

LITTLE RED FLOWERS 看上去很美
Kàn shàng qù hén měi (Could be Beautiful)

Director Zhang Yuan 张元, 2005. 92 min

Based on the semi-autobiographical novel by Wang Shuo 王朔, 1999



Best Director (Beijing Student Film Festival; Eurasian International FF. Pacific Meridian International FF of Asia Pacific Countries); **Film of Merit** (Shanghai Film Critics)
Best Adapted Screenplay (Golden Horse); **Postimes Jury Prize** (Tallinn Black Nights FF).
International Confederation of Art Cinemas Award (Berlin Film Festival).

Setting

During the decade following the 1949 founding of the Peoples Republic of China, in the early days of socialist education for New China, zealous educators focused on training young children to be obedient citizens of the new society. Although traditional Chinese society subordinated the needs of individuals to the smooth functioning of the family, Mao's revolutionary ideology encouraged extremes of authoritarian state control.

Gender equality under the new constitution mandated that both men and women worked. With both parents employed, boarding schools, even for very young children, were not uncommon. Schools for children of Party cadres were expected to be particularly strong models of socialist education. This film follows a school's highly organized and tightly managed day-to-day activities, designed to mold the children into model citizens in a collective society.

Split pants and group synchronization of toilet habits may seem bizarre to Western audiences, but they are traditional in China where most children are reasonably well potty-trained by 6-12 months of age by means of a process awkwardly translated as 'elimination communication' 排泄沟通 *páixiè gōutōng*. The caretaker(s) observes and responds to the infant's bodily signals, holds him/her over an appropriate receptacle, accompanies the child's performance with a consistent sound or gesture, and rewards the child with praise, hugs, and kisses. Eventually the caretaker can cue the child using the associated sound or gesture. Split-pants free a toddler or small child to 'do their business' when they need to. In schools, group trips to the toilet (as well as regular mealtimes and sleep schedules) are simply an extension of this attuning of bodily rhythms to the smooth functioning of the social group.

Little Red Flowers is based on a semi-autobiographical novel by Wang Shuo 王朔 (b. 1958), one of China's most irreverent and popular contemporary writers. Performances by the very young actors strain belief in this charming, poetic, and painful struggle between authoritarian control and resistance to it.

The Narrative

Four-year old **Fang Qiangqiang** is brought to a kindergarten boarding school in Beijing for children of Party cadres. His grandmother is moving, **his father** is a pilot, and his mother works for a ministry in a different city. They are greeted by **Ms. Li**, the head teacher, and **Ms. Tang**, a younger teacher to whom falls the task of orienting young Qiang. Right away Qiang is given a haircut (so he won't get lice) and to his chagrin, his small pigtail is cut off. He washes his hands with the other children and learns to raise his right hand in the dining hall to ask for more food.

Very quickly, Qiang learns that good behavior and conformity win ‘little red flowers’ that are posted on a board next to each child’s name. Each day will bring 5 opportunities to win red flowers for good performance in such activities as dressing and undressing himself, washing his hands, performing in the toilet. In Qiang’s imagination he dreams of red flowers going up beside his name.

At first Qiang tries to do what is expected of him, but can’t quite manage to be successful. He finds himself excluded by the other children and constantly on the wrong side of Teacher Li, who is blind to his anguish and responds quickly and decisively to any suspected recalcitrance. Qiang develops friendship with two girls: **Nanyan** and **Beiyan** who has the bed next to his.

Qiang’s failure to earn little red flowers brings out his rebellious nature. He begins acting out by bullying other kids, creating havoc in the playroom, and cursing. What is even more disruptive is the way his rebellious behavior resonates with other children’s inner feelings and empowers their collective mischief.

Director: Zhang Yuan 张元 (b. 1963, Nanjing)

Zhang Yuan graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1989, the year of the Tiananmen student demonstrations. He rejected the opportunity to work with state-owned studios and chose to work as an independent filmmaker. With his debut film *Beijing Bastards* 北京杂种 (1993), Zhang emerged as a leading member of the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers whose work emphasizes the effects of Chinese economic and social conditions on the inner lives of contemporary Chinese people, particularly urban youth and marginalized populations. He has produced a wide range of award-winning dramatic and documentary films, some of which have brought him into conflict with the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television. *East Palace West Palace* 东宫西宫 (1997) was the first mainland Chinese movie to directly address gay culture. Films that passed the censors include *Seventeen Years* 过年回家(1999), *Crazy English* 疯狂英语(1999), and *Green Tea* 绿茶(2003).

YouTube Search: “我 11 Eleven Flowers 2012 DVDRip XviD” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldUARuCAxQ>
For English subtitles: click on the cog wheel. Next click on “subtitles off”. Next click on ‘English’. Box will appear “Subtitles English” and English subtitles will appear superimposed with subtitles of another foreign language (Polish?). Click somewhere else and the black box will disappear. It’s odd but you quickly adapt_