INFORMAL SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ITS
EXPRESSION THROUGH CHINESE CINEMA

A Dissertation in
Educational Leadership

by
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ABSTRACT

The term “leadership” has been infused with different understandings by “Eastern” and “Western” culture. East Asian thinking generally links the idea of “leader” (lingdao) to rank or position, while Western scholarship tends to accept the idea that leaders may emerge and act within less formal contexts or structures. At the same time, much of East Asian history and literature, particularly that from China, highlights the non-formal contributions of individual citizens in pursuit of social goals and social change. In other words, “informal leaders” apparently exist within the Chinese social context, but without benefit of being labeled lingdao. Using contemporary Chinese popular films to illustrate the practice of informal leadership, this study seeks to derive and justify a definition of “leadership” that is robust with respect to differing “Eastern” and “Western” cultural understandings.

Based on inductive context analysis of a sample of Chinese fictional, non-fictional, and documentary films highlighting issues of educational practice and policy, this study explores the extent to which these cinematic texts: (1) depict or suggest “Western” understandings of leadership and (2) serve as a discursive medium of social change. Five emerging themes were then identified across a variety of Chinese educational settings which frame the practice of leadership in terms of the mobilization of collective volition, aimed at social change, and independent from formal rank or position.

The significance of the study lies in its potential sociolinguistic impact on the recognition and acceptance of “bottom up” or “grass roots” leadership within China and other East Asian nations. More specifically, this study aims to promote new understandings and discussions of school reform and teacher leadership.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Orientation

After beginning my doctoral studies in “educational leadership,” it wasn’t long before I had to confront the question of what this conceptual phrase actually meant. Of course, it was the name of my program and was mentioned and discussed in the readings I was assigned. Yet, there seemed to be no comprehensive theory or even definition of “leadership” that could be universally applied or taught in either or both the United States or/and my home country of China (Lee & Pang, 2011). More specifically, the concept of leadership – and the corresponding Mandarin word, lingdao, lingdaoli (Sally, 2004) – seemed to carry different connotations on each side of the Pacific Ocean (Hong & Engestrom, 2004; Law, 2012).

An array of scholars (for example, Chen, 1995; Law, 2012; Sia, 1997; Wang, 2007; Wong, 2001) highlighted these differences, focusing on the traditional cultural and social influences on the development of Chinese leadership practice; e.g., Confucianism, Taoism, and the military science of Sunzi. Within this literature (and within my own understanding of the concept), leadership, or lingdao/lingdaoli, referred to the presence and action of individuals assigned to formal positions by higher ranking authorities also designated as “leaders.” At the same time, however, the term also emphasizes non-coercive guidance via the development and application of wisdom, integrity, strength, and respect (Shouse and Lin, 2010). In contrast, a good
deal of western literature framed leadership as a phenomenon that could arise and move formally or informally, from any source, and any direction within an organization (Hoy & Miskel, 2001).

To reconcile these East/West contrasts seemed like a daunting task. Despite my readings and coursework, it has been a challenge to completely comprehend the western understanding of educational leadership or to establish its correlations to Chinese concepts. A series of questions whirled about in my mind. What is a “leader?” From an eastern point of view, if a leader is simply “the person in charge,” then why do we need other words corresponding with “leader” such as “authority,” “manager,” or simply “the boss?” And what about the word “leadership?” Does it merely refer to the legitimate acts of people “in charge?” Or can leadership be distinguished from these various related concepts? If so, would that imply that “leadership” isn’t restricted to acts of those in charge, but could be evidenced across a broader range of human interaction?

More questions came to me. On what basis could those without formal rank practice “leadership?” Would they not require “power” or “authority” to do so? What is the distinction between “power” and “authority?” Would these concepts also need to be distilled? And how would they relate to “leadership?” What difference would this all make from Chinese perspectives, which tend to look at these as functions in terms of being representations of a legitimized right to exercise authority? To complicate things further, my readings led me to conclude that even western scholars had not always taken the time to sort out such issues.
These questions persisted throughout the time I was taking many specialized courses on educational leadership and reading numerous books to try to improve my understanding of theory. I was thus left with a research challenge, that is, to comprehensively assemble a picture of educational leadership that might overcome the different meanings attached to the concept in China and the West. Could common understandings of this widely appreciated concept be achieved? Would it be possible to find an interesting, intuitive, and easy-to-understand way to comprehend and unite the essence of educational leadership across cultural boundaries?

**Purposes of the Study**

These ideas prompted me to pay attention to the possibility of utilizing non-traditional approaches to advance a robust, cross-cultural understanding of educational leadership. A first step toward this, it seemed, was to study the extent to which phenomena linked to Western notions of educational leadership (or leadership generally) could be observed within Chinese social narratives or texts. Having had the opportunity to study representations of leadership in American popular film, it made sense to use this approach with Chinese cinema as well. Specifically, to what extent did such cinematic texts depict or imply “western” understandings of leadership, particularly (though not limited to) educational settings? If phenomena similar to “western” understandings of leadership were consistently found in Chinese films, a contradiction would appear to arise. That is, a Chinese social phenomena existed for which no word could be assigned, but whose nearest representation would be
The research problem can thus be stated as follows: although much evidence exists indicating the strong tendency within Chinese tradition and society to limit the definition of leadership to acts of those with formal rank and authority, a literary tradition – and a cinematic tradition – exists which highlights the non-formal service and contributions of individuals to various social or political goals, in particular, as they struggle to overcome various natural, human, or organizational threats or barriers to social or political progress. Such narratives portray the efforts of individuals and groups to mobilize social volition in ways that transcend the assignment of formal authoritative right. These individuals or groups are not “in charge,” but are nevertheless influential in terms of shaping social realities. Moreover, social influence flows not simply from the characters and their stories, but also from the screenwriters and filmmakers who bring them to the public eye. This tension between formal designations of “leader” and the reality of individual social influence seems worthy of attention from global scholarship in educational leadership.

To summarize, this study rises from the following observations:

1. In common usage and understanding, the right to exercise “leadership” is socially restricted in China to particular *formal* categories of individuals.

2. Evidence exists, however, that some Chinese citizens outside those categories engage in (and/or are portrayed as engaging in) *informal* activity commonly understood in Western society as acts of “leadership.”

3. Because Chinese language fails to assign a name to such activity, it makes
sense to develop or identify one.

4. “Leadership” (or, at least, “informal leadership”) appears to be the most congruent symbolic representation of the observed phenomenon.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to gather and present evidence to support the argument that the concept of lingdao/lingdaoli can be applied to mean much more than the strategies and actions of those in formal positions of authority. Popular Chinese film serves as the basis for this challenge, as we highlight its assorted depictions of individuals and groups engaged in acts intended to mobilize collective volition. Moreover, we argue, that the creation and distribution of a cinematic text represents a form of discursive leadership (Allan, Gordon, & Iverson, 2006; Barge & Fairhurst, 2008) as represented by the filmmaker’s effort to engage in social influence. Many of the films examined in this study involve Chinese school settings, and therefore relate directly to educational leadership. However, we also suggest that the overall process of film creation and viewing can represent a form of educational leadership even for textual settings not directly related to schooling. In other words, acts of social influence through the communication between filmmakers and audiences can be viewed as acts of discursive leadership.

A second rationale for the study relates to globalization and institutional isomorphism. The environment for understanding organizational and educational theory increasingly transcends national boundaries. Concepts and practices once held as constant become negotiable, problematized, and contested. New patterns of thinking flow like Wi-Fi waves back and forth across the Pacific Ocean. “School
reform,” as it emerges and evolves in both China and the United States can thus be thought of as a “wave packet” with the potential to upset the cultural, philosophical, and practical equilibrium set within traditional structures of leadership thought. As Shouse and Lin (2010) discovered, Taiwan’s school principals who were hesitant to apply the concept of “teacher leader” beyond the classroom nevertheless used other words in expressing hope that their teachers would show leadership in helping to implement the complex demands of school reform.

Taken together, the implication appears to be that “leadership” is, but is not necessarily always, a function of formal authority; that from time to time, “leaders” can emerge from among the ranks of Chinese citizens; and that this represents a desirable social phenomenon within Chinese society. Therefore, a major goal of this study is to understand and problematize this seeming contradiction based on data gathered from a sampling of films depicting various occurrences, successes, or failures of lingdao/lingdaoli. In addition, the study seeks to systematically examine the culturally situated semantic/symbolic and expressed/behavioral meanings of discursive leadership.

Method

For purposes of this study, “Chinese cinematic texts” are understood to comprise two broad categories of fictional or non-fictional/documentary films depicting Chinese cultural, social, organizational, or political themes. One category consists of “authorized” works produced under what might be called an “umbrella of formal
authorization,” that is, films produced in China, typically by Chinese filmmakers, and approved for mass commercial distribution and viewing. A second category consists of films of similar genre produced, distributed, or viewed outside of that umbrella. Both categories of films contain fictional, semi-fictional, and documentary works.

(See Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of this study’s methodology.)
Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

Brief summary of Pertinent Leadership Theory

Leadership is said to be a “slippery phenomenon” (Selznick, 1957). Perhaps this is because even in the West it is imbued with multiple and often contradictory meanings, even within scholarly literature. On top of that, it is a concept that is very familiar to average people, yet one that they may find very difficult to define. For some, the word serves purposes of a “floating signifier” (Carlson, 2003), a term with contested meaning often used as a rhetorical or political device (Shouse and Lin, 2010). Adding the word “educational” to “leadership” does not clarify matters. For some, “educational leadership” involves administrators, policies, change, and even obedience to higher authority. For others, it may signify an opening for radical new designs for schooling and learning. The key point, perhaps, is that “leadership,” even in its “western sense,” has often become entangled with and mistaken for the specific goals sought by those calling for “leadership.”

In addition, “leadership” is often lumped together with other related concepts such as “authority,” “power,” and “management.” For over a century, scholars have sought to distinguish these terms, and yet their differences — and their connections — often remain obscure. Given that countless books and articles focus on the meaning and use of “leadership” (especially “educational leadership”), it seems crucial to distinguish its meaning from these other related concepts. One thus asks, what is the
essence of leadership? What does it denote that related concepts do not?

Based on ideas presented in prior studies (see, for example, Barnard, 1938; Haller and Strike, 1986; Hoy and Miskel, 2001; Shouse and Lin, 2010), it is suggested here that leadership involves actions aimed at mobilizing volition toward the acceptance of individual, social, or political change. Change is achieved primarily through non-coercive persuasion, where individuals or groups gradually accept ideas or actions they previously had not considered to be necessary or valuable. Chester Barnard (1938) described leadership as a form of authority that could emerge from individuals regardless of their formal position. In similar terms, leadership represents the expansion of what Barnard (1938) called the “zone of indifference” and what Simon (1957) later termed the “zone of acceptance,” an imaginary space wherein lies the various directives or suggestions for which potential followers will suspend their own judgment in favor of that of the potential leader. As the zone expands, authority grows allowing leadership to occur. In other words, leadership aims at mobilizing volition for purposes of goal attainment or change. “Educational leadership” can thus be broadly viewed at such efforts that are related to processes of organized and/or deliberate learning.

At the same time, no objective justification exists to assume any congruence between leadership exercised within organizations and formal organizational goals. As Gary Yukl (1998) suggests, leadership is a process in which all members of an organization may influence and reshape its goals, processes, outcomes, and power relationships. Or, as stated by Hoy and Miskel (2001, p. 394), “leadership is comprised
of both rational and emotional elements with no assumptions about the purpose or outcome of the influential efforts.”

It is also important to note, that “leadership” is not defined by success. Hemphill (1949) emphasizes, in contrast, three categories of leadership; attempted (acts resulting in little or no influence); successful (resulting in some influence); and effective (resulting in change or goal attainment). Hemphill’s perspective allows leadership acts to be perceived in their early formative stages, and helps avoid the tendency to apply the word “leader” primarily as an indicator of past success. In many cases, acts of leadership are neither effective nor highly successful at the time they occur. Such forms of attempted leadership, in fact, often serve as the basis for literature and film.

Thus, another good way to think about leadership as a phenomenon and as an answer is to think of it as a vector of social influence with widely diverse potential for direction and magnitude within social units. People communicate and construct meaning on the basis of their “available stock of discursive resources” (Luke, 1995) together. And the discourses, talks, texts, and literature that “reflect ideologies, systems of values, beliefs and social practices” (Hicks, 1995) will eventually be recognized and become an effective means of influencing and training good citizens and maintaining a well-ordered and controlled society, which has been defined as discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2008). The importance of language and the art of communication is the essence of discursive leadership.

While such descriptions may seem more compatible with Western leadership
theory, it is important to remember that such vectors are evident in nearly every social unit, especially at times when uncertainty and expectation are on the rise. This description is applicable to school systems throughout East Asia and China in particular.

**East Asian Perspectives**

According to a range of empirical and theoretical studies, the most widely perceived difference in the way leadership is understood in East Asian and Western settings relates to its association with formal positions of authority. In East Asian political and organizational settings, the possession or exercise of leadership or *lingdao/lingdaoli* is tightly linked to formal rank and is understood to flow from “authority” to “subordinate” (Shouse & Lin, 2010). In a Chinese school, for example, the norm of understanding tends to be that principals “lead” directors and teachers, directors lead teachers, and teachers lead students.

As previously discussed, in Western settings, the above description is just one of several diverse understandings of what it means to lead. As Hoy and Miskel (2001) suggest, leadership is understood as a phenomenon that can arise from any point within an organization and that can flow in any direction. Leadership may work to support or, in some situations, to block or change formal organizational goals and procedures (Shouse & Lin, 2010). This diffuse and somewhat egalitarian interpretation of leadership is likely rooted in traditional Western philosophies stressing equality, freedom, and the rights of individuals.
In contrast, the meaning of leadership in China has been shaped by five fundamental guiding philosophies as applied by numerous emperors throughout the nation’s history -- Taoism, Confucianism, Mohism, Legalism, and Militarism (Chen, 1995; Law, 2012; Sia, 1997; Wang, 2007; Wong, 2001; Wang & Chee, 2011). Together, these philosophies have produced themes of meaning that are often complex, subtle, and contrasting with Western perspectives. Prevalent among these themes in today’s China (and throughout East Asia) are collectivism, power distance, and a pronounced social status structure (Shouse & Lin, 2010; Bush & Qiang, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 1991). Collectivism refers to the willingness of individuals to identify with the needs and goals of the larger groups to which they belong; more specifically, to coordinate or suspend their own needs and goals with respect to the larger groups. Power distance refers to how remote citizens perceive themselves from legal, administrative, or political authority. To put it in terms of an old American saying, power distance represents the degree to which citizens believe they can “fight city hall.” Such cultural dispositions remain strong despite the democratization trends occurring throughout East Asia over past decades. In particular, social status remains a highly salient indicator of individual value and character. Intellectual work, for example, is ascribed higher status than most forms of physical labor, a disposition likely related to an over 2000 year old system of meritocratic exams and to a generalized belief that education was indicative of high moral character.

In addition to these dispositions, the importance placed by East Asian societies
upon maintaining “social harmony” should not be underestimated. In general, conflict is something to be avoid or, at least, to occur subtly or outside of public view.

Consideration is given to preserving “face” or dignity for oneself and those with whom one interacts. The value placed upon social harmony fundamentally shapes “leadership concepts and practices, expectations and responses” (Shah, 2006, p. 365). Taken together, these dispositions facilitate and reinforce the idea of hierarchy in social and organizational settings. As individuals move upwards in terms of social or organizational rank, they acquire rights of authority that are generally well-understood by others. As Shouse and Lin (2010, p. 24) suggest, such understanding changes the idea of leader from “someone who does something” to “someone who is something.”

It thus seems fair to suggest that while Western views tend to link leadership to change via persuasion, Eastern views tend to associate it with stability via experience, wisdom, and “obedience.” Change, of course, still occurs in Eastern societies, but it tends to occur slowly, carefully, and from the top down.

From both theoretical and empirical perspectives, however, the problem with this narrative is that although Western ideas of diffuse egalitarian leadership may lack legitimacy in Eastern settings, one nevertheless sees them in action. For example, when he first began to mobilize followers and launch a revolution against established formal authority, was Mao Zedong engaged in Chinese “leadership?” The same question can be asked with regard to other Chinese citizens, including writers and filmmakers who engage in public acts of social persuasion. The questions raised here flow from the cultural and conceptual tensions that I hope to examine more fully.
throughout this study.

**The Film as Discursive Leadership**

The term “discursive leadership” (Fairhurst, 2007) circumscribes a set of ideas related to the use of words, texts, and narratives as tools for the shaping of social meaning. In this regard, various scholars (Thomas, 1998; Shouse, 2005, 2009; Wang, 2009) have highlighted how cinematic texts operate in two important ways. First, the stories presented within the film provide opportunities for understanding particular social problems and, in some instances, also suggest ways to address them. Second, those who control the creation and distribution of cinematic texts acquire the potential capacity to construct larger social narratives. Wang (2009), for example, describes the shift occurring within post-revolutionary Chinese cinema “from star to revolutionary culture,” as popular film became a useful field of play for government officials and party members to advance or attack particular ideological understandings.

Once mainly the province of powerful and wealthy interests (e.g., governments and large studios), over time and globally, the ability to produce and control the content and distribution of cinematic texts has expanded. Example of this trend are described in Mao’s (2011) study of Chinese documentary films and Zhou’s (2009) study of Chinese “schools on film.” Both studies describe a gradual change from films presenting formal “normative” depictions of life and education (e.g., appropriate moral or civic lessons) to films offering more problematized perspectives. Despite the fact that filmmakers often risk losing formal government authorization for their work, it has become far
more difficult today for governments to block distribution of these works outside their national boundaries. For example, movies like *Please Vote for Me* (see Chapter 4) and *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* were both filmed in China and highly regarded outside of China despite having their distribution blocked within China. The widening availability of film as a discursive resource has greatly expanded the power of filmmakers to reshape social narratives, mobilize public volition, and, hence, to lead discursively. In this study, how the film in a whole try to create social influence and form cultural consensus would be studied and analyzed carefully in chapter four with each cinematic texts as a research unit.

To summarize, I offer Robinson’s (2001, p. 93) definition of leadership, which seems congruent with the idea of mobilized volition:

Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them.

In terms of the present study, the important point here is that skillful cinematic texts work as vectors of social influence, mobilization, and leadership. They constitute informal vectors of leadership to the extent their creation and distribution lie beyond authorized position or systematic government control.

**Leadership, Education, and Social Learning**

Up to now, the present study has drawn several inferences and conclusions that require further discussion. Of note here are the following: (1) that leadership (or *lingdao*) is a social phenomenon that can occur informally within and outside of
formal organizations and (2) that “learning,” “education,” and “educational leadership” are closely linked phenomena that can occur formally or informally outside of school organizations. In light of the mental boundaries typically surrounding the formal process of schooling, the latter assertion is perhaps more provocative than the first. If asked, “who are educational leaders?” people tend to first reply with answers such as “principal,” “teacher,” or the names of other formal positions within organized systems of schooling.

Upon further discussion, however, many readers may recognize the multiple meanings associated with words like “education,” “learning,” and “leadership,” and thus begin to conceive of broader understandings. For example, “education,” can refer to either collective activity (study, research, etc.) associated with formal institutions or to describe a single individual’s path of learning over some period of time. And now, because we’ve just used the words “formal” and “learning,” we have invited readers to consider (1) the possible contrasts between formal and informal and (2) comparisons between education and learning. The following section will thus discuss the contrasts and comparisons, and then juxtapose them with the concept of “leadership.”

**Education, Learning, and Leading: Formal and Informal**

Whether one defines “leadership” in terms of mobilizing volition or advancing the solution of tasks and problems, education and learning serve as its key processes and outcomes. If education is thought of as a process in which activities and
experiences are gradually assembled in some purposeful way, then it follows that "learning" serves as its units. For example, one might "learn" to play the guitar, but a musical "education" centered upon the guitar would likely consist of extended units of learning. To the extent that such learning or education were externally encouraged or directed, one may infer that some form and combination of formal and/or informal leadership had occurred.

We can now consider the connection between "formal" and "informal" in education, learning, and leadership. The formal–informal continuum has been used to draw a contrast between forms of organization that are explicitly planned to attain particular goals and other forms of organization that are mostly the result of circumstances related to individual or group needs. The classic example of this is offered by Barnard (1938) who spoke of formal organization as an established structure of planned and coordinated activity among two or more persons aimed at achieving specific results. Informal organization, he suggested however, resulted spontaneously from the coincidental collective of individuals associated with a formal organization. Informal organization, he suggested, would gradually produce its own characteristic social and normative structure capable of promoting or impeding the goals of the formal organization. Examples might include such things as the "grapevine," an often important form of organizational communication. Another common example is "plea bargaining" within the U.S. judicial system—a strategy and process developed out of grass roots necessity and not found in any law book.

