

11 FLOWERS

A FILM BY WANG XIAO-SHUAI

我 11

Shanghainese, Mandarin w/ English subtitles, China/France, 2011

35mm print: 120 minutes, Dolby SRD, 1.85

Video (BluRay): 115 minutes, Stereo, 16x9



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Synopsis

One of China's foremost Sixth Generation directors, Wang Xiaoshuai (*Beijing Bicycle*, *Shanghai Dreams*) tells a striking, autobiographical coming-of-age tale set in the final days of China's Cultural Revolution in his new film *11 Flowers*.

Eleven-year-old Wang Han lives with his family in a remote village in Guizhou province. Life is tough, but they make the most of what little they have. When Wang is selected to lead his school through their daily gymnastic regiment, his teacher recommends that he wear a clean, new shirt in honor of this important position – a request that forces his family to make a great sacrifice.

But one afternoon, soon after Wang is given the precious shirt, he encounters a desperate, wounded man, who takes it from him. The man is on the run, wanted by the authorities for murder. In no time the fates of Wang and the fugitive are intertwined.

Beautifully performed by a troupe of child actors, and vividly creating a sense of time and place, *11 Flowers* is a delicate and moving film about growing up in a time of great upheaval.



Wang Han, played by Liu Wenqing, and his father, played by Wang Jingchun

Director's Statement

11 Flowers is an autobiographical film. This child, his friends, his parents, the painting classes, the Cultural Revolution and the factory born from the Third Front movement all come from my childhood memories. There are obviously new narrative elements but I did meet this runaway murderer and I saw him being arrested.

The story of *11 Flowers* is infused with the memories of my life in Guiyang, in the province of Guizhou. In the mid '60s, my parents followed the Chinese government's call asking families to move the main factories in charge of national production inland in order to defend China against a potential attack from the USSR. We left Shanghai to go and live in this poor province. I grew up in this countryside with my older sister, while our parents hoped to rapidly be able to go back to Shanghai. This period of my life left a profound mark on me. We lived in a small village that had been built for us near the Shanghai factory, then dismantled, then put together again. We felt the burden of the obligations my parents – and all other grown-ups in society – were tied down with. I saw how this movement and the Cultural Revolution changed them.

When I became an adult, I realized that very few people knew about the Third Front movement, which pushed these city-dwellers to live with their family in the middle of the countryside. In my films, it was important for me to speak about these people and their lives. I even started a documentary on the subject so that my parents and their friends could tell us why and how they lived there. One of my previous films, *Shanghai Dreams*, already had my life in the Guizhou province as a background. The film recounted these workers' children awakening to the world, until their adolescence and their desire for independence. In *11 Flowers*, the children are still young and do not understand the world that surrounds them. They do not question the situation they live in. This creates a gap between their point of view and the social and political backdrop.

When the mother is cooking, and the father and the son paint, or when the children play, I see my 11-year-old self, in 1975, in my village. When I started this film, I didn't know whether I'd be able to recreate my childhood with images. At the early editing stages, I showed my mother a few scenes from the film. Without knowing what the film was about, she instantly recognized the locations and the people, and was quite moved.

About the Film

The Title *11 Flowers*

The Chinese title for *11 Flowers*, *Wo 11*, means “I am 11”. This title uses the first-person pronoun to underline the fact that it is a personal story told in the first-person singular, by “me, Xiaoshuai.” This is the story of my being 11, my memories, and my vision of this time period at the end of the Cultural Revolution. The international title *11 Flowers*, encompasses my being 11 and the idea that I was in the spring of my life. The flowers are a kind of metaphor, and as it is, the father compares human beings with a bouquet of flowers. This also conveys the idea that we aren’t in the city, but in the middle of the countryside.

The Cultural Revolution

There are so many stories and different points of views concerning the period of the Cultural Revolution. For this film, I adopted a specific, and different, stance: subjective narration, as seen through the eyes of this child. Wang Han does not have a point of view on the Cultural Revolution. At the time, the Chinese also were the spectators of what was happening; they didn’t know what to say about that movement. Similarly, young Wang Han, who has no opinion, doesn’t pass judgment and only watches what is happening until he decides to no longer follow the herd and takes his life in his hands. Suddenly, he’s grown.

