



# Digital Jianghu: Independent Documentary in a Beijing Art Village

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**Digital Jiangu:**  
**Independent Documentary in a Beijing Art Village**

A dissertation presented by

John Paul Sniadecki

to

The Department of Anthropology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

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## **Digital Jianghu: Independent Documentary in a Beijing Art Village**

### **ABSTRACT**

My ethnography explores the independent documentary film community in Songzhuang, an artist village in Beijing's Tongzhou District. Through participant-observation, interviews, participation in festivals, and my own filmmaking practice, I describe filmmakers and festival organizers as cultural producers endeavoring to work outside the confines of both the government and the mainstream cinema industry. To offer an analysis of the social, political, economic, and ethical conditions of this independent film community, my study also focuses on concrete practices of filmmakers and film supporters; privately-owned centers and social networks that enable the production, exhibition, and distribution of films; and the relationship between this community and government regulation.

I argue that the independent documentary community constitutes a *jianghu* (literally, “rivers and lakes”), which, drawing from Chinese literature, I delimit as a social world of marginality and resistance against the status quo. Further, *jianghu* refers not only to independent filmmakers, but also to millions of “migrants” within the Chinese population who, even as they provide labor that fuels development, nonetheless subsist on the margins. This study also considers the efforts of filmmakers and scholars to elucidate a Chinese visual aesthetic, which has been called *xianchang* (“on the spot”) and, most recently, *jingguan dianying* (“quiet observational cinema”). These indigenous framings counter eurocentric notions of

documentary and prevail among the majority of independent directors as an aesthetic well-suited to represent the “cruelty of the social,” a term I introduce to describe social suffering born not only of China’s modern history of pain but also its contemporary turbulent era.

I draw together the issues of distribution, social impact, and economic stability for independent documentary, as well as document the role of the state in quelling, censoring, and co-opting independent film. I conclude by exploring *xianchang* and my own filmmaking practice as advancing a form of knowledge that, owing to its experiential quality and its refusal to simplify and reduce phenomena into cultural data, is well-suited to represent the inherent complexity of Chinese society. Finally, a coda documents recent government oppression and festival cancellations to argue that the current moment is one of grave uncertainty for Chinese independent film.

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Dedicated to the memory of Paola Sandri, my dear friend and my inspiration

## Acknowledgements

This project began in August of 2008 with my first visit to the Li Xianting Film Fund office and Fanhall Films in Beijing's far-flung artist village of Songzhuang. That visit and the individuals I met engendered in me the exhilaration of possibility and a comforting sense of connecting with one's peers. In some ways, for me it was a homecoming to a community I had never entered before but yet had been hoping to find after a decade of living between the United States and China, working a wide range of seemingly disconnected jobs, from dishwasher to truck driver to instructor. Here, in Songzhuang, I had finally met up with fellow creative spirits whose dedication to the filmmaking craft and the possibilities of cinema mirrored the emerging community of filmmaker-anthropologists producing films in the newly-formed Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard, which I had the honor of joining in its first year. This initial visit to Songzhuang was followed by a second and a third, until I was regularly spending weekends and then weeks in Songzhuang over the next few years. My gratitude thus goes out to all the individuals who so generously opened their homes and their lives to me, and shared their insights and opinions not only about independent documentary, but also the broader political landscape in China. Foremost among them are Zhu Rikun, Li Xianting, Wang Wo, Xu Xin, Xu Ruotao, Li Hongqi, Lu Zhixin, and Huang Xiang. Filmmakers, scholars, and cinephiles who do not live in Songzhuang but also kindly contributed to my understanding of this sphere of alternative film production include Ai Weiwei, Zhang Yaxuan, Zhang Xianmin, Feng Yan, Wu Wenguang, Hao Jian, Wang Xiaolu, Hu Jie, Wang Hongwei, Jia Zhangke, Zhao Liang, Wang Bing, Xue Jianqiang, Huang Weikai, Ji Dan, Yi Sicheng, He Yuan, Lu Xinyu, Qiu Jiongjiong, Wu Haohao, Cong Feng, Ying Liang, Xu Tong, and Zhang Zanbo, among many others.



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## INTRODUCTION

On a typical smoggy and muggy Beijing afternoon in mid-August 2012, filmmakers, artists, cinephiles, and scholars gathered at the Original Art Expo Complex (*yuanchuang yishu zhongxin*) located along the main artery of Songzhuang, a dusty, gentrified artist village on the far eastern outskirts of the Beijing municipality. In the spacious main hall, over 500 people gathered for the opening ceremony of the 9<sup>th</sup> Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF), organized by the Li Xianting Film Fund. Wang Hongwei, who most film fans recognize from his acting career in Chinese director Jia Zhangke's celebrated underground film productions of the mid-to-late 1990s, played the festival host as he paced back and forth with a cordless microphone on a stage flanked with tall audio monitors that sputtered and hissed his welcoming remarks. Wang introduced Li Xianting himself, who greeted the sizable crowd – the largest ever gathered for an independent film event in Songzhuang – and thanked the several festival sponsors, a group of successful contemporary artists whose rise to fame and wealth benefited from Li's earlier passionate work as a leading curator and critic of China's emerging art world. Next, the directors whose films were selected for this edition's program were invited to the stage to introduce themselves. Due to a multitude of factors – the unexpectedly impressive turnout of people, the inherently precarious nature of independent cultural activities organized outside the auspices of the state, and the internal organizational politics leading up this year's edition of BiFF – a bizarre mix of excitement and uncertainty hung over the opening proceedings, engendering an awkward atmosphere of celebration and tension.

After the introductions, new fiction director Huang Ji's award-winning debut feature *Egg and Stone* (*Jidan he Shitou*) was slated as the opening film. An extended delay in projection, however, allowed attendees to spill outside into the spacious courtyard of the art center.

People stood around, chatting, smoking cigarettes, wondering what was going on. As is usually the case with independent film events in China, practically half of the individuals present were wielding digital camcorders or DSLRs, and many of them were recording video and taking snapshots. Among these photographers, there were several who no one in the independent film community recognized. These interlopers were determined to take close-up portrait shots of key figures in the crowds. “They must be working for the local government. They may even be plainclothes policemen,” a filmmaker friend told me.

Then, an entourage of seven Songzhuang local government officials showed up with several police officers in tow. When the start of the opening film was announced, these scowling men stood in the entrance to the main hall screening space and insisted that only attendees who were wearing official invitation badges were allowed back in. Fortunate to be an invited filmmaker, I made my way back inside the darkened screening space and took a seat in the audience. Looking around, I saw that the floor seats were almost full, but there were no longer the throngs of people standing around the balcony and seated on the steps at the back of the hall as was the case during the opening ceremony. Thus, with the officials’ sudden intervention, they reduced the viewership to around one hundred people.

The first dark, beautifully composed image of Huang Ji’s film projected onto the screen, and we, the lucky accredited filmmakers and guests, settled into our seats for a powerful and disturbing narrative of sexual abuse in the Hunan countryside. The non-accredited attendees either left the premises or hung out outside in the courtyard waiting to see what would happen next. Approximately forty minutes through the film the entire hall suddenly fell into darkness. The projection stopped, the electric fans ceased whirring, and the house lights did not come on. The electricity was cut, presumably by the local government. Startled but not wholly surprised, we stumbled out of the hall and back into

the courtyard. Cases and cases of warm beer magically appeared, and it was announced that we would be skipping the screening and proceed directly to the opening banquet, lit by candlelight.

As if this troubled, inauspicious beginning to this small-scale, non-commercial independent film festival was not absurd enough, the festival organizers and attendees were forced by representatives of the Chinese state into a sequence of relocations, negotiations, and evasions undertaken over the course of the next eight days of the 9<sup>th</sup> BiFF. Towards the end of this ethnography, I will return to this narrative and describe in further detail how BiFF, after literally having the plug pulled on its opening ceremony, transformed into a mobile film exhibition that operated clandestinely in select, semi-secret locations throughout the Songzhuang artist community. Here, however, in order to offer greater context to this fascinating case of independent cultural production struggling against the strategies of an authoritarian state, I would first like to explicate the concept of “independent film” in post-socialist China, and then proceed to lay out the various threads of analysis and description that I intend to pursue throughout the rest of this work.

### *Independence, hidden transcripts, and semi-autonomous spheres*

The term “independent film,” when employed in the context of non-authoritarian nations outside China, often refers to the economic and financial dimension of filmmaking, and generally applies to films conceived of and/or produced outside mainstream studio production systems and commercial interests, or at least with less overt connections to the industry. In these cases, then, the status of “independence” is less predicated on a thematized and direct opposition to a politics, though politics and economics tend towards a complex imbrication throughout all social systems. In China, however, “independent film”

*(duli dianying)* refers to filmmaking practice and exhibition that strives to operate in spaces with varying levels of detachment from the Chinese state, in terms of both political as well as economic realms. As has been well documented, the current Chinese state, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, is everywhere, infiltrating many aspects of its populations' lives, even as it presents itself as "opening up" and "pulling back" from the policies of radical collectivization and social control during the Mao era (Mueggler 2001; Greenhalgh 2005; Kleinman et al 2011; Dutton 1999; Jun Jing 1998; Yan 2010; Rofel 2007). Thus, while no social, political, economic, or cultural space is completely void of the state, what has been called Chinese independent film can be seen as an attempt to found and sustain an alternative film culture. Analogous to Arjun Appadurai's notion of a "media-field," this sphere of cultural production is one that identifies itself in opposition to the influence of both the Chinese state and the ever-expanding Chinese commercial film industry (Appadurai 1996).

As can be expected, there have been numerous variants of "independent" used to label this cultural output, such as "alternative," "underground," "amateur," and even the somewhat awkward negative formulation of "non-state" (Pickowicz 2006; Berry, Lu, and Rofel 2010; Jia 2003; Zhang 2007). Further, among the few academics and filmmakers who write about independent film, there has not been agreement towards a standard terminology: Jia Zhangke has written articles about a future age of "amateur" cinema that will counteract both professionalizing and globalizing forces (2003); Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel suggest "alternative" to describe an archive of images produced by independent filmmakers that exists alongside, and not necessarily in opposition to, mainstream public filmmaking (2010:136-137); Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang choose to highlight the movement from the subversive connotation of "underground" to the more flexible and varying

“independent” in order to capture the sphere of filmmaking – political, apolitical, or otherwise – outside the state system of production, exhibition, and distribution. Throughout this ethnography, I employ the term “independent film” for these reasons and also, most importantly, because it is the moniker most commonly and frequently used by the filmmakers and organizers to describe themselves, their film projects, and their exhibitions.

There are, of course, many filmmakers who refer to themselves as independent directors yet collaborate to varying degrees with the state and the market. Others begin as maverick directors making “underground” films – i.e. films made without official approval and therefore not eligible for domestic release – who, once they achieve success internationally, are then either co-opted by the state or themselves seek out ways to collaborate with the state and the commercial film industry in order to enhance their production resources and exhibition outlets. I discuss this process in-depth in chapter three. Still some others, from the outset, even harbor the ambition to be state-sponsored directors but are forced to work within the independent structure because they lack the connections, skills, and/or pedigree to enter into the highly competitive world of state-financed, big-budget film production. In short, independence admits of a spectrum of positions and identities that are prone to shifts and re-definitions, just as the state’s priorities and policies re-orient depending not only on the exigencies of a social reality in constant flux, but also on the shifts in political climate of the Party’s top leadership. My main concern throughout this dissertation, however, is with the sphere of independent film production and exhibition in Songzhuang, which stands out in terms of its claim on the symbolic capital of independence through an ethos that must be understood as relatively extreme in its pursuit of autonomy from the state and from commerce. From the standpoint of social theory, the independent film community in Songzhuang – a nexus of artists, producers, programmers, festival

organizers, scholars, and audiences, some of whom reside year-round in the village and other non-locals for whom it serves as an important node for exhibition, comradery, and support – is analogous to what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu described as a “semi-autonomous field of cultural production” which, unlike mass production, features “small-scale production” and a relatively high degree of autonomy, but can never attain full autonomy (Bourdieu 1993). Given the extent of the Chinese state’s neo-authoritarian strategies for social control, the elusiveness of autonomy is all the more true in China.

Furthermore, in his analysis of Bourdieu, David Hesmandhalgh has pointed out that:

“Bourdieu often writes of small-scale production as oriented towards the production of ‘pure’ artistic products, and mass production as oriented towards the making of ‘commercial’ cultural goods. He is also inclined to talk of the field of small-scale production as ‘production for producers’: in rejecting the market, he implies with this phrase, cultural producers in the restricted sub-field are left pretty much to talk to each other (2006).

With a general disregard for the commercial aspects of their documentary productions in favor of revealing the social realities and lived experiences of Chinese people undocumented by both the studio system and state media, the independent directors with whom I work form an avant-garde of cultural producers who are predominantly concerned with what Bourdieu terms “pure” artistic products. Indeed, the status of purity from both the state and the market is a central element in the discourse surrounding independent cinema in China, which I describe further in chapter three’s discussion of co-optation and artistic integrity.

Drawing further on the insights provided by Bourdieu, his classification of “production for producers” is largely applicable to the subculture of independent film; for, a large number of the audience members for most independent film exhibitions are independent directors themselves. We only need to turn to the state’s aggressive crackdown on BiFF which opened this introduction for evidence of the political obstacles entailed in any attempts for these filmmakers to expand viewership and reach larger sections of Chinese

society. Indeed, the existence of an independent film community is, in part, predicated on the Chinese state's capacity to allow space for it, and the state only allows this space if independent film exhibitions remain limited and do not try to transgress their social, political, and economic marginality. Thus, constrained to the corners of Chinese society, projecting films in darkened spaces to limited numbers of audiences, the independent film world is akin to Bourdieu's image of producers "talking" to other producers. Despite this truncated and narrow reach, several compelling questions remain: what do these films do, what do they say, and what do their makers talk to one another about?

To begin to answer these questions, we may turn to another social theorist James A. Scott, whose concept of the "hidden transcript" as practices of resistance bound to power and language not only helps elucidate what independent documentary cultural producers "talk about," but also sheds light on the shifting relationship between the dominating state and the dominated yet, in this context, semi-autonomous sector of cultural production. Scott explains:

"the hidden transcript represents discourse – gesture, speech, practices – that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power. The practice of domination, then, creates the hidden transcript. If the domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a hidden transcript of corresponding richness. The hidden transcript of subordinate groups, in turn, reacts back on the public transcript by engendering a subculture and by opposing its own variant form of social domination against that of the dominant elite. Both are realms of power and interests" (1990:27).

Thus, in the case of China, the state's strategic aim to exercise power over what is producible (or utterable) produces the alternative "hidden transcript" of critique and counterdiscourse that pervades the sphere of independent documentary production, which, in turn, according to Scott's explication, forms a subculture over and against the state. Indeed, I see significant associations between a subculture formed around "hidden transcripts" and the multivalent Chinese cultural concept of *jianghu*, which, as I discuss in chapter one, invokes a space –



both imaginary and geographical – of resistance and marginality in Chinese literature, historical discourse, and public perception.

Scott also highlights the direct relation between domination and the “richness” of hidden transcripts (1990). Thus, as the current Chinese state has, over the six decades of its rule, demonstrated highly sophisticated, penetrating, flexible, and at times severe domination of its ever-expanding population, it has, as an unintended consequence, produced correspondingly complex, voluble, and ardent opposition. Over the years, this direct relation has been seen in many realms of Chinese cultural production, especially in the realm of literature. I argue, however, given the advent of both digital video technology and social media, visual culture in the form of independent documentary has recently become the avant-garde in terms of both the form and content of a sphere of Chinese cultural production that seeks to oppose the dominant status quo. Judging from the currently escalating frequency and intensity of government pressure applied on Chinese independent festivals, it has also arguably become the most contested, politically sensitive, and popularized form of small-scale cultural production today.

### **Research Overview**

Indeed, since the implementation of media policy reforms and the introduction of affordable digital video technology in the 1990s, independent documentary filmmaking has exploded in China as mainly artists, some activists, and a few academics pick up cameras in order to represent the rapid changes, social injustices, and overlooked everyday experiences taking place around them. In recent years, many of these documentaries have been showcased in film festivals and some have won awards at premier international venues. While the expanding production and popularity of independent Chinese documentaries has

begun to capture the attention of film critics and festival programmers around the world, there nonetheless remains a dearth of scholarship not only on this filmmaking community operating at the margins of media production in China, but also on the social, economic, political, and aesthetic dynamics that shape the independent documentary subculture, or what has been called China's "new documentary movement."<sup>1</sup>

Within this sphere of cultural production, what array of motivations – moral, ideological, economic, political, artistic – underlies the impetus to document China's shifting social landscape? How do the directors understand their own projects, and how do they situate themselves not only within China's documentary tradition, but also within the larger context of an international documentary film scene? What range of aesthetic considerations inform the creative practices of the filmmakers? Who funds these films, and why? What social networks are formed through artistic and economic connections beyond and within China's borders? How are politics and the new documentary movement imbricated? How do these filmmakers and organizations interact with and negotiate official channels, whether dealing with local cadres or the Film Bureau of China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT)?

These questions were among the many that have helped shape my three years of research on Chinese independent documentary, conducted not only as an anthropologist but also as a fellow documentary filmmaker. Thus, it was as both an ethnographer and a peer that I participated alongside Chinese directors as we exhibited our work at film festivals in China and overseas; held panel discussions on documentary aesthetics and ethics; shared

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<sup>1</sup> This term was first advanced by Fudan University scholar Lu, Xinyu in her 2003 book *Jilu Zhongguo (Documenting China)*. Beijing: Sanlian Publishing. For many of the filmmakers and producers I have met, the notion of a "movement" must be approached with caution, since political movements – often generative of dubious results – have been the main engine of social and cultural change in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China.

beers and late night conversations at family-style restaurants; helped one another produce new films through active collaboration or providing critical feedback in the post-production process; and contributed to the cultivation of the independent cinema subculture by giving talks, lectures, and workshops to film students and interested spectators. I also conducted countless interviews with directors, producers, festival organizers, audience members, film students, and government representatives; translated subtitles for feature-length films as well as prefaces for festival catalogs free-of-charge; founded and curated *Emergent Visions*, a Chinese independent cinema screening series that has regularly brought filmmakers from China to the United States (and often helped other universities and screening venues curate similar programs); and even served as volunteer courier of filmmaking equipment, hard drives, and exhibition prints during frequent peregrinations in and out of Beijing.

### *Anthropology of Art*

Although art practices and cultural objects have figured in the analytical gaze of anthropologists since Boas, the anthropology of art has historically been relegated to a marginalized position within the discipline. However, with the recent resuscitation of interest in material culture as well as the human sensorium as legitimate objects of inquiry in the discipline, a growing number of anthropologists have expressed a concern with aesthetic experience and artistic production. Through their inquiries, the anthropology of art as a subdiscipline has been enriched by a range of studies that have focused on, for example, artisan communities (Herzfeld 2004; Moeran 1984), individual creative vision (Caton 1999; Stoller 1992), culturally specific aesthetics (Myers 2002), visual anthropology (Anna Grimshaw 2007; MacDougall 1998), and media anthropology (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, Larkin 2002; Taylor and Barbash 2002). Less common has been the formulation of an

anthropological theory of art relevant to the social sciences; that is, the field confronts a paucity of theoretical orientations that manage to situate art within the social sphere, going beyond the Kantian notion of aesthetics which has tended to prevail in art history and the philosophy of aesthetics (Bourdieu 1993; Gell 1998). Among these, Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* is arguably the most influential work to advance a critical study of cultural practices.

Similar to his project of addressing the ostensible divide between objectivism and subjectivism which has plagued the social sciences, Bourdieu's approach to the field of cultural production seeks to overcome the prevailing opposition between two analytical frameworks commonly applied to the process of cultural production: internal analysis and external analysis. The first approach, popular among art historians, considers a work entirely in terms of its formal properties, divorced from the social and historical contexts within which the work was produced. The external reading, on the other hand, attempts to understand a cultural product solely through the socioeconomic conditions of production and the relations between social agents involved in production, exhibition, and reception. Howard S. Becker's sociology of art as collective action – what he calls “art worlds,” or the “sociology of occupations applied to artistic work” – stands as the seminal work adopting this approach (Becker 1982). As a sociologist, Bourdieu does not deny the importance of the social relations in which cultural works are produced. Indeed, his approach calls for the text, art object, or cultural product to be reinserted into what he calls the “field – the space of objective social relations where agents interact and compete” (Bourdieu 1993). Thus, in his rejection of the homology between art and social structure, as well as his attempts to go beyond the antimony between objectivism and subjectivism, Bourdieu's approach contributes significantly to any cultural analysis of art. His work is particularly relevant to

my understanding of the infrastructure of support for independent documentary, operating at the margins of Chinese society, forming what Bourdieu would call a “semi-autonomous sector” of the overall “field of cultural production” wherein they compete for material and symbolic capital as they navigate government regulation (1993).

A handful of scholars from literary and cultural studies have responded to the growing interest in Chinese independent documentaries with recent publications on the topic, and they have attempted in various ways to achieve a balance in analysis that brings together the external and the internal (Pickowicz & Zhang 2006; Berry et al 2010; Zhang 2007; Lu 2003). Those scholars who do comment on the filmmakers themselves tend to rely on a combination of written materials and, at best, a brief formal interview. Crucial aspects of the subjectivity of film producers as well as the social process of filmmaking and film exhibition – and the attendant ethical, aesthetic, and political questions that these processes give rise to – go largely untreated. In my dual role as both a social anthropologist and a documentary filmmaker working in China, it is my hope to improve on these studies with an approach that foregrounds the lived experience, the “local moral world,” and the aesthetic practices of filmmakers and festival organizers as well as the social conditions of their media practices (Kleinman 2006). I also probe the intersection of anthropology and art, exploring aspects of experience – the creative process and aesthetic experience – which go largely overlooked even by scholars engaged in the sub-disciplines of the anthropology of art and the anthropology of media alike. In addition, given the opposition between the independent film community and the political and economic status quo, this project also promises to contribute significantly to anthropology’s understanding of alternative media formations vis-à-vis a state that has conventionally been the prime actor in the regulation of media practices.

### *The History of Cinema in China & the Emergence of Independent Documentary*

As one of the quintessential art forms to emerge from modernity, cinema has been closely linked to modern development and Chinese nation-building since the new media form's first appearance in Shanghai in 1896. Early cinema was first received as a mode of spectacle and entertainment, a response that generally holds true across cultures during the advent of the "moving picture" (Ying 2012). Soon, however, as film historian Ying Qian points out, "social reformers and revolutionaries were also quick to harness its historiographical, educational and mobilizing powers in response to the turbulent first decades of the twentieth century" (Ying 2012: 105). In terms of film form, social message, and overall aesthetics, Hollywood's influence was the dominant one until the Communist Revolution. With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, however, the trajectory and style of cinema in the New China took a major turn.

Similar to many other socialist countries influenced by the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China devoted significant resources to develop the nation's infrastructure of film production. Taking direction from Lenin's belief that cinema was "the most important of all the arts" and Stalin's claim that that state of a nation's cinema measured that nation's socialist development, the new Communist leaders of China undertook an increase in the construction of movie theaters, and even organized mobile projection units to bring socialist propaganda films into work units in factories and agricultural collectives, as well as to remote villages (Johnson 2008; Ying 2012). The films of the collectivist era under Mao emphasized socialist values, refused moral ambiguity, extolled the Chinese masses, and projected unequivocal heroes as examples for the entire nation to emulate. Always in the service of state's ideology, these socialist propaganda films featured one-dimensional character types

and highly constructed ideal worlds, sanitized from the difficulties, uncertainties, and messiness of lived-experience.

Indeed, during the Mao era, state censorship policies maintained a tight control over film and television productions (Chu 2007). Although government control and management of media production is still very much at play today in post-socialist China, when the climate of ideological control shifted in the 1980s to Deng's pragmatic concern with economic growth, a process of gradual reform in media regulation allowed for the exploration of previously unprogrammable content and new production models. In this context, when exactly did independent documentary emerge? Arguing for the necessity of understanding the history of documentary in China as emerging from a media scene tightly managed by the state, Lu Xinyu writes that "in China, the term 'documentary film' gained its significance in the 1980s and 90s from the understanding of the term as resistance to the term *zhuanti pian* (special topics)" (2003:13).<sup>2</sup> While Lu aptly connects the category of documentary film as emerging in resistance to the pre-scripted and propagandistic quality of special topics film, it is also important to note the strong disdain independent filmmakers also felt towards the prevailing yet largely discredited socialist realism (i.e. "representational realism" or *xianshibizhuayi*) employed by state-run documentary production houses (Berry 2007). Thus, independent directors can best be described as striving for a wholly new form of filmmaking capable of capturing the complexities of everyday lived experience unfettered by government control or a tired socialist aesthetic. Interestingly, despite disdain for propaganda, the first independent documentary filmmakers actually emerged from state-run media organizations, such as CCTV.

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<sup>2</sup> These films can be characterized as fitting television broadcast standards.

In fact, filmmaker Wu Wenguang was a freelancer for mainstream media outlets when he made the low-budget documentary that would never be sold to state television but instead earned him the title of “father of independent documentary.” That film, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers (Liulang Beijing) (1990)*, combines conventional interviews with more free-form verite moments as it focuses on a group of young artists who embrace their “bumming” (*liulang*) status, constantly struggle against the state-dominated mode of creative expression, and ultimately face eviction from their enclave on the outskirts of Beijing, the Summer Palace (*Yuanmingyuan*). Thus, from its advent, independent documentary was intimately connected to both mainstream media production as well as experiences of marginality, practices of resistance, and schemes of urban development and tight political regulation that threaten and limit the spatial existence of independent cultural production.

Through the use of long takes, informal interviews, and depictions of disillusionment, Matt Johnson argues that Wu’s film inaugurated “a preference for an unadorned verite aesthetics which serves to implicitly critique not only mainland filmmakers’ emphasis on ‘artistry,’ but also the ‘distance’ from reality that, in Wu’s view, plagued contemporary Chinese media of all kinds” (2006:58). Thus, an amateur mode of filmmaking became the dominant form of production among the painters, media producers, and photographers who turned to independent digital video. The new documentary movement’s harnessing of spontaneous, unrehearsed material also served as a methodology to bolster claims of portraying reality as it unfolded and, at the same time, provide indirect criticism of official perspectives (Berry 2007; Johnson 2006). This shift was predicated, however, on the social and political changes following the end of the Mao era. It was the combination of media reform and swift technological development that created the platform for, and handed the tools of DV production to, independent filmmakers. They, in turn, have responded in



ever-increasing numbers by producing films that, in their amateurism and independence, pursue the telling of a “history that is able to inform the future” (Lu 2003:37).

The literature focusing on the shifts and variations in Chinese subjectivity in the post-Mao era of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” presents compelling descriptions of an emergent individualism expressed through cosmopolitan desires, consumption patterns, and notions of personal happiness (Kleinman, Yan, Jing, Lee, Zhang, Pan, Wu, Guo 2011; Yan 2003; Rofel 2007). In addition to this important work being done on the overall “rise of the individual” in the post-socialist era, there are a handful of scholars who have sought to characterize what they see as the common perspectives and aesthetic approaches of film directors whose work has proved to be vital in ushering the independent documentary scene into relative prominence.

Matthew Johnson has shown that many of the early underground documentary filmmakers came from backgrounds in television or the fine arts; feeling paralyzed, disillusioned, or shut-out by the practices of mainstream cultural production, they turned to unofficial distribution channels and production tactics (Johnson 2007). Others turned to digital documentary filmmaking for its media-specific immediacy. Directors such as Xu Xin, Wang Bing, and Zhao Dayong, all of whom graduated from fine arts academies, abandoned painting for digital video because they felt the contradictions, dramas, and suffering of Chinese social reality are best rendered not by figurative or abstract painting, but by the cheap, direct, and lo-fi aesthetic of digital video (Xu 2009; Wang 2010; Zhao 2009). Thus, unlike excitement over the unlimited possibilities for image manipulation that the “digital age” ushered into cinema – such as the potential for “painterly” interventions into the formerly strict indexicality of the analog photographic image, as David N. Rodowick notes – Chinese independent documentary filmmakers turned to DV for its capacity to capture

everyday life in the raw (Rodowick 2007). Indeed, influenced early on by the direct cinema of Fred Wiseman and the documentaries of Shinsuke Ogawa, as well as the Chinese Sixth Generation filmmakers,<sup>3</sup> the underground directors of the 1990s also evince a concern with objectivity and an interest in the lives of marginalized people as they provide an indirect, inconclusive criticism of official social perspectives (Johnson 2007).

### *Songzhuang, Beijing: a Nexus for Independent Cinema*

Beijing, the current center for cultural production in the People's Republic, serves as the main site for my analysis of independent documentary production in China. Given the growing popularization of digital video filmmaking and the rising numbers of individuals adopting "film director" status and identity, it is not possible to give an accurate estimation as to the number of independent documentary filmmakers currently working in China,<sup>4</sup> and Beijing boasts the most active and vibrant scene. Not only has the capital attracted many directors from across China – just as it has attracted other talented and ambitious cultural producers – but it also boasts a significant infrastructure of support for independent filmmaking, especially in the remote artist village of Songzhuang.<sup>5</sup>

Songzhuang is an expanding and steadily gentrifying community in Tongzhou County of quaint one-level brick structures dotting stretches of dusty brown earth on the far eastern edge of Beijing. Just a few kilometers from the border of Hebei province, flat and

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<sup>3</sup> Sixth Generation filmmakers, in contrast to the preceding Generations, are loosely united by a shared concern with everyday experience in Chinese society, often depicting anti-heroes and marginalized people caught in overwhelming social forces. Filmmakers include Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yuan, Luo Ye, and Wang Xiaoshuai.

<sup>4</sup> A recent New York Times article on the upcoming New York Film Festival screening of the independent documentary filmmaker Zhao Dayong's *Ghost Town* (2008) put the yearly output of films at 200 (NY Times, September 25, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> I follow the notion of infrastructure Brian Larkin advances in *Signal and Noise* (2008, Duke: Duke University Press), his study of media and urban culture in Nigeria: "Infrastructure, in my usage, refers to this totality of both technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate, connecting and binding people and collectivities" (2008:6).

dusty Songzhuang became one of the officially approved locations where artists were allowed to relocate and establish studios, galleries, and museums following the government's 1994 swift dissolution of the unofficial (and now practically legendary) artist community near *Yuanmingyuan*, the Old Summer Palace eight kilometers beyond Beijing's city walls to the northwest.<sup>6</sup>

Once a remote farming community, Songzhuang lies far outside Beijing's major ring roads. With a travel time of approximately one and a half hours from the congested center of Beijing to the relatively provincial atmosphere of this artist village, it is thus far enough away from Zhongnanhai – the headquarters of China's central government – yet still accessible to cinephiles, filmmakers, and scholars interested in the new independent documentary scene. Thus, Songzhuang has proved to be an ideal spot for the highly regarded and respected art critic Li Xianting to raise funds through his contacts in the contemporary art scene in order to establish the Li Xianting Film Fund. The fund provides support to independent directors, hosts two independent film festivals, manages an extensive archive of independent films (both domestic and foreign), and organizes a film school for the training of independent filmmaking, both documentary and narrative.

In terms of financing film production and creating space for film exhibition and education, the connection between contemporary art and independent documentary in China presents a unique and fascinating case. For, as has been well documented by Sasha Welland in her ethnography of the Chinese contemporary art world, one of the outcomes of its recent international success has been the accumulation of tremendous wealth in Beijing's art scene (Welland 2006). Li Xianting, beginning with his promotion of the historic and

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<sup>6</sup> I describe this total eviction in greater detail in chapter one.

greatly influential Stars Group<sup>7</sup>, has been a central figure in promulgating this success and wealth. Significantly, a number of the newly-wealthy artists that he supported and helped bring to fame have gladly dedicated considerable resources to him. As Li's focus is always directed towards the avant-garde, he uses these resources not to support painters or performance artists but to develop independent filmmaking as an art form that, unlike much of Chinese contemporary art's current commercial-oriented output, is still able to present a powerfully critical perspective on Chinese society. Indeed, Li has often voiced his dissatisfaction with the perceived commodification of Chinese art and the attendant dulling of its subversive edge, favoring instead the raw images produced by independent cinema (Li 2011; Li 2012).

Thus, Li needed only turn to his *guanxi* network of artists – such as Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Yang Shaobin, Chen Shaoping, and Ai Weiwei – for monetary donations to help produce new films, equip the film school, and host a film exhibition. In conjunction with film critic and producer Zhu Rikun of Fanhall Films, the Li Xianting Film Fund has hosted two annual film festivals – the Beijing Independent Film Forum and the Chinese Documentary Film Week – as well as an irregular exhibition series and special events. To host the first festival, for example, Li asked Fang Lijun for 100,000 RMB, and the painter gladly contributed. With this strong material backing and a clear vision to support avant-garde filmmaking, Li's efforts have attracted directors not only from the local area but also from all over China and the world to convene together in Songzhuang, whether to participate in the film festival or share their works in progress. Despite the fact that

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<sup>7</sup> The Stars Group included artists such as Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Wang Keping, Qu Leilei and Ai Weiwei, and was the first major art collective to emerge after the Cultural Revolution. In September 1979 they displayed work outside Beijing's National Art Museum of China and joined the activities at the "Democracy Wall" by hanging their paintings and protest. Their "breakthrough" exhibition was shut down by authorities after only two days, but was finally reopened after the artists protested on October 1 (Cohen, Andrew. 2010. "Off the Page: Li Xianting" in *Art Asia Pacific*. Vol 71).

government officials do occasionally “check up” on the activities of the film fund – and often crackdown on exhibitions with the force brought to bear on the 9<sup>th</sup> BiFF as described above – there still persists the hope and struggle for relative autonomy pervading the community in Songzhuang. Indeed, commenting on the setting for the Li Xianting Film Fund, filmmaker and scholar Cui Zi'en observed: “a new space is required for a new cinema.” (Cui 2010).

### *Beyond Songzhuang*

Of course, there are also important sites for the new documentary movement outside Beijing, particularly the China Independent Film Festival in Nanjing (CIFF), the Yunnan Multi-Cultural Video Exhibition Festival in Kunming (Yunfest), and the Chongqing Independent Film & Video Festival (CIFVF). Indeed, I want to emphasize that any analysis of the various subjectivities and social practices animating the independent documentary subculture must not be limited to the activities occurring in Beijing. I have ventured to festivals in Chongqing, Nanjing, and Shanghai, attended film screening events in galleries, bars, and clubs in Chengdu, Kunming, and Tianjin, as well as traveled overseas to festivals in Europe and North America where the films of my Chinese peers and my own films were being screened together. In this way, my research integrates a multi-sited perspective; however, given the paramount importance of two film entities in Songzhuang within the world of independent documentary – the Li Xianting Film Fund and Fanhall Films – it stands as the central focus of this study.

In my research, I also made numerous, albeit less frequent, trips to the urban art village of Caochangdi as well as the nearby 798 Art Space. In contrast to remote Songzhuang, 798 Art Space is a more accessible art zone that, due both to heavy state

intervention as well as its location in the northeast corner of Chaoyang district just inside the 5<sup>th</sup> ring road of Beijing city proper, enjoys a steady stream of visitors, curators, and buyers. With its ultra-clean alleys, uniform grey brick galleries, sleek cafes, and designer shops, 798 Art Space presents an arguably more commodified and regimented image of China's contemporary art scene than Songzhuang, though Songzhuang is by no stretch of the imagination bereft of consumer-oriented practices. At first glance, the highly rational organization of 798 Art Space expresses the ideal of a regulated and civilized art scene tamed by and integrated into China's prevailing economic aspirations.

Caochangdi itself is home to a handful of other studios, galleries, and art centers that, given its proximity to 798, can be characterized as a less commodified extension of its commercialized neighbor. There, I also made several visits to 258 Fake Studios (*Fake Gongzuoshi*), the bustling workspace of Chinese artist, architect, activist, and filmmaker Ai Weiwei whose provocations against the government, which frequently take the form of documentary videos, resulted in an array of punishments and discipline. Due to his outspoken internet postings and his documentaries that are oppositional to a wide range of the Chinese Communist Party's practices, Ai has endured physical assaults, constant surveillance and, in April 2011, a sudden three-month detention and heavy fines for tax evasion.

In addition to visiting Ai Weiwei's studio, the bulk of my visits to Caochangdi were primarily for the purpose of attending film-related events at Caochangdi Workstation (*Caochangdi Gongzuo Shi*), an independent space that features compelling combinations of dance performance and documentary video. Caochangdi Workstation was founded by Wu Wenguang and choreographer Wen Hui in April, 2005 and its funding comes from both

domestic and international sources.<sup>8</sup> Given the Workstation's expressed attention to not only training young documentary filmmakers through intensive workshops but also showcasing the work produced through the China Village Documentary Project, which, for the first time in China, opens a multi-media channel from the villages by putting video cameras in the hands of peasants and young filmmakers across the nation, the Caochangdi Workstation presents a compelling platform for discussing key issues regarding the poetics and politics of representation in a filmmaking scene that is experiencing exponential growth. In chapter one, I explore more fully this site for instruction in filmmaking and actual production, which is supervised by Wu Wenguang.

### Chapter Overview

Chapter one of this project begins with a thick description of the independent film infrastructure and community in Songzhuang. I argue that this particular sphere of cultural production constitutes a *jianghu*, which, drawing from Chinese history and literature, I delimit as a space of marginality and resistance over against the political and social status quo. *Jianghu* serves, for the purpose of my analysis, as a framework that highlights the lived-experiences and political agendas that animate the independent film community. With this framework, I then trace the development of the Li Xianting Film Fund, which the famous curator Li Xianting founded in order to support what he deemed the avant-garde of Chinese cultural production: independent digital cinema. The film fund's success and economic

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically, in terms of domestic support, Wu's friend Mo Ran, a developer and businessman focused on construction, built the studios, living quarters, and performance spaces of the Workstation, and lives in a residence attached to the impressive gray-brick complex. Mo Ran also funded the establishment of the China Independent Film Archive, which has had limited success at both domestic and international sales. Internationally, Wu has several sustained relationships with overseas universities and film funds, most notably Swiss Films, which donates resources for his creative initiatives as well as supports the annual visit of a Swiss filmmaker to Beijing to conduct workshops at the Caochangdi Workstation.

viability hinges on the charismatic leadership and esteemed reputation of Li, both of which he cultivated during his tenure as a leading critic and curator of Chinese contemporary art. In short, Li's tremendous power and influence in Songzhuang renders him the unofficial "chief" (*laoda*) of the village, and the "godfather" (*jiaofu*) of its independent film world. As an expert in contemporary art but a newcomer to digital cinema, Li searched for a creative collaborator who had deep knowledge of the independent film world to assist him in developing his film fund and his film exhibition aspirations. This desire led him to team up with Zhu Rikun, a young yet already well-known programmer and promoter of independent film who had formed the nation's premier independent documentary film festival, China Documentary Week, later named DOChina (*Zhongguo Jilupian Jiaoliu Zhou*). This chapter also recounts the collaboration between Zhu and Li.

The chapter's second half offers a lengthy consideration on how *jianghu* pertains not just to the circle of independent filmmakers, but also describes the experience of a large portion of the Chinese population who are the primary focus for the lenses of independent directors. *Jianghu*, in this expanded understanding, refers to the "drifters," "migrants," "itinerants," and "hooligans" who lead a mobile, unmoored, under-represented, and disenfranchised existence on the margins of Chinese society. Although *jianghu* conjures the idea of a social minority in the collective imaginary, it ironically describes the lived experience of a vast swath of China's population. In addition, there is an existential and experiential homology between the general member of China's greater social *jianghu* and the specific, delimited *jianghu* of independent digital cinema, and this homology translates to an preponderance of films made about the Other as a social agent ekeing out a living in the dark, forgotten corners of China. In her analysis of the amateur aesthetic employed not only by independent documentary filmmakers but also by China's "Sixth Generation" fiction



directors, Valerie Jaffee calls attention to a significant shift in the director's relationship to the Other. Jaffee posits that the first and best-known Chinese underground films, in their attention to artists trying to survive within a cultural hegemony, are actually portraits of the self marginalized (Jaffee 2006). She then places these early filmmakers in contrast to a more recent filmmaking trend to turn the lens on ethnic minorities, marginalized groups, and the poor: "in these later films an obsession with the Other – with impoverished people speaking in exotic dialects and living at the mercy of socioeconomic forces – has led to what I see as the heart of this discourse of amateurism: an attempt to lodge the aura of art in the Other, and to redefine the self in so doing" (102). Thus, although Jaffee posits a distinction between the progenitors and their Other-centered successors, she sees a general and sustained self-consciousness at the heart of independent filmmaking in China. I finish the chapter exploring the ramifying implications of these preoccupations.

In chapter two, I interrogate the aforementioned obsession with the Other, and examine the power dynamics and ethics entailed in a filmmaking approach that forms an alternative archive of Chinese social reality. Indeed, this chapter tracks the *jiangbu's* dominant aesthetic of an observational filmmaking approach as it explores the major points of intersection between ethics and aesthetics. In order to take into account the uniqueness of the Chinese context, this chapter also offers a consideration of the efforts of Chinese filmmakers, programmers, and scholars to elucidate an indigenous Chinese visual aesthetic, which has been called *xianchang* (literally, "live" and "on the spot") and, most recently, *jingguan dianying* (quiet observational cinema). Focusing on the writings of these Chinese thinkers not only opens a space for Chinese aesthetics, but also acts as a much-needed corrective against Euro-centric formulations of documentary history and the genre's

development. Indeed, although I acknowledge the important insights garnered from a perspective that posits Chinese independent documentary as a movement similar to antecedents in Europe, the U.S. and Japan, I argue that such a prognosis is ethnocentric in that it places China a few steps behind “the West” in a unilinear narrative of cinematic development.

Throughout chapter two, I also interrogate the very *social* process of documentary filmmaking – i.e. the complex web of relations, negotiations, emotions, and ideologies from which all documentary film emerges. Following phenomenological film theory, I aim to draw out how an intersubjective and interobjective space – triangulated between the film-subject, filmmaker, and the film viewer – is constructed through both the filmmaking process and the aesthetic experience of film-viewing. In addition, important moral and ethical questions – hinging on informed consent and the relationship between filmmaker and film-subject – are tied to this space and the social process that animates it. Accordingly, I also explore the politics and poetics of representation and trace the ethical discourse derived from the moral dimensions of documentary filmmaking in China. As a case study, I examine the production and filmmaker/film-subject contract of Xu Tong’s *Wheat Harvest* (2008), a documentary that follows the life of a young woman Miao, who makes a living as a prostitute in a suburb of Beijing in order to support herself and her sick father in the countryside. The film has received awards in national and international film festivals, but has also generated considerable controversy over the question of informed consent. In short, there were doubts that the film-subject, Miao, had been adequately apprised of the use to which the filmmaker, Xu Tong, intended to put the footage. Indeed, by merely asking permission and giving no further explanation regarding the motivation or intention of the

film, filmmakers arguably adopt a secretive and ethically problematic position.<sup>9</sup> I end the chapter by positing that the “renegade” ethics and default “observational” style of Chinese independent documentary are predicated on the impulse to witness and represent the tremendous and variegated experiences of social suffering and trauma endured by the Chinese people. In other words, currently, the *jingguan* or *xianchang* documentary is the aesthetic form still deemed by a majority of directors operating within the local moral world of the digital cinema *jianghu* as best suited to represent the “cruelty of the social” that shapes lived-experiences across Chinese society.

Chapter three draws together the issues of distribution, social impact, and economic stability for independent documentary, as well as the role of the state in quelling, censoring, or co-opting these avant-garde cultural producers. For, despite growing international attention to Chinese documentary and the vibrant energy that continues to be directed towards its expansion, the fact remains that in comparison to the viewing audiences of films by famous directors Zhang Yimou or Jiang Wen, few people ever see these digital documentaries, especially within China’s borders. The uncertain but certainly limited zone that media reform has opened for this kind of cultural production remains precarious, prompting slow development in terms of institutionalizing and professionalizing the scene. There is no official distribution system and certainly no chance for domestic television broadcast, but there have been attempts at unofficial DIY distribution, not only through DVDs sales but also via social media sites on the internet.

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<sup>9</sup> Writing about this secretive position, David MacDougall argues that “if not in their personal demeanor, then in the significance of their working method, they inevitably reaffirm the colonial origins of anthropology” (133).

Nonetheless, as a director grows older and takes on more economic demands, she tends to face mounting hardships if she remains on the margins of cultural production. Thus, some directors are willing partners in the Chinese state's desire to turn the "maverick" filmmaker into a "mandarin." I argue that this strategy, which finds historical precedent in the *jianghu* myths of righteous outlaws giving up their autonomy and joining the imperial forces in exchange for a pardon by the court, is connected not only to the state's aim of gaining control over rebellious talent, but also to its overall goal of enhancing global "soft power" (Nye 2005). To demonstrate this political transformation and official co-optation, I detail the career trajectories of not only the former prince of independent film, Jia Zhangke, but also the most recent "*jianghu* defector," Zhao Liang. In contrast to these two important figures of digital cinema, I conclude by laying out the biography and recent documentary production of Ai Weiwei, whose stridently oppositional tactics in cultural production and political intervention have been lionized and scrutinized by members of both the international and domestic art worlds – including the *jianghu* of digital cinema – to the same degree that they have been criticized and punished by the Chinese state.

Chapter Four returns the focus back to Songzhuang, and documents the internal politics and external forces acting on the Li Xianting Film Fund, Fanhall Films, and the two festivals they host, DOChina and BiFF. Interestingly, these two festivals – and all independent exhibitions in China – do not actually employ the term "festival" (*jié*) in their Chinese titles. Instead, they use alternative monikers such as "forum" (*luntan*), "exhibition" (*yingzhan*), or "exchange week" (*jiaoliu zhou*), despite the fact that they tend to adopt the English terminology of "festival" for their international communications. Significantly, in the context of independent film, very little or nothing in terms of content distinguishes the

forums, exhibitions, and exchange weeks from a conventional film festival structure. Yet, in China, the difference between these alternative titles and “festival” is significant: it frames the ambiguous interplay between the unofficial film scene and the Chinese state’s regulation of media. If the organizers wished to use the term “film festival,” they would have to make a formal application for official approval. In order to evade both the bureaucratic process and, most importantly, the possibility of censorship, they have elected to employ the currently less sensitive terms in hopes of curtailing restrictions brought about by government intervention. Although this language game may appear trivial, it nonetheless shows the festival organizers’ awareness of the potential volatility that resides in the intersection of shifting government policies and critical artistic expression. Chapter four dives directly into this volatility by recounting the cancellation of the 8<sup>th</sup> DOChina as well as the power plays, negotiations, and evasions that transpired during the film fund’s attempts to host and make public the 2011 and 2012 editions of BiFF despite facing intense government scrutiny and, ultimately, suppression.

Chapter five marks a shift from the ethnography’s explicit focus on the digital *jianghu* of independent documentary to a reflection not only on my own filmmaking practice in China but also to the complicated and often conflictual relationship between written and media anthropology. I first recall the production process and theoretical sensibilities involved in making *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, a feature-length work of media anthropology that I recorded on a worksite in the center of Chengdu, Sichuan province. With long takes and an open-ended aesthetics, the film focuses on migrant labor, urban space, and ephemeral relationships, including the relationship between film-subject and filmmaker. From the initial encounter of the filmmaking process, I then explore the experiences and insights that

are left out of the final film, and which I seek to recover through writing. I tell the story of returning home with one of the film-subjects, Guo Congjun, whose life as a migrant worker traverses “the rivers and lakes” of *jianghu*. We travel together from the city to his home village, where I meet his wife and three children, and where he decides to share with me the experiences of trauma and suffering he and his wife endured as a poor peasant family with more than one child. In illustrating this moment of witnessing through writing, I not only wish to offer a thick description and deep analysis of Guo’s lived-experience, but I also attempt to make sense of my particular moral stance towards representing the pain and personal history of others.

Then, the chapter turns towards what nonetheless draws me to work in audio/visual media. I explicate the fundamental difference in forms of knowledge constructed by media anthropology and the written word, and elaborate on features of media production that compel me to work primarily through image and sound. These features include an aesthetics of ambiguity, an investment in experiential knowledge, an activation of opportunities for cinephilia, and the inherent self-reflexivity in image-making, all of which I explain in the chapter. In conclusion, I connect my project with that of the *jianghu* of independent documentary by drawing parallels between our mutual concern for offering an alternative and enobling history of the lived-experience of the Chinese people.

Finally, as a conclusion to this introduction, I must present three important caveats: the first concerns gender; the second concerns the role of the internet in the formation of a digital *jianghu*; the third concerns Chinese directors and their films within the global flow of cultural production. First, independent documentary filmmaking, just like most cultural production in China – as well as filmmaking in general – is still very much a “boy’s club”.

Although there are several important and outstanding female filmmakers whose work ranks as among the best of the independent documentary output – such as Ji Dan, Feng Yan, Yang Lina, Liu Jiayin, Tantan, Yang Rui, Yang Shu, Zhang Mengqi, and Zuo Xueping, to name a few – the vast majority of filmmakers, producers, and critics are male. Various inroads have been made to encourage more women to make documentaries, and the Li Xianting Film School tries to create a fair balance of male and female students when they select each cohort. The obstacles women face, however, are more a product of filmmaking’s long-standing andocentrism, as well as China’s overall culture of patriarchy, and less due to a some tendency towards male domination peculiar to independent documentary in China. Significantly, Songzhuang and independent cinema in general have been fairly pgressive in terms of welcoming minorities, and showcasing entries that would be categorized as queer cinema, women’s issues films, and indigenous media of ethnic minority groups. Nonetheless, male Han Chinese still run the show. It is the sincere hope of many that, given the continuing influx of younger filmmakers, this gender and power imbalance will gradually be eroded.

Secondly, the reference to a “digital *jiangbu*” in this ethnography’s title refers to independent directors’ media production as filmmakers, and it highlights the crucial role the digital – with its low cost, ease of use, and continuous improvement – has played in popularizing amateur filmmaking. Indeed, given the Chinese state’s long-standing control over celluloid film – whether 35mm or 16mm – there previously was no avenue for experimentation, popularization, or the amateur in cinema. Thus, China does not have a history of avant-garde and subversive cinema that, as in other cultural contexts, stretches back to the 1930s and blossomed in the 1960s and 70s. Digital video, however, provided the breakthrough opportunity for China’s first avant-garde cinema to establish itself. The digital,

in the form of online social media, has also allowed radically new social networks, associations, discussions, and organizations to emerge, albeit virtually. One only need consider the wide-spread impact of Ai Weiwei's blog (which the authorities eventually shut down on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2009) or the overwhelming number of microblog posts that feature Chinese netizens discussing any number of highly sensitive issues, such as the house arrest of Chen Guangcheng, the fall of Bo Xilai, and the excesses of the Party princelings. Although the size and reach of China's internet police is considerable, and the Great Firewall of China is able to block any website deemed dangerous or threatening to the Party rule, it is still surprising the range of matters discussed and the virulence of countless posts. Many independent filmmakers, producers, and fans, in their attention to China's social ills as well as the injustices and corruption inherent in the One Party rule, spend several hours of each day on China's social networks such as *weibo* (China's microblog equivalent to Twitter) and *renren* (China's equivalent to Facebook). They exchange news, share photos, circulate exhibition information, provide opinions on current events, and even criticize the government (often in slightly coded language), all in 140 character postings. This online life, then, is another dimension of the digital *jianghu*. However, given my focus on the non-virtual social process of filmmaking and exhibition, I do not have here the space to give an adequate treatment of the internet's role in the formation of associations and identities within the independent filmmaking community. I do hope, however, that this lacuna will soon be filled by other scholars.

