interviews interspersed with historical visuals and recordings—the seldom-seen photographs and news footage chosen by the producers adds unexpected interest and an element of emotion.

Each woman tells her own story. For most, that story begins with the “click,” the realization that men were “valued more than women.” That “click” usually occurred on the job, as women confronted the sexism of the workplace before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) opened their eyes to unfair employment practices. Fraser remembered asking her boss why a male coworker received a larger raise. He responded: “Because you’re a woman.” Thom wanted out of the female “cushion line” and a chance to earn more money in “the pit” with the men. At the end of World War II, Haener was moved from her high-paying inspector position into a lower-paying clerical job because she was a woman. She sighed: “When the war was over, that period of my life was over.” Shown together, these individual narratives document the ways in which women were “somehow stranger[s] in this world,” a world created to benefit men.

The realization was followed, in the 1950s and 1960s, by the gradual coming together of these women with other women. This segment is perhaps the most powerful and exciting of the film. After the interviewees identified the sex discrimination in their own lives, they found other women with similar experiences in unions, politics, and academic settings—and their lives were changed. Their experiences with the EEOC, labor unions, conferences, or party politics taught the women how to make their voices heard. Listening to them talk about the challenges they faced as they organized across race and class lines to end sex discrimination, it is impossible to keep from rooting for these women, hoping that they will succeed despite our knowledge that the story continues into the present.

The final segment of the documentary takes the women from their earliest collective activism to the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s; six of the interviewees were founding members of NOW. The narrator and film clips recount other types of feminist activism as well. Of particular interest are the reactions of the interviewees to “women’s liberation” strategies such as consciousness-raising sessions. The conclusion focuses on the National Women’s Conference, “American Women on the Move,” held in Houston, Texas in 1977, and the film does not shy away from presenting the conflicts that erupted at that meeting.

There is little that is new in the basic storyline of this documentary. That story, however, bears repeating—often. As Wyatt notes, too many young women and men “haven’t heard the stories.” Step By Step also adds a perspective that has been woefully lacking in accounts of female activism after the passage of women’s suffrage: the Midwestern perspective. It is this Midwestern angle—focused principally on Wisconsin—that is one of the film’s strengths; too often, the East is privileged in accounts of U.S. feminism. Furthermore, documentaries on feminism are too few, and Step By Step should be seen as a “step” in filling that void as well as an excellent documentary. Viewers will probably be reminded of The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (1980); Step By Step has the same intelligent and quiet passion of the earlier film, and I hope it will find as large an audience.

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Xiaxiu: The Sent-Down Girl is a film about the life of one “sent-down youth” during China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). While its cinematic merits are evident in its many awards (Special Jury Award, 1999 Paris Film Festival; Best Dramatic Feature, 1998 Fort Lauderdale Film Festival; and seven Golden Horse Awards, Taiwan’s equivalent to the Oscar), the film is also historically significant, dealing with an important subject that few historians have seriously researched. The narrative is set in a specific historical period: the early to mid-1970s. The tragic story of its title character unfolds against the backdrop of Mao Zedong’s campaign to reeducate urban youth by sending them to the remote countryside.

The relocation of millions of urban youth to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution is one of the major social events in modern Chinese history, and it has profoundly shaped the life experience and mental outlook of a whole generation. Many prominent personalities in China today are members of that generation; some of these people will lead the country in the next century. Yet, although personal recollections, memoirs, and literary writings about the lives of the “rusticated youth”—as they are sometimes referred to in English literature—are so abundant that “sent-down youth literature” constitutes its own rich genre in recent Chinese writing, no serious scholarly work on the subject has been undertaken by historians, in China or abroad.

As far as film is concerned, despite the wide range of subject matters that Chinese filmmakers have covered in the last two decades, the “sent-down youth movement” remains largely unexplored. Only one other film has dealt directly with this subject: Sacrificed Youth (Qingchun ji) directed by Zhang Nuanxin in 1983. Sacrificed Youth and Xiaxiu share many similarities. Both films are directed by women; both critique Mao’s radical politics from feminist perspective; and both screenplays are adapted from the rich literary output on the subject. It is also interesting to observe that the two films come from directors who did not personally experience the youth rustication program. Those Chi-
nese filmmakers who did experience rustic reeducation have so far shied away from tackling the subject in their films—in sharp contrast with the literary world, where the outpouring of writings based on the sent-down youth experience continues unabated.

The key difference between the two films is in tone. The dominant tone of *Sacrificed Youth* is one of sentimentality and nostalgia. It portrays the life of its character in a Dai village as a liberating and ultimately enriching life experience. *Xiuxiu*, on the other hand, condemns the youth rustication movement in the strongest terms possible. The story that unfolds tells of the destruction of the life of a beautiful, innocent, and vulnerable young girl, the Xiuxiu of the title. In making this girl’s story the centerpiece of her film, Joan Chen gives her denunciation of Mao’s radicalism deep emotional appeal. Whatever future historians say about the youth rustication program, the film projects a powerful image that will certainly influence the scholarly research agenda, forcing historians to address the disturbing questions it raises. Seen from this perspective, it is truly pathbreaking.

Moreover, the specific focus of this film is on sexual exploitation and victimization of women. The emphasis is particularly pointed, because no published literature, let alone films, has directly dealt with this issue (although many personal recollections and anecdotal accounts suggest that young girls often had to sleep their way back to the cities, and that a great number of them suffered extreme forms of what contemporary Americans have termed “sexual harassment”). The film certainly implies that what happens to its character is not just an isolated case. When Xiuxiu is brought to a local clinic for abortion, one of the nurses remarks to her colleague “she is the fifth abortion case this week,” suggesting that illicit sex occurred frequently. Yet, for a variety of reasons, the question of sexual exploitation and victimization of women has not featured in the discourse on the Cultural Revolution. Understandably, the victims themselves are reluctant to bring back the unpleasant past, and the government certainly has no incentive to open this can of worms. As a result, stories about the sent-down youth movement like Xiuxiu’s are largely buried in memory. There seems to be a real danger that, a few generations from now, what happened to the thousands of real Xiuxius during the Cultural Revolution may be completely erased from official history. In this regard, *Xiuxiu: The Sent-Down Girl* constitutes a major contribution that will make it more difficult for historians to ignore or neglect the subject. Chen and fellow screenwriter Yan Geling are clearly well aware of their story’s historical significance. At the end of the film, over a sequence of shots of Xiuxiu’s innocent face, the narrator’s voiceover proclaims: “Though Xiuxiu’s life is short, the story I have written about her will linger for a very long time.” Let us hope so.

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