Chinese Cinema and the Cultural Revolution

Many Chinese films take place during the Cultural Revolution. They speak about the anti-right wing campaigns, the red guards. These are films in which we can feel that the director is looking – today – at what happened then: present-day adults looking back. I think it is sometimes interesting to forget the contemporary vision of the past and make films about what we experienced, what we felt at the time. This amounts to adopting an artistic point of view on history. This is why I didn’t want to make a historical film about the Cultural Revolution. *11 Flowers* is a film about a child and a murderer, about their destinies crossing paths, the problems they encounter and the consequences on their lives at the time. The child is a witness of 1975 Chinese society. The Cultural Revolution is merely a set, a backdrop. The world is seen from the level of children’s eyes, Wang Han’s eyes.

The name Wang Han

Wang Han, the main character’s name, was my name when I was a child. I wanted to keep it as such in the film. And it is my voice which opens and closes the story. It was a way for me to assert my link with the film without changing the audience’s relation to it, because they don’t know that it’s me. In a novel, it is easy to write in the first-person, and as a matter of fact, this is the way in which I had written the first version of my screenplay.

But in cinema, it is more complicated. I therefore sought to keep Xiaoshuai's "I/me" approach while creating a fictional work. Then I had to choose the actor. Who could be the double for me at age 11? I chose Liu Wenqing for the way he looks, the way he moves. I thought he didn't look like the other children. When I was a child, I felt I was different from the others, even from my friends. I found in him this impression of feeling different. This is why I chose him.



From left to right, Lou Yihao as Wei Jun, Liu Wenqing as Wang Han, Zhong Guo Liuxing as Mouse, Zhang Kexuan as Louse

Casting Children

The children in the film are all professional actors and they've been in many productions, for television as well as cinema. The biggest challenge was to find children who looked like they were both city children and country children. Peasants. Once on

filming location, I taught them the games I played when I was a kid. We children were very sheltered; we played with whatever we could find, for there was nothing. Our world was little more than "Long Live Chairman Mao, Long Live the Chinese Communist Party." We knew nothing about the outside world. We were quite naïve. This is how I envisioned Wang Han and his friends.

A Co-Production with France

I had worked with France before, for some of my previous films, but **11 Flowers** is an official coproduction between China and France; in addition, it is the first film coproduced by the two countries since the agreement signed by the two governments in April 2010. One of the highlights in the coproduction was the editing stage with Nelly Quettier. The challenge was for us to be able to understand each other, to agree on the visual form as well as on the essence of the film. We sometimes ended up speaking with our hands when our interpreter wasn't there. An additional difficulty for Nelly was that the rushes were in Chinese, a language she doesn't speak.

During sound editing, we had to recreate, in France, the sound atmosphere of the 1970s Chinese countryside. We spent some time looking for crickets or Chinese birds. The French team who joined me for the postproduction of the film was truly professional. It was especially interesting because they came after a Chinese team, for a film shot in Chinese and in China. This gave rise to really interesting exchanges.

Filmmaker Bio

Wang Xiaoshuai, director and writer, graduated from the Beijing Film Academy. Wang Xiaoshuai wrote and directed his first feature *The Days* (1993) when he was 27. Acclaimed at first, the film is soon after black listed and its distribution banned in China. The film depicted the last days of a deteriorating relationship between two artists in Beijing. Two years later, he directed *Frozen* (1995) under the pseudonym Wu Ming (Without a name); the film got selected at many International festivals and was awarded with Special Mention of the jury in Rotterdam in 1995. The film offers a look at the Beijing avant-garde art world, where a young artist organizes a set of performances culminating in his own suicide as the final act.

The same year, he directed *A Vietnamese Girl* for the Beijing Film Studio. The film was refused by the censorship committee and it took 3 years of re-editing and a change of title (*So Close to Paradise*) to be finally approved for a (limited) screening in China. *So Close To Paradise* tells the story of two rural migrants, a naive young boy and a small-time con man, trying to make ends meet living in the city of Wuhan, and falling in love with a female bar singer they abducted. In 1998, it was selected for the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival. His fifth feature, *Beijing Bicycle*, won the Grand Jury Silver Bear Award at the 2001 Berlin International Film Festival and its two leading male actors received the Best Young Actor Prize. The film had a great international career. In 2003 *Drifters* was screened in Un Certain Regard at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival. In 2005, his following film, *Shanghai Dreams*, was selected for competition in the 2005 Cannes Film Festival where he won the Jury Prize. In 2008, *In Love We Trust*, won the Silver Bear for the best screenplay in Berlin. In 2010, *Chongqing Blues* was selected in competition at Cannes Film Festival. The film received the Chinese Director Association award for Best Director.



