broadcasting. Dubbed “edited film recordings” (*dianying luyinjianji* 电影录音剪辑), these made-for-radio compilations kept much of the ambient music and most of the dialogues directly from the original soundtrack. These were complemented with a voice-over narration that explained the background, setting, and connections between the *dramatis personae* and the various scenes, thereby helping listeners visualize the auditory experiences. For those who had previously seen the films in question, the edited recordings would simulate the experiences of repeated viewings of the same scenes over and over. For those who lived in remote areas and who had limited access to film venues, radio broadcasts equipped them with relevant expertise in a socialist visual culture in which everyone was encouraged to be an active participant. In other words, expertise in the mass film culture of the time could be achieved even without access to the films themselves. The hybrid nature of this particular form of mass entertainment thus created an illusion of more and equal access to what was a symbolic order of socialist daily life. Together with serialized radio novels and radio plays, the edited film recordings were among the most popular form of radio entertainment for children and adults who lived through the 1970s. Children born in the 1960s and '70s would later remember the particular experience of “listening to novels” (*ting xiaoshuo* 听小说), and, perhaps more significantly, “listening to films” (*ting dianying* 听电影).<sup>31</sup>

Imagined classrooms are portrayed in several mid-1970s' films since education was a central issue on the political agenda. Both *Spring Sprouts* and *Red Rain* glorify the images and cause of “bare-foot doctors” (*chijiao*

<sup>31</sup> Many children born in the 1970s would later recall how they grew up with a culture of hybridity. See, for instance, Jiang Xiaoyu, “Wode xiaorenshe shengya” [My life with the little-people's books], *Shenghuo shibao*, 27 July 2000. Jiang writes: “At the time, our ways of reviewing films were mainly two-fold: first, we read the comic books adapted from the films; second, we listened to the edited film recordings on radio.” Also see Zhu Xiukun, “Ting dianying de gushi” [Stories of listening to films], *Xinmin wanbao*, 20 September 2000.

**Figure 6**

Page 138 of Gu Bingxin, *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1976)



<sup>32</sup> For an account of the production of *Spring Sprouts* and *Red Rain*, see Ying Guan, "Chunmiao: yinmou yingpian de kaishanfu" [*Spring Sprouts*: the definitive work of "conspiracy cinema"], *Dazhong dianying* 5 (2001): 18–22.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of *Breaking*, see Rosalind Delmar and Mark Nash, "Breaking with old ideas: recent Chinese films," *Screen* 4 (1976): 67–84.

<sup>34</sup> The 1973 incident surrounding Zhang Tiesheng 张铁生, the so-called "hero who handed in a blank exam" (*baijuan yingxiong*) was first reported in *Liaoning ribao* on 19 July 1973. On 26 December 1973, *Renmin ribao* published diary entries of an elementary-school student named Huang Shuai 黄帅. Zhang Tiesheng and Huang Shuai came to be the spokespersons for the so-called "counter-trend" (*fan chaoliu* 反潮流) in an overhaul of the educational system masterminded by the 'Gang of Four' in 1974.

functions of a horse tail (*ma weiba de gongneng* 马尾巴的功能), only to be ridiculed by his students, most of whom were previously country children and factory workers (*gongnongbing xueyuan* 工农兵学员). This is an episode that has already been incorporated in everyday mythologies from the Cultural Revolution era. It also brings forth an important issue that is not at all unique to the 1970s. This is an issue that has been situated at the center of evolving educational philosophies ever since the earlier twentieth century, that is, how a modern educational system can improve and regenerate itself to better accommodate and negotiate between the call of a centralized authority set on a course of industrialization and the demands and needs of the laboring masses.<sup>33</sup> While this might seem, on the one hand, to be a further reflection of Mao's call for young people to be re-educated by the poor-and-lower-middle peasants, and might also be viewed as part of a further propagandistic attempt to undermine the higher education system, there is, however, in such moments, no hint that the educational system should be done away with altogether. Tertiary education is ridiculed in the film, but at the same time its importance is reaffirmed and brought into the realm of public discussion.

During the mid-1970s, school children returned to their desks and were enjoined to follow Chairman Mao's direction "to study diligently and make progress every day" (*baobao xuexi, tiantian xiangshang* 好好学习, 天天向上).<sup>34</sup> The last image in Gu Bingxin's comic book *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard* portrays the model worker Grandpa Shitou embracing a group of courtyard children. It is a black-and-white version of the cover illustration, the background of which is the famous line in Mao's bold calligraphy calling on students to study hard, an image that appeared repeatedly in media representations and was recreated tirelessly in real life, either inside the entryways of

