

1976

Although 'workers' universities' gained prominence during the Cultural Revolution, they were not the only experiment in moving beyond the elitist and 'bourgeois' values of the conventional university through the integration of mental and manual labour. Nor were they the earliest. First established in 1958, the Jiangxi Communist Labour University (江西共产主义劳动大学, or 'Gongda'), was one of the most notable attempts in this sense. Its students were taught through a curriculum of 'part-work, part-study' and, unlike other universities, Gongda was registered as both a university and a production unit, supporting its staff and students through the sale of products from its farms and factories. This essay looks at the Cultural Revolution's larger intellectual project of integrating the labour of education with the labour of production through the lens of the 1976 movie Juelie, a feature film depicting a fictional account of the university's founding. Through narrative references to the historic role students played in the Cultural Revolution, the film responded to the crises raised by student activism during the Cultural Revolution by reinscribing student subjectivity within the patriarchal and developmentalist structures of the state.

The Blank Exam: Crises of Student Labour and Activism in the Late Cultural Revolution Film *Juelie*

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The dramatic conflict at the centre of the 1976 film *Juelie* (决裂, *Breaking With Old Ideas*, directed by Li Wenhua) involves a group of students' last-minute decision to skip an exam. When the local production brigade's ricefields are imperilled by a surprise infestation of a pest called the 'night bandit', which is capable of destroying the entire crop overnight, the students abandon their textbooks and rush off to save the harvest. They stay up late killing the bugs with insecticide, rescuing the brigade's rice but missing their exam the next morning.¹

However, instead of recognising their heroism, conservative administrators at the students' university threaten them with expulsion. The school's vice-principal, a career educator named Cao Zhonghe (portrayed by character actor Chen Ying), had warned the students before they abandoned their books to mind their own business and focus on scoring well. But an impassioned plea from an idealistic student convinces the group otherwise. 'Classmates, what are we studying for?' she asks. 'How can we not use our scientific knowledge to serve the peasants?' The school's bureaucratic administrators disagree, and say that skipping the test constitutes submitting a 'blank exam' (白卷儿). The controversy surrounding the group's expulsion indicates there is clearly more at stake than just the academic futures of fifteen college students. Indeed, the success of the entire university model hangs in the balance.

Juelie depicts the establishment of a fictional branch of the real-life Jiangxi Communist Labour University (江西共产主义劳动大学, or 'Gongda'), an institution that sought to reject the elitist and 'bourgeois' values of the conventional university by integrating mental and manual labour. Its students were taught through a curriculum of 'part-work, part-study' (半工半学) and, unlike other universities, Gongda was registered as both a university and a production unit, supporting its staff and students through the sale of products from its farms and factories.² *Juelie*'s portrayal of students engaged in both classwork and productive labour

contributed to the period's larger intellectual project of integrating the labour of education with the labour of production, understanding the experience of production itself as a legitimate site of education.

Thus, grading the students' 'blank exam' becomes a contested exercise pitting the university's progressive leadership against its traditionalists. In a heated faculty meeting, vice-principal Cao produces the blank exam papers, throwing them on the table as proof of the students' failure to perform to standard. 'We're not a farm, we're a college!' he shouts. 'We need to have universal standards!' But the university's popular principal, Long Guozheng (portrayed with hale gravitas by Guo Zhenqing), sees things differently: 'Actually, these blank exams demonstrate a great deal: they show a high political consciousness, and a deep feeling for the proletariat. They carry sweat from the students' brows, and represent the many tonnes of grains rescued for the lower-middle peasants [贫下中农]: Long concludes that 'the students did right', making the blank exam a Rorschach test revealing Cao's and Long's oppositional understandings of education's ultimate purpose.

Much like the blank exam at its centre, the film *Juelie* was itself a contested text, controversial during its time for its radical reconceptualisation of the position of the university and the student within society. In this essay, I argue that labour was the key site through which the student in the late socialist cultural imaginary transformed from the bespectacled urban intellectual of the May Fourth era into a diffuse, pluralistic subject embedded within the socialist project and its productive social relations. As the most extensive mainstream narrative from the period to depict higher education and its subjects, *Juelie's* adaptation of real-life experiments in proletarian education and student rebellion should also be understood as both a response to and a mediation of the crises around student subjectivity raised by the student activism of the Cultural Revolution.

