

# Short Essay



# Three *Bad Kids*, One Loving Killer: Red China Noir in Blakean Symmetry

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## Abstract

The twelve-episode Chinese TV series *Yinmi de Jiaoluo* (隱秘的角落 *Hidden Corner*, translated as *The Bad Kids* [2020]) dances on a Blakean “The Tyger and the Little Lamb” tightrope between childlike innocence and homicidal nihilism, between an art house sensibility and a pop culture chained to party propaganda. Amidst the flood of ethnocentric and jingoistic police procedurals “with Chinese characteristics” on TV, director Xin Shuang (辛爽) energizes his tour de force with a sensibility ranging far beyond Chinese shores, flirting with Western artists and meta-physical self-reflexiveness torn between good and evil, innocence and meaninglessness. Xin Shuang adapts Zijin Chen’s (紫金陈) eponymous web novel while imbuing the series with an off-kilter, haunting Yeatsian “terrible beauty” of violence and attraction.<sup>1</sup> *The Bad Kids* made a killing not so much in profits as in the true art of Sino Noir, or Red China Noir.

The eponymous “bad kids” blackmail a murderer to obtain funds for a life-saving surgery. Courting his own death, this “loving” killer saves one of the three kids from an asthma attack and spares the other two out of a fatherly compulsion to sire his own offspring, to pass on the legacy of revenge and guilt, to prolong his life—his afterlife, rather—as he confides: “I want you all to live—to live like me.” *The Bad Kids*’ Red China Noir teeters on a Blakean symmetry of love and hate, East and West.

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1. Zijin Chen (紫金陈). *Huai Xiaohai* (壞小孩; Bad kids). Hunan: Hunan Wenyi, 2014. <https://www.99csw.com/book/5956/index.htm>.

**Keywords:** *Yinmi de Jiaoluo*, The Bad Kids, Xin Shuang, Qin Hao, Red China Noir

The twelve-episode Chinese TV series *Yinmi de Jiaoluo* (*Hidden Corner*, translated as *The Bad Kids* [2020]) dances on a Blakean “The Tyger and the Little Lamb” tightrope between childlike innocence and homicidal nihilism,<sup>2</sup> between an art house sensibility and a pop culture chained to party propaganda.<sup>3</sup> The suffix of “the” in *The Bad Kids* is grammatically redundant in the Chinese language, which has no definite articles. Conceivably, *The Bad Kids* can be shortened into *Bad Kids*, a perfect rendition of the web novel title *Huai Xiaohai*, from which the TV series is adapted. This bilingual backstory leads to the titular liberty of “Three *Bad Kids*,” alliterating with the nursery rhyme “Three Blind Mice,” dogging and dogged by one killer cat, so to speak.

As the “Chinese Century” uncoils amidst global unrest and the pandemic of COVID-19, as China enjoys a comparatively low crime rate vis-a-vis industrialized and industrializing nations, *The Bad Kids* is but one show out of what amounts to a “crime wave” in TV series. This growing collective (collectivist?) fascination with crime suggests paranoia over the West’s capitalist sins of social inequality and alienation; over China’s own vices censored, repressed, and even institutionalized, normalized; or over both. Apropos the virus infecting the “good” China, does it hail from the “bad” West, or is it endemic to China itself? Per W. B. Yeats’s “The Second Coming” (1920), is the beast slouching from Bethlehem toward Beijing, or is Beijing the beast? On the one hand, crime shows intimate these unsettling doubts on viral evil, a theoretical, theological premise out of keeping with secular, pragmatic Confucian-cum-communist-materialist ideology. On the

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2. William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1789–94, Project Gutenberg, accessed May 16, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm>.