*yisheng* 赤脚医生), that is, paramedics trained in the field as opposed to university-trained medical professionals, suggesting that classrooms were now located outside the conventional boundaries of established institutions. This was a continuing manifestation of Mao Zedong's directive that young people should walk out of their homes and classrooms into the vast realm of the outside world (*guangkuo tiandi* 广阔天地)—an expression that often referred to the countryside.<sup>32</sup> Compared with classrooms, sun-facing courtyards could for many children be considered the larger outside world. Children raised in the courtyards would also clearly recall a comic episode from the film *Breaking*, in which a university professor is explaining the anatomical

elementary schools or within many sun-facing courtyards (Figure 6). Despite continued disruptions to the revival of pre-1966 educational institutions—they were particularly evident in the much publicized incidents involving Zhang Tiesheng in the northeast and Huang Shuai in Beijing, public sentiment seemed to suggest that existing educational spaces were to be reused and occupied all over again, and not to be abandoned.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, these public sentiments were nowhere to be found in the news media. But they could be detected within the ambivalent positions represented in the 1970s' feature films, even though many of these films were masterminded by Jiang Qing and her cultural cohort. Even *Breaking*, which is considered by the Chinese authorities as being the most representative work of “Gang of Four cinema,” contains a compromise which suggests that a normalization of the educational system began long before the end of the Cultural Revolution, even though the very values of that system were being repeatedly undermined in the broader political culture.

While children went back to their desks and the new imperatives for education were being emphasized, the public political discourse of the time increasingly focused on ways to ensure that children were receiving the ideologically correct kind of education and learning to process political messages in precisely the intended way. A cursory review of the local Shanghai media in 1975–1976 shows how children's film-viewing experiences were being monitored. An itinerant film critics group (*yingping zu* 影评组) was established, possibly unique to Shanghai, and a faint reminder of the city's fascination with cinema during the many years of its pre-revolutionary past.<sup>36</sup> Consisting of employees in local cinemas, model workers who had previously worked in Mao Thought propaganda teams, and model teachers from local normal schools and colleges, the team traveled to sun-facing courtyards throughout the city.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes a work unit would send out its own workers' propaganda team to courtyards to host lectures and discussions on “how to watch a movie the right way.” The goal was to correct the tendency of children to watch films “just for fun” (*baixiangxiang* 白相相 in Shanghai dialect). The fact that many children would imitate the tones and gestures of the villains in films was also perceived as being a serious problem that had to be addressed. As noted earlier, the candy poem in *Stories from a Sun-facing Courtyard* was possibly the most popular tune among children. The film critics' teams had to reinforce the message that to take pleasure in such verses was to miss the correct messages from the films completely. To be lured and corrupted by what Mao had famously called “sugar-coated bullets” (*tangyi paodan* 糖衣炮弹) discharged by class enemies, even if they were only the virtual ones portrayed in movies, was dangerous. They were to be taken as being a real threat, much like the dreaded fashion statement made by the aberrant bell-bottoms mentioned earlier. When watching a film, the media reports insisted, it was crucial to “learn from the heroes and raise [class] awareness” (*xuexi yingxiong, tigao juewu* 学习英雄, 提高觉悟).<sup>38</sup> Such a cultural line expressed an elementary political theory of film and articulated a basic revolutionary aesthetic catering specifically to children. The obvious irony here lies in

<sup>35</sup> This process of normalization was a direct result of a brief revival of Deng Xiaoping's political power in the mid-1970s. Deng pushed for a restoration of the educational system of the pre-Cultural Revolution era and began to promote a process of “four modernizations” during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. See Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and after: a history of the People's Republic* (New York: Free Press, 1999), pp.376–410.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of Shanghai's cinematic culture in the Republican era, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, “The urban milieu of Shanghai cinema,” in *Shanghai modern: the flowering of a new urban culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.82–119.

<sup>37</sup> See “Yingping zu kaijin le xiangyangyuan” [A film comment group heading into a sun-facing courtyard], *Wenbui bao*, 5 August 1975.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

the fact that, despite such corrective measures, the candy verse remains the most vivid, and “real,” moment from that particular film and can be taken to represent how cinema functioned in a quotidian context at a time of extreme politicization, and how a subversive and mischievous childhood could be lived within the ideological confines of a sun-facing courtyard.

### *The Advent of Television*

<sup>39</sup> Some preliminary information on television ownership in the period preceding the Reform era can be found in James Lull, *China turned on: television, reform, and resistance* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.20.

The strictures of a courtyard, that is, its spatial boundaries, proved ideal for another powerful new medium, that of television, one that would see the mass reorganization of both public and private space during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. In the mid-1970s, televisions were still luxury items. Statistically, ownership and access to a TV set were limited to work units and local or street organizations. But the growing importance of televised media in the daily lives of the populace of Shanghai and other Chinese cities did not begin with the Reform era (1978–); rather, in its dying days, Maoist cultural practice and discourse generated a space, a mechanism, and an organization that played a key role in the introduction of the crucial medium of television into Chinese cities and some rural areas. Shanghai was at the forefront of this technological transformation. Contrary to the now prevalent belief that television in China was a product, a witness, and a shaping ideological force of the Reform era, television and its viewing culture were already situated at the center of urban life in the mid-1970s, that is, before the Cultural Revolution was drawn to a close and long before an average family could afford a TV set. This phenomenon cannot be explained by statistics alone.<sup>39</sup> The pre-history of individual TV ownership has to be addressed in terms of the role that television played in organized leisure activities and how the medium shaped individual experiences in a communal setting.