The Revolutionary Rural Undergraduate on Film

When *Juelie* was filmed in 1975, the release of a major motion picture enacted a very different set of cultural precepts than those operative in the release of a major movie today. A film made during the mid-1970s was neither a work of art made by a visionary auteur nor a work of consumer corporate entertainment. Rather, films were made to shape and reflect national mass culture, to defend national policies, and to showcase socialist culture and entertainment.³ In those terms, *Juelie* was intended

to celebrate the success of a new national education culture exemplified by Gongda. This culture was practical, cultivating useful skills such as animal husbandry and agricultural production, and rejected the class politics of theoretical knowledge divorced from real-world application, such as taking tests only for the sake of achieving high scores. It was also egalitarian, striving to offer rural students as much access to higher education as their wealthier urban peers.

Juelie's showcase of China's new national education culture was underwritten by a widespread reconsideration of the role of students in the labour of social reproduction. When the people's communes (人民公社) were formally established in 1958, their architects recognised that greater economic productivity could only be achieved by establishing wideranging social services that facilitated the full participation of all available potential agricultural workers. 'Farm cooperatives must be not only organisers of production, but also organisers of the way of life,' wrote the editors of *Red Flag* magazine in a 1958 article promoting the implementation of the commune.⁴ This would be materialised through ambitious programs that collectivised the onerous burdens of domestic labour in the countryside—which fell nearly exclusively on women—including establishing commune-run public canteens, sewing circles, maternity wards, and nurseries.⁵

Education also fell under the purview of the communes, as organisers of 'the way of life,' and their supporters believed that commune management of rural education would result in the Marxist realisation of the 'gradual elimination of the difference between mental and manual labour.'⁶ Communes were therefore responsible for establishing not just nurseries and daycare centres, but also primary, secondary, and technical schools, the last of which were expected to conduct scientific research.⁷ Thus, outside urban regions that were already equipped with education infrastructure, the adoption of the commune effectively integrated education within the purview of productive labour.

For many rural communities, commune responsibility for education meant establishing new schools and educating children who had not previously attended formal schools. Accordingly, the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) period saw a widespread expansion of the rural education system, particularly at the primary and secondary levels.⁸ Where education had previously been seen as the prerogative of the moneyed urban classes, the rapid expansion of China's education infrastructure, particularly in the countryside, corresponded with a wider reconceptualisation of

education as a social right, not a privilege—a shift that was also taking place elsewhere in the world during the middle of the century.⁹

Naturally, depictions of students in the cultural imaginary began shifting as well, transforming from the romantic, bespectacled, white-gowned May Fourth intellectuals portrayed in Yang Mo's 1958 novel *Song of Youth* (青春之歌) into *Juelie's* ideal of the well-rounded peasant-intellectual. No character showcases the new student ideal better than Li Jinfeng, the Gongda student who spearheaded the overnight action to save the nearby brigade's imperilled rice crops, played with fiery resolve by Wang Suya. A farmer recruited from a poor mountain community to attend Gongda, Li is admitted to the university under new affirmative action higher education policies implemented during the Cultural Revolution. These policies allowed universities to enrol deserving members of the worker-peasant-soldier masses (工农兵群众) through political recommendation, even if they did not possess the typical qualifications, such as a high school diploma.¹⁰

Like several other farmer-student characters in the film, Li Jinfeng is not a traditional undergraduate. Through the commune representative's testimony, the audience learns that, before Liberation, Li Jinfeng had starved as a child labourer, suffering daily abuse at the hands of her landlord, and was eventually sold as a child bride. Even after Liberation, her region remained too poor to set up local schools, so she only learned to read and write in night classes for poor farmers. When Gongda's progressive new principal comes to recruit students from her village, Li Jinfeng impresses him by writing the sentence 'Chairman Mao is our great liberator' in tidy calligraphy. Even though she did not sit for the entrance exam and does not hold a high school—or indeed, any—diploma, Long Guozheng considers her literacy and record of labour to be exemplary qualifications and admits her on the spot.¹¹