3. Xin Shuang, dir., *The Bad Kids* (隐秘的角落), performances by Qin Hao and Wang Shengdi, iQIYI, 2020.

other, crime shows expound law and order exemplified by the public security known as *gongan*, equivalent to the police in the West, not only to toe the party line but also to alleviate, subconsciously, existential angst. Amidst such ethnocentric and jingoistic police procedurals “with Chinese characteristics,” director Xin Shuang (辛爽) energizes his tour de force with a sensibility ranging far beyond Chinese shores, flirting with Western artists and metaphysical self-reflexiveness torn between good and evil, innocence and meaninglessness. *The Bad Kids* made a killing not so much in profits as in the true art of Sino Noir, or Red China Noir.<sup>4</sup>

Xin Shuang adapts Zijin Chen’s (紫金陈) eponymous web novel while imbuing the series with an off-kilter, haunting Yeatsian “terrible beauty” of violence and attraction.<sup>5</sup> From the outset of the opening credits, Xin Shuang couples an Escheresque Möbius strip of stairwells with an eerie, disorienting, and off-key soundtrack accompanying three white will-o’-the-wisps chased by a looming blob of darkness in a nightmarish game of peekaboo or cat-and-mouse (Figure 1). The three flitting phantoms represent the titular “bad kids” while translating, literally, the common expression *xiaogui* for “little ghosts” or “little kids.” The soundtrack music punctuates a male or female vocal gasping, perhaps expiring. This disjointedness intensifies in the crime accidentally witnessed by the three adolescent protagonists, all from broken homes, one excellent student Zhu Chaoyang and two orphans Yan Liang (Ding Hao in Zijin Chen’s web novel) and Pupu. The first name Liang means “good.” Pupu, notwithstanding the English soundalikes of “poo(h),” means ordinary, common, drawing viewers close to the lovely, petite “everygirl” à la the medieval morality play *Everyman*. Despite her young age, Pupu’s elocution is so affective that she delivers some of the most philosophical reflections: “Have you studied hard so that you can kill?” she queries

4. A portmanteau of the communist “Red China” and the genre of “film noir,” Red China Noir points to representations of crime and detection “with Chinese characteristics,” or within the context of the communist political, social, and cultural apparatuses.

5. W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 184–85.

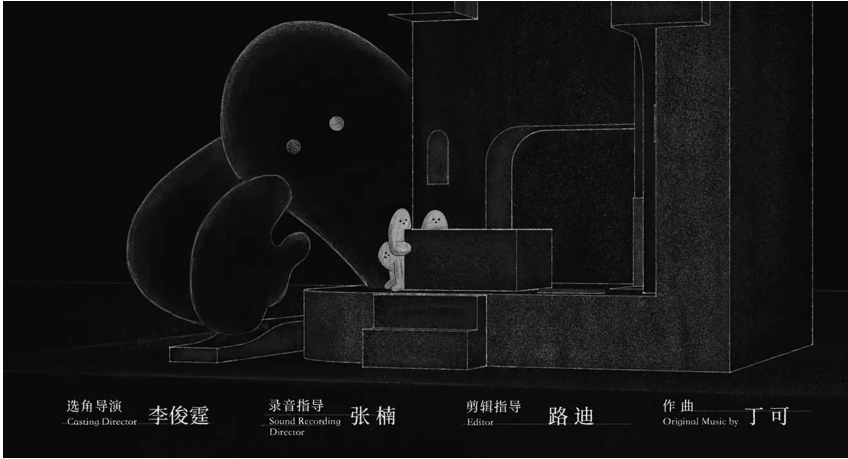


Figure 1: Three little ghosts chased by a big one in the opening credits to *The Bad Kids*.

The Bad Kids Fig 1

Source: A screenshot from *The Bad Kids*, subject to the fair use rule in copyright laws

the teacher-murderer; “Are criminals always criminals?” She queries her two “partners in crime.” Both are rhetorical questions to a certain extent, yet it remains an open question whether her elders would answer in the affirmative or in the negative.

The orphans run away from the orphanage to try to scrounge up money to pay for a life-saving surgery for Pupu’s younger brother. As they video themselves on their rare outing, singing the children’s song *Xiao Baichuan* (literally “little white boat”) together at a tourist site, they capture unwittingly the murderer Zhang Dongsheng shoving his parents-in-law over an adjacent peak. The middle-schooler’s first name Chaoyang (morning/rising sun) eerily repeats the murderer’s name Dongsheng (east rise). The symmetry of innocence and evil hides in plain sight of the characters’ names so common as to go unnoticed by censors until one realizes that Chaoyang is a key government and financial district in the capital Beijing. “Dongsheng,” more problematically, evokes not only Chairman Mao Zedong, the

proverbial Red Sun, but also the revolutionary song forever associated with Mao. “The east is red. The sun rises,” the tune goes: “China has sired a Mao Zedong.” To name a fictional murderer after a historical mastermind of famines and “reeducation” pogroms seems apt, but it is tantamount to suicide under Xi Jinping modeling himself after the father of Chinese Communism.

