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# Violence, Rebellion, and Compromise in Chinese Campus Cinema ---- The Comparison of *Cry Me a Sad River* and *Better Days*

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Violence, Rebellion, and Compromise in Chinese Campus Cinema  
----- The Comparison of *Cry Me a Sad River* and *Better Days*

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my director, Krista Van Fleit, who gave me many instructive suggestions; to Professor Rebecca Janzen for carefully reading my second draft and providing valuable advice; and to Professor Tan Ye, who discussed with me critical aspects that could be included in my arguments. I also thank the professors at Beijing Film Academy and Shanghai Theatre Academy heartily for facilitating access to important material and encouraging me to chase my passions.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the social critiques in Chinese campus films by viewing their development and cultural context. Social Criticism, a prominent trend in Chinese cinema, addresses a wide range of widely concerned social issues, including education, romance, marriage, politics, environmental concerns, psychological repressions, etc. It appears that a Chinese mainland woman filmmaker and a Hong Kong professional director echo each other on the same theme. They are inspired by similar genuine events and share many similarities in the way they orchestrate the relationships and backgrounds of the characters. However, the two films retain their different characteristics. This thesis will discuss campus bully as a widely occurring social and educational concern, focusing on the portrayal in two films (*Cry Me a Sad River* and *Better Days*) across the sides of mainland China and Hong Kong and detecting the observations and social and political factors behind it. It also explores the differentiated handling of bullying representations and their functions in articulating the directors' thinking and criticism.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Cry Me a Sad River* (directed in 2018 by Luo Luo, a female director from mainland China) and *Better Days* (produced in 2019 by Kwok Cheung Tsang, a male director from Hong Kong) deal with campus bullying and trace the social contexts behind it. Several points are associated with such writing: the authors' personal experiences, as well as their ways of viewing, reading and assessing society at various historical moments. Authors/ filmmakers are included in the scope since they determine which aspects of the event will be portrayed and how they will be displayed. Furthermore, when addressing the director's art depicting style, we must incorporate the notion of interpreting promises and required methods. Furthermore, theoretical assessments contain invisible allegorical parts and signified meanings, and the academic goals of this study are those articulations.

### 1.1 THE FOUNDATION FOR COMPARISON

There is some narrative and realistic basis in their similarities. Simultaneous focus on bullying issues promises the films to be paralleled. Apart from that, both films are adaptations of novels: the two films bear some striking similarities. First, Both films are novel adaptations, and they have some startling parallels. First, both happen in major cities on the Chinese mainland. The story of *Cry Me a Sad River* takes place in Shangh

ai, a metropolis, while *Better Days* takes place in Chong Qing, another municipality that is economically comparable to Shanghai. The cities' sheer sizes reflect the extensiveness of the bullying problem. Second, the bullying victims—Yi Yao in *Cry Me a Sad River* and Chen Nian in *Better Days* - are lonely high-school girls, whereas the bullies, Tang Xiaomi (*Cry Me a Sad River*) and Wei Lai (*Better Days*) - are their classmates. Both seek protection from their male peers rather than from institutions such as the school or the police. Third, both girls develop romantic feelings for their escorts.

Bullying should be chosen and highlighted as the narrative emphasis. It is characterized as violent behavior that is intentional, repetitive, and harmful, with an imbalance of power between the offenders and the victims. Bullying behavior may occur in a variety of settings, including schools, communities, and online. An investigation reveals that 29% of teenagers were bullied in the previous month, that 57.5% of those incidents were intentional, and that 11.5% of bullying victims died (Li Shuai; Bai Sensen). Bullying victimization and perpetration have been classified into three categories: physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, chasing), verbal (e.g., teasing, name-calling), and social or relational (e.g., excluding or ostracizing from social situations, spreading rumors) (Peng et al.). Campus bullying has elevated one of the significant issues within China. A survey of 104,825 Chinese primary and secondary school students discovered a victimization rate of 33.36%. Individual and contextual risk factors for being the target of school bullying can be identified. Low agreeableness, high neuroticism, low extraversion, perceived weakness, shyness, being physically unattractive and overweight, disability status, internalizing symptoms, and poor mental health are all characteristics of the former (Zhao et al.). Students with internalized inclinations are easily targeted by those

with violent tendencies because this type of adolescent is incapable of promptly reporting aggressions immediately and instead tolerates them. This condition may contribute to increased victimization due to a lack of peer or teacher support, which is one of the most significant risk factors for victimization (Huang et al., 2013; Jenkins & Demaray, 2012). The list of causes corresponds to the elements outlined in the films – the bullies’ belief that their alternative status may be used to launch communal persecution of them is strengthened by the protagonists' self-alienation from the collections.

Furthermore, research data reveals that bullying is strongly linked to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms. In addition, adolescents who have been bullied are more likely to engage in self-harm and suicidal behavior than those who have not been tormented (Peng et al.). That is, the films depict bullying caused by psychological imbalances and trace the causes of the adverse effects. Tang Xiaomi (*Cry Me a Sad River*) and Wei Lai (*Better Days*) demonstrate their jealousy through bullying, revealing that their bullying is a psychological release with little connection to the victims’ moralities.

A hostile family environment and a lack of support from parents, teachers, and peers have been identified as contextual variables (Zhao et al.). Bullying's psychological triggers are the result of educational policies. Furthermore, mainland Chinese educational regulations contribute to the prevalence of bullying. The highly prioritized college admission exam (Gaokao) compels students to emphasize their academic performance over their interests and extracurricular activities. The regular routine of school and home with the goal of being successful in Gaokao leads to psychological issues. As a result, teenagers outside of this routine are considered “the alternatives,” and the pattern has



become popular. Furthermore, the mainstream is more indicative of Chinese tradition, emphasizing loyalty to the authorities. Alternatives to the mainstream are typically marginalized. They gradually evolve into two forms: the lonely inner and the unorthodox appearance, shown in the films. Academic guidelines in disciplinary education serve as the standard for being mainstream. In addition, with the priority of test marks, family education is aligned with school teachings. In other words, families and schools are both components of the college-admission- exam (Gaokao) oriented educational mechanism. Gaokao is the modern manifestation of traditional Chinese intellectual choices. Gaokao is the distinctive form for the communist party choosing and nurturing competent intellectuals, spiritually inherited from imperial examinations (Ke Ju Kaoshi), which served the regimes of Chinese feudal dynasties. Gaokao has been more systematic and consistent since its re-implementation in the post-Mao era (it was suspended during the cultural revolution), for which a fundamental educational principle has been formed. Like the imperial examinations, Gaokao has largely impacted people's life by raising individuals to the upper class, which gives excellent jobs and improved social welfare.

Gaokao is Chinese students' primary aim and watershed, focusing on the link between contributions and advantages. The high-school stage is the most essential due to its transitory function. With millions of competitors, the rivalry is under the heading "Improve one point. Then you can exceed one thousand peers." Throughout the decades, the admission ratio has risen. In 1977, the first year of Gaokao's resumption, the ratio was just 2.5%, but by 2020, more than four decades later, it had risen to 90%. However, the rising statistics do not bode well for the youth but rather for stiff competition. With many graduates flooding the employment market, talent supply has outstripped market

needs. On the other hand, the rating of Chinese universities leads to classifications for universities where the upper class may draw more significant financial support and policy inclinations. In this situation, top university students are more likely to get hired by large corporations with high salaries. On the contrary, graduates from low-performing schools would probably be marginalized and likely to be sidelined in employment markets. As a result, in campus cinema, Gaokao, the center of Chinese education, is portrayed as the source of pressure and youth problems. Chinese campus movies use this importance as the narrative framework. Dominated by educational machinery, alternative adolescents are typically ostracized as academically inferior persons, such as those shown in “*Cry Me a Sad River*” (Gu Senxi) and “*Better Days*” (Liu Beishan).

## 1.2 THE GENRE OF CHINESE CAMPUS CINEMA

The treatment of bullying in the two films differs due to the geographical distance between the directors' origins. Kwok Cheung Tsang is a Hong Kong filmmaker who has studied the history of Hong Kong's reunification with mainland China. China's handover of Hong Kong in 1997 under the policy of “one country, two systems” indicates that Hong Kong was politically and culturally independent of China's mainland. The nuances between the two sides allow for intricate comparisons. For one thing, people cannot see bullying as middle school students' childish behavior and a method for them to release their inhibition. Another factor influencing the filmmakers' diverse approaches is geographical remoteness. *Cry me a Sad River*, on the other hand, is more likely to express strong personal views about the situation. The various economic forms, consolidated political authority, and unified educational policies in contemporary Chinese society have

compounded the causes of campus bullying. In contrast, *Better Days* focuses more on the protagonist's personality and interactions with other characters.

Meanwhile, this story is intertwined with globalization—economic and political movements, social classifications, and evolving ideals. Middle school is commonly viewed as a transitory age with infantile qualities and adult impulses. For statistics purposes, the United Nations defines “youth” as everyone between the ages of 15 and 24 (*Definition of Youth*). According to the study on the existing conditions and growing trends for Chinese youth populations, young people in educational stages will be classified into high school, undergraduate, and graduate phases, with high-school students being the majority of the youth. This division is also based on the definition by the United Nations. Campus cinema seeks to depict on-campus teenage lives (usually high schools or colleges) and their attitude toward social and political institutions. Teenagers' psychological inclinations, desires, and physical maturation all contribute to the artistic depictions unique to campus-genre cinema. The overlapping of the characters' ages and scene designs of cinematic description and real-educational settings gives campus cinema aesthetic uniqueness and worldwide relevance in expressing critical viewpoints.