In more recent times, the formal-informal contrast has been applied to education
and learning. The institution of schooling, either public or private, is considered a means of providing formal learning and education. Informal learning can also occur within such formal settings. Various scholars (Coleman 1961, Jackson 1968, Dreeben 1968) have described in rich detail the vast amount of learning that occurs in school that is only peripherally related to classroom lessons and often related to the acceptance or inculcation of social norms. The informal social education that follows over a longer period of time may be vital when it comes to developing intuitive understandings of interactions and relationships; for example, who to trust, who not to trust, and how to tell the difference (Shouse, 2004).

It is also the case, however, that academic learning can occur informally – or less formally – within formal school organizations. Examples might consist of activity related to clubs, music, or athletics that allows students to apply their learned skills in a context of individual interest and choice. In addition, teachers may also encourage less formal forms of learning through the use of semi-structured “free choice” assignments or through affectively designed field trips to key locations such as museums, farms, theater, etc.

Although the terms “informal learning” and “informal education” tend to be applied to out-of-school activity, the lines are sometimes blurry. Consider, for example, a child who develops an interest in collecting coins or stamps. The child’s interest typically begins at an informal level, perhaps triggered by a friend or sibling. Learning gradually occurs as the child acquires knowledge about different nations or famous people and historic events. Over time, the child may acquire knowledge about
the stamps or coins themselves—e.g., production, style, metallic content, or value. He or she may even begin to attend stamp/coin exhibitions, interact with other collectors, or become a member of a formal club. Two things have thus occurred. First, the experience shifts from one of learning to one of education. Second, what was originally an informal process interacts with and takes on characteristics of formal learning and education. Processes involving music, art, sports, politics, just to list a few, are likely to follow a similar pattern.

In my own case, I recently volunteered to serve as an extra in a Penn State police training film on how to react in the event of a terrorist attack on campus. My participation was both formal and informal. On one hand, my involvement was casual, voluntarily, and without expectation of acquiring a great deal of skill. On the other hand, as I interacted with the formally organized filming effort, I gained some knowledge of the process of constructing a set of meaningful scenes. My experience was something like a casual trip to an art museum. I went for pleasure, had to follow a set of formal rules and routines (e.g., “do not touch,” “no flash photography”), and left having learned in a context that was neither regulated nor evaluated by anyone but myself.

One can also imagine processes of learning and education that are completely informal. A daughter learns to cook by watching her father do so over a long period of time. She may ask questions and he may offer advice, but most of the learning occurs with little or no systematic instruction. Indeed, many or most of the skills young people eventually develop may be learned entirely outside of school.
Leadership in Formal and Informal Educational Settings

A number of issues need to be sorted out with regard to leadership and its relation to education and learning within and outside of organizational settings. As previously suggested, “leadership” essentially refers to the “mobilization of volition” toward particular goals. We begin by discussing the formal and informal nature of leadership within formal and informal educational settings. The figure below serves as an initial organizing framework, listing simple examples of leader types.

Figure 1: Intersections of Formality, Leader Type, and Educational Setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Type</th>
<th>Educational Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A. School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C. Piano Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>B. Teacher Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D. Parent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It appears, however, that Figure 1 is somewhat lacking in at least two ways. First, it presents a truncated representation of “learning” and “education,” which have been collapsed into the heading of “educational setting.” Second, it is understood that principals, teachers, and parents vary greatly in their leadership capability and effectiveness. The following paragraphs aim at fleshing out Figure 1 by discussing the underlying logic behind the placement of the examples within each cell.

Formal Leadership in Formal Setting: The Principal

Consider, for example, the example of “principal,” here used to represent formal
leadership within a formally organized setting. Although in everyday terms, one speaks of the principal as “the leader of the school,” the term is typically used to designate a formal administrative or managerial position. In reality, leadership – as the ability to mobilize volition – may be more or less absent from or unnecessary to the principal’s skills or responsibilities. As others have argued (Selznick, 1959; Shouse and Lin, 2010), leadership (as mobilized volition toward change) may sometimes be “dispensable” or unnecessary.

**Informal Leadership in Formal Settings: The Teacher**

“Teacher” is used to represent informal leadership within formal organization. Teachers, of course, have a formal leadership role, that of leading students; to mobilize classroom volition toward the act of learning. The informal teacher-leader role involves the mobilization of volition beyond the classroom into the realm of professional practice. Although this can take a wide range of shapes and sizes, one typical case might involve the public expression (and implicitly the mobilization) of opposition and resistance to the imposition of rules or regulations perceived to impose on teachers’ professional judgments. Over time, teachers may yield a substantial amount of symbolic or strategic influence with colleagues, which in some instances can create sufficient power to block top-down organizational initiatives or directives. Such situations illustrate the potential for conflict between formal and informal authority when representatives of each disagree over the size and shape of the organizational zone of acceptance. Indeed, the ability of organizational collectives to
expand this zone is evidence that “leadership” has occurred.

**Formal Leadership in Informal Settings: The Piano Teacher**

Many teachers, of course, operate primarily outside of or adjacent to formally organized settings. Consider, for instance, the neighbor down the street who offers piano lessons to local children. The educational setting may be entirely unconnected to any formal organization. Seldom are contracts involved and lesson times are flexible and subject to change. Evaluation tends to be cordial, intrinsic, and absent of significant external reward or sanction. The actual teaching, however, occurs in coordinated and regularized fashion following a specific predesigned course of study. Teachers may assign homework, expect a certain standard of performance to be met, and engage in a range of strategies to improve student performance and increase motivation. Because progression to advanced skill levels is often very frustrating for students, and because attrition rates may be quite high, successful teaching depends on an ability to persuade students to suspend their own judgment in favor of the teacher’s. That is, it depends on the teacher’s ability to mobilize the volition of students who may perceive their involvement as casual or temporary.

**Informal Leadership in Informal Settings: The Parent**

A great deal of parenting can be understood as the exercise of informal leadership in informal educational settings. It is true, of course that parents possess formal legal authority over their children and that a family can be understood as both formal
institutions and structures. It is also true that parents may adopt relatively formal, regularized, and coordinated forms of teaching and guidance, with examples being things like regular church attendance, family meetings, or requiring a child to attend a drug rehabilitation camp. At the same time, a tremendous amount of parental teaching and guidance occurs informally. For example, though parents may wish a child to acquire various skills and attributes (i.e., housework, musical skill, honesty, responsibility, good overall character), much of the teaching and guidance associated with this kind of learning takes place informally through example, suggestion, or as particular problems or opportunities arise. Whatever learning that results from such informal interaction tends to be voluntary on the part of the child; that is, the long-term job of education and guidance hinges on the parent’s ability to expand their child’s zone of acceptance through strategies varying in quality, consistency, and effectiveness.

Is Figure 1 Relevant within a Chinese Context of Meaning?

The examples and explanations above on leadership within education and learning settings may be applicable to non-western societies. In China, as discussed in concurrent essays, the idea of leadership, or lingdao/lingdaoli, tends to be limited to actions taken within the context of formal position and formal organization (type A in Figure 1). Shouse and Lin’s (2010) observations from Taiwan are also applicable throughout China; that (1) “school leaders” are those with formal authority, (2) the principal holds the highest position of authority, and (3) and “leadership” flows in one
direction (downwardly toward subordinates). Yet, as I have pointed out, numerous elements exist within Chinese literature and history emphasizing non-formal contributions of individual citizens to various social and political initiatives both within and outside of formal organization or position (see Figure 1, types B, C, and D). At the same time, Mandarin language contains no single explicit term to capture the idea of “informal leader.”

From an anthropological perspective, this poses no “problem.” Rather, it may be interpreted as reflecting the collectivist, power-distance dispositions of East Asian culture (Hofstede, 1991). From a socio-linguistic view, however, words and meanings are socially constructed, often disconnected from actual phenomena. This disconnect led me to discover the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure on relationships between “thoughts” and “sounds.” Writing in the early 20th century (Harris, 1988, cited in Hansen, 2001, p. 372), he stated that

Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world.

His idea seems to be fit and helpful on understanding the puzzling situation we discussed earlier. It leads me to conclude that leadership – and educational leadership – are fundamentally natural and informal processes of human survival, which have migrated and evolved within formal organizational settings. This idea thus opens the door to the problematization (Crotty, 1998) of what could be called the East Asian
leadership myth – the formalistic, top-down, and nested understanding of what it means to lead.

Figures 2 and 3 offer further support for and illustration of these arguments, suggesting the loose connections between “ideas” and “sounds.” The top irregular area (A) indicates ideas and thoughts within the society, the bottom irregular area (B) indicates vocalized sounds or words. Between the two is a “nether region” in which the connections between the two are socially or politically negotiated or contested. The vertical lines map the rough associations of thoughts and sounds. Language combines the elements of sound and thought and produces, as Saussure emphasized, “a form, not a substance” (Hansen, 2001).

Figure 2: Ideas (A) and Sounds (B) (From Hansen, 2001, following Saussure, 1916/1959)

In our present case, Figure 2 suggests how the human mind can observe, imagine,
and connect numerous combinations of individuals, actions, and assigned labels related to purposes of mobilizing collective volition; what we refer to here (for simplicity’s sake) as “leadership.” However, between the mind’s conception and its corresponding word lies a playing field of social interaction and linguistic negotiation over various time frames. At the present time, for example, negotiation within the Chinese social framework has resulted in “lingdao” being assigned specifically to individuals, actions, and intents associated with formal rank and authority. Similar actions and intents conducted by individuals outside of formal rank are left with no simple corresponding word (see Figure 3).
Figure 3. Sociolinguistic Negotiation (Time 1)

Conception of individuals and actions assigned to, intent upon, or designed for purposes of mobilizing collective volition

A  Disconnected from Formal Related to Formal Rank

B  Undetermined or Varied  *Lingdao*/*Lingdaoli*

From a socio-linguistic perspective, negotiation does not cease and meaning is continually contested. Today, moreover, the contest has shifted to a global arena; to an age of “lasers in the jungle” (Paul Simon, 1987) and where “language is a virus” (Laurie Anderson, 1986). In other words, the construction of meaning now transcends national or cultural boundaries. Local structures of meaning can no longer be considered sacrosanct.
The Role of Cinema

My proposed study will explore the ways in which popular film serves to extend and redefine the meaning of leadership so as to represent the mobilization of volition by groups and individuals outside of formal positions of authority. Film is a language – a virus – and a powerful global resource challenging and reconstructing connections between ideas and language.

As explicit narrative and implicit symbol, film has the potential to reshape both individual and social understandings of power distance, political efficacy, and, ultimately, connections between ideas and language. Cinematic narratives can potentially deconstruct, negotiate, and reconstruct viewers’ opinion, imagination, and sense of agency. In short, by revealing acts of determination and courage, the film depicts leadership and invites viewers to conceive of it in new ways. A good example of this is the film *Pretty Big Feet*, the story of a strong and independent woman who constantly struggled to persuade her small, drought-plagued village that education offered the only means for community survival. Through wit, determination, and sacrifice, teacher Zhang overcomes traditional barriers of male dominance and the attraction of distant urban life to raise the educational consciousness of her students and other villagers. At the same time, on discursive leadership level, the film aims to raise the social consciousness of the audience by sending various symbolic messages through character’s discourse and actions, reminding them of their debt and obligation to those who struggle to improve the nation. *Zhang lao shi* (teacher Zhang) become a symbol and a tool for mobilizing volition among citizens and educators.
One thus sees how film constructs lingdao/lingdaoli in multiple ways – through the actions of characters, through its overall message, and through its very creation by the collective individuals responsible for that. An important task for researchers of educational leadership then is to decode the meaning that flows from creative production, to big screen images, to social transmission. To put it in slightly different terms, the messages within a film can change the minds of those who view it; but the release and distribution of a film can potentially change an entire nation. Effective films can arrange events and narratives to generate audience identification, empathy, and understanding – to create entirely new patterns of thought and language that can become diffused throughout a society. Figure 4 suggests the capability of film (as process and as product) to rearrange connections between ideas and language.
Film works as a powerful negotiator between ideas, images, and language, and a catalyst for interaction between critical issues, social phenomena, individuals, and society. This negotiation (i.e., creation, distribution, viewing, and impact) evolves and is understood formally or informally depending on time and circumstance. An original film idea, for instance, may come from the mind of an artist or writer (informal).
while the subsequent technical and distribution processes will tend to occur in some sort of formally organized setting. If the film is historical, it may become a required part of an academic course, in which case the “leading and learning” also occur within a formal framework. Most of the time, however, decisions to view and/or be influenced by a film are informal. The issue of sanction or censorship adds another layer of complexity, as a state or other formal interests may authorize or seek to restrict the creation or viewing of a film.

In terms of educational outcome, film evolves like “organized anarchy” – issues are problematic, technology is uncertain, and participation is fluid (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). Narratives are deciphered and understood in different ways, even differently from the creators’ original intent. Of course, the same is true for many other creative works such as literature, music, painting, or even conversations between people. As a researcher, I also contribute to the process, proposing and eventually placing this study in the space between thought and language. The answers and ideas I offer are intended to further discussion; in other words, to propose the word “lingdao/lingdaoli” to the mobilization of volition outside of formal position is not a solution or an end to a problem. Rather, it is a way of generating new thoughts and new understanding.

Grammar, Syntax, and the Cinematic Construction of Meaning

Clifford Solway (1966) states that a film is “a didactic arrangement of camera shots, charged with meanings and implications nowhere in the original, organized for cumulative impact.” Directors and producers use film as a pliable medium for sending
out messages and meaning. In this study of leadership, film meaning is interpreted in two ways. First, films are viewed as texts depicting the contributions of individual citizens working informally (without official position or authority) in pursuit of social goals through manifest acts of persuasion, an activity commonly understood in Western society as attempted leadership. Second, the authorization, construction, and distribution of the film itself is also viewed as a manifest act of social persuasion. According to Marshall McLuhan’s (1967) important idea “the medium is the message,” a “medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.” Thus, the film, as medium, serves as a focus of leadership study because of its potential to reshape social meanings not only via explicit text, but also by the characteristics of the film itself.

A key task of this study, then, is to interpret meanings embedded in the images on the big screen to understand the “leadership activity” portrayed within a sample of Chinese films, as well as that represented by the directors, producers, and others responsible for their creation. To put it in slightly different terms, the messages within a film can change the minds of those who view it; but the release and distribution of a film can potentially change an entire nation. Effective films can arrange events and narratives to generate audience identification, empathy, and understanding – to create entirely new patterns of affect and intellect which then become diffused throughout a society. Through the manipulation of events, characters, sounds, and story, a skilled director can lead an audience to experience a noble or heroic struggle similar to that expressed within the film.
In order to capture and analyze both types of leadership phenomena, a major concern of the study is to decode the grammar and syntax of the film and find out how the ordering and arrangement of shots and scenes contributes to the construction of leadership meanings. Within the selected films, various techniques have been used to stress or symbolize characteristics and activities of leadership. As Fabe (2004) suggests in *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*, shots manipulation can be grouped under the headings of editing, duration, type, camera movement, camera angle, camera lens, lighting, composition, symbolism, and sound.

In addition, the director’s choice and use of actors, choice of setting or set design, props, costumes, and make-up also influence the credibility of a film in the eyes of its viewers (Fabe, 2004). Thus, the “mise-en-scène”, which essentially means "visual theme" or "telling a story," along with the cinematography and editing of a film, help express a film’s vision by generating a sense of time and space to bring the audience into the action and experience the same feeling as the main characters. First, I will explain in general how some these techniques can influence the viewing experience of the audience; in particular, how they work to reinforce a leadership message in the film. I will then illustrate the influence of these techniques using one of the films in the present study’s database to show how leadership traits have been intentionally attributed to the characters and how the director tried to lead the audience by sending out messages in chapter 3.
Summary

Chapters 1 and 2 were designed to describe the conceptual puzzle of leadership meaning in the Chinese context and to argue that meanings attached to *lingdao/lingdaoli*, though solidly associated with formal rank, could be problematized and socially negotiated through the creation and presentation of cinematic counter-narratives. The chapters offered a rationale for this position, along with descriptions of a potential framework for film analysis. The following chapter provides more details of the sample selection and analytic methods to be used in this study.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The various broad and perhaps non-traditional understandings of leadership discussed in the previous chapter prompted me to consider non-traditional approaches to support their legitimacy within an East Asian context. Having had the opportunity to study the presentation of leadership in American popular film, it seemed to make sense to use this approach with Chinese cinema as well. Specifically, to what extent did such cinematic texts depict or imply “western” understandings of leadership, particularly (though not limited to) educational settings?

Data Sources

For purposes of this study, “Chinese cinematic texts” are understood to comprise two broad categories of fictional or non-fictional/documentary films depicting Chinese cultural, social, organizational, or political themes and served to the public as a communicative artifact as “visual rhetoric” (Foss, 2004). According to the definition given by Sonja K. Foss (2004), visual rhetoric has two senses of meaning, which could mean both a visual object and a perspective on the study of visual data,

“In the first sense, visual rhetoric is a product individuals create as they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating. In the second, it is a perspective scholars apply that focuses on the symbolic processes by which visual artifacts perform communication.” (Foss, 2004)

Thus, through the medium of their products, filmmakers and producers tend to
communicate with the audience by enciphering various codes and visual symbol of their films and other video products.

In this case, it is important to figure out how do filmmakers express and depict behaviors, actions, or characters involved in mobilization of collective volition within Chinese education environment? What’s the message they want to communicate with the public through the film as visual rhetoric? Did the films bring any change or influence on its focused people’s life? With these questions as guiding principles, I accessed published lists of the movies released each year between 1979 and 2013 because visual rhetoric created after the Cultural Revolution tend to be less propaganda and more out of directors’ free will.

Within the Chinese film database, there are basically two categories of films under the supervision of the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT). One category consists of “authorized” works, films produced in China, typically by Chinese filmmakers, and approved for mass commercial distribution and viewing within the PRC. A second category consists of films of similar genre, created, distributed, or viewed without SARFT authorization. Within this study, both the authorized and non-authorized films have been considered as long as it fits the bellowed data selection criteria. Besides, Researched cinematic texts consist of a variety of genres, fiction films, semi-documentary/pseudo-documentary, documentary, TV shows, talk shows, etc. – they all provided condensed experience and communicate to the audience.
Sample Selection Criteria

After determined the data source of this research, several sample selection criteria were specified and carried out in accordance to provide relative and useful data to the research questions efficiently. First, I examined portrayals of worthy of remembrance characters in selected movies and television shows in terms of their intention of mobilizing collective volitions expressed by their discourses, behaviors, interactions, and the consequences of their actions on themselves and others. Then, I selected films and documentaries that turned out to be famous or influential in terms of recording or causing social changes within Chinese society. To be specific, I examined films that might portrayed real-life events or experience during tremendous social change periods of China, which might include incidences occurred with a range from ancient China to current time. Or released films that had caught public’s attention or had influence on the society. Third, I also included films with strong symbolic messages and/or delivered discourse that try to communicate and persuade its audience. That is, films that have been discussed so heatedly on various online movie forums, such as Douban Movie, Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB), Rotten Tomatoes, within and without the nation that gradually bring some change to the society. Last, an educational setting is a preferable but not necessary criterion for the film selection. To put it in a nutshell, in the selecting process, I attempted to reveal the attempted leadership and discursive leadership beneath the existence of the cinematic texts.
**Sample Selection**

After surveying Chinese and Chinese-related films dating back to 1979, based on the selection criteria, I constructed a list of films that appeared to illustrate examples of informal leadership/discursive leadership in Chinese society (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Authorized</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King of the Children</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Substitute teacher, rural school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her Smile Through Candlelight</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Teacher, poor quality Shanghai school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Blue Kite</strong></td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Middle class family through recent Chinese history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Ji</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Rural students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Country Teachers</em></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Teachers in rural village school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grass house</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Principal, middle class elementary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Not One Less</em></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Substitute teacher, poor rural school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Student Village</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Remote, rural boarding school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shining Teenagers</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y(TV)</td>
<td>High school teacher befriends students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress</strong></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Displaced students befriend peasant girl, Cultural Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pretty Big Feet</em></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Principal, poor rural elementary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Senior Year</em></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Dynamic high school teacher, college entrance exam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The films listed in Table 1 were selected based on their focused portrayal of characters and/or events engaged in or related to acts of change, struggle, or persuasion and in which the characters are portrayed as heroic, honorable, or worthy of remembrance. Based on this framework, the sample of films was selected as follows:

- films known to the researcher and or her/advisor that fit the above criteria
and/or

• films dealing with issues related to educational and/or social change in China, obtained from an Internet search.