Third, given the blossoming international enthusiasm for the new documentary movement in China, there are also important *transnational* points of interaction and negotiation to consider. In the brief history of the independent filmmaking phenomena, a range of fruitful international collaborations and contacts have emerged with individuals and



institutions in Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Europe, and the United States. As the films that I produce have been invited to be screened in a range of contexts around the world, I have joined these transnational infrastructures – universities in the United States, festivals all around the globe, and distribution companies working overseas – and experienced first-hand how films and filmmakers move across the globe. In addition, in contrast to the film-subjects they tend to train their lenses on, the filmmakers in the independent scene – even if they have had different training or lack thereof – often come from the kind of educated, middle-class backgrounds that make material comfort, extensive travel, and international tastes increasingly the norm rather than the exception. Further, most of them have already adopted, or are aspiring to adopt, global cosmopolitan lives.<sup>10</sup> This can be witnessed, for example, in my conversations with Zhao Liang at the 2010 BiFF as he reminisced about the workshop he had recently conducted in eastern France. Enjoying a pleasant evening in Songzhuang drinking beer with friends after a colleague’s screening, his comments nonetheless frequently turned to his longing for the solitude, peace, and sense of belonging he found in Alsace-Lorraine but had had to leave behind.<sup>11</sup> A scene such as this prompts an

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<sup>10</sup> This is similar to those described by Sasha Welland in her study of the role of gender, neoliberal capitalism, and cosmopolitan aspirations in the contemporary art scene in China today (Welland 2006). Although independent documentary across the globe has garnered nowhere near the capital and market value boasted by contemporary art, there are tremendous similarities in the transnational flow of people and objects that animate both worlds. That is, just as the person and the work of artists such as Zhang Xiaogang and Cao Fei are flown to and from cultural capitals all over the world, the more successful of today’s independent documentarians, such as Wang Bing, Zhao Liang, and Wu Wenguang, are invited to show at film festivals and conduct master classes in cities throughout *Oumei* (Europe and North America), Korea, and Japan. Discussing the motivations of Chinese contemporary artists to enter the international art market, Welland writes:

“I propose that for them this market is not just about money but that its international circulatory power provides a means of social engagement, a way of becoming visible and demonstrating their ability to act in and on the world (forthcoming). Again, following Gell’s insistence on the way artists strive to send parts of themselves (their artwork, carrying their names and histories) into the world also demonstrates another, concomitant form of exchange, a dynamic based on travel that maps a social network, of genealogies and encounters, across time and space” (Welland 2006:42).

<sup>11</sup> Sometimes, however, these transnational relations produce conflict, and such discord presents opportunities for further research. A recent example is the December 3rd 2008 statement issued by a group of fourteen independent filmmakers which raised a number of questions regarding, and objections to, what they described as the “murky practices” of the REC Foundation, a non-for-profit organization founded in New York in 1997

inquiry into how the figure of the artist as a global agent shapes the subjectivity of independent directors (Welland 2006; Gell 2002). While my study does include the references to very real and important transnational connections and trajectories animating independent documentary, it favors instead an approach that focuses predominantly on the social process of filmmaking and film exhibition as it plays out in the specific context of post-socialist China and, more specifically, in the artist village of Songzhuang.

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with the purpose of promoting cultural exchange programs between East and West. Since its founding, the REC Foundation has conducted research on and followed the development of contemporary Chinese documentaries, as well as served as the main sponsor of the biannual REEL China Documentary Film Festival at New York University. Citing instances of copyright infringement, such as the failure to attain permission from or even inform the filmmakers regarding the domestic and international non-commercial film loans and screenings the foundation facilitates, the filmmakers demanded that the REC Foundation “provide each filmmaker with a report listing out all previous screenings of his/her work(s) and all incomes generated by the screenings.” Thus, such palpable friction between this group of fourteen filmmakers and an important organization for international exhibition and distribution raises pressing questions regarding the history of underground distribution, the regularity of illicit circulation of undistributed films, and how differently the filmmakers and the promoters may perceive of the new documentary scene’s project. Furthermore, the REC Foundation controversy also provides insight into the desires, aspirations, and professional trajectories of the filmmakers themselves and the movement as a whole.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**Jianghu and the Rise of Songzhuang**

*The Jianghu of Chinese Digital Documentary*

In conducting three years of fieldwork at the festivals and screenings, informal gatherings, sprawling banquets, and late night drinking sessions that comprise the interactions and exchanges animating the independent film scene, there were several occasions when informants – whether filmmakers, critics, or viewers – would refer to the independent filmmaking community as forming a *jianghu*, which is translated literally as “rivers and lakes” but which, as a cultural concept, also presents an array of possible meanings. Each time the two syllable phrase was uttered, I would ask what exactly the speaker meant by his/her use of *jianghu*. I received a range of responses, from classic literary references to stories of righteous outlaws to descriptions of lives lived at the margins of Chinese society today. Generally speaking, *jianghu* refers to a subculture or social underworld that operates by a cultural logic and morality separate from, yet also at times penetrated by and also mirroring, the mainstream. In short, *jianghu* conjures the ever-shifting, mobile, and illicit margins of Chinese society.

Pursuing a philosophical study of the term, Wu Helena Yuen Wai describes *jianghu* as “an unsettling concept related to a great number of imaginary spaces including but not limited to the fantastical world of Chinese martial arts, the criminal realm of triad societies, an anarchic condition beyond the reach of government, or simply a mythical world 'out there'” (2011:1). Its range of meanings in Chinese culture stretches widely and signifies richly; as a result of this multivalency, Avron Boretz observes in his ethnography of Chinese martial arts that “no English phrase quite captures the full meaning of the term” (2011:31). Hence, my decision in this ethnography to refrain from a facile translation and employ the

original Chinese pinyin form of *jianghu* is a strategy to point up the term's inherent complexity, richness, and importance for the study of Chinese culture.

Acknowledging this complexity as well as the many possible scholarly and popular applications of the term, my main interest in deploying *jianghu* is as an analytical and poetic framework for exploring experiences of marginality and practices of resistance, both of which constitute the central values of *jianghu* as both an imaginary and actual realm. I hope that this framework engenders a deeper understanding for the experiences of marginality and resistance animating the Chinese independent documentary community.

What I mean by *marginality* refers, on one level, to the inherently limited, non-commercial scope of independent cultural production in China, both in terms of social impact and film finance. On another level, marginality also shapes the lived-experience of not only independent filmmakers but also the majority of their film-subjects who work, struggle, and subsist under socio-economically marginalized condition outside the purview of China's mainstream media representations.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, many filmmakers and festival programmers work at the margins of Chinese cultural production to craft documentaries and exhibitions that reveal the underrepresented and often ignored social realities of contemporary China. Of course, for some filmmakers, it is a deliberate, conscious choice to remain marginal, to assume a position of defiance against the devouring mainstream; for others, however, the experience of marginality is a structural reality that must be coped with and accepted in hopes of survival. This is especially true of the majority of film subjects who attract the lenses of independent directors.

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12 It is important to note here, as Valerie Jaffee has alluded to, the perhaps ironic fact that those who live under socio-economically marginalized conditions and outside the purview of mainstream media actually comprise the majority of China's population (Jaffee 2006: 108).

What I mean by *resistance* is typically tied to the experience of marginality and serves as a response to it, granting agency to lives led and films produced out of view, on the periphery, in the in-between and forgotten spaces. The concrete acts of resistance vary. Some acts of resistance emerge in the very formal considerations of cultural production, akin to what Jacques Ranciere describes in his *Politics of Aesthetics* as works able to “contribute to liberating political possibilities by undoing the formatting of reality produced by state-controlled media, by undoing the relations between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable” (Ranciere 2005:65). Thus, the act of using digital video to document that which is left out, elided, rendered unseen and invisible by mainstream media and the State’s near-domination of representation is one example and, at the same time, also functions as opposition in ways homologous to Scott’s “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990). Another, arguably more direct method is the employment of documentary and/or social media to launch a politics of confrontation and conflict with the State, as evidenced in the documentary productions of Ai Weiwei Studio.

Resistance may also be a practice folded into the everyday aesthetics of lived-experience. Here I draw on the distinction Michel de Certeau formulates between “strategy” and “tactic” in the *Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau 1984). For de Certeau, a strategy is an exercise of a dominant power (usually performed by an institution such as a government) that attempts to map a schema of order over space and, in so doing, produces disciplined subjects. Most memorably, he uses an arresting moment of giddy-vertigo during a visit to the top of the World Trade Center Tower as a metaphor to describe the elevated vantage point from which leaders wield strategies like ordered grids or steel nets to be cast over an urban space. A tactic, on the other hand, occurs on the street-level. Tactics are calculated departures, or even ruptures, of the status quo enacted by a would-be subjectified subject

and constitute, in de Certeau's words, "the space of the other" that social agents carve out of the controlled space of strategy (1984:36). Thus, a tactic is a practice of the marginal and, as a practice emergent from the slippage between institutional order and individual agency, a tactic is an everyday form of resistance to an already existing schema. Tactics require the individual to "vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them" (de Certeau 1984:37). Most notably, even the practice of walking, de Certeau tell us, can be a site of tactical resistance if the pedestrian makes unforeseen, contrary, or subversive use of the spaces officially designated for walking (de Certeau 1984).

Significantly, against the wide-reaching strategic schemas of control the Chinese state has attempted to put in place, examples of tactics abound in Chinese society: Falong Gong practitioners who use public parks to hold meetings; intellectuals who repudiate simplified Chinese and operate only in traditional characters in order to demonstrate a cultural lineage to the non-Communist imaginings for China's modern development; food stall owners who emerge at night and wheel their carts from street to street so as to avoid the city management forces who notoriously use excessive violence; migrant workers who adopt underground shopping areas as their air-conditioned napping quarters; and film festival organizers who, blocked by authorities from projecting in their original theater settings, transform their festival into a migrating event and appropriate cafes, studios, and offices as screening spaces. In fact, given the remarkably wide gap between the idealized order towards which the Chinese state's strategies strive and the chaotic, messy, everyday tactics of survival employed by the Chinese people, perhaps no better illustration of de Certeau's distinction could be found. Fascinated as he was by walking the city and observing street-

level practices, one afternoon in Beijing would have given de Certeau enough material to fill a tome.

### *A Brief History of Jianghu*

A framework of *jianghu* that emphasizes the experience of marginality and the practice of resistance, however, requires an elucidation of the term that glosses a large portion of its cultural history in favor of channeling its significance for both anthropology and film studies beyond its more conventional applications. In what follows, I will provide a brief exploration of *jianghu* in its literary, cultural, and social configurations, and then describe further the conceptual work to which I put it to use.

The first appearance of *jianghu* in literature occurred over two thousand years in the the *Inner Chapters* of the Daoist philosophy text *Zhuangzi*. The poetry of the 8<sup>th</sup> century literary figure Du Fu also presents several manifestations of *jianghu*, each of which posit a slightly different tone and atmosphere. As Wu Helena Yuen Wai argues:

At times, *jianghu* helps to explore a sense of cosmic vastness and infinity. At other times, the term conveys a sense of freedom, liberty and mobility. Sometimes, *jianghu* is deemed a space to hide away from the official authority; sometimes, *jianghu* is correlated to the pursuit of personal freedom and a carefree life...*jianghu* is not entirely a physical locale, as *jianghu* embodies different abstract and intangible forms including thought, idea, emotion, desire, hope and others” (2011:5)

Holding the cosmic connotations of *jianghu* in abeyance and, instead, focusing on the social implications suggested here, the notion of “rivers and lakes” as described above captures several dynamics central not only to the independent documentary film world as a whole, but also to the lived experience of individual filmmakers. For, in many cases, freedom, liberty, and independence are the motivating ideals fueling not only the film productions of many of the directors with whom I have worked but also the film festivals, screening series, and filmmaking programs. Furthermore, this community on the margins is also shaped by

mobility, as filmmakers struggle to make a living in Beijing, move around within China for film production and exhibition, and travel the international circuit of film festivals, often with a feeling of homelessness and restlessness. Due to their relevance to the Chinese independent documentary community, these qualities of *jianghu* – the pursuit of liberty and independence, and the experience of marginality and mobility – as constitutive of lived-experience are threaded throughout this ethnography.

In addition to its uses in philosophy and verse, the most widely cited use of *jianghu* in Chinese literature is the vernacular novel from the Ming Dynasty, *Water Margin (Shuihu Zhuan)*. Also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh*, this late imperial work follows various valiant and often extremely violent episodes of the 108 outlaws of Mt. Liang (*Liangshan*), and is considered the archetype for Chinese literary genre of the knight-errant (*xia*) (Liu 1967). This genre – also translated as “noble outlaw,” “wandering force,” and “underworld stalwart” – presents the knight-errant as an individual driven by a sense of justice and a personal desire for freedom who acts as a folk hero during a time of widespread chaos or corruption in the imperial court. Thus, this formulation of *jianghu* reflects another central dimension of independent documentary in contemporary China: the quest for justice in the face of an unjust status quo.

Later Chinese novels coupled this model of the knight-errant with superb (and sometimes superhuman) skill in martial arts (*wu*) to form the highly popular *wuxia* genre, which shaped not only literature but also theater, film, comic books, television, and computer games. No matter the medium, *wuxia* heroes are narrativized as righteous martial arts experts who move freely within the *jianghu* and use their powers to right social and/or personal injustice as they follow the principles of knight-errantry (*xia*). These stories have enjoyed wide success and extensive research has been conducted on *wuxia* cultural



production, most notably in film (*wuxia pian*) (Chan 2004; Fu 2007; Ho 1981; Song 2007; Teo 2005). In fact, *jianghu* as a conceptual term in academic research is most often employed in the discourse on martial arts films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as those produced in mainland China since the collectivist era ban on *wuxia* films implemented in 1949 was lifted in 1978.

While an argument can be made that the potency of skill in martial arts in combating injustice mirrors the potential power of an independent filmmaker's camera lens in depicting social reality, I want to expand the discourse on *jianghu* beyond its conventional use in the *wuxia* genre. This expansion requires focusing on its status as a site of resistance by exploring three applications of the term in the context of this ethnography: one, what *jianghu* tells us about the physical and moral landscape of the Chinese independent documentary film community (as a site of resistance); two, what *jianghu* can reveal and highlight within the lived-experience and creative process of independent documentary filmmakers (an ethos of independence and marginality); and three, what it reveals about and how it pertains to the experience and perceptions of the documentary filmmaker's film-subjects (as members of the larger and social *jianghu* of China's floating population).

#### *A Geography of Independence: from Yuanmingyuan to Songzhuang*

Although *jianghu* is largely understood as an imaginary space, in its various representations in myth, literature, and film, it often also corresponds to a physical space or even, sometimes, a clearly marked geographical location. Thus, *jianghu* is both a fluid ethos as well as an actual physical environment. For the outlaws of the marsh in *The Water Margin*, the physical site of the *jianghu* community was Mount Liang (*Liangshan*). For the triad gangs in modern times, it is the dark urban streets and backrooms where illicit deals or ghastly

murders unfold. Now, the Chinese independent film community *jianghu* is comprised by a network of interlocking spaces and disparate pockets, including art zones, universities, film festivals, gallery spaces, film clubs, bookshops, bars, and living rooms. Internet websites and microblogs (*weibo*) frequented by documentary filmmakers also constitute an important virtual dimension of *jianghu*. Even the spaces of film production, whether an impoverished Tibetan village in Yunnan province or a crowded Beijing street, contribute to the overall sphere of the Chinese independent documentary *jianghu*.

Just three decades ago, Songzhuang was a sleepy agricultural community located in Tongzhou country at the far eastern edge of Beijing municipality, just a few kilometers from the border of Hebei Province. It was not until the late 1990s that it became a vibrant hub of artistic activity situated at a remove from the capital yet always within its orbit. Before that time, from the 1980s until the mid-1990s, the artist community of Yuanmingyuan (also known as the “West Village”) located near the Old Summer Palace was one of the city's main nexuses for artists. There, during the era of Reform and Opening that began in 1978, new possibilities for mobility and artistic expression emerged, and the individuals in China who dove head-first into the risks and liberating potential of life as avant-garde artists formed the first *jianghu* of the post-collective period based on artistic practice. Yuanmingyuan was the site for their fellowship, and this space, due to its marginality in the city's faraway northwest corner, offered relative personal and creative liberty. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, it also offered affordable housing in a stimulating creative environment, which was no doubt nourished by collaboration and competition among the artists gathered there, as well as by the intellectual communities of the nearby universities in Haidian district. Often described as an ideal pocket of creativity, a “utopia” for artistic

practice and critical engagement, at its height the area attracted over a hundred painters, poets, and musicians.

Given the relatively high cost of analog camcorders before the arrival of digital video, filmmaking was relatively late to arrive on the scene. However, some individuals, such as seminal documentarians Wu Wenguang, Zhao Liang, and Hu Jie, all of whom were quite early in their careers at the time, did turn the lenses of camcorders they had the good fortune of being able to borrow or buy on this important artist enclave.<sup>13</sup> In fact, a group of five young artists who moved there from the provinces serve as the subject for Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990). Like Wu's film-subject/artist-friends, the majority of artists living and working in Yuanmingyuan were migrants hailing from China's hinterlands. As migrant members of China's "floating population" (*liudong renkou*), they lacked the proper residential registration permits (*hukou*) and therefore were denied access to the social services and resources available to official Beijing city residents. Thus, although life in Yuanmingyuan offered refuge from the economic demands and hostility of the city, granting the artists greater creative freedom and chances to work collectively, it also came at the price of a bohemian and rather bitter material existence (*chiken de shenghuo*). Indeed, in Wu's documentary we witness lean artists cooking meager meals over communal stoves; freezing in drafty rooms during the winter's cold; and undergoing psychic meltdown following the Tiananmen tragedy of 1989, which, in the film, is treated as a

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<sup>13</sup> Wu Wenguang was able to borrow cameras through his freelance post at CCTV; Zhao Liang borrowed money to purchase a camera in order to shoot *Farewell, Yuanmingyuan (Gaobie Yuanmingyuan)* (2006), which was shot in 1995 in order to document the area's dissolution; Hu Jie also had access to a camcorder through his briefly held post in official media, Xinhua News Agency, and shot *Yuanmingyuan Artist Village* (1995). Wu Wenguang was able to borrow camera through his freelance post at CCTV; Zhao Liang borrowed money to purchase a camera in order to shoot *Farewell, Yuanmingyuan (Gaobie Yuanmingyuan)* (2006), which was shot in 1995 in order to document the area's dissolution; Hu Jie also had access to a camcorder through his briefly held post in official media, Xinhua News Agency and shot *Yuanmingyuan Artist Village* (1995).

powerful, silent absence: a stretch of black video leader, marking a major turning point in the collective lived-experience of Yuanmingyuan.

A few years after the crackdown on the democracy movement in Tiananmen, in 1992, a China Youth Daily press report drew national attention to the artist enclave, and this in turn attracted international press. With heightened media focus on this independent, unofficial, and semi-illicit village of artist-migrants, city officials began making random inspections of the area. Individuals without the proper residential permit were arrested and, ultimately, sent back to the provinces. Artists who resisted or made significant problems for the authorities during these regulatory proceedings were apprehended and sent to a detention center even farther out on the outskirts of Beijing. Referred to simply as the “Temporary Shelter,” this detention center's exact location was largely kept hidden, and stories told by individuals held there all evince a similarly strong emotional amalgam of anger, confusion, and darkness of spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the individual and collective trauma induced by these detentions was so great that fifteen years after the arrests and detentions, artist-filmmaker Xu Ruotao, who lived in Yuanmingyuan until its final dissolution in 1995, produced a short film, simply titled *Temporary Shelter* (2009), that attempts to address this emotionally painful experience. Xu researched the architecture and history of the building – which, in a cruel twist of irony, is today used as a shelter for the capital's stray dogs – as well as conducted extensive interviews with friends and acquaintances detained there, asking them to recall and describe through memory the built environment and architectural layout of the Temporary Shelter. Instead of using a conventional “talking heads” interview format, however, Xu employed a unique 3-D

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14 Tellingly, this anger, confusion, and darkness of spirit also mirrors that expressed by artist and activist Ai Weiwei after his release from a three month detention in 2011, sixteen years since the final dissolution of Yuanmingyuan

animation process to render the accounts of his informants into digital format and, following the composite data, virtually reconstruct the building. The result is a haunting, monochrome, and utterly silent journey through inhuman spaces from the subjective yet, at the same time, impersonal viewpoint of a first-person video game. Rather than inducing a sense of excitement and (virtual) personal potency as such video games are designed to do, Xu's short film generates a disturbing atmosphere of foreboding and danger closely linked to the collective memory of the traumatic detention experience itself (Xu Ruotao 2012).

From 1992 to 1994, harassment in Yuanmingyuan continued at the hands of the authorities, who saw the artists as either loafing nuisances or, worse, troublemaking elements who invaded the city. Finally, in 1995, all artists residing in Yuanmingyuan were evicted from the village under the guise of government plans for redevelopment. The process of peaceful resistance practiced by residents and the ensuing arrests and gradual demoralization suffered by the artists were captured by a young filmmaker, Zhao Liang. His documentary *Farewell Yuanmingyuan* (2006), which he shot in 1995 but didn't finish editing until 2006, depicts the final days of the once utopian enclave. Ultimately evicted, scattered across the city, or sent back to the provinces, many artists from the Yuanmingyuan village cast about for a new space in the capital to regroup and rebuild. The two most notable new destinations in Beijing for the nation's avant-garde cultural producers was the idyllic setting of Songzhuang, a farming community in the farthest eastern reaches of the Beijing municipality, and then, five years later in 2000, the nearly defunct 798 munitions factory in northeast Beijing just inside the capital's fifth ring road.

Although the artist-driven gentrification of Songzhuang started at least five years before the development of 798, it has been slower to succumb to commodification and commercialization than the more accessible, concentrated, and architecturally arresting 798

Art Zone. For, today the 798 Art Zone counts as a major cultural landmark and tourist destination within Beijing's sprawling urban landscape. In the first years of its existence, however, the development of the 798 munitions factory followed a similar trajectory as Yuanmingyuan. Official harassment kept newcomers at bay, and many studios and spaces opened up by artists were closed down. With the incredibly rapid growth in global demand for Chinese contemporary art in the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, city officials soon realized not only the potential economic benefit residing within this new space for artistic output and commerce, but also the greater global cultural capital that could be accrued by cultivating 798 as a premiere space of support for the hottest art commodity on the market (Welland 2006) (Smith 2005). Thus, the authorities decided to change their approach and rather than demonize the artist, they set out to transform the experience of engaging with contemporary art into a consumer practice. With economic efficiency and market-driven rationality as guiding logics, the city government mobilized the new tenant-artists and construction crews to transform the already arresting infrastructure of 798 into a 21<sup>st</sup> century Art Zone. Thus, once-paltry artist studios in various corners of the area were greeted with new developments: galleries, exhibition halls, gift shops, cafes, bookstores, and souvenir stands. Small-time players were gradually pushed out as big-name entities moved in, such as the Belgium-based Ullens (Welland 2006). The entire space has converged with the dictates of the market and, consequently, adopted the identity of a highly-profitable commercial art zone. Of course, important exhibitions still take place in 798, but the overall feel of the game is one of commerce and commodification.

Despite also undergoing steady economic and infrastructure development which, in recent years, has increased exponentially, Songzhuang has lagged behind 798 (Zhang 2011). The overall slower pace is due, in no small part, to the fact that Songzhuang, unlike the

vacuous and empty factory spaces of 798, was a far-flung agricultural village before the gentrifying artists appeared on the scene. Foremost among the new-comers was Li Xianting, the highly influential art critic whose writing and curating helped artists such as Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Ai Weiwei and Liu Wei become international stars. After tremendous success in the 1980s and 1990s writing for various art publications and curating exhibitions which brought a number of Chinese artists to the domestic and international stage – most notably, the famous “The Stars” exhibition in 1979 – Li was among the group of avant-garde artists who had to relocate after the downfall of Yuanmingyuan. His reputation was constructed not only through his important elucidation of artistic practice and aesthetic concepts operative in Chinese contemporary art – in the 1980s, Li coined the terms “cynical realism” and “political pop” to frame the critical discourse that the work of Yuanmingyuan artists offered as a powerful antidote to the heady narrative of China's economic miracle. His position of leadership was also based on his willingness and bravery to assume a more confrontational role with the Party and the State (Smith 2005). For his efforts and successes, Li was dubbed the “godfather of Chinese contemporary art.”

In the aftermath of Yuanmingyuan, Li decided to move to Songzhuang, a village that he felt offered the right balance of distance from the regulatory powers of the State yet proximity to the capital so that art movements developing in the village would not lose relevance to critical discourse (Farrar, Moxley 2010). He invited as many painters, photographers, and sculptors as he could manage, including the constellation of star artists he had taken under his wing. At the time, housing was cheap, with prices even lower than Yuanmingyuan. For example, in the beginning of this influx of artists into sleepy Songzhuang in the mid-1990s, a courtyard home in Songzhuang could be purchased for under \$1000 USD. With such low housing costs, artists not only from Yuanmingyuan and

Beijing's "East Village" – another artist hotbed that was dismantled by the State in the mid 1990s – but also from all over China flocked there in order to establish themselves. The newcomers had first to contend not only with persecution from the Beijing municipal government which followed on the heels of the eviction from Yuanmingyuan, but also with the local authorities who were not sure what to make of the waves of invading newcomers. Upon encountering initial suspicion and hostility from the authorities, Li explains how he established good relations with the local power base:

I discovered that in this village it was possible to dialogue with the lower-level cadres. Why did I pursue dialogue with the government? Well, in 1995, after we had arrived in this village, the police followed along too, because they knew that many people from Yuanmingyuan had moved here. So the police wanted to keep an eye on these people... It wasn't until later that I learned nine different government bureau representatives came to tell the local secretary [Cui Dapai] that no matter what method he chose to use, he had to drive these artists out of Beijing. But the local secretary had interacted with the artists and thought they were pretty good people. And not to mention that the artists had given funding and support to build electric lines and repair the roads. He thought these artists weren't bad, so he persistently communicated with his superiors, asking them to let the artists stay in Songzhuang. After a while, the police didn't come anymore. So this proved that if the local leaders had the ability to keep the artists here, then it must be a place where we could stay for a long stretch of time. By 2000, after more and more people came, I then went to the local government to discuss how Songzhuang had become a resource that has completely changed the local economic structure. Originally, the area was farmland. Now there was no more land, and no more source of income. But with artists moving in, rent was coming in and even rising, and every household could count on 20,000 to 30,000 RMB as yearly income. The cost of living would no longer be a problem, and supporting a college student wouldn't be a problem either. So I told them that artists are a resource, and you can use this resource. After that, we started developing the Artist Zone that exists here now. When we started developing, we didn't encounter too many problems. Beijing city government didn't really understand, and when we were building the [Songzhuang] Art Museum they sent down a notice that they would tear it down. But we kept moving forward, kept striving on. In the process, a deputy mayor paid me a visit, and I shared with him this truth: Chinese art is constantly expanding, growing, and won't be dissolved again. Many artists will wander and drift, and then gather in various places, like a pool of water. You may want to force the water out, but new fresh water will come in, and it will become flowing water. And this continual growth actually helps the government resolve social problems. I already stopped my work as an art critic, and I am not solving the problems of art. I am actually solving social problems. From that time on until 2006, this village became the first test site for a zone of culture and creativity (Li 2010).

Li's narrative not only demonstrates his skill as a negotiator, but also highlights the disagreement and diversity at varying levels of Chinese government. Contrary to the perception of China's national government as forming a uniform body of total consensus, there actually exists great heterogeneity within its various bureaus, levels, and structures.



Although the city government (and possibly the top national government as well) were determined to drive the artists entirely out of the Beijing municipality, the village secretary Cui Dapai was of a different mind and took a contrary tack. He realized that more material gain would be achieved for Songzhuang if he actually did not comply with the higher level commands. So, instead, he actually acted contrary to the orders of his superiors and pursued his own path of working with the artists in order to promote the village's well-being through the resulting construction projects and enhanced sources of revenue (Cui 2012). With the green light from the local government, Li and his colleagues started building studios, galleries, and museum spaces. Construction costs were low and tracts of barren land were made available. Within a few years, many artists that Li Xianting supported did indeed hit the international jackpot, and their fast-growing success and wealth attracted even more artists to Songzhuang. As they settled into the village, Li and his colleagues began to hope to recreate – and actually improve on – the ideal utopian space they pursued at Yuanmingyuan. For them, Songzhuang would become a place for artistic fellowship, independent expression, and even a holistic model of education that, unlike educational institutions across China, nourished students' individuality and creativity (Shaffer 2011).

Before these utopian ideals could be realized, however, the commercial success of Chinese contemporary art came to the fore and shaped the course of development in Songzhuang. The first artists to reach auction house glory were individuals such as Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Yang Shaobin, and they all gladly financed their benefactor, Li Xianting, as he pursued his infrastructure-building projects in Songzhuang. Indeed, in 2006, with the help of a handful of thriving artists, Li oversaw the construction of the Songzhuang Museum of Art (*Songzhuang Meishuguan*), where he served as director. After these initial

success stories, Chinese art on the whole did not cool off but, instead, turned red hot in markets around the world.

As a consequence of what Li perceived as the aesthetic ossification and political dulling that success introduced, he started to grow less interested in contemporary art as practiced and commodified in 21<sup>st</sup> century China. Reflecting on his shift away from championing contemporary art, Li mused, “when I first started in the 1980s, contemporary art in China was barely even a seed. I was happy to help it grow, from a seedling through its fragile beginnings until it was a strong plant. Now that it is a great big tree, I am just not interested in it anymore” (Li 2012). With this metaphor, Li reveals himself to be a *jianghu* stalwart in that he shies away from spheres of cultural production that achieve economic success in the mainstream and, instead, dedicates his energy to nurturing artists and movements that are nascent, still unknown, and free from both institutional control and the spiritual ossification brought on by the influence of the market. Indeed, after Chinese contemporary art took over Sotheby's and international art world mega-star Zhang Xiaogang paintings sold for \$6.7 million, Li turned his sights elsewhere.

#### *Fanball Films & Li Xianting Film Fund*

Just as Li's disillusionment with contemporary art set in, the DV revolution of independent filmmaking was reaching its peak across China. Film clubs and a few galleries were holding screenings of independent films, many of them made by painters and art students who were drawn to digital video's immediacy, ease, and affordability. Li took notice of this fascinating phenomenon of fine artists crossing over to digital cinema. He attended several screenings, met a range of filmmakers, and grew excited over the range of possible

cultural productions enabled by digital cinema. Li recalls his enthusiasm for independent film thus:

“During my viewings of independent films over the years, what has impressed me most deeply is that the real world, which for the most part has been buried under ostentation, is still visible through the camera lens. Conscience and a sense of responsibility – rare qualities in today’s age of consumerism – are traits that still can be found in these independent filmmakers. This evokes the feelings and atmosphere of the early years of contemporary art: passion and earnestness despite hardship or danger” (Li 2007).

As evinced by his statements here, Li discovered in independent digital cinema, and in documentary in particular, echoes of the same avant-garde sensibility, critical edge, and social consciousness that had invigorated his curatorial work in the early days of contemporary art during the Yuanmingyuan days. In fact, Li was so convinced of the importance of digital video that he made sure to include plans for a screening space in the design of the Songzhuang Art Museum, which he was in the process of overseeing. He also needed a curator of independent cinema to select films for exhibition in the museum.

Li asked for recommendations from director Wang Bing, who, at the time, was the rising star director of Chinese independent cinema with his nine-hour masterpiece, *West of the Tracks* (2003), winning awards around the world. Wang Bing suggested the young, galvanizing, and controversial film enthusiast and Guangdong native Zhu Rikun, a recent Beijing University grad who left his office job in the company he founded with a classmate to devote his energy and skill to supporting Chinese independent film. In 2001, Zhu founded Fanhall Films (*Xianxiang*), which began as an internet website for cinephiles and expanded shortly thereafter into a store that sold DVDs and music CDs. Fanhall's popularity grew as a space for independent film and music, and Zhu and colleagues worked together to develop Fanhall as a platform for discussions, screenings, and film festivals. They organized screenings and held forums at various locations, from university classroom

halls to local cafes and bars. Fanhall was never a profit-seeking business venture, and Zhu Rikun relied on a salary from the company he founded for survival (Zhu 2011).

By 2006, when Li Xianting was looking for a partner to curate a film exhibition at his newly-constructed museum in Songzhuang, Zhu had already become a seasoned underground festival programmer and organizer, having helped queer filmmaker and novelist Cui Zi'en host the first Beijing Queer Film Festival in 2001, as well as founding his own film festival, China Documentary Week (*Zhongguo Jilupian Jiaoliu Zhou*), which had grown rapidly over the years since its first edition in April 2003 into the most influential documentary event in China. Zhu was also the recipient of more and more requests from filmmakers to help them secure funding or even to serve as producer on their new films. In fact, Wang Bing himself had recently asked Zhu for assistance in financing his follow-up film, *He Fengming: Chronicle of a Chinese Woman* (2007), a three-hour documentary comprised entirely of a single camera set-up trained on He Fengming as she recounts the challenges and suffering she and her husband faced during the Cultural Revolution and, in particular, the Anti-Rightist Movement, which saw them both sent to labor camps. Zhu helped Wang find sources of funding, and even loaned him 50,000 RMB (approximately \$8,000 USD) of his own personal money. In addition to helping filmmakers connect with the funding necessary to realize their projects, Zhu accumulated substantial cultural capital due to his tireless work as a director and organizer of China Documentary Week. In 2006, Li Xianting contacted Zhu and after a brief discussion, offered him the job as curator of film exhibition at the Songzhuang Museum of Art. Zhu accepted.

For the first exhibition, Zhu and Li planned a new festival which would showcase not only documentary but also fiction and experimental cinema. They named it the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF) and its first edition was held in the autumn of 2006 during

the Songzhuang Arts Festival, a local government event organized in part by Li Xianting and designed to showcase the growing art community. A week before the festival's opening ceremony, however, local leaders in Songzhuang came in search of Li and Zhu, asking to preview the films that were slated to be shown. The local leaders explained that the Beijing city government had heard about the screenings and wanted to first preview and vet each film that had been selected. The Beijing leadership wanted to ensure that no "sensitive" (*min'gan*) films would be shown in a public event organized by the government. Despite the fact that BiFF screenings were not held in a commercial screening venue but rather in the screening space of the Songzhuang Art Museum, the authorities were still concerned enough to demand *de facto* censorship. Zhu Rikun let the government officials take DVD copies of the films, and shortly thereafter they returned with instructions to refrain from showing several titles, including the opening film, Zhao Liang's *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*. On the opening night, with over two hundred audience members gathered for the festival in the newly opened Songzhuang Art Museum, Zhu was determined to continue with the original screening schedule. He recalls: "the authorities wouldn't allow us to screen [Zhao Liang's film], and the museum managers were angry at the conflict, so I decide to first play *Betel Nut* (2005) as the opening film and then later screen *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*" (Zhu 2011). The debut digital film of Hunanese fiction director Yang Heng, *Betel Nut* depicts the daily lives and misadventures of two teenage rebels in long takes framed exceptionally wide in the vein of Chinese landscape painting. Zhu's decision to replace Zhao Liang's politically-charged documentary about artists evicted from Yuanmingyuan with Yang Heng's narrative was based not only on the relatively innocuous content of *Betel Nut*, but also on the glacial pacing of its action as well as the fragmentary structure of its plot. It was arthouse cinema par excellence. The officials were dumb-founded as they sat among the audience in the brand-

new screening space watching this exquisitely shot but slow, disjointed, and meandering narrative. Zhu had used similar tactics in his own DOChina festival: when faced with political pressure, he elected to show a less sensitive film first and allow the authorities a chance to not lose face (*din lian*). The authorities would depart once they were satisfied that their orders were being followed, and then Zhu could project the more controversial film he originally planned to screen as soon as they left.

In this situation, the authorities faced a difficult situation wherein they faced pressure from both their superiors and their local patrons. They was fully aware they needed the influence and leadership of Li Xianting to continue to steer the economic and social development of Songzhuang; however, they also had an official political obligation to carry out the orders of their superiors. By enacting a show of force against the festival's independence but then eventually departing the scene, they were able to balance their alliances and offend neither Li Xianting nor the city government. Thus, Zhu was eventually able to screen *Farewell Yuanmingyuan*, but for the rest of the festival attendance was low as the officials continued to make their presence felt at screenings.

In 2006, shortly after Zhu started as curator for the museum, Li founded the Li Xianting Film Fund in order to support, exhibit, and archive independent film production in China. He converted his courtyard home into an office space, and invited Zhu to oversee the fund's operations and exhibitions. Zhu earned this position as CEO of the film fund due to the vision for the future independent film he shared with Li Xianting. Zhu's consistently brave programming and refusal to bend to State or commercial interests were also of considerable influence in the decision to expand his role in Songzhuang. To the fund's aims of offering funding and infrastructure for production, as well as forming a “platform for exhibition and archive of independent film,” Li brought his cultural influence,

as well as his extensive network of wealthy and powerful contacts. Thus, the merger between Li and Zhu, based upon mutual respect and common goals, appeared destined for greatness. At the very least, it would certainly lend independent filmmaking a significant and much needed economic as well as spiritual boost. Many observers felt that one source for Li's interest in working with Zhu stemmed from the latter's unflinching confrontational stance vis-a-vis State authority: "Zhu reminds Li of himself when Li was younger," some filmmakers told me. With this affinity, together they established a major platform to assist filmmakers in their productions, as well as hold the most influential festivals in mainland China. The philosophical core of their approach to and understanding of their work was to maintain a position of total independence: no state or commercial influences were allowed entrance into their world.

In 2007, Zhu Rikun decided to move with his wife Gaoxin to Songzhuang in order to focus on his new position, and to get away from the assaulting urban space of Beijing city. He also invited his friend, the designer and experimental-filmmaker Wang Wo, to join him. They wanted to build a world apart, so Wang moved his family to Songzhuang and designed a complex that included both their homes and the headquarters for Zhu's expanding Fanhall Films. They named it the Fanhall Films complex. Financed by loans from Zhu's friends, the complex is built more like a fortress and a communal workspace than a typical cinematheque. Large brick walls splash-painted white enclose a spacious courtyard of grass and stone where, during screenings and exhibitions, filmmakers and audience members gather to drink, smoke, and discuss the latest films, production gear, and national events. The ground level features a cozy cafe managed by Gaoxin where festival parties, forums, and music performances are hosted. On the top floor are the office spaces for Fanhall Films website and media productions, run by Zhu's Beijing University classmate and CEO of

Fanhall Films, Li Zhixin. The bottom level, which is the heart of Fanhall, is arguably the most well designed cinematheque in all of independent cinema in China, with comfortable seats for over 150 viewers and the best quality projection equipment. Connected to the complex are also the spacious, two-story homes of Zhu Rikun and Wang Wo. The friends share a vegetable garden between their front doors, which face one another, and their children run freely at play between the two homes.

From 2006 to 2011 there was a momentum to the developments in Songzhuang that seemed to carry a powerful trajectory towards a sustainable *jiangbu* community of independent cinema, despite frequent incursions from local, city, and even national authorities designed to cease the festivals and screenings. As Zhu cultivated the resources and production tools available through the quasi-merger of Fanhall Films and the Li Xianting Film Fund in order to engineer a major center for independent filmmaking and exhibition, he and Li also worked towards expansion in exhibition, archiving, and education. Indeed, preparations for the fourth edition of Zhu's China Documentary Exchange Week (DOChina) to be held for the first time in Songzhuang in spring of 2007 were underway, adding a second festival to their operation.<sup>15</sup> In terms of education, in 2008 they established a film school that regularly attracts students from all over China and brings in teachers from the depth of talent in the Songzhuang film community for two to three forty-day sessions per year (Shaffer 2011). The film school was only a first step, however, to a much larger and broader plan they envisioned of building a wholly independent education system that would serve students from kindergarten through university. Significantly, this ambitious undertaking of an education system completely free from the state and offering an

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<sup>15</sup> Prior to this, DOChina had operated as a floating festival with no fixed location or venue in Beijing, and for the third edition it was decided at the last minute that the festival would be held in a university in Anhui Province, some thousand kilometers to the south of Beijing.



educational experience counter to China's school system – in that it seeks to foster independent thinking (*duli sikao*) and personal creativity (*siren chuangzao*) – was actually one piece of a larger, ultimate goal of creating a kind of utopia of freedom and non-institutional cultural production. The aim was to build their own self-sustaining world.

In Beijing, and in China as a whole, Songzhuang became a creative node of paramount importance, as it not only engenders a collective spirit of independence among filmmakers, but also constitutes a physical manifestation of *jianghu* in its remote geography and vibrant community of marginalized art producers. Further, that Fanhall Films and the Li Xianting Film Fund were able to insist on total independence renders their endeavor and the space they create wholly unique among the film community's other festivals, venues, and platforms. For, China Independent Film Festival (CIFF) in Nanjing as well as Yunnan Multi-Cultural Image Festival (Yunfest) both exhibit and showcase independent films, but are also officially hosted at universities and partly financed by those institutions (CIFF is hosted at Nanjing University; Yunfest is hosted at Yunnan University). Such connections thereby tie these festivals in some, albeit attenuated way to the state. Nonetheless, these festivals still carry the moniker of “independent” and occupy a more fluid hybrid space, hovering between the official film world and the independent circle. Indeed, it is precisely Songzhuang's unwillingness to compromise total independence that forms the ground of *jianghu* for independent cultural production. For, as Wu Helena Yuen Wai emphasizes:

“by opposing all totalizing and colonizing forces brought about by the authority, the institution, the hegemony, the hierarchy, and the ideology, *jianghu*, the very notion itself, is a site of resistance, linguistically, literally, physically, and even psychologically. This might also explain why the notion of *jianghu* is often connoted to a form of hope and a chance of anticipation, as *jianghu* is always deemed an outlet to vent out frustration, disappointment and anxiety in reality” (Wu 2011:11).

For the first five years of the Li Xianting Film Fund, Li and Zhu did not waver from their stance of independence. During the Songzhuang film exhibition, their events and

exhibitions provided the premier outlet for independent films that voiced growing frustration over China's pressing social and political problems, as well as a platform for hope.

### *Jiangbu & Vagabond Culture*

In his ethnography of martial arts and ritual practitioners, Boretz writes that the concept of *jiangbu* commonly “evokes mobility, fluidity, and movement, life in a shadow society populated by thieves, gamblers, prostitutes, highwaymen, itinerant swordsmen, drifters, and entertainers. It is a world that can exist only beyond the stability and security of village and family and conventional occupations” (Boretz 33). That is, in the collective imaginary of contemporary Chinese society, those who belong to the realm of “rivers and lakes,” those who are in fact *of the jiangbu*, are those dark, shifty figures who subsist unmoored from the family structure and conventional order of mainstream society. Furthermore, according to popular perceptions, their marginal existences render them as unpredictable, unstable, and even potentially unsafe social elements. Beyond the popular perception of *jiangbu*, however, the experience of marginality is not necessarily tied to criminality, though it is intimately connected to mobility and fluidity. Furthermore, in this section, I want not only to elucidate the larger social *jiangbu* beyond the independent filmmaking world described above, which includes a wide range of the Chinese population – from traveling singers to migrant workers to families displaced by development, for example. I also intend to explore the homologies and ruptures between independent documentary filmmakers and the greater social *jiangbu* (members of which predominantly serve as film-subjects for independent directors) in their various lived-experiences as mobile and marginal social agents.

One evening at the 5<sup>th</sup> Chongqing International Film and Video Festival in 2011, I was enjoying a spicy meal and cool beers along the riverbank with two recent graduates of the Li Xianting Film School, Yao Yu and Sheng Yin. During our meal we began talking about the concept of *jianghu* in independent documentary. For Yao and Sheng, the independent filmmakers, in their lifestyles and their selection of film-subjects, constitute members of the larger, general social milieu of *jianghu*, not just the *jianghu* of independent cinema. Yao offered Xu Tong – the director of *Wheat Harvest* (2009), *Fortune Teller* (2010), and *Shattered* (2011) – as a clear example of a filmmaker deeply-invested in *jianghu* not only as a chronicler but also as a member due to Xu's *jianghu* sensibilities. In fact, Yao argued that Xu Tong's films are precisely instances of “*jianghu* filming *jianghu*.” (Yao 2011). Xu Tong began as a novelist and the original idea for his first documentary, *Wheat Harvest*, was born from his disappointment with his attempt to capture the experience of prostitution through words alone. He wanted to try to work in moving image and sound. From the 1960s through the 1980s, Xu's father was a successful cinematographer for the national government's nature film productions, and so Xu was acquainted with the principles of photography. Thus, in 2008, equipped with a new Sony EX-1 camcorder, Xu began his exploration of beauty parlors – often a front for brothels in China – on the outskirts of Beijing.

Yao Yu went on to say that there is also the “traditional” (*chuantong*) in Xutong's work. For Yao, Xu's films, in their commitment to depicting the details both gritty and valorous within the lives lived in “the lower depths,” share a similar focus on marginalized populations evinced in vernacular literature, such as the classic novel *The Water Margins*. In fact, Yao pointed out that “there is a Chinese literary tradition of focusing on the lower classes and the overlooked, which dates back further back than *The Water Margins*.” Thus,

Xu Tong's desire to connect with, to somehow sublimate himself within, the lower classes renders him a member of the greater social *jiangbu*. For Yao, in fact, what is fascinating and exceptional about independent documentary is that many of the current projects pursued by Chinese documentarians are actually instances wherein a member of the *jiangbu* is filming *jiangbu*. Yao and Sheng both agreed that in the current age of conspicuous consumption and market-oriented objectives, very few Chinese cultural producers serve this role.

Xu Tong had just arrived to Chongqing from Beijing that day and, fifteen minutes into our discussion, he coincidentally appeared, walking along the river promenade, scoping out the restaurants, his new Canon DSLR 5D hanging over his shoulders. He saw us, waved, and came over. We invited him to join us, and apprised him of our discussion. Xu Tong jumped right in, eager to engage. Drawing from Wang Xuetai's two-volume work of historical sociology, *Vagabond Culture and Chinese Society*, Xu delivered a summary of the formation of today's social *jiangbu*, which Wang argues emerged from an earlier subculture of vagabonds that took root during social changes in the Song Dynasty (Xu Tong 2011).

As Wang and other Chinese sociologists have pointed out, Chinese tradition is to remain rooted to a region or particular village associated with one's family and/or clan, to act in accordance with one's own position within the clan, and to revere – and, in most cases, even worship – one's ancestry, which is usually documented through careful genealogical record (Wang 2007; Fei 1947). But, Wang asks, “what about those who lost their position within mainstream society” throughout Chinese history (2007:70)? For example, what about those who have lost family and/or home by warfare, pestilence, or famine? What about orphans, or widows who chose not to remarry? What about offspring of poor families who were forced to leave home and support themselves? Wang classifies these social figures as a population “out of family order” (*tuoxu ren*) who form a subculture which he calls

“vagabond” (*youmin*) (2007:70). Wang also argues that, given the instability and uprootedness of such an existence, significant changes of personality and value took place within this new “vagabond” social group. The paramount shift was a new moral code and social structure no longer based on family but rather on non-familial human connections. Without family protection and the structure of the clan, vagabonds are only able to rely on friends and allies within a group.

This banding of vagabonds together, in turn, is what constitutes the social milieu *jianghu*. The *jianghu*, as discussed above, is the amorphous social network – existing in the collective imaginary as wholly outside the mainstream yet always related to the mainstream in actuality – wherein experiences of marginality and practices of resistance give rise to values and social practices differing from tradition and mainstream society. These values, which are understood as holding paramount position within *jianghu*, range from positive formulations to negative ones. While the latter invokes dark dealings and retrograde ethics, the former includes resourcefulness, independence, loyalty, and a code of honor based on non-familial relationships (Wang 2007).

Beijing Film Academy professor Hao Jian has laid out a descriptive schema of four major characteristics of *jianghu*. First, in both practice and discourse, *jianghu* members evince a consciousness and concern for the group (*jiang zai yiqi*). This includes the value of loyalty and the practice of protecting one's “brothers and sisters” (*xiongdi jiemei*) in a group. The second major characteristic Hao describes is that of “vanity” (*ben xurong*) and its intimate association with the concept of “face” in Chinese culture (*mianzi*). “Face” operates in an exchange economy that possesses the capacity to bestow symbolic capital in instances when a social agent acts in accordance with the *jianghu* code of honor and is consequently “given face” (*gei mianzi*). In contrast, a social agent “loses face” (*diulian*) through an embarrassing,

disloyal, or regressive action, which then leads the agent to experience shame and thereby suffer attenuated symbolic capital. Vanity, then, in the context of *jianghu*, is an individual's mild to strong obsession with the acquisition of symbolic capital and the status of "face."

The third characteristic is based on linguistic practices: within *jianghu*, like in many subcultures, there is frequent use of crude and rough language as a way to mark oneself as outside the mainstream and, thereby, re-appropriate verbal markers of one's marginality in such a way that renders it a source of honor. This practice includes not only the free and easy use of vulgar terms, but also the open discussion of taboo topics, both of which are inappropriate within mainstream culture. Examples of this can be found in Zhao Dayong's incessant addition of "fuck" (*cao*) as an emphatic ending to almost every pronouncement he makes, as well as in the notorious "Study in Perspective" photographic works of Ai Weiwei wherein he frames his raised middle finger in a point-of-view perspective and directed at famous architectural landmarks around the world, including the Eiffel Tower, the White House, and Tiananmen Square. The fourth characteristic of Hao's schema is the vagabond experience of being homeless in the world. Populated by drifters and wanderers, *jianghu* dwellers share a common experience of mobility, rootlessness, and instability. There is no physical, political, or conceptual resting ground for those in the *jianghu*, and this existential insecurity and uncertainty is a fundamental reality that they must realize and accept. Most significantly, Hao Jian's four major characteristics of *jianghu* are applicable not only to the independent filmmakers with whom I worked, but also to the Chinese people whose lives on the margin, adrift in *jianghu*, tend to attract the filmmakers' camera lenses.

Given this multivalency of moral experiences and interpretation operative within the various communities of *jianghu*, Arthur Kleinman's notion of a "local moral world" as a particular network of interpersonal relations is a useful framework to understand the moral

economy of *jianghu*, as well as its relationship to the mainstream (Kleinman 2006; Kleinman 1998). For Kleinman, a local moral world is a community imbued with a localized and particular morality that may, and often is, distinct from both mainstream morality as well as universal notions of normative ethics. Indeed, Kleinman points out that *moral* is an ambiguous term because it presents two senses: *moral* stands for an individual sense of right and wrong, and yet, in its broad sense, it also refers to values, especially those shaped by a moral environment, regardless of scale. Contrary to its common usage, however, a local moral world should never be construed as benevolent and healthy by nature, and it can even prescribe unethical behavior such as exploitative voyeurism, or even destructive practices such as genocide. Consequently, this understanding of *moral* as an environment of values is always in need of critical review based not only on ethics – an abstract set of principles, such as virtue and justice – but also on divergent formulations of morality contained within the moral environment yet standing in conflict with it. Thus, *jianghu* and the mainstream of Chinese society, both of which constitute different moral environments and social aesthetics, are able to provide precisely these critical perspectives on one another.