Credits

Cast

LIU WENQING	Wang Han
WANG JINGCHUN	Father
YAN NI	Mother
ZHANG KEXUAN	Louse
ZHONG GUO LIUXING	Mouse
LOU YIHAO	Wei Jun
MO SHIYI	Jue Hong
WANG ZIYI	the murderer
QIAO RENLIANG	Brother of Wei Jun
YU YUE	School teacher
ZHAO SHIQI	Sister of Wang Han
CAO SHIPING	Father of Jue Hong
CAO GANG	Policeman

Crew

Director	WANG XIAOSHUAI
Screenplay	WANG XIAOSHUAI / LAO NI
Cinematographer	DONG JINSONG
Production Designer	LU DONG
Editor	NELLY QUETTIER
Sound	FU KANG
Sound Editing	JEAN GARGONNE
Mixing	JEAN-PAUL HURIER
Music	MARC PERRONE
Producers	WANG XIAOSHUAI, ISABELLE GLACHANT, DIDAR DOMEHRI, LÜ DONG, LAURENT BAUDENS, GAËL NOUAILLE
Production	WXS PRODUCTIONS, CHINESE SHADOWS, FULL HOUSE
In coproduction with	ARTE FRANCE CINEMA
In association with	FILMS DISTRIBUTION
With the support of	FONDS SUD CINEMA MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE ET DE LA COMMUNICATION - CNC, MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET EUROPÉENNES (FRANCE), VISION SUD EST, OPEN DOORS LOCARNO, DIRECTION, DU DÉVELOPPEMENT ET DE LA COOPÉRATION SUISSE, BUSAN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL – PPP AWARD, ARTE FRANCE

http://movies.nytimes.com/2013/02/22/movies/11-flowers-directed-by-wang-xiaoshuai.html?_r=0

The New York Times

MOVIE REVIEW

A Child-Eye's View of Life in 1970s China

'11 Flowers,' Directed by Wang Xiaoshuai

 NYT Critics' Pick

By JEANNETTE CATSOULIS

Published: February 21, 2013

Poised on the brink of sexual awareness and the waning of the Cultural Revolution, an 11-year-old boy struggles to interpret the signals from his changing body and an increasingly confusing world.

Yet Wang Xiaoshuai's "11 Flowers" never allows politics to overwhelm its fondly intimate portrait of life in a Chinese village in 1975. Seen through the curious eyes of the young Wang Han (Liu Wenqing) and his friends, the film's more mysterious events — including a corpse on the riverbank and the strange sadness of a neighbor's beautiful daughter — are little more than incomprehensible distractions from the daily rituals of rural life.

Delicate and autobiographical (Wang Han was the director's name when he was a child, and the story is constructed from his boyhood memories), "11 Flowers" clings steadfastly to its youthful point of view. And while there is a plot involving a lost shirt and a fateful encounter with a murderer, information leaks through from the adult world mostly in the form of glimpsed interactions and overheard conversations.

This oblique approach allows small moments of direct connection between Wang Han and his parents — in particular a lovely scene where his father teaches him about the brush strokes in a Monet — to resonate with luminous simplicity. And when someone remarks that "a change is coming," he's as likely to be suggesting a shift in the weather as the dawning of a brand-new era.

<http://www.npr.org/2013/02/21/172395278/11-flowers-a-revolutionary-childhood>



'11 Flowers': A Revolutionary Childhood

by MARK JENKINS

February 21, 2013 5:00 PM

Over the frequent objections of China's censors, director Wang Xiaoshuai has made 10 provocative features in 20 years. His latest, the earthy yet subtly evocative *11 Flowers*, is in the same mode as the one that's best known in the U.S., 2001's *Beijing Bicycle*. Both are simple, resonant tales of youths who have something taken from them.

In *Beijing Bicycle*, a poor teenager's search for his purloined bike echoes the archetypal Italian neorealist film, 1948's *Bicycle Thieves*. In *11 Flowers*, the lost object is even more humble: a white shirt.

But that garment means a lot to earnest 11-year-old Wang Han (wide-eyed Liu Wenqing), who begs his mother (Yan Ni) for it. Identified as his school's best gymnast, Han is asked to lead daily calisthenics. His teacher suggests that the honor deserves a new white shirt. To Han, who usually wears a nonregulation blue one, said shirt becomes an obsession.

It's 1975, during what will turn out to be the last year of the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong's manufactured upheaval has banished Han's family to a small factory town in the southwestern mountains; the boy knows no other life, and can't understand the frustration of adults exiled from major cities. He doesn't really fathom why his dotting opera-performer father (Wang Jingchun) is encouraging him to become a painter, an artistic profession that can be pursued in seclusion.