The boom in Chinese campus cinema begins in the middle of the 2010s with a string of award-winning films such as *My Old Classmate* (2014), *Fleet of Time* (2014), *The Youth* (2014), etc. With the enthusiasm of young filmmakers for campus film productions and hot commercial investments, it eventually grew into a characterized genre with well-structured formula. It became an essential member of the film industry system. Globalized competition and an open market are required for it to thrive. The WTO's accession in the 2000s stimulated the profitability of Chinese cinema,

encouraging young people to work in the business, which has had several box office successes. Furthermore, their commercial success stems from high box office receipts and low investment. *My Old Classmate!* grosses 730 million USD at less than 30 million USD; *Fleet of Time* grosses 150 million USD at the cost of 40 million USD for the entire film production. *Cry Me a Sad River* is also included. The movie made \$345 million at the box office in 2018 and maintained a 6% opening schedule.

The low investment in campus cinema is primarily due to lower financial expenditure on newcomer actors (actresses), such as Ren Min, who is appearing in a widescreen film for the first time in the part of Yi Yao. When asked why some online celebrities with a large fan base were not hired, one of the producers, Sun Yonghuan, responds that they (online celebrities or film stars) would likely demand a high monetary reward and lavish living conditions (e.g., a presidential suit to live in and an RV for work) in exchange for their performance, as well as a maximum of eight hours per day of filming time.

A wide variety of people's attention is drawn to the form of a mixture of mass cultural and artistic expressions, thriving the production of campus cinema. As a traditionally low-budget film genre, it creates a box office miracle by depicting a contentious societal issue from many high-profile criminal cases nationwide. Another incidence of bullying occurred on trial in Beijing in 2017, during the film's pre-production, when five teenage offenders were sentenced to ten to twelve months in prison. The question is whether the issue directly influenced the film's production. Nonetheless, various portions of interviews with harassed victims corroborate its realistic implications in the end. It is a cultural product catering to mass culture with the purpose

of financial profits, deeply anchored in a market-oriented economy. Furthermore, the relatively lax regulation on this genre allows the film greater leeway because the responsible bureau sees it as a reflection of romantic youth memories with less anti-governmental content.

Meanwhile, because of the filmmakers' nostalgia for campus life, the cinema frequently features personal emotions blended in poetic genres. The genre's prosperity is destined by the hope of financial gains and social reputations, and the achieving routine inspires many filmmakers to switch to campus cinema productions. Guo Fan's second film, *My Old Classmate*, gains him international fame as a filmmaker. Yoyo Yao's first movie, *Yesterday Once More*, establishes her as a promising young female filmmaker. Both were born after the 1980s, indicating that young filmmakers are emerging as a new force on the stage.

### 1.3 THE TAKEOVER OF HONG KONG AND COLLABORATIVE CINEMA PRODUCTION

The comparison is based on social issues, film reflections, and the filmmakers' stylistic approaches, with the political and institutional differences between the two sides serving as the basis. The historical moment—the Chinese government handing over Hong Kong - begins the cultural negotiation in which individuals on one side watch the other from opposing perspectives. First, Hong Kong's views reflect the contentious integration of Hong Kong into mainland China, which divides Hong Kong's history into colonialism and being ruled by contradictory Chinese-central-powered socialism. The roles either strengthen or weaken Hong Kong people's sense of Chinese identity (Kan and

Vickers).Second, the Post-socialist context complicates matters by directing campus bullying away from individual issues and tying it to political and educational policies. As a result, the directors of the two versions of campus bullying films have taken various viewpoints, observing it both from the actual areas and from Hong Kong—the historically, culturally, and politically distant side.

Meanwhile, the film style comparison is also related to the cinema traditions on both sides. Because of its history, Hong Kong cinema has seen two revolutionary waves since the 1980s, the historical distance of which still impacts narrative ideas and expressive designs today. The first wave in Hong Kong film history happened around 1979, “when a new generation of Hong Kong-born filmmakers educated in film schools abroad and with no direct ties with either China or Taiwan turned to filmmaking after a period of apprenticeship in local television. The result is a cinema representing a qualitative leap forward from what went before regarding technical competence and thematic richness.” Many of them, such as Ann Hui’s *Boat People* and Allen Fong’s *Father and Son*, enhance their thematic expressions and show ordinary lives honestly by employing sophisticated film language and technically groundbreaking approaches (Abbas).

The second occurred before the Chinese government’s takeover of Hong Kong, and the inspiration was absorbed from people’s collective anxiety over Hong Kong’s future after 1997. Abbas believes this second wave is ever more consequential for Hong Kong cinema because of its sensitive starting date ---- the “Joint Declaration” sign (Abbas). Despite the slogan “one country, two systems,” the new scenario provides Hong Kong filmmakers with opportunities to reflect on the annoyances of new identifications

and nationalities, the position of cultural and political quandaries, and obstacles in discussions between the two sides. Many films, like Ann Hui's *Summer Snow*, *Song of the Exile*, and Mabel Cheung's migration trilogy (*The Illegal Immigrant*, *An Autumn's Tale*, and *Eight Taels of Gold*), have explored the difficulties and ambivalence of self-redefining in the face of historical transformation. Filmmakers in the second new wave began to go beyond local concerns and dig possible expressive fields of psychological anxieties from identities and nationalities combined with enhanced technical ability and intelligent uses of film language. The film conceptions created in those waves, expressed primarily in sensitivity in perceiving subtle psychological shifts corresponding to social-political transformations, also impact the dealing with themes of following generations of Hong Kong filmmakers. Kwok Cheung Tsang expresses his concerns about Hong Kong's future by voicing concerns about existing schooling and the next generation. This argument is essential for the articulations of this paper since it distinguishes the genre of *Better Days* from the mainland counterpart *Cry Me a Sad River*.

The new millennium ushers in a new era of filmmaking collaborations between Hong Kong and mainland China. With the communist party's severe censorship as an external constraint, internal dynamics of shifting narrative and stylistic stereotypes, and motivations of integrating mainland representations in their films, Hong Kong filmmakers seek outward partnerships with mainland counterparts. *Better Days* is one of the representatives. This article also discusses the collaboration of two sides and the evolution of film productions under new conditions.

In terms of name, age, and style, the definition of the New-Generation filmmaker is uncertain. Cui Shuqin defines it as the generation of filmmakers born between the late

1960s and early 1970s (Shuqin). In her article “Negotiating In-Between: On New-generation Filmmaking and Jia Zhangke’s Films,” she describes the new generation as the filmmakers born and growing up synchronously with Jia Zhangke, the sixth-generation director. The author identifies cinematic characteristics of this age based on Jia Zhangke, an influential sixth-generation director, and his *World*, a partially independent film. The claim is primarily based on their pursuit of a balance between commercialized filmmaking and personalized articulations in a globalized wave where China imports Hollywood movies, particularly blockbusters, and maximizes domestic market share by telling coming-of-age stories to integrate more audiences and competing with Hollywood cinema (Shuqin). Her depiction is based on a long history of Chinese cinema. Furthermore, the confluence of independent and commercial genres featured new-generation cinema narratively and artistically and labeled the sixth generation as the new generation.

Nonetheless, another sixth-generation director, Wang Xiaoshuai, has argued that the seventh generation (after the sixth generation) will cease to exist due to a lack of narrative and stylistic commonality. On the conceptual level, his thoughts stimulate the coming-of-age of a new generation. Lacking identical traits and distinguishing themselves from the sixth generation, Wang Xiaoshuai proposes designating the newly-debuted filmmakers (the era following the sixth) as newbies due to their adaptation to a free-competitive market and alignment with the masses’ preferences (Huayi Brothers Media Group Institute). Furthermore, including the word “new” in the title denotes a break from the generation-division tradition and acceptance of the international film industry. As a result, the current generation’s production is capital-audience centered. In



other words, rather than a film-noumenal definition, it is a market-determined classifying. Luo Luo, the mainland filmmaker of *Cry Me a Sad River*, is classified as part of the new generation.

#### 1.4 THE COMPARATIVE ASPECTS FOR TWO FILMS

With the shared subject of campus bullying in both movies, this comparison will focus on the characters, stories, and film languages. It will also highlight the bullying's socio-political and cultural implications, the directors' perceptions, how comments are delivered, the origins of the differences in styles between female and male directors, etc. The two movies' contemporary appearance is phenomenal in Chinese film history, indicating the issue's elevation to national concern and the young filmmakers' sensitivity to social problems. The director of *Better Days*, Kwok Cheung Tsang, explains what inspired him to produce the film: his shock at the bloody violence and tremendous humiliation experienced by adolescents, as well as his strong desire to discover the educational reasons for this (Pengpai News). His voiced annoyances help the film transcend the level of campus and into historical and institutional critiques of a nationally disseminated awareness and values established in a particular political environment (Carolyn Hinds). Similarly, his mainland counterpart, Luo Luo, emphasizes adolescents' psychological difficulties and the educator's obligations. Theoretical assessments are responsible for determining invisible allegorical aspects and signified meanings, and these articulations are the academic goals of this study.

Furthermore, the proven bullying concerns are not limited to China but are a global concern. According to Cheung's interview, the problem has happened in many

nations and has been addressed by governments and educators. His emotional complex toward frequent bullying issues and his proclaimed sympathy for victims influence how he would demonstrate that and publicly identify socio-economic and institutional foundations. Cheung's concern about campus bullying catalyzes the investigation of underlying causes—the political, educational, and patriarchal structures that dominate Chinese culture. In keeping with the victims, he metaphors ambiguity in identification into tangible images of the characters' fates. Viewing and investigating the subject from outside the city and from distant political and institutional perspectives, his depictions may combine oriental aesthetics and western viewpoints in expressing the situation. On the contrary, Luo Luo may offer a different view based on her experiences in mainland Chinese cities where bullying occurs. Meanwhile, her feminist consciousness is crucial in the overall presentation of the story.