Zhang commits the double murders to win back his wife who is seeking a divorce under her parents’ “bad influence.” Instead of turning over the evidence to the police, the kids fancy extorting money from Zhang in hope of financing the surgery. An echo of the opening credits’ stairwells that drop off and the soundtrack that breaks off, the bad blackmailers’ good intentions set in motion a chain reaction of deceptions, police fumbles, involuntary violence, and four more deaths: Zhu’s spoiled, willful half-sister; his hysterical stepmother; his grieving father; and the half-sister’s dotting gangster uncle. Courting his own death, the “loving” killer Zhang is shot and killed, after having saved Pupu from an asthma attack and spared Yan Liang’s and Zhu’s lives out of a fatherly compulsion to sire his own offspring, to pass on the legacy of revenge and guilt. Pupu’s bout of asthma was so severe that she had lost consciousness. When Zhang called the ambulance, he did so at great risk to himself as a suspect and fugitive.

*The Bad Kids’* Red China Noir teeters on a Blakean symmetry of love and hate, East and West. Such Blakean symmetry is as much complementary as it is contradictory. Out of an obsessively pathological love, Zhang disposes of his parents-in-law to cling onto his wife. Initially, Zhang takes two lives to continue his abject, masochistic enslavement to a wife who despises him. Subsequently, Zhang is compelled to kill again and again to conceal his crime. Out of love for Zhu, Pupu corners Zhu’s bully of a half-sister, indirectly causing the frantic girl’s fall from the school building. Although Pupu harbors no evil intent like Zhang’s, the result of a smashed body looks similar to Zhang’s premeditated murders. Out of the urge to prolong his life—his afterlife, rather—Zhang refrains from knifing Yan Liang, confiding: “I want you all to live—to live like me.”

Zhang's exhortation resonates with the serpent's seduction of Eve in the Book of Genesis and Mephistopheles's bargain with Faust in Goethe.<sup>6</sup> The drive for self-aggrandizement is shared by God, who shows off Job—"Hast Thou [Satan] considered my servant Job . . . a perfect and upright man?"<sup>7</sup> (*The Book of Job* 1:8)—and by Satan, who deceives, tactically—"If what is evil/Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?"<sup>8</sup> To mimic God's omnipotence, Satan plots to have evil, once known, be shared and not shunned, hence enlarging the Satanic Kingdom on Earth. Nietzsche's Zarathustra, of course, dismisses both the biblical and Miltonic fallacy, centering good and evil squarely in the human heart that wields the knife and hatches the serpent: "His soul wanted blood, not booty: he thirsted for the happiness of the knife!" and: "What is this man? A coil of wild serpents that are seldom at peace among themselves—so they go forth apart and seek prey in the world."<sup>9</sup> Akin to Eve, Faust, and the "coil of wild serpents," all three kids are to live on, allegorically, as Zhang's "bad" children, to bear Cain's mark of sin—not the Semitic fratricide against Abel but the Sinitic pseudopatricide against Zhang. The childless Zhang also feigns stabbing Zhu to force the police to shoot him. In the last episode, his last words to Zhu come as a parting shot at the kids and the world. Witnessing Zhang's knife raised high in the air, the police resort to deadly force to save Zhu from what they believe to be mortal danger. Zhang is slain midsentence: "You can believe in fairy tales . . ." (Figure 2).

The blood on Zhang's left shoulder in Figure 2 comes from Zhu's stab wound earlier, not the gunshot about to bring him down. Goading Zhu to avenge three lives—his father, whom Zhang killed with a screwdriver, and his friends Yan Liang and Pupu, whom he let go or saved without Zhu's

6. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, translated by Walter Arndt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

7. Book of Job 1:8.

8. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poetry of John Milton* [[editor?]] (New York: Anchor, [1667] 1971), 698–99.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, 1883 and 1885, Project Gutenberg, accessed May 16, 2023, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0011](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm#link2H_4_0011).



Figure 2: The murderer Zhang Dongsheng about to be slain in episode 12 of *The Bad Kids*.