• Films recommended by others during the time of data collection.

**Narrowing of Sample**

Based on film availability and so as to avoid repetition of themes, ten films were selected for in-depth viewing (listed in bold type in Table 1). After consideration of overall content and relevance, six films were selected for in-depth written analysis in Chapter 4, which are*Pretty Big Feet, Senior Year, Not One Less, Please Vote for Me, Education, Education*, and*Country Teachers.*

**Analytic Approach**

Mass media, such as movies and television shows, are a collection of images created deliberated by the producing team in order to express messages and communicate with the audience. In other words, producers would use visual mediums (Hill & Helmers, 2012) like films and television to transmit and broadcast different voices and discourse to the public to bring some change to the society. In order to infer the “existence of images, emotions, and ideas” (Foss, 2004) within a visual rhetoric artifact such as films, the unique combination of colors, lines, textures, and rhythms of the visual images need to be deciphered and analyzed inductively.

In order to gather the needed information from the data source, inductive content analysis was use as the main analytic approach for this research. According to Harold
Lasswell (1948), the essence and main effort of content analysis is to understand the question, “who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect?” To be specific, as Kimberly Neuendorf (2002) explained in *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, content analysis is, “a summarising, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, inter-subjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalisability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented.”

Thus, the major components of conducting inductive content analysis within this study are: a) documents, which included cinematic texts of films and literature texts about filmmakers, b) data collection, which means acquire access to selected films, c) data coding and organization, which needed to encipher symbolic messages and/or elements of visual rhetoric within each cinematic texts, d) data analysis, which means to weave all the fragments together into a comprehensive craftwork.

**Data Collection and Coding**

To be specific, first, films were viewed and examined inductively; that is, with an eye toward scenes and events concrete or symbolic acts of mobilizing collective volition. Notes were taken and codes were developed to categorize emerging themes related to informal expressions of leadership, authority, and power. Character quotes, thick descriptions of film events, and detailed observational notes were gathered as data entry and been put in research journal by using Beyerbach’s (2005) film data
organizational method. Table 2 illustrates a typical data entry of the cinematic texts as data source.

Table 2: Example of Data Entry for *Pretty Big Feet*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Pretty Big Feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Set in a small northwest China village on the Loess Plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyline</td>
<td>Ms Zhang Meili, a strong and independent woman, who believed education was the only way to help the villagers change their fate, set up a school in the dry desert landscape of northwest China. The movie centers on three relationships - the communication between Zhang and a Beijing volunteer teacher Xia Yu; the intimacy/love affair between Zhang and Wang Shu, the village projectionist; and the special commitment by the two teachers to the village's children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted informal leadership portrayed in the film</td>
<td>Ms. Zhang is a non-traditional woman who struggled to break through the traditional shackles through the power of knowledge as a teacher and a principal. Ms. Zhang is also a determined person who sticks to her dream—to provide better education and a bright future to the kids. And her persistent and never-give-up attitude on the kids and on the education career finally moved Ms. Xia and changed her mind. Ms. Zhang is the altruistic mother figure in the film. Her dedication and selflessness has strongly moved and influenced the surrounding people, especially the kids and people close to her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive leadership (i.e., the film’s overall moral or social message)</td>
<td>All you affluent city folk need to understand all the sacrifice and devotion that took place historically so that you could have a “soft life”. You still have an obligation to help your brothers and sisters who are less fortunate than you. Poverty people in the rural areas tried hard to make a living deserve to be respected and given help by the affluent city folks. Education as the major way of changing the living condition of the rural people should be emphasized and pay more attention to by the government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging Themes</td>
<td>Activity related to a lot of sacrifice, devotion, and obligation. Emphasis of persistence of hard work, selflessness. Leadership exercised through emotional attachment. Demonstrating the value of education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
shooting techniques such as shot duration, shot types, camera movement, camera angle, lens selection, lighting, and sound were recorded and analyzed to see how the filmmakers manage to create a values-driven context through the visual and audio elements that they and the audience would respond to.

**Shot Duration**

The length (duration) of shots is an important consideration that can greatly affect the rhythm or pace of the film. Based on the editing of film shots, the “story teller” can weave information and messages into the different scenes to spread out meaning they wish to convey to the audience. Long shots are associated with more relaxing and lyrical moments. Short shots traditionally being used to show urgent, emergent, and even violent scenes. Besides, shots that end before the viewer had a chance to understand all they contain, such as sudden fade out scenes, can instill atmosphere of nervous, anxious, or excitement. To the contrary, films that cut after most viewers have comprehended the content of the image tend to bring calming, contemplative, or boring feelings (Fabe, 2004). Thus, when characters are captured in shots with a shorter duration or the scene has been cut out by a sudden fade out that can created an intense environment which would make the need of leadership or action seems more urgent and necessary to the audience.

**Shot Type**

Different types of shots and framing can generate different kinds of emotional or intellectual feelings, experiences, and responses among the audience. The most common shot types are introduced in Table 3 with film *Pretty Big Feet* as sample data.
Table 3: Varieties of Cinematic Shots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shot Name</th>
<th>Shooting technique</th>
<th>Shot effect</th>
<th>Example (from film <em>Pretty Big Feet</em>)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extreme long shot (ELS)/ Extreme wide shot (EWS)</td>
<td>Extreme long (wide) shots are far removed from subject; often shot with wide-angle lens.</td>
<td>ELS may show subject in distance, but emphasis is on showing subject in his/her environment.</td>
<td>ELS shows droughty and barren environment to express isolation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long shot (LS)/ Wide shot (WS)</td>
<td>Long shots (also known as wide shots) provide overall view of scene.</td>
<td>Sometimes called an establishing shot; orients audience as to location, weather, time of the day, etc.</td>
<td>WS establishes character's action, surrounding environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium shot (MS)</td>
<td>Medium shot shows interaction between characters, including dialogue.</td>
<td>MS shows movement and background info while still focused on subject.</td>
<td>Interaction between two characters had been greatly captured by MS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close up (CU)</td>
<td>Close up shots typically show the face and shoulders of a subject, with some headroom.</td>
<td>CU shots convey emotion and help audience connect with the subject.</td>
<td>CU shot shows determination and dedication to lead students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Extreme close up (ECU)**

ECU focuses on particular part of a person, object, or animal. ECU shots create intimacy, mood, or emotion. Focus on significance.

ECU on feet shows symbolic meaning.

**Reaction shot (RS)**

RS (or noddy shot), show listening or reacting. Shows effect of one person’s words or actions on other people in the scene.

Scene shows a cheerful response.

**Point of view shot (POV)**

POV (first person or subjective shot) shows character perspective. Audience assumes character’s position and perception to create sense of identification.

POV from child’s angle, with emphasis on bracelet.

---

**Camera Movement**

In a movie, the direction of lens movement has a dramatic effect on the results. The camera can be moved upwards, downwards, to the right or left, or away from or toward the subject in order to produce different feeling for the audience. The most common camera movements are the pan shot, swish pan, tilt, traveling shot, and crane shot. One famous example of how meaning can be created this way is the crane shot scene from the 1952 film High Noon. Director Fred Zinneman pulls the camera upward and away from Marshal Kane, showing him alone, isolated, and in danger on
his town's main street.

**Camera Angle**

Camera angle variation can give factual, experiential, and emotional information to the audience, and guide their judgment about the characters or objects in the shot (see Table 2). Extreme angles, for instance, can emphasize one character’s power over others in the film. The more extreme the angle, the more symbolic and heavily-loaded the shot. The most common camera angles are introduced in Table 4 with film *Pretty Big Feet* as sample data.

Table 4: Varieties of Angle Shots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shot Angle Name</th>
<th>Shooting technique</th>
<th>Shot effect</th>
<th>Example (<em>Pretty Big Feet</em>)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bird's-Eye view</td>
<td>Shot from directly overhead, a very unnatural and strange angle.</td>
<td>Puts audience in godlike position, looking down on action. People seem insignificant, ant-like, part of a wider scheme of things.</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Bird's-Eye View" /> Bird’s eye view suggests helpless, desperate feeling of crowd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Angle</td>
<td>Overhead shot, not as extreme as BEV.</td>
<td>High angles make object seem smaller, less significant.</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="High Angle" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eye Level</th>
<th>Camera positioned from human perspective.</th>
<th>Expresses neutral or calm attitude.</th>
<th>High angle shot; characters seem weak and vulnerable.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Angle</td>
<td>Camera is down, looking up at character.</td>
<td>Low angles make subjects seem larger, imposing, or more important.</td>
<td>Low angle suggests character importance to the viewer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lens selection**

Lenses can alter the perceived magnification, depth, perspective, and scale of objects in the shot, allowing directors to shape story meaning or direction. The most common lens styles include normal lens, wide-angle, fish-eye, telephoto, zoom, deep focus, soft focus, and rack focus.

**Lighting and color**

Special application of light and color help to draw the eye to the object of greatest significance. This is another shooting technique that can gently guide the audience’s
thoughts and emotions to a particular place, idea, or status. Table 5 lists two scenes in which the filmmaker used lighting and color to guide the audience *Pretty Big Feet*.

Table 5: Use of Lighting Techniques in *Pretty Big Feet*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene Description</th>
<th>Symbolism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunlight in background indicates hope, future, expectation for new life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projector light shines on school building suggests village’s bright future thanks to Ms. Zhang.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sound*

In modern film, sound plays an increasingly important role in creating additional levels of meaning and sensual and emotional stimuli that increase the range, depth, and intensity of audience experience. Basically, there are three categories of sound in film: dialogue, sound effects, and musical score. Examples of these are offered in Table 6 below.

Most of the techniques described above were found in most of the films selected for the present study. Table 6 offers examples of these techniques along with other examples of how films “lead” viewers toward new understandings of social problems. For example, by highlighting the noble or heroic acts of its main character (teacher Zhang Meili), *Pretty Big Feet* constitutes an act of discursive leadership on the part of
the filmmaker.

Though the tone of the film is somewhat depressing and often negative, the director still aims to express a hopeful message regarding the village, its school, and teacher Zhang’s role in their positive development. The film aims to raise the social consciousness of the audience, reminding them of their debt and obligation to those who struggle to improve the nation. Zhang lao shi (teacher Zhang Meili) becomes a symbol and a tool for mobilizing volition among citizens and educators. In order to send out the message, the movie puts much emphasis on color, light, scene setting, empty space, and various hidden symbols.

Table 6: The Creation of Meaning in *Pretty Big Feet*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Via Action</th>
<th>To “lead” her village, Zhang lao shi took several actions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Started the only school in her village, serving as both teacher and principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Went to every household in town to promote school enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Raised funds by “drinking” with a rich businessman and selling potatoes grown by their village in the big city.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Via Words

Zhang lao shi’s anguished and compelling speech to her students (see Chapter 4) emphasizes the importance of study by appealing to their senses of shame and pride

Via Lighting

Film’s final scene; “Film Wang” aims projector beam at school; signifies village’s bright future, thanks to Ms. Zhang
Via Integrated Word, scenery, background music signify character’s importance; at 01:00:30, a red
Scene/Dialogue glow suddenly appears and expands one horizon; “I knew the sun will rise soon”

Via Shooting Several close-up and extreme close ups of Zhang Meili and her feet;
Techniques
- Reference to movie title
- Symbol of her personality, worldview, and life situation
- Reference to Chinese foot binding, negative beliefs about big feet, women
- Zhang’s shame over her big feet, loss of husband
- Zhang represents rural women of new era, struggle against bigotry
- Signifies Zhang’s persistent hard work to improve student and village life

Dramatic pullback of camera at start of film;
- Ms. Zhang and students welcome teacher Xia, camera pulls back to view
  them among barren mountains; Zhang’s arms open widely

Via Sound Music and songs throughout film;
- At the start, kids do not know/can’t sing the welcome song; one student,
  Wang Dahe, son of “Film Wang,” knew the words because, as his friend
  said, “he is smart and he’s got a father able to project films.” Suggests power
  of knowledge and technology in this poorly educated and isolated village.
- Ballad sung at start and end of film resonates the message and reinforce the
viewer’s sympathies; Wang Dahe changes words to honor teacher Zhang.

Via Other Symbols

“Teaching stick” represents the responsibility and authority as a teacher. “Class, Ms. Xia will be teaching you from today, let’s welcome her. Ms. Xia, I am passing this teaching stick to you now (With serious expression on Zhang Meili’s face).”

Sunglasses and leather coats on city dwellers suggests affluence, power

Names of the main characters:

“Zhang Meili”

- “Mei li” means beauty in Chinese; her beautiful heart

- “Mei li” also in movie’s Mandarin title, “Mei Li De Da Jiao.” Does it mean the big feet of Zhang Meili? Her pretty feet? That her shoes are hard to fill?

“Xia Yu,” the young visiting teacher, has the same pronunciation as “raining” in Chinese. Ms. Xia “watered” the kids with knowledge and love. Her appearance was just like a timely rain bringing hope to a remote arid village that desperately needed rain.

Last but not least, other than analyzing and decoding messages in cinematic texts, literature texts including news reports, interviews, and comments about film directors and/or other figure salient to either film creation process or post-release public response were gathered and analyzed as another main data source of this study. Table
Table 7: Example of Literature Data Entry for *Pretty Big Feet*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Pretty Big Feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Producing Team | Film-maker: Yang Yazhou  
Producer: Song Dai, Bao Haming  
Screenwriter: Li Wei |
| Winning Awards | 2002: Golden Rooster Award for Best Movie  
2002: Golden Rooster Award for Best director  
2002: Golden Rooster Award for Best Actress  
2002: Golden Rooster Award for Best Supporting Actress  
2003: China Huabiao Film Awards for Best Actress  
2003: Best Actress Award on Beijing College Student Film Festival  
2003: Hundred Flowers Award for Best Supporting Actress  
2003: Golden Phoenix Award by China Film Performance Art Academy |
| News Reports & Interviews | Yang Yazhou, 2004 interview: [I like] to look at their life and put it down through my camera, because I can see and feel how they make a living, because I am one of them.  
Initial thoughts of making the film: triggered by an accidental visit to northwest China during which he was “shocked by the local kids’ tough living conditions,” but also “moved by their genuine warm attitude” towards him and his crew as outsiders. This experience prompted his decision to make a movie eulogizing the common people – the “small potatoes” – who tried hard to make a living in the “middle of nowhere.”  
Response when asked if he had “over glorified” Teacher Zhang in the film: doesn’t an ordinary female like Zhang Meili deserve to be put on the big screen and eulogized? There were so many heroic ordinary people doing marvelous work in their common positions. They were worthy to be understood, respected, remembered, and extoled on the big screen. It seems a shame that so few films focus on these kinds of characters and topics. |
| Public Comments/Responses | IMDb review1:  
Author: HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR  
(handsass@sify.com) from India  
29 March 2006  
I had an opportunity to see this wonderful film at the recently concluded Jamshedpur film festival and I consider myself really lucky for being able to do so. This is one worth-talking-about film. There are certain scenes in this movie that really stand out and are |
there inside the head even days after having seen this film. The relationship between the two women has been portrayed very beautifully. Zhang's outburst at a Beijing mall is quite powerful and touching. That one scene, perhaps, sums up the spirit of the entire picture—how far could a person could go for the sake of others? The opening sequence is equally engaging. The rugged Chinese landscape make for a very nice visual experience. The lead actors are awesome. Both Pi Ying and Yuan Quan look very good. However, I should make special mention of this child actor (his screen name is Da He). He'll leave you in splits and, in the climax, in tears. I'd like to recommend this film to everyone, whether they're serious cinema afficionados or whatever. Movies like this shouldn't be missed for anything.

Imdb review2:
Author: brainfertilizer from United States
12 October 2005
Great movie. It changed my fiancé's life, gave her a goal in life that we will fulfill together: to move to an impoverished village and teach, hopefully helping reinforce the importance of education.

Douban: User: Girl from Yuan’s family
13 April 2009
I cried like a baby when I was watching this movie. At first I thought I would never go to a place like that and work as a volunteer teacher if I was Ms. Xia, but I changed my mind after I watched the whole film.

Data Analysis

After all the data have been categorized, decoded and presented in chapter four in forms of each film independently. In chapter five, emerging themes including common actions, behaviors, concerns, issues, contexts that relates to either director’s or characters’ intention to communicate, influence or lead across various films will be discussed and analyzed elaborately.
Chapter 4

Data Presentation

The primary means of gathering data for this exploratory study was through cinematic literature analysis, and document analysis reflecting actions or intentions involved in mobilizing collective volition, and which included filmmakers’ discourse or meta-language that lead to social influence. Due to the time and resource limitation, six most representative films have been selected from the initial watch list as the main cinematic literature for the study. The chapter will present the content analysis on each of the cinematic documents included brief synopsis, emerging leadership themes depicted, symbolic messages and discourses, social influential narratives. For each film, I will present narratives that attempt to capture 1) characters’ actions or intentions engaged in mobilization of collective volition, and/or 2) filmmakers’ efforts to engage in social influence through their films as discourse.

Pretty Big Feet

As discussed earlier in this study, a process of influence involving the crafting of narratives can be understood in terms of discursive leadership. A film can thus be viewed as a leadership attempt, process, or struggle involving the mobilization of human, fiscal, and social capital toward the construction of a socially influential narrative. The filmmaking process thus begins as an attempted leadership process (Hemphill, J.K., 1949). For this process and its ultimate product to be considered
successful or effective as a discursive leadership artifact requires the construction of persuasive cinematic syntax – the integration of dialog, sounds, and images into persuasive patterns of social meaning.

The desire and capacity to mobilize cinematic resources can be considered catalytic ingredients of a discursive leadership process. This seems evidenced in the remarks of Pretty Big Feet director Yang Yazhou, who in a 2004 interview expressed his sharp attention to the lives of China’s common people.

[I like] to look at their life and put it down through my camera, because I can see and feel how they make a living, because I am one of them (Wang & Tian, 2004).

Yang goes on to describe how his initial thoughts of making the film were triggered by an accidental visit to northwest China during which he was “shocked by the local kids’ tough living conditions,” but also “moved by their genuine warm attitude” towards him and his crew as outsiders. This experience prompted his decision to make a movie eulogizing the common people – the “small potatoes” – who tried hard to make a living in the “middle of nowhere.” (Wang & Tian, 2004)

Yang’s words reflect the initiation of a creative leadership process, an interpretation seemingly reinforced within Yang’s response when asked if he had “over glorified” Teacher Zhang in the film – “Doesn’t an ordinary female like Zhang Meili deserve to be put on the big screen and eulogized?” Yang added that he always believed there were so many “heroic ordinary people doing marvelous work in their common positions” and that they were “worthy to be understood, respected, remembered, and extolled on the big screen.” (International Herald Leader, 2011)
“It seems a shame,” he added, “that so few films focus on these kinds of characters and topics” (International Herald Leader, 2011). One may reasonably infer that in attempting to raise respect, remembrance, and glorification of “heroic ordinary people,” a film can thus be viewed as a leadership attempt, process, or struggle involving the mobilization of human, fiscal, and social capital toward the construction of a socially influential narrative, this is the essence of discursive leadership. Yang’s intent with Pretty Big Feet is to mobilize popular volition towards understanding the need for heroic action, support for such action, and a wave of collective perceptual and cognitive change that might gradually reframe such action as more normative than heroic. Thus, gradually, after the publication of the film within Chinese society, more and more people get to know and understand each other, then changes can be take place gradually.

Explicit Leadership Themes

Pretty Big Feet depicts the arduous life of a middle-aged teacher, Zhang Meili, in a rural northwestern village of China. Earlier in her life, her 23 years old husband had been tied and executed for stealing railroad spikes and causing a train derailment that killed two people. Believing his poor education had caused her husband’s fate, Zhang Meili dedicates her life to teaching and gradually establishes the village’s only school. After many years, Xia Yu arrives, a young volunteer who offers hope for stability, new knowledge, and opportunity for the local community. After a series of conflicts, quarrels, and misunderstandings, Ms. Xia and Ms. Zhang begin to understand and
care for each other. Ms. Xia, nevertheless, decides to return to her husband in Beijing. Despite this loss, Ms. Zhang presses on, teaching and striving to raise local funds to buy a computer for the school. After just limited success, she submits to the sexual advances of *nouveau riche* “Noodle Zhao” in exchange for his agreement to fund the purchase.