Throughout human history, modern scholars have interpreted and defined the youth age to regard this era as a comprehensible and appropriate path to maturity. Clause has pointed out, "Adolescence not only can be considered as a biological stage but also a period of major social transition in one's life." In Western civilization, adolescence is a time of self-discovery and self-expression, but "it is also a period when social and cultural influences play a major role in shaping the person to be" (Changsong Wang Yiming Chen, Rohani Hashim). Christian Exner thought it could be loosely divided into three fundamental categories. The first category is the so-called "coming-of-age" films which have been strongly represented for years. According to educationalists and others, the second category comprises productions about issues that give young people food for thought. The third category consists of films that young people have raised to cult status

(Changsong Wang Yiming Chen, Rohani Hashim). This statement divides youth cinema into three representing viewpoints: the genre “coming-of-age,” which targets a particular age group and is inclusive in narrative scopes such as school, family, teenagers’ folk collections and activities, etc. The second group focuses on relationships between schools and students, while the last category concerns students’ psychological self-development. According to this category criteria, the two films cannot be in the same circle. Instead, they cross the category borders and encompass the first and second categories. The characters in both films are coming-of-age and face unsolvable obstacles. Meanwhile, even if educators’ actions are rarely evident, their unseen effects on adolescents can be seen in their behaviors and choices during critical occasions.

*Cry Me A Sad River* is a tragic story about bullying. Yi Yao and Qi Ming are classmates who grew up in the same Shanghai alley but come from different families—Qi Ming comes from a wealthy household. On the other hand, Yi Yao lives in a single-parent and impoverished household. Yi Yao's mother is usually unpleasant to her, unlike Qi Ming’s mother, who is a homemaker who cares for her unique son. Furthermore, Qi Ming’s excellent academic accomplishments pleased his parents and made him a teenage celebrity in the alley and at his high school. Yi Yao appears mediocre compared to him, with her middle-rank academic grades and her mother’s inferior job—massaging male customers in her home, which her neighbors consider a type of sexual service. Qi Ming and Yi Yao generally spend their time together after classes, despite appearing to be a mismatched couple due to their economically distant backgrounds.

Tang Xiaomi, a transfer student with romantic intentions toward Qi Ming who perceives Yi Yao as her enemy due to her association with Qi Ming, alters the scenario.

Tang Xiaomi grabs the weapon to humiliate Yi Yao after unexpectedly seeing her at the illegal clinic and knowing about her sexually transmitted sickness. With the message about Yi Yao's infection going on spreading and fermentation, the individualized agony develops into collective bullying. Her surroundings keep their distance, and Qi Ming, without separating himself from the other students, throws strange glances at her and asks, "how could you get this disease?" On the other hand, Gu Senxi is an exception. He is academically mediocre, yet might see her as innocent of the infection, showing sympathy to the bullied classmate by blaming the bullies. Furthermore, when confronted with aggressiveness, he assists Yi Yao in combating the adversaries. Yi Yao begins to value their relationship and develops a dependence on Gu Senxi due to his encouragement and aid. Gu Senxi's untimely death throws everything off course, which breaks up the friendship. She travels to the place specified in the mobile phone message titled "to Qi Ming's girlfriend," and falls off the platform accidentally after being trailed upstairs by numerous nefarious men.

Similarly, *Better Days* depicts the protagonists' terrible ending as a direct result of bullying. Chen Nian, a promising candidate at Beijing University (the top Chinese university), was bullied because of her loneliness, single-parent family, and excellent academic performance. Chen Nian's mother, who lives in a slum, distributes uncertified and unqualified face masks to female consumers, with catastrophic health repercussions. She lives in a distant collective dormitory to avoid fights and creditors. The bully and an academic rival Wei Lai relentlessly discriminates against her mother's employment and underprivileged family conditions. Chen Nian's plight was exacerbated when her classmate, Hu Xiaodie, committed suicide, prompting her to seek shelter to protect

herself from harm. Unlike Tang Xiaomi's aggressions, Wei Lai's appears more complex due to school partisans and her parents. Given Hu Xiaodie's suicide and the police's targeting of Wei Lai as a criminal, the school has decided to suspend her in-school studies without further disciplinary action. Simultaneously, Wei Lai's parents firmly believe in her innocence, attributing Hu Xiaodie's tragedy to her unintentional loss of her feet and her personal psychological issues. As a result, the extent she engages in reckless aggressiveness toward her classmates eventually increases. Chen Nian becomes the next target as the violence escalates. She first makes concessions due to the forthcoming Gaokao (only one month from then). Later on, Liu Beishan's joint brightens her being bullied. Their relationship began when Chen Nian rescued Liu Beishan from a bunch of street boys. Chen Nian is shamefully forced to kiss Beishan in front of the men when her report to the police about the group fighting is discovered, and they angrily destroy her cell phone.

Furthermore, the film's title, *Better days*, is an ironic expression that reflects their warm and memorable moment when their relationship had romantic overtones, however, this setting reinforces the tragedy and sad pathos. Beishan offered to defend Chen Nian after witnessing Wei Lai's hostility toward her. With Wei Lai's aggression intensifying, Chen Nian agrees to Beishan's offer. With Beishan as an escort, the days pass calmly and safely. The filmmaker's objections stem from the contradiction between romanticism and violence. Narrative interruptions of their mutually supportive life travails with a severe accident devastate their future expectations. Beishan's once-losing connection exacerbates Chen Nian's pain. When Beishan is needed by the authorities to be identified as a suspected criminal, Wei Lai and her followers catch and circle her, stripping her

clothes, cutting off her hair, and filming the process. The bullying peaks with Chen Nian's powerless and hard battle; at the same time, their connection is heightened by Beishan's willingly cutting his hair to appear precisely like Chen Nian, soothing her internal damage. The silent, long-shot camera in which Chen Nian shaves hair for Beishan as both are in tears conveys sadness and tragic undertones.

## 1.5 THE SURROUNDINGS RELATED TO THE BULLYING

The presented contributions to bullying occurrences involve familial origins, showing more inequities in the Chinese educational system. First, it functions as a decision for an individual who is being bullied. More significantly, adults' capital-oriented tendencies impact a teenager's personal ideals in school. Her peers ostracize Yi Yao because of her poor family background and the absence of a father as the center of a patriarchal family. Yi Yao is trapped in a self-locking predicament due to the mother-daughter family pattern in which the mother's negligence irreparably reduces her self-confidence. Recognizing her condition, her peer is divided—Gu Senxi represents compassion and friendliness, while Tang Xiaomi and her followers are antagonistic. Furthermore, Qi Ming's neutral position — his acceptance of Tang Xiaomi, his care for Yi Yao, and his concern for Gu Senxiang - complicates the story and precipitates the catastrophe. First, his presence at school and everyday life physically and narratively polarize Yi Yao's predicament. Second, his tolerance of Tang Xiaomi's aggressiveness and blindness to Yi Yao's suffering is partly compatible with his mother's economy-oriented norm for judging people, according to which she requires that Qi Ming stay far from Yi Yao despite the neighboring relationship. On this issue, he gradually alienates Yi Yao, as directed by his mother. He becomes close to Senxiang, who is intellectually

similar to him and comes from a household that adheres to his mother's values. Furthermore, he creates discrimination towards Yi Yao subconsciously. Hearing the rumors about her condition, he tends to trust them and makes suspicious queries about Yi Yao, pointing out that her infection is the result of sexual activity.

Meanwhile, his parents' long-overdue interventions shape him into a self-centered individual. Qi Ming, who lacks care for others, likes to ponder questions from his viewpoint of pushing oneself to high morality. His words statements— "if you haven't done such things, how did you get infected" demonstrate his self-assigned superiority in remarking on individuals in misery. In addition, it depicts a common educational genre among parents and families. The mother sees her interventions and directives as protection, viewing Qi Ming as a personal treasure and crediting his academic achievement to her as a mother's reward for hard work. Therefore, her mother believes that avoiding low-moral concerns that would distract him from studying. As a result, Qi Ming's erratic decisions, such as staying with Yi Yao while keeping an ambiguous friendship with Tang Xiaomi, exacerbate the latter's jealousy, and more gravely, his love attraction to Gu Senxiang without breaking up with Yi Yao leads to Gu Senxiang's death.

Unlike Qi Ming, Tang Xiaomi's family is invisible in the film, and some of her actions, such as collecting classmates around her, provide information about her growing up environment. Her treatment of classmates to entertainment on KTV to buy off them, especially Qi Ming, appears to imitate grownups. She sees wasting money as the most efficient way of rallying peers and directing them to antagonize someone she hates. Tang Xiaomi saw herself in an alternate adulthood-socialized situation in which capital and economic aptitude might distribute and dominate resources. Personal worth is compatible

with the residents of Qi Ming and Yi Yao's valley, a microcosm of the larger community. Meanwhile, her dual predicament as a bully and a victim is linked by troublesome consciousness, and the case puts her in a financial bind. Her pre-belief in money is now questioned as she stands before dissatisfied peers. The difference in perspectives on money or capital is a metaphor for deceptive value, in which people desire economic growth while deflecting the consequences on inferior individuals. Yi Yao's interaction with Tang Xiaomi's humiliation demonstrates this, intensifying the latter's animosity. Being tormented by senior students for money, she appears incapable of escaping the onslaught and instead vents her rage on Yi Yao.

