

CONFUCIAN AND COOL

China's Youth in Transition

By Robert Moore and James Rizor

Kicking Bird could be considered Qingdao University's first hippie, at least if one were to judge him by his appearance. He had shoulder-length hair and made a point of publicly protesting the university's rules on grooming.¹ That was 1994, and even though young Chinese who looked like Kicking Bird could be found in Beijing and Shanghai at that time, they were all but non-existent in provincial cities like Qingdao. In fact, given the conservative grooming of most young Chinese at the time, Kicking Bird's appearance was striking to say the least.

His inspiration came from Hollywood. He had seen the Kevin Costner film *Dances with Wolves* and, having been mightily impressed with a Sioux Indian character in that film, had dropped his Chinese name in favor of the character's and let his hair grow to shoulder length. The university officials were aghast at his behavior and told him that until he conformed to a more conservative appearance, he wouldn't be allowed back on campus. Kicking Bird was saved by what might be called the parent-child bond of an enduring Confucian mindset—his parents stood up for him and forced the university to back down. We can regard young Kicking Bird as emblematic of the inroads that American popular culture began to make in China once the barriers to outside influences were brought down by the post-Mao reforms initiated in 1978.

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Today, China is host to a youth culture that is changing rapidly, so rapidly that every description should be read as couched in qualifiers like, "As of now" or "For the time being." In fact, the varying strands of this culture make use of the singular suspect in describing it; we would be safer to talk of China's youth *cultures*. Many young Chinese of the new millennium are, on the surface, surprisingly similar to their counterparts in America and elsewhere, while at the same time maintaining a distinctly Chinese undercurrent of values. This undercurrent can be traced back to the earliest versions of Chinese civilization.

What we hope to present here is a brief description of where China's youth and student cultures stand today, and how they have been shaped by forces of the past. Almost all of our interviews with young Chinese took place in urban areas, and, though some of those we interviewed had grown up in rural areas, our data is more pertinent to urban rather than rural China. Again, we would emphasize that the young people of China are diverse enough in their socio-economic backgrounds, their ethnicity, and their communities of origin that we cannot capture contemporary youth culture in terms of a single essential type. Still, despite the diversity evident in this cohort, the adolescents and young adults who shape and participate in China's youth cultures account for about a fifth of that nation's total population. Three hundred million young people, with access to disposable income greater than that of any previous generation, are bound to be a force for change in the immediate future.

YOUTH IN THE REFORM ERA

As the young people of China have experienced the rapid changes characterizing the past few decades, they have made increasingly pronounced distinctions between “modernization” and “Westernization.” There was a long period, starting in earnest with China’s early youth rebellion—the 1919 May Fourth Movement—when things Western were considered, almost by definition, to be modern and therefore sought after. Today, however, based partly on the influence of Japanese and Korean youth cultures, and partly on the growing self-confident nationalism of the young Chinese themselves, modernity is no longer conceived simply in terms of what Americans and other Westerners are doing. But this is a distinction that has not always been made.

Since 1980, rapid, Western-influenced change became the new “normal” in China, particularly for China’s younger generation. By the end of the 1980s, young Chinese made the music, clothing, and grooming styles of Westerners their own. American movies and televised sports rapidly gained popularity, as did certain American television shows, such as *Growing Pains*.

Although the 1980s brought American and other Western cultural styles to the attention of young Chinese, it was during the 1990s that the international floodgates truly opened. By then, posters of Michael Jordan, Madonna, and Michael Jackson could be found in cities all over China, and Chinese rock music, performed by Cui Jian, Tang Dynasty, and other Chinese groups, packed concert halls with young fans, or *fensi* as they came to be called in Mandarin.

By the mid-1990s, a new and powerful medium was added to the other sources of Western influence on young Chinese: the Internet. Internet cafes began to appear in Chinese cities and their clientele consisted almost exclusively of adolescents and young adults. The Internet brought young Chinese into closer contact with Westerners and Western-influenced Japanese and Koreans, but just as significantly, it brought Chinese into contact with each other. A prominent feature of young Chinese Internet use then, as now, was the chat room, a site where young people could share ideas with relatively little parental interference. The rapid expansion of cell phone use and text messaging has had a similar effect.