Ms. Xia returns to the village with an invitation for Ms. Zhang and her students to visit Beijing, which they happily accept. Their visit to Beijing is marked by two key events. The first occurs when one student brays like a donkey to the delight and ridicule of a local Beijinger. This triggers a tearful, heartfelt admonishment from Ms. Zhang to her students; they must study hard, overcome elitist urban bigotry, and demonstrate their dignity and value to the nation. The second occurs as Ms. Xia introduces Ms. Zhang to businessman, “Boss Zhang,” who agrees to invest in her village’s main product – potatoes – as a way to support local education. After returning home, however, Ms. Zhang is fatally injured while transporting potatoes. At this point, Ms. Xia decides to stay on as the village’s schoolteacher.

We use the term “explicit” to describe manifest leadership acts and processes unfolding within a given cinematic narrative; in other words, the leadership efforts displayed by characters within the film. As discussed previously in this study, acts of leadership – or a leadership process – may be viewed as attempted, successful, or effective depending on the degree to which the individual acts or continued process lead to changes in behavior or the accomplishment of goals. Most often, however, few clear-cut definitions or boundaries exist that help categorize action or process into one
specific stage. In other words, a leadership effort may be viewed from all three vantage points depending upon the time, place, and direction of action.

This framework is particularly useful for evaluating the nature and impact of teacher Zhang Meili. As the story unfolds, we see her individual acts and overall effort evolve in and out of each leadership stage. The following paragraphs discuss key examples of her engagement in this process.

**Building a School**

Teacher Zhang’s leadership attempts and successes are evidenced both visually and through dialogue, with the latter serving to summarize action and meaning at key points of the narrative. For example, early in the movie, character “Film” Wang (the local movie projectionist) speaks to his friend:

Her [Teacher Zhang’s] husband broke the law and was executed out of ignorance when her kid was one year old. She brought her kid up all by herself. She taught him characters every day so that he won’t follow his dad’s track. At first she only taught her own kid, but then she also taught other village kids, and then she started this school. But then her own kid died. We didn’t have any schools before she came. [00:03:25]

Admiration underlies Wang’s remark, as it implies that Teacher Zhang (with no beloved connections to the village after her son’s death) could have sought a better life in her hometown or in a larger city. Wang and, we assume, other villagers note that she did not do so and thereby recognize her responsibility and passion to help
other children change their lives.

**Acquiring Human Resources**

In addition to Teacher Zhang’s effort to establish the school, the arrival of Xia Yu to the village opens a new opportunity for leadership action. Xia Yu’s choice to teach in the village does not appear to have been prompted by dedication. Rather, the film constructs her choice as one of running away from her husband and their messy life. Her first weeks in the village are somewhat awkward and clumsy, suggesting her unwillingness to adapt to local physical and social conditions. Teacher Zhang, wishing her to become integrated and engaged in the school and village, goes to great lengths to provide Xia Yu with special comforts and privileges (clean water, children’s special songs, taking care of her laundry, etc.). When Xia Yu insists that she cannot tolerate the taste of the local water, Teacher Zhang offers her a cup of orange tea. Teacher Zhang begs Xia Yu to stay, but can only persuade her to stay a little longer:

> You are the only volunteer teacher to come to our village from a big city. We have expected you for so long, but now you are leaving so suddenly like this? Miss Xia, you must have seen our situation. Our kids almost know nothing. Can't you leave something more for them? Please, I beg you! [00:33:54]

Xia Yu does leave, but, as revealed in the previous section, returns to offer Teacher Zhang and her students the chance to visit Beijing.

**Acquiring Fiscal Resources**
Before she left the school, and as she came to understand the eagerness of the students to learn, Xia Yu suggested that the school obtain a computer to facilitate student learning. Though Teacher Zhang liked the idea, she knew it would require a huge expenditure. After Teacher Zhang made several visits with village officials, they agreed to provide about one-third the total cost if she could raise the rest from local donations.

Teacher Zhang, the last time you came to us you said you wanted to buy a computer for the children. Good! It's quite necessary. However, because we are a poor town, you know our budget is small. But we still tried our best to find you three thousand Yuan. And, we will provide the school with a special telecommunications link. That's all we can offer. You need to seek other ways to get the rest. [00:48:48]

The above bit of dialogue reveals Teacher Zhang’s persuasive impact, as 3,000 Yuan was a large investment for the small village. It also suggests the daunting challenge remaining, one which Teacher Zhang was willing to accept.

Her success would come at great personal cost. The village’s wealthiest businessman, “Noodle” Zhao was planning a memorial party for his mother. Teacher Zhang saw opportunity and organized her students to sing – persuasively – for the old man.

Mr. Zhao, you are so lucky, your mom lived to eighty-seven,

Eighty-seven is a long life, No one in the village has lived so long.

Everyone in the village is happy for you.
Mr. Zhao, you are such a dutiful son, as we can tell you are such a good person!

Mr. Zhao, you are rich, you should make some contribution to local education,

We just want to buy a computer, Children say please make a contribution to our school,

Make a contribution! Make a contribution! [00:52:04]

But Mr. Zhao is unmoved. He asks Teacher Zhang, “Drink with me tonight,” meaning, of course, more than just a drink. Teacher Zhang tries to drink with him there at the party, but Zhao insists on an evening tryst as requirement for any donation. One may conclude that Teacher Zhang’s individual leadership attempt has failed with respect to Zhao. Yet, her willingness to sacrifice and even debase herself in exchange for funding, so that kids in her school can have a better chance to change their lives through cyber-education can also be viewed as part of a larger leadership struggle.

**Building Commitment and Engagement**

Although Xia Yu left the village, she returned with an invitation to Teacher Zhang and her students to tour Beijing. At one point during the trip a seemingly wealthy young man wearing designer sunglasses and expensive clothing pays for the children’s entrance to an indoor playground to play with his kid. Laughing when he heard one of the children (Wang Dahe) mimicking a donkey, “Sunglasses” called the boy over to repeat the “heehaw” sound. Witnessing this, Teacher Zhang viewed it as a form of humiliation – innocent poor children being mocked by a wealthy urbanite.
She then delivers a heartfelt tearful admonishment to the students.

Stop! Stop! Wang Dahe, if I hear you do that braying again I will punish you!

Is Beijing good? Yes, everything is good in Beijing. What do we have in our village? Go back and study hard, Children! Please study hard so that we don’t need to grow potatoes and eat potatoes every day. Otherwise you will never come to anything. We should study hard and enter colleges in Beijing. We will build our village as good as Beijing. Then we won’t have to get a free tour and be pitied and looked down upon for mimicking a donkey as they asked. Aren’t you silly and naïve? I didn’t pay the entrance fee for you kids and you are tall enough to be charged. Why enter the playground? Kids, I am getting old and I tell you again, you should study hard. You are the only hope of our village. Right? You must study hard so you don’t need to make a living growing potatoes. Did you hear me, Dahe? I should not blame you for that. It is me who’s not good enough and doesn’t have the money to pay. Don’t tell Teacher Xia about this. I shouldn’t have blamed you. It is just because you still didn’t study hard when I told you. Now you see the distance between our life and the city people’s life. You have to study hard. There is no other way out, right?

[01:14:41]

A simple reading of the above dialog is insufficient to understand the power of this scene. By the end of Teacher Zhang’s appeal Wang Dahe and the other children are crying along with her. It is an extremely moving moment in the film for both the children and the audience.
Thus, within the story of the film, Teacher Zhang brings hope and change to the village. Through continued, persistent actions and efforts (some of which failed in the short run) she is able to garner resources and strengthen educational structures throughout the village. People increasingly paid attention to her mission. We see this last point emphasized at the end of the movie when “Film” Wang projects his beam of light upon the school building as if to honor Teacher Zhang’s efforts and impact.

To summarize further, Teacher Zhang acted as an altruistic mother figure in the film. Her dedication and selflessness moved the local citizens, especially the children and others close to her. Her leadership is revealed in her persistence, encouragement, spirit, and results. She expanded her zone of acceptance as others suspended their own judgment in favor of hers. A famous sentence from a classic Chinese poem offers an apt description of Teacher Zhang: 春蚕到死丝方尽,蜡炬成灰泪始干, (Chūn cán dào sī sī fāng jìn, là jù chéng huī lèi shǐ gān), which means a silk worm keeps spinning silk till the end of its life, a candle goes on lighting us till burning itself out. Zhang Meili is a representative of the traditional teacher figure in China, who is willing to dedicate her personal life, all her energy, and her happiness into the career of teaching in the remote little village. However, it might be hard to understand and appreciate from view of the west. Thus, through this film, we can see that to influence others through moving them can be one way of demonstrating leadership in Chinese society.

Patterns of Symbolic Meaning under Discursive Leadership

A cinematic narrative’s persuasive impact is, perhaps, first rooted in an effective
translation of tangible resources into literal patterns of meaning. Characters, events, and dialog representing ideas, beliefs, and values are thus woven into what may justly be called “an argument.” The argument consists of literal and implicit components.

The literal components of Pretty Big Feet have already been discussed. We now shift to the film’s symbolic component, which consists largely of visual imagery. Symbols and their meanings often flow from filmmaker intent, but may also be independently constructed by individual viewers (a perspective from critical literary theory) (Boggs, 1996). Filmmakers use symbols to focus upon and reinforce attention to particular patterns of meaning. Viewers (again from the critical perspective) may discern additional implicit themes that relate to, push beyond, or conflict with the film’s explicit argument. These arguments and symbolic messages sent out by the film is an act of discursive leadership that aims at striving social changes within the culture. Throughout the movie, director Yang appears to have intended his audiences to notice various symbolic messages. These are the focus of the following sections.

**Water/Rain**

When asked about his initial thoughts on making Pretty Big Feet, Director Yang stressed how the severe water shortage in the small northwestern China village intrigued his interest (Wang, 2004). Water, and the lack of it, is a key theme throughout the movie. Water is the source of life and something that most people in China today can take for granted. But in Teacher Zhang’s village, which has received no significant rain for more than three years, water is precious.
Water and rain repeatedly appear in the film as symbols of resource inequality. In one later scene, for example, the village students are startled when they see a large pool of water in a bath center in Beijing. (One child, Wang Dahe, is shocked to the point that he pees in his bathrobe.) By the time this scene appears, rain and water have already repeatedly appeared as tools of greater meaning. For example, the village’s need for rain and water parallels its need for education and economic development. The first image of this is found in the volunteer teacher’s name, Xia Yu, which in Mandarin is pronounced the same as “falling rain.” Xia Yu’s arrival means hope for a better quality life of the local people, like a timely rain poured on arid land.

As the movie continues, the symbolic meaning of rain and water morphs into something different; the eagerness – and also the hopelessness of the local people. The theme is artfully phrased within the subplot involving Xia Yu’s decision to return to Beijing after having contributed only modestly toward Teacher Zhang’s goals. Despite the villagers’ wish that she stay, Xia Yu “can’t drink the local water.” Her temporary presence seemed insufficient and unsatisfying, like “thunder without rain.”

The idea of thunder without rain is previously introduced in an earlier scene [01:05:26 – 01:06:38]. It is a typical afternoon and students are reading a lesson called “Thunder Rain”. The students copy quietly as Ms. Xia writes new words on the chalkboard. A series of loud thunder crashes break the quiet air – the children rush outside. The director’s use of two medium close up shots (MCU) capturing Xia Yu and Zhang Meili’s reactions and expressions along with many kids running in front of them generate a tense uncertainty for viewers. The camera follows the group outside.
In a manner that first appears haphazard, the children and their teachers run purposefully to fetch any sort of containers they can find. Objects fall from shelves and shatter on the ground. Children trip and fall. But within a minute, they are all standing still, holding their containers, and waiting silently for rain.

After a longshot “bird’s eye view” of the crowd and various containers, the camera turns to a medium shot of the sun, followed by several high angle medium shots revealing a gradually frustrated expression of the teachers and some of their students. The camera returns to the sun and the scene gradually fades.

Within this scene, the extremely high camera angle longshot and the stillness of the crowd can produce and reveal a kind of helpless and desperate feeling of the crowd. By putting the audience in a godlike position, that is, looking down on the action without providing any guidance or help, director Yang presses the segment’s initial hope and ultimate disappointment into audience perception by presenting the scene through the extremely high camera angle shot. Despite the dearth of rain and water, however, subsequent scenes reveal how villagers allow teachers to fetch water from public reservoirs first, without waiting in line, as a way of showing respect for the value of education. If we say water is the source of life, then through the movie we can perceive a message that education is the source of a better life.

**Big Feet**

As the title of the movie suggests, Zhang Meili’s big feet symbolize her personality, worldview, and life story. The movie begins, in fact, with a close up shot
on Zhang Meili’s big feet walking fast accompanied by a shift from the black-and-white past to colorful present. And ends with another close up shot on Zhang Meili’s big feet in stillness, indicating her death.

Until relatively recently, small feet were highly valued and admired in Chinese society. Young girls were compelled to have their feet bound from early childhood to keep them look small and eventually find a good husband. For centuries, women’s natural “big feet” were considered ugly and associated with provincial people and rustic life. Even as time went by, people, especially uneducated people in rural areas, still held the belief that a woman with “big feet” was unattractive and unmarriageable. Thus, by picking this name, director challenges the traditional social norm.

With her big feet, Ms. Zhang represented rural women of the new era who fight against such repressive norms. But while she feels ashamed and unsuccessful for having “a pair of ugly feet,” she follows her heart’s desire and against all obstacles in her way. As a teacher, Zhang Meili started her own school out of a wish that kids will lead a better life through education. She dedicated almost her entire life to her teaching career and never complained a word.

**Clean and dirty**

Contrasting details suggest a message that sometimes affluent people with clean appearances may have polluted souls – “Noodle Zhao,” for instance. In contrast, poor people, might look dirty or untidy, but have soft and genuine hearts. This is taking aim to the idea that it is wrong to judge people from their appearance, or to imagine
“wealth” to represent status or hard work. Poor people from rural village who worked hard to make a living deserve more respects and a helping hand from society.

Xia Yu serves as a vehicle for this message, as the film presents an obvious transition in her appearance. Upon her arrival in the village, she dresses in black outfits with her face completely covered by a black scarf, black hat, and black sunglasses, ostensibly as a barrier to the sand and dirt floating in the air. Her expression is difficult to recognize behind the shield. Xia Yu even hesitates momentarily when offered “clean” water for washing her face, put off by its cloudy appearance. When Wang Dahe first greets Xia Yu, he takes the can of Coke (perhaps an uncommon item in the village) and runs down the sandy hill, prompting Xia to cover her face to block the dusty sands and dirt he kicks up. When she put her hands down, Xia’s face is mixed with shock, sadness, and confusion—apparently uncomfortable being so close to the “earthy” village. Yet at the end of the movie, after Zhang’s death, Xia Yu returns to the sandy hill. After a deep breath, she jumps and slides down with a resolute and composed face. The sand and dirt on face no longer matter. She has transformed from a self-centered woman who cared about appearances to a thoughtful, kind, and cheerful giver who seems comfortable with the village and its earthiness. Her heart and soul shines as her face is covered with village dust.

*Sunglasses and Leather Jacket*

"Sunglasses” and “leather jacket” appear as stereotypes held by many of China’s rural citizens toward affluent urbanites – teacher Zhang several times warns her students to
keep away from those who sport them. Villagers apparently also pre-judge people from their appearance, and sunglasses/leather jackets appears as another theme representing mistrust and misunderstanding. Director Yang reinforces the point of how appearances and façades lead us to forget our most important asset, social assets.

All these signals made me wonder. Does our wealth and cleanliness make it more rare and difficult for us to share with others? In the early 1960s, most all of China was still very poor with the majority of its citizens living in rural areas and working on farms. People would share dinner with their neighbors and look out for each other. With wealth and urban migration, however, the distance between people seemed to grow. Have people become more cold and detached? More selfish, defensive, and judgmental to one another? Does abundance threaten trust, kindness, and the sense of generosity to those in need? Do clean and pretty appearances hide selfishness and indifference? Director Yang seems to pose these questions in Pretty Big Feet and in so doing challenges his audience to consider if whatever debt they may owe their hard-working rural brothers and sisters might be at least partially paid by increasing educational equity. These messages and ideas have been transmitted through discourses and symbols within the film, and gradually have influence on the public.

**Senior Year**

Senior Year did not get much attention from the public when it was first shown on China Central Television (CCTV) in 2005, but one year later, after receiving several national awards, it gradually attracted attention and provoked tremendous response.
and discussion across China, and brought changes into the society. Senior Year loosely follows a student’s (Lin Jiayan) diary to push the storyline and timeline forward. Director Zhou Hao filmed the normal daily life of the students in Grade 12, Class 7, Wuping No.1 High School, for many years one of the best high schools in Fujian province.

Director Zhou’s initial thought of making this documentary grew after viewing the documentary, Secondary School, filmed and directed by Zhang Hong in Hong Kong in 2002 (Liu, 2007). According to director Zhou, he didn’t plan to make the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) as the main focus of the film. Instead, he simply wanted to “capture the growing process of an ordinary teenage kid from an average county in China” (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2006). The film nevertheless turned out to be a remarkable and influential portrayal of how Chinese youth prepare for the NCEE (Wang, 2006).

The film highlights, at times (at least for non-Chinese viewers) almost painfully, the collective ordeal facing Chinese 12th grade students, whose lives will be forever affected by the results of the NCEE. For Chinese viewers, the film may be viewed in numerous ways ranging from a bit of warm nostalgia to a stunning examination of the “education fever” problem built into the structure of Chinese education. Some viewers may see it as an invitation to consider the possibility of more humane educational alternatives (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2006).

Discursive Leadership of Senior Year

The Power of Documentary
Throughout years of Chinese cinema, the documentary has been used primarily as an educational tool, but mostly as a means to present “official” knowledge to Chinese viewers (Mao, 2011). Over the past 30 years, however, Chinese directors began to utilize their greater freedom to draw public attention to areas of social concern. Thus, in contrast to the “official knowledge” style, the documentary film took a more “folktale” style, with directors finding ways to create new narratives of social understanding (Mao, 2011). Though no longer limited to the presentation of official persuasion or directive, the documentary remained a powerful tool for shaping public attention, concern, and discussion so that it can create certain social changes within the society and lead discursively.

Director Zhou Hao, known as “Master Zhou” among his former colleagues and friends, was a former professional press photographer in Xinhua News Agency of China. In 2000, Zhou made up his mind to give up his steady and promising position to work for “China’s most influential liberal newspaper” (Rosenthal, 2002), Southern Weekend. In his new position, Zhou won photography awards throughout the world for his unique focus upon the interaction between man and environment (Liu, 2007). As time passed, however, his “strong desire for storytelling” could no longer be satisfied by still camera alone.

[I like] to communicate with the world by making documentaries. I have the freedom to say anything I want [through documentaries]. There are no restrictions. I couldn’t find a more suitable way to express [my thoughts] (Lin, 2013).

From a photographer to documentary film director, what remains the same is
Zhou Hao’s strong enthusiasm to recording personally and socially important and influential ideas and stories, and the intention to deliver these voices and discourses to the public. With that in mind, it is no great leap to infer that Senior Year was intended to record a common “state of mind” that would resonate with those who had experienced a “senior year” as well as those who had not (Chen, 2006). The importance of this type of communication through film was stressed by director Zhou during one interview.

I don’t want my films to remain aloof from the world. I want to see [my documentaries] strike a responsive chord in the hearts of the audience. I enjoy applause (Liu, 2007).

Zhou Hao goes on to note that since the restoration of NCEE in 1977, the whole society has been “affected by the event,” as it has deeply influenced life of “thousands of students and their families” for an entire year. It would be “a shame,” he continued, for no one try to put it down on film. Moreover, he suggested that if more and more independent film directors would demonstrate a “unique way of looking at things” to the public, it might gradually “break [society’s] predominant centralized perception” of the event. Thus, one key potential function of documentary filmmaking is to “pay attention” to the “social public space” (Liu, 2007).