Gu Senxi stands out for his challenges to educational and societal standards. Putting aside the educators' admonishments about academically aligning with his twin sister, he appears to have an easy existence walking about campus while others strive for Gaokao. Given his family background, he should have joined Qi Ming's social circle, isolating himself from Yi Yao, which could have maintained two children (Gu Senxi and Gu Senxiang) with advanced resources. Nonetheless, rather than conforming to social conventions, he emotionally and practically supports Yi Yao as an alternative in the eyes of his classmates. In the narrative, Gu Senxi serves as a humanitarian symbol in communicating critiques of other peers by juxtaposing his compassionate comfort with Qi Ming's cold blame for Yi Yao's condition. Furthermore, Gu Senxi's actions dismissing arguments and insisting on accompanying Yi Yao represent the authors' critique of education, in which teachers over-prioritize teenagers' studies while ignoring other attributes. Nonetheless, the design of Gu Senxi and Yi Yao's familial history follows the Cinderella and the Prince formulas, in which a stylish Gu Senxi as the prince



extends a hand to Yi Yao, a contemporary Cinderella being rejected by the world. This design corresponds to many spectators' emotional, romantic aspirations and colors the relationship with idealism. Regarding the characters' relationship, *Better Days* takes a more realistic approach. The collaboration is congruent with classification among teenagers based on familial circumstances while questioning the educational standard about student intellectual division. Beishan is not among the strivers aspiring to study in universities, indicating that he is in a difficult situation with inferior social status, making him uneasy about maintaining the relationship with Chen Nian, whose promising future as a top university candidate has decided the relationship is short-term, despite its romance.

Beishan, like Chen Nian, suffers from social loneliness due to being a school dropout and a child abandoned by his mother. His relinquishment of studies might be attributed to his graduation from a vocational high school, which limits his options to study in college. As a section of the education system in mainland China, a vocational high school is an alternative high school that teaches working skills. Graduating students are often assigned to primary production or reproduction sectors. A vocational high school is not for students with bright academic prospects but for mediocre people. Furthermore, graduating from a vocational high school and working as a blue-collar worker most likely leads young people to an inferior social welfare status with constrained well-being compared to individuals from undergraduate/graduate-level universities. The diploma-oriented stratification and social distribution policy encourage adolescents to endeavor to meet academic high school entrance requirements, whose

platform can enable students to be socially highly rated in the future when applying to universities or colleges.

## CHAPTER 2

### CULTURE AND POLITICS AS INVISIBLE HANDS

Comparisons between Senxi and Beishan are crucial to the films' interpretations, allowing for decoding cultural and political contexts. First, Gu Senxi's living conditions are far superior to Liu Beishan's, who must struggle for daily revenues from his small and precarious cellphone-repair stall. On the contrary, despite Senxi's D-level grades, neither his family nor his teachers have lost faith in him and have worked hard to enhance his academic performance.

Furthermore, Sen Xi would be integrated with Gu Senxiang, a well-regarded exceptional student. In addition, due to his congenital heart abnormality, he received more parental attention than Senxiang. Senxi's escorting of Yi Yao stems from his attraction to her, as opposed to the emotional bond created only after a time of mutual help between Beishan and Chen Nian. Long-term living conditions provide special schoolgirl attributes such as tolerance, loneliness, and tenacity, distinguishing her from her peers. However, the purity and warmth of the relationships in both films characterize them from the cruel bullying and the capital-dominated societal predominance.

Regardless of the distinctiveness of their relationships, decoding the female protagonists' psychology and cultural contexts requires tracking down their motives for

being partners. On the one hand, their (Chen Nian and Yi Yao) acquiescence to the bullies increases the intensity of violence. Meanwhile, the schoolgirls see the relationships as a complement to their incomplete families. In *Better Days*, Chen Nian travels to Beishan to construct a shelter for Gaokao. In Yi Yao's view, Gu Senxi is her ally in the fight against prejudice. Compared to Gu Senxi and Yi Yao, Chen Nian and Beishan's meeting appears more coincidental. Their relationship begins because Beishan apologizes to Chen Nian for the pushed kiss. The paradoxical opening signals the relationship's painful end. Chen Nian's first rejection expresses her opinion on Beishan that he should also be held responsible for the quarrel because he had previously gotten associated with those street guys strolling around. Their collaboration cuts across educational classifications, with high schools teaching academic fields and vocational high schools teaching labor skills. This challenge denies a social acquaintance that individuals classified as inferior would not be included by the superior. Furthermore, their presence together signifies adolescents' challenges to social-educational order. Moreover, commonplaces such as broken families and loneliness, which divide them from the majority, lead to the formation of their partnership. The foregrounding of Chen Nian and Beishan's bundling up identifies post-socialist education features in which rigorous classification dominates an individual's emotion and selection.

On the other hand, *Better Days* depicts the complexity of human nature more than *Cry Me a Sad River*. Chen Nian, whose actions require more analysis, connects personal choices to societal situations. The key topic in analyzing her happenings is the term protection. Insecure conditions drive her to the Beishan side to protect her future Gaokao. The alternative method of obtaining protection is to conspire with Beishan to exonerate

herself from murdering Wei Lai. In demonstrating seeking-protection scenarios, the filmmaker applies a naturalistic cinematography style to evoke real memories and emotions in audience. Aiming for victory in Gaokao as the only way out of her current situation, Chen Nian first follows Beishan for a reprieve from being bullied and then consents to his after-the-killing scapegoat plan, allowing him to substitute herself as the murderer. The resulting replies demonstrate the efficacy of Chinese educational selective policy in governing the youth, and Gaokao is the exclusive route for young people's personal achievement. Nonetheless, her proactive denial of Beishan's scapegoat plan reflects her morals and indebtedness to Beishan, whilst her reluctance stems from her psychological frailty and aggravation in dealing with future uncertainties. When the authorities notify Chen Nian that Beishan will be condemned to death, she confesses and accepts responsibility for her crime, despite the devastation of her life plan.

## 2.1 THE BULLIES AND THEIR METHODS

Both the bully and the victim are female teenagers. Schoolgirls are members of Tang Xiaomi's bullying group, which centers on her. Wang Aiyu, who has a sense of inferiority and likes Qi Ming but would instead seek the accomplishment of the romantic fantasy by bridging more links for Tang Xiaomi and Qi Ming, is one of the girls who are used to blindly following the orders of Tang Xiaomi since they lack the ability to make judgments. *Better Days* is an example of a band that fits this category. Wei Lai is intended to be an academically outstanding student in school. As a result, her superior status attracts many peers, among whom Xu Miao and Luo Ting are representatives actively obeying her orders. They bully others by spreading rumors and gossiping about them. The tool at Tang Xiaomi's disposal is an expansive imagination concerning the

origin of Yi Yao's sexually transmitted disease. Wei Lai believes that a student who comes from a less privileged background should not be allowed to compete for admission to a prestigious university. However, the bullies' inner jealousy often manifests itself in the form of rumors that they spread. By spreading falsehoods about the victimized classmates, Wei Lai and Tang Xiaomi rationalize the bullying that occurs throughout the school body. The truth about Chen Nian's mother provides Wei Lai with the ammunition she needs to defeat her competitor. Similarly, advertising Yi Yao's disease is an efficient way to get Qi Ming to leave her.

Most crucially, there is a significant difference in their application of rumors. The purpose of Wei Lai's rumor is to destroy Chen Nian so that she may improve her chances of admission by getting rid of her competitor. On the other hand, Tang Xiaomi's motivation does not stem from well-articulated expectations. In addition, the education that Wei Lai received from her family gives her the confidence that she has an unassailable standing in school, allowing her to eliminate any students she finds disagreeable. Wei Lai's parents respond to the police, including the phrases, "she is so smart and well-educated schoolgirl, she can't do that thing," and "it must be the passed-away student's fault, none of our Wei Lai's responsibility". After hearing it, Wei Lai displays her arrogance by claiming she is already the case winner. As a result, Wei Lai's peers are subjected to even more severe and brazen humiliation than before since her parents covered up the crime.

## 2.2 REBELLIONS AND SOCIAL CRITICISMS

The characters' animosity for one another is a primary catalyst for their uprising. *Cry Me a Sad River* and *Better Days* turn to criticisms of the peer bullies on the surface, differentiating themselves from other styles in some youth-campus movies, such as romantic expressions in *Yesterday Once More* (directed by Yoyo Yao), *You Are the Apple of My Eye* (directed by Giddens Ko), *So Young* (directed by Zhao Wei), etc., whose criticisms lie in the representations of students' rejections from being pushed into the rigorous study and constrained by nonhumanitarian school laws. However, the portrayals of hostility amongst classmates are the beginning of harsh criticisms of society.

Firstly, teachers, who are supposed to act as mediators between students who are having conflicts with one another, are practically never present while bullying occurs. To a certain extent, it may be attributed to the partialities of the bullies, who believe that concerns beyond academics are inconsequential. In other words, teachers try to steer students away from wasting their study time on non-academic-related issues (for example, mediating individual conflicts) whenever possible. Meanwhile, the film shows that teachers take the benefits and willingness of students who are at the top of classes as principles in dealing with issues. Take Qi Ming and Gu Senxiang as examples, their academic achievements let the school staffs believe that students around them are morally and academically similar to them. With the trust in Qi Ming, teachers do not intervene in every conflict involving Tang Xiaomi who seems to be his friend, even when she is allegedly spreading rumors. Through Tang Xiaomi's successful invitation of Qi Ming to KTV, she claims the intimation between her and the peer-admired monitor. As a result, she solidifies her leadership position among her peers and creates a positive image in the

eyes of the educator. Students and educators tend to categorize juveniles according to academic standards. Those who stand in an advanced group can get more attention, whereas groups with individuals who rank lower are probably marginalized. This trend served as some of the inspiration for Tang Xiaomi's endeavor to form a friendship with Qi Ming. Meanwhile, the head of a group is often the person who, to some extent, chooses the fates and treatments of other group members. Therefore, Tang Xiaomi's decision to join Qi Ming is simultaneously an act of self-satisfaction and an attempt to achieve a more prestigious standing among their contemporaries.

