Tiny Times: China’s Summer Blockbuster Draws Fire, Fans

BY CLAIRE ZHANG ON JULY 19, 2013 | 1 COMMENT

The plot of China’s new hit movie Tiny Times may sound familiar to those in the United States: four young women struggling to navigate their personal and professional lives in the big city. But Tiny Times is not set in New York: the glinting skyscrapers in the opening credits belong to Shanghai. The domestically produced Chinese film earned USD$11.9 million on its opening day, breaking China’s 2-D movie opening day box office record, pushing the Hollywood blockbuster Man of Steel out of its number-one position, and generating a storm of controversy.

Despite comparisons to “Sex and the City” or “Gossip Girl,” the buzz surrounding the movie is more comparable to that surrounding HBO’s television series, “Girls.” Some critics have said that Tiny Times captures the spirit of China’s younger generation, known colloquially as the “post-90’s” generation, or those born between 1990 and 2000. Based on a book by one of China’s best-selling authors, Guo Jingming, the movie was heavily promoted and anticipated.

Upon release, the film was immediately greeted with a wave of criticism. Filled with brand names and designer goods, beautiful actors and actresses, lavish apartments, exorbitantly expensive dishware, and glittering lights and snowflakes, it has been accused of being shallow, superficial, and flashy. “Guo Jingming treats luxury and glamor like a person who was starved in childhood, then grew up drooling at a table full of food – no calmness or true happiness, only sickening greed,” wrote one Beijing movie critic, Zhou Miling. Many have argued that the glitz and glamor of the movie’s pervasive luxury encourages the debauched values of materialism and excessive consumption in its young, malleable post-90’s fans.

In contrast to the United States’ millennials, who have grown up during an economic recession, China’s post-90’s generation consists of only-children who have grown up in a booming and affluent economy, a society in which materialism and consumerism was on the rise, and enormous shopping malls and luxury brands were sprouting like wildflowers. Thought to be influenced heavily by these new circumstances, post-90’s city-dwellers are often stereotyped as selfish, spoiled, lazy, and entitled.

“We must face the question of how to deal with the generation mostly based on consumerism. If you carefully observe this movie, you discover that in Tiny Times, everyone’s existence and worth can be objectified. The way to express your friendship is through brand name gifts. Love’s purity is shown through how expensive the gifts are. Whether a person is stable or is deserving of respect also depends on their material life. There is a barcode on everyone’s skin, and Guo Jingming is the god of this universe, determining who is worthy of a good life, who is worthy of love,” wrote Beijing critic Qian Delie.

The fear that a modern but depraved, materialistic and consumerist value system will replace traditional Chinese morals and ideals has been bubbling since the post-80’s generation, also made up largely of only-children, began to come of age. Tiny Times has served as a magnifying glass for these worries, highlighting yet another growing generation gap between old and new.

Many Chinese discussed the movie and its implications on social media. Microblogger @刘力军 wrote, "Tiny Times is written about the post-90’s generation, but most moviegoers belong to the post-80’s generation, who find it impossible to understand the post-90’s way of thinking, which they see as unrealistic and even degenerate. They’ve forgotten that the parents of those born in the 90s were born in the 60s. Their parents became wealthy, so the post-90’s generation has many fuerdai [wealthy second generation]. Their parents, who were brave enough to take business risks to achieve prosperity, support and encourage them. They have more autonomy. By comparison, parents born in the 50s were sent to the countryside, so post-80’s children faced heavy emotional repression. They criticize Tiny Times because it is too dissimilar from their own experiences.”

The box office success of Tiny Times, however, shows that the post-90’s generation is becoming a dominant consumer group. As a member of the movie’s marketing team noted in an interview with Ifeng: “Initially, I didn’t think the movie would appeal to the mainstream market, but unexpectedly, the movie earned the mainstream market’s approval. It’s actually not surprising at all, because the mainstream audience’s
average age has dropped from 24 to 21. The old mainstream audience has become non-mainstream. We’re getting old, and the younger, hipper crowd has become the mainstream. They have arrived.”