The Bad Kids Fig 2

Source: A screenshot from *The Bad Kids*, subject to the fair use rule in copyright laws

knowledge—Zhang tempts Zhu to follow his own path of violence, to become, as Yan Liang warned, “the second Zhang Dongsheng.” If love and its fruits of children are out of reach, hate satiates the human need just as well for physical contacts through clashes of bodies. The fruits of hate hemorrhage into rotted body parts and tormented souls, both in denial of the finality of death. Maggots emerge from wounds, murders from a diseased heart—both filling the void of mortality.

With a pleasant smile, Zhang dangles midair his weapon of choice to invite the bullet. Zhang’s open, welcoming body language reminds one of Sigmund Freud’s “bad” children misbehaving, “to provoke a punishment of some kind, and that after they have been punished they calm down and are quite happy.”<sup>10</sup> Failing to clone a second Zhang Dongsheng, he

10. Sigmund Freud, “Criminals who Act Out of a Consciousness of Guilt,” in *The “Wolfman” and Other Cases*, translated by Louise Adey Huish (New York: Penguin, [1916] 2003), 346–48.

clowns to hasten his own demise. His weapon is a round steel rod with a sharpened end; its handle consists of a tightly wrapped twine. On his way to pick up the extorted money from Zhang, Yan Liang picks up by chance this weapon in his and Pupu's hideout, an abandoned boat stranded at the beach. This strange-looking "knife" has a fortuitous feel to it, as though Yan Liang improvises rather than proceeds by design. This slapdash quality permeates the heinous killings as well. Zhang's executions of crime look almost haphazard, knifing Zhu's father with a screwdriver, strangling Zhu's stepmother with a crowbar—both objects happen to be at hand. Even the final push over the cliff is done with his bare hands, after one final plea to the in-laws falls on deaf ears. "Impulsive crimes of passion," a seasoned defense attorney would no doubt argue in court: "Not premeditated homicides." Akin to his in-laws' fall, Zhang's own fall into evil appears more accidental than intentional, making him somewhat sympathetic. Viewers may even share Zhang's fear as the kids and the police tighten the noose. The identification with the murderer, an empathy somewhat misplaced, stems from human nature, mirroring theatergoers' fright, alongside Macbeth's, over the knocking in the wake of Duncan's murder, or moviegoers', alongside Peter Lorre's in *M* (1931).<sup>11</sup> Thomas De Quincey's 1823 essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*"<sup>12</sup> analyzes readers' projection onto the perpetrator of a regicide, the tenor of romantic self-inflation and overreach quite applicable to murders in Red China Noir two centuries later.

On the part of the "bad kids," the entire blackmail proceeds less according to plan than dictated by circumstances, once the three kids are

11. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971), 1184–1219; Fritz Lang, dir., *M.*, performances by Peter Lorre, Ellen Widmann, and Inge Landgut (Berlin: Nero-Film AG, 1931)

12. Thomas De Quincey, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," in *English Literature Anthology for Chinese Students*, ed. John J. Deeney, Yen Yuan-shu, and Chi Ch'iu-lang (Taipei: Hongdao Publisher, [1823] 1978), 403–5.

taken hold by the urge to help Pupu's brother. Saving one child entails ending the lives of three adults and one child. Making it up as they go, Yan Liang happens upon the steel rod in a boat, secreting it in his school bag. In a series of botched confrontations, the rod passes from Yan Liang's school bag to a ploy in Zhang's hand to induce triple births of his very own "bad kids." Baited by Zhang "to avenge your father," Zhu thrusts the rod into Zhang inches above the heart. A lucky miss or a bad kid's inner goodness averting the point of the blade? Either scenario lands the rod right back in Zhang's hand, symbolizing the will to power over lives, even Zhang's own if not Zhu's. The rod embodies as much Yan Liang's instinct for self-preservation against Zhang as Zhang's instinct of self-regeneration out of Zhu, the heir apparent. Absent the clone, Zhang wields the rod in gleeful anticipation of self-annihilation. The phallic symbol of the rod delivers death—both homicide and suicide. Inadvertently, however, it also underwrites life with Zhang's blood, ensuring the bad kids' new lease on life with Zhu's single mother, Yan Liang's adoptive parents, and Pupu's and her brother's recoveries.