The Internet is such a popular forum for young Chinese that it serves as a kind of arena in which new words and expressions are born and popularized. For example, the number 520 originated on the Web as code for “I love you” among young Chinese chat room users by virtue of the similarity in pronunciation between this number and the Mandarin phrase “*Wo ai ni*,” or “I love you.” Also, “eighty-eight,” pronounced *baba*, now symbolizes bye-bye or good-bye, and the abbreviations “mm” and “gg” refer respectively to *meimei* (little sister or, the homophonic phrase “lovely eyebrow”) and *gege* (big brother). These terms are slang for, respectively, cute girl and cute guy. This language is commonly referred to as Web speech, or *wangluo yuyan*, and is one of the most productive sources of neologisms for young Chinese today.



Cui Jian is often referred to as the “The Father of Chinese Rock.”

Image source: the *Rock in China* Wiki Web site at http://wiki.rockinchina.com/index.php?title=Cui_Jian.



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Chinese Internet users use cameras to chat online at an Internet cafe in Yichang city, central China’s Hubei Province, March 2008.

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A SECOND CULTURAL REVOLUTION

During the 1990s, China can be said to have experienced a second cultural revolution. Its impact has actually been more enduring than the one launched by Chairman Mao in the 1960s, and its effects have been in some ways the direct opposite of those the Chairman was seeking. Where the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution sought to eradicate individualistic striving, the 1990s youth culture revolution was all about individualism. Individualism, for the generation coming of age around the turn of the new millennium, was cool, or, as they say in Mandarin, “*ku*.” *Ku* (“cruel” in standard Chinese) was unknown as a slang term before 1995, but as Internet cafes emerged, it became one of the most commonly used youth slang terms of the new generation. By the end of the 1990s, practically every young Chinese was familiar with it, though most of their parents were not. Most young Chinese first encountered this word on the Web, often through contacts with Hong Kong or Taiwanese youth, who in turn had adopted it in imitation of the sound of the English word “cool.”²

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But the Chinese who came of age in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century not only adopted *ku*, they also adapted it, shaping its meaning to their own purposes. Cool in its original African-American context had suggested a laid back, emotionally controlled quality. But for young Chinese, *ku* also came to symbolize the new youth culture value of individualism, to which it is semantically linked by virtue of two key images. One kind of *ku* person is the strong, silent, but fundamentally benevolent male hero, the type often played by Chow Yun-fat in action films. In fact, a number of young Chinese point to Chow when asked to identify the ideal *ku* persona. The other image of *ku*, less gender-specific but equally individualistic, is the stylishly and flamboyantly dressed rock star or rock fan. The *ku* quality of this type, rather than being emotionally subdued, is bold, modern, and individualistic, sometimes outrageously so. As one young woman explained in an email message, “[*Ku*] is rather a kind of style—new, independent, unique—meaning it is different from the classical, and different from the ordinary, yet in no way low tasted.”

Ku, in other words, is emblematic of the new spirit of individualism that is a crucial defining quality of the millennial generation. The parents of this generation, survivors of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, had seen their individualistic expression snuffed out through systematic suppression. But for young Chinese today individualism is considered “*ku*.” It is in fact a key factor in China’s current generation gap. A powerful force behind this growth of individualism is the changing nature of China’s economy. Today most jobs are no longer assigned by the state, and competition for employment has become an important fact of life for young Chinese. Furthermore, the *danwei*, or work unit, does not control the lives of its members the way it once did. Many young employees actually change jobs and even move to a new city, often far from their family’s traditional rural home.



Models display the latest creations of Von Dutch during the 2007 Summer Collection Fashion show in Shanghai. Image courtesy of ImagineChina. ©2007 ImagineChina.