Li Jinfeng and her fellow worker-peasant-soldier classmates at Gongda represent the reconceptualisation of 'the student' along multiple subject positions. This transformation is illustrated most clearly through the contrast drawn between Li, her cohort at Gongda, and a third-year male undergraduate whom Long encounters on a study tour of China's most prestigious universities. Like Li, the unnamed male undergraduate comes from humble origins in the countryside, but he treats the chance to attend university as an opportunity not to enrich his community, but to attain individual social mobility. When the student's mother comes to visit, Long watches as the student rejects one by one every handmade gift she

has brought. He tells his mother that things are different now that he has been educated ('我现在是有知识的人!'), and the camera pans down as the mother takes stock of her son's inward and outward changes: the cross, exasperated expression he wears behind black-rimmed glasses, the button-down shirt with a pen tucked into its pocket, the slacks held up with a leather belt, and the black leather Oxfords on his feet. Distinctly unaffordable to the lower-middle peasant, each item signifies the privileged intellectual.

The smart clothes of the rural farmer's son serve not just as physical evidence of his elitist values, but also as a material manifestation of corrupted social relations. Although the village boy achieves social mobility, he no longer wishes to return to his home village, thus removing himself from the social relations of his birth. The knowledge he has attained while attending college has transformed him into the product of a system that equates learning with class standing. The village boy turned undergraduate illustrates the perils of education for education's sake: a fundamentally destructive path that prevents not only the reproduction of the labourer, but also the production of new socialist subjectivities—namely, that of the educated labourer.

Li Jinfeng, by contrast, demonstrates the virtues of being an educated worker. In addition to her rural background, Li is mother to a young daughter, who appears during her recruitment scene, playfully tugging on her mother's shirt. To the university's conservative administrators, Li's motherhood makes her unsuited to attend college, and one teacher who cannot bite his tongue after Li is admitted disdainfully asks whether she expects to take her daughter to campus with her.¹² Although her daughter appears on screen only twice, Li's motherhood is no coincidence or minor detail of her backstory. Unlike the male undergrad at the traditional university, Li actively expands and redefines the social identity of the student, allowing for students who are red, not experts; women, not men; labourers, not intellectuals; and of the country, not the city. Li is explicitly reproduced in the form of her daughter, who physically manifests Li's embeddedness within the generative social relations of her community, as well as her capacity for social reproduction.

By depicting university students who break the traditional mould, *Juelie* depicts a radically new university. Rather than serving as a stronghold of bourgeois class interests, the Gongda depicted in *Juelie* is a university where students do not need to be wealthy, male, traditionally educated, or come from the city. Instead, *Juelie* presents the university

as a site for the socialisation of worker-students, integrating education with production to ensure that the university fulfils its potential as an incubator of productive forces and reproductive social relations. Li Jinfeng and her cohort demonstrate that the student is less a marker of class or identity than it is a diverse and pluralistic subject position within society.

Heroes of the Blank Exam

But Li Jinfeng rewrites the role of the student as much through her labour and activism as she does by simply attending university. During the Cultural Revolution, the production and reception of major feature films were embedded within a dialectic negotiating the boundary between narrative fiction and recent history—similar to films produced today depicting historical events. In particular, using the term ‘blank exam’ to frame Li and her cohort’s decision to work in the fields rather than sit for an exam was a deliberate choice meant to connect the fictional students of Gongda with a real-life ‘hero of the blank exam’ (白卷英雄), Zhang Tiesheng.