Television took the center stage in leisure life in sun-facing courtyards from the mid-1970s. The moment is captured in a short story written by a collective of writers for the Yangpu 杨浦 District Cultural Center in Shanghai, entitled “Struggles in a Sun-facing Courtyard” (*Xiangyangyuan li de douzheng* 向阳院里的斗争):

This last summer, numerous sun-facing courtyards swiftly lit up every alleyway in the city, like brilliant wildflowers in bloom.

One morning, the deafening sound of gongs and drums sent the Red Star Neighborhood Sun-facing Courtyard into a festive mode. A tricycle was hauled in, filled with books, followed by the retired worker and Communist Party member Uncle Ah Gen, who carefully carried in a television in his arms. He told everyone: “This is a gift from the Party Committee of our neighborhood to our courtyard. Tonight we are going to see a revolutionary model opera, so I welcome you all to come and watch it!” Uncle Ah Gen thought to himself as he walked in: “Our television is an important tool in disseminating Mao Zedong Thought. Everything will work out just fine now! We will use it to

generate lots of revolutionary messages in the politically complex battlefield of our *lilong*."

Children gathered about, all yelling and jumping around the television, beside themselves with anticipation. Even an old lady in her seventies heard the news and rolled her wheelchair over to check out the excitement. She caressed the television with both hands, tears in her eyes. She said: "Things are finally going to be fine now, the revolutionary arts are going to be performed right in our alleyway, and Mao Zedong Thought will be invited right into our homes!" Uncle Ah Gen's little grandson Junjun was maintaining order on the side. He protected the television in case any damage might be done by the over-enthusiastic crowd.<sup>40</sup>

To the arrival of sun-facing courtyards as a new phenomenon in 1970s' socialist China was now added the grand entry of something even more important, a TV. Read today, the story is more about the introduction of a new medium into the everyday lives of people than a cautionary tale about the existence of class struggles even in peaceful times. The whole courtyard is portrayed as being overwhelmed by the joy of acquiring this black-and-white 9-inch magic box. Finally, the community has been given just the right kind of technology to bring everyone and everything together. A new communal space is immediately forged around this magic box, one which obviously has more potency than even the most revered model worker. An illustration accompanying the story depicts the model worker getting together with two child leaders from the courtyard to discuss strategies for winning out against a new form of class struggle that is generated by the introduction of the new medium. The TV set, placed firmly atop a cabinet, perhaps the only decent piece of furniture in a sparsely-furnished room, quietly observes the intense scene (Figure 7). The narrative mode here is familiar, drawing as it does on a style prevalent in all revolutionary children's literature of the time, complete with an old model worker, a little boy, an old grandma, and, as always, a villain. But there is something unique in this otherwise rather predictable story: television is being introduced as a key player and a new site of conflict is identified with the introduction of the new technology.

The introduction of television served to organize a specific block of time and in a specific place that had until then remained unregulated despite numerous waves of social mobilization launched since the 1950s. *Naliang* 纳凉 or *chengliang* 乘凉,

40 *Wenhui bao*, 30 May 1976.

**Figure 7**

*An illustration for the short story "Struggles in a Sun-facing Courtyard," Wenhui bao, 30 May 1976 by Zhang Peichu. The caption reads: "Uncle Ah Gen summoned Junjun and Xiaoyan over to have a discussion ..... then they laid out their plan of action"*



阿根伯就找军军、小燕商量，……  
布置了行动计划。 张培础插图

<sup>41</sup> See "Spend a revolutionized summer break," *Wenhui bao*, 29 July 1975.

<sup>42</sup> *Wenhui bao*, 11 August 1976.

meaning "enjoying the cool breeze outside," was a summer ritual in southern cities like Shanghai. This evening period of leisure was now regarded as a space to be filled as well as a time to be redefined with new meanings. After a day's work or school and supper at home, on hot summer evenings men, women, and children living in various courtyard compounds in the city would mingle in individual courtyards or common alleyways to enjoy the cool evening breeze, to chat, and to exchange stories. The introduction of television served to "occupy the battlefield of summer cooling" (*zhanling naliang zhendi* 占领纳凉阵地) as well as to control a crucial block of time when all "elements" of a community were present.<sup>41</sup>

