

Chinese Documentary: Changing Film Culture in China

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BEYOND NARRATIVE CINEMA

Metz has argued that “the merging of the cinema and of narrativity was a great fact, which was by no means predestined—nor was it strictly fortuitous”; he has also added that “all non narrative genres . . . have become marginal provinces . . . while the feature-length film of novelistic fiction . . . has traced more and more clearly the king’s highway of filmic expression.”¹ Indeed “feature-length film of novelistic fiction” has dominated Chinese cinema as well. Director Xie Jin has stated that a film should mostly focus on a story and its characters and that “a film about which one can only say that it had a nice photography or ‘what a great shot that was’ is a failure.”² Similarly, in an interview with *China Daily*, Jiang Wen pointed out how it is the story that makes a film and reiterated that the genuine soul in a film is the screenplay, while “the director is only the organizer of a film, or the one who creates an environment for the making of the movie.”³

However, while celebrating 100 years of Chinese cinema, we should also remember that feature films just happen to be the most popular form of cinematic productions, not the only one. Wasn’t the first Chinese film, *Dingjun Shan* 定軍山 (Dingjun Mountain, 1905), after all a documentary film? Furthermore, since the 1990s, DV technology has opened up new possibilities for filmmakers to work outside the studios and challenge genre divisions. As a result, both established and new filmmakers have increasingly experimented outside the format of standard feature-length films.

Feature films are often labeled as “art films” whenever they depart from classic Hollywood narrative structures; documentary films can also cross boundaries with art

videos when they present a more apparent editing work or expressionist film techniques (anything from unusual camera angle, use of filters, special effects, etc) as one can see in works like Jiang Yue's 蔣樾 *Bi'an* 彼岸 (The Other Bank, 1994) or in Zhao Liang 趙亮's short videos. Music videos and animation are other venues for cinematic experiments that go beyond "feature-length film of novelistic fiction" (i.e., Cui Jian's 崔健 *Mr. Red—Hong xiansheng* 紅先生—music video was done in flash animation and began to circulate on the Internet in March 2005 in conjunction with the release of the singer's latest CD). Under the broad category of "not-just-feature films," one can find a great number of innovative and creative works which contribute to the general development of *movie-making* in China.⁴ Among these works, documentary has arguably the closest connection with feature film, both in terms of subject matter and production style.

Chinese documentary has indeed been a major—albeit unrecognized—force in changing film culture in China. However, because of the scholarly bias toward full-length feature films, the documentary's influence has been underestimated and sometimes even gone unnoticed. Yet, since the early 1990s documentarians have greatly contributed to reshape film culture by reviving the concept of individual authorship, searching for authenticity rather than realism, and emphasizing the importance of audience.

Film Culture in China: main trends

Film culture in China has only very recently (from the mid 1980s onwards) become part of popular culture. While pre-liberation cinema also developed in the framework of commercial entertainment and movie stardom, the emergence of leftist film directors and the urgent need of rescuing the nation from both external and internal threats resulted into

an emphasis on the social and political role of cinema. Even though the main goal of cinema became to reach and educate the masses, the discourse on cinema could not be described as popular culture, but rather as ideologically tinted high culture. In other words, discourse on cinema was dominated by political concerns and mostly carried on by intellectuals. Even though cinema was a popular medium, film culture was still constructed by elite.

One major shift in film culture was brought about by the Fifth Generation. Fifth Generation film directors all came from similar training and life experience. They were all graduates of the Beijing Film Academy and were all influenced by European cinema and they all set out to tell and reinterpret China's recent history (especially the rise and fall of communist idealism). The Fifth Generation was therefore indeed a collective effort at using a different film language to explore controversial topics. The directors themselves participated in the debate that followed the screening of their first films, both inside and outside China.

The Fifth Generation "revolution" was still discussed as a matter of high culture. Very few people in China actually saw their films, and even abroad they never appealed to a wide audience. By 1989, the Fifth Generation as a movement had already ended, while the directors themselves continued to produce films trying to prove their individual abilities rather than as part of a movement. Nonetheless, Fifth Generation directors did have a long-term impact on Chinese film. First, they showed to the rest of the world that China did have a film industry besides Hong Kong's martial arts films, and that new things were emerging from it. Secondly, they showed to Chinese film studios that there was an interested international audience which wanted to see more.

Although initially the search for international recognition was at the artistic and intellectual level, in the 1990s directors also began looking for international funding for their films and sought out international distribution outlets to make “blockbusters” possible. While the Fifth Generation produced their films in China with state funding in state-owned studios, the Sixth Generation (also known as “urban cinema”) directors have often chosen independent production. Furthermore, as some of the exponents of the Fifth Generation became increasingly famous, they also moved to more popular and commercially-viable topics. The criticism on their films shifted from high culture to popular culture analyses. As a result, since the 1990s, films have been discussed not only in academic journals, but also in the commercial press, and on Internet chat rooms, both inside and outside of China.

Another major shift was brought about the Sixth Generation (a.k.a. urban cinema). As directors like Zhang Yuan or Wang Xiaoshuai received much critical attention, the Sixth Generation directors came to be known as those who brought contemporary China back to the fore. Although the Sixth Generation indeed contributed to changing Chinese film culture by bringing in new and controversial topics (such as gay life, urban alienation, poverty, criminality, etc.), they were not the only ones interested in showing such topics on screen.

The role of documentary in Chinese film culture

Documentary film-making developed in China just when the Fifth Generation was completing its initial phase and the Sixth Generation directors were entering the scene. In fact, documentary arguably has a very close connection with feature film, both in terms of subject matter and production style. Indeed, clear-cut divisions between

documentary and feature film have become rather artificial and mostly based on different costs and distribution venues, rather than a substantial difference in subject matter or formal choices.