Critic Liu Yang wrote in the People’s Daily, “The film is important, not because of any high artistic quality, but rather because this is the first time that a movie has been successful at getting teens to come out to theaters in droves since the film industry began reforming 10 years ago. In addition, the audience is unmatched in emotional investment and infatuation, to the point where for some of the older audience members, the laughter and tears of the kids in the theater are more moving than the movie itself.”

The popularity of the movie can also be attributed to Guo Jingming’s status as a teen pop idol prior to the movie. His novels were already popular with the post-90’s generation. Tiny Times was based on the first book in his series of novels by the same name. As a result, some have argued that the movie became a hit simply because of the large preexisting fan base.

“Today I was talking with two girls in their early twenties at lunch, and Tiny Times came up. Only then did I realize what Tiny Times and Guo Jingming meant to them – it represents their youth. They talked about City of Fantasy and Never Flowers In Never Dreams [novels written by Guo Jingming] as if they were talking about an old friend from their tearful past, filled with emotion. I have to say, I didn’t realize Guo Jingming’s influence was that great.” wrote @姜子 Tao.

Tiny Times also confirms some Chinese parents’ worst fears: the vapid, materialistic attitudes of the younger generation coming to life, displayed in all their sparkling, slow-motion majesty on the big screen. Yet Tiny Times fans say that while the film does feature many brands and luxury items, this such fantasizing is normal and not inherently immoral.

“In reality, everyone has had a wonderful dream in their youth: gorgeous clothing, handsome boyfriends, pretty girlfriends, abundant laughter, loud crying, and a friend who stands forever by your side. Don’t they say that in every girl’s heart lives a Prince Charming, and in every boy’s heart lives a dream lover?” wrote 舒月夜朦胧.

Fans pointed out that the movie’s actual message, behind all the fantasy, is a good one for audiences. Tiny Times encourages people to pursue their dreams and passions with determination and perseverance. Indeed, fans point out the characters are hard working: the protagonist and narrator, Lin Xiao, struggles daily to be a good assistant to the editor-in-chief of a popular magazine; Ruby, though a fuerdai, studs to earn a joint college degree and researches her own investments. Nanxiang, who comes from a poor family, paints on the streets in order to earn money to pay for her fashion design courses. Her work and passion for fashion design leads to her triumph at a big fashion show. Blogger Leafwizard wrote of Nanxiang, “[She] allows us to see that all dreams are equally worthy, they are all appreciated, and that dreams make the weak become strong.”

The movie about dreams has come out just as China’s new leader Xi Jinping has promoted the “Chinese Dream” as a rallying point. On May 4, Youth Day, at the China Academy of Space Technology in Beijing, according to the state-run news outlet Xinhua, Xi Jinping encouraged young people to “be optimistic and tenacious when facing adversities,” a message that seems to align well with what has been advocated as the message of the movies.

Yet, the Chinese Dream is a collective one, concerned with the future of the country as a whole: “Only by integrating individual dreams into the national cause can one finally make great achievements,” said Xi Jinping, according to Xinhua. In contrast, the movie champions the unseen struggles of ordinary individuals that might become lost in the collective group. The pursuing of dreams promoted in the movie, of professional aspirations and personal relationships, appears to be somewhat more akin to the individualistic nature of an American dream rather than one of a great China. It is telling that the movie chooses tiny times as its title, despite China’s typical affinity for the grandiose.

“My friend said the movie was too shallow, and I guess that’s not wrong, but I still thought it was a good movie,” said Zhang Mengni, a 22-year-old who had read the novels, noting that the cinematography was beautiful and pretty to watch. Another 26-year-old, Zhang Simao, technically of the post-80’s generation, said that she did not find the materialism or luxury in the movie that obvious. She enjoyed the film as well, citing comic relief character Tang Wanru as her favorite because she was so funny.

“Generation gap?” Liu Meichen, 19 years old, repeated when asked, laughing a little. “No, I think it’s just a matter of personal preference.”

For these and many viewers, the movie was just a movie: and perhaps that’s as it should be. The strong opinions on both sides seem to be more indicative of critics’ preexisting beliefs about society rather than the quality of the movie itself, and worries that the movie’s message may be harmful to impressionable youth may be overblown.

As a member of the movie’s marketing team commented in an interview with Ifeng, “What I really want to know is, if a movie can destroy an entire system of values all by itself, then what kind of value system is it anyway?”
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