Secondly, it demonstrates a disregard for moral instruction in high schools, which is done to increase the number of students accepted to universities. According to the educational categorization, guaranteed examination results can conceal additional flaws in traits or psychologies. The fact that Wei Lai is prosecuting Hu Xiaodie does not affect her reputation as an excellent student. The policy that places a high priority on academic outcomes exonerates Wei Lai from her actions as a bully, leading her to believe that her behavior would not have consequences for her life and studies. However, this false notion ultimately led to her death when she was killed by Chen Nian in the act of self-defense. In addition, discrimination is often based on categories that are defined and reinforced through academic structures and institutions. The fact that flowers and applause were bestowed upon Qi Ming and Gu Senxiang when performing on the school stage is evidence of their supremacy. It suggests that the student's achievements are intrinsically linked to the reputations of their respective institutions. On the other hand, Yi Yao is not inside the educator's line of sight. The fact that Yi Yao is about to end her own life brings



her back into the circle of her friends. The absence of educators during the entire event causes a terrible conclusion.

The third reason is that it conforms to the societal stereotype. Public schools in China, including primary and secondary schools, are frequently overcrowded with students and teachers, unlike the large classrooms common in industrialized nations. In most cases, classrooms with an area of around 500 square feet are packed with 40 to 60 students. Education policies are unified across different provinces and ethnic groups to ensure consistency and effective regulation of students. First, the students are required to adhere to a standardized class schedule and do not have the option to select their classes. Because of the College Entrance Exam (Gaokao), students are required to study the same disciplines. This discourages students from pursuing their academic interests. If even one class is failed, the whole GPA will suffer as a result. Second, there is a lack of flexibility in the pedagogical approach. The schools use challenging in-class lectures that provide little time for student discussions and urge the students to remain seated while concentrating on the teachers' instructions while they are being imparted. Third, to keep students' attention on their academic work rather than their daily clothing choices, students are required to wear school uniforms. The regulation has a communist quality in that it appears to reduce individuality, particularly among teenagers. The oppressiveness of the bullies and the claustrophobia of the bullied are symbolized by the campus's drabness, which is reinforced by the white-blue uniform and the grey-white buildings. Their disagreements are sparked by Yi Yao's persistent requests for money so that she may buy a new school uniform suit, which her mother repeatedly denies.

Aside from the unification, uneven dedications toward academically different students are triggers of hostility among peers and generate numerous rebellions among teenagers. In most cases, Chen Nian and Yi Yao's rebellion began with a more passive approach and was gradually forced to escalate to more aggressive tactics. Yi Yao's pessimistic outlook may be influenced by her solitary circumstance, as she has come to accept her situation as lonely and isolating. Her connections with Qi Ming, Gu Senxi, and her mother all serve as examples throughout the movie of how this is the case. Her gloomy demeanor toward Qi Ming when she was in the hospital served as the basis for her decision to turn down the assistance of the male peer for fear of being immorally degraded by Qi's mother. Yi Yao wakes up in the hospital after passing out due to extreme hypogastric pain and finds Qi Ming accompanying her. Instead of expressing gratitude, she asked him, "how much did you pay for my medication?" and warned him not to be too helpful because she believed that "the more you give, the cheaper your goodness is." Later, she declined Ge Senxi's offer to accompany her, citing her belief that she had brought misfortune to those around her and did not want to burden him with her problems. The use of tight and static camera angles in scenes of bullying accentuates the character's helplessness, reinforcing her sense of despair and contributing to an overall atmosphere of gloom.

In addition to educational classifications, attitudes toward patriarchy is a driving force behind discrimination based on the conventional bias about the concept of woman/female. The articulations from Yi Yao and Chen Nian's mother are similar in that they agree that life would be challenging for women without their male counterparts. It is worthwhile to investigate their reasons through naturalistic depictions. Because of her

mother's circumstances, Yi Yao is forced to live in seclusion in the valley. Furthermore, Yi Yao contracts the herpes virus as a result of her mother's negligence in leaving her towel on the door, which allowed a male customer with the virus to use it. The innocent teenager has to visit an unlicensed medical facility to receive treatment for her disease due to her lack of money and reluctance to tell the fact to the mother for fear of being blamed. She conceals that she is diseased and lies to the mother when she asks for money to avoid being accused as “a cheap girl, inauspicious offspring.”

Additionally, her emotional separation from her environment is also caused by the collective estrangement of her mother from the rest of the community. The public's disapproval of Yi Yao and her mother heightened her isolation. The film portrays the treatment of the mothers of Qi Ming and Yi Yao as a metaphor for the hierarchical structure of society, highlighting how the collective behavior of the nearby residents reinforces this structure. The residents' upholding of Qi Ming's mother indicates their adoration for money. On the other hand, Yi Yao's mother appears to bring disgrace to her neighbors due to her low-paying job and the fact that she has never been married since her previous husband, Yi Yao's father left. Yi Yao's composure and emotional depth are a result of the challenging environment she has faced. Her subsequent self-salvations from the disease without resorting to her mother for aid are sparked by the home settings in which she lived.

Yi Yao's home circumstances, including her family's tight financial status and the fact that she has a single mom, are eerily identical to those of Chen Nian. Therefore, the passive attitude in the face of bullying threats originates from their recognition of the lack of sustainable patriarchy, which makes them feel inadequate. It is possible that Chen

Nian's compromise of Wei Lai's attitude was primarily caused by her mother's education, in which she was taught that her primary responsibility was to attend prestigious colleges.

The nature of campus bullying is revealed through the circle of bullying that occurred between Tang Xiaomi, Yi Yao, and other upperclassmen. This cycle of bullying started with the older students and worked its way down. Targeting solitary people is less risky since they are more willing to make concessions. Freud emphasized in psychoanalysis that unconsciousness and consciousness are systems for human beings' recognition and perception systems. The experiences that Chen Nian and Yi Yao had while growing up, together with the situations they were exposed to, impacted their subconscious. Yi Yao is ultimately forced to give in to the bullying because of her icy family. Regarding the bullying issue, Chen Nian never considers the possibility that she may sway Wei Lai's opinion. Even though providing emotional support, the family's financial constraints lead her to believe she cannot stand up to Wei Lai since his parents are wealthy. Meanwhile, factors such as social judgment guidelines, prevailing moral standards, contemporary gendered cultural contexts, and socio-political institutions all play a role in creating their consciousnesses. Therefore, the submissions made by the female juveniles' in these instances are alternate articulations concerning the unseen tendency of social value that economic inferiors are unable to speak about.

Nonetheless, the bullies' random acts of vengeance occasionally result in an unanticipated catastrophe for themselves and their innocent peers. Yi Yao's unintended discovery of Tang Xiaomi being bullied was the precipitating factor that led to Gu Senxiang's accidental death. Following Yi Yao's discovery, Tang's group concluded with a sophisticated plan to humiliate Yi Yao. On the other hand, the chainlike succession of

bullying incidents demonstrates that the level of school bullying in terms of brutality and complexity has increased to a point where it exceeds the scope of typical disagreements between classmates. The inclusion of Tang Xiaomi as a victim of bullying and the combination of her position in the chain can assist in tying the social context to the psychological issues experienced by the juvenile. Not only the awareness of those who are bullied but also that of those who bully must be brought to the notice of psychologists. This interpretation must consider where Tang Xiaomi falls in the chain with reference to examining the inconsistencies between her actions and her psychological vulnerabilities. Taking the dual roles of a bully and a victim provides rapid gratification through a release from repressed feelings. For another, the reciprocal antithesis situation in which she was accepted by her groups but humiliated by senior schoolmates creates her drive to deflect the latter to others, making it look as though nothing negative has happened to her psychologically. Tang, once discovered, captures Yi Yao in a conspiracy. She sends Yi Yao a text message with the subject “to Qi Ming’s girlfriend,” which unexpectedly prompts Yi Yao to transfer to Gu Senxiang, whom she feels merits the label of Qi Ming’s girlfriend. The action provides ambiguity in understanding Yi Yao’s inner complex, that is, her thoughts toward Gu Senxiang in terms of acknowledging her as Qi Ming’s matched girlfriend and considering her a romantic rival.

Despite the fact that Yi Yao’s defiance in trans-sending the mortal message catalyzes the catastrophe, Tang Xiaomi’s action of rejecting bullying is not on par with Yi Yao’s. In other words, Tang Xiaomi’s transformation of her anguish symbolizes her impinged proclivity to choose awful grassroots juveniles as an easy targets. Those

impacts can be taken from the absence of background demonstrations. First, Tang Xiaomi sending Yi Yao a message "to Qi Ming's girlfriend" demonstrates her regard for Yi Yao as a romantic competitor. Second, she ignores feminine care and humanitarian considerations, arming with Yi Yao's agonizing disease to launch collective attacks on her. Those rash behaviors can be traced partly to educational deviance in which exam-oriented disciplinary emphasis precedes morality-related courses. Compared to Tang Xiaomi, Yi Yao's suffering indicates socioeconomic and educational extensiveness. It suggests that human rights are subordinated to capital and power, as Yi Yao points out in her critiques of her peers who prioritize their own interests over basic rights and equality. The school is responsible for relocating violent activities to an obscure corner. In the academic pursuit, educators and students interact in a dynamic where educators are seen as authorities and students as learners. Within this dynamic, students who meet the academic requirements of the institution are often seen as models or exemplars of success.

The juxtaposition of Gu Senxiang and Qi Ming's discussion of their impending national chemistry competition with Yi Yao's anguish from the disease establishes the educational partisan based on an individual academic level. Meanwhile, the opposite soft and harsh attitudes of respective doctors toward Gu Senxiang and Yi Yao's simultaneous medical appointments provide another layer of differentiation based on the patient's illness. Gu Senxiang receives extensive treatment for her pollen allergy, whilst Yi Yao faces the doctor's rude orders due to the sexually transmitted disease. Followers represent glory and are used to honor accomplished individuals in a highly selective institution, and as a result, pollen has the same symbolic meaning as a production of followers.