*“Jianghu filming jianghu, vagabonds filming vagabonds”*

Wang Xiaolu's newspaper article “New Vagabond Cinema” describes Xu Tong as a “vagabond filming vagabonds,” and offers this explication of the subculture: “vagabonds in the past were an important social form existing within Chinese society's lower depths. They were those within the mainstream of social order who had lost resources for survival, and yet were unwilling to be fettered to a fixed social position. Instead, they pursued a more creative way of life, which also served as a form of resistance to the old mode of social organization”

(2011:47). Classifying Xu Tong's trilogy of films as “The Vagabond Trilogy,” Wang writes: “The protagonists in each of Xu Tong's three films drift through society without any social security, and yet they still bring to light a lively and prosperous outlook on life. Li Baicheng [the central focus of *Fortune Teller* (2009)], even if he is seriously handicapped, comes across as a strong, brave, and valiant survivor” (Wang 2011:47).

Xu's positive depiction of the valorous dimensions of his vagabond film-subjects matches with the vernacular literature documenting the heroes and dramas of *jianghu* and “vagabond culture” that began to be produced during the Song Dynasty. It runs counter, however, to most representations of *jianghu* throughout Chinese cultural history. For, as Xu Tong himself has pointed out, if Confucianism is considered the dominant tradition and understood as mainstream, courtly, official, refined, and [therefore] dead, then ‘vagabond culture’ is the lesser tradition, understood as minor, folk, valiant, *jianghu*, and [therefore] alive” (Xu 2012). Due to the threat they were perceived as posing to mainstream social structure, and to the frequency with which many “vagabonds” turned to illicit means of securing a livelihood, the official representation of these outsiders tended towards nefarious, sinister, and evil aspects, as associated with their unlawful and often shameful occupations: prostitutes, thieves, thugs, and mafia members. Michael Dutton, Frank Dikotter, and Li Zhang have extensively documented the wide range of negative and fear-inducing signs that have been attributed to drifters (*mangliu*), hooligans, (*liumang*), and migrant workers (*mingong*) in the Chinese cultural imaginary and throughout official media representations (Dutton 1999; Dikotter 2002; Zhang 2002).

These denigrating perceptions and demonizing imaginaries have continued, and in fact played a major role in the radical re-organization of society following the Communist victory in China in 1949. After seizing control of the nation, the new government



penetrated deeper into the lives of the Chinese than any previous dynasty. Indeed, despite the Chinese Communist Party's romantic vision of the virtue and righteousness of the downtrodden masses, this extolment did not include vagabonds awash in *jianghu*. Instead, they were classified as the “bad elements” of society, and one of the early goals of the Party throughout Liberation and the early days of the Communist state was to “erase and smash” the dark side of society. Xu Tong pointed out that one of the first state actions after victory in the civil war was to raze Ba Da Hutong in Beijing, a place infamous as an incubator for the sinful, dark side of society (Xu Tong 2012).

The Communist Party went beyond just knocking down neighborhoods; they reorganized all aspects and levels of life to achieve the socialist model and eradicate not only bourgeois culture but also *jianghu* culture. Although it is beyond the scope of this manuscript to embark on a thorough delineation of the historical process and revolutionary practices the Party put in place, it is nonetheless important to highlight how the very social units the CCP introduced – the urban work unit (*danwei*) and the rural collective – not only organized Chinese citizens into a comprehensive and inescapable socio-political structure, but also served to liberate every vagabond member of the *jianghu* culture. Further, there was no longer ambiguity or uncertainty in even the titles and roles that the Communist leaders applied to every member of society; in collectivist era China, every citizen was locked into one of the four possible socialist roles: a worker, a peasant, a student, or a soldier. Finally, the household registration system (*hukou tizhi*) implemented in 1958 not only also drastically reduced opportunities for mobility across the stark rural and urban divide, but even limited intra-rural or intra-urban movement.

This radical and comprehensive collectivist organization of life persisted until the death of Party Secretary Mao Zedong in 1976. After a few years of uncertainty concerning

the future of China which saw the quick rise and fall of Mao's appointed successor, Hua Guofeng, the reformist Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated and elevated as the nation's new leader. With his bold new vision to undo many of the collectivist-era economic practices through a policy of Reform and Opening, the Mao-era social structures began to be slowly dismantled. In 1979, Deng made the pronouncement that "some should get rich first" and, taking him at his word, entrepreneurial and enterprising people all over the nation pursued this opportunity with energy and excitement after decades of tight social control. Other Chinese citizens, less business-minded than these small-scale entrepreneurs (*getihu*), also took advantage of the new gradual relaxing of restrictions on mobility to pursue lifestyles and occupations unmoored from convention and divergent from the status quo. Thus, entrepreneurs, free-lancers, fixers, hustlers, artists, migrant workers, musicians, gangsters, and criminals formed the new vagabond culture (*xin de youmin*).

As has been noted in articles and volumes focusing on the new documentary movement, the dominant film-subject selected by most directors has been the lived-experience of individuals within *jianghu*. In fact, Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1991) is widely considered the first independent documentary and, as noted above, is entirely focused on the hardships and aspirations of five vagabonds artists who have left the security of their hometowns in the provinces and moved to Yuanmingyuan in Beijing. Film critics such as Valerie Jaffee and Wang Xiaolu have highlighted Chinese independent documentary directors' initial obsession with depicting fellow artists, forming a creative interest that could be described as filming "across" – rather than "up" or "down" – with peers. In electing to film "across," Wu and other early independent filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai not only recorded the actual lives of a handful of artist-vagabonds, but also, through their films, evinced a concern with depicting their own

experience within the bohemian artist *jianghu*. Indeed, Jaffee posits that the first and best-known Chinese underground films of the early to mid-1990s, in their careful attention to artists trying to survive within a cultural hegemony, are actually indirect portraits of the self-marginalized (Jaffee 2006).

This preoccupation with artist-peers, however, did not remain the dominant theme in independent documentary. Since the mid-1990s, with the growing popularization of independent filmmaking, there has been a shift in documentary production away from an obsession with fellow artists and a marked emphasis on depicting the larger social *jianghu* itself. This shift in independent documentary's focus runs parallel to the shift in Chinese fiction film's focus which was inaugurated by the Sixth Generation filmmakers, most of whom sought to restore to the cinema lens a documentary impulse and its attendant concern with the social reality of everyday life in Chinese society.<sup>16</sup> In general, this shift in Chinese independent cinema has been understood as a reaction against decades of socialist propaganda and commercialized blockbusters (Berry, Rofel, Lu 2011; Pickowicz, Yingjin Zhang 2006). Pointing to the widespread moral exhaustion and aesthetic frustration engendered by state control and market interests, Wang Xiaolu has pointed out that:

“After the 1990s, the loss of confidence and trust in the system [caused by ten years of chaos and violence during the Cultural Revolution as well as the Tiananmen tragedy of 1989] caused a deep sense of uncertainty among the population. The living conditions of vagabond artists and the ‘lower depths’ are extremely similar. Most of the artists could have entered into the system and benefited from the nation’s burgeoning economy, but due to the importance they placed on freedom, they refused to make a living within the system. In their lived-experience they frequently maintained a condition of being down and out, and therefore they are able develop resonance with other vagabonds, able to distinctly depict the most turbulent segments of the Chinese contemporary mind. Their tendency to focus on those living at the bottom of society derives not only from concern for social justice evinced by intellectuals, but also from the feeling of connection from shared living.” (Wang 2011:47)

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16 I explore the importance of the Sixth Generation directors as well as their distinction from the Fifth Generation directors in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

In what follows I'd like to explore the last two explanatory components of Wang's assessment – a feeling of connection due to shared living conditions and a concern for social justice – in order to better understand the motivations and tensions at work within the documentary impulse to record the marginal Other.

### *Shared Living and Social Distance*

We may take Wu Wenguang's career as an example that not only offers a compelling and representative view of various transformations in creative approach, but one that is also intimately connected to the two components of Wang's analysis. Wu, as a filmmaker, has continually revolutionized his methods and his interests, and with each revolution he disavows the previous body of work. Thus, his career trajectory is one of constant deconstruction. It moves from an initial practice of filming the lives of the (self) artist marginalized, to filming the lives of those who are socio-economically marginalized, and ends in his ostensible abdication of filming in favor of putting the camera in the hands of the Other.

Indeed, after being celebrated at film festivals around the world for *Bumming in Beijing* and his follow-up film, *At Home in the World* (1995), wherein Wu tracks down and films the bohemian artists appearing in his first feature who have fled China for more comfortable lives in Europe and the United States, Wu moved further away from both professionalization and the burgeoning success of the art world and instead cultivated a personal approach that embraced the kind of self-critical compulsion and ethnographic fascination with the subaltern akin to recent anthropology, though Wu does not claim anthropology as a major influence. Ecstatic with the freedom of movement and ease of production a small DV camera makes possible, Wu tagged along with a traveling song and

dance troupe, a ragtag group of quintessential vagabonds adrift in *jiangbu*, to film his documentary *Life On the Road* (1999), which, appropriately enough, has the Chinese title of *Jiangbu*. He contends in an interview with Lu Xinyu that his films prior to *Life on the Road* are all “garbage” (Lu 2003:15). Furthermore, in an essay he wrote titled *DV: Individual Filmmaking*, Wu praises this new process of traveling far away from Beijing, the center of Chinese cultural production, and living and filming freely with the troupe in such an intimate way that makes possible a merger of life and film:

“I would like to talk about how the feel of this project was totally different than the very ‘professional’ kind of documentary filmmaking I had done before. With this project, I just carried the DV camera with me like a pen and hung out with the members of the troupe. Every day my ears were filled with the rough sounds of Henan dialect; evenings were spent lying under the big tent, surrounded by the sleeping forms of the roadies, the air filled with the stink of feet and the smells of the wilderness while the stars glittered through the holes and cracks in the tent’s roof. Getting up in the mornings, I would pull on my shoes, walk out of the tent, and take a piss in the wilderness, the air incomparably clear and fresh and perfectly silent. A young roadie would be squatting not far off, taking a shit; we would greet each other: ‘You’re up.’ At times like those, Beijing felt really far away. All that modern art, really far away” (Wu 2001).

With this poetic description Wu not only announces his insistence on a form of filmmaking that distinguishes itself from the establishment of contemporary art and documentary production by being strictly “personal,” “individual,” and “amateur.” He also casts himself as a quasi-ethnographer who affectionately embraces and, at times, romanticizes even the tiniest details from the lives of his marginalized film-subjects.

Significantly, this embrace that oscillates between validation and romanticization closely resembles how Maoism extolled the masses and enacted a wide-sweeping romantic interpretation of China’s peasants. As Maurice Meisner comments, “for half a century Maoist thought was characterized by a deep emotional attachment to the rural ideal of ‘the unity of living and working’ and the rural traditions of ‘plain living’ and ‘hard work’” (1982:98). This romantic ideal of the peasant masses also gave rise to “sent-down youth” (*zhixing*) and “to the village” (*xiaxiang*) movements, which essentially forced urban youth to

relocate to the countryside to study and absorb the peasant values of hard work while also sharing with peasants the knowledge they gained in city schools. Born in 1956, Wu Wenguang was a product of these movements. After high school graduation, he spent four years from 1974 – 1978 in the countryside as an “intellectual youth” (*zhibishi qingnian*). Clearly, Wu’s appreciation for his time filming among the *jiangbu* of the “big tent” operation echoes Mao’s own proclamations at the outset of the Cultural Revolution: “I have spent much time in the rural areas with the peasants and was deeply moved by the many things they knew...Their knowledge was rich. I was no match for them” (Meisner 1982:99).<sup>17</sup>

Rather than analyze Wu’s creative shifts through a perspective that takes account of his personal experience in China’s revolutionary history, Valerie Jaffee sees his ethnographic and romantic impulse through the lens of class (2006:87). She argues that Wu’s filming style, unlike the intimacy achieved with his artist-peers, remains distant and thereby makes visible a fundamental alienation from the troupe dancers based on their socio-economic differences. She does not detect affection or excitement within Wu’s roving camera but rather a cold, clinical gaze. Further, she senses an additional chasm that hinges on the status of artist. That is, despite Wu’s championing of the amateur, she claims it is evident that, from his responses to interview questions posed by Lu Xinyu, he is ambivalent about accepting these singers and dancers as creative equals (Jaffee 2006:88-89). Wu emphasizes the fact that they sing pop songs composed not by them but by the mainstream cultural establishment, and this observation may in fact be an indirect critique of their status as authentic artists on a par with Wu. Thus, Jaffee aims to raise doubts against the sincerity in Wu’s valorization of these lower-class performers living under the tent as – unlike the intellectuals and fellow artists Wu

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<sup>17</sup> Meisner quotes here from the *Joints Publications Research Service 49826* (12 February 1970): 30.

disdains even as he masterfully courts their company on occasions when institutional validation is needed – the “rightful inheritors” of the struggling artist ideal (2006:88).

Wu’s next creative tack came in 2007, one year after Jaffee’s critique, and can be understood, I argue, as a response if not directly to Jaffee then to similarly formulated critiques, some coming from Wu himself as he continued the deconstruction of his practice and approach as an artist. Faced with the offer to realize a public diplomacy collaboration between the European Union and China by documenting the trial implementation of election proceedings in select villages, Wu decided against assuming his standard role as documentary director, no matter how much joy and freedom his personal and amateur style afforded him. Instead, he set up the Village Documentary Project, which was a training program for ten villagers to come to Beijing, all expenses paid, and learn how to operate a camera and editing software. After this initial training period, they would return to their village to shoot and then bring the footage back to edit under the guidance – and curatorial vision – of Wu and his technical staff. In bringing together two socio-political experiments – one experiment in implementing a village-level democratic mechanism and the other in self-representation – the project received tremendous press in both domestic and international media, and has produced more than ten films since its inception in 2007.

Although it is not within the scope of this ethnography to document and analyze the brief but rich history of this program, it is important to note a number of tensions that exist within the program. First, echoing Mao’s sense of being “no match” for his peasant Other, Wu has continually remarked that the village-filmmakers are far more adept at producing documentaries than he ever was or could be (Wu Wenguang 2011). Does Wu really believe this, or is it a part of his continual self-criticism, his rejection of his previous modes of creativity, and his abiding desire to provoke? Another, albeit related, tension revolves

around his relatively unchecked power within his artistic compound, Caochangdi Workstation. At the technical level, he exercises curatorial power in that he selects what films from the Village Documentary Project will be exhibited (out of the ten original filmmakers, only four remain active today). He intervenes in the shooting process by paying a visit to each filmmaker during production in their respective home villages as well as guides the filmmakers as they edit during post-production. Of course, he also documents this process and has edited together a feature-length film, *Show Your Stuff* (2010) that, appropriate to its title, claims to lay bare his involvement in the complex social process of each film's production. Finally, his most recent focus, the Memory Project, operates in a similar fashion to the Village Documentary Project but replaces the villagers with youth. For the Memory Project, Wu trains recent college graduates to operate cameras and editing software. Once they have learned these production skills, they are sent back to their native villages (or their ancestral village) to record oral histories of the Great Leap Famine (1958-1960) by interviewing the elderly still surviving in the village. By exploring this highly sensitive topic, the young filmmakers are not only contributing to a valuable alternative archive of suffering under Mao, but also, through the process of interviewing, are themselves awakening to knowledge of recent Chinese history that has been systematically denied to them. The tension here is that the Memory Project has supplanted the importance of the Village Documentary Project; thus, villagers are swapped out for college grads, but Wu Wenguang remains as the ultimate curator of films that all evince an impulse to record Chinese history and an unmistakable concern for social justice.

### *Social Justice and National Consciousness*



Indeed, the films of the Memory Project and the Village Documentary Project all share a concern for social justice that Wang underscores above in his analysis of Chinese independent documentary in general. Stretching back before Wu Wenguang and the advent of independent documentary, this concern for the nation's ethical compass and the moral economy of the masses has been an ongoing preoccupation within Chinese intellectual circles throughout history. That is, a central function of intellectuals has been to serve as a voice warning against social injustices and corruption throughout Chinese civilization.

In fact, the major genesis narrative for another modern mode of cultural production, modern Chinese literature, is commonly understood to have begun with a call-to-arms at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Set in the dark space of a medical classroom in Japan, the protagonist in this story is the great Chinese writer-to-be, Lu Xun, who was pressed to the study of medicine overseas at the Sendai Medical School. Like many Chinese intellectuals of the time who were obsessed with the uncertain fate of the nation, Lu was eager to return to the mainland and join in the reform process necessary to reverse a stultifying backwardness that only violent confrontation with Western powers revealed. It was the self-proclaimed duty and singular mission of Lu as well as many of his countrymen to fix the motherland and, further, lift it from its disgraced geopolitical position. One day in class a set of violent and shocking lanternslide images radically altered the methodology he would choose to pursue this wide-sweeping national reform. In his preface to his first short story collection *A Call to Arms*, Lu recounts that moment:

[As a medical student in Japan] I dreamed a beautiful dream that on my return to China I would cure patients like my father, who had been wrongly treated, while if war broke out I would serve as an army doctor, at the same time strengthening my countrymen's faith in reformation.

I do not know what advanced methods are now used to teach microbiology, but at that time lantern slides were used to show the microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructor might show slides of natural scenery or news to fill up the time. This was during the Russo-

Japanese War, so there were many war films, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a film showing some Chinese, one of whom was bound, while many others stood around him. They were all strong fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, who was to have his head cut off by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle.

Critics such as David Der-wei Wang have deemed this the “primal moment” for modern Chinese cultural production, thereby framing it within Lu’s nationalistic response to an act of traumatic violence (Wang 2004). Here, in this process of witnessing a beheading (albeit mediated through the lantern slide), Lu Xun’s focus per se is not on the occupying Japanese forces or his hapless Chinese compatriot about to be beheaded. Rather, what appalled Lu Xun to the point of making a life-altering decision to abandon medical practice and pursue literature – in effect, to value the morally transformative potential of aesthetic experience born of literature over the medical applications of technical training – was the indelible, piercing image of his countrymen, apathetically standing by, observing the plight of a fellow Chinese with utter indifference or, even worse, mild delight.

He goes on to explain the reasoning behind his decision as well as his newly defined goal of spiritual reformation:

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn't really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement. There were many Chinese students in Tokyo studying law, political science, physics and chemistry, even police work and engineering, but not one studying literature or art. However, even in this uncongenial atmosphere I was fortunate enough to find some kindred spirits. We gathered the few others we needed, and after discussion our first step, of course, was to publish a magazine, the title of which denoted that this was a new birth. As we were then rather classically inclined, we called it *Xin Sheng* (*New Life*) (Lu Xun 1960).

After finding his community of writers and getting their own publication off the ground, Lu Xun went on to become the father of modern Chinese literature. His body of work, first ignited by the cultural possibility enabled by indifference in the face of a brutal killing, offers

not only critique and exposure of China's darker cultural forces but also inspiration for others in attempting the artistic representation of suffering and violence. In hopes of effecting social change, he also introduced the concept of a “culture of onlookers” (*kanke wenhua*), which he used to criticize the cultural phenomenon of Chinese who standby merely watching, refusing to intervene as an atrocity or injustice unfolds before their eyes. This detached form of spectatorship, for Lu Xun as well as for other reform-minded intellectuals and artists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, is not condoned as a position of neutrality or naturalized response, but rather censured as a cultural practice tantamount to an egregious moral failure.

Interestingly, this critique of a particular cultural form of detached observation – “culture of onlookers” (*kanke wenhua*) or “the surrounding gaze” (*weiguan*) – has significant relevance for directors and viewers of independent documentary. It is arguably one of the motivating factors behind Wu Wenguang’s Village Documentary Project and the Memory Project; that is, Wu seeks to offer the tools to both villagers and youth to awake from a gazing slumber and become active social agents. In addition, it also informs a critique some audience members and even filmmakers level against other directors who employ a cold, detached observational camera: Xu Xin has commented that he morally could not shoot suffering film-subjects who are in helpless situations or victims of violence the way Zhao Liang does in both *Crime and Punishment* (2007) and *Petition* (2009) (Xu Xin 2011). Thus, for some directors, engaging in independent documentary production cannot simply be a passive mode of witnessing suffering and injustice, but must in fact harness the power of filmic images to address China's social issues in a manner that is neither complicit with authority nor exploitative of film-subjects. Other filmmakers, as I discuss in the next chapter, claim the opposite: that the occupation of the director is to record the harshness of

social reality with a similar aesthetic and ethical harshness in order to hold up a mirror to society's dark side of moral depravity and inhumanity.

In addition to underscoring the potential power of filmic images, Chow also highlights an important connection between modern visuality, spectatorship, and the formation of (national) self-consciousness in what she calls “the post-colonial third-world” (Chow 1995:9). In her analysis, Lu Xun, while watching the lantern-slide, is hyper-aware of varying layers of spectatorship: that of his apathetic countrymen in the film; that of his cheering and clapping Japanese classmates who are watching, along with Lu, a representation of a powerless China; and that of his own self-conscious spectatorship which renders him, at one and the same time, a subject who sees and an object being seen. Chow states that:

“Lu Xun discovers what it means to 'be Chinese' in the modern world by watching film. Because it is grounded in an apprehension of the aggressiveness of the technological medium of visuality, self-consciousness henceforth could not be separated from a certain violence which splits the self, in the very moment it becomes “conscious,” into seeing and the seen. 'Being Chinese' would henceforth carry in it the imagistic memory – the memorable image – of this violence. National self-consciousness is thus not only a matter of watching 'China' being represented on the screen; it is, more precisely, watching oneself – as a film, as a spectacle, as something always already watched” (9).

Chow's observation here is apt, and in concluding this chapter, I argue that the *jianghu*, despite being a space of marginality, is still deeply and tightly interwoven with the concept of Chinese nationhood. Indeed, this perception of oneself as Chinese, a self-consciousness that merges with a larger national consciousness, is not only operative in the independent filmmaking world, but also takes on the form of an obsession. To understand this consciousness and anxiety over the very image of China as an experiential and creative obsession helps explain why many independent filmmakers almost exclusively focus on topics that relate directly to China's cultural and national identity; how some filmmakers can perceive documentary as a powerful tool to “fix” the nation and “cure” it from its woes; how other filmmakers, rather than being motivated by an intellectual obsession with the

nation, seek personal gain by capitalizing on the expectation that international audiences welcome depictions of the dark sides of China; why most of the Chinese independent film festivals do not make it mandatory to provide English subtitles to the films screened; why only a handful of the ever-increasing number of independent films coming out of China reach an international audience; and, finally, why Chinese independent cinema can be understood as a site of resistance against mainstream cultural production that operates according to market-oriented logic and a state censorship system that seeks to silence any cultural product that may encourage mass action against the status quo.

Finally, in the narrative of Lu Xun realizing his calling, Rey Chow has noted that what goes less emphasized is that this originary moment for modern Chinese literature began within the beaming projection of a coevally nascent art form: film. She argues that the projected filmic image itself – a completely new, modern, and “shocking” form of visuality – thrust itself onto Lu Xun as a “menace” with a violence parallel to the violence of execution itself (Chow 1995:8). She observes that:

“For Lu Xun himself as a film spectator, we may say that what he 'sees' and 'discovers' is not only the cruelty of the execution or only the apparent cruelty of the observers, but the direct, cruel, and crude power of the film medium itself. In its projectional thrust, film intensifies the shock inherent to cruelty in the form of an attack: similar to the beheading about to be experienced by the victim, the effect of the film images on Lu Xun was that of a blow” (Chow 1995:8).

Chow’s reference to the “projectional thrust” of the image is echoed in the writings of modernity's critiques such as those by Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger as they grappled with the disorientation caused by the era's assaulting sensorial, though primarily registered as visual, field (Benjamin 1969) (Heidegger 1971) (Vattimo 1992). The intense affective and physical impact of images and image-making has thus been a dimension of cinema's power since its origins, and continues on through into the digital video era of today. For, it is equally at work in the immediate and raw digital video images captured by

contemporary documentary filmmakers, which are then beamed into darkened screening spaces for the audiences who gather for precisely the “shock” of independent cinema, which I explore in greater detail in chapter two.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Aesthetics & Ethics of Chinese Independent Documentary: Intersubjectivity, Interobjectivity, and the Cruelty of the Social**

At the closing awards ceremony for the 7<sup>th</sup> annual DOChina festival held in May 2010 at the Fanhall Film complex in Songzhuang – a gentrified artists' village at the far eastern edge of the Beijing municipality – young animator, poet, and filmmaker Xue Jianqiang was recognized with an honorable mention for his haunting documentary *Martian Syndrome*. The award came with 2000 RMB, a Panasonic DV camera (the jury's official comments noted that Xue lacked his own camcorder and had to borrow one to make his film), and the chance to speak before a gathering of who's who in Chinese independent documentary filmmaking. He no sooner got his hands on the microphone than had these words to share with his peers and elders:

“Now it's time to criticize you, you idiotic documentary directors. You only fucking know how to use TV stories and TV aesthetics to make films. You think of yourself as a blemish on your film, and so you cut yourself out and lose many secrets that lie behind your documentary. I can see clearly every cut you make. You want society to be open. You want every person you film to be open, but you yourself are not open and cut yourself out. You are dictators. This is totally a kind of... Since you shoot people, you should let other people shoot you. Only like this is it OK. Otherwise your logic is a violent logic. Thank you” (Xue 2010).

If this unexpected outburst did not have enough impact on the audience gathered in the Fanhall Film complex's state-of-the-art theater, it reappeared a few months later in digital form: captured by Xue's friend on a Handycam, it forms the first few minutes of Xue's follow-up feature, *When I Was Young I Also Beat a Tiger* (2010). In a bold move of self-reflexivity – as well as a testament to the ubiquity of DV cameras capturing live all moments great and small within the Chinese documentary world – *Tiger* arguably marks a first step towards a metadiscourse on the Chinese independent film scene itself.

The film is a naïve yet cutting romp through Beijing's notable alternative documentary centers and organizations – namely, Caochangdi Workstation, Fanhall Films, and the Li Xianting Film Fund. It features Xue as a self-styled provocateur using his critique of the “logic of violence” to make multiple attacks on, and pursue multiple inquiries into the methods employed by the older generation of filmmakers. In perhaps the film's most shocking moment, Xue barges in on Wu Wenguang, the figure often cited as the father of independent documentary in China, and asks to chat. Wu, obviously annoyed and wary of the brash intruder, blows off Xue's repeated attempts to know his opinion on the young director's films and personal character. Xue retreats from Wu's gated Caochangdi Workstation but later returns with the fiction film director Ying Liang, a well-respected filmmaker with whom Wu suddenly has time to sit down and talk. Omitting the content of the conversation with a quick and artless cross-fade, Xue cuts right to his chance to pounce on the patriarch. He thrusts his camera into Wu's face and insists: “I've seen all your films and only [your 2005 film] *Fuck Cinema* is OK. Your village documentary project is good, but your time is over. You shouldn't make films anymore.”

In these outbursts, is Xue driven by genuine concern for the “logic of violence” – an imbalance in power relations wherein the filmmaker conceals him/herself while importuning the film-subject to bear all – underlying the filmmaker-film subject relationship in the works of his peers, or is he perhaps an ambitious upstart motivated by a desire to revolt against the more established order of filmmakers?<sup>18</sup> It is nonetheless interesting to consider how Xue's

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<sup>18</sup> In the independent film movement as in other art movements, scholars have often deemed the question of periodization and categorization an important undertaking. Analyzing the shifts in creative motivation and aesthetic concern, Lu Xinyu has articulated a distinction between what she calls a “First Phase” and a “Second Phase” of independent documentary filmmakers. For Lu, the “first phase directors,” who now constitute the established generation, occupy the position of a social observer and embrace an “artisan” identity in opposition to the perceived elitism of the art establishment. Lu sees “Second Phase” directors – such as Xue Jianqiang – as more directly affected by the “rise of the individual” in Chinese society; therefore, she contends that they are less committed to claims of objectivity, and more self-reflexive and performative in style than the “First



attack resonates with concerns persistently raised by scholars and critics tracking the scene. These concerns hinge on a sense that a particular observational filmmaking style that unreflectively claims “truth” and “objectivity” in representation not only holds reign in Chinese independent documentary but that it also raises ethical questions that tend be pushed aside, if addressed at all. The over-arching ethical concern at stake within the critique is the power imbalance inherent to observational cinema’s ostensible goal of a detached observer striving for objectivity and recording the lives of those who remain powerless in the shaping of their own representation.<sup>19</sup>

Two recent reports of independent festivals held in different Chinese cities in 2009 express these concerns. Abe Markus Nornes' report on the Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival (Yunfest) in Kunming and the 6<sup>th</sup> DOChina Festival in Songzhuang portrays the documentary world as flourishing and vibrant, but ultimately faults the Chinese directors for their “renegade” approach to documentary ethics and for falling short of formal innovation. He concludes that “having tired of their conservative devotion to direct cinema, not to mention roughshod camerawork and sound for otherwise amazing films, I look forward to something new” (Nornes 2009:55). Similarly disappointed in the documentary output at the 6th China Independent Film Festival held the same year in Nanjing, Chris Berry demurs: “listening to a forum of documentary filmmakers, it was clear that observational cinema still predominates in Chinese independent documentary” (Berry 2010).

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Phase.” Further, these “Second Phase” directors embrace the label of “artist” as they search for a new method to dialogue with society. However, Lu’s assertion of a “Second Phase” is undermined by the sustained reliance on a filmmaking approach that continues to adopt an observational aesthetic to explore under-represented sectors of Chinese society.

<sup>19</sup> As I argue below, it is dubious to claim that Chinese independent documentary today is wholly analogous to Direct Cinema of the 1960s; however, these ethical questions are strikingly akin to the 1970s backlash against the American documentary movement. For more on the critique of Direct Cinema, see Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” (1975) in: Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory. A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press 1999, pp. 31–40.

This is not to say that other approaches to documentary filmmaking have been entirely absent. Xue's deviation from straight and strict verite is not an anomaly: from Ju Anqi's voxpop-styled *There's a Strong Wind in Beijing* (2000) to Hu Xinyu's exploration of his own domestic realm in *The Man* (2005) and *Sisters* (2008) to Wu Haohao's provocateur "action cinema" (*xingdong dianying*), best exemplified in his *Action/Kun 1* (2009), there has been a range of experimentation and shifts away from the observational. In addition, Luke Robinson has pointed out how the heterogeneity of formal elements that operate *within* the films themselves renders them fairly resistant to the categories we may try to thrust upon them (Robinson 2010). In fact, more than a few documentaries that would for the most part fall under the rubric of observational cinema also seamlessly incorporate informal interviews and moments of self-reflexivity to varying degrees, as seen in Feng Yan's *Bing' Ai* (2007) and Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2003). Further, recent years have witnessed the rise of what some refer to as the "second wave of independent documentary," characterized as foregrounding the poetic, the participatory, and the performative against the first wave of "public," observational documentaries (Robinson 2010; Lu 2010). The 7<sup>th</sup> DOCHINA, with the buzz created by Xue's *Martian Syndrome* and Li Ning's autobiographical documentary *Tape* as well as the special section of "Private Portraits" devoted to Wu Wenguang's three most recent works, may indeed bode well for the fate of "private" documentary in China.

Yet, by and large the dominant mode of filmmaking in the independent documentary world continues to reveal the "real face" of Chinese society – as opposed to the state-approved programs of mainstream media – through the formal approach based on observation that has alternately been called cinema verité, the observational mode, or direct cinema. In fact, Chinese film critics, academics, and filmmakers – most notably Wu Wenguang, who spent two months in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1997 as a guest in the

home of direct cinema documentarian Frederick Wiseman and observed his working method – acknowledge the wide-reaching influence of direct cinema on Chinese independent documentary filmmaking (Wang 2012; Lu 2003; Berry et al 2010; Pickowicz and Zhang 2006). Literature and film scholar Lu Xinyu has described how Wiseman, during his sole visit to Beijing in 1997 for a retrospective of his films at a state-funded film conference, made a substantial creative impact on independent documentarians through candid discussions with them about his work, which offers critiques on the various ways power operates in institutional settings in the United States (Lu 2003).

Even before Wiseman's visit, however, early independent documentaries in China were influenced by the direct cinema approach: for example, the visual style and montage of both Zhang Yuan's *The Square (Guangchang) 1994* and Duan Jinchuan's *No. 16 Barkhor Street (1996)* are indebted to Wiseman's probing, patient aesthetic which serves to reveal absurdities and contradictions within the power dynamics that shape social space. Japanese verite director Shinsuke Ogawa, who made documentaries *with* (rather than *about*) radical political movements in 1960s and 70s Japan, has also been cited by filmmakers as a creative inspiration for his engaged, activist approach to documentary (Feng 2009). In contrast to Wiseman's non-reflexive, non-interventionist approach, Ogawa's films, while still observational, present themselves as clearly in league with and committed to the film-subjects in their struggle for social justice. Given the influence of these two figures, the bulk of academic discourse concerned with independent Chinese documentary has cast this sphere of cultural production as descending from a creative lineage that enshrines Frederick Wiseman and Shinsuke Ogawa as totem gods and espouses an austere and spontaneous filmmaking style (no voiceover, no extradiegetic music, no staging, no formal interviews) that serves as stark witness to the injustices and social suffering that find no place in the

official narrative of China's triumphant rise to global ascendancy (Berry et al 2010; Pickowicz, Zhang 2006; Lu 2003).

### *Xianchang Aesthetics*

Yet, there have also been a number of Chinese film critics and filmmakers who argue for understanding the Chinese independent documentaries produced since the advent of digital video as forming their own unique aesthetic tradition. Film critic and programmer Wang Xiaolu has argued:

“Many Chinese documentary directors have understood the direct cinema style of Wiseman and Ogawa as a kind of mentor for their own filmmaking, but the kind of direct cinema style used in China also evinces its own different sense of space, even if it has some Western-influenced direct cinema qualities to it. The Chinese approach is closely connected to China's contemporary social conditions and spirit of the times” (Wang 2012).

The first term that can be associated with an indigenous aesthetic of Chinese independent documentary – though never explicitly set to the goal of shoring up a unique space for Chinese aesthetics – is *xianchang*, which translates as “live” and “on the scene” and is observational in shooting style. Wu Wenguang was one of the earliest proponents of *xianchang*, which he developed in the early to mid 1990s with fellow independent filmmakers such as Duan Jinchuan and Zhang Yuan during informal meetings in his Beijing apartment, which arguably formed the first *jiangbu* of independent cinema. These filmmakers – straddling a position between freelancers for state news agencies and active contributors to and enthusiasts of avant-garde art – defined it as a shooting style, applicable to both narrative and documentary features, that was conducted “in the present and on the spot,” and advanced an aesthetic counter to the pervasiveness of the scripted media productions of the state, for whom most of the early independent documentaries worked for at one time

(Wu 2000:274).<sup>20</sup> Film scholar Luke Robinson has noted how *xianchang*, as an approach predicated on responding to the unplanned and the indeterminate inherent to the filmic encounter, accommodates contingency instead of evading or omitting it as official media would seek to do (Robinson 2010). In distinction to the term “documentary realism” (*jishi zhenyue*) which is closely related to *xianchang* but has fallen out of use, Robinson points out the continued popularity and, thus, inviolability of *xianchang*, claiming it to be “a thread that binds together an increasingly diverse Chinese documentary scene” (Robinson 2010:180). Indeed, the principal style of Chinese documentary continues as *xianchang* and the goal is to record the flow of lived-experience as it unfolds, only rarely including overt self-reflexivity and, to return to young Xue Jianqian's rowdy critique, almost never turning the gaze of the camera directly back on the filmmaker.

However, no matter where directed, every act of pointing a camera carries the subjective imprint of the operator. David MacDougall has emphasized the inherent reflexivity of photography and cinematography: both forms of image-making “refer back” to the image-maker and, through framing, “reveal the sensibilities of the author by focusing on certain subjects or displaying a distinct way of looking” (MacDougall 2005:4). Thus, image-making is always corporeal, and “corporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relation to the world” (MacDougall 2005:3). Understood thus, a *xianchang* or the observational approach admits of self-reflexivity in that it entails an embodied camera.<sup>21</sup> On this reading, then, the directors Xue attacks are never actually able to completely cut themselves out of their images. For,

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<sup>20</sup> Wu even published two volumes bearing this term as title, *Xianchang I (Document 1)* and *Xianchang II (Document 2)*, respectively. These publications featured film criticism, interviews with documentary and narrative filmmakers whose works were interpreted as made in the *xianchang* style, and attempts to expand the interpretive function of *xianchang* as relevant for other artistic practices, such as performance art and dance.

<sup>21</sup> It is also for this reason that one of the main proponents of *xianchang*, director Wu Wenguang, has emphasized that his fiercely individual and independent form of filmmaking resembles a personal “diary of images.” Wu, Wenguang. 2010. Program for The 7<sup>th</sup> Documentary Film Festival China (DOCHINA), p. 47

attached to the embodied camera is the filmmaker's own subjectivity, which contends and connects first with the subjectivities of film subjects in the filmmaking encounter and then with those of audience members in the multivalent process of reception. It is to these interactions – the intersubjective dynamics each film posits – that we must look to understand the *xianchang* aesthetic's popularity in Chinese documentary as well as the ethical complexities entwined with it.

While the relative ease of shooting in the observational style – simply stand nearby and record while life passes by the camera's lens – and its contrast with mainstream media's ostensibly more manipulated productions are certainly factors in the construction of this preference, I argue that one major reason for the dominance of *xianchang* in Chinese independent documentary is because it serves to adequately address social suffering. Through these independent films we witness how suffering and violence may shape the film understood as a social process, which includes the filmmaker's image-making as well as his/her relation to film-subjects, and yet always extends beyond, ramifying throughout the larger social realm. Thus, Xue's cry against the "logic of violence" and the scholarly critiques of a default observational style overlook how Chinese independent documentary opens up to a shared experience of social suffering that suffuses the profilmic and marks the subjectivity of the filmmaker. Further, from the ripples of psychic damage that weigh down upon the artist film-subjects of Wu Wenguang's early and seminal *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990) to the expressions of extreme grief and anger by parents who lost their children in the 1994 fire that stands as the centerpiece of *Karamay* (2010), Xu Xin's six-hour expose of the suppressed tragedy, countless independent Chinese documentaries have not only served as testimonies to the overlooked and often actively denied narratives of pain

and injustice suffusing Chinese society today, but also doubled as a creative process through which the filmmaker may work out his/her own experience of social suffering.

With these observations as a point of departure, my aim in this chapter is to elucidate how the *xianchang* aesthetic is able to open up various cinematic spaces that, rather than necessarily adding up to a logic of violence, may potentially serve as responses to violence and injustice experienced in the social world. I aim to do this, however, without losing sight of the very real and pressing ethical questions that are produced by documentary production and exhibition, and that may themselves, as Xue avers, (re)produce violence. In fact, throughout the chapter, I will explore several cases wherein the relationship between film-subject, filmmaker, and the filmmaker's quest for the problematic notion of documentary truth and/or career gain give rise to moral ambiguities and ethical problems that are diagnostic not only of the current state and ethos of Chinese documentary, but also shed light on the potential danger in every act of indexical representation. I begin with an overview of *xianchang* as an indigenous Chinese cinematic aesthetic and then explore some of its formal elements – including its relationship to the pro-filmic – that render it fertile ground for both *intersubjective* and *interobjective* experience. These observations then lead to a closing discussion of how the appeal of many of today's independent documentaries lies in their capacity to constitute a powerful form of witnessing trauma and suffering.

### *Ethical Debate: The Shamans/Animals Manifesto*

Those tracking Chinese independent documentary often contextualize the aesthetic commitment to *xianchang* as possible only within a post-socialist era of media reform and, perhaps more importantly, as reactions to both the didacticism of socialist realism and the

lavish films of the 5th Generation (Lu 2003; Berry 2006; Johnson 2006).<sup>22</sup> Further, in contrast to official and commercial productions, independent filmmakers are seen as able to bridge the gap between mainstream media and the everyday experience of Chinese people by turning their DV lenses to the marginalized corners of society, thereby contributing to an unofficial and ever-expanding archive of counter-discourse. They aim to expose the hardships and complexities of China's shifting social landscape and render visible the injustices that transpire in the dark overlooked corners of the nation's economic miracle. In terms of production, filmmakers tend towards an ethnographic model, investing considerable stretches of time living among their film-subjects and, in most cases, working solo for all phases of production. DV technology has allowed them to pursue low-budget, individual efforts that remain unadorned by smooth camerawork or post-production polish, but also unfettered by government censorship. Raw reality thus serves as an antidote to official and commercial gloss. And the antidote has been celebrated and pursued with increasing gusto since affordable digital video cameras hit Chinese markets in the 1990s. Indeed, there has been a boom of amateur video production as people from all walks of life pick up camcorders and adopt the title of independent director.

While the popularization of documentary filmmaking has developed a unique indigenous Chinese digital cinema aesthetic – and a dynamic alternative sphere of cultural production – it has also led to a saturation of productions and, perhaps more alarming, serious ethical questions regarding the exploitation of film subjects and the politics of representation. Due to the indexical quality of film, and the complexities inherent to the politics of representation, the documentary genre has always been intertwined with ethics and often gives rise to unforeseen moral implications for both filmmaker and film-subject.

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<sup>22</sup> I also explore this point further in Chapter 3.



In recent years, several Chinese independent festivals – those peculiar events where tribes of filmmakers, cinephiles, curators, academics, and critics gather together to watch and discuss films – have become sites for some of the most animated and sometimes hostile debates concerning documentary ethics. These debates have focused mainly on the perennially complex issue of documentary representation and the relationship between the filmmaker and film-subject. At the 2009 Yunfest, the central ethical debate revolved around Xu Tong's *Wheat Harvest (Maisbou)*, which I will discuss further below. The most recent debate springs from the academic documentary forum organized by Wang Xiaolu at the 8<sup>th</sup> China Independent Film Festival (CIFF) in November 2011. The forum was dominated by the academic presenters, and their comments and critiques ignited an impassioned and censorious response from documentary filmmakers. In response, that night over a ample supply of rice wine the filmmakers composed a Cultural Revolution era “big character poster” (*dazibao*). Titled *Shaman/Animals*, the filmmakers' response critiques the academic critics on several accounts: using outdated and stilted frameworks of class consciousness, power relations, and social differentiation; assuming a position of superiority over both filmmakers and film-subjects in delivering theoretical pronouncements and ethical judgments; and lacking first-hand experience of actual production and the filmmaker/film-subject relationship involved in documentary filmmaking. Here are some memorable quotes:

“Reject a film critical perspective that is remote from common people, one that abuses a concept like 'the lower strata of society.' Do you like this concept because you feel that you are in a position of superiority?”

“Can an intellectual-style round table discussion have any possible constructive nature?”

“For the past few years, it seems that we’ve abandoned discussing film language. It’s more fun discussing the ethics of social differentiation.”

“If possible, watch more movies. If you ever have the opportunity, then try to shoot a film. If you’ve never shot a gun yourself, how can you teach someone else to shoot?” (Kraicer 2011).

From follow-up conversations and informal interviews I conducted after CIFF, the bulk of the filmmaker's fury was aimed at the tone of Lu Xinyu's presentation as well as her attachment to using – or, in the words of the manifesto, abusing – the term “lower class” (*diceng*) to delimit the social status of the majority of film-subjects at whom Chinese documentaries tend to aim their lenses. Both of these elements – Lu's tone and her insistence on filtering everything through a framework based on class – are indeed deserving of critique.

As a filmmaker, I too have rejected the kind of criticism that smugly operates as a blind application of theory, completely ignoring a film's specific qualities and its unique underlying concerns. Nonetheless, this indignation directed towards Lu points to the rift between Chinese academia and the directors. Although a single academic cannot represent all critical discourse, the tenuousness of these relations between Lu – a representative of the official institution of Chinese higher education – and the local moral world of independent documentary is also revealed in the filmmakers' willingness to conflate her particular approach to scholarly critique on that day with the goals and roles pursued by all critics in general. Such far-reaching dismissal undermines the potential for productive dialogue between critics and filmmakers, and overlooks the productive insights she and other critics do present.

There are two interrelated and recurring assumptions at work within the *Shamans/Animals* manifesto that I would like to address. One assumption is that filmmakers themselves know how best to handle documentary ethics, and the other is that theoretical or intellectual discussion of ethics is useless, counter-productive, and detached from reality. Both of these assumptions have their value and their place, and they also underscore the importance and uniqueness of the lively, intense, and transformative lived-experience of

documentary production, where film-subject and filmmaker are brought together as individuals engaged in a very complex intersubjective and emotional process. But this process, and the relationship between filmmaker and film-subject, are nonetheless penetrated and shaped by greater forces – social, economic, political, and legal – that are greater than our intentions as filmmakers and, therefore, worth investigation. This investigation is best conducted on both an individual and a collective level, since no one person, whether director or critic, can hold a comprehensive and infallible view of the ethical concerns raised by each act of representation.

Another obstacle to such investigations may be the term “ethics” itself. For some thinkers, “ethics” denotes a set of rigid general principles that are used by a few – government officials, leaders, and academics – to govern or criticize the behavior of many. What I mean by “ethics” here, however, is a form of *concern for* and *responsibility towards* the Other that is never based on prescribed principles, is always shaped by context, and serves to open space for discussion. Yet, due to the empty rhetoric of morality employed by the Chinese government, as well as the many instances of moral bankruptcy within Chinese academia itself, the term “ethics” may now be widely perceived as shallow and meaningless. Furthermore, I also see aesthetics and ethics as intrinsically intertwined and inseparable, just as form and content are interrelated, and these connections deserve thorough analysis and discussion from directors and viewers alike.

David MacDougall, a filmmaker-scholar whose films and writings about film offer great insight into the aesthetic and social process of filmmaking, has pointed out that “the real 'crime' of representation is representation itself” (MacDougall 1998:38). In a similarly realistic take on the violence and exploitation involved in recording the lives of others, Wu Wenguang has addressed this “crime of representation” in his documentary *Fuck Cinema*

(2005) by focusing on the power dynamics and conflicting motives for each individual involved in not only the film industry but also film production itself. In the October 2011 issue of the Chinese monthly publication *Cinema World* (*Dianying Shijie*), the two interviewers summarized Wu Wenguang's understanding of the moral implications inherent in documentary film with a rhetorical question: “isn't this a form of using and exploiting suffering?”

Perhaps the most pessimistic response to the inescapable potential for exploitation in documentary comes from Sergei Dvortsevov, who has made four powerful documentaries about lives on the margins of Russian society. His sense of guilt over the moral dimensions of nonfiction filmmaking was so great that in 2005 he announced that he was giving up documentary and turning to fiction film: in the end, he said, documentary had “morally exhausted” him. By his own account, when making a documentary, he was unable to handle the ethical dimensions of the process:

“I interfere very strongly with someone’s private life, and then make art out of it. It’s very controversial for me. The documentary film for me is essentially a terrible thing...First you live with that person a long time, you interfere with their life, and then you recreate it and show to others – that is, basically, absurd. Documentary film is controversial in a way, I think it is a very unhealthy genre” (Dvortsevov 2005).

Dvortsevov's reaction to this crime, this “original sin” of documentary, is rather extreme and unfortunate for documentary film. Most importantly, I do not suggest that, because of the inevitable moral complexities, documentary filmmakers all switch to fiction. Rather, I want to point up the complex web of moral ambiguity and ethical concerns entailed in documentary practice and, at the same time, explore the range of responses to these thorny and pressing questions. MacDougall, for example, has not stopped making nonfiction film despite his sense of the “crime” of representation. Instead, his active awareness and interrogation of the politics of representation – in dialogue with a community of critics and

fellow filmmakers – have continually sharpened his sensitivity to responsibility to the film-subject without dulling the power of his documentaries.

### *Documentary Cruelty & Filmmakers' Responsibility*

Given the vast, unpredictable ethical questions raised by a documentary, some filmmakers even feel it to be a good practice to screen the film to film-subjects before its release, ask for their feedback, and respect their requests for changes. Others, however, do not see the value in pursuing these questions or in giving the film-subject a chance to vet the film; in fact, they may claim that their pursuit of “truth” should not be hampered by objections based on ethics or legality. This seems particularly true today in Chinese documentary, as filmmakers often cite the quest to expose the “dark” and “hidden” side of society as a justification for their filmmaking approach. From another perspective, film scholar Yiman Wang employs the term “the documentary of cruelty” as a label for films that are produced in “deliberate violation of the codes of decorum, or the documentary ethic, that help to maintain the subjects’ dignity” (Wang 2005:16-38). According to Wang, filmmakers see these transgressions as necessary and justified in the pursuit of footage capable of “cutting into the private realm of everyday reality and exposing it with unbearable clarity” (Wang 2005:16-38). A “documentary of cruelty,” then, would not bother to share the finished film with the film-subject(s) upon whom the film focuses. In *Documenting China*, Lu Xinyu points out that the film-subjects of Li Hong’s feminist documentary *Out of Phoenix Bridge* were not only denied a chance to see the finished film but also unaware of its success. Even the fact that their images, voices, and personal stories have made their way to festival and university audiences around the world remains unknown to these four migrant women from Anhui. In an interview with Lu, Li Hong herself confessed that documentary

filmmaking is a cruel, unbalanced process and that she felt her film amounted to “robbing” from her subjects, who stood to gain nothing from their participation in the film (Lu 2003).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Valerie Jaffee has observed how, in the past decade, independent filmmaking has differed from the output of early independent documentary by tending to turn the lens on the *jianghu* of marginalized groups, the poor, and ethnic minorities: “in these later films an obsession with the Other – with impoverished people speaking in exotic dialects and living at the mercy of socioeconomic forces – has led to what I see as the heart of this discourse of amateurism: an attempt to lodge the aura of art in the Other, and to redefine the self in so doing” (Jaffee 2006:102). Thus, although Jaffee posits a distinction between the progenitors and their Other-centered successors, she sees a general and sustained “self-consciousness” and “narcissism” at the heart of independent filmmaking in China (Jaffee 2006:103). We must continue to interrogate this obsession with the Other by examining the cultural history, the power dynamics, and the ethics entailed in this (perhaps unconscious) act of cultural cataloguing. Further, I want to ask what the countervailing trajectories of an orientation towards the Other and the self-consciousness Jaffee highlights might reveal about the subjectivity of these filmmakers? What are the goals and motivations in probing *jianghu* for film-subjects? To what degree are directors reflective on their own positions as artists and intellectuals engaged in a kind of cultural production that seeks to represent the plight and suffering of the marginalized?

A recent case study is the informed consent controversy at the 2009 Yunfest that erupted around Xu Tong’s *Wheat Harvest*, a portrait of a young woman from Hebei province earning money in Beijing as a sex-worker in order to pay for her father’s medical expenses back home on the farm. During the festival it was discovered that the protagonist, Hongmiao, was not aware that Xu was making a film destined for domestic, let alone

international, exhibition. One of the festival's main sponsors protested the awards given to the film. Xu argued that she both knew and accepted that he was taking footage – the level of intimacy he achieves would be practically impossible if she did not – and, further, that at the time of shooting even he himself did not know what would become of the rushes. Following an eight-hour discussion the pressure relented and Xu was allowed to keep the awards. However, the lively debate from this incident that ensued on internet blogs caused Hongmiao tremendous alarm. She contacted Xu and asked to see the film. Xu refused, fearing she would have a negative reaction and perhaps try to censor certain scenes. The two of them eventually agreed that, in order to keep her occupation a secret from her parents (and legal authorities, for that matter), the film would no longer be screened in Mainland China. He also agreed to edit a “memorial video” for her of footage he did not use for the final version – a version that excludes discussion of her sex-worker occupation or any other sensitive material. But Xu Tong has still not shared the film with her. This kind of incident is what compels Nornes' critique of “renegade” ethics and, in the views of some scholars and NGO representatives, serves as an example of Wang's “documentary of cruelty.”