Due to the significant influence of NCEE on thousands of students and their families, the high school senior year (gao san) has attracted increasing social attention, especially for those at the lower middle or bottom class of the society. To most
Chinese parents and students, getting a high NCEE score and entering a four-year university is a “turning point” of their lives. It also represents, by any practical standard, “the only way” to get out of small villages and live a better life. In *Senior Year*, director Zhou depicts the situation by aiming his lens primarily at head teacher Wang, parents, as well as students. A dynamic teacher, Wang asks his students to give up “half of their life” and to eat “bitterness” during their senior year to prepare for the NCEE. One of the students’ mother expresses her hope to her daughter that “you should study hard and get into the university, so that you can live a better life, a much better life than us.” Another student’s father declares directly to the camera that being a peasant means endless hard work and low social status, a path he does not want his daughter to follow.

Especially after receiving the Humanitarian Award for Documentaries at the 30th Hong Kong International Film Festival in 2006, *Senior Year* has become more influential within social discourse. Multiple and diverse responses and interpretations have emerged, many of which fell completely out of director Zhou’s anticipation.

After the film [Senior Year] was released, one response was that I made an inspiring film. At the moment, I was not so happy with the response, for I don’t see how it would inspire people. But gradually I understand that different people might have different insights towards the same movie, which is quite normal and actually quite good (Liu, 2007).

When asked about what motivated him for this particular film, director Zhou answered in an artful way,
To put it simple, I see my film as a mirror—that would reflect what we look like to those who seldom take a look at themselves. And which would make them pause and think. That’s pretty enough (Liu, 2007).

These insights offered by director Zhou seem to run parallel with – and seem to prompt consideration of – some key concepts in Western organization theory; specifically, distributed decision making and transformational leadership. Consider, for example, how a transformational school principal faced with pressures for curricular reform might pose a series of questions to his or her faculty, encourage responses, encounter unexpected responses, and finally whittle down the question to something like, “what kind of school do we want to become?”

Moreover, similar to what the above school principal might hope for, Zhou added (Liu, 2007) that he wished his film generated would gradually “get more people involved” in the topic of NCEE, thereby leading to a more comprehensive form of social/public understanding. Thus constitutes director Zhou’s attempt to lead others discursively through the use of his film as a stimulant to motivate citizens to pay attention to an issue he considers critical. As he stressed,

I don’t expect my film would have any influence on the NCEE system, but at least it can work as a good cause for people to refocus on this issue. I hope eventually [people’s concern] will make the NCEE system better (Liu, 2007).

Coincidentally or as a result, the structure of NCEE has been slightly revised year-by-year and place-by-place. For example, many provinces and cities have recently gained the right to design their own college entrance exam test topics for
their students.

Whether viewed as an inspirational tribute to academic diligence or as a critical question mark aimed at a system’s brutal intensity, Senior Year compels Chinese society to set their eyes—again and with less nostalgia—on the NCEE’s impact on student life. A question that may thus emerge is “how are students’ lives proceeding after enduring the gao san ordeal? Do those who do well, who enter their “dream university,” experience substantial change in their life, happiness, and social status? And, do those with unsatisfactory scores on the NCEE become locked forever into their small village lives?

Some such questions were addressed by a subsequent 90-minute television broadcast in which teacher Wang and several of his students were asked to reflect on their lives after high school graduation from Wuping No. 1 High School. Notwithstanding the comments of teacher Wang or his students, the broadcast suggests the discursive social wave that swelled up in the months after Senior Year’s release.

The wave is further evidenced by the increasing number of documentaries focusing on different high schools and their preparation for NCEE. For instance, in 2008, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) put on a series of documentaries named Chinese School, which included five episodes focused on the lives of a group of families, teachers and children during the course of a single academic year in the rural town of Xiu Ning in Anhui province. In the same year, America’s Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) telecast a documentary, China Prep, following five
Chinese students through their senior year and revealing their preparation and fierce competition at an elite high school in Sichuan Province. Later in 2011, director Wang Yang produced a documentary called *China Gate* about how students and their whole families living in west-China’s Hui Ning poverty-stricken (but known for producing top scholars) county prepared for NCEE exams.

Thus, although some of the reactions and responses about the film turn out to be unexpected to director Zhou, *Senior Year* may be thought of as a successful act of discursive leadership, by providing persuasive cinematic syntax, and integrate dialog, sounds, and images into persuasive patterns of social meaning—the importance of NECC and education. As it led enduring attention to a key public issue and pointed a direction for further observation and investigation. Sometimes, to lead means to provide a different way of thinking, a different angle of looking at thing, or a fresh opportunity for reflection.

*Explicit Leadership Portrayal within The Film*

In terms of explicit leadership action, the spotlight falls on Wang Jianchun, the head teacher of students in Grade 12 Class 7. Teacher Wang is a dedicated, motivated, and encouraging leader of the students and their parents in what he refers to as the “battle of life.” He dedicates nearly all of his waking time and energy to his students, knows them well, and displays consistent empathy. Teacher Wang is presented as knowing when to push his students hard, when to soothe their nerves, and how to communicate with students at different levels of ability and motivation. Director Zhou
stated in tongue-in-cheek fashion that teacher Wang “is such a good teacher, it makes me feel so sorry that I didn’t run into him when I was in school. Otherwise, I might be doing even better now” (Liu, 2007).

The documentary technique employed by director Zhou greatly resembles that often seen on western-style “reality television,” a style that should resonate with anyone who has ever watched an episode of “Ramsey’s Kitchen Nightmares.” Throughout the film, teacher Wang is shown giving a “full Ramsey treatment” to his students. The film begins, for example, with a flash-back scene of teacher Wang shouting at two students in the early morning in their dormitory for having fallen asleep during exams and being late for class. Teacher Wang seems so irritated and full of anger. He loses his temper, swears that the boys are “hopeless,” and wonders aloud why they even “bother come to school.” After getting the two out of bed, Wang paces back and forth in the school courtyard, cigarette in his hand to calm him down. He points toward the classroom and sighs worriedly that he “couldn’t change their behavior no matter by stick or carrot.” He then gazes off, as if deep in thought. At this point, one might assume teacher Wang to be merely a foul-tempered coach, an assumption belied throughout the rest of the film.

In fact, teacher Wang is later seen acting as both father and coach to his students. In “good cop – bad cop” style, he shows caring for all of them, and spends much time with students who appear to be falling behind. When necessary, he gives the “falling behind” students some realistic suggestions for their future. Although students are discouraged or prohibited from spending much evening time in the city (this is a
boarding school), he promises two internet-addicted students time off on Saturday nights in an effort to persuade them to persist in studying. He engages deeply with one rebellious student to behave himself to avoid being expelled. After a round of tough talk, he calms and encourages the downbeat, fearful, self-abased, depressed, and frustrated students with consoling words.

Teacher Wang uses different communicate approaches towards female and male students. For female students he tends to use comforting words, joking tones, soft warnings, and encouraging patting on the back. With male students, his words tend to be louder, more straightforward, and focused on tough requirements. Body language and contact includes pats on the back and arms over the shoulder. After the hard-edged opening scene, director Zhou’s camera captures the fullness of this coach-teacher; his dedication, reliability, energy, and authentic concern.

An American friend who watched the film considered teacher Wang as a tough, vigorous football coach or drill sergeant, whose authority is well understood and virtually unquestioned by the students entering his classroom. The events captured by the camera suggest that, as with a coach or drill sergeant, Wang’s reputation has preceded him. We see the opening day of the school year, when Wang begins by telling the class, “This will be your toughest year….I will treat you strictly, for your own good!”

Wang’s next moves aim at building confidence through reasoning and discipline. Citing classic Chinese poetry, he continues,

Now we know what our goal is. And we have confidence (to achieve it). The next
step is how to take action. Scholar Wang Guowei divided life into three phases. The first one we mentioned earlier.

“Westerly winds withered trees last night,
Climbing up the stairs alone
I overlooked the endless distance.”

This is a process of encouraging and consolidating yourselves. Next comes

“Languishing in missing you
I have no regrets becoming emaciated for you.”

Now you’ve set up your goal and confidence, then it’s time to take actions. Take actions! So, I tell you, in your senior year, you must be prepare to eat bitterness.

Every year, I would ask my senior year students to give me half of your life [class chuckles]. Just half of your life. I don’t want your whole life. Because as far as I know, there is nobody has ever died or fainted in the classroom from studying too hard [whole class laughs]. You are no exceptions. You must go through it. So I hope you can eat the bitterness. And don’t feel bad about me when I am strict to you, for I do that in the best interest of you. To put it in popular words, “I love you anyway.” [00:06:23-00:08:20]

Encouraging, even virtually forcing the students to work hard in their last year, Wang later meets with parents to clarify the situation and garner their unconditional support.
He emphatically reminds parents of the importance of NCEE and asks them to form a “harmonious environment” during the senior year for the best interest of the kids. To quote teacher Wang,

In this year, I hope all the parents can create a harmonious family atmosphere. Don’t consider anything like divorce, even if you want to, wait until your kids pass the NCEE. [00:10:34-00:10:51]

After the parent meeting, teacher Wang meets parents one by one to review their child’s prior test results and explain their current overall position. Based on his knowledge of each student, he suggests different coping approaches to the parents.

“Do job! Pay more attention to her personal life! I will do the rest!” Wang treats parents respectfully, but, in a very real sense, also like “support staff” who ought not put up any barrier to his strong leadership style.

Gradually, teacher Wang uses various persuasive tools on his students – inspiring songs, poetry, and slogans. He even offers at one point to “take the blame and resign” for their disappointing test scores. Another teacher’s class had done better overall, and so he stressed his sense of feeling “looked down upon” by that teacher. “But now we can have a fresh start and beat them on the NCEE!” As he speaks, the camera traces every student’s face, showing them frowning, yet listening carefully with their eyes still gazing at the textbooks.

To enhance students’ collective morale and sense of group honor, teacher Wang encourages them to speak out their thoughts and opinions at regular class meetings. Zhong Shengming, a student who might be considered “bad” for often skipping
classes and breaking school rules, gives a powerful speech during this class meeting, saying,

A dragon has nine children, and each of them is different. There are good students, average students, and poor students. I think if poor students like me, who are still wavering and feel lost, can keep chin up and never give up, then there a famous quote for us, “there must come a time when we will be successful and respected by all”. [00:25:30-00:26:08]

His distinctive and powerful words seem to inspire his classmates and prompt a burst of applause. As we can see, gradually, students in this documentary, like comrades in the same battle are tightly bonded with each other. And they strive to lead one another – an additional lesson embedded within Wang’s strategy.

Years later, we might be in different places around the world saying with one voice, “I am proud to be a graduate of Class 7 Grade 12 in Wuping No.1 High School”.

And make yourself a legend! [00:26:09-00:26:41]

They comfort each other by sharing their feelings and dreams. They support and keep an eye on each other. Although they need to compete with each other on the NCEE test, they still support each other to walk through the toughest period, the senior year, together. Teacher Wang epitomizes the essential definition of leadership – he mobilizes popular volition.

Teacher Wang’s concern may be test scores, but his students are more than numbers. The film presents examples in which Wang approaches students who he thinks may be in a difficult position and in need of guidance. He relaxes the nervous
ones with warm and funny words. He soothes the sad ones with inspiring and meaningful conversations. He talks reason to the misbehaving ones. When teacher Wang finds out one of his students, Zhang Xingwang, has an emotional break down and tried to run away from the coming NCEE tests in fourteen days, he rushes to the bus station to find him store by store. After teacher Wang finds Xingwang at a restaurant, he has a long conversation with him and successfully changes his mind and has him promise to make it through the last few days and take the NCEE no matter what the result might be. Wang is presented as both taskmaster and father figure – a powerful blend of two key leader dimensions.

As time goes by, we can see that under teacher Wang’s continuous construction of communication, mutual understanding, and trust, his bonds with students become tighter and stronger, even for the most rebellious student, Ming. Although Ming has been dressed down by teacher Wang so many times, he holds no grudges. Instead, after he got a “warning” for breaking school regulations, he feels sorry and wants to apologize to teacher Wang out of his fear that what he did might cause him trouble. There is a unique commitment between students and their teacher. In the senior year, teacher Wang strives to help his students feel secure and confident. He becomes their rock.

In the end of the film, when the NCEE finally comes, Wang stands on a table to address his class. The camera presents him as a commander addressing his troops prior to battle, offering last minute heart-stirring encouragements to boost their courage before they walk into the examination room,
Persistence is the secret of victory! We already overcame so many difficulties. And now it’s time for the final “attack.” The full surge has begun. And I look forward for your triumph! I wish each of our classmates success! One, two, three, say “we made it!” We made it! [said by all students in unison with smiles on their faces.]

[01:28:16-01:28:38]

The film ends with teacher Wang introducing himself to another class of senior year students as their head teacher. In this very first meeting, he shares a poem to signify the starting point of a new cycle of battlement, “I wouldn't care, success or failure, for I will only struggle ahead as long as I have been destined, to the distance.”[01:33:26-01:33:33] As we can see, in the NCEE battle, teacher Wang is the commander and discursive leader that needs to boost the morale through encouraging words, enlightening thoughts, and enduring patience, and give out directions to different soldiers every year to make sure together all of them would at least survive the fight.

**Not One Less**

*Not One Less* tells a story set in a small rural Chinese village whose only primary school teacher, Gao Enman, must leave for one month to care for an elderly parent. The village mayor can find no one to take his place other than an awkward 13-year old girl, Wei Minzhi, whose primary motivation appears to be the small money she will earn for serving as a substitute. Before he leaves, Gao tries to explain as much as he can to an obviously inept Minzhi about teaching. A major concern for Gao is the
possibility that some of the poor students will drop out while he’s gone because their families are in dire need of the income they could earn by seeking work. He tells Minzhi he will add ten yuan to her pay if all of the students are still in school when he returns.

So when one of the boys, Zhang Huike, leaves for the nearby city to search for job, Wei Minzhi, mostly out of fear of losing money, plots to go find him and bring him back. Wei Minzhi and her students muddle through a series of failed efforts to raise money for a bus ticket, until out of sheer frustration she simply begins walking the ridiculously long distance toward the city. After hours of fruitless walking, she is offered a ride by some workers on a flatbed truck. Once she arrives in the city, it becomes apparent – again – that her strategies to find Zhang have little chance of succeeding. And yet, partly due to Wei Minzhi’s “ignorant persistence” (Zhang, 2001; Kraicer, 2001), but mostly due to the kindness of a few strangers, Zhang is found. During the entire process, Wei Minzhi’s motivation for finding him gradually changes from financial interest to a genuine concern for the wellbeing of her student. On the surface, the film has an uplifting finish. The city’s television station turns the story of Wei Minzhi and Zhang Huike into a piece of public interest “infotainment.” The two children are returned to their village school as heroes, along with cash and supplies raised through the TV station’s appeal to viewers.

**Discursive Leadership of Not One Less**

In terms of how it has been defined in this study, “leadership” is mostly absent in
the narrative presented by *Not One Less*. Although the film is often presented and perceived as a heartwarming story of a young girl’s persistence in the face of great odds, with few exceptions, the motivations and actions of its characters range from selfish indifference to helpless sympathy. *Not One Less* thus presents a complex challenge for those seeking to frame it in the context of “educational leadership.” The key to this challenge is to first accept the characters for the authentic, non-heroic, and often-obtuse individuals that they are. Once this is done, the film’s underlying discursive message appears not only powerful in terms of educational leadership, but also somewhat troubling from a sociological perspective.

**The intention of the director**

In 1999, director Zhang Yimou presented two movies, *Not One Less* and *The Road Home*, both of which focused on rural people’s lives and challenges. The two films caused an incident at Cannes Film Festival that year when the festival’s committee chair suggested that because *Not One Less* looked like a political propaganda product, Zhang Yimou should only submit *The Road Home* to run for the competition. Angered, Zhang Yimou withdrew both films in protest and claimed they were both apolitical. In an open letter published in the Beijing Youth Daily he accused the festival of being motivated by other than artistic concerns. Zhang wrote,

> What I can’t accept is that it seems there’s only one way to interpret Chinese film for the westerners—the political way of interpretation. Based on their judgment, Chinese films are either ‘anti-government’ or ‘political propaganda.’ It is so naïve
and biased to judge a movie based on simple ideas like that (Zhang, 1999).

Zhang viewed the problem as a form of prejudice, as “discrimination against Chinese films” (Zhang, 1999). He then sent *Not One Less* to the Venice Film Festival and wins the Golden Lion award. In an interview for the Venice festival, Zhang explained his previous action, saying that while political influence on film production in China is unavoidable, cultural differences lead westerners to view all Chinese film through a political angle (Kraicer, 2001). He also stressed that withdrawing the two films from Cannes Film Festival was “a way to express my attitude and send a message to the public.” (Kraicer, 2001) When asked about what’s his intention by making a film like this, director Zhang revealed his disposition toward using films as a vehicle for public influence stating,

Indeed, no matter the content of the story, the way of telling the story is quite plain and traditional. You can say *Not One Less* is a “cliché” movie. But that is one of our intentions—to show the reality and power through a common occurrence. As a movie maker these days, we want to produce interesting and eye-catching movies. However, another intention of mine is to show the audience things and people that they might not aware of, think of, and care for. And I believe that the audience’s zone of acceptance is not so limited and small as we assumed (Kraicer, 2001).

Clearly, Zhang intended *Not One Less* to have some social influence and lead the
public discursively. The question then remains, what was his message?

*The Critical Discourse of Not One Less*

Perhaps the most curious characteristic of *Not One Less* is its pseudo-documentary approach. The storyline, though fictional, presents a problem pervasive to rural Chinese. That is, poor citizens, limited access to only the most rudimentary schooling, and strong pressures for students to leave school to go to work. The large cast consists solely of amateur actors whose real names and occupations resemble those of the characters they play in the film – “people playing variations of themselves in front of the camera” (Rea, 2000). For instance, deputy TV station manager Wu Wanlu plays a TV station manager in the film. The main actors, Wei Minzhi and Zhang Huike, were selected from a pool of thousands of poor rural students (Kraicer, 2001). (The names and occupations of the film's main actors are listed in Table 8 below.)

Table 8: *Not One Less*, Character/Actor Matches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character, who helps Wei search for Zhang Huike in the city</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Actor’s Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sun Zhimei</td>
<td>Sun Zhimei</td>
<td>middle school student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Actor’s Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Wei Minzhi</td>
<td>Wei Minzhi</td>
<td>middle school student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Zhang Huike</td>
<td>Zhang Huike</td>
<td>primary school student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor Tian</td>
<td>Tian Zhenda</td>
<td>mayor of a village in Yanqing county</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Gao</td>
<td>Gao Enman</td>
<td>village teacher in Yanqing county</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV station receptionist</td>
<td>Feng Yuying</td>
<td>ticket clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV show host</td>
<td>Li Fanfan</td>
<td>TV show host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Additional Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sports recruiter</td>
<td>Zhang Yichang</td>
<td>sports instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brickyard owner</td>
<td>Xu Zhanqing</td>
<td>mayor of a village in Yanqing county</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang Huike's sick mother</td>
<td>Liu Hanzhi</td>
<td>villager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man in bus station</td>
<td>Ma Guolin</td>
<td>clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV station manager</td>
<td>Wu Wanlu</td>
<td>deputy manager of a broadcasting station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>train station announcer</td>
<td>Liu Ru</td>
<td>announcer for a broadcasting station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stationery store clerk</td>
<td>Wang Shulan</td>
<td>stationery store manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV show director</td>
<td>Fu Xinmin</td>
<td>TV station head of programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restaurant owner</td>
<td>Bai Mei</td>
<td>restaurant manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Zhang’s stated intent was to “restore the story in a realistic and authentic way.”

(Kraicer, 2001) More than that, however, Zhang’s purpose appears to be to blur or erase what amounts to an artificial distinction between documentary and fictional film; to force viewers to recognize the reality behind the folk tale narrative he presents. In a nutshell (one to be cracked open in the following section), far from being a story about hope and the power to succeed through rugged determination, *Not One Less* is a story of helplessness and futility among the poor, its message and discourse suggesting that the poor will never advance their social status without proactive assistance from their more fortunate fellow citizens.

Although both films carry themes of rugged determination in a rural educational setting, the message of *Not One Less* sharply contrasts that of *Pretty Big Feet*, which presents the almost flawless, considerate, and dedicated teacher Zhang Meili who is willing to dedicate her entire life to the kids out of pure concern and love. She is the inspirational hero who can overcome most obstacles to create a “dreamland” of hope with the help of her super progeny, Xia Yu. The message is clear: we need more
heroes, and those heroes need our support. But if Pretty Big Feet’s Teacher Zhang is a cinematic hero, Not One Less’s Teacher Wei is an antihero, the individual who repeatedly struggles and fails, yet who is ultimately saved by the attention of sympathetic observers.