INDIVIDUALISM IN OTHER ARENAS: FILM

The evidence of young China's emerging individualism is not restricted to newly coined slang terms; it is everywhere. For one thing, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Kicking Bird would not attract attention with his shoulder-length hair, given that every imaginable hairstyle has now made its way to urban China. And, since the 1990s, popular writers have been spinning their own novelistic versions of an individualistic and anti-social underground youth culture. The best known of these works of fiction were the writings of Wang Shuo (whose rough, colloquial style has been compared to Jack Kerouac's),

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Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baobei* (*Shanghai Baby*, 1999) and Mian Mian's *Candy* (2000). The latter two books were widely read by young Chinese, even though they were banned by government censors. Each told its story from the protagonist's viewpoint, highlighting drug use, casual sexuality, and other behaviors that flew in the face of traditional social mores. In fact, the scenes of explicit sexuality and drug use would give many American parents pause were their teenage children to delve into these confessional tales. The illicit underground culture portrayed in these novels was not invented by the authors; it already existed in urban China, and continues to exist. Although it is a small part of China's youth culture, the fascination of mainstream young readers for this forbidden realm is notable.

Recently, Chinese film directors have also contributed significantly to young China's newly individualistic spirit. Zhang Yang's 2002 film, *Quitting*, offers one example of this spirit. It tells of the struggle with heroin addiction by the young Chinese actor, Jia Hongsheng. Jia plays himself in this remarkable biographical film, as do his parents and other acquaintances. A striking feature of *Quitting* is its focus on the struggles of an individual who has pit himself against his family and every other institution Chinese society has to offer.

Other contemporary directors focus similarly on clashes between individuals and mainstream society. Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) portrays the aimless and destructive lives of a group of young hooligans during the Cultural Revolution. Zhang Yuan's *East Palace West Palace* (1996) explores the tribulations of a young gay man held overnight in a Beijing police station. Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000) spins a tragic yarn of obsessive love in Shanghai's underworld. These directors helped shape the individualistic spirit of modern China by rejecting the broad historical dramas of such predecessors as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige and focusing intensely on stories whose power comes from intimate revelations of the protagonists' inner lives.

Young Chinese since the 1990s have had easy access to foreign fiction films, and these have helped shape contemporary youth culture. The names of Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg have been widely known among young Chinese since then, and their words are sometimes quoted in the youth-oriented novels of writers like Wei Hui and Mian Mian. Cui Jian, the PRC's first famous individual rock star, is sometimes referred to as China's Bob Dylan.

There is a thriving market in DVDs, many of which are pirated editions and all of which are remarkably inexpensive. Even the latest American or international film can be purchased for one or two US dollars. Most films are watched on computer screens at home or in a dorm room. To see a movie in a theater in China costs about fifty yuan (roughly US \$7.00), and this is more than most are prepared to spend, particularly given the easy access to up-to-date DVD copies. Consequently, there are relatively few movie theaters in China, since they are not the arena for incubating romantic relationships that they have been for young Americans.

INDIVIDUALISM AND THE FAMILY

Though young Chinese are living in a world in which individualism has secured a foothold, it can't be forgotten that China is a nation with a 5,000-year history, a history which is a powerful source of pride. A basic ethical premise underlying this historical tradition is that the family is more important than the individual, which means there are limits on how far young Chinese can go in expressing themselves as independent agents. Youth in the new century carefully negotiate the uncharted waters between the entrenched tradition of filial devotion (*xiaoshun*) and the emerging celebration of the individual.

Chinese adolescents and young adults still defer to their parents on a wider range of matters than do young Americans. This is apparent where educational and career plans are concerned, and in other areas such as boyfriend-girlfriend relations. In fact, most Chinese parents discourage their children from

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having any romantic involvements during their middle and high school years, and teachers usually support parents on this point. In the early 1990s, parents and teachers were even more aggressive in telling adolescents that they must not involve themselves in romantic affairs while in middle or high school. In that era, stories about parents demanding that their child break off a budding relationship were common. But, as the decade progressed, and with increasing influence from Western youth culture, adolescents resisted their parents' injunctions with steadily increasing success. Today high school romances are not rare. When we asked high school students to estimate the proportion of their classmates who were involved in romantic affairs, the responses we received ranged from ten to fifty percent. The variation here may indicate different rates at different schools (the better schools tend to report lower rates) or simply differences in the perceptions of our respondents. In any case, the widespread taboo on adolescent romance has faded. Until the mid-1990s, even university student romances were discouraged by the authorities. During that decade, a new attitude emerged among professors and administrators, one that amounted to "Don't ask, don't tell." As of this writing, student romances on Chinese university campuses have become common, though perhaps not quite as common as they are on American campuses. There is still a relative conservatism about romantic relationships among university students, and many Chinese still refer to their parents' greater experience as a good reason for consulting with them on matters of romance and mate selection.³