Other 'revolutionary tactics' were also introduced to further infiltrate the unregulated periods of summer relaxation. One of these is illustrated in another one of Zhang Leping's *xiangyang yuan* comics subtitled "Counter Strategies" (*Zhengfeng xiangdui* 争锋相对). It shows the Shanghai Tiezhu overhearing "feudalistic" tales being told by an apparently "bad element" in the courtyard to a group of adults and children. Tiezhu exposes and drives the villain away, and leads the courtyard population to a revolutionary story-telling session that dramatically transforms the strategic place of summer cooling. The story they listen to is taken from the exemplary model Beijing opera "Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy" (*Zhiqu Weihu shan* 智取威虎山), a work further propagated through repeated TV broadcasts from the mid-1970s.<sup>42</sup>

Television viewing was celebrated as a communal ritual located at the heart of mid-1970s' social mobilization. It was then that television became a ubiquitous element in individual courtyards and local street organizations, though not yet in individual homes. A sun-facing courtyard could not fully justify its existence without a TV set. TV rooms were established one after another in Shanghai courtyards, which became miniature theaters that repeatedly showcased dozens of revolutionary feature films and model films. These communal sites appeared all over the city, and right outside individual homes. The mid-1970s thus witnessed the use of television as a crucial form of visual propaganda, educating, informing, enlightening, controlling, as well as entertaining an already highly organized urban population.

Though television programs have changed drastically from the mid-1970s to the present, and people's viewing habits have changed considerably as well, the last twenty years of Chinese television history has consistently been a history of negotiation between the central government, TV programmers, local governments, and the viewing public. Funded by governments on all levels, organized by a community of viewers, reviewers, and educators, a certain level of public opinion was generated from the time of the introduction of the medium in the 1970s, though initially there appeared to be little difference between these constituencies.

It is intriguing to ponder the fact that neither children nor adults ever appeared to tire of watching the same films and programs night after night. Children in particular seemed to be fascinated by an endless reproduction of enjoyable moments in the televised shows. Repetition did not seem to



work to reinforce intended messages; on the contrary, repetition served to deplete the obvious meanings, tease out the hidden contradictions, and generate subtle departures from the officially-ordained audio-visual texts. Watching television in the mid-1970s might indeed be entertaining if viewers—adults or children—could memorize words and scenes from programs shown repeatedly, crack jokes, and evoke laughter amongst a highly-informed audience that was profoundly familiar with the cultural repertoire presented to it. The meanings of what they viewed were most probably twisted, and words were often lifted out of the context to suggest something entirely new to these insider viewers.

### *Conclusion*

In a period when it mainly served as a mediating force for the central authorities, television ironically provided one crucial realm where that power could be undermined or ridiculed. The 1970s' city-wide festivity in Shanghai was not imagined or reconstructed. It should be viewed as a celebration of departures from intended meanings, a shift away from what had become a highly politicized (and weary) society. The vibrant urban communal culture made possible by the creation of the sun-facing courtyards signified the downfall of an entire era even before it officially came to an end. In other words, the process of depoliticization took place at the height of the mass cultural movement of the mid-1970s.

In one recent memoir essay, the author Huang Yihai 黄沂海 recalls the intimate atmosphere within a sun-facing courtyard and the favorite activities shared by its residents:

Just when I was about to leave my alleyway home, a TV set managed by our sun-facing courtyard began to take the center stage of our leisure life. With its unrivaled magic power, the TV created a sweet illusion that faraway places could be brought within reach. The presence of a TV set continuously enlivened the evening chats when courtyard residents got together to enjoy the cool summer breeze. New scenes and meanings were generated in an old ritual ...<sup>43</sup>

Here the author brushes aside the fact that the mid-1970s' spatial mobilization was meant to impose a systematic control on the residents, one that organized their leisure and occupied private spaces. In this writer's reminiscences, the regulated space of summer cooling became deregulated. The residents quietly took back their homes and courtyards. A personal history of coming of age eclipses the political history of the urban courtyard and the words and images it housed. Perhaps representative of a generation of urban residents who came of age during the last few years of the Cultural Revolution, this particular author chose to memorialize an era of political repression as one of brightness and opportunities. This process of reshaping personal histories must have begun even in the midst of the era, while the

<sup>43</sup> Huang Yihai, "Laoshi naliang" [Old-style summer cooling], *Xinmin wanbao*, 1 September 1999.

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tumultuous political events were still unfolding. When minds began to wander away from the intended meanings of officially-ordained audio-visual texts, and when everyday conversations traveled to places outside sanctioned territories, the central authorities' attempt to infiltrate and organize the private finally collapsed. The waning years of the turbulent Cultural Revolution era, the brief moment of lasting festivity crystallized in the activities in and around the sun-facing courtyards prepared the ground for a process of remembering, forgetting, reconstructing, and reinventing.

EAST ASIAN HISTORY 25/26 (2003)