Combining the sequence of welcomed hospital treatment because of pollen allergy, scenes construct a cultural atmosphere where materialistic accomplishment can extensively decide an individual's well-being.

Montage images enhance the visual effect of highlighting winners and deterring disgruntled individuals. Discrimination is challenged in romantic relationships. Detailed displays of Chen Nian and Beishan's regular life trivialities in *Better Days* show a warm friendship, refusing student categorization. Gu Senxi and Yi Yao's relationship is similar to Chen Nian and Beishan's regarding mutual support and Gu Senxi's unwavering faith in Yi Yao.

Frequent long shots and montages demonstrate the convergence of expressionism and realism. As the primary technique throughout the film, juxtaposed montage scenes show Yi Yao's anguish and torment. Parallels between lifestyles in diametrically opposing conditions provide eye-catching visual effects. Throughout the film, scenes of Yi Yao's mother abusing her are juxtaposed with Qi Ming's happy family life and adoring parents. Aside from that, Yi Yao's resilience to terrible humiliation at school is mirrored in the other well-treated females, such as Gu Senxiang, whom her brother and Qi Ming adore, and is loved by other female students. The sorrowful predicament of the former is developed step by step throughout the film through contrasting loneliness and warmth in a particular film environment. Moreover, the students' strictly structured study life and unified time slots prevent them from engaging in extracurricular activities. With a focus on textbooks and minimum interaction with peers, youngsters are more prone to resolve challenges in interpersonal relationships in more direct, violent, and simple ways.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CINEMATIC METHODS IN THE CRITICIZING EXPRESSIONS

Shot schedules are external and expressive signifiers demonstrating the films' connotations and criticisms. Long shots trace the protagonist's psychological developments and explore nuances, while close shots can single out relationship changes by exteriorizing characters' inner activities. Yi Yao and her mother reconcile after her discovering an envelope labeled "Yaoyao's tuition" when she tries to steal money from her mother's drawer to treat her illness. The close-up shot of the envelope suggests a complicated emotional condition and highlights a watershed moment in Yi Yao's relationship with her mother. Yi Yao immediately integrates herself into her peers' category by acknowledging the mother's love, being inspired by the newly discovered affection within her family following her recovery from an illness, which emboldens her to address a large group of her peers confidently.

Similarly, Chen Nian encounters difficulties inside her family. The public perception of the banner (a liar, repaying the money), advertising her mother as deceptive and indebted, describes the adversary in Chen Nian's story. Despite this, she still loves and adores her mother. The slow zoom over the banner emphasizes Chen Nian's mental distress and emotional tension. Furthermore, close shots of the mother-daughter phone



conversation are utilized to highlight Chen Nian's emotional response to her mother's encouragement to work hard and attend university in Beijing to fix their difficult situation and Chen Nian's status as the single hope of the family in her mother's heart. A wide shot shows her mother's proud emotions following her talk with Chen Nian. This demonstrates her deep emotional attachment to her daughter and her idea that Chen Nian's achievement is her own.

### 3.1 THE FEMINIST IMPLICATIONS

Yi Yao's rejection of discrimination carries a feminist significance, as it reflects her sense of bodily autonomy and control over her sexuality. Her character is similarly a mix of independence and reliance. Her family's lack of support has pushed her to become self-sufficient. Her mother's stinginess, such as her refusal to purchase a new school uniform, has taught her to rely on herself even when faced with a terrible illness. Her experiences living in a room with male clients who caused her condition has also reinforced her intolerance of men. On the other hand, the reconciliation between Yi Yao and her mother sends a different feminist message. The sequence in which the two head out of the alley hand in hand, witnessed by their previously disdainful neighbors, underlines their acceptance of the current situation while rejecting patriarchal ideals.

On the other hand, *Better Days* stresses masculinity. Chen Nian's emotional bond develops into a romantic relationship that she remembers for her entire life. Chen Nian's personality is complicated in general. Her relationship with Beishan exemplifies her feminist symbolism. Beishan is first captivated by Chen Nian due to her independence and optimism, and his feelings for her blossom into a romantic attachment. Chen Nian

and Beishan's relationship is a complicated combination of romance, family dynamics, and societal difficulties. Beishan serves as a substitute patriarchal figure for Chen Nian, providing financial and emotional support, while their living arrangements show mutual respect, although initially lacking romantic desire. The film's denouement, in which Beishan offers to confess to a crime committed by Chen Nian, emphasizes the depth of his affection while highlighting themes of sacrifice and selflessness in their relationship. However, given the context of the plot and her character development, Chen Nian's behavior toward the police is equivocal. She first opposes Bei Shan's idea, knowing he would suffer legal ramifications for her mistake. However, Xiao Bei persuades her by presenting a rosy vision of her future as a graduate of Beijing University. She eventually succumbs to his charms and denies confessing her involvement in the murder. Her decision to accept responsibility displays her generosity and devotion to Bei Shan, but it also raises problems about agency in the face of cultural constraints. This contributes to her character's and relationships' nuanced and multi-layered presentation. From a feminist perspective, "*Better Days*" elevates the female's well-being over the male character's sacrifice. Chen Nian, the protagonist, is emotionally torn between her love for Beishan and her commitment to her mother about her future. Chen Nian may look selfish because she is concerned about her future. On the other hand, her concurrence with Beishan's offer is motivated by her concern about her mother's future and her incapacity to evaluate the logic behind Beishan's plan. Chen Nian's feminist identity appears to be a process that culminates when she commits the crime. This partially aligns with the notion of feminism being associated with self-worth and accountability.

Nonetheless, comparable familial circumstances force Yi Yao and Chen Nian to face and solve challenges independently, leading to a feeling of gender equality. Although Yi Yao rejects Qi Ming and Gu Senxi by referring to herself as an inauspicious person, this nevertheless implies that she can survive without relying on a man. In comparison, Chen Nian's view of gender equality is based on a conditional exchange. Her relationship with Beishan is with the prerequisite of mutual help, beginning with her initial rescue of him. Later, Chen Nian purposefully attracts the attention of the police to Beishan, displaying her implicit confidence in intellectual supremacy. From her point of view, her good grades can entitle her to more protection, superiority, and exoneration. On the other hand, Xiao Bei displays his dedication to Chen Nian and willingness to stick by her in tough times by protecting her despite the potential repercussions. Both Xiao Bei and Chen Nian's acts defy the traditional patriarchal perception of women as meek and subservient. Their acts display agency and strength, demonstrating that women can make decisions and stand up for themselves and others they care about.

The film does not give a definitive answer on the state of their relationship, but Chen Nian's expressions and words imply a sense of nostalgia and grief for what has passed. Her use of the phrase "used to be" to describe their former experiences suggests a desire for what is no longer there. Chen Nian's tears and gaze out the window reflect a complicated combination of emotions, including despair and longing. The shots transcend time and space, implying a link between the past, present, and future. The image depicts an unpleasant conclusion to their relationship and that the memories they share continue to have a strong influence on her. The two films emphasize the significance of males' partisan for their female partners in heterosexual partnerships. Chen Nian is well-

protected by Beishan, but when the police bring him to accept identification as a criminal suspect, she endures severe humiliation. After being upset with Yi Yao, Gu Senxi demonstrates a tremendous attachment to her, and his temporary departure is due to doubts about her integrity. When confronted with the collective accusations against Yi Yao, Gu Senxi undoubtedly blames the bullying group for their lack of compassion and empathy towards weaker peers and argues that this is the root cause of bullying. The movies emphasize the significance of male youth safeguarding their female peers in a challenging environment, emphasizing equality.

### 3.3 THE DIFFERENTIATED NARRATIVE STYLE BY RESPECTIVE HONG KONG AND MAINLAND DIRECTORS

Film elements are purposefully designed to reflect the director's perspectives and personal experiences. Style, structure, film language, and characters expressing specific ideas can expose the director's thoughts and criticisms. Characters and relationships are an essential element of storytelling and can provide important clues about the style and genre of a film. "*Cry Me a Sad River*" is a youth campus film mainly aimed at high school students. The majority of the scenes in "*Cry Me a Sad River*" take place on campus, with only a handful taking place in the alley. These limited alley scenes illustrate Yi Yao's impoverished family and her mother's mistreatment, emphasizing the director's condemnation of bullying students. Unlikely, "*Better Days*" is a social problem film with a broad socioeconomic background focusing on Beishan and Chen Nian's everyday challenges. While the film depicts high school students attempting to attend college, Liu Beishan represents an inferior social class with his lack of a decent degree certificate and the struggling operation of a cellphone repair stall in a chaotic street.

The structural contrasts between the two films are most noticeable in their spatial and narrative presentation. Both films begin with a flashback to the climax of the story. "*Cry Me a Sad River*" starts with Yi Yao's suicide, presenting the story's conclusion before telling it chronologically. "*Better Days*" begins with a flashback to the final scene of Chen Nian teaching English, during which she separates the phrases "this was our playground, and this used to be our playground," reminiscing her time with Beishan. Both films use flashbacks due to their similar original material, inspiration, and cultural relevance.

Both female characters reminisce about their past. The opening flashback in "*Cry Me a Sad River*" establishes the film's sorrowful tone by revealing that the story will be replayed through Yi Yao's recollections as she drowns in the river. Similarly, the flashback in "*Better Days*" suggests that the story would be delivered chronologically through Chen Nian's memories. "*Better Days*" begins with a more detailed flashback than "*Cry Me a Sad River*," which portrays the aftermath, with Tang Xiaomi being punished, Gu Senxi transferring schools, and Yi Yao dealing with trauma. Meanwhile, "*Better Days*" depicts an alternate scenario in which Beishan is missing, and the phrase "this used to be our playground" appears, implying that Chen Nian has lost him and the fate of the characters is unknown.