It also demonstrates that filmmakers are not necessarily the best judges of how to handle the ethical dilemmas produced by representing the lives of others. They may not even be aware there are any potential problems. Yet, in constructing an intimate, compelling, and revealing portrait of an individual engaged in an illegal and socially taboo occupation, Xu Tong made a film that, in addition to showing her strength and filial piety in the face of hardship and scorn, also carries the power not only to deeply disrupt Hongmiao's domestic life and her relationship with her family, but also to subject her to legal action that could lead to her incarceration. This danger was not Xu Tong's intention; however, had he

not been challenged at Yunfest, Hongmiao would not have put a stop to the film's domestic exhibition and *Wheat Harvest* might have gone on to screen in many more locations within China, which is, on the face of it, ideal for Xu Tong and for Chinese audiences; but, the film's greater national success might have caused egregious effects on Hong Miao's life.

Zhang Zanbo's *A Solemn Tranquility* (2011) is another more recent film which carries perhaps an even greater potential for grave damage to the film-subject. Screened at this year's Beijing Independent Film Festival in Songzhuang and the 5<sup>th</sup> Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival – yet conspicuously not selected for screening by the China Independent Film Festival – the structure of *A Solemn Tranquility* (*Yizhong Jingjiao de Shengyin*) is organized around a surprise visit to director Zhang's modest apartment by a hometown classmate who has come to Beijing for work: he is an “interceptor” of petitioners, sent to Beijing to bring petitioning villagers back home so that their appeals for justice do not reflect adversely on the local government. Thus, like Zhao Liang's *Petition* (*Shang Fang*), Zhang's documentary presents an incredibly rare and valuable view of the petition process from the ground level; however, unlike Zhao's downtrodden and suffering petitioners, Zhang's film-subject stands within the state apparatus, giving an opposing yet complementary perspective of this legal mechanism.

Almost as soon as he opened the door for his former classmate, Zhang understood the value of this oral record. He immediately grabbed his camera and recorded their two-day encounter, from his living room to the taxi, from the office space where the petitioners are detained to the cozy modern hotel and massage parlor where his friend unwinds. All along the way, with a gift of rhetoric and poetic phrasing cultivated while he was a student of Chinese literature, Zhang's friend discloses not only his own personal trespasses and infidelities (for example, the fact that he has a lover), but also instances of corruption and



injustice within the levels of government higher than his own rank. (Incidentally, the title of the film, *A Solemn Tranquility*, refers to the literary description the interceptor uses to relate to Zhang his utter sense of awe when a higher-ranking official snuck him into China's central government compound, Zhongnanhai).

As I watched this cynical yet thoughtful young man bear all to Zhang's lens, indicting himself and others in government positions, speaking candidly about the absurdity and injustices pervading Chinese society, I (and many others in the audience) experienced a wonderful thrill: finally, someone from the official side, from “other side,” is admitting the unpunished crimes and unbridled self-interest that has produced tremendous suffering across China. This titillation, however, is dangerous; for, it possesses the power to overshadow and muffle ethical questions concerning the consequences of such full disclosure for Zhang's interceptor-friend. If this film is seen by government officials who recognize him or the names and locations he mentions, he will likely face legal action, perhaps for crimes as serious as revealing state secrets. Why was I temporarily willing to overlook the very real legal dangers for this particular film-subject, and yet feel that the case of Hongmiao is clearly an example of a moral breakdown in responsibility towards a film-subject?

Of course, one obvious reason for overlooking the ethical dilemmas in Zhang's film is that we experience a kind of satisfaction witnessing a crafty and corrupt low-level representative of the government hang himself with his own words. That is, as he himself traffics in deceit and usury, it seems fair and just that he should be undone by similar methods. Another reason is that we may assume he was fully aware that he was the subject of a documentary production, fully aware that he knocked at his *director*-friend Zhang's home, and fully aware that Zhang was filming everything he said. So all his disclosures were

committed with full awareness that he was being filmed by an active, if not commercially successful, filmmaker. In this way, one could argue that the film-subject was giving a tacit consent to be filmed. But this consent would also have to be understood through the dynamics of the shared history and friendship between film-subject and film director. Similarly, one could argue that Hongmiao was also extending this consent to Xu Tong because she was aware that his camera was constantly trained on her every move, her every word. Yet, because Xu did not avow to her that he was producing a work of art out of the footage he filmed of her life, it is also not a clear-cut case. She herself may also have felt tremendous concern for and responsibility towards her new friend and didn't want to stand in the way of what he wanted: to film her life.

Residing within these two documentaries, the danger for both Hongmiao and the interceptor still remain, and it is Xu's and Zhang's responsibility as filmmakers (and friends) to not only consider the consequences, but also be open to critiques from others that would reveal consequences they themselves as directors did not foresee or preferred to conveniently overlook. After the BIFF screening, an audience member asked Zhang Zanbo if he had shown this film to his friend, the film-subject, and he said he has yet to, though he plans to soon. Later, I asked him how he planned to handle distribution, and whether he had thought of what would happen if officials saw the film. He replied: "I have distribution figured out; I am going to carefully control when and where it will be screened" (Zhang 2011). While this response is a sign that Zhang is aware of the danger his film may create for his friend, it is not an adequate approach to handling that danger. Once a film is out, released, screened, and DVDs are circulating, it is impossible to control whose hands it lands in. After all, we all know China is the kingdom of pirated DVDs.

Once I got over the initial excitement of *A Solemn Tranquility* and began to ruminate on the hazards it could create, I wondered why Zhang did not consider employing a different visual track than the “talking head” style. For, film images are indexical – they refer exactly to that person, place, or thing – and that inescapable fact, along with verbal references to particular individuals and places, is exactly where the potential dangers lie. In short, the written word can easily conceal identities and mask locations, but filmic images cannot (unless you blur a film-subject's face and alter the voice in post-production).

Although there is a compelling gritty *xianchang* quality to being face-to-face with this interceptor in the cinematic space created by Zhang's lo-fi camera, it would be less legally dangerous and perhaps even more aesthetically engaging to create a visual track that concealed the identity of his friend. An alternative way of visually constructing the film would also move it beyond the conventional, direct relationship to “reality.” Zhang has made experimental films before, and perhaps, in the name of responsibility to his film-subject as well as an interest in seeking new forms of filmic expression, he could challenge himself to employ a visual approach that would not detract from but, in fact, amplify the words and confessions of his friend. Do we really need this man's face and identity for his disclosures to have power? Is there a way to visually enhance the power of his words by employing something other than straight, direct realism? When I posed this question to Zhang, he responded that the observational style – and all its indexicality – was necessary for his film because he wanted to register the painful experience of a man – his friend, the interceptor – who had been altered by his social experience. In effect, Zhang wanted to portray a Chinese idealist who, through his political involvement with the state and the economic aspirations and pressures of his social milieu, had been reduced to a cynical realist whose allegiances and goals were wholly shaped by his own self-interest. Implicit here is

Zhang's sense of his own complicity and his own experience with this form of personal transformation.

### *The Persistence of Xianchang & Quiet Observational Cinema*

Hoping for greater accountability extended towards film-subjects, many critics anticipate that the ever-increasing number of more personal and self-reflexive films will refresh the scene. This expectation may arise from a comparison, all too tempting to draw, between the documentary scene in China and earlier ones in Europe, the U.S. and Japan. That is, similar to the shift away from cinema verité and direct cinema that dominated the '60s towards more personal and self-critical documentary in the '70s that took place outside China, an eventual decline of the dominant observational aesthetic is seen as inevitable within China. The ever-growing output of more explicitly autobiographical and fiction/non-fiction hybrid films mentioned above demonstrates the diversity within Chinese documentary, even if international festivals and scholars have been slow to acknowledge the importance of these less observational works, preferring to continue to lavish praise on the more conventional and staunch verite of filmmakers such as Wang Bing or Zhao Liang.

Furthermore, while the introduction of more self-critical elements in representing the Other may help soften contentious tactics employed by some directors today, one objection to this prognosis is that neither self-reflexivity nor the use of other documentary modes necessarily ensures ethical filmmaking. In Xue's overtly self-reflexive *Martian Syndrome*, for example, one of his film subjects makes repeated requests not to be filmed and at one point even asks for the DV tape in Xue's camera. Xue not only continues filming and refuses to hand over the tape but also, at the climax of the conflict, puts down his camera – still rolling – in order to chase and thrash his unwilling film subject. For Xue, it is the decision to

include this eruption of violence that exempts his work from trafficking in the “logic of violence.” In this case, as also for the numerous verbal lashings Xue unleashes in *Tiger*, this justification is satisfying perhaps only to Xue himself; for, the mere fact of the filmmaker's appearance before the camera lens – which is often a guarded performance of the self – does not absolve him/her from criticism for abusing film subjects. In fact, no mode of documentary can claim the moral high ground over others, since what constitutes responsible filmmaking is never fixed, always shaped not by external ethical prescriptions but rather by the specific dynamics of the filmmaking encounter and the uses to which the resulting footage is put.

Thus, while speculating about what is on the horizon remains a worthwhile endeavor, it is also vital to continue to consider some of the reasons why this largely observational *xianchang* cinema has generated excitement both overseas and within China's own borders. I will explore a range of possible hypothetical reasons below. For, by virtue of their amateur and independent status, these films do not usually screen to mass audiences; however, they do generate impassioned responses from their growing number of viewers. The energy in the theater (or gallery or café or classroom) during screenings is often intoxicating. Perhaps, in more cases than we would like to admit, this excitement is a result of an Orientalism, both external and internal; that is, audience members are so enlivened because they share with the filmmakers a curiosity about the social and cultural “Other,” whether it be a young prostitute, a Tibetan nomad, or a mentally-handicapped drifter.<sup>23</sup> Or perhaps it is the suspenseful thrill of what Dai Vaughan has called the “horror of a documentary,” which “can lie in our being required to conceptualise (or – if there were such a word – *perceptualise*) the world in a certain way and being, at least for the duration of the

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of “internal Orientalism,” see Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China,” *Modern China*, Vol. 23, No. 1, January 1997. 69-98

film, powerless to intervene in it” (Vaughan 1999).

Film scholar and filmmaker Li Xiaofeng draws on China's native philosophical tradition of Daoism to contextualize the wide appeal of the observational mode of documentary throughout the Mainland (Li 2011). From the moment direct cinema arrived in China, Li states, it was adopted with alacrity and bloomed as a filmmaking style due to its resonance with indigenous Daoist aesthetics, which, for Li, clearly still possess philosophical relevance and cultural influence despite the barrage of attacks launched on Chinese traditional culture since the Communist's victory and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In a collection of essays by filmmakers and critics published and edited by Yunfest organizers Yi Sicheng and He Yuan in March 2011 and titled *Today (Jintian)*, Li Xiaofeng writes that

“after the direct cinema films entered China, their [production] concepts of 'don't interfere, don't control' produced a strong resonance with Chinese Daoist aesthetics in a marvelous way. It seemed as if in an unexpected burst of fortune, Chinese documentarians were more predisposed than their American counterparts to assume relative neutrality and adopt a stance of the 'onlooker.' They seemed more respectful of the ambiguity and diversity of reality. Maybe this is due to the restraint, calm, and philosophical nature of that Eastern people have adapted as their outlook on life” (Li 2011:49).

Thus, for Li, the non-interventionist approach of direct cinema found an even more fertile philosophical ground in China than it enjoyed in the United States. Whether or not this claim can be effectively measured, one thing is certain: for Li, China's independent digital nonfiction filmmaking can be construed as the 21<sup>st</sup> century expression of a long-standing Daoist aesthetic which, akin to direct cinema, values receptivity over partiality and contemplation over exposition.

Significantly, Li Xiaofeng's provocative observations in his short essay regarding the connection between Daoist aesthetics and Chinese independent filmmaking have been echoed in the writings of Wang Xiaolu, who has published extensively on Chinese

documentary, served as programmer for Yunfest and China Independent Film Festival, and interviewed many of the leading directors of the independent film scene. In an effort to take stock of the vast number of documentaries that have been produced independently in China since the early 1990s, as well as codify in precise terms a uniquely Chinese documentary tradition, Wang conceives of an entirely new term for Chinese documentary, which he has calls “quiet observational cinema” (*jingguan dianying*) (Wang 2012). One immediately apparent complication with this particular terminology preferred by Wang is that it arguably fails to be effective in linguistically differentiating the Chinese indigenous aesthetic from the already existing term, the observational mode, which has been adopted in cross-cultural discourse on documentary. Yet it is crucial to hold onto the range of senses - including “quiet,” “calm,” and “contemplative” - evoked by the Chinese character 静 (*jing*), which is rooted in Daoist notions of meditation and acceptance. An alternative formulation could be “contemplative cinema;” however, this also seems a poor fit since many of China's independent documentaries do not offer distanced contemplations of social reality but rather constitute video registers of the tumultuous events they capture. Regardless of the complications in terminology, Wang lays out his criteria and thoughts regarding this classification of “quiet observational cinema” in an article titled *Quiet Observational Cinema and Relational Aesthetics* which features the following ten main points (translated for the first time in English):

1. Quiet observational cinema is intimately related to the spirit of traditional Chinese culture. Scholar Li Xiaofeng has explained the presence of Daoist aesthetics in independent documentary. The earliest I elucidated such a connection was in 2007, before the two of us had ever discussed the topic, and this coincidence verifies the connection.
2. Quiet observational cinema is closely associated with an anti-technique culture. But there are two kinds of anti-technique culture: one is an active opposition, wherein the filmmaker pursues simplicity over technique, and is a dedicated to allowing the emergence of unexpected phenomena before the camera; the other is a passive opposition, which is, in fact, just inadequacy [on the part of the filmmaker] in the foundational elements of technical skill and experience.
3. Related to the points above, [quiet observational cinema] makes extensive use of long take

aesthetic. The long take is a kind of deep, experiential aesthetic form, granting a more complete experience of time and space. In the process of watching, the director, audience, and film-subject establish a space of shared feeling. Ji Dan says her documentaries, through her experiential approach, actually achieve a sense of undifferentiated [subjectivity].

4. In the early 1990s, quiet observational cinema was a linguistic strategy imbued with political awareness – in opposition to the television aesthetic of conventional voiceovers. But later, this kind of initiative became passive, the revolutionary spirit disappeared, and its strategy of depoliticization eventually become a total cancellation of political perspective. This is entirely different from the process of "re-politicization" that some Chinese independent documentary filmmaking is undergoing in recent years.

5. The popularity of quiet observational cinema is also associated with the self-loathing and self-positioning by intellectuals in the early 1990s. At this moment the intellectuals were in despondent state, they began to reflect on the practices of grand discourse and sermons to the clouds and opposed making the lower strata [of society] merely material for their views. They no longer serve as the "spokesman" of the lower strata, but instead try to pull back and let them speak for themselves. In the eighties, the intellectual discourse was often an exuberant elitist discourse, and later some directors began to oppose such a discursive mode.

6. Quiet observational cinema is a powerless form of filmmaking. The film-subject and the filmmaker are in an equally powerless situation, and this parallels the development of civil society in China. Being outside the environment of power does not provide much freedom of action, so in order to face such a hard reality, filmmakers can only implement this observational style. Quiet observation is political, but it is a specific politics, and different from the more direct political practice of some documentary filmmakers today [i.e. Ai Weiwei, Ai X'iaoming, Hu Jie].

7. Quiet observational cinema sometimes reflects a lack of comprehensiveness and confidence in the subject – we often establish a monotonous mode of social interaction film-subject(s), since we still do not know how to build more diverse and richer relational schema. This kind of documentary is unlike some documentaries from Hong Kong and Taiwan, wherein the filmmaker freely enters the film, including performing before the lens and even openly directing film-subjects.

8. Quiet observational cinema has relative resonance with insights from Western phenomenology. The spread of phenomenology in China may be based on some misunderstandings, but it still produces some inspiration. Phenomenology asserts that, in the process of understanding the outside world, humans should suspend their existence, so that the object may appear undisturbed. Thus, critics have a collective tendency to see the director's notion of "forget the self and verify the real" as a virtue. When director Ji Dan and I discussed this, she talked about a difference between herself and another documentary director Shaqing, she said she is relatively anxious and invasive, while Shaqing is relatively quiet, gentle, and therefore more "at ease". She feels being at ease is a realm.

9. Quiet observational cinema is a "truthful" cinema, even a cinema of justice. I have already written an article that states, at the time, the lack of truth in [mainstream] documentary led some filmmakers to willfully seek truth. Documentary is able to become poetic prose, to be a form of self-expression.

10. Quiet observational cinema offers an approach to suffering. There is a kind of subconscious [understanding]: the deeper the suffering, the greater the value of the film, thus it takes on an aesthetics of suffering. Quiet observational cinema will sometimes naturalize suffering, as if suffering is a natural property, life is just fundamentally like this, so it is difficult to mobilize with activist strength. Subjectively, it is compassion, but objectively it is powerless. Later, interventionist documentaries and citizen movement videos became the two extremes (Wang 2012).



In his essay, Wang observes, like many others, that the dominant documentary style in China has continued to be observational and has continued to efface the presence of the filmmaker. He states that with these ten main points he is trying to shore up a historical understanding for the unique qualities of Chinese independent documentary.

One of the pressing questions, however, is what cultural or analytical work “quiet observational cinema” does that *xianchang* has not or does not. Both terms can be employed in the agenda to establish an indigenous Chinese aesthetic and refute unilateral formulations of cinema development that relegate to China in a position of “backwardness”, still operating in documentary’s recent past. In terms of actual nomenclature, on first glance it is clear that “quiet observational cinema” seems to amount to only a slight variation on the style of documentary known as the “observational mode” that Bill Nichols established decades ago within the discourse on nonfiction film (Nichols 2001). It is unclear if positing such a similarly-worded term is intended to draw the two disparate discourses – Chinese non-fiction film discourse on one hand and Western non-fiction discourse on the other – closer together and thereby enable greater dialogue, or if Wang is rather reaching for something new and vital. *Xianchang*, of course, is by far more exotic, more evocative of indigenesness, and perhaps therein resides its lasting power. But the ten points that Wang raises – especially his observations about Chinese independent documentary's relation to suffering and to its affinity with phenomenology – all prove to be important contributions to understanding Chinese documentary and will be echoed throughout the remainder of this chapter.

In addition to the focus Wang’s “quiet observational cinema” places on Daoist aesthetics, phenomenology, the long take, the distrust of technique, and the representation of suffering, the tendency towards observational cinema in Chinese independent

documentary production must also be seen in relation to the filmmakers' consciousness of their own political accountability and self-preservation. By this I mean the potential range of adverse consequences a director may face – whether vis-a-vis the state or vis-a-vis her community – for expressing a more overtly critical position or approaching a taboo subject (such as the Cultural Revolution, Tibetan independence, Uighur Independence, or Taiwan) in her documentaries. Although documentary filmmakers tend to face far less personal political repression than activist and human rights lawyers in China, the specter of detention or house arrest still loom before them. The April 2011 detention of artist, activist, architect, and filmmaker Ai Weiwei serves as an example of the loss of liberty and hardship that the Chinese government can inflict on those who explicitly confront its authority.

### *Haptic Cinema & Intersubjectivity*

Another hypothesis is that the raw and observational DV aesthetic, in its creation of an unrehearsed and digitally visceral co-presence, substantiates what Laura Marks calls “haptic visuality,” a viewing experience that, in immersing the spectator in a rich sensorial field of textures and movements, departs from the more detached stance often associated with optical visuality (Marks 2000). In contrast to the “logic of violence” critique leveled by Xue, MacDougall has shown how observational cinema in fact possesses the potential to empower both film-subjects and audiences because of its insistence on the autonomy of the pro-filmic (MacDougall 2006). In this view, the material world – including other human beings – is self-sufficient and autonomous, with an agency beyond that of the filmmaker's. Autobiographical documentary, on the other hand, grants us access to a self-authorized “thick” description of the filmmaker's subjectivity but, in doing so, tends to work towards constraining the pro-filmic, and may even eclipse the subjectivities of others appearing in the

film.

In Li Ning's *Tape* (2010), for example, we are privy to the narrative of hardship that Li constructs as a performance artist and avant-garde dance troupe leader in Shandong, but are left more or less in the dark when it comes to the lives of those who support him and perform with him. Thus, the observational approach more readily acquiesces to the fact that reality always exceeds the intentions of the filmmaker rather than attempting to bend the pro-filmic – and by consequence the alterity of the film-subjects – to one particular subjectivity. The filmmaker's sensibility and agenda weigh down upon the world he/she depicts but can never succeed in fully becoming its master. Such a formulation of *xianchang* as caught up with the *flesh* of the world destabilizes the popular critique that it aspires to pure objectivity and a mere duplication of the scientific gaze. As Zhang Zhen has observed, Chinese independent cinema provides: “a new cinema anchored in the social and the now but also, in aesthetic terms, an alternative cinematic space that is haptic rather than optic, sensuous and open rather than abstract and closed” (Zhang 2007:21). This viewing experience also has much to do with the amateur style of almost exclusively handheld shooting, with cameras sweeping across surfaces and sliding between film-subjects.

Such an intimate and embodied camera, in turn, works to foster a valuable cinematic space of *intersubjectivity* between film subject, filmmaker, and audience. Intersubjectivity is constituted by the ever-shifting ways of social interaction and communication between subjects that accommodate both accordance and discordance, what anthropologist Michael D. Jackson has described as the “interplay of subject and object, ego and alter. Singular selves are simultaneously part of a commonality, sole but also several, not only islands but parts of the main” (Jackson 1998). Indeed, a focus on this shared space of relationships and encounters engendered not only by the actual production phase but also by the receiving

audience sheds light on the intricate nexus of relations, emotions, and ideologies that animate documentary filmmaking and viewing. Jackson's description echoes director Wu Wenguang's account of the interconnected relationships between filmmaker and film subject he experienced in the production of his film *Life on the Road (Jianghu, 1999)*: "It's not a clear-headed, outsider's gaze...Your range of emotions follow along with theirs" (Lu 2003).

A focus on this field of relationships and encounters engendered not only by the actual filmmaking encounter but also by the receiving audience opens an intricate, co-constituted nexus of relations, emotions, agendas, and ideologies that animate documentary filmmaking and viewing. Thus, despite the fact that certain dubious truth claims might go unquestioned, or that the observational style employed by primarily male middle-class directors carries the risk of merely reinforcing existing power relations, these films nonetheless often succeed at not only acquainting people who might never have meaningful contact with one another, but also committing to digital record the hardships and sufferings of others. This is not necessarily just a matter of raising awareness; for, the production process entwines the film subject and filmmaker, and the viewer's cinematic immersion into that encounter – revealed in digital fragments onscreen – connects him/her to the subjective experience of both.

Zhao Liang's *Petition (2009)*, which he filmed over the course of twelve years from 1996 to 2008, provides an example of the primacy of intersubjective cinematic space within the dominant formal mode of Chinese documentary. *Petition* focuses on a community of petitioners who have come to Beijing from the provinces to seek justice in the Chinese court system. In 1996, when still a student at the Beijing Film Academy, Zhao was searching for a documentary subject and a friend directed him to the Petitioner's Village near Beijing South Train Station. The petitioners, struggling for survival along the railroad tracks in shacks

made from scraps of metal and wood, had left their homes in the provinces in order to bring their unresolved cases and bitter grievances to the attention of the central government. Enduring the opaque machinations of the Petition Bureau for years without any substantial response to their appeals, the petitioners' Sisyphean struggle reflected an admirable tenacity and tragic desperation that immediately appealed to Zhao (Zhao 2011).<sup>24</sup>

As Jie Li observes in the work of Zhao Liang, throughout *Petition* his camera adopts a variety of styles: from direct address serving as a conduit for their vehement anger; to a humane observer of individual and collective suffering; to an embodied and self-reflexive engagement with his film-subjects (Jie 2009). As the petitioners wait in vain for justice and eke out a living with Zhao in tow, we witness several meaningful and complex relationships unfold. Foremost among them is Zhao's relationship with Xiaojuan and her adoptive mother, who have been petitioning since Xiaojuan was a young girl. Despite begrudgingly allowing herself and her daughter to be filmed, the mother remains suspicious of Zhao and, in one unforgettable scene after Xiaojuan abandons her, rails against him for his intrusion into their lives. By contrast, as Xiaojuan grows into a young woman and Zhao matures as a filmmaker, we witness mutual trust develop. This deepening connection unfolds not only profilmically between subject and filmmaker but is also refracted through our engagement with the film as audience members. Like Zhao, we as viewers are situated within the petitioner milieu, even if the irreducible opacity of each individual's deep subjectivity remains intact and we are unable to fully experience their torment and indignation. It is these varying kinds of intersubjective dynamics involving the spectator that Vivian Sobchack, in developing a phenomenology of nonfiction film reception, describes as her central concept

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<sup>24</sup> There are two versions of the film, a two-hour version for international festival programming and a five-hour trilogy version for the "domestic" audience in China. The two-hour *Petition* premiered in Cannes in 2009 and the longer version took the top documentary award at both the 2009 DOCHINA festival and at the 2010 Hong Kong International Film Festival.

of the address of the eye: “It is a visual address always housed in a situated body experienced as ‘mine’ and yet always also able to extend itself to where that body is not. It is able to reflectively connect that body both with its own future and past situations and with the bodily situations of others” (Sobchack 1992:27-28).<sup>25</sup>

### *Interobjectivity & Witnessing*

Sobchack’s evocation of the role of the body in relation to intersubjective cinematic space is important here because a large number of Chinese documentaries, like *Petition*, depict the aftermath of actual physical trauma and represent experiences of suffering that constitute the dark side of China’s economic development. In one particularly striking scene of *Petition*, Zhao’s tracking camera allows us to sense his body-in-motion and, more importantly, his body-in-shock as one among a group of petitioners searching a railroad line for the clothes and body parts of an elderly petitioner who was chased to her death along the tracks. Suddenly, his camera fixes on the meager material remains of the pursued woman: a piece of skull and her severed hand. What is revealed in Zhao’s decision to linger over the skull bone and the severed hand is the horror of encountering the evidence of death, which Sobchack argues is experienced by subjects like us as “other than we are and as an object” (Sobchack 2004).

While death remains an extreme beyond our comprehension, the experience of the body as a suffering object is one we are all able to share. *Petition* puts forward a steady stream of disturbing images of the suffering body, of the body as an object that can be acted

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<sup>25</sup> In Sobchack’s project to construct a film theory on the basis of phenomenological thought, she asserts that “as a philosophy of conscious experience, phenomenology systematically grounds the attempt of this study to make explicit the phenomenon of signification in the cinema as it is lived through and embodied in an enworlded subject of vision, that is, as it occurs existentially and directly for us and before us, rather than abstracted from us or posited against us” (1992:27-28).

upon and mangled: from the man beaten so heavily that his eyes turn blood-shot black to the coroner-like photos of severely injured loved ones that petitioners thrust towards the camera as evidence. Different from the confrontation with death, what strikes us as viewers in these moments, Sobchack explains, is the surprisingly intimate experience of the body – both our own body and the body of the Other in the film – as an object (Sobchack 2004). By depicting maimed, mutilated, and disfigured bodies onscreen and expressing the filmmaker’s embodied way of looking, *Petition* and many of its contemporaries make possible an ethically-charged cinematic space, supplementary to intersubjectivity, that Sobchack terms “interobjectivity,” the “co-constitutive experience we have of ourselves and others as material objects,” as bodies that can suffer, that can be vulnerable to external forces (Sobchack 2004).

Resonating with Veena Das’ philosophical contemplation of “how my pain may reside in your body,” Sobchack’s notion of interobjectivity forms the ground for ethical response to the pain and suffering of others (Das 2005; Sobchack 2004). Thus, there is a kind of social engagement at work in Chinese independent cinema that helps to further contextualize the persistence of the raw and the observational. Simply put, this kind of filmmaking serves as a humanizing response to trauma, as a witness to suffering, and as a platform for testimony. In their seminal study of testimony and witnessing in the aftermath of World War II, Soshana Felman and Dori Laub draw from literature, psychoanalysis, and film<sup>26</sup> to emphasize the inter-connection between audience and speaker, and the co-creation of a narrative of trauma:

“The listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation

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<sup>26</sup> For film, the authors focus exclusively on Lanzmann’s epic documentary, *Shoah*, which features participants of the Holocaust.

of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as a listener, and if the trauma is to emerge" (Felman and Laub 1992).

Following Felman and Laub, we may understand independent documentary filmmakers as possessing the capacity to be the primary "listeners" or "co-owners" of trauma. If the filmmakers are able to address trauma, then their digital records of suffering may then bring the co-created narrative or experience of trauma to viewers, who, for their part, if they are also able to adequately address the magnitude and weight of looking and listening, also participate in the constitution of the traumatic event.

Of course, films that testify to suffering through the structured interview format, such as Hu Jie's *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul* and *Though I am Gone*, Wang Bing's *He Fengming: A Memoir*, all three of which focus on the excesses of the Mao period, are also powerful oral histories of injustice and trauma, and perhaps have more in common formally with the testimonies analyzed by Felman and Laub than observational films. The confrontational activist mode, championed by Ai Xiaoming and artist Ai Weiwei, is another powerful way to marshal forth a protest against injustice. Yet, with *xianchang* understood as another more open-ended form of witnessing, such an approach offers an experiential receptivity to register the pain and suffering of others. Although less directly engaged than the activist mode, this process is still political in China, if not explicitly then implicitly, as the anguish depicted is often the result of state violence, corruption, or negligence – precisely that which goes unaddressed by government authorities and official media. Such accounts, committed to sound and image, become what James Scott has called "hidden transcripts," the secret discourse shared by members of the public behind the Party's back (Scott 1992).

The filmmaker Xu Xin, in his six-hour documentary *Karamay* (2010), also makes



extensive use of these hidden transcripts and delivers them in austere fashion to not only criticize the Party but also show how trauma – especially when suppressed – affects individuals and ripples out into a community. *Karamay* recounts a tragic fire on December 8th, 1994 in Karamay, an oil town in northern Xinjiang, which broke out when primary and middle school students held a performance to honor a delegation of officials. Very few students made it to safety and, in the end, the fire claimed the lives of 323 people, 288 of whom were children. The exact details of what happened remain unclear, but one thing is certain: all the city officials escaped to safety without suffering any serious injury.

The film's contemplative long-take opening shot of an early December sunrise over the graveyard housing the students' tombs eventually gives way to verité scenes of director Xu approaching tomb after tomb, caressing with his handheld camera the faded photos of the students attached to the cold stone, performing a visual elegy. As the morning light grows, a handful of grieving parents who have come to mourn their children begin to talk to Xu, speaking out their anger and sadness. The film then moves into its main formal register, which is a skillful interweaving of interviews with parents with archival footage from local newscasts and home videos to shed light on the community's experience of trauma as well as the chain of events leading up to and following the tragedy. When the stage curtains first caught fire, the students were instructed to "stay seated" and "let the leaders go first." But the fire spread quickly and claimed hundreds of lives due to startling oversights on the parts of the local leadership. Rescue attempts were delayed and, inexplicably, the fire trucks arrived on the scene more than 45 minutes after first being called. After promising martyr status for the victims and paying off the families, officials turned their backs on the traumatized citizens and intervened only to prevent them from reaching out to media or petitioning in Beijing.

When Xu began production exactly 13 years later in December 2007, the situation was still tense. The bulk of shooting had to be conducted in the homes of the grieving families, out of sight of local authorities. Although the interview format lies outside the conventions of most *xianchang* or observational cinema, Xu open-ended shooting style registers the lived and embodied experience of prolonged, unacknowledged suffering and at the same time constructs a new historical document. Indeed, Xu has stated these scenes are not easily definable as interviews, for he refrained from posing a set of questions but rather created a space not only for testimony and disclosure, but also for the parents' grief to be observed and felt. During these intimate moments where Xu adopts a self-effacing and receptive mode of filming by placing the camera on a tripod and allowing the parents to speak freely at length, the duration of the long takes opens the possibility for meaningful contact between film-subject, filmmaker, and viewer.

While the tragedy in Karamay resonates with other cases of injustice that today call for exposure – the frequent cover-up of mining accidents or the collapsed schools in the Sichuan earthquake come to mind – what is most striking about *Karamay* is that it not only gives voice to multiple narratives, but also depicts various embodiments of pain through its careful attention to gesture, speech, and comportment. There are certainly numerous emotional scenes as parents shed tears in memory of their children. Similar to the scenes of direct address in Zhao Liang's film, some parents even unleash their outrage – in an act of *sukou*, or “speaking bitterness” – at the government directly into the lens. Xu also makes use of archival VHS footage of emergency staff and volunteer rescuers carrying the charred bodies of the children through hospital hallways and placing them onto hospital beds. Witnessing these small, charred and deformed human forms plopped in piles onto hospital beds, some perhaps still breathing yet with no doctors in sight, we as viewers feel the charge

of interobjectivity wherein, as Sobchack writes, “the body-subject ‘suffers’ a *diminution of subjectivity* and, in this diminution, comes to experience – within subjectivity – an increased awareness of *what it is to be a material object*” (Sobchack 2004). Other, less dramatic moments reveal more subtle expressions of suffering. After an aging mother finishes speaking, for example, the shot lingers as she stands next to her son’s framed photo. Rather than cutting on this pause, Xu is compelled by the mother’s wistful posture to continue filming as a witness to her pain. Eventually she begins wiping the portrait not with heavy melancholy but with quotidian caresses that express her everyday experience of loss.

Zhao Liang and Xu Xin are not the direct victims of the pain and trauma their films strive to depict, and there is substantial scholarship that argues, if not for the extreme limits of testimony and the representation of suffering, then for making a clear distinction between the first-hand experience of trauma and its vicarious representation (Felman and Laub 1992). Exploring the role of literature in representing social suffering, David Morris writes that “perhaps the most important thing that literature has to tell us about suffering concerns the need for respect in the face of an experience that always holds back part of its truth, inaccessible and alien” (Morris 1997). Nonetheless, Michael Berry has pointed out that cultural texts – whether literary or cinematic – focused on the experience of pain and violence such as these films are no less powerful in the construction of cultural memory and national psyche (Berry 2008). They achieve for the filmmakers, for the body of the film, and for us, what Veena Das, writing about another nation’s recent history of violence, hopes she achieves in her anthropological project: “letting the pain of the other happen to me” (Das 1998).

*The Cruelty of the Social*

What are we to make of this project to reflect social suffering and the experience of trauma, to allow the pain of the other to mark? Independent directors have used such imagery as “double-edged swords” and descriptions of the production process as a mutual “searing” or “wounding” to express that documentary is not only damaging to the film-subject but also to the filmmaker him/herself (Wang 2005:37-38). Similarly, Wang Yiman has employed the metaphor of a lightning rod held up in a thunderstorm to describe the role of the DV director. She warns against the inappropriateness of casting independent directors as political activists and asserts that they view themselves more as individual witnesses producing subjective yet honest accounts of Chinese society. Likening them to ethnographers who expose themselves to the “multivalent material circumstances” of their surroundings, Wang states “it is only by allowing him/herself to be seared by the environment that the documentary maker is able to channel and manifest an electrifying reality” (Wang 2005).

I think this is an illuminating metaphor, not only for the reasons Wang explores in the space of her essay, but also for how it might, in turn, modify her own concept of “the documentary of cruelty” and ramify out into Chinese society. That is, the cruelty she describes exists not only within the confines of the filmmaker-film subject relationship. It also exists beyond the body of the film as a diffuse social force acting on and shaping both the filmmaker and the film subject. This *cruelty of the social* – one of the key formative aspects, in my reading, of the “multivalent material circumstances” for Chinese filmmakers today – is not only the offspring of the hardships of *jianghu* life and the countless injustices pervading Chinese society today. It is also the legacy of an intensely violent and tumultuous 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, an important and formative element of the reality the independent filmmaker reflects by raising high the lightning rod is both individual and social suffering. Against the

assumption that only careerist ambitions motivate independent filmmakers, I argue that many filmmakers are actually compelled by both social responsibility and self-examination to use DV cinema to make sense of this very experience of suffering, whether it be their own or that of the Other. Xu Xin, for example, has expressed that although he cannot claim to have faced the same trauma as the families in Karamay, his act of recording their verbalized and embodied experience of suppressed grief and pain was also a method for him to register and work through his own experience of trauma as a social being. Thus, Wang's concept of the "documentary of cruelty" can be extended and modified to characterize the DV works that serve as a response to the pain and trauma shaping the social.

By way of conclusion, I return to Xue Jianqiang. In the introduction, I raised the question of generational dynamics but held it temporarily out of bounds. I lack the space here to explore it fully, but would like to at least acknowledge – and then destabilize – concerns regarding the younger generation of filmmakers that are relevant to the foregoing. In short, a prevailing assessment of the 80s and 90s generation in China casts this age group as self-absorbed consumers driven by material desires and cut off from full awareness of the dark sides not only of China's recent history but also, if their guardians have their way, of the massive social changes taking place around them. In terms of filmmaking, then, the concern is that these young filmmakers are only capable of producing narcissistic works that lack the political and historical consciousness of their elders and fail to critically respond to social suffering.

The selective amnesia induced by Chinese authorities is indeed a genuine concern, and the works thus far produced do evince a high degree of egotism, but the effects of China's tumultuous history and uncertain present nonetheless remain embedded within the social fabric and are readily reflected through DV cinema. Xue's *Martian Syndrome* is a prime

example of a film that is shaped by the hardships of *jianghu* living and, more generally, what I call the cruelty of the social. In addition to its use of the Bazinian long take and its incisive interventions into the film's temporality, *Martian Syndrome* stands out precisely because it registers – in a vague and ambivalent manner appropriate to its themes – the social dislocation and everyday violence of *jianghu* in particular and of Chinese society in general; for, as argued in the previous chapter, the *jianghu* and mainstream society are interwoven despite their stark separation within the collective imaginary. Just as his film disturbs with its haunting imagery, it also demands a deeper engagement with the cruelty of the social – and the documentary impulse to reflect and re-create that cruelty.

Shot on a summer evening in the outskirts of Beijing on only two one-hour DV tapes, *Martian Syndrome's* unfolds with the power of Beckett's later works as its Sony NightShot aesthetic envelopes the viewer in a world of desperation, confusion, fear, and nihilism. Indeed, the dialogues in *Martin Syndrome* are on par with any piece of absurdist theater, yet it was filmed utterly spontaneously, without any pre-planning. The film begins with Xue and his friend Yang walking along a quiet street. On the way to the home of their friend Xiao Dong, a stranger around their age, Wang Xi, stops them and inquires if Xiao Dong is home. Intrigued by the shabbily clothed stranger, or perhaps just utterly bored and wanting something to do, Xue and Yang continue talking with him. Another depressive young man who is later described as "lonely" joins the discussion. Their conversation drifts from Wang Xi's recent routine of asking their friend for food, to the hardships of their shared experience as outsiders in Beijing, to incomplete statements about art and philosophy. Forlorn Wang Xi mumbles "I am from Mars" and Xue responds with alacrity "I'm from Mars too." Eventually, Xue and Yang leave the two needy interlopers and step into Xiao Dong's home. They find him alone, shirtless, shaking in sheer terror due to Wang Xi's

harassment. Yang begins to caress and calm his friend as Xue continues filming, panning around the room to a bedside knife. Eventually, Xue steps outside again and begins to argue with Wang Xi about the DV tapes. Their tempers escalate until Xue suddenly attacks. After we hear the audio of the beating (we only see the dark dusty lane where the camera was set down), Xue collects his camera and goes back indoors. Some time later, Wang Xi returns and stands outside the door asking for a chance to take revenge on Xue. This NightShot section, which constitutes the bulk of the film, closes with a long take of the frightened yet fed-up Xiao Dong lecturing the remorseful Wang Xi through the screen door, which serves as a textural metaphor for their tense communication. The film's final shot removes us from this nightscape and places us in daylight: we are suddenly at the Fanhall Films complex in Songzhuang where scores of people are milling about the courtyard. A festival must be on and the crowd is ostensibly waiting for the next screening. Suddenly Xue's camera pans to a young man seated at one of the courtyard tables: it is Wang Xi seated among us.

Through his openness to letting a film take shape around him – and for allowing the desperation of Wang Xi, the trembling fear of Xiao Dong, and the sudden violence he himself exhibits to mark the videotape – Xue has brought forth a unique chronicle of the experience not only of migrants in the capital but also of the social surround of violence, suffering, and desperation within Chinese society and pervading *jianghu*. Demonstrating that the everyday can be brutal and horrifying, he makes the inherent cruelty of the social the very fabric of his work. Indeed, with its elucidation of the process by which cruelty and violence, in the words of anthropologist Veena Das, “becomes so embedded into the fabric of the social that it becomes indistinguishable from the social,” *Martian Syndrome* also contributes to an understanding of the moral experience for contemporary Chinese struggling to survive within the *jianghu* (2007:219).

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The State, Distribution, and Co-optation: Jia Zhangke, Zhao Liang, and Ai Weiwei**

While the affordability and consumer-friendly interface of DV camcorders and editing software has significantly lowered many economic and technical barriers to independent film production in China and, consequently, given rise to a growing popularization of the amateur documentary form, the expected attendant proliferation and distribution of these films on digital format has only partially been realized. This is due, I argue in this chapter, not to any failings in the capacity of the digital but rather attests to the efficacy and breadth of strategies employed by the state to control, shape, and guide cultural production. Indeed, contrary to what many scholars and observers anticipated would be a deluge of digital distribution – including digital cinema projection (DCP), digital video discs (DVDS), online streaming, and downloadable torrent files – the Chinese state's tight regulation of both film exhibition and the internet has reduced the dissemination of independent film to a trickle, at least for the domestic audience. How has the state achieved this? Through what mechanisms does it succeed in keeping independent film off-line, off-screen, and out of sight? What practices of independent distribution do exist, and what tactics can filmmakers use to survive economically without income from box offices, television contracts, or mainstream home video sales?

#### *Film Exhibition and Censorship*

Film exhibition in China is a highly regulated distribution channel that is intimately connected to the state. All selections of film titles hopeful for a theatrical release in China – and thereby gaining access to audiences and ticket sales at cinemas, cineplexes, and all other screening venues connected to commercial exhibition – require official approval from the



State Administration of Radio, Film and Television's (SARFT) (*guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju*). SARFT, an executive branch under the State Council of the People's Republic of China, not only administers state-owned enterprises such as China Central Television, China National Radio, China Radio International and other movie and television studios engaged in cultural production. More pertinent to the discussion of independent filmmaking, it is also responsible for vetting all potential commercial releases and censoring any materials that run counter to the sensibilities of the Chinese government and its cultural standards.

The censorship process proceeds thus: a film whose producer(s) intends for it to reach a domestic audience via official channels such as cinema exhibition and/or television is reviewed by members of SARFT's censorship committee which is invested with the power to determine what films may be incorporated into China's official film industry. After viewing, this committee may accept the film or reject it based on legal grounds that it offends the ideals and dictates of the state. Alternatively, rather than reject the film outright, the committee may request specific changes and/or omissions be made to it. If the filmmaker complies with these requests, then the re-edited film may be re-submitted for another process of review by the committee, who then may reject, accept, or ask for further revisions. If the film finally passes approval, then SARFT bestows upon it a "Dragon Seal" (*longbiao*), which allows the film to be screened in commercial venues.

Significantly, there is no standard for gauging what might not pass the censorship committee. Besides the clear taboo on highly sensitive topics – such as Tibetan, Uighur, and Taiwanese independence or the Cultural Revolution – what exactly counts as offensive, unacceptable, or dangerous to the Party regime is always fluid, shifting, and unpredictable. As Paul Pickowicz has pointed out, "the state clearly 'allows' underground films to be made. But, with one important exception, the state refuses to spell out in any detail what is

acceptable and unacceptable in terms of subject matter. The exception, of course, is that no direct criticism of the party or state is allowed. Those who engage in such criticism will be isolated, detained, even jailed” (2006:6). This tenuous ground on which filmmakers who seek theatrical release tread not only reflects the very real divisions within the state; that is, cultural liberals within the Party are in a continual struggle for power with the more conservative members to determine what filmic content the state deems to be morally reprehensible. The shifting lines, by virtue of their very uncertainty, also serve another important function: since filmmakers have no concrete understanding of what is acceptable, they are induced to self-censor before ever going before the SARFT committee.

Of course, most independent documentarians seek to evade this guessing game of self-censorship as well as the gauntlet of official censorship by simply not submitting their films to SARFT. Thus, they willingly forego the potential income and social impact that their productions could generate in order to maintain artistic integrity and creative independence. Although this decision not to participate in China’s official film industry could itself arguably be seen as self-censorship, filmmakers often testify to the fundamental importance of resistance to state control that their stance of independence supports and maintains. In other words, they are emboldened by a moral imperative to uphold a vital alternative mode of film production.

### *Distribution Channels*

However, the question of how this alternative mode of production can reach audiences and sustain filmmakers remains. For international audiences, a handful of exceptional filmmakers do have the opportunity to show in film festivals around the world and even win cash prizes in international competitions; however, the percentage of

filmmakers who achieve this is quite low, and there is no guarantee that each film that moves through the transnational festival circuit will receive awards. For the domestic audience, with theatrical release and television contracts out of the range of possibility for independent filmmakers, the modes of distribution are limited to independent film festivals, online streaming, torrent downloads, and DVD sales.

Independent film festivals, while granting filmmakers prestige within the small circle of artists, scholars and cinephiles, tend to reach a very limited public. Further, given their independent status, these independent film festivals tend to lack the resources to award substantial monetary prizes. Interestingly, the Chinese title of every independent film festival actually omits the term “film festival” (*dianying jie*) and, instead, uses an alternative phrase such as “film forum” (*dianying luntan*) or “image exhibition” (*yingxiang zhanlan*). This shift in nomenclature is crucial. For, in China, the difference between “forum” and “festival” is significant: it frames the ambiguous interplay between the unofficial film scene and the Chinese state’s regulation of media. If the organizers wished to use the term “film festival,” they would have to make a formal application to SARFT and possibly the Ministry of Culture for official approval.

In order to evade both the bureaucratic process and, most importantly, the possibility of censorship, they have elected to employ the (currently) less sensitive terms and thereby curtail restrictions brought about by government intervention. Although this language game may appear trivial, it nonetheless shows the festival organizers’ awareness of the potential volatility that resides in the intersection of shifting government policies and critical artistic expression. In recent years, and especially in the year leading up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2012 that featured the major transition in leadership that takes place every ten years in China, that potential volatility has been increasingly actualized

through direct state intervention. The fierce and unrelenting pressure from multiple levels of government on the organizers of the 9<sup>th</sup> Beijing Independent Film Festival, held in Songzhuang in August 2012, is a recent example, and will be examined further in the following chapter.

Online formats for distribution, whether in the form of online streaming or torrent downloads, have fared even worse than film festivals in recent years. The initial hope was that internet distribution of independent film would help filmmakers and activists leap over the existing obstacles and gatekeepers of the film industry infrastructure and thereby connect with audiences. Streaming and torrent downloads were, at one time, thought to be pathways to freedom of information and democratic channels for dissemination of video. What happened instead was that the Chinese government erected the Great Firewall to block video-streaming websites that allow user-submitted content such as Youtube and Vimeo, as well as social network sites such as Facebook. They do offer Chinese alternatives such as *Youku* and *YY*; however, these sites are closely regulated and filtered through censorship channels. The state has already created an enormous internet police force who patrol the world wide web and not only remove content deemed morally inappropriate or dangerous to the regime's security, but also replace content critical to the government with propaganda which praises the Party. Thus, the internet police force – reported to boast some 50,000 officers – is able to take down films that have been uploaded for torrent download sites; block streaming videos; and erase posts on social media sites such as the microblog *weibo*, China's twitter.

This strict control over the internet does not deter some filmmakers from posting their work anyway, in the hopes that between the time of the initial post and the time of the police force's detection and removal of the site and/or content, at least some Chinese

netizens will be able to download or view their film. Ai Weiwei's Studio, discussed more in-depth below, is an example of an entity that consistently engages in this game of digital cat and mouse. Through Ai's team of workers and international connections, he is able to re-post films on a range of websites, moving content to new, usually overseas website hosts each time the police discover and block the current site. Others, such as the Fanhall Films website, which was once the central nexus of online discussion of independent films as well as the main source of information for exhibitions and distribution, have not been able to overcome the intense state supervision. After the Fanhall Films website was blocked in early 2011, Zhu Rikun tried multiple times to re-launch the site through different hosts but was unsuccessful due to the unrelenting government surveillance of the organization and the online platform for discussion and debate that it provided. The fact that Fanhall did not provide online streaming or torrent downloads and was strictly providing valuable space for news and the production of discourse surrounding independent film points up the fact that a work's impact reaches beyond the actual film "text" itself and includes the criticisms, reviews, debates, and tweets that it generates.

Outside of actual screenings and online formats, the other option for distribution (and sometimes revenue) for filmmakers that remains is through DVDs. Like at most film festivals around the world, filmmakers eager to share their work with film critics, scholars, potential producers or distributors, and other filmmakers will carry with them a stack of DVD copies of their film to distribute or exchange free-of-charge. Some of these discs are self-burned DVDs with the film title and director name scrawled in sharpie pen across the shiny silver surface; others are polished, professional discs with a glossy still image from the film professionally printed on the top. Of course, some filmmakers come with DVDs not to share but to sell. For example, the young and provocative Wu Haohao, heralded as "China's

Godard” by film critic Zhang Xianmin, is known for walking around at festivals trying to drum up buyers for his “box set collection,” which consists of the ten micro-budget films he has made. The price he charges hovers around 500 RMB (\$80 USD), which is a fairly high price considering cinephiles are accustomed to purchasing pirated DVDs of film classics and auteur cinema for 10 RMB (\$1.60). At the other end of this extreme is Ai Weiwei, whose overwhelming success and access to resources allows him to freely hand out DVDs of the films produced by his studio and even cover postage to mail them to anyone who requests them.

Several organizations – such as Fanhall Films and Iberia Gallery – have attempted to distribute DVDs in order to expand independent cinema’s audience base as well as make a small profit for the organization and the filmmaker. I have found DVDs of independent films in the kinds of cafes, bars, bookstores, and art galleries that attract artists, activists, intellectuals, but unfortunately sales have never been very high, and the DVD distribution efforts have yet to place DVDs in locations that would reach new audiences who might have never been introduced to independent cinema before. Zhu Rikun of Fanhall Films explains:

“In the distribution of DVDs, we have a small budget and lack mature, developed nationwide distribution channels, so it is hard to cover so many places. In addition, the production costs for small-scale DVD distribution is quite high, and for audiences who are used to buying pirated DVDs, the price of our DVDs [30-50 RMB] seems relatively higher. And since the government has tight control, many places won’t sell our ‘underground’ DVDs. But, of course, DVDs have really helped audiences. In China, many opportunities for people to view independent cinema are made possible by DVDs” (Zhu 2012).

Recently, the early and seminal independent documentaries have entered into the nation’s pirated DVD market. Given China’s tremendously swift and successful capacity to produce pirated DVDs and fulfill ever-growing domestic demand, this development seemed only a matter of time, although sales still do not come close to matching the recent blockbusters or arthouse cinema titles sold at pirated DVD shops. Thus, even among the pirated and illicit trade, independent filmmakers still occupy a marginal space. Nonetheless, most filmmakers

are happy to have work enter the pirated market, despite being cut out from the revenues for DVD sales. They are satisfied that the film may potentially reach a wider audience, as well as the feeling of prestige brought on by appearing alongside Zhang Yimou, James Cameron, and Jean-Luc Godard.