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL ACHIEVERS

Secondary school life in China has a number of features that make it quite distinct from the US. Many Chinese public schools have dormitories, since students generally attend the best school they can get into, rather than the school closest to their home. Those who live in dormitories often form their closest friendships with their roommates, since the same group of four or more students will room together through all their school years. Americans who attend boarding schools, and those at the university level, understand what it's like to have a total stranger assigned as a roommate. What Americans might consider less than ideal is sharing a single, somewhat crowded dorm room with three or more such strangers, and being expected to stay with the same group in the same room over a period of three or more years.

Chinese middle and high school students are more hard-working than most of their American counterparts. This is especially true for students in their final year of high school who are preparing for the all-important national university entrance exam or *gaokao*. This fiercely competitive exam is given to high school graduates all over China in July, and the grade a student receives determines the university he or she will be able to attend. To an extent, even the choice of major depends on this exam grade. Chinese universities do not allow students to choose their major course of study without restriction. Some majors attract more applicants than they can accept, and this is particularly true of

those that lead to careers that promise prosperity, such as International Business, English, and Japanese. Most young Chinese accept the idea that they need to dedicate long, hard hours to study in high school—so much so that high school studies are widely regarded as more grueling and demanding than anything students will face at the university level.

Though China has expanded its universities to accommodate a larger student population than in the past, most of China's high school graduates still will not be able to attend a university. The *gaokao*, like many exams in the Chinese educational system, requires an immense amount of memorization—so much that nobody can expect to answer every question correctly. Consequently, those who want to excel feel there is no limit to the number of hours they can dedicate to the memorization of exam materials. For the most dedicated students, virtually every evening during the school year is spent not watching television or hanging out with friends, but immersed in study.

Serious students often take extra classes after regular school hours to give them an even greater advantage in the competition. A typical day for these students consists of sitting in the classroom for seven



Shixi Middle School students smile before they take their university entrance exam in Shanghai, June 2003.
Image courtesy of ImagineChina. ©2008 ImagineChina.

or eight hours, then going to more classes after school, and finally going home or back to the dormitory, and opening the books for yet another round of study. The studying may continue until the student falls asleep, and in fact, a common complaint made by high school students is that they never get adequate sleep.

Clearly, university-bound students in China have limited social lives. Their friends are usually those with whom they share a dorm room or a class. They have less time to indulge in leisure activities than do American students, and much of their socializing occurs at meal times or during group study sessions. Extracurricular activities do not flourish in Chinese secondary schools. Compared to American students, who have the time and resources to play sports, watch television, go to the movies, and simply hang out with friends, Chinese students preparing for the university entrance exam indulge in such things only sparingly. One result of this is that many Chinese students describe their lives as uninteresting compared to the lives of their American counterparts. The proliferation of student types that has characterized American high schools in the late twentieth century, such as Goths, band geeks, jocks, etc., is absent in China. Interestingly, most Chinese high school students say that the American system is preferable to their own, not simply because it offers more leisure opportunities, but because they have doubts about the value of the memorization required of them for their exams.

Those students who do engage in activities other than study often dedicate themselves to activities that are demanding and enriching rather than merely relaxing. One senior we interviewed at High School 101

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in Beijing, for example, had made a couple of films in her senior year. One was a documentary on student life, the other was her own version of the John Woo thriller *Internal Affairs*, a production that relied on her classmates to play the various parts. This extracurricular activity did not prevent her from scoring well enough on the university entrance exam to get into People's University, one of China's best. Other university-bound students were accomplished musicians, or had spent time studying such career-enhancing languages as Japanese or Korean, in addition to the English that most of them master as a matter of course.