The contrast in the opening sequences of the two films shows the directors' differing approaches to realism and setting. The classroom scene in "*Better Days*" is filmed with natural light to achieve a realistic and documentary-like effect. Still, the opening scene in "*Cry Me a Sad River*" employs a long shot of Shanghai and a close-up of Yi Yao sleeping to create a sense of time and place and establish the social backdrop

of the story. In "*Cry Me a Sad River*," the long shot and non-source sound relate the tale to real-life occurrences and underscore the director's objective of revealing the societal elements of bullying. According to Bazan, this method is meant to allow the audience to experience the events more realistically and immersively without being distracted by artistic or editorial choices that may damage their emotional or psychological experience. The audience may better grasp the spatial relationships between the many aspects of the scene and acquire a more incredible feeling of the context and setting by displaying a wide, uninterrupted shot. Natural lighting and real-world sound can also strengthen the film's connection to reality, making it simpler for the audience to relate to the events and characters on screen (Bazan). Additionally, the director's choice of such approaches demonstrates their goal to highlight financial disparity as a societal cause of campus violence by displaying the challenges of individuals who live in poverty despite living in a city brimming with optimism and prosperity. The first scene establishes a tone of tragedy and introspection throughout the film. Meanwhile, the opening depicts the narrative's ideas and location in a more abstract and metaphorical representation, laying the groundwork for a more emotionally charged and compelling story.

Similarly, *Better Days* also begins with a realistic presentation of the classroom using a hand-held moving camera. This method establishes an immediate connection with the audience, immersing them in the film world and making the story more tangible and accessible. The use of natural colors and montage shots contributes to creating a credible and familiar atmosphere, allowing the audience to get totally immersed in the story and invest in the characters. At the beginning of *Better Days*, near and close-up shots emphasize the students' intense focus on preparing for the Gaokao exam, an important

event for many Chinese high school students. This approach increases the film's impact and thought-provoking potential. The close-up shot of the certificate of merit supports the concept that the school is a training facility for students who did not make it to university. It allegorically signals the consequences for students if they fail the Gaokao again. Using a hand-held filming style, natural light, and synced audio provides a documentary-like atmosphere and helps the audience feel more connected to the story. Because it is based on real-life events and situations, it adds authenticity and reality to the story, making it more accessible to the audience and letting them connect with the characters on a deeper level. The filmmaker emphasizes the importance of the topics addressed in the film and their influence on society by truthfully telling the narrative. Overall, the opening of *Better Days* is a realistic depiction of the pressure associated with the Gaokao exam and invokes collective memories from the audience.

Kwok Cheung Tsang, the director, is instrumental in developing the film's various aesthetics. Tsang's pragmatic attitude to social issues partly stems from his discipline studies. Tsang has a sociology degree from Toronto University, which gives him a well-rounded awareness of numerous societal concerns. This academic background qualifies him for a multi-faceted analysis of the social concern's recurrence, helping him to understand the complexity of campus bullying better. As a result, despite not having a film background, he has a distinct approach to dealing with the screen story, in which his personal thoughts and experiences strongly affect the depictions. Cheung stated candidly in an interview, "I have always been curious about the Chinese mainland educational system and its college admission policy; I hope this film can partially convey my curiosities and observations of that" (Pengpai News). The fact that Kwok Cheung Tsang

is a Hong Kong director shows that his film depicts bullying in mainland China from a distinct perspective. Tsang takes a more objective attitude, watching the story from the outside, rather than focusing entirely on the perspective of a single protagonist or their inner thoughts. In another interview, he freely reveals his emotions on the tragic issue: for research, we watched lots of these traumatizing bullying videos that you can find online. There are a plethora of them; they are only available online and are really harsh. I wanted to make a scene as heinous as I had witnessed. We also spoke with several students who had been bullied, as well as bullies, about why they had bullied others. I was desperate to discover why individuals bully in the first place. But, in the end, I believe it is something that cannot be addressed; it is a part of our human character, and there is no easy solution. All I could do with the film was replicate settings where bullying may occur, where these people come from, their backgrounds, and what allows them to do such things (Adriana Rosati). From his perspective, *Better Days* wants to highlight two critical concerns in mainland China: bullying and the high-stakes college admission exam, Gaokao. The film begins with a scene of Hu Xiaodie's suicide and the student's classroom, both of which highlight these pressing issues. As he mentions: The Gaokao (the Chinese college admission exams) is something I wanted to discuss since it has always amazed me how highly pushed the students are and how much blood and sweat they put into these exams. It is similar to a phenomenon. Every time I visit China between May and June, there is always this issue around, all this social commentary on Gaokao, and it's a high-risk setting, so I wanted to adapt it and use it as a background in the film (Adriana Rosati).

Kwok Cheung Tsang creates an uninterrupted and realistic environment for the protagonist by breaking through the "fourth wall" (as described by Stanislavski). He



based the film on documented facts and aesthetically removed the audience and himself from the depicted circumstances in order to generate a realistic and compelling representation. This approach separates the filmmaker and the audience from the story, enabling the characters to talk freely. Furthermore, the director emphasizes authenticity by using recorded incidents as material for his film. Hu Xiaodie's suicide, through which this technique emphasizes the director's intention, offers an accurate picture of the concerns of bullying and Gaokao.

*Cry Me a Sad River* takes a more in-depth look at the inner thoughts and feelings of its primary character, Yi Yao. As a skilled writer, the filmmaker, Luo Luo, contributes her literary abilities to the film, accentuating the protagonist's internal journey and thoughts. This approach reflects Luo Luo's literary style, which frequently goes into her characters' inner world, exploring their emotions and views. As a result, the film gives insight into the director's understanding and perspective on the subject. This distinct approach helps the film's narrative while providing viewers a more personal and intimate experience.

Moreover, the filmmaker emphasizes the involvement of the populace in Yi Yao's tragedy rather than simply her personal experiences. The opening scenes of the city and alley imply that seemingly innocent citizens, such as educators, parents, and neighbors, have unknowingly contributed to bullying via their collective preconceptions. The mother and daughter are mentally pushed to leave the alley due to the neighbors' skewed viewpoint, which perceives the mother's employment as a masseuse for men as tainting their moral purity. The film focuses on Yi Yao's struggle under the winner-takes-all system, concentrating on her reactions to the emotional and physical brutalities she

experiences. The film examines the repercussions of communal prejudice and how it affects people in society.

Luo Luo also emphasizes the distinction between Senxi and Tang Xiaomi's followers by juxtaposing their personalities and beliefs, criticizing society's concerns of conformity and moral deterioration through these opposing individuals. Senxi, a low-achieving student, embodies the director's idealistic moral code for society, marked by honesty and friendliness. On the other hand, Tang Xiaomi's followers represent blind obedience and a lack of independent thought. They take pleasure in supporting their peer leader, such as feeling happy when Tang Xiaomi gets closer to Qi Ming and bullying Yi Yao to avoid offending their leader due to the uncertainty of her relationship with Qi Ming.

Besides, Luo Luo also uses great visual contrast in scenes in which Yi Yao is being bullied to emphasize the collective nature of the bullying and to communicate her disapproval of the masses. The film's last scene depicts Yi Yao's peers' harsh and unreasonable treatment of her. Despite her innocence, she is blamed for Senxiang's death, highlighting the harshness of the collective mindset and the pressure placed on students by the winner-takes-all system. The scene's striking visual design underscores the director's point of view and condemnation of mass bullying, and the minimization of Yi Yao's figure highlights her powerlessness and fragility. The use of long shots and a thorough perspective by the filmmaker highlights the tremendous force of the collective students against an innocent victim, foreshadowing Yi Yao's tragic ending. The high-angle panoramic view, with the red-highlighted word "killer, murder, shameless" and Yi

Yao's diminutive figure seated in the corner of the frame, conveys the director's sympathy for Yi Yao as well as his criticism of Yi Yao's blind-following peers.

## CHAPTER 4

### FEMININE STYLES AND CRITICISMS

According to a general investigation, women filmmakers create about one-fifth of all youth-romantic films in China. Unlike in Hollywood, where male directors dominate the creation of romantic films, Chinese women directors or scriptwriters born after the 1970s and 1980s have established a new group of professional filmmakers. Following the year 2010, twelve female directors of the new generation debuted as representative work in romantic and youth films (Zhouhui Xiaowan, Yang Ziming). Furthermore, the representation of female directors in youth-romantic films is growing in China. Eight female directors have created eight forty-three films that have made over one hundred million at the box office. This trend raises issues regarding the reasons for this representation, such as the financial benefits of low-budget youth cinema and the creators' intentions. Several explanations are related to the country's economy, the prosperity of the film industry, and film education, during which film intellectual cultivation deserves to be elevated and discussed.

