

Director Wang Xiaoshuai and the Sixth Generation

Adapted from "The Sixth Generation and China's Modernization" by Nancy Jervis. Dr. Jervis is Vice President and Director of Programs at the China Institute in New York City.

In the 1990s, a new generation of filmmakers in China emerged. These filmmakers, sometimes also called the urban generation, tell a different kind of story in a very different way from their immediate predecessors. Their films are set primarily in China's major cities and tell of a rapidly changing urban environment and the social dislocation it causes.

Beijing Bicycle, (2001) by Sixth Generation filmmaker Wang Xiaoshuai, is set in 1990s Beijing, China's capital city. Until twenty years ago, Beijing was a city of many small alleyways and close-knit neighborhoods. The main means of transportation was the bicycle, and there were millions of these. By and large, the social aspects of people's lives were taken care of by the workplace, which also provided housing, health care and primary education.

The Beijing of today is a different place. In the last two decades, China has experienced rapid economic development and this expansion is quite evident in China's cities. People from the countryside flooded into the cities and Beijing, in particular. These rural-to-urban migrants number close to 100 million. Many find work as construction laborers. The city folk often ridicule these migrants, dismissing them as "country bumpkins." Guei, one of these migrants, arrives in Beijing and lands a job with an express delivery service. In the first part of the film, we see life through Gui's eyes, looking up, literally at skyscrapers and figuratively at the upper classes.

On the other hand, Jian is a city boy, a teenager who lives a vastly different lifestyle than Gui. He comes from a hard-working, upwardly striving family, and desperately wants the freedom having his own bike represents. He is also in the midst of China's own kind of adolescent rebellion, in which kids his age long for the increasingly prevalent modern goods that now surround them.

How China will resolve these tensions between rural and urban lifestyles, between modern and traditional values, between the old and the young, remains to be seen. But in dramatizing the dilemmas that ordinary people confront daily in their lives, Sixth Generation filmmakers like Wang Xiaoshuai are becoming part of the solution to the inevitable problems that China's modernization brings.