### *Economic Demands and Commercial/For-Hire Projects*

Given the extreme restrictions on exhibition and distribution of independent digital cinema within China, the market for documentaries that circulate outside the official network of films bearing the SARFT “Dragon Seal” approval is severely limited. The limited reach of independent film engenders serious consequences not only for the audience formation, artistic impact, and social function of each film, but also for the actual economic livelihood of each filmmaker. Unless a filmmaker is independently wealthy, she is destined to face severe hardships in the pursuit of sustaining economic stability solely through the production and sales of her films.

Wang Bing, for example, is arguably the foremost Chinese independent documentary filmmaker whose films are celebrated around the globe, and consequently he is able to earn a comfortable living that places him in China's middle-class but definitely does not count among China's ever-growing wealthy population; however, on the other end of the spectrum are filmmakers such as Wu Haohao who peddles his home-made “box set” of films and still relies on his mother for rent money to cover the expense of his small apartment in Beijing. These economic hardships born of little to no income for one's art are arguably more bearable in a filmmaker's youth; by middle-age, however, they tend to only become more pronounced as growing economic demands, such as starting a family or caring for aging parents, weigh down upon the filmmaker. In response to these greater economic demands,

Markus Nornes notes, “the filmmakers are newly professionalizing. They are initiating foreign financing deals and hope dearly for foreign distribution, or better yet broadcast. They are getting older, getting married, and having children. Income is more of a priority” (Nornes 2009:55).

Many filmmakers, such as Xu Xin, Wang Wo, and Zhao Dayong, secure the bulk of their income through lending their media production capabilities to the production of commercial media projects, such as advertisements, music videos, or commissioned documentaries. These “outside jobs” usually have the benefit of paying well for intense work over a relatively short period of time, leaving more time for the filmmaker to dedicate to producing his own documentaries. Wang Wo, for example, has helped finance the remodeling of his home adjacent to the Fanhall Film Complex by producing advertisements or overseeing design projects, each of which span a few weeks time and garner wages of anywhere from 10,000 RMB – 19,000 (\$1,6000 - \$3,000 USD) per project. In addition, with certain commissioned projects, sometimes the director can earn income and develop a new film at the same time, thus conflating the distinction between commercial work and one's own artistic work.

For example, in early 2012 after Xu Xin's six-hour documentary *Karamay* traveled the international festival circuit and astonished audiences from Hong Kong to Paris, Xu was invited by well-known feature director Yang Chao to shoot a documentary of an entirely different nature: Yang Chao offered 100,000 RMB (\$16,000 USD) to Xu Xin to record the production process of Yang's new film-in-progress, *Crosscurrent*, a dramatic fiction about love, shame and sexual desire to be shot entirely on a ferry traveling up the Yangtze River. Xu Xin agreed on two conditions: one, in addition to shooting the narrative film production process, he would also be allowed to turn his lens towards whatever else interested him



during their months on the ferry; and, two, in addition to delivering a documentary complement to Yang Chao's film, Xu Xin could also produce his own documentary, independent of the narrative feature and of any attachment or obligation to Yang Chao. Yang Chao agreed, and said he hoped Xu Xin would do just that. Xu Xin traveled twice up the Yangtze on the boat with Yang Chao and crew: one initial month-long journey for location scouting, and the other a slower, two-month trip during actual film production. After these two trips, the narrative film ran out of funding and production has stopped, indefinitely. Xu Xin has only been paid one half of what was promised him.

Yet, while the producers for *Crosscurrent* are scrambling in search of additional funding to finish the film, Xu is already back home making his own new documentary. After shooting these three months along the Yangtze River, allowing his lens to glide in long take form across misty, industrialized river banks and to capture close-ups of the ferry's movements through various graduated locks of the Three Gorges Dam, Xu is currently editing a new, abstract, impressionistic, and dialogue-less film, that he is tentatively titling *The Yangtze River (Changjiang)*. Thus, this strategy of working on other short-term projects for hire allows independent filmmakers who are skilled, connected, or fortunate enough to make enough money on which to live while also keeping time and space in their lives open for the production of their own films, or, as in the case of Xu Xin, to be able to bring the two – the commercial and the personal – together.

There have been cases, however, wherein the tactic of “working for hire” has raised pressing questions regarding the status of the filmmaker and their allegiance to the independent community. These questions, which animate discussions and online microblogs of cinephiles and filmmakers, are most pronounced when the Chinese state is perceived as directly involved. For, as discussed in the introduction, the definition of independence in

China's underground digital cinema community, though subject to shifting and contested ground, is largely constituted by independence from not only commercial interests but also the state.

Yet, since Reform and Opening, media policies have shifted and arguably grown more amenable to forms of expression that are not wholly shaped by official policy. Significantly, the Chinese state has, in tandem with these ostensible freedoms for cultural production, developed increasingly sophisticated strategies to co-opt independent filmmakers who have gained acclaim and notoriety outside mainstream society and official circles (i.e. overseas and in the independent film communities). That is, as a maverick or “outsider” filmmaker blooms in both the international film festival circuit and the domestic sphere, she may become an object of desire for the state, which would seek to commandeer her reputation and skill, as well as disarm her status as a threat. The state is able to achieve such a result often by offering the filmmaker the opportunity to work with large budgets – easily one hundred times greater than a filmmaker could muster independently – as well as access to locations and resources that someone working outside the system could never imagine attaining. Another enticement to work within the system is the chance to reach large swaths of the Chinese population by showing the filmmaker's work in the ever-expanding official cinema circuit in China, only after the film has been vetted by SARFT and granted a “Dragon Seal.” Ironically, it is savvy government officials who can offer independent filmmakers precisely what many of them have desired since they first picked up a camcorder: a powerful platform to speak to their fellow countrymen. But this gift comes at the price of unabated censorship and the practically ineluctable censure from the *jianghu* of the independent film community.

This desire by the state to appropriate and integrate the outsider artist into its official discourse and agenda is also aligned with the national objective to strengthen China's "soft power," the term Joseph Nye Jr. uses to describe a government's ability to persuade and influence through the strength of its cultural production and ostensibly progressive political policies (2004). The non-confrontational means of "soft power" are opposed to the more conspicuous use of "hard power," which operates through coercion and force. By co-opting maverick filmmakers, the state attempts to not only dismantle a critical voice but also to expand its sphere of soft power geopolitically, adding another domestic source for national contributions to an international cultural discourse. At the same time, the Chinese state is also able to exhibit itself as sufficiently flexible and progressive of a governing body to accommodate once-dissident voices. Pickowicz has argued that these strategies employed by China's government are in fact implemented by cultural liberals within the Communist Party, who are "opposed by conservative Stalinist/Confucian-type state cultural bureaucrats who continue to insist on state control of all cultural production and who are highly suspicious of all individual, private, and entrepreneurial initiatives. The combatants are locked in a moral (and political) struggle among the ruling elite" (2006:6). There are, however, limits to the display of flexibility and tolerance practiced by the cultural liberals within the Party, and certain topics and issues trump any programmatic approach towards developing soft power. Most notably, Ai Weiwei's detention after he turned to social media and documentary production to unleash a multi-media onslaught of criticism on the opacity and corruption of the Chinese government serves as an example, and later in this chapter I shall examine the very real and often harsh consequences of traversing these limits.

### *Co-optation (Zhao'an)*

Significantly, this strategy of co-opting outsiders which the state employs has historical precedent in the literary and cultural discourse surrounding *jiangbu*. *Zhao'an* (literally, “recruiting and pacifying”), co-opting, is the term used in *The Water Margin* and other Chinese literature to refer to the strategy employed by feudal rulers to grant amnesty to outlaws and enlist their services, and is akin to the notion of “selling out” to either government or commercial interests, or both. In the narrative of *The Water Margin*, the outlaw leader Song Jiang, after years of living on Mount Liang (*Liangshan*) and vexing the Song imperial court through banditry and self-governance, accepts amnesty from Emperor Huizong towards the end of his career. By granting amnesty to a former nemesis, the emperor effectively co-opts his foe, and then the outlaw and his minions to combat enemies of the court, making the once-maverick Song Jiang a valuable element in the imperial court.

In addition to the literary and historical context of Chinese rulers co-opting subjects perceived as enemies of the state through the strategy of *zhao'an*, the instances of co-optation and the narrative of “maverick turned mandarin” are not new to Chinese cinema. The Fifth Generation filmmakers, in the films they made early on in their careers or even during their time at the Beijing Film Academy, gained international recognition not only for their explicit departure from the prevailing aesthetic of socialist realism but also for their implicit critique of Chinese authority and history, both imperial and collectivist. After the destructiveness of Communist propaganda discourse, the Fifth Generation filmmakers, influenced more by Chinese classical painting and poetry than Marxism, evinced an aesthetic approach of ostensible resistance that Rey Chow has termed an “ecological consciousness” (40). This approach focuses on landscapes and emptiness, depicting mute nature as indifferent to human efforts. The conventional interpretation of this “return to nature” cinema is that, bound by the strictures of a regime that controlled the representation of history and, at the

same time, faced with the enormous psychic dissonance and social suffering caused by the cultural violence of the Mao era, the Fifth Generation embraced the ambiguity of the natural environment, employing an open-ended aesthetic that, in its muteness, brimmed with potential meaning and lay waiting for interpretation.

Yet, Chow presents an alternative interpretation when she cites not only Adorno's reputed and controversial claim – that after the Holocaust, writing poetry amounts to barbarism – but also Brecht's remark that today even simply commenting on something as banal as a tree is criminal because such an utterance remains silent about countless historical horrors. Through citing these observations, Chow exposes an important ambivalence between opposition and collaboration within the Fifth Generation's aesthetic of “ecological consciousness.” Further, she anticipates the Fifth Generation's move to the mainstream with a series of penetrating questions regarding the relationship between social suffering and representation:

"Even though this is not the place to compare the European Holocaust of the first half of the twentieth century with the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution in terms of the demands they place on cultural representation, [Brecht's insight] is relevant here because it highlights the difficult question about the relationship between the representation of nature and political totalitarianism. Is that relationship an opposed or collaborative one? Is the silence of the image of a tree a subversive non-alliance with fascism, or is it, precisely because of its silence, an accomplice?" (Chow 1995:40).

While it is not possible to access the actual intentions and allegiances of the Fifth Generation filmmakers during their more maverick days outside the official system, history has shown that, ultimately, these figures of Chinese cinema have departed from their former ambivalence and have become accomplices to the state and mainstream commercial interests. They have, in short, “sold out” (*zhaò'an*).

Indeed, as they gained notoriety at overseas film festivals and yearned to reach larger audiences (including, and perhaps most importantly, their own domestic audience), Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Zhang Junzhao and many of the other Fifth Generation filmmakers

sought out ways to work in accordance with government regulations to produce films – often with official sponsorship – that would pass censorship committees, granting the films access to larger budgets as well as the Chinese national box office. Zhang Zhen observes: “By 1993 the Fifth Generation as a whole (except for Tian Zhuangzhuang) had been finally and decisively embraced and even given crowning awards by the Chinese official film apparatus, as well as skillfully transitioned into the market through big-budget hits (Zhang Yimou again shows his mastery in this league)” (2007:10). Indeed, Zhang Yimou is the most obvious and emblematic figure who underwent just such a transformation. Initially heralded in international film circles as a hero against a repressive Chinese state whose visually luscious films, touting their political merit with the label “banned in China,” delivered indirect critiques of authority and unearthed suppressed cultural violence, Zhang moved closer and closer towards the Chinese mainstream as his films shifted focus to become colorful and innocuous action-adventure flicks. Then, he arguably took the crown as the king of “sell-outs” in Chinese cinema when he agreed to serve as the Master of Ceremony for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

### *Jia Zhangke – from “amateur” to “insider”*

As directors of the Fifth Generation navigated into the official film world in China, another generation – the Sixth – took its place as the maverick cohort. After years of members of the Sixth Generation being hounded by authorities. In 1993, a severe and widespread ban fell on filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan, yet four years later *Pickpocket* (*Xiao Wu*) (1997), directed by Jia Zhangke, was smuggled out of China and celebrated at international festivals. Jia's film is exemplary among the Sixth Generation output, and it presents many of the common threads of its milieu: small budget, street-level realism, and

unromantic narratives about everyday life in China which often expose the unseen dark side of the nation's ascendancy. Just as the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation sought to craft works in opposition to official social realism, the Sixth Generation was also highly critical of the status quo at that time: the lavish, abstract cultural allegory films of the Fifth Generation. Despite Jia Zhangke's self-proclaimed moment of cinematic awakening that took place while he was viewing Chen Kaige's Fifth Generation classic, *Yellow Earth* (1985), no one was more vocal in the critique of the dominant aesthetic than Jia Zhangke himself: “In the 80s, the Fifth Generation filmmakers were real heroes: they managed to break Chinese cinema out of its closed little mould and try something new. But they've changed a lot: in their current films, you're no longer seeing the experience of life in China. While my way of filming allows me to describe Chinese reality without distortion” (Douhaire 2002).

Interestingly, at the time that Jia made these critiques and claims, he was poised for a professional transformation similar to that of his Fifth Generation predecessors. His filmography up to that point – *Pickpocket* (1997), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), all of which were filmed under the official radar and imbued with Jia's notable blend of an unadorned formal style with a transcendent humanist tone – delivered precisely what he argues was lacking in the work of his elders: the unglamorous yet valuable lived-experience of common Chinese people. Yet, with his fourth film, *The World* (2004), Jia made the decision to work within the official Chinese film system. Since then, he has been continually and increasingly accused of falling out of touch with the pressing concern to represent the hardships and hopes of everyday life in China.

Rather than succumb to these criticisms and return to “underground” filmmaking again, he has continued to make critically-acclaimed films that do not run afoul of the official SARFT censorship system and, as a consequence, has enjoyed ever-growing budgets, the

exhibition of his films in official cinema complexes, the income of shooting big-budget advertisements, and the chance to mentor a younger generation as well as help produce their films through his production company, Xstream Productions. Although he does not feel as though he has been forced to make significant artistic compromises and his commercial success definitely does not rival that of Zhang Yimou, the career of Jia Zhangke, once heralded as the leading figure in Chinese independent cinema, has been increasingly described in terms that arguably fit into the cultural narrative of *zhaohan* or “sell-out.” When Jia burst onto the international art cinema scene with his low-budget film *Pickpocket* (1995), a portrait of a small-town anti-hero played by Wang Hongwei, he was quickly perceived as the antidote for the ossified style of the 5<sup>th</sup> generation.

But after his first three films, all of which were smuggled out of the country to win awards at international film festivals around the world rather than be subjected to censorship by SARFT, Jia moved into the mainstream of Chinese cinema. In 2003, Chinese film authorities offered to lift the ban on Jia and other similarly troublesome yet successful directors if they agreed to a streamlined script-approval and censorship process. Jia and his compatriots consented. Thus, with his fourth feature, *The World*, Jia chose to work within the system, and since then his filmmaking and reputation in independent filmmaking circles has changed significantly. Even his handful of documentaries, many of which do address social issues in China today albeit in an indirect fashion, are seen as “mere advertisements” (*guanggao pian*) for the corporations or benefactors who finance them.

Thus, Jia is no longer the champion of independence waving the flag of amateur cinema and freedom; rather, now he is seen by the many filmmakers within the *jianghu* as the talent who sold out. Consequently, his films, which boast budgets that grow in size with each production, seem to no longer hold relevance for the independent film world in China.



Indeed, in discussions with several filmmakers at festivals in Songzhuang, Nanjing, or Chongqing, they acknowledge Jia's *Pickpocket* as a major contribution to Chinese film, but feel his work since then has grown consistently more in-line with official, commercial film production. Despite this, Jia has continually supported the independent community. In addition to his work with his company Xstream Productions as a producer for young, upcoming talent – such as female Song Fang's award-winning debut *Memories Look at Me* (2012) – Jia has also loaned equipment to young filmmakers outside his production company and even donated a substantial sum of money to the 2011 Yunfest when it appeared to festival organizers that they lacked the resources to hold the celebrated biannual event. Jia was planning to attend the festival as he was presenting new short films he had produced, and when he learned of the economic difficulties facing the organizers, he quickly stepped in to help monetarily.

Yet such a move did not garner him popularity at the weeklong event. Performance artist and filmmaker Li Ning was also there presenting his autobiographical documentary, *Tape* (2011), and observed a palpable distance between Jia and the other directors. For example, when Jia walked into the dining space on Yunnan University campus where the festival is held, Li Ning said he was shocked that no one stood up to say hello, to express gratitude to Jia Zhangke, or to even acknowledge his contribution (Li Ning 2011). Thus, with this powerful example of an ostracized benefactor, the principles of independence within the filmmaking *jianghu* are upheld. Once a major figure in the symbolic *jianghu* of Chinese independent filmmakers who criticized the Fifth Generation for falling out of touch with social reality, Jia is now seen by directors outside the system as having been fully co-opted by the state, in a manner similar to Zhang Yimou.

### *The Melbourne International Film Festival Incident*

If directing the opening and closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics was the crowning moment for Zhang Yimou to unequivocally complete the shift from outsider to insider, then the controversy over the 2009 Melbourne International Film Festival arguably marked the denouement for Jia's complicity with the Chinese state. Following the July 2009 ethnic riots in Urumuqi, Xinjiang, which saw a protest held by Uighur Chinese citizens escalate to city-wide violence between Uighurs, Han, and police forces. The riots claimed the lives of hundreds and left around 2,000 people injured. Shortly after the riots, the 2009 Melbourne International Film Festival announced that it had selected *Ten Conditions of Love*, a documentary about the exiled Uighur liberation leader Rebiya Kadeer and, in addition to the screening, planned a series of discussions with Kadeer. Jia, upon learning of the presence of Kadeer at a festival where his films were to be shown, withdrew his short film *Cry Me a River* (2008) as well as Emily Tang's *A Perfect Life* (2008), both produced by Jia's company XStream Pictures. The vast majority of independent filmmakers I interviewed and discussed the matter with stated that they believe Jia was acting in accordance with the demands made on him by the Chinese state. Some claimed he received a phone call from a Ministry of Foreign Affairs; others said he was "taken to tea" (*zhabo ta be cha*) by employees of the Ministry of Culture.<sup>27</sup> Jia himself has claimed that his decision to pull these two films was entirely personal and not influenced by the government. Here is his official statement:

1. We have no intention to interfere with the film festival's freedom to facilitate artistic communication. It is our way of self-discipline to withdraw from the Melbourne Film Festival. I'm not an expert at Xinjiang history, but since it is only two weeks after the Urumqi riots, I think we should at least be cautious not to offend the victims.
2. The political inclination of the Melbourne Film Festival this year is getting stronger. First, it was the British director Ken Loach who questioned the funding of the

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<sup>27</sup> The phrase "take to tea" (*zhabo ta be cha*) is a euphemism – employed usually ironically by dissidents, activists, artists, and intellectuals – to describe the practice by which officials call a meeting with a citizen to warn them against taking certain actions or supporting certain politically-inflected causes.

festival, accusing them of using blood money. Then *Ten Conditions of Love*, a documentary about Rebiya Kadeer, appeared on the program list. They even organized a series of activities for her.

3. We think attending the same event with Rebiya Kadeer contains political meanings. It is emotionally intolerable and practically inappropriate. So the staff of XStream Pictures agreed to withdraw from the festival to show our attitude and stance.

4. On July 19, our company representative Zhou Qiang (Chow Keung) wrote to the president of Melbourne Film Festival, announcing that two films from XStream Pictures: “Cry Me a River” and *A Perfect Life* will withdraw from the festival. Director Emily Tang Xiaobai and producer Zhou Qiang (Chow Keung) also canceled their plans to attend the festival.

With these four points, Jia clearly exhibits a personal concern for the socio-political consequences of the Urumuqi riots. In addition, it also suggests how powerful the concept of the Chinese nation remains for him as a point of identification. Even though he is a cosmopolitan figure of auteur cinema, Jia is still committed to China as a project, and as a nation – the fate of which grips him, as it does his more marginal filmmaking detractors, with the totalizing force of an obsession.

Outside China, cinephiles and film critics had a range of responses regarding Jia's decision. Some were completely taken aback, while others, such as historian Michael Berry, film critic Richard Brody, and journalist Evan Osnos, saw Jia as acting in accordance not only with the general trajectory of successful directors in China (i.e. the movement from “maverick to mandarin”) but also with his own self-understanding in relation to the status of independence. In Evan Osnos' online blog for *The New Yorker*, he writes that Jia, while speaking about the more extreme independent directors, told him: “Marginalization can be a kind of pleasant stance—I really admire many of those people—but I would rather expend enormous energy trying to dance with the many levels of the era in which we live” (Osnos 2009). Brody makes the claim that Jia, even in his role as a filmmaker no longer banned but actually embraced by the mainstream, has never faltered either in his criticism of the state or in his adherence to creative freedom. He argues: “Jia’s symbolic art, like that of Howard

Hawks and Ernst Lubitsch under the Hays Code, is ingeniously conceived to say exactly what's on his mind regardless of external constraints." For Brody, Jia is "a great artistic modernist and a subtle yet outspoken critic of the government's repressive policies" (Brody 2011). He cites Jia's 2010 documentary, *I Wish I Knew*, as a clear example: within a film that ostensibly explores the history of Shanghai in order to contextualize its hosting of the 2010 World Expo, Brody detects Jia's deft move to also include "an audacious recuperation of ways of life and thought from pre-Communist China, an embrace of Taiwan and Hong Kong, a poignant lament for victims of the Cultural Revolution, and a depiction of the Expo as an alienating, inhuman monstrosity" (Brody 2011).

Within China, Jia's decision to pull out his film from the Melbourne Film Festival became a hot topic for filmmakers and critics. Most of the individuals working in independent cinema that circulated through Songzhuang and Caochangdi saw Jia's move as a way to not only avoid serious, career-threatening political repercussions, but also elevate his collaborative relationship with the state. Rather than try to point up the complexities of Jia's position and the navigation of his career between artistic integrity and political constraint as Brody and Osnos did, most Chinese directors I spoke with in regards to the event called Jia a "henchman" (*goutui*) of the state. None of them were surprised by the actions of the former champion of "amateur cinema." Jia's courtship with the state had gone on long enough to make the Melbourne controversy wholly within their understanding of his allegiances.

### *Zhao Liang: from PETITION to TOGETHER*

What brought surprise, however, was Jia's counterpart in the matter. Indeed, the independent film world was shocked when Zhao Liang, director of hard-hitting, scathing critiques of the Chinese justice system and star of the Chinese independent documentary

scene both at home and abroad, also pulled his film *Petition* (2009) from the festival. Rumors surrounding this turn of events circulated, as fellow directors and independent film fans speculated as to how much Zhao and Jia, friends from their shared time as students at the Beijing Film Academy, both benefited from their removal. What onlookers did not debate, however, was the presumed general sequence of events: upon learning of the Rebiya Kadeer film's inclusion in the Melbourne International Film Festival, the Ministry of Culture requested Jia remove his film and asked him to contact Zhao and urge his friend to comply.

As Edward Wong of the New York Times reported in his feature article on Zhao Liang:

“In July 2009, while in Bangkok, where his wife, who is Thai, and their two children live, he got a call from a friend, the well-known director Jia Zhangke. Mr. Jia said film bureau officials were demanding that the two of them withdraw their films from the Melbourne International Film Festival to boycott a documentary on Rebiya Kadeer, the Uighur businesswoman whom China blames for unrest in the Xinjiang region...The two directors decided to pull out. 'You're a small figure, it's scary, and you get stuck in a mess like this, in an international incident,' Mr. Zhao said. 'Yeah, at the time I was pretty much, 'Let's think of me first.' The bottom line, as he put it, was this: 'You still need to work in this country'...Mr. Zhao was surprised to find, when returning home shortly afterward, that official news organizations had made the two filmmakers into heroes in articles and newscasts. Mr. Zhao and 'Petition' were actually mentioned by name. It was an upturn in Mr. Zhao's relationship with the government, but not one he entirely welcomed. 'I sort of felt like I had been used,' he said” (Wong 2011).

Zhao's sense of being “used” ramifies in significance beyond himself; for, his decision to pull *Petition* (2009) from Melbourne has been spun by state media in multiple ways. By touting the two cosmopolitan directors as heroes, the official news organizations in China thereby elevated the two directors as figures who uphold a form of Chinese nationalism that, in this particular spin, make national sovereignty and ethnic distinctions between Han and Uighur paramount to any other value, whether an individual director's career or a kind of discourse that seeks alternative understandings to dissent, critique, and ethnic strife. The other way in which Zhao was “used” hinges on his former identity as an independent director who faced bans and restrictions on his domestic screenings. That such a formerly renegade artist can be co-opted by the State and entangled in a national narrative of support for the status quo

effectively sends as a message to all independent cultural producers: even the most extreme mavericks can be tamed by the state.

Yet, in interviews and conversations with myself and others, both Zhao and Jia deny that any representative of the government approached them or suggested they remove their films from participation at the festival in Melbourne. Jia insists it was a personal decision (*geren de jueding*): “It's unacceptable to us personally, both emotionally and in practice, to appear with Rebiya Kadeer at the highly politicized Melbourne festival. It's inappropriate,” Jia Zhangke said. When I interviewed him, he expanded on this:

Jia Zhangke (JZK): I learned [about the Kadeer film] through newspapers... because I basically can't pay attention to film festivals. Because my films go to so many film festivals, I cannot keep track, check every film festival. But at the time just before the Melbourne Film Festival, there was some communication between the festival and Chinese officials, and there may have been some controversy. It was only at that time that I learned my film was in the festival. The most important thing, I think, is that I was not over the entire Xinjiang July 5th event, because I think that is an event worthy of our attention, because that event was the first ethnic conflict...[where it was] common people against the common people. So I think the situation is very complicated. I suddenly remembered ... I do not know that you've seen [Taiwanese director] Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness*? The film depicts Taiwan's February 28 event... In the film the character of Tony is deaf and mute, and there is a scene when the violence erupts, the Taiwanese natives try to kill the Mainland newcomers. How do they identify who is a mainlander? By whether or not you can speak Taiwanese. If you cannot speak Taiwanese, you will be killed. It becomes a very violent, very extreme kind of situation. So, in a situation where we have such incorrect information...I really do not know, I only know there was a serious conflict between Han and Uighurs in Xinjiang. What kind of people might be behind the scenes, controlling [the situation]? Who is instigating? I don't know anything at all. But the problem is that so many people died. So, in light of this, if we still go to Melbourne, with this kind of political background already in place, if I go it will look like I agree with Melbourne Film Festival's point of view. But I don't agree with their point of view, so I will not go.

JS: What is their point of view?

JZK: Their point of view is... They want to invite Rebiya's film and have her deliver three speeches, representing her as a hero for freedom. I don't think she is, because I think there are a lot of doubts [surrounding her motives], though up to even now I do not have much information. But I think my approach is right: to remain cautious... and I did not politicize it. We just wrote a letter to the Film Festival said: “Sorry, we will not participate.” But, then, the film festival began: “Ah! They refuse to come!” and so on and so forth.

JS: So the decision to pull out was entirely your own? The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not call you?

JZK: No. Absolutely not.

Despite Jia's insistence on his independent decision, the prevailing belief is that he acted in accordance with requests brought forth by the government. Perhaps the greatest reason this assumed collusion with the State goes unquestioned by the majority of onlookers is the fact that both Jia and Zhao, following the controversy, produced films that not only passed censorship but were also supported by organs of the Chinese government. The Shanghai World Expo commissioned Jia to make *I Wish I Knew* (2010), a film ostensibly showcasing the international event that, in addition to featuring scenes of actress Zhao Tao wandering through the expansive spaces of World Expo architecture, also presents interviews with a range of individuals - some celebrity, some common - who remember the history of Shanghai before Communism.

Zhao Liang, at the invitation of his highly successful filmmaker friend Gu Changwei and with extensive funding - \$77,000 to be exact, which amounted to half the film's budget - from the Ministry of Health, directed the documentary *Together* (2010). Director Gu had actually approached Zhao about the project before the Melbourne controversy. He was preparing to shoot the fiction film *Love for Life*, which is based on a book by Yan Lianke which has been banned in China and which focuses on villagers afflicted by HIV infection and AIDS. Gu wanted Zhao to film a documentary on the production set. For, despite the sensitive topics raised by the film, the Health Ministry had agreed to support the feature film production and, in addition, wanted to produce a documentary in tandem that could be shown as a public service announcement to raise AIDS awareness. This shift in the Chinese government's handling of the domestic AIDS issue from suppression of the exact scale of the nation's AIDS epidemic - as well as covering up the public tragedy of HIV-infected blood banks in central China - to an interest in portraying the efforts taken by the government to combat the disease meshed well with Gu's plan, and so the collaboration

pressed forward. This kind of collaboration also sheds light on the ever-shifting terrain of which particular media representations are considered off-limits for government agencies to support or even commission. Zhao Liang's involvement also underscores a filmmaker's perspective that is more accommodating of the mainstream and less confrontational and rigid than the politically polarized views of producers such as Zhu Rikun and filmmakers such as Xu Xin, Hu Jie, and Ai Weiwei. Zhao Liang states:

“The New York Times wrote that we wine and dined with the Ministry of Health, that we had some kind of relationship, but this simply was not the case. For me, I felt that to make this film, the most important thing is not to care about who I work with, even if it means collaboration with the Communist Party. Whether or not this video is guided within the party ... Even if it is made under the auspices of the party, it still could have significance for society, it could be useful, this is its real value. [You] shout slogans, curse in public, and when it is all over, its pointless, and your efforts are counterproductive” (Zhao 2011).

Here, Zhao Liang cites the importance of a practical and utilitarian approach to attain the greatest possible social impact over what he characterizes as ineffectual ideology. Zhao's perspective may also be understood within the context of a new, bifurcated personhood in post-socialist China that has been termed “the divided self” (Kleinman, Yan, Jing, Lee, Zhang, Pan, Wu, Guo 2012).

Noting the countervailing social pressures acting on – and the range of contradictory personal desires active within – each individual member of Chinese society, a group of recent sinologists have opted to “adopt ‘the divided self’ as a focus for the study of the Chinese today and suggest that the self can be divided by a number of ‘dividers,’ such as past versus present, public versus private, moral versus immoral, and so on” (Kleinman, Yan, Jing, Lee, Zhang, Pan, Wu, Guo 2012:5). These scholars argue that the main struggle for a meaningful and productive life hinges on a question of balance. For the divided self, “how to balance individual interest and professional ethics, therefore, presents a new challenge to the divided self of the Chinese individual, each of whom must find a way to come to terms with herself or himself in actual social performance” (Kleinman, Yan, Jing, Lee, Zhang, Pan,



Wu, Guo 2012: 10). Thus, in the case of Zhao Liang and Jia Zhangke, we see this internal balancing act brought out into the public eye and opened up for moral scrutiny. Indeed, despite any proffered explanations, Zhao's former friends and colleagues would not accept his argument as either valid or sincere, and they countered him by pointing out that "once you open the door to collaboration with the Party, they barge right in and take over everything" (Wang 2011; Ai 2011; Zhu 2011).

In October 2010, before either Gu's narrative or Zhao's documentary were released, artist-dissident Ai Weiwei and Zhao Liang had a acerbic exchange at an art exhibition opening at China Art Archives and Warehouse (*Beijing Wenxian Cangku*). Ai Weiwei confronted his friend Zhao Liang about the decision to pull *Petition* from the 2009 Melbourne International Film Festival and the assumed benefits Zhao accrued by complying. Accustomed to documenting all things large and small in his purview, Ai Weiwei made sure to capture this moment on digital video as well. The resulting footage has been edited into a short video called *A Head's Up*, which features the rare occasion wherein Ai Weiwei, the artist, architect, and social activist, in addition to acting as interviewer, director, and protagonist-antagonist, serves as cameraman as well. The transcript below of the short video reveals an aggressive Ai Weiwei and a defensive Zhao Liang:

Ai Weiwei (AWW): What's the deal with you guys pulling out of Melbourne?

Zhao Liang (ZL): (laughing) We were harmonized.

AWW: Forced to pull out?

ZL: Harmonized.

AWW: Forced to pull out? No, as individual participants, why did you and Jia both pull out at the same time?

ZL: I wasn't in China at the time. I didn't really understand the situation.

AWW: You didn't know? You didn't pull out or you didn't know?

ZL: I heard about this outside the country. I didn't even know about entering the festival. That was all the producer's doing.

AWW: Your own work was pulled out – how can you not know about it?

ZL: I knew about my work being pulled out.

AWW: So why did you pull out?

ZL: Someone gave me a head's up

AWW: Who gave you a head's up?... Come on, as a documentary maker, you...

ZL: Jia Zhangke called me.

AWW: What did Jia Zhangke tell you exactly?  
 ZL: He said there's this... this... official... upstairs... who deals with movies. Said they talked about it and said, "Can you pull this one out?" At the time I didn't know exactly what the situation was.  
 AWW: What was his tone?  
 ZL: I asked him, because at the time I was in Thailand, and didn't know the situation, so I asked him, exactly, I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm pulling out." I said, "OK, if you're pulling out I'm pulling out." It was like that.  
 AWW: So you weren't there at the time?  
 ZL: No I wasn't.  
 AWW: So it's because Jia wanted you to pull out?  
 ZL: He didn't say he wanted me to pull out. I asked him. At the time I didn't know how to deal with this thing. I've never dealt with something like this. So he asked me, he asked me. So this is the situation now. He said in the end it's going to escalate into a political incident, he said the best is probably that we try to have as little to do with this as possible, or something. So I said, "What's your attitude?" and he said, "I'll pull out." So I said, "If you're pulling out, I guess I'll pull out too."  
 AWW: So did he say he was going to get any benefit out of this?  
 ZL: No  
 AWW: Did he end up getting any benefit out of this?  
 ZL: How should I know?  
 AWW: Do you know about the documentary he made at the [Shanghai World] Expo?  
 ZL: *I Wish I Knew*. Yeah, I know about that.  
 AWW: Did you know about it at the time?  
 ZL: Not at the time. We hadn't been in touch for awhile.  
 AWW: So did you receive any financing from the state afterwards? I heard you did.  
 ZL: Of course I didn't, Ai Weiwei.  
 AWW: You didn't. If you didn't, you didn't. It's just something I heard.  
 ZL: Why should I have?  
 AWW: Hey, Jia did.  
 ZL: Well, I didn't.  
 AWW: So it's totally possible that people might think this way, right? So of course I hoped that you would be able to say it yourself. Because the Beijing News news report is about the two of you pulling out and Jia has voiced an opinion on this issue.  
 ZL: But after, according to my understanding, he didn't. He said he didn't have this opinion, but it's the media that said this.  
 AWW: No. No, if he didn't he would clarify it. But he didn't clarify it, right?  
 ZL: I don't know exactly. I don't know the details.  
 AWW: He didn't clarify it, you're saying.  
 ZL: Well, I didn't see it. I'm not really clear.  
 AWW: Thanks.

Ai Weiwei's short video wherein he confronts Zhao Liang, the artist-documentarian who directed *Petition* and *Crime and Punishment* (among other films) thrown back on his heels by the surge of scathing questions his former friend and classmate unleashes on him, was greeted with glee by many independent filmmakers and critics. As some observers noted, seeing Zhao Liang squirm under direct interrogation provides a sense that justice has been served. Given his perceived transgression of the values of loyalty and the code of honor

within the local moral world of the independent film *jianghu*, one observer declared: “he got what he deserved.” To struggle for auteur status and greater economic foundation for one's cultural production through capitulation with officials and authorities – as Zhao Liang was seen as doing in this case, despite his protests to the contrary – falls into the rubric of betraying his maverick roots and damages his standing within the social capital of the independent film *jianghu*. For example, after the release of *Together*, a number of Zhao's important relationships with members of the independent film community became strained, most notably with curator and festival programmer Zhu Rikun, a friend, supporter, and producer for *Petition*. Zhu Rikun expressed that he felt disappointed by Zhao's shift away from producing films that contribute to a counter-discourse, and did not feel he could defend or even understand the choices made by his former friend. As a result, these two major figures in independent filmmaking have become estranged.

Conversely, by wielding a small digital camera and engaging in verbal fisticuffs with Zhao Liang, Ai Weiwei causes Zhao to not only “lose face” (*diulian*), but also to grant himself greater “face” (*gei mianzi*). For, rather than refusing the interrogation or fiercely attacking back in the video, the beleaguered Zhao Liang sheepishly responds to Ai Weiwei's pricking questions. His hesitation and timidity are readily interpreted as products of his guilt, no matter how many times he denies receiving any concrete benefits from his decision to pullout from the Melbourne festival. Thus, this short exchange, which Ai purposefully sought out and committed to documentation as a digitized ambush of his friend, achieves two goals: 1) it mounts a retaliation against the allegeddefector Zhao Liang and 2) it enhances Ai Weiwei's already well-established symbolic capital, expanding his status as a hero among independent filmmakers. Indeed, despite enjoying several years as a celebrity in international contemporary art circles for his work as an artist and architect, Ai's lionized

status within China did not take significant hold until he turned to politically-engaged social media and documentary filmmaking in 2008 (Zhu 2011). In fact, his initial reputation as a charlatan celebrity within overseas art circles may have even hindered his development of symbolic capital among domestic independent filmmakers. But his foray into digital media production has since excited and inspired a range of filmmakers. The videos, pursued through a combination of low-budget documentary and performative intervention akin to *A Head's Up*, offer bold and daring attacks on Chinese authorities at all levels – local to federal. Further, the documentaries emerging from Ai Weiwei studio have been tremendously influential in the independent documentary *jianghu* over the last several years. Of course, he has also been ridiculed as an operator, a privileged princeling, and an egomaniacal extremist whose work only harms China's political reform process. Given the range of responses and his widespread influence, in what follows, I focus closely on Ai's biography, his political troubles, and his approach to filmmaking.

### *Ai Weiwei's documentaries and detention*

Indeed, Ai's aggressive and prolific video output supports his ever-growing “charismatic authority” within the *jianghu* of independent film (Weber 1924). In his discussion of leadership, Weber identifies three ideal types of authority: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. In practice, the three types are neither fixed nor easily mapped onto the complexity of leadership dynamics. Rather, they present the possibility of hybridity, flowing into and transforming one another, though Weber's schema suggests social evolution towards rationalization and legal-rational authority. As ideal types, though, the three forms of leadership also present clear definitions: traditional authority relies on an

established system of meaning, order, and hierarchy, such as patriarchy or feudalism; legal-rational authority is akin to nation-state government and modern bureaucracy, and derives its mandate from law and reason; charismatic authority relies on perceived legitimacy based on, in Weber's terms, a

“certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader” (1924:328).

Ai Weiwei's charisma among documentarians and artists is certainly not based on the range of religious or supernatural powers most often attributed to charismatic leaders, especially since most of the individuals operating in these circles of cultural production in China tend to identify as atheists. His privileged position and personal bravery are seen as extraordinary, however, and therefore his charisma is more in line with a secular notion of the charismatic leader, whose position is legitimized by “exceptional personal qualities or the demonstration of extraordinary insight and accomplishment, which inspire loyalty and obedience from followers” (Kendall, Linded, Murray 2000:438-439). Whether sacred or secular power, however, Keyes has pointed out that charismatic authority is generally conceived “as posing a challenge to existing authority based on traditional or rationalized bureaucracy” (Keyes 2002: 249). It is this challenge to the Chinese state, formed by both traditional authority and rationalized bureaucracy that constitutes and nourishes Ai's charisma and influence.

In fact, his charismatic authority and celebrity status of has been steadily and masterfully constructed over the past decade via his multi-media provocations and large-scale interventions in both art and politics. Combining a bold conceptual vision with a staunch belief in the artist's role as social critic, his works have aimed to traverse boundaries, push buttons and, ultimately, redefine our sense of what is possible. An early work that

possesses Ai's characteristic mix of hard-edged critique, bravery, and humor is an untitled photograph taken of his soon-to-be wife, Lu Qing, in Tiananmen Square lifting her skirt up to the camera on the fifth anniversary of the 1989 Massacre. Mao's portrait, hanging on the façade of the Forbidden City, is framed just over her shoulder. At Documenta 12 in 2007, Ai presented *Fairytale*, an epic work that activated a wide range of fairytales by enabling 1,001 Chinese citizens who responded to his online call for participants to travel to Kassel, Germany and reside in a massive living-space installation for the full twenty-eight day duration of the international art event. When the Tate Modern's Unilever Series commissioned a sculpture from him in 2010, he gave them *Sunflowers Seeds*, filling vast Turbine Hall with one hundred million porcelain sunflower seeds hand-crafted by 1,600 workers from the porcelain capital of China, Jingdezhen. With a flair for publicity and strong social conscience, Ai the prankster-artist has climbed to the top of the international art world – he was designated the most important figure in art today by *Art Review* magazine – all the while speaking truth to power and launching daring attacks – most recently and most frequently in the form of social media – against the Chinese government.

Many observers have claimed that it is this very success overseas that bought Ai a special form of political immunity at home. After all, the authorities might not be keen to take down such a valuable source of global cultural capital (interestingly, his name and work remains unknown to the majority of citizens of the People's Republic). It also doesn't hurt that he is the son of famous Party poet Ai Qing, who had his own dramatic ups and downs with the Chinese government. In fact, this revolutionary heritage feeds into Ai's charismatic authority: his pedigree and lineage afford him extraordinary powers. Many filmmakers have commented that although they support Ai Weiwei's tactics and motives, they themselves do not possess the standing and power to follow his lead. They would like to harass police

officers and slander the Party in ways similar to Ai Weiwei, but they profess that they lack his exemplary power and exceptional position that comes with his revolutionary background (Wang 2012).

But no one, not even Ai himself, was certain that he actually possessed this protective talisman. As his fame and reach expanded, detractors in the Chinese art world blew him off with the label of a *fenqing*, or “angry youth,” barking from his privileged position, while his supporters, reveling in his brazen whistle-blowing on corruption and illegality, followed his blog and, when that got shut down in 2009, his many daily postings on China's microblog *weibo*. Tensions between Ai and the authorities escalated, and the Shanghai government even demolished the very studio they had invited him to build to springboard a nascent urban art space there. Finally, in spring 2011, during revolutions in the Arab world and their Jasmine-tinted aftershocks in China, his international stardom reached its crowning moment – and his immunity proved limited – when he was detained by Chinese authorities for three hard months of confinement and interrogation as he was preparing to set up a base in Berlin. After pressure from the international community as well as microblog postings from increasing numbers of domestic supporters, Ai was finally released on bail. Rather than charge him with political crimes as with previous dissidents such as Wei Jingsheng or Wang Dan, he now faces a formidable list of economic crimes and over \$2.4 million USD in fines and back taxes. His detention and the subsequent fines did not diminish his charisma; in fact, these hardships and persecutions only enhanced it.

While it is clear that Ai's outspoken internet postings and his activism played a major role in his being detained, another related cause that has been less explored in discussions of Ai Weiwei is his role as a documentary filmmaker. Yet it is precisely the contribution he has made to documentary and social media production that has earned him hero status within

the *jianghu* of independent filmmakers. Working with a production team organized through his Beijing studio – his residence and his main headquarters located in the northwest corner of the capital – Ai has released numerous guerilla-style documentaries and many short online videos that, in their rough style and critical approach, seek to open a space of open inquiry and free speech around social issues in China.

At first glance, these goals may appear similar to some of those pursued by well-known Chinese independent filmmakers such as Wang Bing, Zhao Liang, and Zhao Dayong. Ai's work, however, is far more confrontational, far more directly political in function, and absolutely devoid of concern for both conventional cinema aesthetics and the status of artist. Rather than the dominant observational style of most independent documentaries, his are hard-hitting activist films that are shot “in-situ,” edited together swiftly, and then immediately posted online to contribute to his larger project of unmasking abuses of power and egregious cover-ups. Thus, in political stance, his films are more akin to the work of Guangzhou-based activist Ai Xiaoming's films and director's Xu Xin's *Karamay*, the powerful six-hour documentary about a tragic fire that claimed the lives of hundreds of innocent schoolchildren in an oil town in the northwestern province of Xinjiang (Ai's Studio staff actually helped Xu Xin post *Karamay* online). Yet the major difference here is that Ai's interventionist filmmaking often compels him to puncture the body of the film itself by appearing on screen to present challenges to authorities in direct defiance of their power. In fact, what captivates and thrills Chinese audiences – the majority of whom view these films on laptops after downloading them for the brief window that the films remain undetected by internet police – is exactly the daring verbal assaults Ai hurls at police officers and officials who fail to respond to his demands for fairness, justice, and greater transparency.

Ai's quest to serve as witness and expose the injustices buried in the national



propaganda that smothered open public discussion after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake resulted in the production of three powerful films on the tragedy, all released in 2009: *Dirty Faces* (*Hua Lian Ba Er*), *4851*, and *Disturbing The Peace* (*Lao Ma Ti Hua*). *Dirty Faces* is a feature-length documentary that was shot in the wake of the earthquake, when Ai organized a “citizen investigation,” which consists of on-going grassroots, door-to-door investigations of the shoddy construction of schools that contributed to the high death toll of children in the earthquake. The film weaves through disaster sites, witnesses the grief and suffering of survivors, and follows Ai Weiwei and other “citizen investigators” as they try to track down every name of every child who died in the earthquake. In hopes of suppressing public outrage over poor construction and corruption, Sichuan officials have made no efforts to document these casualties. Ai's project here, then, is to fill that void, and his obsession with recording every child not only has a physical manifestation in the form of a growing list of more than 5,000 names and background information of the children that occupies an entire wall in his studio, but also a cinematic one: the film titled *4851*. Over the course of 87 minutes, *4851* presents the names of 4,851 schoolchildren lost to the earthquake. The list of names, titled in white against a black background, form a social meditation on the tragedy and a political defiance of official silence.

The third film, *Disturbing The Peace*, follows Ai and his colleagues, mostly activists and lawyers, as they travel to Chengdu in August of 2009 to testify on behalf of Tan Zuoren, the Chengdu-based activist who is on trial for his own systematic investigation of the oversights in the quality of school construction. The film begins with the gay atmosphere of the train ride from Beijing to Chengdu. Ai and crew arrive at night and have dinner at the famous Laoma Tihua restaurant (which, in Chinese, translates to Old Ma's Pickled Trotters, the local specialty), after which the film is named. That same evening they notice that they are being

monitored by plain-clothes police, who are stationed outside their hotel. In the middle of the night, Ai is awakened by banging at his room door. He grabs his sound recorder, and documents the arguments and violence that ensue over a black screen as men claiming to be policemen break-in and beat him. A female colleague is taken away in the night, and Ai and the rest of his team are detained in the hotel until after Tan's trial is over, thus preventing them from testifying in defense of Tan. The rest of the film tracks Ai, two lawyers, and the husband of his colleague in custody as they try to find her exact whereabouts. The exasperated team grapples with the opaque justice system and travel from police station to public security headquarters, barging into offices and disturbing the peace. At every stop of their mission they are denied any clear account of her whereabouts and why she was taken away. Each officer and official they encounter passes the buck to another office, department, or bureau. Ai looms large in the film, shouting at police chiefs and berating officials. His fuming anger may be attributable to his damaged sense of justice, but he was also reeling from his head wound, a cerebral hemorrhage, for which he was hospitalized a month later in Germany. It is precisely his fierce demand for transparency, rule of law, and moral justice that forms an intervention into the status quo and engenders the awe and support of many filmmakers and activists.

Ai's working method of keeping a buzzing hive of assistants and fellow artists at his 258 Fake Studio ["fake," when pronounced as syllables in Chinese pinyin, sounds analogous to English "fuck"] has been likened to Warhol's The Factory, and his documentary output is no different. Unlike the solo, quasi-ethnographic practice of a sustained production process evinced in the films of Wang Bing, Zhao Liang, Feng Yan and others, Ai relies on production teams, made up of both regular members and temps, who are sent out to locations around the nation and follow a story much like investigative journalists. Thus, at

the time the three Sichuan earthquake films were in production, Ai was also able to focus his attention on the startling case of Yang Jia. Yang was a 28 year old Beijing resident who drew national headlines when, on the morning of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, the 87<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, he stormed a police station in a Shanghai suburb armed with Molotov cocktails, tear gas, a hammer, and a knife. Before police could subdue him, he stabbed six police officers to death and injured three more. Yang's motives for such violence originate from his experience as a victim of what he claimed was an abuse of justice. In 2007, as a *jianghu* traveler in Shanghai, a police officer arrested him for riding an unlicensed bicycle. The officer took him to the station for interrogation, where he was denied basic rights and allegedly beaten by a gang of police. Yang Jia's case bears strong resemblance to the Sun Zhigang Incident of 2003, when Sun Zhigang, a young university graduate from Hubei province looking for work in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, was brutally beaten by police after being taken into custody for not having his ID card (*shenfen zheng*) on him. The difference for Yang Jia, however, was that he was not killed and therefore had the chance to seek justice.

Once Yang Jia was released and back in Beijing, he and his mother, Wang Jingmei, worked through every possible legal channel to have their case heard, and even tried to sue the police. Officials from Shanghai came to Beijing to bribe Yang Jia and his mother, offering ever-increasing loads of cash. Dedicated to higher ideals and driven by perhaps unrealistic expectations of a corrupt system, Yang Jia and his mother refused all offers and continued to insist that the police officers responsible for the beating stand trial. Denied justice at every step, Yang eventually, lethally, took matters into his own hand.

Like many across the country who followed the case, Ai was certain that Yang would not be given a fair trial. He sent a team led by artist Zhao Zhao to Shanghai to record

interviews with Yang Jia's relatives, lawyers, and Shanghai residents, as well as film his own efforts to gain access to the officials concerned with Yang Jia's trial. The resulting two-hour film, *A Lonely Man* (*Yi ge Gupi de Ren*), is “dedicated to all those work towards equality and justice in Chinese society” and brings together blog postings by Ai Weiwei written in reaction to the unfolding case, various opinions of legal experts, the reactions of the Shanghai public, and the feelings of Yang Jia's relatives and father. Conspicuously missing from this film is Yang Jia's mother, Wang Jingmei. The morning of the slayings, Yang Jia's mother, even before she knew about his son's crime and without being given an explanation, was taken into custody by authorities and held in an undisclosed detention center on the outskirts of Beijing. Incidentally, this form of detention wherein the detainee is not given a precise explanation for the punishment is similar to Ai's experience in detention. She knew her detention had to do with her son, but she was not told exactly what had happened until after Yang Jia was executed. Thus, during the filming of *A Lonely Man*, there was no way of interviewing her. After she was released, Zhao Zhao conducted an extended interview with her, and the DVD of *A Lonely Man* includes another film, simply titled *Wang Jingmei*, which is primarily a talking heads hour-long account made by Wang Jingmei about her son's desperate battle for justice and her own Kafka-esque experience in detention. The film ends with Zuoxiao Zuzhou's soundtrack of plaintive howls and ballad power chords over soft-focus slow-motion images of the two divorced parents burning paper money in memory of their executed child. Close-ups of the tearful mourners dissolve into images of ashes lofting into the gray sky.

With this sudden and intense sentimental move, the Ai Weiwei studio comes startlingly close to portraying cop-killer Yang Jia as a hero. That is, despite the fact that he murdered six people who may or may not have had anything to do with his beating that

night in 2007, Yang Jia's desperate desire for rational justice resonates not only with Ai Weiwei and his cohort, but also with a wide range of artists, filmmakers, musicians, and activists. Furthermore, Ai's film itself shows Shanghai residents gathered on the street outside the courthouse even sympathizing with Yang Jia, discussing the case and expressing their support for him. This reveals a local moral world wherein faith in state institutions has crumbled and violent actions against it are condoned. Indeed, the reputation of both the Chinese police forces and the justice system are shown to be so dismal that any form of resistance or revolt, any eruption of vigilantism against these two government bodies, no matter how bloody or futile, will be met with approval and applause by those members of the Chinese population whose status and well-being does not directly rest on maintaining good-standing with the Party or even in mainstream society. Yang Jia, then, is a hero for the margins, a quintessential knight-errant of the *jianghu*.

