* how it fits in the work of the director
* how it fits in the genre

**Movie title, director's name, year of production, length (minutes)**

[Zhang Yuan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang_Yuan)张 元－ ***Little Red Flowers*** 看上去很美 （2006）

* **Introduction (director; general interest (incl. to Medical and Health Humanities)**

In the spirit of his directorial debut, *Mama* (1991), about a disabled child and his mother, Zhang Yuan’s 2006 feature film returns to the theme of the plight of marginalised children. His second adaptation of a popular novel by Wang Shuo, *Could be Beautiful* (the first being the 2003 *I Love You*), the semi-autobiographical story of four-year old Qiangqiang reflects his recurring concern for individuals in trouble with Chinese socialist conventions of the late twentieth century. Similar narratives can be found playing out in *Beijing Bastards* (1993) and in *Sons* a film about a dysfunctional family with a father confined to a psychiatric institution and his increasingly alcoholic and disorderly sons. In *Little Red Flowers* these tensions between individual and community are intimately portrayed and satirised through the necessity of forming good and timely personal habits, and the difficulties of negotiating space for personal expression.

* **Synopsis/plot**

Qiangqiang has been abandoned to a Beijing residential nursery by a faceless father and a mother working out of town. Bed-wetting and unable to dress himself, he has a hard time conforming to the daily rhythms and regulations of the institution’s conditions. His domestic and hygienic behavior is found wanting by all around him who are invested in the school’s strict regimen and efficient operation. The ‘little red flowers’ of the title refer to the much-coveted rewards given to students who successfully subordinate themselves to the local discipline. Qiangqiang’s b seemingly obstinate behaviours mean that he soon alienates his more conformist playmates and attracts the anger and censure of the long suffering headmistress, Mrs Li. Qiang’s own suffering and alienation emerge in an instinctual, rather than intentional defiance, which emerges in playground conflicts, in appropriating ‘little red flower’ as contraband, and the determination to control the timing of his own bowel movements.

**Cinematography and the Medical Humanities themes**

Told effortlessly through the interactions of the children themselves, and the children and their guardians, the film is nevertheless a serious reflection on the struggle for independent action and creativity in a 1980s? China undergoing profound social change. Fairly traditional in its shooting techniques, the establishing ariel shot draws us in to a dilapidated Qing courtyard, where the parentless children are themselves the little red flowers playing in the ruins of former imperial splendor – the collective apparently triumphing against privilege. Yet the camera moves at a very slow pace in the nursery to give a sense of the repressed atmosphere deliberately inculcated by the staff to maintain that group harmony; and then speeds up a little when the children are planning various unpredictable forms of insurrection, and then a great deal with intense action such as the inevitable bullying, or to create a sense of confusion amidst the pandemonium and cacophony of random-running-around. Fast circling shots are used to set the errant child apart from the dominant majority and its group acts of suppression, ridicule and humiliation – increasing the sense of loneliness and confusion. Distant shots spying on the child, or turned on the teacher from behind windows and fences intensify the distances between the protagonists, and create suspicion and suspense. Still, there are moments of tenderness, of connection with the other children, even with the teachers, and they are not all unfeeling, nor uniformly strict. There is no explicit corporal punishment, and with what must be three carers to forty children we might feel some sympathy for the adults! This is not one of the horrendous orphanages that were the butt of international media attention a decade or two ago.

Where space is at a premium – the children are barracked up in their cradles nose to nose, head to toe – what room is there for independent action? As a microcosm of the state, bottom wiping in the nursery is a military exercise performed to the whistle, an homology given explicit visual form as the children march in crocodile fashion past the soldiers on drill. But Qiangqiang runs in the opposite direction, always seeking out places and spaces to move in his own way, piss in his own time. The natural environment acts as a foil for the nursery endorsing his quest for freedom: the child walks alone in the snow, the wind blows his hair as he gallops on the makeshift merry-go-round horse, he escapes at night into the rain.

Where *Sons* used real life members of the dysfunctional family, in Zhang’s now familiar documentary style, in *Little Red Flowers* he draws out impressively naturalistic performances from the child actors no doubt faithfully capturing their own games, conflicts, and moments of introspection, rather than totally manufacturing the narrative. In fact there is very little narrative development, except to say that the final shot finds Qiangqiang intentionally isolating himself in the nearby temple gardens. We leave him curled up alone in a palatial, but barren, stone room, and wonder about what the future will bring for a child without friends, in a state of uncertainty. Zhang’s film capitalises on all the charm of well trained child actors, has a gooey sound track, and all the nostalgia of a cultural revolution setting in an outpost of the Forbidden City, yet somehow manages not to betray its deeper messages about how individuals negotiate the state demands for conformity, then as now.

**Points for Discussion**

* the condition of abandoned children in China
* the individual potential for expression in a socialist state
* the state reach into individual and collective lives through public health hygiene
* ways of asserting independence
* gender and childhood

- the role of documentary film in the depiction of Chinese reality

- perceptions of childhood in China

- inclusion or exclusion

- the state relationship with and responsibilities for children

- how does Zhang Yuan’s film figure in the changing nature of Chinese documentaries

- how does the film depict desperation?

**Links to articles, websites, reviews**

http://v.youku.com/v\_show/id\_XMTc3MzM1ODc0NA==.html?from=s1.8-1-1.2&spm=a2h0k.8191407.0.0

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghOad7MKzfo**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghOad7MKzfo)

**The Director**

Zhang Yuan (1963) is considered by many to be the helmsman of the Chinese documentary movement. Besides *Mama,* his first documentary, we would like to mention among others, *Beijing Bastards* (Beijing zazhong, 1993), *The Square* (Guangchang, 1994) on Tian’anmen square, *Sons* (Erzi, 1996) on dysfunctional families and alcoholism, *East Palace West Palace* (1997), his first feature film based on a novel by Wang Xiaobo, and *Seventeen years* (Guonian huijia, 1999).

Another set of pages on Genre to come somwhere

**Independent Documentary Movement in China**

“Any attempt to understand China’s visual culture today must start from an understanding of the New Documentary Movement.” Chris Berry.

The development of the now 25-year-old wave of new Chinese documentary film-making (and documentary-influenced fiction) has paralleled the nation's emergence as an economic powerhouse. There's been a lot of interest in this movement because the documentaries are made largely outside the state system, so they reflect a more independent and realistic point of view than that of the government.

*Mama* helped kick-start the Sixth Generation of filmmakers (including Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke) and their ethos of employing documentary realism to depict the true conditions of contemporary China.

**For additional information on the Chinese documentary movement:**

<http://dgeneratefilms.com/academia/chris-berry-on-the-new-chinese-documentary-movement>

Additional readings:

**Paul G. Pickowitz, Yingjin Zhang eds. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, Rowman and Littlefield Publ. Inc., 2006.**

**Chris Berry, Xinyu Lu, Lisa Rofel eds. *The New Chinese Documentary Movement: For the Public Record*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010.**

**Zhang Ying**

**in *Cinema, Space and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* esp. chapters. 5 (Space of Subjectivity: Independent Documentary) and 6 (Space of Performance: Media and Mediation), University of Hawaii Press, 2010.**

**Maybe we can get clips from director**

Arrival 2.18

Hair 5.24

Hygiene to a whistle: 10.22

Insurrection 11.53

Red flower16.30 18 29

Clothes 23.20

Collusion

Military training 38.20

Escape 1.24