One reason for the dedication of Chinese students to their studies is their sense of obligation to their parents. Here is where the influence of the Confucian tradition has a powerful and enduring impact on the lives of young Chinese. Many of the parents of these students had no opportunity to get an education when they were growing up because schools were shut down during the Cultural Revolution. As adults, those in the Cultural Revolution generation have dedicated themselves to earning enough money to support their children's education, living very frugally all the while. Today's students are aware of the sacrifices their parents have made for them, and most of them carry a strong sense of obligation to live up to their parents' expectations. These students often explain their willingness to dedicate their own youthful lives to endless hours of study by citing an obligation to their parents. Also, China's one-child policy resulted in the entire millennial generation consisting mainly of only children, and this adds to the pressures they feel. Since there are no brothers or sisters to whom they will be able to look to for help as adults, they will be expected to care for their aging parents by themselves or with a spouse who also has aging parents. China's only children may seem like "Little Emperors" today, but their reign carries heavy long-term responsibilities.⁴



November 2008, crowds of Chinese college students queue up for the registration of the 2009 National Postgraduate Examination at a registration center in Hefei city, east China's Anhui Province.

Image courtesy of ImagineChina.
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Young man with a tattoo.
Image courtesy of ImagineChina. ©2008 ImagineChina.

THE REBELS

There are some young Chinese who do not dedicate their lives to study. These students we refer to as “the rebels,” given that their behavior sets them in direct opposition to society’s authority figures. In the eyes of these rebels, their more studious classmates have sacrificed their freedom for dubious goals, goals that imply a desire to rise in the social hierarchy. The rebels look down on such striving, not only because it involves an unacceptable sacrifice of one’s freedom, but also because it shows a desire to rise above one’s classmates. For many of China’s rebellious students, i.e., those not focused on the university entrance exam, friendship should come before status striving. This attitude seems more typical of working class than of middle class youth. There is an interesting parallel between these rebellious young Chinese and those students described as “Burnouts” by Penelope Eckert in her study of a Detroit high school. Eckert distinguished two broad categories of students: Jocks—status conscious strivers who conformed to the demands of the school, and Burnouts—who saw themselves as more mature and more loyal to their friends than the ever-striving Jocks.⁵

One high school graduate we interviewed in July 2008, exemplifies some of the values and attitudes of the rebels. Yang Ming, now in his twenties, not only illustrates the rebel type, he also shows how American youth culture continues to influence China’s youth.⁶ In his case, the influential American prototype is what some refer to as “gangsta” style. He has large tattoos of winged figures on each of his forearms, and when we met him, he was wearing a skullcap and an ostentatious metal necklace. A long chain dangled from his blue jeans. Yang Ming works as a video game seller now, but when he talks of his high school years, he emphasizes that he was not willing to conform to the standards offered by his teachers.

“I wanted my freedom,” he said, “so I didn’t spend much time studying.”

Yang Ming and other rebels sometimes refer to their studious classmates as *shudaizi*, a disparaging term that translates literally as “book fool.” Sometimes, he says, if a *shudaizi* got on his nerves, he and his friends would resort to physical violence or intimidation to settle the matter. Yang Ming is a classic example of a type that is deftly characterized in the autobiographical novels of the popular author Wang Shuo, a type that is distinctly different from the great majority of young Chinese we interviewed.⁷

REBEL VALUES: FRIENDSHIP & LOYALTY

Rebels like Yang Ming value friendship above competitive striving. When we asked him what kinds of people he knew as a high school student, he divided his acquaintances into those who “were real men, who would stick up for their friends in a tight spot,” and those who might talk big, but could not be counted

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on. The rebels approve of their classmates who seem ready for the working world, as opposed to the *shudaizi* who know only what they find in books. This value contrast also matches what Eckert wrote about Burnouts and their attitude toward the Jocks in the Detroit school she studied.

Some rebel students talked about romantic affairs in ways that indicated they saw them as further evidence of their maturity, as opposed to the innocence and immaturity they attributed to their more studious classmates. According to one rebel, dating is a way to say “we’re done with being children who concentrate only on books; we’re ready for more serious activities such as complicated emotional relationships.”