By underscoring Yang Jia's hero status and, in general, provocatively contradicting official rhetoric, the films produced in the Ai Weiwei studio surely played a part in the government's decision to reign in the international heavyweight; yet, there are no clear distribution channels for this work within China and, as mentioned above, these films are only now gaining attention outside China. The latter may largely be due to the fact that so far only two of the Ai Weiwei films have been subtitled in English (*Disturbing The Peace* and *Fairytale*, a 152 minute documentary focused on the process, preparations, and execution of Ai Weiwei's contribution to Documenta 12). In addition, according to Ai, these documentaries are first and foremost intended for the Chinese domestic audience. Yet, as mentioned above, the question of distribution in China is a troubled one. These films cannot be shown on television, in movie theaters, cinema complexes, or distributed via commercial or educational channels. Thus, the only channel remaining with the most reach

is the Internet. But, as soon as Ai's team posts them online, they are taken down. In September 2010, he set up his own Youtube Channel ([user: aiweiweidocumentary](#)) that features his documentary work, but China's Great Firewall prevents most Chinese from actually accessing the site. Fortunately, similar to his willingness to gift the porcelain sunflowers from his lauded *Sunflower Seeds* installation, Ai will gladly ship a set of DVDs to any one who requests them, free of charge. With his intended main platform for distribution – the internet – under constant surveillance and policing, incessant posting is all that can be done to get the studio's documentary investigations into the hands of Chinese citizens.

As previously noted, not all filmmakers enjoy the privilege and resources of Ai Weiwei. Unable to generate comparable economic and symbolic capital to distribute their films on their own, many filmmakers seek alternative paths to broaden the social of their films as well as the economic return of their films, and this often entails collaboration with the state, as in the case of Zhang Yimou, Jia Zhangke, and Zhao Liang. By way of conclusion, it behooves us to consider Zhao Liang's rebuttal to the accusation of being a "sell-out" who was co-opted by the Chinese government. He argues:

"The New York Times wrote that the Ministry of Health officials wined and dined us, that we had some kind of relationship, but this simply was not the case. For me, I think to do this movie, the most important thing is not to care about who I work with, even if it means collaboration with the Communist Party. Whether or not this video is made under the auspices of the party, it still could have significance for society, it could still be useful. This is its real value" (Zhao 2011).

Providing his assessment of the approach of Ai Weiwei, Zhao Liang added:

"[You] shout slogans, curse in public, and when it is all over, it's pointless, and your efforts are counterproductive. . . They have you under control, and can't do anything, and nothing you can do has any positive impact on society. I think after Ai Weiwei was caught, the bad influence has only been intensified. Because now a lot of people are even more afraid. They say, 'Fuck, if Ai Weiwei can be arrested, then we all need to be more careful, keep our voices down.' This is normal, a natural reaction, to protect yourself. After all, he certainly is not just any kind of person. We all know the situation. If you influence things for the worse, then what significance can you have? I think true intellectuals should not only warn others, but also guide others, give them hope, give them positive direction and encouragement. I think this is [role for] intellectuals" (Zhao 2011).

Clearly, Zhao Liang aligns himself here with a more pragmatic approach to both filmmaking for social change and the status of independence, finding common ground with cultural producers such as filmmakers Jia Zhangke and Fan Lixin, director of *Last Train Home (Huitu de Lieche)*, as well as the recent 2012 Nobel laureate for literature, Mo Yan, whose Party membership and complicity with the Chinese state's cultural agenda has been the object of heated debate since he received the award. Rather than embrace the political binary – i.e. that an artist can either be a rebel against or an accomplice of the state – constructed by the discourse on independence, these cultural producers perceive a spectrum of possible collaborations with the state as well as with the industry. It is their hope to work through these collaborations to not only realize larger budget projects and thereby further their own career, but also to position themselves to affect positive change from within “the system” (*tizhi nei*). For, they see China's neo-authoritarian Party system as inescapable, but not impervious to gradual reform and opening. However, as mentioned above, the consequences of such an approach are clear: loss of symbolic capital in the digital *jianghu* and compromised creative freedom.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Lock-ups and Close-Downs: the political obstacles faced by Ai Weiwei and Songzhuang's Li Xianting Film Fund**

As the world turned to the riveting events and uprisings in the Middle East in the spring of 2012, the Chinese government launched a hard-hitting and wide-sweeping crackdown of political opposition. Officials not only quelled attempts by activists to join in the spirit of demonstration with calls for a Jasmine Revolution, but also harassed and detained numerous political activists and intellectuals, such as Ai Weiwei and blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng. Tight regulation and heightened surveillance added additional tension to an already pressurized climate in the independent film *jianghu*, especially in the two art villages of Caochangdi and Songzhuang.

In both contexts, major figures in independent filmmaking were brought under intense scrutiny that resulted in significant political uncertainty and upheaval in the sphere of independent cultural production. In the last chapter, I showed how the April 3<sup>rd</sup> detention of world-famous artist, architect, and filmmaker Ai Weiwei dealt a major blow to independent cultural production. In order to silence Ai's critiques and condemnations of opaque government and lack of rule of law, the Beijing authorities arrested and detained him at the Capital Airport as he was on his way to Hong Kong and, eventually, the United States for a number of public appearances. This crackdown on the previously "untouchable" Ai Weiwei ramified in multiple directions, causing many filmmakers and festival organizers to exercise extreme caution as surveillance and political pressure mounted around them.

In Songzhuang, also in the spring of 2011, the deputy mayor of Beijing asked to preview the films selected for the upcoming 8<sup>th</sup> DOChina. Zhu Rikun, the founder and the artistic director of the festival, refused on the ground that submitting to censorship would



erode the festival's hard-fought and sustained political independence from the state. While Zhu's partner and major benefactor, the famous art critic Li Xianting, had supported his position, this sudden and intense application of pressure from a high level of government exasperated an internal conflict within the leadership of the Li Xianting Film Fund that had been brewing during the winter and throughout the spring, leading to disagreements and organizational reconfigurations that significantly altered the film community.

In this chapter, I dig deeper into both of these cases and document the mounting political obstacles independent documentary filmmaking faces today. For Ai Weiwei, I give full attention to an interview I conducted with him after he was released from detention in hopes of allowing his particular perspectives on the relationship between media-making, art, activism, and political change to hold forth. For the situation in Songzhuang, I will track the internal conflicts and explore the power dynamics and positions of independence that were instrumental in precipitating the implosion and eventual cancellation of the most important documentary event in mainland China. The analysis of these two cases not only sheds light on the relationship between the independent cultural production and the state. For Ai Weiwei, it illustrates the creative process of a veritable hero in the *jianghu* of documentary film, as well as highlighting his understanding of his relationship between aesthetics and politics. For Songzhuang, my investigation of the external political pressure on and internal contradictions animating the independent film *jianghu* offers insight into the complex array of power dynamics at play in Songzhuang.

### *Ai Weiwei's Digital Cinema Activism*

My first encounter with Ai's films came after making a trip to his studio one bitter

cold morning in January 2010. As I left, he slid five DVDs into my hands. It was over a year-and-a-half later, and under very different circumstances, when I finally caught up with him again to discuss his gifts. Since his release from detention, he is not officially allowed to give interviews, nor to produce any films, but he told me he has the personal need to commit at least one act of disobedience a day:

JPS: When did you decide to work in video, to use documentary as one form of your work?

Ai Weiwei: My process of documenting started as early as the 1980s while I was living in New York, and at the time I was using my still camera a lot. That was from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. I also shot some video, but I have never used that footage in any of my work. It was more a simple documentation of my life, of the things I found interesting. We normally think that to document is to record some part of reality, but no matter how real the act of documenting may seem to be, it is not a part of reality at all. It is only a part of the act of documenting. The moment it is brought into the open, people understand that there is a great difference between that which is reality and that which is documented. And this includes when the documentarian himself sees things that he actually does not understand, and every time he sees the documentary it is always different. I think this is very interesting. Documentary itself has its own independence - despite the fact that is it you documenting, it does not mean that you truly understand that which you document. All you are doing is merely making this thing happen, making this document appear.

You ask when I started to make this a part of my work, but in reality when I started to make documentaries, I didn't think of making "works," I was simply documenting. Just like when I started to design buildings, I never thought of myself as an architect. I only thought, "We need buildings that are functional." Of course, in the process, you need to make decisions and judgments. Why use this piece and not that piece? You have to make choices. Of course, these choices are based on judgment, and these judgments are based on aesthetics, philosophy, and all kinds of inexplicable things. Judgment makes up a style, and this style can be said to be an activity related to art.

As for the short documentaries, the first one I worked on was a film by my brother Ai Dan in 2003, at the time of SARS. We thought SARS was totally special, with society in an abnormal state, so we made a short film called *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry During SARS (Feidian Shiqi de Chi He Wan Le)*. At the same time, I also made *Beijing 2003*. The idea was to make Beijing into a visual map, to make a film that covers all of the city's *hutong* alleys in 150 hours. At the time I was teaching, and everyday the students and I would get on the bus and go. We went all around Beijing, dividing the city into 16 areas that we would film, and in the end we edited together a 150-hour piece. This work was my first documentary work, and it didn't really have any clear intention or any personal aesthetic judgment. It was simply an act of recording, then stopping, and then the next day begin recording from where we last stopped recording, and so on. When it was over, we just put it out into the world, without any changes or adjustments to the image. We recorded whatever appeared before the lens. And we filmed Chang'An road, the second ring road, the third ring road, and so on.

JPS: But from *Fairytale* to *Dirty Faces* and *Disturbing The Peace* and *A Lonely Man*, you used a different style?

AWW: We started a series of social investigations, which I think are crucial, because the accurate record of these investigations is not only important for us, but also for history. We wanted to help those who cared about the projects we pursued. And at that time we had already thought about how we would utilize the internet. I may be an artist, but I really don't like to work as "an artist." It is foolish to act the role of the artist. Michelangelo painting

frescoes, or Rodin sculpting clay figures, I feel those methods belong to those particular periods. Today we don't have churches, so what is the point of painting all those paintings? Paint a canvas in order to hang in a museum or on a rich person's wall? I am not very interested in those things. I also don't want to serve anyone. So what can we do? I think the internet is a great method, so the films I was interested in making were those that could be put online.

We posted them everywhere, anywhere we could. And as soon we posted them, they would be deleted, so we would post them in other places. We usually posted the films on five or six sites, and they would all be taken down. I am actually least interested in posting on YouTube, since it is unavailable in China, and I don't make these films just for foreigners. I make these films mainly for the young people of China because, unlike overseas, there are so few in China who can make this kind of work. We still show them to a few people who can get over China's Great Firewall, but this was not my original intention. But we have no choice, because we are resisting a blockade against information and knowledge. If we can only post these documentaries overseas, then it proves that the internet policing technology is really incredible, and so the film's impact is greatly lessened, but we really have no other choice.

JPS: How do you select the topics for your films? The Sichuan earthquake, the case of Yang Jia, these are all captivating topics, but every day in China so many things happen that are worthy of attention and investigation.

AWW: When I started getting online, I actually didn't pay much attention to the things that happened everyday. But as soon as I did see something, such as the case of Yang Jia, I wrote 60-70 articles, and it became something I couldn't hide from. I wanted to talk about it clearly. When I do something, I hope to do it with accuracy and clarity, no matter how small of a matter it is. But most people lack the patience, perseverance, and persistence to do the same, and this is especially true for Chinese people, which is why this society is the way it is today.

JPS: What is the division of labor in your documentary work?

AWW: I am engaged in many things all at once, and my hope is that more people participate and join in. Because these things are not only my own. We are a team, and this team can be as large as 40 or 50 people working together, and even sometimes more than one hundred people. So this person does this, that person does that, and you might tell someone to go out today and film something, and when that person comes back you take a look, let them know what works, what doesn't work, and what we need more of tomorrow. There are some individuals who regularly serve as the videographers, like Zhao Zhao or Guo Ke, but there are also some who are not regular. Anyone can film. For example, when we filmed *A Beautiful Life (Mei Hao de Shenghuo)* [a documentary about the plight of Feng Zhenghu, the Shanghai-based human rights advocate who was denied re-entry into China and stranded in Tokyo's Narita Airport for 92 days], we asked, "which one of us has a passport?" We had a young American working here who had a passport and didn't need a visa to go to Japan, so he just flew direct to Japan and started filming upon arrival. He had never filmed anything in his life, never even held a camera before, but as far as I am concerned, it is all the same. No matter who films, it is all the same. All you need to do is press record. He asked me what was the most important thing in documentary and I said, "press record."

JPS: The key is to capture the moment "live" and "on the scene"?

AWW: The most important thing is to record, the second most important thing is to record, and the third most important thing is to record. You might feel awkward or uncertain about filming when the police are present, that if you were to record then they would give you trouble straightaway. You fear that the cops will immediately take away your camera. But I say that if you don't film because of police presence, then they've already taken the camera away from you. If you don't film, then what use is your camera? To get just a few authentic shots, as a videographer, this is the most important. This brings us back to the earlier question: because you are doing this work of documentation, there is no need to think about the equipment and framing. All you need to do is record. I don't care if your camera work is shaky or if your composition isn't strong, just press record. So there are lots of rough images

in these films, but I don't think this is a problem at all. This is a problem left for the editors.

JPS: You just said that recording is the most important, and this statement may lead some to think that when filming it isn't necessary to think too much, that they simply need to stand there, on the scene, and record.

AWW: Filming is merely only one part of the whole process of filmmaking. There's thought, editing, exhibition, and explanation, and these aren't things that are not accomplished by the act of filming. If you think you can accomplish them by simply filming, this is impossible. It's very difficult to cultivate a documentary filmmaker if he has no brain. It's hard to cultivate a writer, for example. Do any good writers come out of writing courses? I don't think so, despite whatever techniques and skills are presented.

JPS: You mean you are against a formulaic or trained aesthetics?

AWW: Right, that is the worst, totally clichéd. A unique aesthetic must be anti-aesthetic. If it doesn't achieve anti-aesthetics, then it is not unique. Whether or not the content and shooting style of my films are flawless, or if the quality of each image is good or not, I don't see these as real questions. It's like if you were to give me a fabric: I could create clothing out of it. Even if it is an old and tattered hemp sack that was gleaned from the trash, I could still design an article of clothing from it. It is only the material. But if you don't have that material, that piece of fabric, there is no possible way I can produce clothing for you. So, with the films, all I ask is that you bring back materials.

Editing is very important, especially documentary editing. When editing these films, I talk with the editor and explain my intention, and we make cuts, changes, and editing decisions, again and again. And after that we use music to supplement the image. When we are close to finishing, we discuss things extensively, and most of the time ask the musician-artist Zuoxiao Zuzhou to contribute the music. His music is pretty rough and raw, just like my films. I don't want something light or exquisite.

JPS: In *Fairytale*, *Dirty Faces*, and *Disturbing The Peace*, you appear before the camera, and some critics have called your presence in these films as a kind of performance art.

AWW: I don't think this is performance art, and I think those people who call it that have no clue about performance art. Simply appearing before the camera's lens does not make it performance art. Sometimes you just have to do appear. This is my activism. If I don't document, if I don't charge to the front, what are others going to do? It's my idea to do this investigation, so if I don't participate then it lacks something of its original impetus.

For *Disturbing the Peace*, we filmed the process of going to Sichuan, where I was going to serve as a witness [for Tan Zuoren], and I was beaten. At the time we thought, "How can we tell other people?" I took lots of photos and posted them on Twitter and suddenly the whole world knew about it. When we got back to Beijing, we started thinking about more could be done. I had recorded the sound of them knocking down my door, and we had all gone to Sichuan with video cameras to document the process. In fact, from *Fairytale*, I started to film everything. But then I grew frustrated, because we didn't edit the footage into anything, and I was so frustrated that I couldn't continue filming. Because we had filmed too much. But after the tremendous response online from my posting of that sound recording, I figured we should see if we could make a film from the footage we shot while in Sichuan. I gave the footage to my friend and it was quickly edited together in one week. I never thought that we were making a documentary, that the footage would finally become a film. If we had thought in advance to make a documentary, it would be much better than the final film now.

JPS: But in most documentary filmmaking, the best moments are never able to be filmed, no matter how much you may have prepared.

AWW: I take a tough stance, and we film with insistence and force. That kind of style no one has ever done before in China, because China is different than Michael Moore's USA, where there is rule of law and effective lawyers. There are lots of problems when we film with force: we can be beaten to the point of suffering a brain hemorrhage, you know? Even before filming it was already like this, for this society is rather brutal and without rules. So, I am not

producing films just to produce film, but rather to bring these stories and injustices into the wider sphere so that others can know. Many people think that I make films for the films themselves, and this is totally laughable. We do so many things here, not just films. I am an artist or maybe better to say a participant in society. Documentary is just one of my tools.

JPS: Some Chinese documentary filmmakers and cinephiles I've spoken with about your work say that the films of Ai Weiwei surpass their imagination of what is possible, and that they themselves cannot do the same kind of work you do.

AWW: Their minds have atrophied and they have no imagination. It's not that I surpass them; I am quite normal. They have simply atrophied too much. They are too focused on the frame and aesthetics, but I have no interest in those things. I don't want to film a beautiful image. I just want to bring a story to light and present a point of view.

JPS: So you believe that questions of formal, beauty, and aesthetics should be placed behind politics and clarity in terms of priority?

AWW: I think that emotion is the most important. This emotion could be beautiful or not, and violence is one kind of emotion. For example, when we see Gaddafi just before he is killed, or the images of Qian Yunhui [the Zhejiang village leader who killed by being run over by a truck, allegedly for his outspoken resistance to a land grab by a power plant company], I think it is a form of documentary, and it is violent and not at all beautiful, but it is powerful. What is the degree of our relationship to beauty these days? Not much at all, and I think beauty is ineffective and boring. I've waited many years for it, but beauty has not appeared, so if it won't come than I won't keep waiting. I still need to eat, use the toilet, go to the hospital. It is hard to wait for beauty.

JPS: Rather than being focused on beauty, is it fair to say that your films are focused on big events, that your films are event-based investigations?

AWW: I don't really like to make films about things that everyone is paying attention to. We are filming the story of Qian Yunhui in order to investigate the actual investigation of his murder. I am filming the investigators, asking what methods they are using, and what their point of view is. In fact, there is no way to make this matter clear, to know if it is a traffic accident or an assassination. If the government does not carefully carry out the investigation, then others have no way of reaching a conclusive understanding. But I can investigate the investigators themselves. So, we are not really interested in filming hot topics, and when we decided to film the trial of Yang Jia there was no one else paying much attention. Yang Jia was one man who killed six police officers, so many people avoided the matter. As for the Sichuan earthquake, an event as big as that, many people went to film. Each individual pursues his/her own things, and one person cannot do everything, no one has that much energy.

JPS: After I watched these five films, I found them extremely rich and diverse, not only in their pursuit of a social investigation and their dissemination of previously concealed information, but also in their depiction of a confrontation or conflict between your idealism and social reality. Your idealism seeks for open and public discussion, equality, freedom...

AWW: It is primarily a matter of freedom of speech: it is just that simple. No matter how wrong or mistaken my point of view may be, I still want to have the right to speak, the right to be heard. In this society, if this right has no way of being guaranteed, then there is no point in speaking about democracy, freedom, and human rights. Humans have been discussing these questions for hundreds of years, and there is no need to discuss them again, they are universal truths. But how did they become politically sensitive questions here? Isn't it comical? It's like air and water, the most fundamental building blocks of life – if they are made scarce, how would we survive?

JPS: Film festivals are now coming to you with requests to screen your films. Why have you never in the past actively submitted these films to film festivals?

AWW: I think that posting the films online is already the greatest film festival possible; it is enough. What is the use of another film festival?

JPS: But now that they will be exhibited, will you attend some international festivals when they screen your films?

AWW: They won't let me go. Now I am a suspect, a political criminal, guilty of this and that economic crime and whatever else they say about me having a mistress and spreading obscene photos, so many different crimes I can't keep track. Washing away all these crimes would take a lifetime. After all this, I hope to one day see a priest so he could say to me: "All is forgiven."

I conducted this interview with Ai Weiwei in October 2011, since then he has been invited to festivals and screenings, but the authorities have still not returned his passport to him.

### *Songzhuang: Li Xianting Film Fund & Fanhall Films*

Since 2007, Zhu Rikun had been serving as both the CEO of the Li Xianting Film Fund and the artistic director of its festival, the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF). At the same time, he was also continued to be the driving force behind his own organization, Fanhall Films, and his own documentary film festival, DOChina. This array of coterminous positions held by Zhu across two organizations gradually gave rise to an unclear yet deep imbrication between Zhu's Fanhall Films and the Li Xianting Film Fund. From 2007 until 2011, this growing inter-connectedness held true in operation and administration, as well as in agendas and priorities. As the primary figure and representative of Songzhuang's art and film community, Li Xianting granted Zhu his position and provided resources, all the while using his local influence to protect and sustain the Film Fund, Fanhall Films, and Zhu's film programming decisions. As time progressed, however, Zhu's more anti-CCP and oppositional agenda began to draw more unwanted political attention and intra-*jianghu* criticism, which inevitably reached an alarming apex in the spring of 2011. Li Xianting and others involved in the Film Fund grew increasingly concerned for how Zhu's oppositional approach would bode for the development of independent film. Contending visions began to emerge between Li and Zhu for an appropriate course of action in dealing with the state's desire to penetrate and shape their form of independent cultural production and film

exhibition. These visions, which share similar ultimate goals, differ primarily in tone. As I shall describe below, Li favored a more optimistic, diplomatic approach, whereas Zhu held onto a more negative and antagonistic confrontation with state and society.

It was late March 2011 in Paris when I first learned of a serious rift in the Li Xianting Film Fund. Zhu Rikun and Xu Xin were invited to the Cinema du Reel Documentary Festival at the Centre George Pompidou to present *Karamay*, and I was attending the festival to show *Foreign Parts (2010)*, a feature documentary I co-directed with Verena Paravel in the auto body shops and junkyards of Willets Point in Queens, New York which were facing eviction by eminent domain law. Zhu, Xu, and I sat on the large stone square just before the museum and discussed recent events. Zhu looked tired, and had taken up smoking – a common practice among Chinese men, especially artists, but a habit Zhu had adamantly refused to participate in before. It was then that he told me he would step down from the CEO post of the Film Fund. I was shocked. He said he was “disappointed” with the conventional film festival model, with the film community in general, and wanted to return to his native Guangdong to rest in the countryside with his family (Zhu 2011). What had happened to the vibrant and courageous enclave of independent film exhibition in Songzhuang? Was the promising alliance between Fanhall Films and the Li Xianting Film Fund crumbling before our very eyes? With Zhu and myself in rather despondent states, I did not want to pose such direct questions, and instead asked if he would return to Beijing to host his DOChina festival in May. He said he was not sure since the film fund would be under new leadership.

Back in Beijing, Zhu’s close colleagues, the filmmakers Xu Xin and Wang Wo, later told me that Zhu had been asked by Li Xianting to resign due to multiple factors. First and

foremost, they said, Li Xianting's wife did not approve of Zhu's cavalier approach to dealing with state power. Her argument was based on a concern for Li's personal safety and professional security; indeed, she feared for Li's head position in Songzhuang, and for his physical wellbeing. This fear was all the more validated in following the detention of Ai Weiwei; for, if "Old Ai" could be taken into custody, so could "Old Li." Thus, it was Li Xianting's wife who proposed to have her close friend and neighbor, Zhang Qi, handle the administrative side of affairs at the Film Fund. Zhang Qi was also a friend of Li Xianting and had years of experience working for CCTV. Wang Hongwei, who was Jia Zhangke's leading actor for his earlier underground films, had served on the selection committee for previous editions of BiFF and DOChina, and was appointed the artistic director for 6<sup>th</sup> BiFF, which was to be held in October 2011. Thus, Zhu's central CEO position was divided into two new roles for Zhang and Wang to assume.

Adding to the motivation for Zhu's departure, there was also the issue of administrative duties and financial accounting. While Zhu did oversee the archiving objective of the Film Fund, his efforts to this end lacked clear structure and motivation. Visitors complained that there was no organization for the archive, just DVDs stacked on shelves. It was even alleged that he neglected to archive a handful of films that had been screened at one of the two Songzhuang film festivals. Furthermore, Zhu was inept at accounting. In an interview, Li Xianting explains:

Li Xianting (LXT): Zhu Rikun would just keep all the money in his pockets and spend it casually. And he had to take care of so many different things, so many bits and pieces [of the administration]. But now we have asked Zhang Qi to join us. As for the matter of Zhu Rikun serving as an artistic director, we will have discussion on the matter. We are thinking that for each exhibition, we may change directors, providing a chance for different styles of programming to be featured. And Zhu Rikun would participate in this, but he just wouldn't have so many administrative duties anymore ... In the past, I used to give him all the money. And all of it was cash. Including my own money, all that I invested into the fund, it was all cash. Including the 10,000 USD cash I received as an award from some European nobility foundation,



JPS: So you yourself were never very certain how much money the fund was operating with, and how much it spent?

LXT: It is very foolish, but I never knew. Whenever I received money, I would just give it to him.

JPS: Is this a common way of operating in art circles?

LXT: I don't know about other people, but I hope that from now on we operate in a more standardized way. Because when you look at the accounts, you don't see any problems. But many of them are filled incorrectly. I don't think he spent the money carelessly, or on his own personal interests. But, for example, money is spent, and there is no receipt, so he used some other expense to account for the expenditure. In China, all financial affairs are handled this way, even the finances of big companies. And there is a word for this practice: 'money laundering'" (Li 2011).

Thus, while Li continued to respect and value Zhu's programming skills and his dedication to independent cinema, he was concerned with moving the operation of the film fund towards a more *professionalized* model – one that would entail a greater division of labor as well as more transparency in decision-making and operation. Consequently, he decided to strip Zhu of his administrative responsibilities because Zhu proved to be incompetent in this realm. Indeed, Zhu was far more focused on his role as a producer and promoter, and far less interested and skilled in daily operations and the small details of administrative duties.

Interestingly, at first glance, the question of Zhu's faulty accounting and "money laundering" appears to parallel the critiques made against China's corrupt leaders (*tamwu fuba*); yet, Li and most onlookers did not believe that Zhu was involved in taking money for his own personal gain. In fact, the important difference here between Zhu and the graft, extortion, and manipulation exercised by corrupt Party members is that Zhu was judged by Li and others as not acting in self-interest in the conventional sense of economic corruption. He certainly was building symbolic capital for his festival, for his favored filmmakers, and for himself, and thereby creating a sphere of influence, but this was not seen as a for-profit venture. Even when Zhu instituted ticket sales at the 7<sup>th</sup> DOChina in

2010, he did so as an experiment “in order for independent film to seek a definite economic potential in the future...if our film enthusiasts lack all interest in purchasing tickets, then distribution of independent films and art cinemas are all just idle talk” (Zhu 2010:7). Rather, he was deemed both incompetent at, and neglectful of, the more menial, detail-oriented dimensions of running an organization. He was also apparently more accustomed to informal modes of leadership and administration, which is akin to the unceremonious and cavalier codes of conduct of *jianghu*. In other words, with his ardent support and curatorial vision, Zhu excelled at generating symbolic capital for DOChina, BiFF, and the films upon which he placed value; however, he struggled to work in an organized and systematic way towards expanding the general reach of independent cinema into Chinese society. But he did not use his curatorial position for personal gain. In the five years he served as CEO of the film fund, Zhu’s efforts – however questionable in execution – were still directed towards the development of independent cinema: he helped produce new works, supported filmmakers he favored, and cultivated a reputation for showcasing avant-garde and oppositional films at the two festivals he organized. Thus, in the local moral world of the *jianghu* in Songzhuang, the phenomena of money laundering and administrative delinquency are not somehow miraculously absent; however, in the case of Zhu Rikun, the goals and consequences of such practices did not aim at lining his own pockets as they would in other spheres of Chinese society, especially in the realm of corrupt government officials.

However, one startling consequence of Zhu Rikun’s poor handling of his responsibilities for the film fund did present the potential to lead to serious legal action against Li Xianting. After the websites for Fanhall Films and for the Li Xianting Film Fund were both closed in March 2011, Zhu sought out a way to raise revenue for the upcoming

DOChina and BiFF exhibitions, and decided to use a crowd-sourcing technique. He asked any and all netizens interested in supporting independent cinema to donate to the Li Xianting Film Fund online. To set up this online donation platform, Zhu posted Li Xianting's bank account information on the internet, and he did so without first obtaining the permission of Li. When Li learned of his maneuver, he was extremely alarmed. Public Security Bureau (*gong'an ju*) officers paid Li a visit, warning him that it was illegal to conduct a public fundraiser of this kind. They directly warned Li that in China "many illegal fund raising activities led to execution or serious prison sentences." Thus, in addition to the administrative missteps, this potentially life-threatening move to post Li Xianting's personal bank information proved Zhu unsuitable for the role of CEO.

While this mistake was alarming enough, what generated perhaps the greatest dissatisfaction with Zhu's leadership was the direction he was taking the film fund and film exhibitions. There was a growing sense within the community that Zhu was transforming the *jianghu* into a "small clique" (*xiao quanzi*) of those he deemed to be "insiders" due to their commitments to him and to his oppositional political agenda. Indeed, there was a growing concern that Zhu was surrounding himself with only like-minded filmmakers, artists, and audiences, who understood filmmaking as a wholly political tool. Of course, understanding digital cinema as a potentially political action and a source for social critique was also important for Zhu's detractors; however, they felt the potential for digital cinema included, but could also go beyond, the explicitly political.

Further, Zhu was seen by observers as creating a sense of exclusivity in his program selection and his outreach – or lack thereof – to greater Chinese society. Some cited his reserved personality as the reason for a less open and welcoming environment; others

complained that the program schedule of films and screening times was made available far too late – usually, a day or two before the festival’s opening day. This delay in releasing information, however, is arguably due to the ever-increasing political pressure placed on the organizers. In order for the program to include highly sensitive films and yet not be made known to government leaders, Zhu and organizers learned it was best to withhold the program as long as possible in order to increase the chances of pulling off an unhindered opening ceremony, and to at least delay a government crackdown as long as possible. The result, however, was that many potential audience members were either left in the dark, often unsure whether or not to make the long trip out to Songzhuang. Only die-hard cinephiles and those who were informed within the community knew to wait patiently for the announcements, which were usually passed via whispered word-of-mouth.

As early as 2009 Zhu sensed this mounting criticism. In his preface to the 4<sup>th</sup> BiFF that year, which I translated, Zhu openly responds to his detractors and critics:

“Often directors give me suggestions to create more publicity for the film festival and complain that our exact schedule of screenings is always late in being released. Some say that the festival is not international enough and that it could be more optimistic. Still others recommend that we invite officials from different levels of government to attend and participate, especially the public figures who are in charge of cinema-related activities. These are all, in fact, particularly fine suggestions, but so far we have yet to implement them. I think we must be patient and wait. We either wait until a day when such harmony is possible, or wait until the day when we are all fed up” (Zhu 2009).

Nonetheless, the perception of a “small clique” in Songzhuang was not just held by those who found themselves outside the circle; even a number of the filmmakers who had benefited from Zhu’s support held this view. For example, when I discussed the matter with director Zhao Dayong at the San Francisco International Film Festival, he commented: “those guys out there [i.e. Zhu Rikun, Wang Wo, Lu Zhixin, Xu Xin, etc] closed themselves up and lost connection with society. They became like their own political party (*pai*). The festival got smaller and smaller and the audience became smaller and smaller” (Zhao 2011).

Zhao also mentioned that, in terms of promotion and priority, Rikun consistently put Fanhall Films before the Li Xianting Film Fund, much to the chagrin of Li and others.

Back in Beijing, following his resignation, Zhu framed the critical perception of his work for me:

“Some people say we have developed a small clique here [in Songzhuang]. They think what I have done is intolerant and too extreme. Maybe to some degree, they are right. They think all the films submitted should be screened, and that I am too selective and only screen several films that they then say are no good. They think the films I chose are too aggressive, and so critical of the government, such as *Karamay* and *Petition*, which are two films that I like the most. But, in China today, the strong films happen to be those that deal with this kind of content. They are convinced that I select only these kinds of films on purpose, but this isn't true. Many people don't dare screen these films, so they dissuade me to screen them as well. I prefer these films to the banal and meaningless stereotypical documentaries. What we have done in Songzhuang is not closed to the outside in all aspects, and I hope we have created an environment that is open to all” (Zhu 2011).

Thus, for Zhu, the fund's slow growth, the sense of a more closed environment, pessimism about the nation's trajectory, and a curatorial vision geared towards political critique are all not the necessary outcomes he intended in his work. Rather, as Zhu avers, these outcomes reflect the nation's current disordered state, and are predicated on the current prevailing cruelty of the social. The argument here – that the overwhelming and pressing dark side of Chinese society calls for an independent film community to represent social injustice and political oppression – parallels the argument made for the renegade ethics of “documentary cruelty,” wherein a harsh reality is by necessity represented by harsh artistic-social criticism (Wang 2010).

Li, on the other hand, championed a more conciliatory relationship with the state, which yet did not abdicate independence. He also continued to hope for a slow, gradual expansion of independent film's social impact and inclusivity. That is, Li continued to stress his desire to foster an open and inclusive creative environment that not only explored the possibilities of filmmaking but also invited greater participation from larger sections of

Chinese society. When I asked Li how he felt it is best to reach a wider audience, he explained:

“This is a problem I really would like to resolve, but in China it is very difficult. I can’t exhibit [independent] films [which haven’t received official approval] in a public cinema, because it is illegal. All of these films are those which have not undergone censorship or been approved, so they cannot enter the commercial cinema stream. Now, in the future, whether or not we can develop a culture of small cinemathèques like in New York City, this is something I’ve always wanted to do. But we can only do so under a private name. We can proceed slowly... I’ve recently been thinking of a new slogan. At first we emphasized the importance of “freedom” (*ziyou*) and “independence” (*duli*), and now I am thinking of using “insist on independence, but seek for understanding” (*jianchi duli, danshi xunqiu lijie*) as our slogan. This includes understanding government officials as well as common citizens. This film fund will perish if we do not make it serve a social use. It cannot be a small clique. If it remains a small clique, then it is no good. This is something I really want to do this year... The more you insist on the position of a small clique, the easier it is to become oppositional to the outside world. Because, in the end, we become antagonistic to the common people, to the local government, and to the police, but this is not our original intent. Objectively speaking, we incited the displeasure of the police and the government, but this was not what we wanted to do. We just wanted to support independent cinema. This is why we will slowly build relations, and clear up this situation. When Ai Weiwei was taken into custody, I wrote an article in support of him. But I don’t approve of Ai Weiwei’s approach. If we all go to fight, then in the end the losers will surely be us. We are only common citizens. They can find any reason or excuse to get rid of us.

JPS: But how do you find a balance between compromise and confrontation?

LXT: This is very difficult to use language to answer. Chinese society is a ‘rule of man’ society (*renzhi shehui*), this is one of our fundamental differences with the West. In a rule of man society, the possibilities for mediation are many. A government official gives you a little, and so you bore open a loophole. And, like this, you open things up little by little. The development of Chinese contemporary art from its early underground beginnings to its current open and successful status was due to our continual hard work in this way. In continuing with independent cinema, we don’t just do as we please. We have to give way when it is the appropriate time to do so. Why is it that Doctrine of the Golden Mean is practiced in China? The Doctrine of the Golden Mean does not mean occupying a middle state, but rather a sense of moderation. So, in this sense, the government and independent cinema search for a point in their state of continuous competition and negotiation, but this point is extremely subtle and concrete. You can’t just rely on some principle, and if you want to find some principle to base it on, then it is moderation, it is the mean” (Li 2012).

Thus, with an emphasis on bridging the gap between Chinese society and the vibrant but insular sphere of independent film production, Li advocates for a more inclusive, more moderate position. Nonetheless, Li does not abdicate his position of independence.

Sensing his influence and position in Songzhuang starting to weaken, Zhu Rikun resigned from the Li Xianting Film Fund and, while traveling the international and domestic

festival circuit with Xu Xin's *Karamay*, he contemplated his next steps. During the call for a Jasmine Revolution, he was not allowed to leave Songzhuang and, on some days when demonstrations were expected to be held, he was also kept under house arrest. But the hope of still going through with the 8<sup>th</sup> DOChina festival remained alive, and the film fund was involved and willing to help with organization and resource allocation. Tensions were still high due in no small part to the detention of Ai Weiwei and the recent arrest of five Songzhuang performance artists for their involvement with the Jasmine Revolution activities. Shelly Kraicer also noted that, adding to this tension:

“was the coincidental timing of the 1st annual Beijing International Film Festival (April 23-28), in many ways the opposite of DOChina. [The official festival] bestrode the capital with glossy, state-sponsored, high budget and high profile media-driven events, attended by a galaxy of prominent foreign representatives from overseas film festivals and other organizations” (Kraicer 2011).

Yet, despite all this, the film submissions to BiFF continued to stream in, and the guest list grew. Then, only a few days before DOChina was to be held, the festival faced pressure from the local leaders, who demanded full powers of censorship. Rather than give in, or change the location or dates of the festival, Zhu decided to cancel it. Guests from all over China and from all over the world were stranded in dusty Songzhuang with no festival. Li Xianting, Zhang Qi, and Zhu Rikun held a banquet which was, surprisingly, paid for by the local leaders. They invited the remaining guests and made toasts, promising “greater understanding” in the future growth of independent film. In the days after the conciliatory banquet, DVD screeners were made available, and some guests watched the films that were to be screened at a few private locations in the village. Ironically, for this festival that was not meant to be, the logo image chosen by designer Wang Wo for the 8<sup>th</sup> DOChina was a meat cleaver adorned with the black and white stripes of a film slate board along the top of

the blade; thus, the intended logo itself denoted a festival whose hopeful lethal edge of counterdiscourse was fated for the government's chopping board.

After his decision to cancel DOChina, Zhu retreated from festival organizing and began to reassess his previous efforts. He fled south to his home village of Huang Niutian in Guangdong province, a retreat not unlike the ones enacted throughout Chinese history by many scholars when they fell out of favor. I interviewed him during this time of reflection, and asked him for his thoughts on the fate of DOChina, as well as his tenure in Songzhuang:

In China, it's impossible to hold an ideal festival. I hope, against the actual situation, to hold a relatively gratifying film festival. Such a festival would reflect your thoughts and gives you more freedom in selecting films at least. It is also unlikely the films are completely not self-censored. To express your own thoughts or reach a goal, you must have some basic understanding about that. I'd like to make such a film exhibition based on this. I don't care the importance of holding a film festival. The new form I am considering would look like something else rather than a film festival, and its objective would be to surpass the current conventional film festival, and bring tremendous influence to people. At present, the film festival indeed affects some people now who are actually a bunch of filmmakers but plays a moderate role in influencing the society and other non-moviegoers. I also told you last time that I'm not fond of remaining at the same stage where a group of independent filmmakers create a warm feeling of alliance, and then falls behind the times. This doesn't mean it is bad that a group of friends stick together. But faced with the current situation of China, it is not acceptable to be out of touch with society, and act like you are throw a party in the midst of war. Certainly this is discordant. That's also all right that you drink with your friends at home, but you must take the external circumstances into account."

By his own account, Zhu was not intentionally limiting the sphere of influence and the growth of the independent film world. In fact, his reference to having a dinner party while the world outside is crumbling under the weight of war echoes the famous Mao quote that "a revolution is not a dinner party," and serves to criticize the formation of a small clique of friends sharing their films and supporting one another while social injustices prevailed all around them. It is for this reason, then, that Zhu became disillusioned not only with the conventional festival model but also with its efficacy in affecting any real social change. By his estimation, the neo-authoritarian strategy of combining an active promotion of



consumerism with highly sophisticated and deeply penetrating political constraints only left a small circumscribed space for critical engagement with Chinese society, and it was the duty of engaged intellectuals and artists to oppose the tightening noose of government control. Similar to Zhu, Li also sought to resist the government intervention, but he adopted a less oppositional view and encouraged a more gradual, processual approach to working to influence Chinese society and the sphere of cultural production overall.

Indeed, by comparing Zhu's decision to cancel DOChina with Li Xianting's approach to government pressure applied to BiFF 2011, a clear contrast in tone comes to the fore. Nonetheless, Li's philosophy of "seeking understanding" (*zhuizhi lijie*), while seemingly the more constructive approach to dealing with state intervention, admits of serious limitations when faced with the pressing demands of a suddenly tense and toxic political situation. This was the case when Li and the organizers of 6<sup>th</sup> BiFF began making preparations for the festival, which was slated for mid-October 2010. With a major cash contribution from Zeng Fanzhi, Li appointed Wang Hongwei as artistic director and Zhang Qi as "festival arranger." The programming responsibilities for fiction film went to Hao Jian, Gan Lin, Liu Yonghong, and Wang Hongwei; experimental and animation submissions were selected by Zhang Haitao and Wang Bo; and the documentary program duties were shared by Wang Hongwei and Zhu Rikun, whose role was greatly reduced when compared to previous editions, though projects he had set in motion – such as the Africa-China film exchange program financed by the Rotterdam Film Festival – still required his participation. It actually seemed Zhu himself was apprehensive about being involved at all. It was only with coaxing that he agreed to also moderate a discussion-based documentary forum for the festival.

In late summer of that year, representatives of the city government ordered Cui Dapai and other local officials to clamp down on any cultural activities involving the Li Xianting Film Fund and Fanhall Films. With Zhu already laying low and under supervision, they were now instructed to keep a particularly close watch on Li Xianting. Li explains:

“The deputy mayor contacted the local leadership and asked them to send a representative to get me to sign a contract that enabled them to censor all the films, and they wanted me to give them a guarantee. I said, ‘I cannot give you such a guarantee, and I can’t let you censor the films, but I can stop for a moment. I can stop, and change the location of the festival or take a short break, but I will archive all these films’... Because when things are [politically] tense, the censors will likely remove a majority of the films. About nine or ten years ago, I wrote an article wherein I used the term ‘Draw a Circle on the Ground to Serve as a Prison’ (*bua di wei lao*) and I also used ‘mental prison’ (*xinyu*), which is an imprisonment of the soul. That is, every person constrained to certain circumstances will define their limits. For example, some words you cannot use. The phrases that are bound for censorship depends on the situation. And these situations amass into a general atmosphere of the larger social surround, and are shaped by the news, media, writings... And this all creates a social pressure, and it is through the experience of this pressure that each person decides the size of the prison they draw on the ground... So at this moment of time we must take a step back. The officials have drawn a very small jail for us. For example, we select 25 films but you want to cut away ten, now where does that leave us? Showing them is not as good as waiting a bit. When the situation relaxes a bit, the jail can be drawn much bigger” (Li 2011).

In practice, the circle the authorities ended up drawing was even smaller than Li himself imagined. He was told that no screenings would go unharassed if held in the Songzhuang Art Museum, the Fanhall Films complex, or any gallery space in the village. Li decided to move the festival entirely outside of the Beijing municipality, and made arrangements to host the festival at a hotel in nearby Yanjiao, a county in Hebei province, within 10 kilometers of Songzhuang and the very eastern border of Beijing. The film fund made a deposit on the hotel, and even prepared to bring screening equipment over. All the public notifications, emails, flyers, and catalogs were composed and printed with directions for audience members to the hotel in Yanjiao. The day before the opening ceremony, however, the hotel owner reneged on his commitment and told the festival organizers they could not host their event on his premises. Li and his team tried to negotiate with him, but the owner was intractable. They scrambled for a new location, but in the end, their only recourse was to

retreat to the office space courtyard of the film fund itself. Working through the night, the festival workers and volunteers completely transformed the space: they dismantled the office and archive, brought projectors and sound monitors, moved seating into the rooms, and thereby set up two impromptu and temporary screening rooms that could sit approximately fifty audience members each.

With this last-minute provisional arrangement in place, the organizers elected to hold the opening ceremony in the courtyard itself. The date for the opening – October 16<sup>th</sup> – coincided with two important national events in China: the Politburo was convening to discuss domestic cultural affairs, and it was National Blind Persons Day. For the latter, many of the festivalgoers wore sunglasses in solidarity with the blind human rights lawyer Chen Guangcheng who was, at the time, still held under house arrest in Shandong province. For the former, the fact that top leaders were meeting to steer the direction of the nation’s cultural production on the same day as this small sphere of independent film exhibition was struggling for breathe only added a cruel irony to what was about to transpire.

It was a clear and bright day in early October, but the blue skies did not create for an auspicious beginning for the 6<sup>th</sup> BiFF. As soon as I walked into the courtyard, Li Xianting whispered to me, “Should we show the films? The situation is very tense right now.” Over two hundred people packed into the garden and milled about the tables of drinks and snacks. Practically one in three people had a camcorder in their clutches, recording snippets of the gathering, waiting for the opening remarks to commence. Finally, Li Xianting and artistic director Wang Hongwei stepped up to the microphones and welcomed everyone to this year’s BiFF. The main event of the opening ceremony was the bestowing of archival certificates to the filmmakers participating in this year’s festival. The filmmakers present –

about twenty in total – came up and accepted the certificates one by one, and we the audience clapped in polite celebration of the filmmaker’s work and the expanding archive. At the very end of Li Xianting’s introduction, however, he quickly admonished the crowd, “The police (*paichusuo*) are on their way here. Please everyone remain calm (*pingjing*).” As Li was whisked away by Zhang Qi and other assistants, Wang Hongwei grabbed the microphone and in his thick Henan accent, announced, “Everyone just stay calm and keep drinking.”

Almost as soon as Li was off premises and Wang finished his announcement, a group of ten police officers dressed in full uniform stormed into the courtyard. A few local cadres (*ganbu*) stood under the awning between the two structures and scowled at festivalgoers. One of cadre burst into a screening space and barked, “It’s all over! Nothing is happening here, nothing to see! Time to leave!” The public security officers split into pairs and approached people in the courtyard garden. Some of the attendees armed with camcorders moved in for close-ups to record the action. When an officer approached me, he politely asked for my name, my work unit (*danwei*), and my passport number, which I wrote down for them. A young filmmaker whose camera was sweeping across the scene was stopped by an officer who requested that he give his name, ID number, and other information. The filmmaker, not even deigning to look at the police officer, shrugged him off by saying, “you have no right to take my information” and continued walking through the crowd, his camera raised high, recording the proceedings. The officers, working slowly and methodically, continued taking down names and effectively broke up the party. A journalist for TIME magazine in attendance remarked how “civilized” the police were, noting that the local authorities definitely “want to close down the festival, but they don’t want to do it forcefully. Not like cops in Shandong, for example, who would just come in

and smash everything up.” PhD students in the crowd commented that the scene was “like smothering a baby.”

Dramatic and harrowing as such a metaphor may be, this invasive harassment served as culmination of the officials’ sustained repression of the event: the local leaders first prevented the festival from being held in the Songzhuang Art Museum (which was designed and curated by Li Xianting); then they forced the hotel in Yanjiao to refuse to play host to the festival; finally, after retreating to his own private space – which in fact originally was Li’s home until he donated it to the film fund for office space – the authorities still insisted on crushing a drastically attenuated film festival held behind closed doors. Li and others had joked that the festival had been forced to morph from its original form as an open film festival event to a small, private film “party” (*yingxiang de wanhui*). When he left the courtyard, Li was called to speak with eight local officials who asked him to stop the exhibition immediately. He replied, “You’ve already pushed me out of public space into my own house. How can you push me any further?” Despite this harassment, the police actually waited until Li Xianting actually left before entering the courtyard and breaking up the party-festival. Novelist and filmmaker Xu Xing pointed out that this was out of concern for “face”: “they wanted to be sure to give Old Li face (*gei mianzi*)”.

Whether tired of the questions or fearful of being officially attached to and identified with this besieged film exhibition, the audience members gradually filtered out of the courtyard. Those who remained behind were asked by Zhang Qi and Wang Hongwei to “go for lunch, somewhere nearby, and then maybe come back later.” As the crowd thinned, the police withdrew. Within an hour, at least half the audience members who were present for the opening ceremony were back in the courtyard, and the festival workers were warming up

the projectors. As had become customary practice here in Songzhuang, the first round of the cat and mouse game had come to a close, and now the show had to go on. As scheduled, albeit an hour or so late, the projectionists screened the opening films: Xu Tong's new documentary *Shattered (Lao Tangton)* and Xu Xing and Lao An's documentary of a Songzhuang native taxi driver, *Five Plus Five (Wu Jia Wu)*. During the screening, agents of China's State Security Department (*guobao*) dressed in plainclothes were stationed outside the door, sitting in automobiles with their engines running, surveying everyone who entered and exited the office. Then, ten minutes before the conclusion of these opening screenings, Wang Hongwei stopped all the screenings and announced that the police were on the way to the fund again. He implored us to exit the screening spaces and to "enjoy ourselves for a little bit." We all spilled out to find a buffet table loaded with barbequed lamb kebabs, Uighur breads and salads, and cases of Beijing's Yanjing beer. We grabbed snacks and beers, and the atmosphere quickly elevated from somber screenings to a backyard barbeque party. Within minutes, a smaller police force than the afternoon contingent showed up and milled about. Within a half an hour, the police were satisfied that the screenings were not taking place and so they left. As soon as they exited, we finished our evening repast and went back to the screenings.

The whole episode unfolded as a social performance approaching the absurd. The local officials were cast in two opposing roles. On one hand, they had to play the government watchdogs suppressing free and independent expression and squelching any critical representations of the machinations and strategies of the Chinese Community Party. On the other hand, they were also actors charged with the task of directing the stewardship of Songzhuang, village leaders who were tied in collaborative relationships with the artists who were, overall, a boon to the local economy and infrastructure. Well aware of this

paradoxical position of serving countervailing ideologies, the village secretary, Cui Dapai, even told Li directly: “We have to do our duty and try to keep this event from happening, but we hope that you persevere and find ways to keep the festival going without us knowing” (Cui 2012). Thus, they were forced to walk a tightrope of negotiation between their obligations to their superiors within the government and their desire to maintain positive and productive relations with Li Xianting and the artist community.

Perhaps it was appropriate, then, that for the following year’s BiFF, Wang Wo selected as the festival’s logo a unicycle balanced precariously on a tightrope. For, the 2012 edition of BiFF featured even higher stakes in terms of both public interest and government repression, and these two countervailing forces created a tenuous, delicate, and constantly shifting situation for Li and his team. Interestingly, if they had chosen to follow a conventional sequence for numbering the festival editions, the 2012 BiFF should have been the 7<sup>th</sup> edition. However, after the fall-out between Zhu and Li, an extended discussion ensued among the major associates involved in the Li Xianting Film Fund over the ownership of DOChina, which, despite cancellation in 2011, remained the most influential and highly regarded independent film festival in China.