Zhang Tiesheng was a sent-down youth working at Baita commune in Liaoning Province who first rose to fame in the summer of 1973 after submitting an empty answer sheet during county college entrance exams.¹³ Rather than accept a failed test result, Zhang submitted his answer sheet with an explanation written on the back: ‘I do eighteen hours of heavy labour every day, there’s no time to study.’ Moreover, Zhang believed the test was a poor indicator of who most deserved a college education. Although Zhang’s time working at the Baita commune had not prepared him for the test, it was honest work, and he felt disdain for ‘those bookworms who have never worked, and live leisurely, unprincipled lives. They truly disgust me, and this test is unwittingly complicit in giving them a monopoly over college.’¹⁴ Zhang’s action caught the attention of provincial officials, including Mao Yuanxin, Mao Zedong’s nephew who was then Party secretary of Liaoning Province. Zhang’s words were published first on the front page of the *Liaoning Daily* and then in the national press, turning him into a celebrity overnight.

Zhang’s blank exam reflected a moment of deep inequity in the distribution of education resources, as well as deep suspicion of the traditional admission criteria to high school and college. With his failed exam elevated to a critique of the education system, Zhang’s dissent crystallised the inherent contradictions of such a system: that the nation’s youth could devote themselves to building socialism in the countryside and be denied

an education because of it. To be certain, Li Jinfeng's cinematic 'blank exam' improves on Zhang Tiesheng's real-life one: where Zhang had not studied and was not capable of passing the test, Li makes the active choice not to sit for hers—a narrative gloss that neatly sidesteps the question of whether or not the rural student is capable of performing well on tests, a point of considerable anxiety.

Zhang was not alone in 'going against the tide' (反潮流),¹⁵ nor was his dissent the only act of student rebellion written into *Juelie's* script. Students were among the first to heed Mao's call to arms in the opening months of the Cultural Revolution, and, as the period writ large endured, accounts of righteous student rebellion were frequent highlights of media discourse. Notably, in 1974, a Nanjing University student's request for an assignment in the countryside was also published on the front page of the *People's Daily*. The student, Zhong Zhimin, was the son of a Long March veteran. He had been admitted to Nanjing University through family connections, but now he repudiated the nepotism that had got him there. He asked to withdraw from the university rather than attend through the 'back door' (走后门).

Zhong's story is evoked in the character Cao Xiaomei, the young daughter of the villainous career educator Cao Zhonghe. When she is first introduced, Cao Xiaomei is a bubbly and blithe young girl skipping by the riverside, but as the film unfolds, Cao's happy-go-lucky innocence gives way to consternation over her father's handling of university affairs. When her father makes 'backdoor' arrangements for her to be sent away to a prestigious university, she publicly disavows his actions and declares that she will remain at Gongda, where she will follow Mao's exhortation to make revolution in the countryside. Cao Xiaomei's fictional narrative mirrors the real-life Zhong Zhimin's, completing her transformation from the innocent, privileged, and politically uninitiated daughter of a disloyal intellectual into an active, mature, and enlightened political subject fully socialised within the rural mountain community. Cao Xiaomei and Li Jinfeng thus go against the tide from opposite directions and, in spite of their diametrically opposed backgrounds, they arrive on the same red path.

Student Activism and the Cultural Revolution on Screen

At its boldest, *Juelie* aimed to represent the Cultural Revolution on screen, adapting stories of real-life experiments in proletarian education and student rebellion for narrative cinema. But *Juelie* can also be understood

as a response to the crises that had been raised by student activism during the period. On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the student indexed a host of thorny contradictions and unresolved legacies, from issues of class, family background, and political engagement, to the enduring urban/rural disparity. Jonathan Unger argues that, by 1966, four distinct groups of students, with the corresponding opportunities strictly delimited between them, were apparent: cadres' children, worker-peasant children, middle-class children, and bad-class children.¹⁶ Seventeen years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, it was clear that educational qualifications remained a key mechanism of class differentiation in socialist society. The Cultural Revolution was thus less a conflict *between* classes than it was a conflict *about* class, as Joel Andreas has argued.¹⁷

Students were famously among the first to respond to Mao's call for Cultural Revolution, and their activism enacted a politics that transgressed the boundaries of state-organised institutions. By forming alliances with factory workers, demobilised soldiers, and personnel in administrative organs, students created networks that traversed the given social and organisational boundaries such as the school and the work unit.¹⁸ Student characters in narrative depictions of schools were simultaneously a reference to the inequality that the school produced and a depiction of a politics that exceeded the established order of the socialist state.¹⁹