Given the Blakean symmetry of self and other, of human-ness and thingy-ness, the weapon of choice may have chosen its handlers in a post-Anthropocene, posthuman era. Yan Liang chances upon the rod in the same manner as he chances upon the hideout of a deserted boat, which is predetermined by the opening credits' white boat imagery (Figure 3). Although such metaphors spring from Xin Shuang's head, that head is created by a lifetime of experiences on Earth. Chicken or egg: which—the man or the world—is the creator, which the creature? In its making, the steel rod resembles an acupuncture needle, which is but steel wire sharpened at one end and wound tightly with more wire at the other end to form the handle. Theoretically, such a needle punctures skin to reach an acupoint, a node of *qi* or energy, to heal. It inflicts local pain to ease holistic pain. The steel rod kills and heals, just as Red China Noir elicits and exorcizes fears. The rod also conjures up the Buddhist vajra of a thunderbolt or a diamond sword of wisdom, shearing through illusions, laying waste to

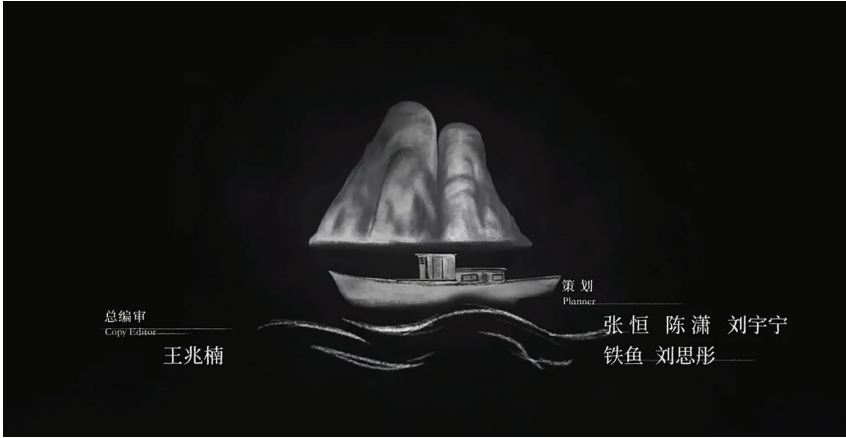


Figure 3: The white boat in the opening credits.

The Bad Kids Fig 3

Source: A screenshot from *The Bad Kids*, subject to the fair use rule in copyright laws

dreams, for awakening to nirvana. Despite symbolism of traditional medicine and Buddhism, Zhang remains a “butcher” against others and the self, arrested in the first half of the popular Buddhist maxim: “Lay down the butcher’s knife, turn into a Buddha anon.” Zhang’s stunted growth, refusing to be “weaned” from the imago of a spouse, provides a wry contrast to childhood innocence.

Zhang’s last words on fairy tales loop back to, ironically, the recurring motif of the Cartesian coordinate system mused, respectively, by Zhu the math wizard and by Zhang the substitute math teacher at a cram school. In their shared rumination over Descartes’s creation and love life, they actually think alike, almost a father-son, master-disciple pair. A coordinate system comprises two intersecting perpendicular and horizontal lines, each marked by positive and negative coordinates from the origin or the intersecting point. To situate *The Bad Kids*, intersecting coordinates are essential, juxtaposing East versus West, art versus politics, noir versus red, life versus death, and romantic make-believe versus reality. Legend has it,

and a twice-told tale from Zhu and Zhang at that, that Descartes served as the Swedish queen Christina's philosophy tutor and fell in love with her thirty years his junior. Barred from marriage by the court, Descartes died of pneumonia and a broken heart. A fairy tale with a tragic ending, the reality, as Zhang relates it, is that the queen never cared for the lovelorn Descartes, who rose early in freezing Scandinavia to instruct the queen on the philosophy of love, contracting pneumonia as a result. Zhang's last words begin by confirming fairy tales of unrequited love, yet this collective wish fulfillment is cut short twice: by a bullet on the abandoned boat and by a bug by the Nordic Sea, both seized midway through the father-lovers' confessions.