Since Zhu Rikun had brought his festival DOChina to Songzhuang in 2007, he relied heavily on the resources and support of the film fund; therefore, some associates – such as Ying Liang, Zhang Qi, and Wang Hongwei – expressed the opinion that the festival should remain under the auspices of the fund, with or without the involvement of its founder, Zhu Rikun. Zhu, disillusioned with festivals and the *jianghu* of independent film overall, was himself not clear if he wanted to retain control by extracting the festival from the Li Xianting Film Fund, if he wanted to continue with the collaborative association, or if he wanted to

relinquish it altogether. After extensive debate, and with the hopes of keeping the attractive symbolic capital of DOChina alive, it was decided that the 2012 BiFF should be a merger of BiFF and DOChina, and that this edition of BiFF should be labeled as the 9<sup>th</sup>. The logic of this sequencing is based on the trajectory of DOChina rather than continuing with the sequencing of BiFF's earlier editions. Zhu Rikun was later critical of this decision and, in the days leading up to the festival, told me via text message that this "so-called merger is really just a ploy to make DOChina disappear" (Zhu 2012). Whether or not this ploy was the actual intention, it is nonetheless possible to see the decision as a creative response to an uncertain and pressing political situation. For, given Zhu's high profile among local authorities and national security agents and the political notoriety of DOChina, the Li Xianting Film Fund decision-makers would do well to create distance between their work and Zhu's activities in order to survive. However, they also did not want to alienate Zhu or his many supporters, which included filmmakers and audiences. Thus, the film fund's move to fold DOChina into BiFF presents the possibility of quelling at least a portion of the unwanted government attention yet, at the same time, maintain the event's ardent following. Recognizing Zhu's contributions to independent cinema as well as his ability to galvanize and attract filmmakers and viewers, the Li Xianting Film Fund organizers also asked Zhu to be a programmer for the documentary section of BiFF (the segment of the festival ostensibly connected to the tradition of DOChina). He eventually declined the offer, and was unhappy that his name and image still appeared among the documentary programmers in the festival catalog. Furthermore, his allegation that the organizers harbored a desire to have DOChina disappear was in part substantiated when the BiFF program appeared: there was little to no mention of DOChina.



The internal dispute over the fate of DOChina and BiFF, as divisive as it proved, merely foreshadowed even more challenging acts of external suppression from the state. As I recounted in the introduction, the opening ceremony of the 9<sup>th</sup> BiFF was shrouded in a literal blackout when the local leaders called for a complete power outage at the art center where the festival was hosted. This extreme measure was precipitated by repeated attempts by Cui Dapai and his colleagues during the weeks leading up to the festival to inform Li and the festival organizers that they could not allow the 9<sup>th</sup> BiFF to be held. The call to squash the festival came not just from the Beijing government, but also from China's central government; thus, multiple levels of the state were active in shutting down the festival. Such a high-level command was in-line with the ever-intensifying crackdown on potentially sensitive cultural activities and political dissidents during aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution and, most importantly, the lead-up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the transition in China's leadership during late autumn 2012. Some Chinese citizens joked that, in the months before the national political meeting, the atmosphere was so tense that they dare not even drink a beer on the street for fear of being accosted by authorities.

Due the tense political climate, the blackout during the opening ceremony was only just one episode in a weeklong drama of struggle between the state and the independent film *jianghu* in Songzhuang. The festival's previous practice was to distribute screenings across two venues, and the two venues originally designated for the 9<sup>th</sup> BiFF were the Songzhuang Arts Museum and Fanhall Films Complex. After the debacle of the opening ceremony, however, both those venues would no longer be viable options: the Songzhuang authorities instructed Li that both venues would also lose their power if any films were screened there. Consequently, Li had no other recourse but to retreat to the film fund's office space as they did the previous year. Again, the office spaces were transformed into temporary screening

venues. This retreat, however, drastically reduced the size of the audience, as well as the social impact of the festival overall. Since state security officers (*guo bao*) were stationed just outside the office door, the organizers kept the doors to the office locked, thus rendering access to the screenings even more difficult for the filmmakers, scholars, and general audience members who remained in Songzhuang and were intent on squeezing into the approximately 50 seat temporary screening spaces. Further, for fear of letting in government agents in plainclothes, the organizers manning the entrance to the office would not allow anyone into the courtyard whom they did not recognize. The security was so tight at times that even some invited filmmaking guests were denied entrance until a colleague already inside the office vouched for them. Thus the festival was forced into re-tooling itself as a festival “party,” which resulted once again in Bourdieu’s description of “products for producers.” Indeed, besides for a handful of foreign scholars, international festival programmers, international and domestic journalists, and local Songzhuang artists, the majority of the audience were independent filmmakers.

This arrangement lasted until the festival reached mid-stride. On the evening of Wednesday, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, when many of us returned from a quick dinner at the small neighboring restaurants to sustain us through for the evening screenings, we returned to see two banners – black ink characters on long vertical white paper – pasted on either side of the office entrance. The banners, written in Li Xianting’s trademark calligraphy, announced that due to “external government pressure,” tonight’s screenings would constitute the closing ceremony (*bimushi*). The 9<sup>th</sup> BiFF was canceled with still four days left of scheduled screenings. We stepped back into the courtyard to find a deflated atmosphere and no sign of Li Xianting. Zhang Qi told us that the local government threatened to shut down the power to the fund’s office if the festival was not canceled. The following day, I asked Cui

Dapai why this was happening, and he simply responded with an excuse based on public safety: by cramming the office spaces with spectators, he said, the film fund had created a serious safety hazard. “Public safety is our number one responsibility,” he added. Li not only interpreted this rationale as an excuse, but also understood the difficult predicament for Cui and his colleagues. They were trying to serve two masters who called for contradictory responses to the festival: the higher levels of the Chinese government and the artists residing in Songzhuang who brought economic benefit to the village. Thus, Li elected to give Cui “face” in this situation: by posting the banners announcing the early closing, Li ostensibly capitulated to Cui’s ruling (Li 2012).

However, just as in previous editions of the festival held in Songzhuang, Li and his fellow organizers insisted that the show must go on. In fact, since Li’s career in curating exhibitions began at the advent of Reform and Opening, he had negotiated countless similarly complex and politically sensitive conflicts. Later Li explained his prevailing method of persistence in the face of state control by citing a Confucian saying: “Even in pessimistic times, when it seems there is no hope, you must still persist. You must still have hope, and you must still press forward. There is a Confucian saying, ‘even if you know you cannot do something, you must still do it’ (*zhi bu ke er wei zhi*).” Thus, drawing once again upon Li’s status and *guanxi* relations within the network artists and professionals in Songzhuang, the festival pushed forward. Zhang Qi explained that, in anticipation of just such a situation wherein the local government would prevent even a low-key and compromised private film “party” in the office space, they had arranged four additional alternative venues, all located adjacent to the Songzhuang Art Museum, where building projects and new developments were springing up all around the nearby reservoir.

On the morning of August 23<sup>rd</sup>, festival organizers led the remaining festival attendees to the new studio space of the famous Chinese artist Fang Lijun, whose regular and substantial financial contributions to the Li Xianting Film Fund not only made the first BiFF possible but also kept the future editions progressing forward. The festival team continued with the independent festival's theme of mobility, carting projectors and monitors into the windowless rooms of Fang's workspace. The first two days were brutally hot, with audience members packed together into rooms with no ventilation. I remember watching Wang Libo's new film *Oh the Sanxia!* (2012) about the Three Gorges Dam in a complete soaking sweat. Several fellow audience members passed out from the heat. Eventually air conditioning units were donated by a local architect who also supported the film fund, and the festival continued in this clandestine way until the closing ceremony. The day of the closing ceremony, local leaders and police officers stepped into the gated courtyard of Fang's studio. We audience members had all spilled out for fresh air during a break between midday screenings. The police officers milled about, scowled at a few of us, but then returned through the entrance gate and left the event alone for the rest of the evening.

At nightfall, chairs were brought into Fang's courtyard, transforming the gray concrete non-descript space into an open-air auditorium for the closing night's festivities. The evening started with an award ceremony, transitioned into a modest banquet, and ended with a three hour multi-media and dance performance by Wu Wenguang's Memory Project student-participants. Three of the films produced in the context of the Memory Project were shown in the documentary section of the 9<sup>th</sup> BiFF and, what's more, one of them, Zou Xueping's film *Satiated Village*, received an award from the jury. That night, the young filmmakers combined video, theater, and dance into stirring and sustained performance that not only formed an alternative archive of the Great Leap Famine's hidden history, but also

addressed each performer's sense of an awakening historical consciousness due to participation in the project. Witnessing the power inherent in the participants' re-enactment and dramatization of their own discovery of their home village's local history of hunger and suffering – which also engendered a form of self-discovery for each filmmaker – it became clear that a new movement in Chinese documentary was taking the stage and announcing its impending prominence.

The most significant moment of the evening, however, came during Li's short address to the gathered audience. He greeted us all, and then shared this anecdote:

“Twenty three years ago in February of 1989, I wrote a notice announcing the premature end of the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*.<sup>28</sup> Then, like the situation now, the police forced the exhibition to close. So, on Wednesday night when I was writing the notice of our festival's early closing, I thought back to this time. Of course, it all felt absurd. But, I also realized that in the twenty-three years after the closing of the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition*, Chinese contemporary art did not falter at all. It only continued to develop and succeed” (Li 2012).

Thus, with this pronouncement, Li hopes to cast the fate of independent digital cinema as able to follow a trajectory similar to contemporary art. He envisions the ascendancy of independent film despite the obstacles, pressures, and suppression that his film fund and BiFF have faced in recent years. Nonetheless, the independent filmmaking community in Songzhuang – as well as elsewhere within the digital cinema *jianghu*, such as Nanjing, Chongqing, and Kunming – will likely face continued harassment and outright oppression for the coming years as the guiding principles of Chinese state's regulation of cultural production are defined under the new leadership of Xi Jinping following the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

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<sup>28</sup> Li Xianting and Gao Minglu co-organized the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition, the first state-sponsored exhibition of avant-garde art at the China Art Gallery. Held for two weeks in February 1989 and featuring more than 200 artists from all over the country, “China/Avant-Garde” included now-renowned figures such as Zhang Xiaogang, Xu Bing, Wang Guangyi, Huang Yong Ping, Mao Xuhui, Fang Lijun and Li Shan. The logo for the show was a “No U-turn” sign, symbolizing the hope that reform would continue unabated (Cohen, Andrew. 2010. “Off the Page: Li Xianting” in *Art Asia Pacific*. Vol 71).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Reflections on Filmmaking, Writing, and Witnessing

#### *Introduction: Sites & Sights*<sup>29</sup>

Every city in China has housed me above, below, adjacent to, or within a worksite. Every walk in urban China has taken me past spaces of construction, demolition, and renewal. This is not by my own conscious plan or design; for, it is nothing new to say that China is perpetually under construction: no matter where one turns in the People's Republic, one beholds a sight – and site – of rapid change. Such sights and sites magnify an atmosphere of ephemerality pervading urban experience.<sup>30</sup> I'd always wanted to explore the work site as a space of impermanence by focusing on two things: the processes that transform urban space and the life-rhythms of the men and women whose labor realizes these changes. Despite this desire, I never had the opportunity to camp out on a worksite and begin the investigation. For, beyond restrictions to access and safety regulations, I always felt awkward standing idle before the intense physicality of the work, as though I too needed to be doing something with my hands. My body required a kind of engrossing, labor-intensive occupation that somehow paralleled the tiresome industry unfolding around me.

It turned out that cinema fulfilled this need. That is, the practice of filmmaking lent my presence at the worksite a conspicuous purpose that was not only legible as such to myself and others, but also valid in the specific context of physical labor. It was July 2007,

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<sup>29</sup> Portions of this introduction text appear in Sniadecki, John Paul. "Beyond the Frame: Personal Testimony as Counterdiscourse," in *Media Fields Journal, vol 2: Media, Labor, Mobility*, eds. Hyejean Chung and Athena Tan, University of Santa Barbara.

<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in the case of expanding cities, ephemerality also shapes the urbanizing experience as villages are transformed into new development zones.

and I had just finished producing a video that promoted medical exchange programs between health care institutions in Sichuan province and Shriners's Hospital in Massachusetts that would specialize in helping orphans with orthopedic problems as well as burn victims. With production complete and the small crew disbanded, I undertook a long stroll through the streets of Chengdu with my Panasonic HVX-200 camcorder on loan from Harvard. In fact, at that time, I still needed to locate a film subject, as I had to record and bring enough video material back to Cambridge to edit together a film for the post-production segment of Harvard Anthropology Department's Sensory Ethnography Program, which is an intensive, year-long media theory and practice course that enables students to produce original works of media – usually in the form of digital videos - informed by perspectives drawn from anthropology and art. I only had a few summer weeks left to shoot my media project for the course. Wandering through the city center on that balmy evening, open to discovery, I turned a corner and was immediately captivated by a demolition site. The razing of a provincial sports bureau building two days prior had gouged open the space between a hotel, an office building, a huge abandoned mall, and the provincial soccer stadium. All that was left behind was a mountain of concrete remains, coils of steel rebar, and a handful of arresting conifers, their limbs trembling lightly in the summer breeze.

I was not the only one drawn in by the visual and aural impression of the site: several city dwellers stood within the walls that encircled the worksite, transfixed by the tedious labor of both man and machine as bushes of tangled rebar were first unearthed, disentangled, and then loaded onto trucks to be shipped out to scrap metal recycling centers. I entered the worksite, unpacked my camera, set up my tripod, and began filming the scene. Within five minutes, a site manager approached and asked what I was doing. I explained to him that I was a student of anthropology and film, not a journalist. I assumed he would

politely ask me to leave the site and that would be the quick end of my foray into worksite film production. After all, a strange foreigner scrambling over a demolition site was nothing but a liability. Instead, however, the manager invited me to stay: “We’re calling it a day at 7pm, about fifteen minutes from now. When you’re done, come and have dinner with us.” I gladly accepted and continued filming, greeting the workers and asking their permission to film as I climbed around the rubble.

When the backhoes whined to a halt, I ventured over to the temporary barracks at the northern end of the site and joined the managers for dinner. After several warm glasses of local Snow beer, one of them told me: “It’s a sign of good luck that you showed up.”

“Really? Do you mind if I come tomorrow morning?”

“Not at all. We start at 5:30am.”

I am not sure if he actually believed I would show up, but the next morning just before 5:30am I was camped out in the site, and thus began the three weeks of production on what would become the nonfiction film, *Chaiqian (Demolition)*. The three weeks were not a timeframe I set in place, but rather the length of time the migrant workers I collaborated with remained on the site. Filmed primarily on this worksite in the city center of Chengdu, *Chaiqian (Demolition)* is a portrait of migrant labor, urban space, and ephemeral relationships, including the relationship between film-subject and filmmaker. Attending first to the environmental dimensions of the transforming worksite – as well as the demands of physical labor and the relationship between human and machine – the film gradually shifts focus to the group of thirty men and women who come from the nearby Sichuan countryside of Renshou county to work in the provincial capital’s ever-changing urban landscape.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> This group was actually two teams of fifteen, each with their “team boss” and their own cook. Each also had one woman working with the men who gathered the rebar after it was removed by chisel and hammer or blowtorch by a male worker. In the three weeks I spent with them, the two teams were fairly amiable, though



This structural shift in the film – from a fascination with the movements of the dinosaur-like machinery and the steady, slow labor of the middle-aged workers to an interest in the human, social world of the demolition process – mirrors the basic trajectory of my own process getting to know the worksite and the workers. For, that first morning of filming, I trained my camera on the menial labor and mechanical power entailed in extracting the rebar and clearing the space. There was a compelling organic, almost beast-like quality to the movements of the growling bulldozers and towering excavators, not to mention the Sisyphean feat undertaken by the workers wielding sledgehammers and chisels to cleave rebar from the concrete rubble. That same day, I spent the lunch break and evening with the workers, drinking and eating together. Contrary to the manager’s statement in the film about the workers never inviting me for a meal, during the course of shooting the workers actually treated me to several meals huddled around plastic tubs of fried vegetables and pork fat. I tried to return their hospitality by bringing fruits, ice cream, beer, and cigarettes for all to enjoy. As we shared food and toiled together under the hot summer sun – the workers facing a much heavier workload than me handling the camera and microphones - my focus fixed on these thirty individuals, their relationship to the city, and the overall social dynamics of the site.

Indeed, in addition to sensuous digital sketches of hard labor, *Chaiqian (Demolition)* also depicts the men and women from Renshou sharing jokes, meals, and evening strolls through the city, all with me, the filmmaker, in tow. Whether on the worksite or visiting Chengdu's Tianfu Square in the center of the city, we encountered different reactions from the city residents, ranging from friendly curiosity to aggressive suspicion, as seen in the film

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they never went strolling out together. Individuals stuck to their team members. And, of course, there were minor tensions, as evidenced in the hand-washing scene where Master Huang pours hot water onto the hands of Master Tian.

during the long take scene at night when, on our regular evening stroll, we are accosted and questioned by a female security officer in Tianfu Square. This form of suspicion expressed by urban dwellers towards the workers and our comradeship not only resonates with the process by which, as Li Zhang observes, migrants laborers in the city are cast as a homogenized and dangerous element in need of regulation and control (2001: 23-46). It also points up the urbanites' experience of strong disapproval (strong enough to be frequently voiced) that their city and even China itself be represented to a foreign media production by what they perceive as a band of dirty, and uneducated "vagabonds" (*youmin*) or "floaters" (*liudong*). With what Harvard Film Archive programmer David Pendleton described as a "combination of rigorous, structured aesthetics – making especially notable use of the long take," *Chaiqian (Demolition)* explores these interactions between members of China's "floating population," the city's residents, and the filmmaker himself, offering a meditation on class, urban change, ethnography, cinema, and image-making itself.

The presence of the camera and the labor of filmmaking granted me the obvious purpose I sought. My clearly defined role as filmmaker was helpful not only in assuaging my own psychological and physiological need to be occupied in a way similar to the workers, but also in situating my social and professional identity in their eyes. Indeed, I remember moments during production when a local city resident passing through the space would try to speak to me. To my surprise, the workers would often intercept him or her with the explanation that it was "best not to bother him while he's working."

Through the lens of the camera and the microphone attached to its shoemount, I was able to extend myself into the nuanced details of the space, as well as place my subjective experience in contact with the subjectivities of the men and women living and laboring there. The final product is a film that expresses the *intersubjectivity* pervading the site

in what I hope is, among other things, an immersive and open-ended experience. By intersubjectivity, I mean the nexus of shifting social dynamics and affective dimensions between human subjects that entails both compassion and conflict (Jackson 1998:6). In discussing the role of intersubjectivity in the cinematic arts, I find most compelling artist and poet George Quasha's description of the concept when he discusses how the work of Gary Hill causes viewers to realize: "we are all inseparable from this total space inhabited by other beings with whom we share the same field of possibilities. This is the field in which, ultimately, we are the actual medium of the piece." (1997:24). In the case of *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, with a receptivity to mutual co-presence as the artistic medium, my approach to representing the various encounters between subjects in the film attempts to open an intricate intersubjective space of relations, emotions, and agendas, and calls on the viewer to join in. This calls for an engaged spectatorship: as viewers watch *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, as is the case with all films, their experience is one of an expansion of space and time as their spectator status puts them in contact, visually and aurally, with the social space, daily rhythms, and lived-experience on screen.

Yet, as David MacDougall has pointed out, "the filmmaker's response [to his/her own film] is in many ways the reverse of that of other viewers. For the filmmaker, the film is an extract from all the footage shot for it, and a reminder of all the events that produced it. It reduces the experience onto a very small canvas" (27). Thus, for the filmmaker, rather than an experience of an expanding world, there is a profound sense of loss in viewing his/her work. Complex layers of a film subject's subjectivity, revelatory moments of interaction, and crucial aspects of duration often end up impoverished or even omitted due to the inevitable sacrifices demanded by the film's final structure.

It is often the case that scholars who find value in film's power to advance a unique form of experiential knowledge also bemoan academia's focus on the written word. Supporting this view, some anthropologists turn to working in image and sound to render what they argue is often left out in a finished manuscript: the ambiguity and contingency inherent within the felt flow of experience; the capacity for an image to contain a plenitude of meaning; the sensual weight of lived duration conveyed by time-base media; and all the varieties of existential imponderabilia that Malinowski lamented in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* have gone largely untreated in anthropological writing. But what about that which is lost in the very act of framing a shot, selecting a scene, and editing a film? What is to be done about the inevitable process of winnowing the accumulated footage and contorting it to fit into a final coherent piece? How does one account for all the events that feed into the life of the film yet pass by unrecorded?

Although it would be a laborious task to recover all the material that fell to the cutting room floor, and an utterly impossible undertaking to recall every detail of the phenomena that went undocumented, in this chapter I aim to turn to the written word in order to recuperate through narrative some of the significant experiences of social experience and social suffering that did not find their way into the film's final version. The extended preamble above, for example, telling how I happened to make a film at that particular site, is a product of this desire to recover. Recovery is crucial for me because where my film succeeds in rendering intersubjectivity, it takes a more modest approach to treating subjectivity, shying away from the possibility of conveying detailed biographical knowledge of an individual experience. Thus, for the purpose of this first part of this chapter, I wish to focus on my encounter with Guo Congjun, a middle-aged migrant laborer, husband, and father of three who I met at the worksite in Chengdu. I write about Guo not only because

his life presents a compelling example of the marginality and mobility of a *jianghu* existence, but also because the narratives of suffering he has shared still linger with me, calling for my further reflection and inscription.

Yet, I make no claim to describe Guo in the full, for any pretension to achieving a comprehensive and fixed representation of personhood should be cast in doubt from the first. Opaque, fluid, and relational, our identities are always too stubborn in their complexity to be rendered perspicuous. Rather, my aim is to creatively combine biography and ethnography in order to relate aspects of Guo's life and dimensions of his social experience that I did not convey, or perhaps cannot convey, through the medium of film alone. Thus, what follows is an experiment in writing, an attempt to remain open to how the elusive quandaries of everyday life may now be inscribed through memory. In this act of writing, however, I do not cede the evocative qualities closely associated with filmic representation; that is, I strive to incorporate the sensations, emotions, and corporeal experience of Guo's being as well as my being with Guo. Furthermore, my attention to personhood strives to not lose sight of anthropology's focus on the social relations that shape subjectivity – the web of connections that comprise intersubjectivity. With these aims and themes laid out, the following is a fragmented yet chronological narrative, interspersed with reflections and analysis, which moves from the public space of the worksite to the private space of home and focuses on revelatory vignettes of both the quotidian and the traumatic within the lived experience of Guo Congjun.

## I

After a late morning break from filming, I step back out into the dripping heat of the city and head to the worksite, the camera bag heavy on my shoulders. Looking up for the midday sun, my eyes only meet slowly shifting shades of gray. With very few exceptions, the

July sky remains an overcast and opaque dome over Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. As I walk towards the hollow space among the glass and tile buildings in the city center, I imagine the interior life of the structures towering over me: floors and floors of office space lit by fluorescent bulbs; rows of cubicles now empty after their occupants have descended to street level and flooded the canteens and noodle shops; some weary men and women lingering at their desks, munching from boxed lunches as they forego this cherished noontime break.

My lunchtime arrival at the worksite is not a ploy to attain an invitation to eat, though such a generous invitation will surely be extended. Rather, I want to be present for the social dynamics that emerge as the workers relax and refuel during their lunch break, freed for two sacred hours from the hard labor of cleaving hunks of concrete still clinging to the twisted steel rebar. During this reprieve from the fatiguing thud of sledgehammers, the deafening hiss of blowtorches, and the maddening clang of backhoes, these men and women follow a fairly established lunch break ritual. First, they gather around a few buckets of water to wash the grime and dust from their tired limbs. Then, selecting an aluminum bowl and wooden chopsticks from the collective assemblage, they squat around blue laundry tubs filled with food – today, fatty pork fried with bright green bitter melon. Some men pour rice wine from a large plastic jug into their bowls and sip while they enjoy the dish; others forego the alcohol and start right away with a steaming pile of white rice. Throughout lunch, their jokes and conversations animate the space rather than the jarring cacophony of demolition.

All thirty of these workers – twenty-seven men, three women – have each traveled approximately a hundred kilometers from their respective homes and fields in Renshou county in order to earn wages as manual laborers in Chengdu. Sharing the same local accent and geography, they are more or less familiar with the places and figures that feature in the

stories they share, even if many of them have never met before this particular project. Thus, in this site of urban transformation, this liminal space somewhere between an ending and a becoming, their comic exchanges and conversations about family back home, the approaching harvest, and their experiences in the city shed light on thirty different yet related life-worlds which stand out against the mounds and craters of gray rubble around them.

It was in a moment of sociality between toil and slumber such as this that I met Guo Conjun, the figure at the worksite with whom I have developed the closest friendship. Remarkable as much for his infectious laugh as for his striking salt and pepper hair, Guo's good-natured presence puts everyone in contact with him at ease. For, he is veteran enough to know that loads of wisecracks and laughter are necessary to make it through weeks of otherwise humorless twelve-hour workdays under the sun. Thus, without fail, every scene with Guo that I have filmed somehow features a side-splitting joke or, at the very least, an occasion for a hearty chuckle. His jovial, easygoing personality also gives the impression that he remains for the most part indifferent to class distinctions, and because of this ostensible "class blindness," he navigates between the workers and the managers on the site with little difficulty. I have witnessed him defuse heated conflicts, serve as mediator between the migrant workers and the city locals, and explain the complexities of urban living to newcomers. Thus, the green army jacket he wears – marked with burn holes from the occasional errant end of the blowtorch he wields – is the appropriate outfit for Guo, a visual cue for the respect he receives as an informal leader on the worksite.

## II

Master Guo, as I call him, was born at the start of the Great Famine into a very poor family of thirteen children. His father died when he was still a boy and his mother, in the face of crushing hardship, took Guo out of school at the age of nine and sent him to work as

a cowherd. “I never received any kind of education,” he has often told me. Yet he never bemoans this lack of schooling as an injustice done unto him. Rather, he mentions his truncated schooling in only two situations: when he wants to contextualize his own rudimentary reading and writing skills, and when he wants to express pride that his three children, in contrast to their parents, all graduated from high school.

Similar to the vast majority of middle-aged migrant workers in China, the bulk of money earned through Guo’s labor goes to improving his children’s future. He takes tremendous joy in the fact that the income he earns salvaging steel from demolished buildings supports the incredible academic success of his only son, second-born Guo Tao, who is currently a scholarship student at a university in Harbin, some 2,600 kilometers away in Heilongjiang province. In addition to wiring a monthly living stipend to his son, these wages also finance Guo Hui, his third child, as she trains to be a kindergarten instructor. Finally, although his first child, Guo Juan, is married and has a one year old of her own, the first grandchild of the family, Master Guo also occasionally serves as benefactor when her husband’s salary as a chef does not cover their expenses.

When I ask any of the workers why they have settled into this particularly arduous occupation, without fail they reply: “For my children, for them to live a little better.” In his study of domestic space, privacy, and family life in China, Yan Yunxiang’s rural informants described this kind of altruistic love as “the ‘heart of parents’ (fumuxin), which means the parents’ limitless benevolence and love of their children” (2003:181). In short, Guo’s reasons for toiling in this July heat resonate with an almost universal parental sentiment: “I want our kids to have the opportunities I never had.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Of course, this ostensibly selfless sentiment must also be understood within the context of what anthropologist Yan Yunxiang has called “intergenerational reciprocity,” whereby parents care for children with the expectation that they will, in turn, be cared for in their old age. Although it is not possible here to pursue



Beyond stating in a matter of fact way that his natal family persisted through dire poverty, the memories of childhood which he has shared with me are primarily pastoral: tending cows on the hillsides, sleeping outdoors under the stars, quenching his thirst in streams, passing whole days without speaking to anyone. When he was twenty-two and of marrying age, he was introduced to nineteen year-old Ren Xueping. Because her family was without any sons and slightly better off economically than Guo's, they arranged for Guo to move uxorilocally to the Ren's father's home in the Number Eight Brigade of Qingshui township. Shortly thereafter in 1981, Guo joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and served as village cadre for almost ten years. When I asked him why he left the post, he said he could not stand punishing people, extracting fines or confiscating property.

Although he and Ren never ceased to struggle to live well (*guo hao rizi*), over the years Guo has managed to amass around nine mu of land on which he plants rice, corn, and beans. Now that the children are older, Ren finds employment in Qingshui. Seven days a week she wakes up at 5:30am to walk three kilometers to work a twelve-hour shift in the local brick factory. She returns home around 7pm or later, has to work one twenty-four hour shift a week, and earns a total of 600 RMB (\$85 USD) a month. For the past ten years, as reforms have loosened the hukou system to some degree and enabled greater mobility for China's rural population, Guo has made it regular practice to earn money in the city when his fields do not require him to sow, fertilize, or harvest. Thus, more than three-quarters of the year is spent away from his home in Qingshui, working as a blowtorch operator freeing snarls of rebar in various urban spaces across Sichuan province. Although wages are not always consistent, he averages 1,000 to 1,500 RMB (\$143 to \$214 USD) a month. In addition, as a migrant worker, Guo is subject to constant discrimination from urban

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the issue further, suffice it to say that Yan argues that this reciprocity, this mutual indebtedness has been undermined due to value shifts associated with the introduction of a market economy (162-189).

residents and public security officials. The stigmatized image of migrants prevalent in urban China is one of the “hooligan” (*liumang*); thus, Guo has learned to restrict his movements within the city. He usually only leaves the worksite to purchase cigarettes, make phone calls, or go for the occasional evening stroll (Zhang 2001). Since his home is only a four-hour bus ride from Chengdu, Guo life’s rhythm is more or less one of intermittent transit back and forth between worksites in the city and brief visits home.

Sometimes home visits him in the city. Passing through the crumbling gate that serves as the main portal between the site and the rest of city, I greet the security guard who has removed his shirt in this oppressive heat and catch sight Guo standing at a short distance from huddles of workers around the tubs of food. He is flanked on both sides by two young women, who are holding the ends of his tattered army jacket, fussing over his appearance as he scoops lunch into his mouth. It takes me a moment to realize that I am beholding for the first time Guo the father, that these young women are his two daughters, Guo Juan and Guo Hui. They are both wearing sand-blasted jeans per today’s fashion trends, and their bright-colored shirts make them stand out against the muted colors of the debris. Wishing not to interrupt this precious father-daughter time, I set down my camera bag and begin to set up the tripod. As I frame a wide shot of the lunch scene, including Guo and his daughters in the foreground, their conversation suddenly turns towards me:

“What is he doing here? Where is he from? How’d he get that big cut on his leg?” his daughters ask. Guo laughs and responds by telling them I am a student from Harvard who has been working on a film here for the past two weeks and that yesterday afternoon I fell on the rubble and cut my shin trying to follow him with the camera. Guo Hui continues to scrutinize my leg as Guo Juan sticks her finger through a hole in her father’s jacket: “Papa, you have to do something about this shirt! You look ridiculous with all these holes!”

Guo just laughs and finishes his rice. I finally dare to interrupt the family by asking if they'd like some ice cream. Guo declines the offer right away, but since the girls' faces light up at the mention of ice cream, I insist. His daughters echo my pleas and we form a united front that soon wears down their father's defenses.

Not wanting his coworkers to judge the ice cream excursion as an instance of preferential treatment, Guo leads the three of us through the gate and along the outside of the two and a half meter high wall lining the perimeter of the site. After about a hundred paces, he crouches down under the shade of a small poplar punctuating the sidewalk. As he pulls out a soft pack of cigarettes and he fishes in his trousers for a lighter, Guo Hui, Guo Juan and I run over to the shop to pick out some ice creams. When we come back, Guo is halfway done smoking his cigarette and I hand him a corn-shaped, corn-flavored ice cream. Rather than protesting, he tears off the wrapper and digs into the cold treat.

"Papa says the project is going to be wrapping up soon. What are you going to do when it is finished?" Guo Juan asks as she unwraps her orange mango popsicle.

"I'm not sure, but I'd like to visit Renshou and see the countryside everyone here calls home."

"You can come back to our home!"

"Well, I wouldn't want to impose," I demur, though I had been hoping for just this kind of invitation from one of the workers I had befriended. Some of my new friends say they'd like to invite me as a guest in their home, but that it is too dangerous for a foreigner like me to be in the countryside. I could get robbed, they say, and if that did happen, they would be held responsible. Others regret that they are too poor to play host. I try to assure them that I had no expectation, that I do not require any lavish accommodations, but to no avail. They feel that inviting me into their homes holds the possibility not only for a loss of

face (*diu lian*), but also for attracting problems with local leadership and public security authorities. Guo's living condition is not much better or worse than these workmates, but it is in actuality his easygoing and friendly nature that not only renders him less concerned about losing face, but also seems to motivate his two daughters to extend the invitation.

“No, it would be loads of fun to have you at home! I'm picking up my daughter from her father's parents' house tonight and then we're going back tomorrow. Papa will come back as soon as things wrap up here. It won't be a problem if he comes with you to visit us when you return, right, Papa?”

“Not at all.”

“So it's settled. We'll wait for you back at the home.”

### III

Guo and I make three bus transfers before reaching the long distance bus station in the southeastern outskirts of Chengdu. He tells me that this is the transit point for all migrant workers from central and southern Sichuan. Even before our local bus pulls into the station, hundreds of migrant workers appear in scattered groups resting along the sidewalk, playing cards under the elevated highway, having breakfast on the grassy shoulders. The density of the crowds of workers increases as we approach the station. In places of transit such as the bus station, these members of China's “floating population” hover between stasis and transience, between waiting and mobility, as they pause among the concrete thoroughfares of movement.

On the crowded diesel bus bound for Qingshui, Guo sleeps as I stare out the window at the suburbs spreading south from Chengdu. The familiar image of a shiny new McDonalds drive-thru startles me. Orange and yellow cranes perch atop the unfinished apartment skyscrapers, punctuating the pale haze that hangs in the Sichuan basin flatlands.

These drab housing developments under construction soon give way to one-story homes of red mud cloaked in forests of green bamboo. As we leave the basin, about an hour from Qingshui, the topography shifts to hills and valleys, causing the bus to groan uphill only to come crashing down the narrow lanes.

When the bus arrives at the county seat of Qingshui, Guo Hui and Guo Juan are there waiting to meet us. We must take care of some shopping before we head home, they inform us. Although it is market day, we arrived at noon, and are too late not only for the lively crowds, but also for the best produce and meat. Fortunately, Ren's younger sister who sells roasted poultry in the market has yet to pack up, and she gives us two birds, one fried duck and one roasted chicken. Guo says he wants to drop his watch off at the repair shop. On the way, Guo Hui freezes in front of an electronics shop with over twenty televisions of all sizes playing popular Hong Kong movies on brand new DVD players. As if caught in a tractor beam, she enters the store, lost in the digital imagery and competing soundtracks. As her father trails behind her, a salesman saunters over to them.

"Guo Hui's been talking about getting a DVD player for the past year," Guo Juan says to me. "She loves watching movies. She could watch them all day."

Guo and his daughter are now standing in the middle of the store, staring at a big screen television as the salesman leans into them, trying to be heard over the din. I enter the shop and listen in on the sales pitch. He claims his quote is the lowest possible price. At 2,500 RMB for the basic model, the cost of the DVD player is equal to seven weeks of wages wielding a blowtorch. I wonder if Guo is also calculating the cost in terms of workdays as he stands between his daughter and the salesman, staring at the flashing screen. The three of them are frozen to their respective spots for a solid three minutes, but then suddenly Guo Hui turns to me and asks if I would take a look at the player and determine its

quality. Disavowing any expertise when it comes to electronics, I nonetheless inspect the display machine with Guo. We look at its inputs and outputs, open and close the disc door, and examine the functions on the remote control. As the student-filmmaker from Harvard, I am conscious that what I say may have a significant influence on the situation, and I try to be careful in framing my response.

“Well, the quality is not bad, but it is definitely not worth 2,500 RMB,” I say. “In Chengdu you can find players of better quality for cheaper.”

When the salesman hears me say this, he immediately objects: “There is no way you can find a better price for this model,” he exclaims. I stare at the long fingernails on his pinky fingers, a mark of belonging to the non-laboring class.

“I think it would be best to look at other shops, and even price the DVD players sold in superstores like Carrefour,” I suggest.

Guo does not look up. He shifts his weight towards the street. “Yes, we should look at other stores and make a comparison before buying a player,” he says. The salesman hands Guo a business card before the three of us head back into the street. Although Guo Hui mentions nothing more about the DVD player, she says very little else on the way back home.

We climb aboard the local bus, place our bags on the engine cover inside the vehicle, and then have no recourse but to wait until it is completely full to depart. Only when practically every square centimeter of space has been occupied and the ticket collector has to hang outside the side door do we begin to move. As we bounce down the dirt two-track, sloshing through mud puddles from yesterday’s rain, I look out at the terraced hills of red earth. My mind returns to the scene inside the electronics store, and I consider Guo Hui’s yearning for the DVD player in relation to the values of thriftiness and sacrifice ostensibly

held by her father's generation. Writing about the rise of individualism in rural China, Yan Yunxiang makes the case that "consumption and lifestyle are particularly significant for the younger villagers who grew up in the 1990s when the party-state worked hand in hand with global capitalism to promote consumerism as the new cultural ideology" (2003:225). With this observation in mind, the significant gap in what constitutes important and even appropriate consumer practices between Guo and his children may be better understood.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that Guo was not himself also affected by the promotion of consumerism. After all, for the past ten years he has spent most of his life just within reach of the material comforts enjoyed by an-ever growing number of the urban middle-class. Furthermore, he is aware of the local cultural capital that can be accrued from investing in a DVD player, not to mention the pleasure of watching favorite films and programs available for low prices on the pirated market. As the bus crawls past more mud-brick homes and even a few newly constructed homes of glass and tile, I project a future moment when the footage I have already shot in Chengdu is flashing across the Guo family television as they are all gathered together during Spring Festival. Suddenly Guo yanks me out of my reverie and we clamber out of the bus. We have arrived.

In a single-file line we follow the slippery clay path past the homes of neighbors, through the darkness of a thick bamboo grove, and emerge on the side of Guo's mud-brick house. When I step into the cement courtyard, the thin dog barks straining against his chain, the ducks waddle into the cover of the broad-leafed squash plants, and the chickens continue pecking the ground for feed. I pause and lift my gaze to admire the baked tile roof across the three connected structures, but Guo lifts the camera bag off my back and carries it into the living room, which is the central space of the home. I follow behind protesting that he should not be burdened with my equipment, but to no avail. He withdraws two cigarettes,

offers one to me, and we sit down on the wooden benches around the square dining table, which rocks slightly on the uneven dirt floor. Once my eyes adjust to the dark, I study my surroundings. An old television and electronic fan are in one corner of the room, and a rice cooker and a tall plastic thermos rest on an end table in the other corner. A few lines of electrical wiring are tacked on the walls, running to the surge protector near the television, and extending over the doorways into the two bedrooms. Pasted to the main wall of the living room are over twenty certificates of academic achievement, all awarded to Guo Tao, the family's only son.

As I read the certificates one by one, year by year, Guo says: "Ever since he could first read, he has studied with more energy and passion than any other child in the township. His teachers in middle school said they never had such a determined and gifted student. They gave him a scholarship to attend high school in Renshou county rather than the local one here in Qingshui, and he did very well there too. Now he is in his third year of university at Harbin and wants to go on to graduate school."

I ask him if his current scholarship covers all his expenses.

Guo responds, "It only covers his tuition, but he works sometimes as a tutor for middle school and high school students. And every month his mother and I send him money for his living expenses. If he continues studying as a graduate student, we'll have to help him for those three years as well."

"Will he be coming home this summer?"

"No, he's tutoring and studying. He comes home once a year at Spring Festival, so you'll have to come during the New Year to meet him."

Suddenly a radiant woman with an irresistible smile enters the room.



“This is my wife, Ren Xueping,” Guo introduces us. Dressed in black pants and a flower-patterned blouse, at first glance Ren’s appearance would not suggest that she just finished a twelve-hour shift at the brick factory. We shake hands and I introduce myself, but am embarrassed when I am unable to understand her dialect.

Guo, speaking slowly in his accented Mandarin, translates for me: “My wife says you must be very tired. She wants you to rest while we prepare dinner.”

#### IV

Following the meal of homemade tofu, fried bitter melon, and the poultry we procured at the market, we remain in the living room for over two hours, watching programs on television and swatting intermittently at the merciless mosquitoes. Guo Juan and Guo Hui sit on low stools almost directly in front of the set despite Guo’s warning that being so close to the screen will ruin their eyes. Not long before midnight, everyone except for Ren, Guo, and me turn in for the night. After the bedroom door has closed, Ren takes the leftover roasted chicken and duck out of the kitchen cabinet and slices it onto small plates. Guo lifts his rice wine jar from the dirt floor and pours us each a healthy cup. It is already late, but since it is my last night in Qingshui before returning to Chengdu, Guo says he wants the three of us to stay up a bit longer.

Sipping wine and smoking cigarettes together for hours into the night, we touch on a wide range of topics: the academic success of their son, the joy of being grandparents, and the story of their courtship. The latter leads to a discussion on the number of government fines they have had to face as a couple. Because they married at a time when Ren was one year below the legal marrying age of twenty for women in the countryside, they had to pay a fine not only for breaking the marriage age limit, but also for having their first child, Guo Juan, in violation of the marriage law. Their second child, Guo Tao, also brought a fine, this

time steeper than the previous two. When I ask about what I imagined to be an incredibly high fine for Guo Hui, their third child, Master Guo and Ren paused. The quiet gaiety we enjoyed a moment ago disappears, replaced by a heavy solemnity. Guo takes a long drag from his cigarette and begins:

“When my wife was seven months pregnant with Guo Hui, we were summoned to the township clinic. Neither the family planning officials nor workers at the clinic explained to us what exactly would happen, but we figured it was not going to be good. After finding a cot for Ren, they gave her a shot to induce labor. Normally they inject the newborn, too, with a kind of poison, which spreads from the child’s head, where the shot is usually administered, to the rest of the body. But when Guo Hui was born, the doctor, who I had worked with when I served as village cadre, hesitated. He injected her foot instead of her head.”

Guo sits pensively, gripped by the intensity of memory, then suddenly swats a mosquito and wipes the smashed insect from his palms. I ask why the doctor would inject Guo Hui’s foot rather than her head.

“Hadn’t I served as the village cadre? The doctor knew me from that time, which had only ended when I resigned a few months prior, and we had formed a relationship as we worked together. So there was *guanxi* involved.<sup>33</sup> He could not bring himself to inject poison into my child’s head, even though that was what he was supposed to do according to protocol. Instead, he injected her tiny foot and then turned away to his little table of

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<sup>33</sup> *Guanxi* has been translated into English as “personal connections,” “relations,” and social networks,” to name but a few. However, following Yan Yunxiang, I choose not to translate *guanxi* in order to retain the full range of its meaning. Furthermore, rather than ascribe to a reading of *guanxi* as a cultural tool solely for pursuing personal interest (sociologist Andrew Walder’s “instrumental-personal ties” formulation stands out as a particularly apt example), I follow Yan again in seeing *guanxi* as “both a power game and a lifestyle; *guanxi* involves not only instrumentality and rational calculation, but also sociability, morality, intentionality, and personal affection” (1996:88).

instruments. He said ‘Go on, take her away. Go back home and don’t let anyone see you on the way.’ For a moment, I was frozen with shock. Then I snatched up my baby and, cradling her in my arms, I ran out of the clinic. I stayed off the main road and headed into the cornfields and rice plots. I didn’t stop running the entire eight kilometers back to our home and arrived completely out of breath.”

To this day, I often recall this incident, and I imagine my friend in that dramatic moment, his face transformed by panic, his forehead speckled with sweat, his breath heavy and quick. I wonder what went through his mind as he dashed along narrow paths in the fields, holding his poisoned child close to his chest, pounding his feet against the ocher earth while the stars above glimmered cold and distant. How many other stories of escape reside in the lived experience of China’s rural population? Do these stories, as mixtures of trauma and triumph, circulate, and how?

The scene in the clinic also brings to mind the descriptions and photographs of women being prepared for abortions in *Broken Earth*, an ethnographic account of rural Guangdong by Steven W. Mosher who was then an anthropology PhD student at Stanford. In 1979, following the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States, Mosher was one of the first social scientists allowed to conduct research in mainland China since the communist took control of the nation thirty years prior. Among other aspects of rural life in southern China, his controversial ethnography relates the tactics that family planning officials used to pressure pregnant women to agree to abortion, as well as recounts murders and suicides that occurred in response to the excesses of population control. As a consequence for presenting this shocking accounts, Mosher was asked to leave the China after only ten months of fieldwork and, with pressure from the Chinese government, was eventually expelled from Stanford’s anthropology department in 1983.

Mosher's work provides graphic images and anecdotal evidence of family planning practices in the early days of the one-child policy. But his vision of the Chinese state as a unified monolith of power that exercises direct and total control over every locality is flawed because it fails to uncover how individual agency, intersubjectivity and the dynamics of human relationships – *guanxi* – shapes the action of social agents and, thereby, the local moral world. In short, there does not exist a direct correlation between policy and action ensuring uniform implementation of rules and regulations. Any analysis will be egregiously flawed which fails to take into account not only the interplay between national quotas and local practices, but also the personal allegiances and the emotional dimensions that inform any individual's course of action.

Listening to the powerful account of Guo Hui's first few moments of life, I was certainly reminded of the very real terror the Chinese state is indeed capable of inducing in its population. Yet I also learned how these fatally coercive yet ill-defined regulatory measures for population control are interpreted and even subverted by social agents who, at crucial moments, act against the moral environment elaborated by the national discourse on China's development. Thus, the decision of the doctor not to administer the lethal injection to Guo Hui's head is a perfect example of the complexity that Mosher seems to have missed. Stuck in a bind between his official duty and his desire to live a moral life according to his own personal sense of right and wrong, the doctor was in a difficult spot. On one hand, the doctor defied the normative procedures aligned with the national goal of birth control. On the other hand, however, he acted in accordance with the moral commitments of *guanxi*: in the end, he allowed his personal relationship with Guo to trump the charge of his office.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> His dilemma, and Guo's decision to flee with his newborn, may arguably be interpreted in light of the double meaning of moral identified by Arthur Kleinman (2006). Kleinman points out that *moral* is an ambiguous term because it presents two senses: *moral* stands for an individual's sense of right and wrong, and yet, in its broad

Guo pauses and takes a sip of wine. With his thumb raised he stares at his hand for half a minute before speaking again: “Guo Hui’s tiny foot was smaller than my thumb here. By the time I crossed the threshold of this house, it had turned from flesh tone to solid black. I was afraid the poison was spreading throughout her body. If it made it up her leg to her organs, into her heart, she wouldn’t last through the night. I sat down on this bench I am sitting on now and poured a glass of wine from this same jar. Holding the alcohol in my mouth, I put my mouth to her foot and sucked on the spot that had been pricked by the needle. I turned away to spit out the toxins and repeated the same action. Over and over again. I did this for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, and when I looked down again, her little foot was regaining its proper pink color. I could finally take a long, deep breath. She stayed here with me and her mom came home the next day.”

During the telling of the story, Guo’s posture has gradually shifted from erect to bowed, as if the emotional weight of revisiting the trauma experienced that evening has shaped his body, distorted his frame. Ren’s silence speaks volumes of her suffering, which I imagine persists in a zone where words fail to convey or ameliorate her pain. She is now standing behind him, her hands on his shoulders. Guo continues:

“But my wife’s father did not want us to keep our third child. He had no sons of his own, only daughters, and since he brought me into his home to be his son, he still had authority in this house. He arranged for a relative in another village to take Guo Hui. After they took

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sense, it also refers to values, especially those espoused by a moral environment. Contrary to its common usage, however, a moral environment should never be construed as benevolent and healthy by nature, and it can even prescribe destructive behavior such as genocide or infanticide. Consequently, this understanding of *moral* as an environment of values is always in need of critical review based not only on ethics – an abstract set of principles, such as virtue and justice – but also on divergent formulations of morality contained within the moral environment yet standing in conflict with it. In this situation, then, the reason the doctor resisted the excesses of his moral environment had more to do with the morality of social relations as articulated by the concept of *guanxi* than with an ethical repulsion to infanticide. As a doctor in the Sichuan countryside, one can imagine he performed countless abortions. It was only when his significant relationship to Guo activated his sensitivity to the humanity of the newborn that he balked at his duty.

the baby away, my wife cried everyday for a week. She held her swelling breasts and cried that she wanted to feed her baby. There was nothing we could do to get her to calm down. Finally, at the end of the week without Guo Hui, my wife turned to me and said: ‘Go there and get our child back.’ I said, ‘That is all you needed to tell me, that is all that I needed to hear.’ And so I hopped on my bicycle and rode out to the relative’s village.”

“They already had two kids of their own, and were not much better off than we were, and so I figured it would not be difficult to convince to agree to return Guo Hui. After all, it made good economic sense: it is expensive to raise a child. But when I arrived at their home they hid Guo Hui and refused to give her back. I pleaded with them: ‘My wife’s breasts are hurting her. She needs to feed the baby. Please understand.’ But they were concerned that if they handed over the baby to me, they would never have her back again. In order to calm their fears, I lied to them: ‘My wife just wants to feed the child. That’s all she is asking to do. After the child has been fed, I will bring her back to you next week. I promise.’ It took a lot of time, but eventually they agreed, and I put Guo Hui in a bag on my back. When we started out at first along the dirt road, she began to cry. I reached back and touched her, cooing ‘Don’t cry, don’t cry, someone will hear us. Don’t cry, don’t cry, we are going back to your mother.’ To my surprise, she immediately stopped crying, and I felt that somehow she had heard and understood me. So I kept speaking to her the whole way. We rode home as the sun was going down and the fields around us grew dark. Night had already fallen when we finally reached the house, but her mother was still awake waiting to feed her.”

Guo tells me that it was due to these two incidents wherein he had rescued his third child that he developed a special feeling for her. Of course, he loves and cares for all his children. However, it was moments such as these, clandestinely transporting Guo Hui back

to their home, which engendered a special bond between father and daughter. After Guo's father-in-law saw that his daughter and son-in-law had gone through so much trouble to retrieve their third child, he did not oppose their will. But he warned them about the legal complications that would surely arise, and that had motivated his decision to give Guo Hui away. For, as a third child, she was an "unplanned" person brought into the world and allowed to remain in it in direct defiance of official birth planning (*jìbù shēngyù*) (Greenhalgh 2003:199). Indeed, in the prevailing discourse regarding China's modernization and development, Guo Hui's very existence signified backwardness. In the moral environment of the one-child policy, a third child triggered a national wish for the "non-existence" of these human obstacles to China's ascendancy on the international stage. Thus, she was stigmatized as a "black child" (*hei hái'zǐ*) (Greenhalgh 2005). This label denotes the marginal status of "unplanned" persons, who are often denied full rights to education, employment, health care, and other benefits.

During the first years of Guo Hui's life, whenever the family planning officials made surprise visits to Guo's home, his two older children, Guo Juan and Guo Tao, would put their baby daughter on the bed, cover her with sheets, and then sit on top of the mound of bedding to hide her. These subterfuges succeeded for a while, but eventually the family could not hide Guo Hui any longer, and they had to pay the fine for having a third child. Wanting her to receive schooling, Guo also worked through local connections to procure official registration for Guo Hui, thus ending her marginal status as a "black" person.

At the end of the story, although I am speechless, a host of pressing questions compete in my mind: Does Guo Hui know the story of her own precarious entrance into this world? With whom do Guo and Ren divulge this episode? How often, when, and in what context do they relate it? What prompted them to share it with me? How have they,

and especially Ren, found a way to cope with such a violation, and how has the national narrative of birth planning repressed or reshaped their trauma? But, in the end, at an utter loss for words, all I can do is thank Guo and Ren for sharing this story with me.

“Maybe someday you can write about it,” Guo says.