At the outset of Not One Less, it is clear that Wei is a reluctant substitute. She barely remembers any of her own third-grade lessons. She can sing only one song. She fails to take the slightest steps to organize a classroom. Her actions explicitly indicate her primary desire to be that of obtaining her salary and promised bonus for preventing any student from dropping out.

Wei Minzhi, you look after the students. More than ten have already left. I don’t want to lose any more. The mayor promised fifty yuan; he’ll make sure you get it. If all the students are here when I get back—not one less—you’ll get an extra ten yuan.

—Teacher Gao, Not One Less (11:08–11:27)

Limited by her age, experience, and apathy, Wei Minzhi displays neither teaching skill nor authority and she doesn’t appear to care. She simply copies text onto the blackboard, expecting that students will copy it in their notebooks. When they protest, she sits outside with her back against the door, shutting the students in while she shuts herself out. Wei is more like a copy machine and gatekeeper. She seems incapable of communicating with the students and ultimately can’t control them.
As might be the case for most young persons her age, she is unable to sort out nuanced situations, for example, not distinguishing between a student dropping out of school and one who is selected by state athletic recruiters to attend a special school for athletes. Fearing she will lose her bonus, Wei Minzhi tries to hide the athletically talented student away from her potential opportunity at a better school.

After her one student, Zhang Huike, actually does drop out, Wei Minzhi’s poor arithmetic ability foils her best plan for traveling to the city to return him home. After eventually reaching the city (almost by accident), she is almost totally able to understand or cope with the problems involved in finding a wandering nine-year-old boy in a large Chinese city. Only a few of the many people she meets offer her any constructive help at all. Some of those from whom she seeks help offer only disdain. Having gone without food for 24 hours, and unable to reach anyone of authority inside the city TV broadcast center, Wei Minzhi essentially lies down at its front gate as if to die. Her efforts have been tireless, but ultimately foolish and futile. Her salvation comes out of the luck that the TV station manager, seeing her physical plight, invites her in to talk.

Indeed, her luck has changed. But even when she is put in front of a TV camera to appeal to Zhang Huike, she becomes nervously speechless. But just as her luck seems about to run out, a woman who had given Zhang a menial café job hears the boy’s name on TV. Zhang is summoned and then sees Wei Minzhi. The two are united electronically through fate and the modest good will of a few city people. Director Zhang almost seems to be hitting viewers over the head with his message. “Don’t you
get it? Without your help, these people simply lack the capacity to develop or even survive!” These words might not be speak out loud to the audience through the movie, however, the discourse has been spread out to the society through the movie as a complete story and gradually changed the original concepts and ideas that exists within the culture. In this way, director Zhang and Not One Less performed the discursive leadership.

We next see trucks full of supplies accompanied by a TV news team driving back to the village. It’s at this point that director Zhang hits us with another point to consider. Zhang Huike is asked by a journalist what he learned in the city, to which he replies, “How it felt to be hungry.” Viewers are left to infer that as Zhang began to feel the pain of hunger, so did Wei Minzhi; and we now note that her concern for Zhang Huike has become one of unselfish authentic affiliation.

To summarize, if the image of Zhang Meili stands for the rural teacher’s heroic image in Chinese society, then Wei Minzhi represents more of a wake-up call to the public by director Zhang Yimou. Both Pretty Big Feet and Not One Less call upon viewers to lend a hand, but the latter’s message now seems much more dire. Rural heroes may be quite rare or, more likely, absent altogether. It may, in fact, be unreasonable to expect poor rural people to better themselves. It is therefore your (the viewers’) responsibility and obligation to provide spiritual and economic support so that they may live a more humane and productive life. Director Zhang might also want viewers to notice how much information, resources, tools, and knowledge, these poor village people lack. They may seem unlovable for their stubbornness and
ignorance, but they are still a part of the society that should not be left behind. A hero like Zhang Meili is honorable and worthy of applause and imitation. Yet, what do we do for those such as Wei Minzhi? After these questions been posed to the audience subtly through the film, audiences respond and try to offer help to these kids in various way throughout the world. Moreover, Chinese government greatly launched the “hope project” as a way to support poor dropped out kids to get back in school as well. Thus, *Not One Less* and its producing team successfully delivered influential messages and discourses to the public, and help the society made some change accordingly.

**The Social Response of Not One Less**

After *Not One Less* was released and shown throughout the world, it received various awards from different Film Festivals, and has successfully drawn people’s attention within and without China, and gradually brought change to people’s life in the small village. Different people have different interpretation and reaction towards the film, and they have expressed their thoughts and ideas through various channels. Some of them even organized fund raising activities to help poor students in rural China.

After the release of the film, in 1999, both Wei Minzhi and Zhang Huike were accepted exceptionally by a private middle school in Shijiazhuang. Their tuition fees have been waived, plus they can get 300 yuan subsistence allowance per month. And school also helped Wei Minzhi’s parents find jobs (Fan, 2010). At the same time, the film also caught many people’s attention in Hong Kong. Pan Jielian, who is among
one of them, got in touch with Zhang Huike and adopted him as her son after she saw the film (Jiang, 2004). Later in 2004, professor Chen Ergang from Brigham Young University Hawaii came all the way to Wei Minzhi’s university in Xi’an to talk to her and promise her that if her oral English can improve within a year then he would help her to study abroad, which he fulfilled his promise in 2006 (He, ND). The release of the film not only brought change to the leading characters’ lives, but also caused bigger influence on various areas in China.

In Mainland China, on the Not One Less Film Premiere in Qingdao on April 21st, 1998, Ma Lunya, the deputy mayor of Qing Dao city called on different institutions to organize leaders, employees, and students to watch this film. He mentioned that it is important to pay attention and give support to rural education in China (Sina, ND). Moreover, during the time of Not One Less release in 1999, the China Copyright Office issued a notice forbidding unauthorized production or distribution of the film, which was the first time China had enacted special copyright protections for a domestic film. This is a governmental discourse of supporting the film.

At the same time, it is reported that after the film was published in Taiwan and Hong Kong, it caused a stir out there as well. Many people reached out and donated a large amount of money to kids in rural areas of China. Richard C.T. Lee, previous principal of Taiwan National Chi Nan University, and Providence University, wrote several articles in 2002 stressing that Not One Less is a “famous film that caused a sensation throughout the world”, and what was shown in the movie should be “remembered and remind us the similar situation in rural areas in Taiwan.” (Li, ND;
Li, 2002). The Hong Kong Institute for Integrated Rural Development, which aims at promoting social, cultural, and economic development in poverty-stricken regions of China through financial support, research, and project development, published an article about *Not One Less* on its website and ask for people’s help to raise funding for other rural villages in the same situation as the one shown in the film (Shi, 2000).

The movie also received much praise by common people all over the world. For instance, an internet user Lareail said that “I was a village kid just like them, and I think more concerns and attention from the public means more hope to people in rural areas.” And he believed that as the name of the film indicated, “no one should not be left behind by his/her country” (Lareail, 2013). In a nutshell, through the voices and discourses delivered by this critical, powerful, and exceptional film by director Zhang, changes gradually occurs within the society in a way he may or may not have thought of.

**The power of mass media**

In *Not One Less*, all problems are eventually solved through the institution of television, as if director Zhang’s intent is to emphasize the importance and power of mass media in society. The combination of image, sound, and story successfully send out Wei Minzhi’s voice to an audience consisting of intentional news watchers as well as passive viewers who might happen to viewing in a café or other public place (e.g., Zhang Kehui and the restaurant owner watching over him). At the time of the film’s release in 1999, television was the most influential and powerful media throughout China (e.g., cellular phones were not yet the pervasive tool they are today). The TV
station plays a critical role in this film as a bridge to connect life between city and village people. Through the camera, poor people can be heard (albeit in a rather haphazard fashion) and receive aid from more affluent viewers. In parallel sense, director Zhang uses *Not One Less* as a powerful tool for raising the problem of – to put it bluntly – rural poverty and ignorance and for reaching out to a nation of otherwise apathetic viewers. In sum, *Not One Less* represents an act of discursive leadership – the creation of a folk tale narrative aimed at generating a social movement to make more people aware of the gap between rich and poor and thus try to provide help and information for those who are still in poverty.

**Social Impact of Not One Less**

*Not One Less* caused great sensation throughout China. Many schools and institutions organized viewings of the film for their leaders, Party members, employees, teachers, and students. The film appears to have been manifestly successful in calling people’s attention to rural education issues. They’ve shown their interest to give a donation to kids in rural areas and some of them asked about the possibility to help out as a volunteer teacher. Director Zhang’s “effective” leadership is also evidenced by the emergence of various Chinese and western-based organized efforts to mobilize volunteers to visit and assist rural Chinese schools, which we will address to in the later paragraphs.

*Not One Less* also made a sociolinguistic contribution to Chinese society. That is, as the film grew in popularity, its name, “Not One Less (一个都不能少 Yī ge dōu bù
néng shǎo)

gradually become a popular phrase used to refer to things related to rural education. For instance, many fundraising activities for rural kids are referred to as a “not one less” activity (Shi, 2000). Other fundraising activities also enlisted the phrase to publicize and mobilize sympathy for Wenchuan earthquake victims. Moreover, even Li Keqiang, the Premier State Council, expressed his concern and encouragement during his visit to a rural northwestern China public school by saying “it is important to make sure every student would benefit from compulsory education, not one less.” (Jiang, 2004)

All in all, whether director Zhang’s intent was to arouse public attention toward rural education, or to get an “admission ticket” from the government, Not One Less had huge social impact and made people face the problems of rural education. It was and it is a drive to create awareness, promote changes in public thinking, and to spark symbolic and concrete contributions for educational improvement.

Please Vote for Me

Released in 2007, Chinese director Chen Weijun’s documentary Please Vote for Me attracted great attention. Part of Steps International’s “Why Democracy?” film series, Please Vote for Me found a place on the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences list of 15 “Oscar shortlist” documentary feature films. The film won the Sterling Feature Award at Silverdocs Film Festival and was distributed in over 35 countries around the world. Yet this “nail-biting political drama about 7-year-olds” (Hesse, 2007) has been banned by SARFT and thus prohibited from public
distribution or viewing, though plenty of pirated DVDs can still be found in most video stores. Even director Chen claims to have bought several pirated copies of the film to send to his friends and family. “They did a good job pirating the PBS version directly,” he laughed (Wei, 2012).

The 58-minute documentary depicts a “democratic election” of class monitor in a 3rd grade class of eight-year-old children in the Evergreen Primary School in Wuhan, China. It’s a race among three candidates, Luo Lei, Cheng Cheng, and Xu Xiaofei, who were nominated by their head teacher. Under varying degrees of press and manipulation from their doting parents, the three candidates use all means to win the desired position.

Much shorter than most documentaries, Please Vote for Me is still powerful. Director Chen spent over a year on the whole producing process. To capture their authentic actions and to encourage their familiarity with each other, director Chen spent three months with the kids before the official shooting took place (Cui, 2007). Over four weeks in 2006, director Chen recorded more than 100 hours of material. For over a year, scenes were edited to keep them brief but forceful.

Thus, what messages does the film carry and deliver? What are the reactions and responses from its audiences? Since the film is non-authorized within the People’s Republic of China, does it have any influence on the society? These questions will guide the following discussion and interpretation of the film as a form of attempted leadership and discursive leadership.
Discursive Leadership of Please Vote for Me

Similar to director Zhou’s (Senior Year) thought, director Chen also finds documentary to be the most suitable and liberal way to express personal ideas and concerns and to evoke public attention, thus, to lead discursively. It is clear that directors Zhou and Chen both sought to exercise public influence by highlighting social issues which, while important to themselves, may lack of public awareness. Chen refers to the process and quality of documentary filmmaking as the “power of authenticity.” It is the power to touch and resonate within the deepest part of an audience’s heart. “Authenticity is the soul of a documentary”, director Chen emphasized (Wei, 2012).

Actually, before setting his camera on issues related to kids and education, director Chen is well-known for making To Live Is Better Than To Die, the first documentary revealing an AIDS-tortured family’s life in Wenlou, an “HIV village” in Henan, China. To Live was awarded a Peabody and Grierson award, as well at the Rudolf Vrba Jury Award from the One World Festival in 2003. Likewise, Please Vote for Me received over 15 awards including a Grierson and an Emmy nomination. Five years late, in 2012, director Chen astonished the world with his new documentary Education, Education, which was screened by 70 national broadcasters worldwide, as a part of the “Why Poverty?” global documentary project also runs by Steps. Director Chen’s pattern of work indicates a desire to wield global attention to Chinese social issues through international organizations and platforms (Zhao, 2013). Asked about this tendency, director Chen responded,
I just want to make movies that can be understood by different people throughout the world. If people can resonate with my work, they would like to spread it out. And if it has been spread widely within the society, it will eventually get public’s attention with or without nominations in various film festivals (Wuhan Weekly, 2013).

Chen thus believes the purpose of creating documentaries to be not merely “making a film and storing it in the filing cabinet”, but to “encourage more people to watch and to reflect” on things they may not know or think about (Chen, ND). Therefore, during the communication of watching various documentaries, people have the chance to understand and look at things and lives from a different angle and gradually change their original thoughts or put down their prejudices and make the society into a better one. This is what director Chen think of the power of documentary, and also how cinematic texts can lead discursively.

*Please Vote for Me* strikes its chord, in Chen’s words, by allowing audiences to “see the rules and regulations found in an adult society placed upon... eight to nine-year-old children” (Chen, ND). Actually, as director Chen recalled, he initially hesitated and declined the invitation to produce a documentary on democracy in China. He stated, it is “too hard to capture a story about democracy in China” and that “a documentary on politics in China would not catch many people’s attention and sympathy” (Chen, ND; Changjiang Time, 2013). Later, however, his casual talk with his colleague’s son Cheng Cheng (who would later become one of the main characters in the film) triggered his new interest in creating *Please Vote for Me*. During that
conversation, when asked about his dream and plan for the future, this eight year old boy replies without hesitation that he “wanted to be the President of the State” so that he would “be in charge of things,” stating that if he cannot drive, “nobody is allowed to drive” (Yang, 2008). After having more talks with different kids, director Chen discovered that most of them sought a government post. Teachers, it was believed, needed to “work hard on grades” and businessman might “risk a loss”(Wei, 2012). Director Chen found this odd as he recalled his own childhood when children seemed more inclined to seek careers as doctors, writers, scientists, and so on (Yang, 2008).

Chen pondered, “What make Chinese kids think and act in this way nowadays? Does that have anything to do with the social-political system?” Chengcheng coincidentally mentioned to Chen that he has an opportunity to “run for” the monitor position through a “democratic election” in the coming semester. This further prompted Chen to imagine what it would be like to place the political rules found in an adult world among children. With confusion and curiosity in mind, director Chen decided to address these questions with his camera so that audiences could draw their own observations and conclusions. His film might also initiate more questions and more reflection, which would “especially be useful for viewers with little interest in democratic politics—and they comprise the majority of the audience” (Chen, ND). So that through the documentary, audience got to communicate and resonate with the director and the characters and eventually understand the messages and ideas coded in the film.

According to director Chen, his initial intent in making the film was to see “the
children’s sense of democracy and collectivism” within a suzhi jiaoyu (quality-oriented education) pioneer school (Cui, 2007). At the beginning, by recording the process of the “democratic election,” director Chen sought to show the audience the benefits and positive impact on children of this “creative and pioneer education activity.” However, as the shooting process went on, various incidents occurred that altered the focus of the film and produced different layers of narrative and meta-narrative, thus stirring a variety of interpretations.

**Political Schemes and Corruption**

Although director Chen appealed to audiences not to “interpret so deeply” into his film’s “political meanings,” (Cui, 2007) most of the responses and reactions on the film still focused scenes depicting various political schemes – and what could be considered corruption – carried out by the elementary school candidates. Despite director Chen’s appeal, it is difficult to ignore the larger social parallels. The children (two boys and a girl) do not start out as “political animals,” but seem gradually pulled in to a system that seems to reward the use of fiscal influence.

For example, after the nomination by their teacher, Ms. Zhang, the two boys appear full of confidence and energized about the first round competition of the election, the talent show. When the current class monitor, Luo Lei, is offered help and guidance by his parents, he refuses confidently saying that he will rely on his “own strength” and will refrain from “control others” because “people should vote for whomever they want” [00:05:23]. Lei later refuses his parents’ help again. His
competitor, Cheng Cheng, however, seems more open to receiving his parents’ support. Bribed with a promise of extra TV time, he practices his most confident song for them, again and again. The only girl competitor, Xu Xiaofei, seems to be a little bit overwhelmed and afraid of the whole thing. She completely has no idea on what to do and what to say to the classmates during the talent show. Gradually, under her mother’s step by step lead and instruction, she builds up her confidence and smile comes back to her face. Little does she know the “political machine” she will soon encounter.

Just before Xiaofei’s performance in the talent show, Cheng Cheng is seen busily lobbying his assistant to “make some noise,” that is, to boo, after Xiaofei finishes her show. Even as she begins her performance, Cheng’s followers jeer Xiaofei by first shouting out her weaknesses and then by simply shouting “overthrow Xiaofei.” The high pressure taunting causes Xiaofei to have an emotional breakdown before she can even begin her performance. When Cheng Cheng realized he caused a problem, he comes to the head teacher and Xiaofei to apologize “on behalf of Luo Lei” (the other candidate). The next day before Luo Lei’s performance, we see the sadly familiar political scheme Cheng Cheng played—he asked Xiaofei to scream out Luo Lei’s weaknesses and taunt him in revenge. As all the audience might wonder, how could an eight-year-old boy seem so tactful at playing political tricks? Cheng Cheng’s words to Ms. Zhang reveals the answer, “my mother told me a trick last night, she said I should boo Luo Lei off the stage, and I am putting that into effort now.”
Cheng Cheng’s mother’s tactic seems effective. Soon after Luo Lei finished his performance, kids began shouting “Luo Lei, Luo Lei, always hit others; Luo Lei, Luo Lei, always threaten others; Luo Lei, Luo Lei, overthrow Luo Lei!” Cheng Cheng’s tricks appear to work and his support seems to grow. Luo Lei grows frustrated and expresses his desire to quit the election. On the other hand, Cheng Cheng feels confident and continues lobbying his classmates by promising to give them some official appointments if he wins the election.

Cheng Cheng’s mother is not the only “political operatives” behind these candidates back. In fact, compared to her, Luo Lei’s parents’ political skills are much more crafty and effective. Realizing Luo Lei’s “underdog” status in the campaign, his parents can’t sit aside and watch him worry. They sit him down for a long strategy session during which his father, a police director and supervisor of the city railway system, offers to invite the whole class for a free ride on the local monorail. Luo Lei’s father suggests that this is a good opportunity for him to “show off” and “improve the relationship” with the classmates so that they will vote him. Luo Lei agrees. After the monorail outing, Luo Lei’s “numbers” (based on his own survey) seem to shoot up. He tells his mother happily “those kids who were against me will now vote for me” Now it is Cheng Cheng who approaches the teacher with an extremely sad face saying that he wants to quit the competition, for he appears to have lost a large amount of support after this event.

By now it seems that the children’s democratic election has evolved and escalated
into a power competition and political battle among three families. As their strongest financial and mental supporter during the competition, all the parents tried their best to help their child win through all necessary means, which, of course, seem to reflect various real life campaigns in which candidates strive to build any kind of guanxi (i.e., “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”) with valid voters. Thus, from time to time they need to make various enchanting and generous offers to secure uncertain votes. In order to gain and maintain the political power, bribery, corruption, political schemes, and empty promises can be seen within almost every electoral campaign.

The competition ends after three rounds of heated debates and a final speech among the candidates. Not surprisingly, both Cheng Cheng and Luo Lei’s parents have drilled them what to say, how to argue, and how to react. At the debate, when Luo Lei’s father sees his son follow every recommended move, he shows a “thumbs up.” Moments later, however, Cheng Cheng follows his mother’s strategies and successfully turns the situation around by calling Luo Lei the “dictator” who always “beats on” others. Now it seems that Cheng Cheng has won majority support by setting up an ideal model of the monitor to the class. Later that night, full of confidence, Cheng Cheng focuses on preparing his final speech in front of his parental “think tank.” On the other side, Luo Lei’s father takes out a pile of Mid-Autumn greeting cards for every student in class – the “trump card” to buy off voters’ hearts. Unexpectedly, although many students promise to vote for Cheng Cheng and show strong revulsion towards Luo Lei’s “dictator” style of leadership, the result shows the majority votes (25 out of 39) go for Luo Lei.
No matter what initial plan director Chen’s had for his film, the appearance of
*Please Vote for Me* provokes heated discussion and intense concentration on current
political practice. On a special U.S. Public Broadcasting System talkback (ND)
presentation of *Please Vote for Me*, viewers with different backgrounds posted and
expressed their thoughts and concerns on the forum. The forum provides people a
platform to exchange ideas and understanding on the film, so that more voices from
the world can be heard and spread out through Internet.