With fabric rationing in effect, a white shirt for the boy will deprive his parents and younger sister of new clothes. When his mother reluctantly provides the shirt, it's the biggest news in town for young Han.

His neighbors, however, are focused on other events: a rape, followed by a revenge murder. Somehow involved is Juehong (Mo Shiyi), a pretty teenage girl who attends the same school as Han and his three mischievous buddies. They observe her closely, sure that something is happening.

11 Flowers was inspired by an incident from Wang's youth. (Its title translates literally as *Me, 11*.) It is in part a portrayal of the deprivations, both material and spiritual, of the Cultural Revolution. But it just as expressively depicts the universal condition of childhood, a period of intense curiosity and profound cluelessness. Like most kids, Han can feel left out, even within his own family.

The director represents this keenly using point-of-view camera; we see through Han's eyes as he circles a table of gossipy grown-ups, peeking past arms and elbows. The director also simulates the kid's perspective through windows and steam, when hanging his head upside down and during the wooziness of a fever.

Sometimes, Wang employs the viewpoint of another character: Jueqiang (Wang Ziyi), a wounded fugitive who's hiding in the woods. He steals Han's shirt and uses it to stanch the bleeding from his side. The gesture has both practical and symbolic implications. How can the boy tell his mother he lost the new shirt? And how can innocence be restored to a bloodied China?

The movie doesn't dwell on the latter question, although the murder is followed by outbursts of teen-gang violence and Red Guard attacks on "conservatives." Like the whole country, Han's hometown is officiously governed yet prone to anarchy.

Maoism's oppressiveness is conveyed by the patriotic anthems that blare from loudspeakers — and are sung by people, including Han's parents, who prefer traditional tunes but fear being overheard singing them. The bombastic music disappears when the boys visit the woods along the river, where only rustlings and burlings can be heard. For children here, as elsewhere, nature offers both its own charms and a refuge from adult perplexities. **(Recommended)**

NEW YORK POST

'11 Flowers' review

By FARRAN SMITH NEHME

February 21, 2013



Wang Han (Liu Wenqing), an 11-year-old boy in a small, poor village in southern China, leads an ordinary life of school, playmates and trying to placate a strict mother. It is 1975, the waning days of Mao's brutal Cultural Revolution, and the local students spend a chunk of the school day in activities meant to exalt their leader.

Still, the anxieties of grown-ups barely register with the boy, whose main problem in life is his desire for a new shirt — until the day a corpse washes up from the river. The man was murdered, and as Wang Han slowly pieces together why, he also gains the first bits of understanding about why his intellectual father is working in a factory, and why the adults are afraid even to sing old songs.

“11 Flowers” boils down to a coming-of-age tale merged with a why-dunit — not unlike “To Kill a Mockingbird” — but the plot is molasses-slow, as threads are dropped, picked up and dropped again. While the actors — especially Liu, and Yan Ni and Wang Jingchun as his parents — are wonderfully unforced and natural, there are a few drawn-out scenes that shade into torpor.

But the movie lingers in the mind, largely because director Wang Xiaoshuai's theme is poignant and classic: The more a child perceives of what the adults around him are doing, the more childhood slips away.



11 Flowers



BY CAROLINE MCKENZIE ON FEBRUARY 18, 2013

The original title for Wang Xiaoshuai's *11 Flowers* translates roughly to *I Am 11*. Though slightly more generic sounding than its English-language moniker, it more thoroughly encapsulates the political and social perspective of the film, which retains the point of view of its pre-adolescent protagonist so closely that the camera follows him under water, flips upside down during his handstands, and even fogs during a period of illness. If this sounds gimmicky, it's actually deftly handled, and contributes to the film's nuanced portrait of coming of age during China's Cultural Revolution.

A semi-autobiographical story of the director's childhood in rural China, the film focuses on 11-year-old Wang Han (Liu Wenqing), whose family has been relocated to Guizhou from Shanghai as part of Mao's Third Front policies. When Wang Han is chosen to lead morning exercises at school, the "honor" requires his mother (Yan Ni) to provide him with a new shirt—a luxury given the time period's rationing of materials—which she labors to make herself. But merely days later, the shirt is stolen when Wang Han encounters a young murderer on the run in the mountains near his village. This run-in with the fugitive, who reveals himself as the older brother of one of Wang Han's schoolmates, marks the beginning of Wang Han's transition from childhood naïveté to a firmer understanding of the world around him.