## V

Here I would like to consider Guo’s striking yet apt suggestion for me to transform this experience of trauma to written text. In particular, I would like to explore its relation to issues of narration and representation, as well as the question of anthropology’s role in the face of state violence, of which the story of Guo Hui’s birth may serve as one example among many. In fact, given that she survived and now leads a healthy, productive life, some might claim that this testimony cannot be analyzed within the realm of trauma. Yet Guo and Ren’s total shift in mood and bodily comportment as they recalled the event, as well as the private, almost secretive late-night setting of the telling leads me to argue that the violation and injustice they endured eighteen years ago still inflects their daily lives. That is, the trauma of this event has remained a steady if muted presence in their lives. What’s more, the excesses and failures of family planning and birth control have continued to be sensitive issues throughout China’s shifting political climate; therefore, Guo and Ren have access to few arenas wherein they may translate the pain of this experience into words. Since their story does not fit within the realm of government-sanctioned or internal social critique, such as “scar literature” (*shangben wenxue*) or acts of “speaking bitterness” (*sukou*), they have no recourse to any official outlet beyond perhaps a few empathetic listeners in their own community (Anagnost 1997).<sup>35</sup> Yet, as Felman and Laub point out in their study of

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<sup>35</sup> Because I did not ask Guo and Ren about their experience sharing the story of Guo Hui’s birth, I can only speculate on the frequency and conditions of its telling.



testimonies from the Holocaust, there is an “imperative to tell and to be heard” that those who survived trauma often experience (1995:78).

Despite this imperative, the narrative of traumatic experience that Guo imparted to me certainly admits of boundaries restricting when and where it may be enunciated in Chinese society. It would find no purchase in the worksite, for example, where joking relationships and more upbeat conversations are employed to maintain morale, express power relations, and, perhaps most importantly, divert attention away from the backbreaking labor. Accordingly, in the local moral world of a community of migrant laborers, tales of suffering and vulnerability would be more or less prohibited. The sense of security, intimacy, and privacy engendered by home, however, enables Guo to share with me this disturbing narrative of how his family coped with the birth planning program’s penetration into their domestic life.

But why did he suggest I write this testimony down? Although Guo is well aware I am a student of anthropology, he primarily knows me as a filmmaker and a camera operator, not as a scholar and a writer. Before he encouraged me to write this account, I had not even considered the medium through which I would represent the event. Indeed, as the narrative unfolded, I became completely wrapped up in a mode of receptivity, of witnessing, that anthropologist Veena Das has described as “letting the pain of the other happen to me,” which could arguably epitomize her approach to the study of social suffering (1998:192). The entire body of her ethnographic work can be understood as an example of this “witnessing” practice, of acknowledging and recognizing the pain of the other without claiming to have direct knowledge of it, and this is what I was aspiring to do. I was also drawing inspiration from Felman and Laub, who emphasize that a listener must be “*unobtrusively present*,” and that “what ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing,

spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony” (1992: 71-85). It is this experience that restores the narrator’s to himself, allowing him to integrate and assimilate the trauma into his lived-experience.

Despite this restorative power of the testimony, in a neo-authoritarian state such as the PRC, narrative accounts that highlight state violence can give rise to potentially dangerous consequences for the speaker and the listener. As I consider the moment now, however, Guo had a far more studied understanding of the potential opportunities and dangers involved in the act of representing this story than I did. Guo recognized that, as I am an outsider in Chinese society and a media-producing anthropologist, I can serve as a conduit to relay this narrative to larger audiences, thus expanding the web of witnesses exponentially. But he also realized it had to be written and not filmed; for, if I were to set up my camera, frame a conventional interview, and ask Guo to tell the story, the indexical nature of any filmic image would refer directly to him, to his specificity, and thereby place him and his family in serious political trouble if the video were to circulate in ways that upset any official of the Chinese state, local, provincial, or national. In short, anonymity was required to protect his family and himself, and only through writing could his anonymity be preserved, unless we disguised his voice and masked his face in the event we used video to record his story.

Although this difference between the two mediums, film and text, may seem obvious, the mercurial and hazardous political climate in which Guo and his family navigate their lives today makes that difference a crucial one. However, I have demonstrated, more and more risks have been taken in terms of filmic representations of state violence in China in recent years. Independent documentary filmmakers in China have produced works that

employ testimony from victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of heinous state and civil violence to deal with a range of sensitive issues. Although these films, denied a “dragon seal” of approval from SARFT, are unable to enjoy the economic and artistic benefits of screening in China's theaters, they still manage to circulate via alternative channels and exhibit in independent film festivals, as well as a handful of living rooms all over China. Thus, they do not reach a wide domestic audience; however, given the mercurial nature of crackdowns in China, Guo’s hesitancy to join his image to a counterdiscourse should neither elicit our reproach nor lessen the power of his testimony.

In light of this compulsion to document history and record injustice – evidenced not only in the example of Guo but also in the independent documentary scene – personal testimonies and challenging independent films can be seen as forming a community of critical voices within Chinese society, as has been demonstrated throughout my study. As anthropology seeks to refine and expand its response to suffering and violence, communities of counterdiscourse such as these must continue to inform its inquiries. In their introduction to *Remaking the World*, Das and Kleinman explore how communities respond to devastation as well as the power of narrative to transcend official discourse and contribute to transforming the everyday. They argue that:

“the social space occupied by scarred populations may enable stories to break through routine cultural codes to express counterdiscourse that assaults and even perhaps undermines the taken-for-granted meaning of things as they are. Out of such desperate and defeated experiences stories may emerge that call for and at times may bring about change that alters utterly the commonplace – both at the level of the collective experience and at the level of individual subjectivity” (Das et al 2001).

Thus, the vignettes from Guo’s life presented here as a blend of biographic and ethnographic description serve two functions: to explore an individual within his local moral world and, at the same time, to resonate with this focus on narrating and storytelling in such a way that his story can contribute to the larger discourse of internal critique. That is, this

experiment in writing has not only been one of chronicling fragments of experience and recovering insights into personhood that were lost in the selectivity and winnowing inherent to the filmmaking process. It has also been an attempt at an anthropological enterprise that casts itself as responsible to social suffering. I have tried to dwell as a witness, at the request of Guo himself, in the intersubjective space between my friend and myself in hopes of “letting the knowledge of the other mark me” (Das 1996).

## VI

For the second and final component of this chapter, I would like to shift attention away from testimony and witnessing, yet use *Chaiqian (Demolition)* to continue to explore the practical and ontological differences between image-making and ethnographic writing. For, many of the aesthetic choices that went into the formation of this film are based not only on my abiding interest in the autonomy and phenomenological power of the image to render aspects of human experience in ways written language cannot, but also on my deep appreciation of what film scholars call the “cinephiliac moment.” I would like to first begin with the question of the status of the image in anthropology, especially as it is understood in relation to the written word.

### *Iconophobia & Media Anthropology*

In his article “Iconophobia,” Lucien Taylor discusses how attacks made on the image in anthropological discourse derive from an almost irrational fear the image induces in what he calls “logos-centric” anthropologists (1996). He asserts that many anthropologists feel threatened by the image because its open-ended nature expands rather than restrains the possibilities for interpretation. This fear hinges not so much on the apparent social meaning of the image – Roland Barthes’ *studium* – but rather on its unmanageable excess. Excess, in

cinema studies, can be defined as that within the pro-filmic that is not enlisted by the film's narrative or premise yet which, in its open-ended, unassigned meaning, carries a unique, subjective significance for the viewer whose gaze is drawn to it (Bordwell 1985).<sup>36</sup> Synaesthesia, the materiality of objects, the execution of a particular gesture, the texture of a surface, even "the rustling of leaves in the background" (as in the early days of Lumiere) can all trigger idiosyncratic reactions from viewers and thereby constitute cinematic excess (Vaughan 1999:5).<sup>37</sup> Taylor points out that, in the case of ethnographic film, excess grants the image a seductive power that "draws the viewer into an interpretive relationship that bypasses professional mediation" (68). That is, if everyone could engage excess – understood in anthropological discourse as social complexity and cultural difference – on its own terms, drawing conclusions for themselves, then anthropologists would no longer be necessary, or so the argument goes. Thus, anxiety over the evocative and ambiguous image dethroning written anthropology as the preferred mode of cultural translation helps contextualize visual anthropology's marginal position in the discipline. The image simply offers too much.

Given the protracted and troubled relationship between word and image in anthropology, there have been numerous formulations of what sets them apart (Grimshaw 2000; MacDougall 1998; Taylor 1996). Yet perhaps no scholar has presented more trenchant insights than the filmmaker David MacDougall. In *The Corporeal Image*, he argues that while writing is cumulative, an image is composite. What does MacDougall mean

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<sup>36</sup> In a way, this notion of excess is similar to all the varieties of existential *imponderabilia* that Malinowski lamented in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* have gone largely untreated in anthropological writing, though this likeness would perhaps not be recognized by Malinowski if he was ever presented with it (1922).

<sup>37</sup> Christian Keathley also notes this story of the primal moment of the thrill of the Lumiere Brothers' cinema: "as the story goes, many viewers of a century ago who watched the first films of the Lumiere Brothers were often delighted less by the scenes being staged for their amusement than by the fact that, in the background, the leaves were fluttering in the wind" (2006:8).

by cumulative? Text proceeds uni-directionally – whether left to right, right to left, top to bottom, or bottom to top – through a process of accretion wherein words form sentences, sentences form paragraphs, and paragraphs form arguments, explanations, and descriptions. It is important to note that, following Nelson Goodman, this uni-directional process hinges on the signs within the linguistic system (in this particular case, writing) being fundamentally differentiated (1976). Since differentiation enables lucid articulation, writing therefore excels at advancing finely reasoned propositions in the service of interpreting and explaining not only social reality but also abstract theory. For example, Eric Mueggler employs the conceptual tools of phenomenology to argue that mimesis in Yi ritual poetics expresses a contiguous relationship between body, house, and universe. Building from Merleau-Ponty, Das, and Dillon, Mueggler argues that:

“Expressive (or imaginative) structures generated in perception are sedimented back into the sensible world – as language, as memory, as culture – and become further material for perception. Perception is in this way an active and open relation with the world, bringing the sentient subject and the sensible object into their ongoing existence. The perceiving body and the world it inhabits are folded one into the other” (45).

Thus, such a formulation of the relationship between the perceptual and conceptual is articulated here with precision and clarity through a uni-directional schema of writing – even as the description itself is encased alone within a text, isolated from living bodies and the sensible world.

Yet there is another way to get at the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible: media anthropology. This alternative mode of media anthropology which I employ in *Chaiqian (Demolition)* is an approach to media production grounded in phenomenology and proceeds neither through the reductionism of abstract language nor the subordination of image and sound to argument but, instead, through the expansive potential of aesthetic experience and experiential knowledge. When I claim the *expansive potential of*

*aesthetic experience*, I am drawing from John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, in which he expands aesthetics beyond the confines of the highly specialized realm of fine art and its cultivated appreciation by an educated few, and locates it within the rhythms and activities of the everyday, thereby investing aesthetic experience with new, broader significance and relevance beyond galleries, museums, and universities (1934). For Dewey, even swinging a hammer can be aesthetic. Thus, in *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, I sought to perceive and record the everyday aesthetics of the labor and lived-experience of my film subjects as they interacted with the worksite and the urban environment.

As for the *expansive potential of experiential knowledge*, I am referring to an expanded field of knowledge production that entails greater involvement from the audience/reader, a possibility which MacDougall recognizes as not only a present potential in cinema but also a nascent "undercurrent" in anthropological discourse:

"just as the anthropologist must insert him- or herself experientially into the process of fieldwork, so the audience must be inserted into the production of the work. This is a perception with close affinity to the cinema. New concepts of anthropological knowledge are being broached in which meaning is not merely the outcome of reflection upon experience but necessarily includes the experience. In part, then, the experience is the knowledge" (1998:79).

My mode of media anthropology is inspired by these thinkers' insights and dedicated to an approach to ethnography and filmmaking that, in allowing the aesthetic and sensorial dimensions of the local lived-experience of informants/film-subjects to directly shape the fieldwork/filmmaking process, upholds the everyday as revelatory, and sees meaning and knowledge production as open-ended, catholic, and experiential. My approach understood thus, I now turn to a related discussion of the ontology of the image.

An image, understood here in the context of media anthropology as combining both the pictorial and aural, renders the contiguous physical and affective space of person and place as a composite: an evocative assemblage of objects, happenings, and emotions, the

sheer indexicality of which takes hold of us, as it were, all at once. Certainly, like text, images in the context of linear film – and most time-based media, for that matter – also move unidirectionally and, therefore, film viewers perceive sequences of composite images just as readers pore over sentences of cumulating words. However, Goodman has pointed out that the “density” of images and “lack of differentiation” within their symbol system renders them incapable of articulation (1976:225-232). That is, although the image presents a sensual, overflowing density of a specific time and space, thereby approximating an immediate sense of “being there,” it nonetheless struggles with elucidating general principles and advancing arguments. Drawing from Goodman’s semiotic analysis to a discussion of film’s place in anthropology, however, Taylor reminds us that film’s combination of the indexical and the paralinguistic “as an ongoing fission-fusion of words, sounds, and moving pictures, all flowing into and through one another, is both dense and differentiated, continuous and discontinuous, all at the same time” (Taylor 24). This is an important observation; for, media anthropology of the kind I produce can and often does admit of linguistic properties.

In *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, I structured the film to first privilege the primacy of the visual and aural so as to evoke a sensorial experience of “being there,” which is similar not only to what anthropologists refer to as “the ethnographic present” but also to the principal aesthetic employed by many independent Chinese documentaries known as *xianchang* – which translates as “live” and “on the scene.” This aesthetic has been employed in numerous independent Chinese documentaries, from Wu Wenguang’s *Jianghu: Life on the Road* (1999) to Wang Bing’s *West of the Tracks* (2003) to Zhao Liang’s *Crime and Punishment* (2007) to Ji Dan’s *When the Bough Breaks* (2011). Although it was not until summer 2008, a year after filming *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, that I learned about *xianchang*, the similarity in



methodology holds: to record the flow of lived-experience as it unfolds and allow the power of the raw image and unadorned soundtrack to hold forth.

I was also interested in opening space on screen for the preconceptual perception of “being.” MacDougall meditates on how, through seeing, we are able to extend our consciousness or feeling of our own being (which we rarely see itself) to comprehend the being of others, and, “in the process, something quintessential of what we know we are becomes generalized in the world. Seeing not only makes us alive to the appearances of things but also to being itself” (2006: 1). He also cautions: “the meaning we find in what we see is always both a necessity and an obstacle. Meaning guides our seeing. Meaning allows us to categorize objects. . . But meaning, when we force it on things, can blind us, causing us to see only what we expect to see or distracting us from seeing very much at all” (2006: 1).

As an anthropologist and a filmmaker, I find MacDougall’s admonishment of great value; for, he is not trying to set up a dichotomy between meaning and being, but instead asking us to not overlook the tremendous yet dissimilar power of both. Due to a number of factors, such as the linguistic turn in anthropology and the social mandate of documentary to present a clear argument, meaning has reigned within both fields, at the cost of a deep elaboration and exploration of being. Rather than marshaling forth a singular meaning or a particular message that might blind, in *Chaiqian (Demolition)* I was primarily interested in depicting the being of film-subjects as well as the being of individual objects in the material world. The intellectual articulation for this interest can be traced back well beyond MacDougall to film theorist Bazin’s early celebration of how film’s unique indexicality lays bare “concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity,” as well as Heidegger’s belief that art carries a promise to counter the purely utilitarian modern predicament through disclosing the “thingness” of objects (Bazin 1971; Heidegger 1977).

Thus, except for the stark introductory title screen, the opening fifteen minutes of *Chaiqian (Demolition)* are an immersive portrait of the worksite and a careful study of the material dimensions and embodied experience of the workers' manual labor, free of audible human dialogue, voice-over, or even textual explanation. Clear verbal acts do not penetrate the body of the film until the moment when Master Huang, washing his hands at the midday lunch break, turns to the camera and asks me where I have been for the past two days. After this sudden, unexpected moment of reflexivity – which constitutes a breaking of the “fourth wall” and suddenly pulls the anthropologist's presence into *Chaiqian (Demolition)* – dialogue emerges as an important thread of the film, on equal footing with its non-verbal dimensions. For, spoken language and text in a film possesses the power to detract from viewers' ability to attend to more experiential and sensorial aspects, colonizing the image and soundtrack. Yet, through a balance of the verbal and non-verbal, the representation of humans as speaking subjects – which is most often privileged in nonfiction filmmaking – does not overwhelm the representation of humans as sensual, emotional, and material beings. In short, my goal was for these modes of human experience to receive relatively equal treatment in the film.

In addition to the capacity of the media anthropology approach I employ to accommodate both linguistic properties and the density of the image, it offers the potential to open up rather than close meaning – what Dai Vaughan has described as “the aesthetics of ambiguity,” the pervasive complexity, indeterminacy, and spontaneity inherent in lived experience and recorded by visual and aural media (1999). Of course, this potential is attenuated when the multitude of meanings within media representation is subordinated to narrative conventions, a clear interpretive frame, or a wholly linguistic structure. There are many films in the ethnographic and documentary tradition that operate to restrict meaning

by fettering the image to verbal and/or textual practices, effectively turning the image into an illustration. Beyond the labels of didactic, propaganda, and educational, Bill Nichols has given us a name for this form of documentary film: expository (1991). In the oft-cited distinction between *showing* and *telling* in filmic representation, *showing* is associated with the observational mode while *telling* is linked to the expository film since it enlists voice-over and/or text to advance an argument. Significantly, Nichols has proclaimed that “at the heart of documentary” – in general and across all the documentary modes he identifies – is “an argument about the historical world” (111).

Thus, for Nichols, documentary practice is a practice of advancing an argument, no matter if that argument is construed observationally or expositoryly. In addition to the varied methods and tactics employed by documentaries to advance their arguments – however oblique or overt – Nichols also makes the claim that the “most common and fundamental proposition we find” in documentary is an assertion, based in language, that poses “*this is so, isn’t it?*” (114). While I resist the ease with which Nichols reduces image and sound to elements of language that serve an argument, I must concur that most documentaries explicitly and self-consciously present an argument. But what about documentaries that do not pursue argumentation, shy away from operating on a premise, or refrain from explication over and against exploration? Even those images appearing in films which may not recognize themselves as reducible to an argument nonetheless remain open to interpretation by critics and audiences as “truth claims,” and these truth claims can be gathered together into a discernible argument, which, therefore, can ultimately be said to render the entirety of the film an argument.

There is much insight to be gleaned from such an analysis and exegesis based on understanding images and sounds as language. In analyzing *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, for

example, one could make the case that the film, with its use of low camera angles and its interest in the daily experience of migrant laborers in the city, advances the argument that migrants are a social group far more noble than their social standing suggests and that they possess a multiple of tactics to resist the homogenizing and derogatory discourse in which they are entwined. Here is another, perhaps less lofty argument: given the dangerous working conditions and the workers' horribly unsuitable protective gear (wearing flip-flops in a demolition site and without headgear), the film is an argument for higher standards of safety and greater regulation on worksites. The possibilities for extracting an argument from the film are multiple and varied, and as multiple and varied as the audience's interpretive frames.

While the film provides evidence to support these arguments, in making the film, I was primarily concerned with that which tends to elude argumentation or resist propositional logic: the experiential, the sensorial, the material, the corporeal, and the affective, because these aspects of lived-experience often remain unelaborated in conventional documentary and untreated (or are rendered inadequately) in written ethnography. Further, these dimensions of experience often inform so much of the process of participant-observation, yet seldom make an appearance in ethnographic writing because they do not fit neatly into interpretive frames. Here I find helpful Bart Testa's distinction between acts of showing and acts of seeing – building on but diverging from the aforementioned distinction between showing and telling – in his analysis of Stan Brakhage's stunning and unsettlingly raw documentary, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971).

Testa argues that Brakhage's silent 16mm film, shot hand-held in a Pittsburgh morgue, is presented free from any verbal explanation or interpretive frame, and asks nothing but for the viewer to engage in “an act of seeing, and seeing this, as the direct

witness to bodies under autopsy” (Testa 272). For Testa, in most documentaries, the act of showing – and, by logical extension, certainly the act of telling – “implants images within a wider and controlling function of meaning. This implantation subordinates seeing images as literal presentations to the higher-order process of argumentation. Witnessing and seeing recede, to a greater and lesser degree, behind signification and showing” (271). In the acts of *seeing*, however, employed in Brakhage’s *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes*, something entirely different from acts of showing is at work: “from this seeming simplicity and directness, interpretive possibilities [do] arise, if only because Brakhage’s film does not interpret its images for us” (272). Wishing to evade the recession of witnessing and seeing, and hoping to downplay the controlling function of meaning, I sought to keep the power of the “act of seeing” as a guide in both the shooting and editing of *Chaiqian (Demolition)*.

Yet this is not to say that my film is random and unauthored.<sup>38</sup> In a seeming contradiction to his championing of an “aesthetics of ambiguity,” Vaughan has been vocal in arguing that films have authors, that films are always about something, and that there is even danger in “the capacity of film to swallow the world into its own syntax” (72). What Vaughan is driving at – and what interests me immensely about working in image and sound – is how “film outstrips its makers’ intentions.” This is the unique capability of a film image’s density, wherein excess meaning enables film images to, at one and the same time, serve the narrative and discourse the film constructs while also going beyond these structures of meaning, welcoming viewers to create their own interpretations (83). Can ethnographers say the same thing about their manuscripts?

In fact, it is the creation of this cinematic space and time to scan the image and attend to the soundtrack that also determined shot length in *Chaiqian (Demolition)*. Rather

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<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, just as Brakhage’s film is composed, so is *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, though my film does not reach and sustain the extremes that Brakhage does in his pursuit of pure acts of seeing.

than present a typical flurry of tightly edited images, forcing the viewer to passively receive information while being carried along by a conventional editing scheme that sutures fragments into a fabricated sense of temporal continuity, I elected for an aesthetic of duration based on the long take. However, I did not insist on duration just for the sake of duration or, as Heider asserts in his attempt to define ethnographic film, for the value of the long take to amass cultural data to be analyzed, although the latter is a fortuitous outcome for viewers interested in extracting ethnographic content (Heider 2006). In my approach, within each long take of uninterrupted cinematic time in the film, there is an internal rhythm, a purposeful trajectory and/or temporal arch and, most importantly, an intentionality towards slow disclosure, thereby allowing small details and sensuous movements of the material world to reveal themselves in their own time. Such an approach grounds the very possibility for revelation, discovery, and surprise. China scholar and anthropologist Angela Zito, reflecting on her first filmmaking experience in Beijing, contextualizes the sense of excitement and novelty she felt in making the documentary *Writing in Water* (2012) by drawing on what philosopher Jane Bennet describes as “enchanted materialism,” which is a combination of surprise and awe that creates “an energizing feeling of fullness or plenitude—a momentary return to childhood *joie de vivre*” (Bennet 2001:104; Zito 2013). My process of editing *Chaiqian/Demolition* was guided by similar excitement and wonder, which engenders an awareness of how objects, sensations, emotions, and individuals reveal themselves according to their own rhythms and/or bio-rhythms, shaped in no small part by a relationship to the environment.

Furthermore, contrary to the belief that every cut in every film is entirely dependent on human agency and is made for a very clear purpose, my process of editing is much more intuitive, sensorial, and open to the scene or the entire work having a hand in shaping itself.

Filmmakers and artists of all kinds – novelists especially – have testified to the experience of the work-in-progress taking an active role in its own formation. Whether it is a novelist, such as Tolstoy admitting that at one point the characters of his novels began to write themselves, or a filmmaker stating that the film’s editing structure somehow fell in place of its own accord, there are numerous examples of this dynamic wherein the artist or maker, immersed within the creative process, gives up a degree of agency to the agenda and intentionality of the work itself.

### *Cinephilia & The Cinephiliac Moment*

The long take not only allows viewers to become engrossed in the unique time and space posited by the film, but also to engage in a productive form of looking, what Vivian Sobchack has termed viewing with an “active eye,” wherein it is possible to actively participate in producing meaning out of the complexity and density of image and sound on the screen (1990:24). Thus, there is another, related rationale for the long take at work here: the desire to produce ample opportunities for cinephilia. Borrowing the term the “cinephiliac moment” from Paul Willemen, film scholar Christian Keathley describes it as intimately connected to cinematic excess. For Keathley, the cinephiliac moment is:

“the fetishizing of fragments of a film, either individual shots or marginal (often unintentional) details in the image...Willemen argues that what persists in almost all cinephiliac discourse is a celebration of the spectator’s subjective encounter with ‘fleeting, evanescent moments’ in the film experience. Whether it is the gesture of a hand, the odd rhythm of a horse’s gait, or the sudden change in expression on a face, these moments are experienced by the cinephile who beholds them as nothing less than an epiphany, a revelation.” (7-8).

Thus, in addition to *Chaiqian (Demolition)*’s several major themes – such as the social experience of migrant workers, the fleeting intimacy that animates Chinese cities, and the transformation of urban space due to rapid economic development – it also presents opportunities for viewers to project their own subjective relationship with details contained

within the pro-filmic. This interest in fostering the productive rather than passive form of viewing was one of my main concerns in the crafting of *Chaiqian (Demolition)*. Breaking down the dichotomy between aesthetics and ethics as well as that between objectivity and subjectivity (in this case, ambiguity), Vaughan states: “just as the ethics of the filmmakers are experienced as aesthetics by the viewer, so the anthropologist’s objectivity translates into ambiguity, and the ‘real-life’ density commonly attributed by the viewer to such film is our experience of active engagement in the generation of meaning” (199: 115).

I would like to provide an example of how the cinephiliac moment engenders a viewer’s sense of uncovering revelatory moments within a film by quoting at some length from a recent interview conducted by film scholar and chronicler of avant-garde and non-fiction film, Scott MacDonald:

“MacDonald: The opening shot of *Chaiqian (Demolition)* creates an optical illusion: a man seems to be sitting on a flat surface on the ground, but when a worker walks into the image, we realize that the man is actually a distance above the ground. I read this as a metaphor for the realities of class structure in China, an issue that comes up several times in the film, including at the end when the policewoman questions you and the workers. Is that how you understand that opening shot?”

Sniadecki: As a relatively vague Marxist and a closet class warrior, I quite like your reading of the opening shot. I would imagine, though, that the critique of class in China would be perhaps more legible, poignant, and concentrated when that opening shot transforms into the 360 degree pan that moves away from the moment you describe and sweeps across the worksite of laborers actually pounding and cleaving concrete from the valuable, bound-to-be-recycled rebar. There you have the middle-aged migrant workers, in tank tops and flip-flops, no protective gear or hard hats, bent over their tools, sweating in the mounds of gray rubble, while the four managers perched atop of the skate park half-pipe structure stare down on this blown-out battlefield of demolition which they command. You are right about the issue of class in China today penetrating practically each shot of *Chaiqian (Demolition)*, and forming a theme of the film overall. After all, economic inequality in China is conspicuous and so extreme in degree and scope, it is reflected in practically every image one might take of China today. But the pedestrian you mention who reveals the actual depth of the space by stepping into the frame before this full-circle pan is, in fact, not a worker, but rather a city resident using the space of the lot opened by the demolition process to pass through the urban fabric and access the other boulevard. I see that illusory moment you describe – when viewers are surprised that what they took to be a flat ground surface is revealed to be a much more complex and vacuous space – as a cue or signal as to how to watch the entirety of the film. Things may not be what they seem, and all fields and layers of the image are activated. Scanning each long-take image, one may discover many important or compelling details, revelations, or tiny narratives in the corners, in the slow disclosure of space and event within each shot.”



Thus, through an aesthetic that incorporates the long take as well as careful, multi-layered framings, *Chaiqian (Demolition)* embraces the cinephiliac moment as well as the freedom for the viewer to be actively engaged in generating and expanding the range of responses, interpretations, and meanings possible within each shot.

### *Self-Reflexivity & Intersubjectivity*

In addition to the inherent reflexivity of photography, *Chaiqian (Demolition)* also features moments of more overt self-reflexivity, wherein the presence of the filmmaker-anthropologist and the very process of recording social reality become significant threads woven into the fabric of the film rather than being elided as demanded by the dictates of mainstream documentary practice. The decision to include these self-reflexive moments in the final film was based not only on their possession of the capacity to provoke or disclose new understandings and articulations of a particular social situation (akin to the work of Jean Rouch), but also on a creative process that allows the specific conditions of the production process to shape the filmmaking approach.

It was never my objective, however, to craft a work that treated the encounter between film-subject and filmmaker as the sole focus of the film, such as French filmmaker-anthropologist Stephane Breton pursued in *Eux et Moi (2001)*, a feature-length ethnographic film structured around Bretons' entanglement within, and interrogation of, the conflicting agendas and motives at play in his fieldwork relationships in Papua New Guinea. In fact, upon gaining access to the worksite, my initial plan was to shoot a more purely observational documentary that was void of overt self-reflexivity – yet, as mentioned above, always shaped by the inherent reflexivity of photography – but not because I wished to adhere to any conventions of conventional documentary. Rather, since I had employed several scenes of

self-reflexivity in an earlier film, *Songhua* (2007), I simply wanted to try my hand at a different mode of filmmaking. I wanted to handle the presence of the filmmaker in a more subtle matter that declined to traffic in what could be interpreted as a “token” moment of ethnographic film: the anthropologist exposing himself and his methods as a way to respond to the ethical complexities and power dynamics inherent in any act of representation. At the time, it was my feeling that many instances of self-reflexivity in ethnographic film served less as useful, productive responses and more as facile nods to the often-raised critiques concerning the construction of anthropological knowledge and the politics of representation. In some cases, they were merely oblique evasions of these pressing questions. Indeed, there is the danger that by simply incorporating a moment of reflexivity, the anthropologist as cultural producer is seen as thereby sufficiently having shown his/her cards, and thenceforth feels empowered to side-step problematic moral entanglements in the social process of representing the Other.

From the first day of filming, however, I discovered the workers from Renshou were just as curious about me as I was about them, and that many of the conversations around the lunch bowls or smoke breaks were indeed about this strange foreigner with a big camera. To fail to include these questions and curiosities felt disingenuous, and by doing so I would be occluding not only a dimension of the filmmaking encounter but also insights into the film-subjects’ (and my own) experiences of urban life, ephemeral relations, media representation, and technology that were instigated by the very act of filming. One very clear example is the long take at night in Tianfu Square: the workers ask me to take their photo with a statue of Mao as backdrop and, immediately following, conflict arises as we are accosted by a security guard who is suspicious of both our act of recording and the crowd of onlookers that such an endeavor to record attracts.

In fact, these interactions that transpire around the camera – and, in several cases, that are provoked by it – form a dense, multivalent, and revelatory sense of shared social space that constitutes an essential component of the film, filling far more screen time than informal interviews. I had conducted interviews with the workers from Renshou, recording their life-stories and impressions of life in the city. And, after the work teams had disbanded, I even re-connected with a leader on the worksite, Master Guo, and a week later went with him to his home in the countryside. Ultimately, however, I made the decision to eschew the convention of developing one or more characters that is commonly employed in both nonfiction and fiction filmmaking as a way to present a tightly constructed narrative or singular psychological depth that many viewers are accustomed to encountering and have come to expect.

This choice was due, in part, to an epistemological humility regarding film's ability to know and represent of the Other; for, the very fact that film is composed of fragments, it tends to render the complexity and indeterminacy of a subject into a frozen caricature, which is then often presented to audiences as somehow comprehensive. David MacDougall has observed that

“the filmmaker is bound by what is expressed and expressible in the footage. Even then, the ‘person,’ as such, only exists in the abstract sense of a particular set of interactions and constructions. The filmmaker may try to suggest this indeterminacy rather than present the person as a fixed ‘character’ but is inevitably opposed by the finality of the film. Filmmakers watch in sorrow as one aspect after another of a subject’s complexity is sacrificed to the film’s required length or thematic priorities. Entire dimensions of a known person are as casually lopped off as fingers or toes” (1998:42)

The greater purpose, however, for not focusing on any one particular subjectivity but rather on multiple in *Chaiqian (Demolition)* was to embark on a cinema of intersubjectivity. Grounded in a phenomenological understanding of the flesh of the world, this notion of a cinema of intersubjectivity echoes insights into the filmmaking process put forth by the so-

called father of Chinese independent documentary, film director Wu Wenguang, who has been a strong proponent of rough and personal *xianchang* aesthetics and a denouncer of documentary conventions, polished soundtracks, and pleasing images. Wu has also been one of the most intriguing and vocal critics of documentary filmmaking ethics, often highlighting the process of exploitation inherent in the genre due to the great divide and power imbalance between filmmaker and film-subject. Despite his observations, he has also offered a countervailing perspective, providing testimony to the interconnectedness he experienced with his film-subjects who were barely scraping by while employed in a song and dance troupe during the production of film *Life on the Road / Jiangbu* (1999). Acknowledging the socio-economic and experiential distance that forms an undeniable gulf between Wu and these traveling performers, Wu nonetheless states: “It's not a clear-headed, outsider's gaze...Your range of emotions follow along with theirs” (Lu 2003).

### *Conclusion*

I would like to end this set of reflections regarding the production of *Chaiqian* (*Demolition*) by straying a bit from my foregoing discussions of anthropology, cinephilia, and self-reflexive filmmaking and, instead, offer a brief yet important discussion on the relationship between historiography, representation, and cinema that returns us to documentary's function to serve as testimony to suffering and witness marginal voices. Much has been written on this matter, but for the purpose of this chapter, I wish to focus on the implications of film's compelling challenge to history that Siegfried Kracauer recognized as early as the 1930's. For Kracauer, cinema possessed the power to capture and present the minor, the overlooked, the excess, and the unarchived within dominant historical discourse.

Film, in this reading, has a subversive capacity vis-a-vis the status quo which resides in its power to inscribe an alternative history. Keathley has observed that “Kracauer specifically located film's challenge to historicism in its vivid rendering of details, which he read as signifiers of a repressed, alternative, undeveloped history – 'indexes of history in the making'” (2006:9). These detailed signifiers that run counter to official History pregnate images, and lie open for the viewer to grasp, analyze, interpret, and employ. MacDougall and Vaughan have both pointed out that the documentary response and the construction of the film's meaning lies within the realm of the viewer; furthermore, film images may be viewed, interrogated, and interpreted by audience members in ways that resist or subvert the filmmaker's intended argument or message (MacDougall 1998; Vaughan 1999). Vaughan states: “in documentary... excess is present in images, in their potential always to reveal – under different interrogations – aspects of the pro-filmic hitherto unremarked” (1999: 113).

It is precisely this quest to interrogate the process by which history is buried and thereby develop a non-official history that motivates many of the works of my Chinese filmmaking counterparts producing documentaries in the world of Chinese independent digital cinema. Fully aware that the hardships and complexities of social reality in China are systematically left out of official discourse and state historiography, filmmakers such as Ai Weiwei, Cong Feng, Feng Yan, Xu Xin, Ji Dan, Wu Wenguang, and Zhao Liang (just to name a few) produce intimate digital video documentaries that oppose the mainstream as they portray the sufferings, the challenges, and the struggles of China's common people (*laobaixing*) that go undocumented by state-approved media.

I myself cannot claim to have produced works of such awe-inspiring and hard-hitting social engagement as my Chinese counterparts; for, *Chaiqian (Demolition)* does not dig into the lives of the migrant workers to emphasize their personal experiences of pain and

hardships. In representing a social experience – in all its irreducible complexity – that is often overlooked in Chinese society, however, it does operate in a way similar to the works of Chinese independent directors as well as Kracaeur's vision for cinema. Many Chinese viewers, at screenings both in China and overseas, have told me that the film has allowed them to see, hear, and connect with people and places they walk past every day but somehow escape their view. Furthermore, in the summer of 2008, a year after shooting the film, I returned to Sichuan to offer post-earthquake assistance in Qingchuan and had the opportunity to meet up with three of the workers from *Chaiqian (Demolition)*: Master Guo, Big Sister Xiong, and Master Ruan. Months prior, I had sent them each a DVD of the finished film and, though Master Guo said that it was “too short” and that I had “cut out all the best parts,” they were overall happy to possess a souvenir from those three weeks in July 2007. What I found most moving, however, was an insight put forth by Big Sister Xiong. She said: “in ten or twenty years from now, no one will be working like this, with bare hands and flip-flops in the rubble and rebar. So it's great to have this DVD because we can pull it out and show our grandchildren: look, kids, see how things have changed! This is how your grandma and grandpa lived and worked before you were born.” Thus, *Chaiqian (Demolition)* stands as a portrait of a shared space and time for Sister Xiong, her twenty-nine fellow workers, a handful of managers and city dwellers, and myself that, if anything, hopefully contributes to the development of not only an alternative history but also a counterdiscourse to China's official narrative of triumphant ascendancy on the international stage.

## CODA

Moving out from my own film production practice and my reflections on the making and motivations of *Chaiqian/Demoliton*, I wish to end with a treatment of major points, themes, and questions raised in this ethnographic account of China's independent digital documentary *jianghu*, an account which has been constructed from my three years of fieldwork and filmmaking among directors, producers, programmers, critics, fans, students, scholars, and officials. What does independent digital documentary filmmaking in China tell us about the anthropology of film and media, and what does it offer the anthropology of China? The answer to these questions range in subject from new forms of personhood to media anthropology's construction of experiential knowledge to global flows of cultural production, and I offer a closing summary below.

One of key starting points of this study is the observation that, since Reform and Opening, massive changes shifting Chinese society and its economy away from state-run collectivism have enabled not only new aesthetic configurations for cultural production but also what anthropologist Yan Yunxiang has termed "the rise of the individual" (Yan 2003). In the worlds of cinema and art, directors and artists have been buoyed by new creative and economic possibilities introduced by market economy inflows and media reforms. These phenomena translate to a range of approaches to cultural production that depart from state propaganda, socialist realism, and mainstream commercial film aesthetics. At the same time, akin to the traditional relationship between intellectuals and the state throughout Chinese history, contemporary artists and independent filmmakers of today have evinced an obsession with the image and the future of China as a nation. This inward gaze shares a corrective function with the documentaries produced in socialist China, influenced as they were by Marxist aesthetics. Rather than proffer possible imaginaries for the nation's future,

however, today's independent documentaries use observational and testimonial footage to witness and uncover social realities that are deemed transgressive to both state propaganda and mainstream media depictions.

Indeed, as I argue throughout this ethnography, a significant portion of works that have emerged from Chinese cinema as well as contemporary art since 1978 derive their power and significance from their status as aesthetic attempts at documenting, critiquing, and coming to terms with the impact, trauma, and meaning of not only the collectivist period, but also the very rapid and painful transition away from Communist ideals and towards neo-liberalism, state capitalism, and post-socialism. This process, while opening up a range of horizons in terms of economy and personhood, has at the same time dismantled former structures of social cohesion and ideological frameworks of meaning, introducing social dislocation, feelings of alienation, and a sense of self that is unmoored from both traditional values and the former moral foundation of Chinese communism. Independent documentary film, then, has surfaced as a method for filmmakers and film viewers to cope with and directly critique both the troubling past as well as the challenging changes of today.

Associated with this observation, independent digital cinema has also emerged as a medium particularly well-suited to render the sheer complexity and fragmentation of both personhood and social life. Drawing from my consideration of media anthropology's ability to present a plenitude of meaning as well as offer a different form of knowledge than is possible through written language alone, I argue that Chinese independent documentary, with its emphasis on *xianchang* ("on the spot" realism, akin to "being there"), has come to the fore as a particular way of knowing a social reality of constant flux in post-socialist China. In short, there is a homology between *xianchang* and media anthropology in terms of the epistemology they advance. The construction of knowledge enacted through the digital



documentaries my filmmaking peers and I produce, then, can be described as hinging on the immersive, the sensorial, and the experiential. Moreover, this knowledge does not seek to substantiate a master narrative nor does it reduce the fundamental complexity of lived experience. Rather, it acknowledges and records the messy, fragmentary, and open-ended qualities of subject formation and social life, and allows them their irreducibility. A form of knowledge that is never complete and never sealed within a totalizing or explanatory framework not only challenges the conventions of anthropological writing but also disrupts any attempts to proffer a grand theory to understand China's intricate and diverse social landscape. As such, *xianchang* and my filmmaking approach, media anthropology, operate with an epistemological humility instead of making immodest claims of advancing deep analytical and diagnostic knowledge aimed at taming the complex nexus of relations, forces, systems, cultures, and communities that comprise China.

I have also asserted that the members of the Chinese independent documentary community form a *jianghu*, which is an indigenous cultural concept connoting alterity. In my fieldwork, *jianghu* emerged organically from the community itself in the speech of a range of individuals I encountered, and I chose to adopt it as an analytical tool to highlight not only the experiences of marginality and mobility that shape the subjectivity of producers and consumers of this alternative media form, but also the varied tactics of resistance that they employ. Here, following de Certeau, tactics are the tools of subversion employed by those subsisting on the margins to resist the strategies – schemas and mechanisms of order and control – exercised by the dominant power of the state (de Certeau 1984). *Jianghu's* use value does not end here, however. Its descriptive import extends beyond the alternative cultural producers operating outside the mainstream who have been the main focus of my study. It also applies to a vast segment of China's population – namely, the millions of common

people who eke out a living under marginalized and disenfranchised conditions, such as the participants in *Chaiqian (Demolition)* Guo Congjun, Ren Xueping, Sister Xiong, Master Ruan. Indeed, in post-socialist China, this segment of the population is not a minority but rather a great mass, despite the fact that “minority,” ironically, is commonly associated with *jianghu*. It is my hope that *jianghu*'s double function as I have outlined here provides a foundation for it to serve as a more widely applied and more efficacious analytical tool in the study of both the lived experience of Chinese individuals and the shifting social landscape of post-socialist China.

The “digital” in the title of this dissertation serves to draw attention to the media *infrastructure* that, along with political media reforms, has provided the technological conditions for an explosion of independent documentary practice and production (Larkin 2008). As Wu Wenguang exclaimed many years ago, “DV saved my life!” (Wu 2001). Indeed, his title as the “father of Chinese independent documentary” as well as his forays into participatory cinema would not be possible without the advent of digital video technology and its constant innovation. Across the world, filmmaking was once the domain of studios and/or the state; now, however, technological innovation in digital video continues to lower production costs at a neck-break pace, so much so that high-definition cameras with full frame sensors and interchangeable lenses are already within economic reach of recent college students, wage earners, and even some members of the peasant population. Thus, amateurs, miners, farmers, academics, teenagers, and advertising executives who want to adopt the moniker of “director” can pick up cameras (or even cell phones which come equipped with high-definition video recording capability) and record the shifting social reality unfolding around them. In short, the digital has ushered in an era of

filmmaking characterized by rampant popularization, amateurism, mobility, and quasi-ubiquity.

In addition, as mentioned throughout this dissertation, the flexible and ever-changing infrastructure of digital video technology provides an immediacy and mobility in production as well as exhibition that allows independent documentary to surface as the purported forefront of the political avant-garde in China. Video footage, for example, is able to be recorded in smaller camera bodies with less conspicuous forms. GoPro Hero technology allows people to film with a high-definition camera that not only is half the size of a pack of cigarettes, but also can be strapped to their bodies and is impervious to harsh conditions such as rain, snow, high winds, or fast motion. Furthermore, in terms of video exhibition, festival organizers who are dogged by authorities and prevented from screening so-called sensitive films – such as the case with the past two editions of BiFF – can transform their screening activities into mobile festivals, carrying a small yet powerful projector, a laptop, and audio monitors into practically any space and, with these mobile tools of exhibition, transform it into a screening venue.

Enabled by digital video technology and bolstered by a documentary impulse to record the changes, injustices, and sufferings that shape everyday life, Chinese directors and their documentary productions have become a focal point for international arthouse cinema appreciation. Critic Robert Koehler has commented that Chinese documentaries, in their dedication to revealing an unadorned reality, are “hard-hitting” and “take no prisoners,” and this “brave” combination places them at the pinnacle of international documentary production today (Koehler 2011). Indeed, if it is too far reaching a claim that Chinese digital cinema does not yet make significant aesthetic contributions to the filmmaking emerging from *Oumei* and Japan, it at least presents a body of work that many programmers, critics,

and filmmakers are increasingly fascinated by. On a macro-scale, this dynamic actually mirrors the way in which China's model for economic development has, in the perception of many developing countries, arguably usurped the dictates of the United States, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. That is, more and more developing nations are looking to China rather than to ailing Europe and the United States for guidance and inspiration in terms of development, economic and otherwise. Indeed, this emulation may also extend into the sphere of cultural production, and independent documentary is, surprisingly or not, no exception. This observation provides an important corrective to the simplistic assessment of Chinese documentary as retrograde, as a form of filmmaking that is a mere copy of Direct Cinema documentary production in 1960's United States. This reading, I maintain, runs dangerously close to ethnocentrism. When it comes to global impact, however, a vastly important question hinges on whether or not other nations will also emulate the breadth and intensity of the Chinese state's regulatory forces when it comes to the sphere of cultural production. It is arguably the case that Chinese independent documentary derives its power precisely from its oppositional stance towards these mechanisms of control and oppression.

In addition to questions of international influence, Chinese documentaries also raise pressing concerns about the politics and ethics of representation and positionality within China's borders and vis-à-vis Chinese directors and their almost invariably Chinese film-subjects. As I discussed throughout the chapters, the prevailing moral environment that documentarians operate in is that Chinese society is beset by a surround of forces that are hostile to the individual, even cruel – precisely what I have termed the *cruelty of the social*. In representing this cruelty, some documentarians argue that they are justified in ethical transgressions vis-à-vis film subjects if the “reality” their films deliver serves the greater

cause of compelling audiences to confront the brutal, unjust, inhuman, and cruel sides of Chinese modernity. As alluded to above, this extreme situation – wherein the degree of “reality” delivered and its level of departure from mainstream media determines how acceptable the film’s methodology and moral harshness can be – arises from the sustained and even, in some cases, heightened control over media and official representation exercised by the Chinese state.

It is precisely this binary that forces the independent documentary to subsist in the *jianghu* as a transgressive subculture, a necessary counterdiscourse to be subdued. Of course, there are many filmmakers and institutions that are willing and able to straddle the independent filmmaking world and the involvement of the state, such as Jia Zhangke, Zhao Liang, and Fan Lixin, as discussed in chapter three of this manuscript. In addition, the Chinese state is ostensibly growing more and more tolerant of critique, though outright dissent regarding the rule of the CCP remains unacceptable. The filmmakers and film institutions that I have focused on in this study, however, view the state as an entity incapable of refraining from grasping for total control and stamping out democracy, debate, difference, and dissent. Such an assessment has been criticized as too radical and unnecessarily subversive in that it fails to take into account not only the ostensibly growing opportunities for negotiation between the state and independent cinema but also the Chinese government’s increasing support of its national cinema overall.

However, at the time of this writing, the space of negotiation between the state and independent cultural production appears to be constricting at a harrowing pace. Indeed, the consistently growing frequency of the Chinese government forcing the cancellation of numerous independent film festivals over the past several years not only in Beijing but also throughout China support my informants’ pessimistic assessment of the state’s intentions.

For, the BiFF and DOChina festivals in Songzhuang, which have served as a focus of this ethnography, have not been the only festivals in China to be harassed and dogged. Other independent and semi-independent festivals which, unlike BiFF and DOChina, have been fairly amenable to collaboration with the government by allowing their organization to include greater state involvement have also been forced to modify, downsize and, in some cases, even accept total cancellation.

In November 2012, for example, the China Independent Film Festival in Nanjing, which has formerly been organized in conjunction with Nanjing University and local theaters and businesses, was forced to cancel. Zhang Xianmin, one of the main directors and organizers of the festival and a tireless supporter of independent film, was shocked to learn that the university and the festival's partners all withdrew their support after various government agencies harassed them and threatened to inflict crippling fines (Zhang Xianmin 2013). On the other side of the nation in the southwest province of Yunnan, the biannual Yunfest – which has been organized with support of Yunnan University in Kunming and has served as a vibrant and unique gathering point for Chinese documentary and local community based filmmaking – also met with extensive and escalating government pressure in the lead-up to its March 2013 scheduled program. Rather than completely canceling Yunfest, however, film scholar and festival director Yi Sicheng and the other organizers attempted to morph the festival from an open public event into a closed workshop for directors to gather, share their films, and hold discussions. Yunfest met with a similar fate in 2007, when the organizers had no choice but to cancel the public festival that was to be held in Yunnan's capital city of Kunming and relocate to the tourist town of Dali. Similar to their tactics this year, they re-structured the festival so that it was a private event for filmmakers only. While the determination to “go on with the (restricted) show” is admirable and

valuable, this transformation that Yunfest has undergone twice wherein a nexus of critical dialogue and creative expression open to all Chinese citizens is reduced to a small-scale meeting akin to Bourdieu's "products for producers" offers a rather pessimistic picture for the future of independent cultural production in China (Bourdieu 1993). The fact that even this closed small-scale event was eventually forced into cancellation a day before its commencement renders the outlook utterly bleak.

This escalation of the state strategy whereby festivals are systematically undermined and targeted for wholesale suffocation has escalated over the past three years and, significantly, it highlights what the Chinese government finds most threatening about independent film events: the free and public gathering of citizens to engage in cultural activities and meaningful exchange without the direct involvement or organization of the state. In a paper titled "Some Ways to Kill a Film Festival" that Zhang Xianmin recently delivered at New York, he argues that cinema itself is not "dangerous." What is dangerous, he observes, is precisely the public gathering that these festivals produce (Zhang Xianmin 2013). Indeed, as revolution and protest require the coming together of the masses, the Chinese state – insecure in its one-party rule – has developed strong and effective responses to the organization of civil society and the manifestation of outright protest. This iron-fisted approach is evidenced throughout recent Chinese Communist Party history, from the June 4<sup>th</sup> Tiananmen Square incident, to the quelling of unrest in Tibet in March 2008, to the suppression of the Jasmine Revolution assemblies of February 2011.

In his paper, Zhang also offers a framework of analysis for the state's strategies of suppression of independent cinema. According to Zhang, the Chinese state oscillates between two forms of control that he terms "precise killing" and "collective punishment." "Collective punishment" is a strategy that the party has used since taking power in 1949 to

advance a general sweeping attack that is “without an individual target, without purpose” and constitutes “only a display of power, a display of a license to kill” (Zhang Xianmin 2013). “Precise killing,” on the other hand, refers to the selective, targeted mechanisms of control that include banning one particular (and particularly sensitive) film, or preventing one particular (and particularly critical) director from making films in the future. “But,” according to Zhang, “they have still the old back-up solution: to go back to collective punishment, to make massive damages, at precise moments. Personally, I consider that 2012 is Year Zero of the practice of demolition in culture and art; they proved its efficiency, that’s why they will not stop it” (2013). Thus, Zhang concludes that in the past few years, the state has employed collective punishment and in fact is in the process of ramping up this strategy so as to squash all free and open gatherings of critically minded citizens. At the end of his presentation, he announced that he has retired and that it is clear to him that he “should not longer be involved in organizing public events” such as the China Independent Film Festival or other screenings since now he is monitored and followed by the Chinese state security agents (*guobao*).

Given these instances of tightening restrictions, then, it does not seem to be the case that China’s new leadership wishes to inaugurate an era of political reform or open civil society. Indeed, my analysis of the documentary *jianghu* serves as evidence that the long and strong arm of the Chinese state continues to exercise tremendous control over the politics of representation as well as cultural production – both mainstream and alternative forms – in an era of transition and ever-present paranoia for the CCP. This reading runs counter to claims that the political climate in China is undergoing slow but steady reform towards a system that allows for civil society, critical engagement, and creative expression. Given the continued opacity of the party’s leadership, there exists no definite or even partly reliable



method to predict the approaching political climate now or in the foreseeable future. As a consequence, the bulk of my filmmaking peers and informants elect to remain mobile and at-large within the digital *jianghu*, at least for the current turbulent and uncertain moment for independent cultural production in the People's Republic of China.

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