Some responses tied the film back to the American setting by affirming the
similarity of the scenario in the film and the reality of current American political
environment.

“How interesting that the traits that make up today’s American political
candidates (and probably politicians all over the world) show up even in eight
year old kids in China. The manipulative kids and parents demonstrate how early
in life the ultra-competitive mindset is drilled into us.”

–User named Dusti Chuang, Feb 8, 2008

“The competition, the selfishness, the needing to get ahead by any means. What
better place than America to understand all of that was displayed in that
classroom? What is it that we reward in this country that is so different than
others?”

–User named Benny Castillo, Jan 24, 2009

Both Dusti Chuang and Benny Castillo raised critical questions and issues after
they saw the film. Their comments on the forum represent and speak out part of the
filmmaker’s meta-message, that is, the impact of family/society on children’s education is inevitable. The influence of family/society on education is an emerging theme that can be found within others films, which we will have further discussion in chapter five.

Different people might pick up different messages even if they are looking at the same thing. For instance, some like red roses for its scent; some like it for its passionate color; some like it for its fresh taste; some like it for the romantic symbolic message it contains. This is especially true when it comes to cinematic art—with stories depicted by fascinating motion picture, sound, background music instead of merely concrete written words on paper, films give people more space to comprehend and associate those meta-messages it contains to everyday life. As we can see through other users’ comments on the film, that there are so many interesting issues worth to discussing, such as “democracy”, “bribery”, and so on.

“Democracy makes you turn against friends and people you love for something that you only want for the moment. Democracy isn't perfect, but it never had to build a wall to keep people from escaping it.”

-Guest User, June 7, 2010

“Democracy means that everyone should be involved and never excluded from being heard. Everyone needs to be involved and interested in our government and, most importantly, feel confident that our opinion does count for something and will make a difference.”

–User named Cynthia, Dec 20, 2007
“Once again money talks. It seems to me the winner's father had deep pockets, which equaled votes for his son. However, I thought both boys were pretty ruthless. But, then again, politics is hardball after all.”

–User named Jeanette m. Johnson, Feb 1, 2009

However, sometimes, it is hard for people to hold back their personal presumptions and totally open their minds when it comes to understand a different culture. People tend to interpret and add their personal attitude on things that they are not familiar with. That is why user Fish posted the following comment on talkback forum,

“I'm surprised that so many people's comments on here revolve around the whole concept of communism. The movie wasn't even about that, and it is presumptuous to think that the election was like this solely because China is a communist country.”

–User named Fish, Oct 23, 2011

People might be able to see more other elements than they are presumed if they would like to learn about unfamiliar things with an more open mind and less judgmental attitude. From another angle, isn’t it interesting and amazing to see how the existence of the talkback forum of the film Please Vote for Me provides people a platform to speak their thoughts, communicate with and even challenge each other with issues they might not be aware of. The act of discursive leadership is an ongoing process within this forum in a unpredictable way. Although the film cannot be shown in public theaters in China, its existence represents the increased interests and concerns on the relationship of social, cultural, political, and education environment of China of Chinese filmmakers. And the heated discussion on Please Vote for Me throughout the
world attracted more audience and discourses, which echoes director Chen’s original ideas on making an influential film,

“I just want to make movies that can be understood by different people throughout the world. If people can resonate with my work, they would like to spread it out.”

(Wuhan Weekly, 2013)

*Explicit Leadership of Please Vote for Me*

In *Please Vote for Me*, director Chen uses a series of extreme long shot/long shot from high angle to show the practice of “Guangbo Ticao (Broadcast Gymnastics)”[00:25:47 & 00:46:33], a nation-wide unified physical exercise enforced in every school in China since 1952. Through the camera, audiences see all students lining up in straight rows doing the same moves according to the broadcasting commands. Capturing the students from high angle in long shots render the filmed objects smaller, less significant, and swallowed by the setting (Fabe, 2004). By using these shooting techniques, director Chen suggests that within the Chinese education system, even an innovative school like Evergreen Elementary, with its pilot democratic election, differs little from other schools and is subject to the same highly centralized drilling as all other Chinese public schools.

Throughout the better part of *Please Vote for Me*, director Chen captures the election process by using medium shots from the eye level in order to bring audience back to the scene. It is interesting to see that throughout the election process, teacher Ms. Zhang is seldom involved in the children’s activities, even when things seem to be moving out to be of control. Viewers may wonder why the teacher allows the
intimidation and bribery to continue. Where are her professional ethics? One ironic possibility is that Chinese education policies stressing “quality education” (suzhi jiaoyu) have prompted her to hand free control over to her students in this one arena of school social activity. Moreover, one may infer that in China’s pressure filled educational context, driven by its system of national exams, this teacher has many other things with which to be concerned. The children must learn to work these problems out for themselves, just as is the case with their older peers who must navigate through years of “testing hell.”

**Education, Education**

As a documentary on the nexus between formal and informal student activity within an elementary school, audiences would be expected to pay great attention to education-related themes. In fact, issues related to education have often haunted director Chen, who has over the years shown great concern as well as grave doubts about China’s current system. During an interview by *Southern People Weekly*, director Chen admitted a belief that most people don’t know how to educate their kids, including himself, and he has been “kidnapped” by the current Chinese education system (Wei, 2012). In response to this phenomenon, he uses his documentaries, first *Please Vote for Me* (2007), then *Education, Education* (2012), as the “weapon” to problematize the issues he sees within the education system.

**Discursive Leadership of Education, Education**

While director Chen sends out subtle social messages about Chinese education
with Please Vote for Me in 2007, his later documentary Education, Education (2012) speaks them out in a more direct and critical way. Both films were supported by and included in projects run by the non-profit Steps International, an organization that aims to “combine documentaries, new media, old media and outreach to get millions of people talking about big issues.”(Why Poverty, ND) Director Chen had been planning on making both films for some time before he got the Steps project invitation. Thus, these two films represent director Chen’s desire to problematize China’s current education system.

Education, Education reveals the post-high school educational pursuits of three seemingly unconnected individuals. They are Wang Zhenxiang, a tutor from (the ostensive) Hongbo Software Education College; Wan Chao, a new graduate from a newly-established private Luojia College, Wuhan University; and Wang Pan, a rural village high school graduate who did not score high enough to enter public universities. The camera exposes a dreadful cycle of corruption and disappointment – especially for rural youth – apparently resulting from the rapid expansion of small private post-secondary educational organizations. Since the Chinese government allowed for privatized universities in 1997, the rapidly blossoming education industry is perceived by some to have gradually gone out of control and in many instances fallen prey to con artists.

According to China’s Ministry of Education, although a huge number of private colleges and universities have sprung up over the past two decades (allowing increased access for many high school graduates), the relatively loose academic
credentials of many new colleges raises questions as to their overall legitimacy. Director Chen is somehow able to capture one such college’s recruitment counselor disturbing confession.

“We (Hongbo Software Education College) are a private enterprise and not really a college. Strictly speaking, it is just a company. We attract the students, get their fees, and send them on their way. That’s it. We don’t teach them anything and the college doesn’t care.” [00:03:47-00:04:10]

*Education, Education* suggests that rural students, desperate to fulfill their “university dream,” but with limited access to quality educational resources, may be more likely to be victimized by such shady operations. Wan Chao and Wang Pan, for example, scored low on their NCEE test and could not enter most public universities or colleges. Not only do they fall victim to sham institutions, but their families go into debt for several years to meet their extremely high tuition fees. Pan’s parents go so far as to throw a “party” for their friends and families, who will be expected to donate money for her tuition.

Director Chen also turns his camera to expose what happens to those who manage to graduate from these sham colleges. Might simply having a certificate provide young people a better chance to find a job? Can a formal piece of paper open any doors? Director Chen tries to show us the answer through Wan Chao’s experience. As a fresh graduate from “Luojia College, Wuhan University” (which viewers discover has no connection at all to the actual Wuhan University), Wan Chao has failed to find a job in Wuhan city despite having gone to several huge job fairs and delivered
hundreds of resumes to all kinds of companies for positions that might or might not
match up with his bachelor degree. Though he manages to pass some interviews and
is offered a probationary training position, his salary can barely covered his monthly
expenses. Life is cruel, however, and Chao is fired from two such positions during the
documentary. Yet as the documentary ends he is still trying his best to find a job while
still living off his parents support. *Education, Education* seems to plead with its
audience: Not only has “education” (as a social institution) failed to provide a way out
of poverty for millions of young Chinese, it also has led to the spawning of what
amount to educational “traps” for them; places that suck away their resources and
leave them with little flesh on the bone!

With *Education, Education*, director Chen expresses his concerns in a more direct
way, using his camera as an explicit social tool to make change and lead. He stressed
that the basic message of this film is to encourage all the “disadvantaged groups”
within the society to honestly face what may amount to socialized and
institutionalized oppression. Nevertheless, his words appear to soft-sell the problem:

[The children] are our successors and the future of our countries. However, our
societies and educational systems have complicated the growing up process of
children by compromising their simplicity and making their child-like innocence
conform to worldly standards. (Chen, ND)

He also hoped that no matter in what cultural background, *Education, Education*
will encourage audiences to think out of the box and consider the flaws of a system in
which they’ve always had faith. During an interview by *Southern Weekend Journal*,

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director Chen made his point clear, stating,

A documentary cannot provide answers to every question. But if people who are poor or at the bottom of the society get a chance to see my film, they might start to realize that many individual problems are actually caused by the system and the “game rules.” Then they might want to speak out and make some change—that is a way out of poverty. (Ji, 2013)

In an interview hosted by Chinese Radio and TV of Amsterdam, director Chen expressed his expectations that,

If Education, Education can touch officials’ and rich people’s heart and make them pause and think about what they can do for the society, and help poor people rebuild their self-confidence by realizing their poverty may be caused by the system instead of themselves, it would be worthy. (Zheng, 2012)

From Please Vote for Me to Education, Education, director Chen has always sought to draw public attention to issues and problems that are systemic, largely hidden from view, or hidden “in plain sight”, so that issues can be throw into the open air and await for “judge” and change to take place. Though any actual systemic fix through individual or government efforts may be extremely difficult, realizing the existing problems is a first step toward improvement. We could use one quote to represent director Chen’s activities and attempts through these two films, that is, “sometime, you need to change the surrounding environment before you could make changes to your own life”. Thus, we conclude, that director Chen uses film to create a new narrative; to transform an audience into a vehicle for social change, thus, to lead
the public through discourses and narrative by the film. The society need to admit its weakness before it can become a better one, director Chen wanted to expose these weaknesses in front of the audience so that change can become the next possible direction.

**Country Teachers**

*Country Teachers* presents us with a young woman’s struggle and experiences as a substitute teacher in a rural village school in the early 1990s. The arrival of teacher Zhang Yingzi stirs up a series of conflicts and dilemmas for the peaceful little village and its only school, Jieling Primary.

Four regular staffs work at Jieling: principal Yu, vice principal Deng Youmei, guidance director Sun Sihai, and teacher Ming Aifen. The difficulties of obtaining sufficient funding from the county push Yu and his staff to falsify student enrollment rates. As an outsider unfamiliar with local culture and the terrible situation of the school, Yingzi’s sense of justice prompts her to expose the truth to county officials. The result is a loss of funding for basic school repairs (as well as a loss of face for principal Yu and his staff).

As Yingzi becomes more socialized to the local culture, economic climate, and the difficulties intrinsic to the school environment and local people, she begins to feel some guilt and some new respect for principal Yu. She writes an article for the state newspaper, which draws considerable public attention and helps the school gain additional funding. We are presented a happy ending as Yingzi and the other teachers
finally begin to understand each other.

**Discursive Leadership of Country Teachers**

Similar to *Not One Less* and *Please Vote for Me*, the film *Country Teachers* as a narrative does not offer viewers any explicit consistent process of “educational leadership.” Among the earliest Chinese films portraying the problems of rural schooling, with few exceptions, *Country Teachers* presents us with characters acting out of self-interest, reluctant to share information, thoughts, and ideas with one another. Despite its somewhat ethically neutral tone, *Country Teachers* has received praise throughout China for helping audiences “understand the extreme hard living condition of community-sponsored teachers.” *(Wu, 2007)*

In a non-heroic fashion infrequently found in Chinese films of this period, *Country Teachers* presents a series of problematic issues common to many elementary schools in remote areas of China; scarce fiscal resources, high teacher turnover rates, high student dropout rates, and limited attention and concern from government officials and departments. The film – and its director He – throw these issues into the open air, suggest how they pose ethical dilemmas for these schools, and call for the attention of accountable public authorities. Why would director He decided to make a film about country teachers? What results did he wish to achieve? What is his main message or purpose behind the production of *Country Teachers*? We gain some insights from some comments he made in some later interviews.

**Intention of the Director**
Shown in 1994, the film *Country Teachers* revealed the community-sponsored teachers’ tough position in rural areas of China through the experience of the character Yingzi. Different from various other films on education topics in the early 1990s, *Country Teachers*, text is ripe with organizational and educational ethical dilemmas and defective teacher behavior, an extreme avant-garde product for its time. *Country Teachers* is not director He’s first educational film. In 1992, he co-produced *Catch with Chaff* with director Liu Baolin, and won huge positive feedback from audiences. Whereas the plot and flavor of *Catch with Chaff* seems humorous and ironic, the tone of *Country Teachers* is formal and grave. In an interview ten years after the release of *Country Teachers*, when asked about the initial thoughts of making this film, director He described his self-felt obligation to bring “problems to the surface” so that more attention could be paid to the fact that “the hope of our nation relies on education.” He stated that modern people tend to set their eyes on material needs and overlook spiritual ends, thereby resulting in a society run in an extremely rapid yet blundering pace. Believing that only education could solve this problem, He’s camera serves as a tool for revealing his perspectives and opinions.

**Funding issues**

The falsifying of student attendance rates at Jieling primary school could barely cover the cost of repairs, let alone teachers’ salaries. This type of financial issue is often traced to (or at least said to be aggravated by) the Nine-year Compulsory Education policy (NCEP) enacted in the late 1980s. According to the NCEP, all
school age children are required to have nine years of “compulsory, free, and unified” education regardless of whether they live in urban, suburban, or rural areas. The policy aims to alleviate citizens’ financial burdens and improve the populace’s cultivation through free compulsory education. However, central government failed to fiscally support the “Deepening the Reform of Rural Compulsory Education Funds Safeguard System” (Notification) enacted in 2006. Thus, ironically, before the Notification, the NCEP policy effectively increased the burden on rural schools and community-sponsored teachers and resulted, in the closing of many rural schools.

The events in Country Teachers occur at the beginning stage of the Nine-year Compulsory Education policy and represent conditions and behaviors understood to be common at that time across poor rural areas; in particular, the use of tricks or subterfuge for gaining needed resources. Director He’s insights, motivations, and creativity helped publicly expose this harsh situation, painting a narrative about the importance of primary education to a social civilization and how it had become an unaffordable “luxury” for many rural children. In the director’s words, this was “the biggest threaten for a nation's future destiny.”(Ke, 2007)

Community-sponsored Teachers Issues

Another acute problem depicted in Country Teachers involves the living and working conditions of China’s rural community-sponsored teachers. These are a group of people who have played a very special and important role in the history of Chinese rural education. Due to the lack of national education finances, various
community-sponsored schools were founded as “make-shift instruments for education expansion” in response to the educational policy of “walking on two legs” (Cheng, 1993; Robinson, 1991). In the late 1950s until the end of Cultural Revolution (1977), in accord with Mao Zedong’s “Down to the Countryside (Shang Shan Xia Xiang)” movement, a vast number of knowledgeable young people were sent to remote rural areas in China. They become the majority elements of the community-sponsored teachers’ group.

In 1992, under Deng Xiaoping’s government, the ranks of community-sponsored teachers was reduced based on five principles; “stop, transfer, recruit, dismiss, retire.” However, according to rough statistical research, the number of community-sponsored teachers reached 4,910,000 in 1977, thus making reduction in ranks quite difficult at best. Although most of the teachers wanted to transfer into the public system, the limited number of available openings produced intense competition. This competition serves as a key theme in Country Teachers, as the staff of Jieling School jockey for whatever slim chance exists for a public school teaching position. The news that the school would be granted one position ironically prompted distress among the staff over the decision as to which of them would be appointed.

Talking about these community-sponsored teachers and schools, director He expressed his feelings,

“I think the job they have been doing is so tough. Teachers are so dedicated to an education career, and especially these community-sponsored teachers. And some of them might encounter unfair things or bad things during their transferring process,
but they own the children’s appreciation and gratitude. Those kids who get out of
the village would be grateful for having these teachers. And in many years when we
look back, we would realize how great they were.” (Ke, 2007)

Social influence

Released in 1994, Country Teachers won several national film awards, including
Best Film at two of the most important national film festivals, the 14th Golden Rooster
and 17th Hundred Flowers Film Festivals. In addition, the actor Li Baotian, who
played Principal Yu in Country Teachers, won three Best Actor Awards in a row at
these same festivals, as well as from the State Administration of Radio Film and
Television (SARFT) for his break-through portrayal of the soul and spirit of most
community-sponsored country teachers.

The discursive leadership of the film not only reflected on these national awards,
but also in the attention it drew from the State Council Vice Premier of the time, Li
Lanqing, who found it so “gripping and moving” that he used it to convey his
concerns to other government leaders about the seriousness of the problem (China
Business News, 2008), and eventually successfully won their attention and brought
change to these substitute teachers’ lives. In Premier Li’s memoir Music, Art, Life, he
mentioned that

“The Cultural Revolution has passed for more than 20 years. It is time to deal with
this historical problem and transfer those qualified community-sponsored teachers
into the public education system as soon as possible. However, it is such an
important issue that requires party and government leaders on all levels to pay full attention and carry it out.” (China Business News, 2008)

To enhance its public impact, Premier Li contracted with China Central Television (CCTV) to broadcast Country Teachers throughout the nation. Seeing the impact the film brought to the public, Premier Li showed this film to relevant government education officials to promote their comprehensive understanding of the problems. Leaders of the Party Central Committee and the State Council also viewed the film during a community-sponsored teacher issues discussion conference. “All of them were so deeply moved by the film, and Premier Li Peng even shed tears.”

Under this circumstance, the State Council leaders decided to establish the community-sponsored teachers’ salary and transfer issues as high priority policy issues, passing legislation in October, 1997. As a result, by the end of 2000, 250,000 community-sponsored teachers successfully were transferred into the public education system under the execution of the policy.

Thus, although director He may not have anticipated the huge changes his film would foster, the film’s influence on the society was highly significant and therefore changed the substitute teachers’ living condition. As the whole, director He and his film lead the Chinese society at that time to embrace new policies and changes. As Premier Li stressed in his memoir, Country Teachers is a “wonderful artwork that contributed unexpected influence on the State Council committee’s decision-making process of solving community-sponsored teachers’ problems. Its existence help accelerate the qualified community-sponsored teachers transferring process.” Within
or without director He’s expectation, the production and expression of *Country Teachers* brought a beam on country teachers’ lives and caught the government’s attention, thus brought tremendous change in the Chinese society in the late 1990s.
Chapter 5

Summary and Implications

This dissertation began with a puzzle, “is it possible to find an intuitive, and universal way to comprehend and unite the essence of leadership despite the language and cultural boundaries between China and the West,” – that is, to gather and present evidence to support the argument that the concept of lingdao/lingdaoli (Mandarin for “leadership”) can be applied to strategies and actions occurring outside the structure of formal authority. To investigate and understand this puzzle, popular Chinese films were identified featuring individuals and groups engaged in the mobilization of collective volition, and which included discourse or meta-language enciphered with the filmmaker’s (or makers’) intention to engage in social influence. In other words, I examined film meanings both denotatively and connotatively. The strength of denotative meaning lies in its close approximation of reality, to “communicate a precise knowledge that written or spoken language seldom can” (Monaco, 2000, p. 161). Film also contains connotative meaning conceived and embedded by the producing team. As Irving Singer (2000) writes,

“The communication present in cinematic art originates with a filmmaker who perceives reality through technological devices that are suitable for conveying whatever ideas and feelings he or she wishes to express. In the act of expression, reality is creatively transformed.” (p. 7)
Compared to traditional Chinese written literature, bound by a lack of words to categorize or formally legitimize informal acts of lingdao/lingdaoli, film has the capacity to restore, depict, and help clarify the authentic nature of heretofore undefined intentions and actions in direct, accurate, and comprehensive fashion.