As in Eckert’s Detroit high school, smoking in Chinese schools is seen as a symbol of rebellion. Smoking signifies maturity and independence, though during school it has to be done in secret, since it is prohibited on school grounds. Even at the university level, student smoking is discouraged. Few of our university student acquaintances smoked, and the general attitude was that smoking is an adult-only

activity, something to indulge in only after graduation. One effect of this attitude is to enhance the power of smoking as a symbol of the rebel. In American schools, smoking is also considered a rebellious symbol, but even more so is alcohol consumption. This is not the case in China. As in most countries, adolescents are allowed to drink beer, wine, or other alcoholic beverages, and they typically do so in family contexts. Therefore, young Chinese do not indulge in the “no-adults-allowed” parties typical of American student culture, where alcohol is illegally consumed (as sometimes are drugs) and flamboyantly reckless behavior is regarded as an expression of freedom.

The student rebels, in a way, seem to adhere to traditional respect for the family in much the same way that the studious adolescents do. Like the student achievers, the rebels seem to have relatively open and benevolent relations with their parents. Since much of the “rebel” behavior is acceptable in the adult working class world (i.e., smoking, acquiring street smarts, putting friendship above status striving), it doesn’t appear to be a basis for intergenerational conflict. It would appear that the ancient sense of the importance of the family transcends class boundaries for most young Chinese, just as it manages to endure in the face of the new individualism.

CONCLUSION

China’s youth culture today resembles that of most industrialized countries in that it can best be described as “in transition.” At the same time, there are underlying values that are distinctive. China has a deeply entrenched Confucian family system, and, though young Chinese are more individualistic and independent than ever, they are still “Confucian” where the family is concerned. In particular, they are more keenly aware of their filial obligations and their indebtedness to their parents than are typical young Americans.

Given the prominence of Chairman Mao as a shaper of twentieth century China’s history, it is surprising to see how little Maoist values influence Chinese youth today. The millennial generation Chinese today focus on several arenas: Most of them follow popular music, and increasing numbers are spending some of their evenings at the bars and clubs where bands like the Carsick Cars, The Retros, Joyside, PK-14, and others perform. Many of them also follow clothing fashions and various aspects of pop culture. They are at the same time deeply imbued with family values, and many are determined to get rich, partly out of a sense of obligation to their families. They also tend to be proudly nationalistic and have taken particular pride in Beijing’s successful hosting of the 2008 Olympics. In fact, in Beijing in the summer of 2008, clusters of uniformed students serving as guides or volunteers in support of the Olympics could be seen everywhere. These youngsters are not really “Communist” in their outlook. Though students are required to study Marxist theory, and those who are ambitious will often join the Communist Party, Marxist ideology carries virtually no weight with them. It is as though the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that drastically disrupted and shaped the lives of their parents was nothing more than a passing storm. The enduring forces that young Chinese continue to respond to are those rooted in their famously ancient culture, and those recently brought to their shores by the fast-paced and commercially driven popular culture of the West. ■

NOTES

1. The data for this study comes from field trips to Beijing in 2007 and 2008 with side trips to Shanghai and Kunming. In addition to this, Moore was on the faculty of Qingdao University during the 1993–94 academic year and collected additional material on Chinese youth culture there and during field trips to Beijing in 1998, 2000, and 2003. Most of the data was gathered through participant observation and in open-ended interviews with young Chinese. This was supplemented with questionnaires on parent-adolescent relations distributed to students (N=52) and their parents (N=49) at Beijing Foreign Studies University in 2003.
2. Robert Moore, “Generation Ku: Individualism and China’s Millennial Youth,” *Ethnology*, Volume LXIV, Fall 2005.
3. William Jankowiak, *Sex, Death and Hierarchy in a Chinese City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Robert Moore, “Love and Limerence with Chinese Characteristics: Student Romance in the PRC” in *Romantic Love and Sexual Behavior: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, Victor C. DeMunck (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998).
4. Vanessa Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China’s One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
5. Penelope Eckert, *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in High School* (New York: Teacher College Press 1989).
6. Yang Ming is a pseudonym we are using to protect the young man’s identity.
7. Yusheng Yao, “The Elite Class Background of Wang Shuo and His Hooligan Characters,” *Modern China* 30: 4 (2004), 431–469.

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