Because of its choice in subjectivity, and despite the film's historical context, *11 Flowers* firmly elevates the experience of the personal over the political. Warring between political factions and youth groups that stampede through the town is seen out of context through the eyes of the child characters, as Wang Han and his group of friends suppose that all the older boys are fighting over girls. Mother and son's differences in perception of the "honor" placed upon Wang Han by being given a leadership position in his state-run school are never spelled out further than the personal conflict between Wang Han's pride and his mother's necessary frugality. The fugitive's crime has social roots instead of political ones: He's murdered the man who raped his sister, Jue Hong (Mo Shiyi). And when politics finally boil up in a scene where the fugitive's father confesses to Wang Han's father (Wang Jingchun) of the personal shame the Cultural Revolution has brought him, Wang Han's focus vacillates between the adults' conversation and Jue Hong, who's changing her clothes in the next room.

Narratively, the events of the film unfold slowly and elliptically. But if it feels at points overlong, the rambling narrative—with the limited events involving the creation and theft of the shirt being the only real plot motivators—is effective at evoking Wang Han's subtle transition from self-involved child to self-aware adolescent. The film is evocative of *Stand By Me*, as both reflect on a bygone era of a country's history through the eyes of young males. But the film also recalls the work of Hirokazu Kore-eda in the way the camera sensitively moves with the children and appreciates their worldview.

11 Flowers is greatly enhanced by the mix of Dong Sinjong's cinematography and the editing of Nelly Quettier (who, known for her work with Claire Denis and Leos Carax, adds a distinctly European sensibility to the narrative flow). The images and the rhythms created by the editing deftly balance the profundity of the mountainsides of this rural Chinese village with the interiority and isolation of the characters. But the real triumph of the film is that Wang has created an intensely personal story from a political period that subjugated the personal, and an utterly universal film that nonetheless stunningly evokes the uniqueness of its own time and place.

<http://www.libertasfilmmagazine.com/coming-of-age-during-the-cultural-revolution-lfm-reviews-11-flowers/>



Coming of Age During the Cultural Revolution: LFM Reviews *11 Flowers*

Feb 22, 2013

By Joe Bendel

Wang Han should not be growing up in the countryside. Whether they like it or not, his parents were forced to relocate to Guizhou province as part of the Cultural Revolution's Third Front campaign. For an active eleven year old boy, it is not such a bad environment. However, he has an unusual vantage point to observe the struggles of another "intellectual" family in Wang Xiaoshuai's *11 Flowers*, which opens today in New York.

Frankly, Wang Han's father is fortunate to have a job with an out-of-town opera company, but it requires spending extensive time away from home. Each time he commutes to work, he accompanies Wang Han part of the way to school. It is an important ritual that cements their bond. Wang Han does not share a similar bond with his stern factory worker mother. When chosen to be the leader of his school's morning calisthenics (part of their daily Maoist regimen), Wang Han's principal rather insensitively tells the boy to ask for a new shirt for the occasion. Of course, this would be a considerable investment in money and cloth ration vouchers for the family. Nonetheless, his mother eventually relents.

For a brief period, life is good for Wang Han, but the discovery of a dead body is an ill omen, as is the conspicuous distress experienced by Jue Hong, his frequently absent crush. While his family has largely avoided trouble, her "intellectual" father, Xie Fulai, has not. Nor has she. Evidently, the dead man raped the young girl, as her brother the killer explains to Wang Han, when circumstances bring them together in the forest. It is a frightening meeting for the eleven year old, made considerably worse when the fugitive forcibly takes his new shirt.

It might be overstating matters to describe the semi-autobiographical *11 Flowers* as the late Cultural Revolution era version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it gives a general sense of what to expect from the coming of age story. Wang focuses on the personal, but the political periodically intrudes in rudely menacing ways. Through Wang Han's eyes, the Cultural

Revolution is not so much an exercise in ideological excess, but the periodic explosion of street thuggery, as when his father is caught in a Red Guard rampage.

Liu Wenqing is a remarkably expressive young actor, who perfectly anchors the film. He makes Wang Han's slow evolution from innocence to awakened conscience quite riveting and moving. Likewise, the young supporting cast-members are spot-on as his classmates. Yet, the subtle power of Wang Jingchun's work as his father really sneaks up on audiences. When he encourages Wang Han's painting as a means of artistic freedom, it feels light and natural at the time, but it is hugely significant in retrospect.

11 Flowers is unusually sensitive and accomplished. It is probably the best film to focus on a youthful cast since Tom Shu-yu Lin's *Starry Starry Night*, which was probably the best since who knows what? Beautifully lensed by Dong Jinsong, it is quality cinema on every level. Highly recommended, *11 Flowers* opens today (2/22) in New York at the Quad Cinema downtown and the Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center uptown.

LFM GRADE: A