The ruin of a boat by the sea returns to the "first impression" of *The Bad Kids* or Figure 3: the opening credits' ink-brushed or computer-generated boat, cruising and morphing into three white will-o'-the-wisps haunted by a (their own?) long black shadow. Shaped like an uroboros biting its own tail, the series ends up circling back to where it started. The closing credits to the finale, episode 12, unfurl under the intertitle of "Dedicated to Childhood," a serial collage of numerous actors' and crew members' childhood photographs, some pictures going as far back as the Cultural Revolution. This tribute favors, apparently, more senior team members, thus containing no baby picture for the main cast's youngest, the barely ten-year-old Wang Shengdi, who plays Pupu. This moving, bittersweet closure may well be an epitaph to the futility of existence, since the visual pathos accrued from innocent children and infants is montaged, auditorily, by the two-part theme song of "White Boat" and "Little White Boat," delivered in tandem by Qin Hao, who plays Zhang Dongsheng, and by Wang Shengdi, as much a "tyger" and "little lamb" pair as they come. While the viewer's eyes mist over, stirred by the melancholia of time past and paradise lost, their ears are shocked by Qin Hao's riff of "White Boat" sans "Little" or innocence, de facto Xin Shuang's final words, who revises the 1924 Korean song "Little White Boat" by Yin Kerong. Xin Shuang's "White Boat" runs as follows (Translation mine, no punctuation added for

there is none in the original. A grammarian would feel compelled to “correct” the song title as “*The White Boat*,” which defeats the whole purpose of dropping “little,” divesting naïveté. Ditto the grammarian’s standardizing of “Little White Boat” as “*The Little White Boat*”):

When you fly  
 The silvery white sail  
 Sink into the bottom of the sea with the setting sun  
 What you once owned  
 Youth and restlessness  
 No one would ever bother to bring up  
 The naïve folk song  
 Sung for whom  
 You ingénues  
 Where have you gone  
 Just follow the waves  
 Follow them  
 There is no “the Other Shore” anyway  
 For anyone to arrive<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding political correctness of an intertitular intrusion, mid-song, on the Communist Party’s ongoing “Laws for the Protection of Youth” (Figure 4), “White Boat” is heart-wrenchingly bleak. “White Boat” in effect obliterates the Buddhist utopia beyond life’s “bitter sea,” beckoning from the other shore of blessedness. Qin’s song of experience is then reprised in Wang Shengdi’s angelic voice of the uplifting “Little White Boat,” which, twelve episodes ago, has already accompanied two bodies

13. “Hidden Corner Episode 1,” [dramasq.com](https://dramasq.com/cn200616/1.html#5), accessed June 3, 2023, <https://dramasq.com/cn200616/1.html#5>; or IQIYI, “The Bad Kids EP01 | 隐秘的角落 | Qin Hao 秦昊, Wang Jingchun 王景春, Rong Zishan 荣梓杉,” YouTube, accessed June 3, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkQg0r93-eU> (YouTube with English subtitles).

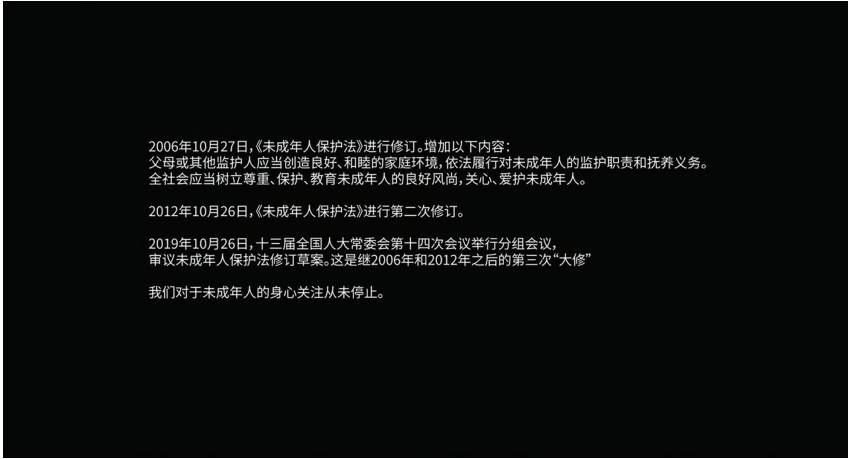


Figure 4: The intertitle on “Laws for the Protection of Youth” halfway through the song of “White Boat” in the closing credits of episode 12. The Bad Kids Fig 4