Produced during the final years of the period that would retroactively be defined as the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), *Juelie* is set in 1959, during the Great Leap Forward—a temporality that is reinforced through character references to the vim of the period and its policies, as well as set pieces, such as banners celebrating the arrival of the Great Leap.²⁰ Yet I believe the film is better understood as a cinematic staging of the Cultural Revolution—a fact made clear not only through its presentation of historical acts of student dissent from that era, but also in the film bureau's internal review of the script. In their review, the committee noted that, by setting the film during the Great Leap Forward, when education policy was controlled by a few 'revisionists' like Liu Shaoqi, the screenwriters created continuity issues around the authority and narrative agency of the script's principal characters. After experiencing the Cultural Revolution, the committee explained, it was no longer plausible for one person to determine the course of sweeping social change, such as the establishment of Gongda. Rather, because the occurrence of the Cultural Revolution had enabled systemic grassroots change such as that showcased in *Juelie*, it was therefore imperative for the film to depict the Cultural Revolution.

'If you don't write about the Cultural Revolution, then don't make your film,' the committee concluded bluntly.²¹ But because Gongda had been established in 1958, neither could the film be set wholly during the Cultural Revolution. The result was a finished product that straddled discrete historical periods, with explicit reference to the campaigns of the late 1950s made through the updated political language of the mid-1970s.²²

In the film's final act, Li Jinfeng is called in for public criticism. The central debate during the session is the question of whether or not Li is a good student, with Cao Zhonghe and the deputy commissioner arguing in the negative and principal Long in the affirmative. Yet ultimately the act that brings Li in for judgement before the masses is not her 'blank exam', but rather her later opposition to new policies seeking to privatise the commune that the corrupt local Party secretary and his henchman try to ram through. For refusing to follow the new policies, Li Jinfeng is accused of inciting people to oppose the work team, in another echo of the historical opposition to work teams occurring at the start of the Cultural Revolution. Seeking to protect the public interest, Li acts not in her capacity as a university student, but as a member of the commune. Thus, by the film's final act, Li has been educated, skilled, and socialised by the university, all without sacrificing her embeddedness within productive social relations.

But where the Red Guard student activists of the historical Cultural Revolution challenged and disrupted the conditions that defined them, *Juelie's* narrative delivers the student back into a socialist moral universe delimited by institutions of the state. Although Li Jinfeng's criticism session ends with mass support for Li and the university, the corrupt Party secretary and his allies remain in their leadership positions, and eventually take the opportunity to force a shutdown of the university. The film reaches its resolution only when the good Party secretary, Tang Ning, arrives in a sedan with a letter from Mao. Mao's letter is addressed to the university's leftist activists, and Mao's support both exonerates Li and reverses the closure of the school. 'Comrades, I am in full agreement with what you have done,' Tang reads from the letter—his dialogue an excerpt from the letter Mao wrote to the leadership of the real Gongda campus on 30 July 1961.²³

While *Juelie* creates a narrative depiction of the Cultural Revolution that interacts with its historical one, the two differ in important ways: where the state's response to the historical Cultural Revolution was to foreclose the possibility of a student-articulated politics outside the state, Mao's letter

at the film's conclusion arrives like a *deus ex machina* reinscribing Li's dissent within the auspices of the Party. Notably, the good Party leaders who rescue Li and the university are men, making a patriarchy of the structures that contain Li's gendered dissent. Through its depiction of an education fully integrated with production, *Juelie* reinscribes socialist subjectivity through student labour, delivering the student back into a historically and politically determined subject position devoted to the developmentalist projects of the state.



[1] Party secretary Tang Ning arrives at the film's conclusion to read Mao Zedong's vindicating letter to Gongda. [2] Gongda students stay up late to exterminate pests



[3]



[4]



[5]

[3] Wang Suya as Li Jinfeng and Xiang Hong as Cao Xiaomei. [4] Principal Long encounters a college student who has forgotten his village roots on a tour of bourgeois universities.
[5] Xiang Hong as Cao Xiaomei.