Six “Chinese” films were selected for study (see chapter 4) from a larger set of works depicting social interaction within educational settings. Four of them were authorized by SARFT, two were unauthorized. Two of them were complete feature films, one was “semi-documentary”, and three were documentaries. Thick descriptions were presented of film events, character quotes, evidence regarding the director’s social intention, and evidence of audience response to film messages. The purpose here was to demonstrate: 1) how Chinese individuals and groups engage in acts aimed at mobilizing collective volition and 2) how the voices of the people, also a part of director’s discourse, are heard, recorded, and spread out through the film medium and catalyze changes happen within the Chinese society.

**Emerging Themes**

So far, if we see this research as a Chinese hotpot feast, then the previous three chapters of the study were basically preparing all the necessary raw ingredients, suitable cookers, and doable recipes for the banquet. Thus, the main effect of chapter four is setting up the dining table with all the carefully sliced and prepared ingredients on the plate, just the right flavors of hotpot soup-stock, personalized dipping sauce, and handy tableware for gourmets to begin an exceptional dining experience. Now, let
us put all the ingredients into the soup-stock and dip into different sauce containers and see what kinds of flavor they would bring us.

The “flavors” offered here, that is, the themes, are offered to serve in two ways. First, they help consolidate this study’s argument regarding the need to socially renegotiate the meaning of lingdao/lingdaoli. But in addition, they are intended to steer readers toward extended ideas relative to the need for the further development and application of lingdao/lingdaoli with respect to Chinese education. To accomplish this task, I will occasionally take the liberty to introduce ideas taken from films and other media not analyzed in Chapter 4.

The overarching themes dealing with leadership in Chinese education concern such matters as teacher leadership, fiscal leadership, parent leadership, media leadership, and the importance of education. Regardless of the story lines, these themes serve as contexts for the exercise of lingdao/lingdaoli outside the structure of formal authority. And together as a whole, these themes formed a relatively comprehensive and in-depth expression on how people attempted to communicate, persuade, and influence others on certain issues, topics, or problems that they concerned, in a way to prompt change occurred within the society.

**Teacher Leadership**

As it is shown in almost all of the sampled films, relationships between teachers and students tend to be affectively close. This is especially evident in the two films depicting explicit informal leadership actions: Ms. Zhang in *Pretty Big Feet* and Mr.
Wang in Senior Year. In both films, the hero (heroine) exerts consistent effort to influence and change the minds of students by repeatedly talking sense to them in different ways and on different occasions. They are the “parent” figure to their students. Mr. Wang and Ms. Zhang come across as authentic guardians of their students’ best educational interests. For instance, Mr. Wang rushes to the bus station to discourage his student from leaving town. Certainly, this is an example of what Anthony Bryk refers to as the “extended teacher role” (Bryk, Lee, and Holland, 1989), a characteristic vital to the establishment of a greater school community.

According to Noddings (1988), the “ethic of caring” is the essential formal organizational feature that plays a central role in communal mission accomplishment in school. That is to say, gradually, teachers might develop a common language and seek out for each other’s help with individual problems. Owing to Parsons (1958) and Newmann (1981), the “extended” teacher role includes broad non-academic responsibilities that beyond specific classroom duties and as well as academic responsibilities. Yet what is also quite important here is the fact that Mr. Wang’s actions were part of an overall effort to lead parents and others within his school community, and thereby what expands his lingdao/lingdaoli into the realm of the informal. The extended teacher role enables teachers the opportunity to “send a variety of moral communications to their students” (Bidwell, 1973), so that the personal influence and informal leadership on students towards their social and personal developments can be far-reaching. Besides, just like Mr. Wang in Senior Year, Ms. Zhang in Pretty Big Feet, and Ms. Wei in Not One Less did, teachers can
establish a personal relationship outside of class with students so that this kind of human connections can catalyze students’ engagement in class and expand their zone of accept ance.

Similar characteristics are found throughout the sampled films, as with Principal Yu in Country Teachers and Teacher Wei in Not One Less. After much time, struggle, and learning, they earned trust and respect – and the suspension of judgment – from students, parents, and local community officials.

In addition to acting as caring authority figures, teachers have begun to be portrayed in some recent films and TV shows as more of a friend or mentor figure, and they lead students as their friends. In other words, they are shown as primarily open-minded young professionals with creative teaching philosophies borrowed from the West. They strive to build an emotional connection with the students, gradually persuade them to view them as friends they can count on or turn to when they are in trouble. Examples of such portrayals include Teacher Gu on the TV show The Shining Teenagers (2002) and Teacher Fan in the film Mark of Youth (2013). Though time and resources prevented such more recent works to be fully analyzed here, it is hoped that their existence will prompt further study of the teacher-as-informal-leader phenomenon.

**Fiscal Leadership**

Among all of the films in our database, five of them set the camera towards the issue of resource scarcity, especially financially. However, although as shown in
*Pretty Big Feet, Not One Less*, and *Country Teachers*, budget shortfalls cause various acute problems, including teacher shortages and low retention rates. Poverty also force local people to face problems and challenges bravely and uprightly. In *Pretty Big Feet*, Ms. Zhang feels compelled to make an extreme sacrifice to obtain a computer for the school. The situation in *Not One Less* is even worse as the use of chalk is restricted to one stick per day. Our *Country Teachers* must work in an unsafe rickety school building and feel compelled to falsify student attendance rate to acquire funding to cover schoolhouse repairs.

Most families depicted by these films were in strained circumstances as well, and many students faced the decision of whether to drop out and support the family or stay in school to get education. Some, like Zhang Huike in *Not One Less* and the dropouts in *Country Teachers*, opt to quit school and go to work. However, several films depict student determination to become educated, attend university, break out of the cycle of poverty, and help their family move upward on the social ladder. This is the drive source of getting out of poverty, and it is also the fiscal leadership depicted within the rural China. This determination is shown to be at least partially rooted in the words of Ms. Zhang in *Pretty Big Feet*, “Now you see the distance between our life and the city people’s life. You have to study hard. There is no other way out, right?”

Interestingly, in most less affluent areas of China, though a lack of money is a fundamental cause of education problems, it is also a driving force for local educational motivation and mobilization. However, aim at this issue, a question raised
among different directors through their films remains to be answered, that is, is education the way out of poverty? We will discuss this question further under the theme “importance of education.”

**Parent Leadership**

Other than formal education institutions, the family typically serves as a child to be the first and parents are the first to pass them knowledge. So what are parents’ opinions on education? What are their expectations for their children? How do they influence their children? How do they express leadership towards their children? Within these films, directors tried to capture possible answers to these questions.

In *Please Vote for Me*, although the lens seems aimed at presenting a teacher’s creative strategy for democratic understanding, it actually veers somewhat off center stage to candidly reveal the tremendous interests and influence of parents, as well as the way in which individuals may be drawn toward corruptive strategies to obtain their goals. The parents of the three candidates not only provide strong financial and mental support, but also seek to help their child win through somewhat questionable political means; attacking other competitors behind their back, bribery; and other “dirty tricks.”

In addition to direct guidance or specific advice, the films show how parents can impact, might not restricted to lead, their child through unintentional behavior or habits. In *Pretty Big Feet*, for instance, Wang Dahe habitually plugs his ears with cotton to block his mother’s endless high-pitched scolding and nagging. Parents’ high
expectation is thus portrayed as a double-edged sword to their child. On one hand, the high expectation might push the child to work harder. Sometimes, however, it might overwhelm the child and become a heavy burden. In Senior Year, out of stress and guilt that he might let his mother (who “did everything to make sure I can get good education”) down, student Zhang Xingwang suffers an emotional break down and runs away from school two weeks before the entrance exam. A Chinese parent and family can be the most loyal dream supporter for their child when it comes to choice of university. In Education, Education, although the whole family is in poverty, Wang Pan’s mother still borrows a large sum of money to send her daughter to a private university with expensive tuition fees. The same situation could be found in Senior Year, a student’s mother states that “as long as she wants to study and can benefit from it,” they would even sell their house for their daughter to study abroad.

[00:19:00]

The parents’ effect and influence on a child is constant. It can deeply influence the way a child would look at the society, deal with problems, and more. It is also an important factor influencing Chinese education, a form of social capital upon which schools and teachers can rely, a form of fuel for further acts of teacher lingdao/lingdaoli.

Media Leadership

The power of media, Internet and computer on influencing and changing people’s lives has been mentioned in several films. In Pretty Big Feet, the Internet and
computer were introduced as trendy useful teaching equipment that can help kids access knowledge they need. While in *Senior Year*, the online world has so deeply attracted teenagers that two of the students would even climb the dormitory wall late in the night to surf the web and make money through online games. In *Not One Less*, it is the power of media helps teacher Wei find the lost student and bring him back to Jieling elementary school. These are all examples of how socio-technological advancements often serve as double-edged swords—bring efficiency and information to the society on one hand, while also bring troubles and seduction on the other hand.

The eased instant access to Internet and the capacity to send out social messages and lead discursively to vast numbers of people at one time is another example. Film itself, and the ability of filmmakers to complete their work and have it quickly distributed can certainly be considered a sword whose direction and impact may remain uncertain for years or decades. Writing over 40 years ago, Jarvie (1970) suggested the nature of this vast power.

Producers produce, audiences assemble, critics evaluate, and all because of the confrontation of people and the screen. Films are a peculiar communication channel: only a few outlet points, only intermittently ‘on,’ a cinema is more like a library than a water tap. The message is usually transmitted in a little over two hours.

Darkness descends, the screen is lit, the film rolls and a world opens up. (p. 131) If worlds could “open up” in the years prior to 1970, when cinematic communication was merely intermittent, one must ponder what sorts of world open up when nearly every individual holds the capability to create and distribute social messages instantly
around the world. Certainly, as nations around the world work to develop new technological innovations, they must also ponder the discursive leadership capacity of skilled sword-wielding masters of modern communication.

The Importance of Education

“The children are our successors and the future of our countries. However, our societies and our educational systems have complicated the growing up process of children by compromising their simplicity and making their child-like innocence conform to worldly standards.”

--Chen Weijun, director of Please Vote for Me

For thousands of years, as Chinese people noted the value brought about by education, the teacher has been a highly respected figure in Chinese society. As it is described in several traditional cultural beliefs and old sayings, “书中自有颜如玉，书中自有黄金屋” (Shū zhōng zì yǒu yán rú yù, shū zhōng zì yǒu huáng jīn wū – “the book owns the beautiful women, the book owns the house of gold”), which means if you study hard, you will become successful, a beautiful woman will want to marry you, and you will be able to afford to buy a big house. The spirit of this idea has been emphasized and passed down from generation to generation, especially for people of lower social status. For instance, in the films Pretty Big Feet and Senior Year, both Ms. Zhang and Mr. Wang give encouraging speeches to stimulate students to “fight the way out” of the small village. As a result, most of their students come to accept the belief that studying hard and going to college can bring a brighter future. The
speeches in the film also serve as a continuous message to the audience about the acute importance of education in rural areas and, to some extent, their responsibility to help improve it. Moreover, the directors of Not One Less and Country Teachers state this purpose explicitly – to focus public attention on rural education and to steer related institutions to provide greater assistance.

Yet, more recently, one senses that people’s faith in education has diminished for various reasons. A question might be haunting a lot of people—can education still bring the “gold house?” Impressions of disenchantment have been raised by various recent cinematic works. Their source of disenchantment may stem in part from ongoing efforts (since 1999) of Chinese education officials to greatly increase university enrollment rates as a means to alleviate employment pressure and stimulate domestic consumption and social contentment. Though such means and ends would seem to work in the interests of Chinese youth, some social critics have focused on the policy’s downside.

For example, the film Education, Education presents viewers with a seemingly cruel reality: the proliferation of private universities offering a “shoddy product.” These operations promise grand results, charge high tuition fees, but fail to provide any serious educational experience for students. In some ways, such operations serve as traps for rural youth seeking a well-paying job in the big city. An unauthorized Chinese film, Blind Mountain, recorded and revealed how a young “graduate” of one such operation struggled to find work to pay for her brother’s education. Failing, she falls prey to a criminal gang and is sold as a bride in a remote area of China.
In a recent (2013) episode of *Morning Call* (a popular Chinese talk-show), host Gao Xiaosong criticized the current Chinese education system stating even if you study hard, you might not be accepted by good university. Once you got accepted by university, you might not be able to graduate. Once you are graduated, you might not be able to find a job. Once you find a job, you might not be able to keep it.

Though his comment seems sarcastic and informal, they echo and mirror the experiences of the young people shown in *Education, Education*. Wang Pan studied hard but cannot enter a public university; those students who entered Hongbo Technology College could never graduate, because the school suddenly shut down; Wan Chao did graduate and was hired; but his lack of serious training prevented him from keeping any job.

**Decoding Themes**

Although these six movies focused on different issues within different groups of people, there are still plenty similar signals, symbols, and elements emerged and formed various themes among the films as we analyzed in the former paragraphs. These themes might seem isolated to one another, but together as a whole they recorded both the filmmaker and the film characters’ effort to communicate, influence, and force change within Chinese society. Moreover, they pointed out public concerns and provoked a series of questions for the audience to respond and react to, though it might be hard to provide a comprehensive answer to these question, it is significant
that filmmakers continue to raise it: can education really changes people’s lives as it has always been suggested throughout Chinese history? If it is so, how can we improve the education system and make it serves our society better?

These concerns have been raised through three different angles within selected cinematic texts. First, some of the films aim to speak up for those who have slight voice or even no voice in the society, so that more people get to notice, know, and understand their circumstances. Each director of the films discussed in this study apparently wished to make some contribution to Chinese people’s social understanding. In each film, education serves as the focal point for public attention; as the arena in which people’s attention may be focused on topics and problems familiar, yet strangely unfamiliar. For instance, substitute teachers’ little known tough living and teaching condition within the rural areas in China have been recorded and reflected by several films including Pretty Big Feet, Not One Less, and Country Teachers. In these films, the way how they teach and lead their students to fight against the rigorous nature, how they fight to gain better teaching environment and teaching material for the best interest of their students, how they go through their inner struggles and win the battle.

In other cases, the filmmaker might leads by making people aware of a totally different side of a story they may have heard many times before. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson’s adage, the filmmaker helps make the familiar new, and the new familiar. In film Please Vote for Me, and Not One Less, stories have been unfolded to the public in a way that they might not have aware or imagined. Such as the severe
helplessness living condition of the poor people in rural China described by *Not One Less*. And on the other side, the cruel and fierce competition among city people even started when they are still in elementary school has been captured by film *Please Vote for Me*. Moreover, the audience would resonate with the character's experience if they have gone through the same situation as the films depicted.

Second, the filmmakers raised concerns on current issues related to Chinese education system, and education policies through their films. In this study, as the selected cinematic texts displayed, as time went by, the main focus of education theme movies gradually shifted from depicting the existing issues and problems within the education system to raising challenges to the fundamental elements of its existence. For example, in *Country Teachers* (1994), *Not One Less* (1999), and *Pretty Big Feet* (2002), all of the stories are focused on depicting the hardship of teaching in rural areas in China. Although they might have totally different story settings, characters, and focusing groups, they all pressed on the importance of equity and equality of Chinese education within urban and rural areas. More important, they all shared a same “motto”, that knowledge is the power to change people’s life, and education is the way to lead poor people out of poverty and ignorance. As we can see, in the 2002 film *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, director Dai Sijie depicts the process of how during China’s Cultural Revolution, an illiterate young country girl (known as “the little seamstress”) became an independent lady with her own thoughts and opinions after being introduced to western literature by two young relocated college students. In time, as the Cultural Revolution was ending (circa 1971
to 1974), she decides to leave her village to seek out “a new life.” The film may be interpreted as suggesting how knowledge and thoughts have the magic to set people’s minds free, change their concept of life, and gradually change their entire life experience. In the final scenes, however, her mentors express some sadness at the loss of the little seamstress and the sweet youthful innocence she represented.

Yet, as time passes, knowledge is much more accessible for the majority of people in China. Moreover, the mechanisms of knowledge production are also more accessible. Though Chinese citizens may forever view the nation’s higher-status universities as the prime goal for striving students, can one not imagine a future in which education, productive employment, and respected social status can be obtained through more realistic means? Must the status and value of all private institutions of higher learning in China be perceived as, at best, questionable? As time went on, more and more questions like this have been raised and thrown into the open air to the audience by filmmakers.

In the latter three films, Senior Year (2005), Please Vote for Me (2007), and Education, Education (2012), traces of the uncertainty and even queries on the importance of “education” can be found from place to place. In Senior Year, although the importance of education and NCEE has been emphasized repeatedly from the school administrators to every subject head teachers to every teacher and to all of the students, as if it is the “only way to get out of Wuping County” and best way that might lead to “a happier life”, in fact, no one know for sure whether entering college can be as vital as they promised. It might be cruel and hard to accept, but according to
the record of *Senior Year*, most of the high schools in China are striving for higher college entrance rate, especially key college entrance rate, so that school can get better source of students, teachers, and education funding from the government for the next school year. The situation gets even worse as *Education, Education* reflected. Since the industrialization of education gradually took place in China, all kinds of private colleges, universities have sprung up throughout the nation in a short time, bringing more problems and issues to the current higher education system. These have been put down into records by different filmmakers, and as in this regard, the present study poses a peculiar irony. That is, while increased access to knowledge acquisition and production has rendered tremendous independent power and influence to writers, filmmakers, musicians, and artists, these do not tend to be considered “high status” careers for young people beginning their way in the world, at least, perhaps, by most parents. It is true that Teacher Zhang warns her students that college is the only way to avoid “growing potatoes in the same village over decades.” Yet for the writer, filmmaker, musician, or artist who chooses to engage in social leadership, “college” may just be code for “education,” introspection, reflection, and personal development. Indeed, it was previously noted in this study that the message of films like *Pretty Big Feet* is not aimed at rural citizens, but rather at a more affluent and socially secure audience. Is it too far a stretch to imagine that the producer of such social narratives hopes for, at least some day, for a far more critical public analysis of popular connected conceptualizations of “education,” “occupation,” and “social status”?
Implications for Theory and Research

It is a researcher’s good fortune to see things that exist, in a land where it is said they do not. Facing the beliefs and assertions of numerous East Asian educators and administrators that appeared to limit “teacher leadership” to formally assigned tasks, I could not help but observe numerous examples where Chinese teachers transcended those limits, expanding their influence within and beyond the school, into community and society.

In addition to the problem of the existence of such phenomena, the question arose as to “how would people realize it?” How could stories of “everyday leadership” enter the discourse of Chinese education theory and policy? One answer, of course, was contained in the very question I asked. Stories can be told through literature, art, music, cinema, and, of course, through doctoral dissertations. The storyteller, in this study the filmmaker, amplifies the acts and experiences of individuals to larger audience. The film serves as a form of social meta-analysis by gathering and condensing unseen data in ways that enlarge public experience and the potential for critical public thought. In this way, the story transposes “everyday leadership” into discursive leadership.

So is the case with this dissertation. By examining and problematizing Chinese conceptions of lingdao/lingdaoli, I hope to enlarge the discourse surrounding them, particularly as it relates to Chinese schools and educational reform. At the same time, this is not the type of study from which policy recommendations can readily flow. Indeed, the very idea of a policy recommendation within the centralized structure of
Chinese education seems to contradict the idea of informal localized lingdao/lingdaoli.

The research implications of my study also seem a bit complex. Though I plan to continue exploring the ideas presented here, it seems clear that further empirical research into concepts such as “teacher leadership” or “informal leadership” in East Asian settings will influence the social reality of such settings. In other words, surveying Chinese educators regarding perceptions of teacher leadership can barely help but influence these perceptions.

Thus, what is offered here is more or less the defense of a specific and, I believe, liberating conceptualization of leadership. It is an idea that fits within a strand of understanding within the literature that holds “leadership” as a process relatively independent from “leaders.” Besides defending these ideas, I hope I have helped to amplify them and in some small way helped to spread it within Chinese organizational thought and discourse; for as Laurie Anderson was cited earlier, “language is a virus.” So, it appears, is lingdao/lingdaoli.
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