Source: A screenshot from *The Bad Kids*, subject to the fair use rule in copyright laws

falling off the cliff. The children’s earlier chorus of a flight of fancy punctuates the nosedive of two victims and the singers themselves. A Second Coming after Qin within the “family album” of “Dedicated to Childhood,” Wang comes across as a spinoff of Qin’s “parent” lyrics, although her words, as composed by Yin Kerong in Korean and translated into Chinese in the 1950s, predate Qin’s. Whereas any song of innocence precedes, theoretically, the song of experience, the reversed order of lyrics puts adulthood ahead of childhood, echoing the sequence of the nightmarish series on Red China Noir before the nostalgic closer via a sepia-toned album of the Gilded Age long faded.

Wang delivers the Korean songwriter’s lyrics, which mashes three Chinese legends of the moon, interlacing immortality with Tantalus’s exhaustion and thirst in Greek mythology. The trio comprise of Chang’e, Wu Gang, and the Jade Rabbit, all tasked with perpetual repetitions that bespeak longings never fulfilled. Chang’e flies to the moon after swallowing the elixir of

longevity, forever regretting the betrayal of her husband.<sup>14</sup> Wu Gang fells the *guihua* or osmanthus tree on the moon, only to have it grow back time and time again. The Jade Rabbit pestles immortality pills in the mortar by the tree, but the fact that she does so night after night begs the question of whether we on Earth look up at a lunar shadow play of transcendence or of punishment for millennia. The piling on of “bedtime stories” comes as though the Wordsworthian or Xin Shuangian Child—“Father of the Man” in “My Heart Leaps Up—is trying to convince herself, to lull herself to sleep, a suspicion crystalized in the glitch of a line: “Oars, oars, seeing none/ Nor does the boat have any sail.” Per Zhang’s counsel, one is free to “believe in fairy tales.”<sup>15</sup> The moon-bound Flying Dutchman, a ghost ship, requires no such earthly tools for flight, while the counselor’s tool, his half-sword of half-wisdom, clink-clanks onto the deck as he drops dead.

Fairy tales are what the Sand-Man Xi Jinping’s “China Dream” is made of.<sup>16</sup> Holding melodramatic soaps in one hand and triumphal crime-fighting police shows in the other, the millennial China Dream in popular TV series sprinkles sand in viewers’ eyes, lulling them to a consensual, collective sleep, albeit too shallow and disturbed for some. Within Lu Xun’s iron house of sleepers,<sup>17</sup> Xin Shuang plays on the porousness of reveries and wokeness,

14. Hou Yi is the husband of Chang’e, a great archer who shot down nine of the ten suns in the sky to save humanity from drought and desiccation. In return, Hou Yi is rewarded with the elixir of immortality, which Chang’e swallows on the sly and flies to the moon to opine her betrayal of Hou Yi.

15. William Wordsworth, “My Heart Leaps Up,” 1802, Poetry, accessed May 16, 2023, <https://www.poetry.com/poem/42279/my-heart-leaps-up>.

16. E. T. A. Hoffmann, “The Sand-Man,” in *The Best Tales of Hoffmann*, ed. with an intro. E. F. Bleiler (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, [1817] 1967), 232–66.

17. The Father of modern Chinese literature Lu Xun deploys a pivotal metaphor in “Preface to *A Call to Arms*” (1922). Lu Xun imagines the turn-of-the-last-century China as “an iron house without windows” about to suffocate sleepers within. Crying aloud would awaken “a few of the light sleepers” only to intensify their “agony of irrevocable death” (5). Evidently, Lu Xun chooses to cry out nonetheless, inspiring Leo Ou-fan Lee’s *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987). See Lu Xun. “Preface to *A Call to Arms*,” in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, [1922] 1972), 4–7.

of China and the West, of wakened and slumbering Chinese, just as the revisionist lyrics of “White Boat” are truncated and made right (left?) by a Model Peking Opera-style banner of an intertitle on youth-protecting laws. Amidst digitally streaming dreams to zombify a citizenry, *The Bad Kids* stands alone as a crypto-noir that secretes Red China’s wake, a well-wrought funeral wake to sleep on, to mull over the deadening of viewing subjects and their immanent quickening.