Many female filmmakers are taught as scriptwriters in college, recognizing their writing ability. Luo Luo is one of the women writers. Furthermore, Xue Xiaolu, the director of *Finding Mr. Right*, graduated from the literature department of Beijing Film Academy. Barbara Wong (Huang Zhenzhen), who studied at NYU, is also a director and

scriptwriter. Female filmmakers, like Li Yu, Xu Jinglei, Yoyo Yao, and others, have faced similar challenges. They strive to represent the natural world and contemporary social concerns, as well as to provide marginalized groups a voice and to depict the world through a feminine viewpoint. This approach produces a more realistic and empathic depiction of the world, which resonates with the audience and encourages them to interact with the subject matter on a deeper level. Yoyo Yao has candidly acknowledged this (in *Yesterday Once More*). “The protagonist Lin Tianjiao is very like herself when she was in high school (at that time) and confronted with many options. One of the personal values she had always considered was whether she should obey others’ requirements and evaluations, live in the eyes of her parents and educators, or should follow her inner voice. And the root of one’s confusion and loss are usually rooted in the resistance and compromise between oneself and their surroundings” (Zhouhui Xiaowan, Yang Ziming). Her delivery in the interview echoes the sentiments expressed by Luo Luo in *Cry Me a Sad River*, directed at Yi Yao and Tang Xiaomi’s followers. Potentially, she hopes to inquire in depth whether the students have formed their judgments of right and wrong, or only blindly followed an individual praised by authorities and took his/her behaviors as their criteria in making evaluations. Female filmmakers often use realistic narratives to express their unique perspectives and experiences, which can resonate with female viewers and offer new insights into different aspects of life, including campus, workplace, and family. By tapping into their own psychological experiences, female filmmakers are able to create captivating stories that explore a range of human emotions and relationships. Thereby, they add a new viewpoint to the genre with their gendered perspective.

Luo Luo, the director and co-writer of *Cry Me a Sad River* is a professional female filmmaker. She has experience writing romantic fiction as the director and co-writer of *Cry Me a Sad River*. Her experience as a signed editor and writer at Guo Jingming's studio has inspired her writing style, which concentrates on the individual's interiority, including contemplation and inner struggles. Her first novel, *Queen Stain*, focuses on stories of abandoned women in contemporary Chinese society and mirrors her personal problems. Luo Luo mixes observations of the surrounding environment with personal opinions to produce an intimate narrative that blends expressionism and realism. As a female filmmaker, Luo Luo incorporates social conscience into her work and uses her pen and camera to speak for herself.

Luo Luo's approach to examining Yi Yao's inner world distinguishes the film and gives depth to the representation of the character's experiences. The film effectively illustrates the impact of bullying on Yi Yao's mental and emotional well-being by digging into her feelings and thoughts, typically overlooked in other representations of bullying. The amorous moments between Yi Yao and Gu Senxi stress the bullying's influence on her relationships and personal life. This approach provides a fresh layer to the film's investigation of the subject and contributes to the film's overall success in raising awareness about bullying(<https://movie.douban.com/subject/27102569/reviews>).

In addition, she offers a distinct viewpoint and style to their work, distinguishing them from male directors. The occasion in which Gu Senxiang offers Yi Yao a menstrual pad through the bathroom door is symbolic. It exemplifies the attention to detail and empathy for real-life experiences that female filmmakers bring to their work. Yi Yao repeatedly scents—shutting her eyes and inhaling the fragrance, after getting the

menstrual pad from Gu Senxiang outside the bathroom door in the representative scenario. She explains in her post-film monologue that she had never understood menstrual pads could have a scent. The filmmaker is able to produce a detailed and accurate picture of a female character's perspective by emphasizing seemingly little, daily situations. Scent as a symbol of distance between two individuals is a subtle yet effective technique to portray the emotional separation between characters. This kind of storytelling lends authenticity and depth to the stories. Chinese contemporary women filmmakers, such as Luo Luo as a delegate, contribute varied viewpoints to social and cultural concerns by adding their personal experiences and opinions as women.

The use of feminine film language and storylines contributes to a more inclusive and reflective portrayal of women in films, which is vital for fostering gender equality and empowering women. Yi Yao, the female heroine in *Cry Me a Sad River*, is shown as both a victim and a fighter, demonstrating the perseverance and fortitude of women who face tyranny and abuse in numerous forms. In other films, female protagonists utilize their wit and tenacity to confront, and battle injustices they or others encounter. *Don't Talk with Strangers*, the first television program to expose domestic abuse against women, was conceived and directed by a woman filmmaker, Xue Xiaolu, twenty years ago. This series established a new level in media production by showing delicate gender issues realistically, and it continues to be significant in addressing domestic concerns covered by the media. These examples demonstrate how women filmmakers offer a particular and sensitive viewpoint to gendered subjects, as well as their own individual storytelling and articulation techniques.

In addition, female filmmakers' efforts to delve into psychic regions contradict conventional perspectives on evaluating their works. As Dai Jinhua has ever viewed, the standard for female filmmakers is somewhat biased. This prejudice is the idea that the mark of success for female filmmakers (those women fortunate enough to have squeezed into the monolithic kingdom of men) is their capacity to produce films that look the same as those made by men, as well as their ability to master the same subjects that men address. In other words, female directors play a particular Hua Mulan social role: they are women who have successfully disguised themselves as men. The more they conceal their gender uniqueness and gender identity, the more exceptional and successful they will be (Dai).

On the other hand, women directors who "expose" their gender status, choose certain themes or show a specific gender perspective are perceived as lowering themselves, as failing to live up to (men's) standards (Dai). Gendered issues have permeated many parts of society, and reference notions have been ingrained in people's consciousness. The feminine narrative and visual expression style is not inferior self-expression in this sense but rather a comparable imagining and portrayal of a male dream. Women filmmakers' understandings of narratology, comprehension of cinema language, and distinctive viewpoints on societal problems add to a distinct viewing effect and emotional expression style when contrasted to their male counterparts. These achievements mold a feminine approach to artistic production and create a new visual cosmos for viewers to acquire and experience a different story and emotional imagination. More notably, feminine demonstrations are dedicated to psychological



articulations, unlike non-feminine accurate descriptions whose presentation is devoid of filmmakers' subjective evaluations and interventions.

*Better Days*, directed by a male director, allows for more audience interpretation, whereas *Cry Me a Sad River* more overtly conveys the artist's thoughts and ideas. The latter provides an alternative ending to the bullying narrative. While *Better Days* concludes with the protagonist killing the bully, *Cry Me a Sad River* takes a more intimate approach, emphasizing individual sufferings and desperation due to a lack of communication and trust. Although *Better Days* is narratively dramatic, *Cry Me a Sad River* concentrates on introspection and displays the filmmaker's point of view through the storyline.

Luo Luo's unique perspective and professional background enable her to coincide with Guo Jingming's concept of the film's two essential elements: the combination of romance and violence and the characters' inner emotional struggles. This results in a plethora of inventive and sophisticated story aspects. The film shows visuals with diverse tones that often represent Yi Yao's point of view. As the tale continues, Yi Yao catches glimpses of the chaotic alley where she was born and raised, providing a vivid portrayal of street life. The camera then lingers on Yi Yao's home, with its mottled green door representing poverty, decay, and melancholy. Despite the cheerful atmosphere outside the alley, the images in the series have a darker tone, representing the protagonist's dismal psychological reality. The film's opening alludes to the protagonist's parallel world, contrasting with the metropolis's fast-paced modernism and opulent city life. The images and tone convey Yi Yao's psychological state, including her surroundings, grief, and hopelessness, in addition to creating a gloomy ambiance.

Through its depiction of the alley, the film *Cry Me a Sad River* implies a catastrophic end. The filmmaker uses Yi Yao's interactions with Gu Senxi and Qi Ming to highlight her feelings. She shares her inner grief and fury after being wrongly accused of being unwell in her conversation with Qi Ming. Yi Yao's forlorn predicament and despair are highlighted by the sound of wind and tide, as well as gloomy yellow tones. Her self-deprecation is a frequent subject in the film, and the director's goal is to elicit empathy while criticizing society's apathy and lack of care. Yi Yao's denunciation reflects human fragility and social prejudice. The film's conclusion highlights the director's perspective and criticism of the educational system, in which students are objectified and held to uniform standards. Despite the director's emphasis on the lack of justification for punishing school bullies, the film depicts students as objects under the education apparatus.

Furthermore, both films begin with a flashback in which female characters divulge their memories to the spectator. "*Cry Me a Sad River*" begins with Yi Yao's suicide to predict the finale, but "*Better Days*" opens with Chen Nian teaching English and reminiscing about her school days. The commonalities in the two films' stories and societal relevance allow the authors to treat the topic comparably, although the narrative techniques employed differ slightly. The opening of "*Cry Me a Sad River*" reveals a definite ending, while Xiao Bei's disappearance from a scene in "*Better Days*" leaves his destiny undetermined.

Overall, *Cry Me a Sad River* takes a fresh approach to the social problem film genre, combining parts of reality with a more lyrical and romantic style. The film's female director, Luo Luo, and male co-writer, Guo Jingming, each contribute their own

viewpoints and approaches to the film, contributing to its distinct aesthetic and interpretation of the societal issue. Despite some criticisms, the film has been a commercial success, appealing to both Guo's fiction and social severe problem film fans. Unlikely, Tsang sets *Better Days* in a naturalist and realist style, pursuing a documentary-like presentation. Despite their distinguished methods and thinking behind the film language and storytelling, the condemnation and articulation behind the tales are common.

## CONCLUSION

Despite their disparate artistic and cinematic approaches, the authors criticize the educational system and society's attitude toward it. The emphasis is on people's lack of social equality, critical thinking, empathy, humanitarian considerations, and the educational system's inability to cultivate these traits. Yi Yao's final statements in the film echo the author's opinions, emphasizing the importance of individuals being able to think freely and comprehend the perspectives of others. The parallel with Lun Xun's portrayal of a sympathetic woman, Xiang Lin, demonstrates a historical similarity in social and collaborative criticism. The film critiques society's collective unconsciousness and forgetfulness, emphasizing the need to build healthy personalities via education.

To summarize, the films are equivalent in terms of narratives, characters, and structural designs. More importantly, the directors employ distinct expressive schemes that convey their perspectives and approaches to screen stories. Differently, the films adhere to the realism and expressionism genres; similarly, both are committed to exposing the truth of bullying and being bullied to the audiences and conveying a critical inquiry on the subject.

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