For instance, Zhang Yuan 張元, who used a documentary style to shoot his first feature-film, *Mama* 媽媽 (Mother, a.k.a. The tree of the sun, 1991), moved directly into documentary productions with *Guangchang* 廣場 (The square, 1995, co-directed with Duan Jinchuan 段錦川), and *Fengkuang Yingyu* 瘋狂英語 (Crazy English, 1999). Li Yu's 李玉 *Jinnian xiatian* 今年夏天 (This summer, a.k.a., Fish and elephant, 2001) is a cross between a documentary and a feature film as it uses actors to play the role of the lesbian protagonists as a device to protect the identity of the real couples, but many other characters in the film play themselves.

Contemporary Chinese documentary is China-centered and global-oriented. On the one hand, documentary filmmaking (or, more precisely, videomaking) is rooted in the domestic production of TV entertainment and news. Since the mid-1990s, TV reforms have allowed an increasing number of locally-produced investigative reports and news broadcast that have recorded changing Chinese realities. On the other hand, documentary has also actively searched for a global recognition both in terms of sponsorship and distribution. This is especially the case of the so-called “independent” documentaries which often participate in international festivals and have even succeeded in being broadcast abroad (see the series *Interesting Times*).⁵

Authorship: bringing back an individual perspective on filmmaking

Leaving aside Chinese documentary produced until the late 1980s—mostly a newsreel and educational/propagandist enterprise—what is today defined as the “new Chinese

documentary movement” (Lü) has its roots in a postsocialist China (Berry), and in a transnational/global context.⁶ While the term “new Chinese documentary movement” has been useful for drawing attention to the innovative works of Chinese documentarians, I believe that—unlike the Fifth or Sixth Generation directors—these documentary filmmakers are hardly describable as a collective whole. First of all, they all have very different backgrounds and training. The subject matter has also been diversified. Finally, it is important to recognize how these directors view themselves; on many occasions, they have emphasized their subjective and individual identities, downplaying their belonging to any movement.

The experiences of three directors—Duan Jinchuan 段錦川, Jiang Yue 蔣樾 and Wu Wenguang 吳文光—are instructive. Duan Jinchuan did not receive any specialized training in documentary filmmaking. He graduated from the Beijing Broadcasting Institute (1984) in the department of “Arts and Literature Editing.” His original passion was theater; his graduation thesis was on Swedish naturalistic theater. After graduation, he was sent to work for the Tibet TV Station. Unlike a big TV station where one can count on large crews of specialized people, he was personally involved in all areas of film and video production. As he said, “There was nobody teaching me. I had to do everything by myself. At that time, I produced all sorts of stuff: films on special topics, TV dramas, shows, weather forecasts, art films . . .”⁷ In his decision to become an independent documentarian, he was greatly influenced by Wu Wenguang, with whom he met in 1990 just when Wu was setting out to shoot his first documentary, *Zuihoude menghuanzhe: Beijingde mangliu yishujia* 最後的夢幻者：北京的盲流藝術家 (The last dreamers: artists roaming around Beijing; a.k.a. Bumming in Beijing: the last

dreamers). Duan and Wu went together to the 1993 Yamagata Documentary Film Festival (where Wu's film, *1966, My Time in the Red Guards*, won the Ogawa Shinsuke Prize) and they had their first extensive exposure to other documentarians' work. They both were very impressed by filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman and Bob Connolly (whose *Black Harvest*—codirected with Robin Anderson—won the festival's Grand Prize).⁸

Jiang Yue, after graduating from the Drama Academy, worked at Beijing Film Studios and was Huang Jianzhong's 黃建中 assistant director in films such as *Longnian jingguan* 龍年警官(Dragon Cops, 1990) and *Guonian* 過年(Spring Festival, 1991). Besides working as an independent documentarian, he also produced over thirty short 10-minute documentaries for the CCTV series *Shenghuo kongjian* 生活空間(Living Spaces).⁹

Wu Wenguang's background is also not in documentary filmmaking. In fact, he graduated in literature at the University of Kunming (1984) and began working as a news journalist for Kunming TV Station. In 1989, he left the TV station and became an independent documentary filmmaker and freelance writer. In 1991, he established Wu Documentary Film/Video Studio in Beijing. Over the next fifteen years, while he continued to produce documentaries, he has also worked in the field of performing arts, as both an actor and a playwright.

As one can clearly see, Duan, Jiang and Wu all come from very different experiences. Their diverse background does not necessarily mean that they don't share similar objectives. For instance, they all value independence as an essential element in their work. In his collections of conversations with Chinese documentarians, Wang Weici lists all three under *dulijilupian* 独立纪录片“independent documentary” (the other

categories being: *dianshijilupian* 电视纪录片 TV documentary, and *renleixuejilupian* 人类学纪录片 anthropological/ethnic documentary). However, the term “independent” mostly refers to their self-relying status in terms of means of production. In their discussions, Duan, Wu, and Jiang all point out how being self-relying is often a necessity rather than a choice. It is not their independent status but rather their individual search for authenticity that better defines their work.

Authenticity: redefining realism

Documentarians have been praised for having brought the “real” China back, giving voice to “real” people and showing their real lives, by emphasizing the connection between authenticity and subjectivity. In other words, being real was no longer equated with being objective and being able to show an event or a character truthfully. Instead the director acknowledges the distortions of the camera and the director’s choices. The filmmaker accepts the limits of the witness’ perspective and reclaims an authentic, although necessarily partial, point of view.

Perhaps one of the most important contributions of the 1990s documentary is its role in abandoning “realism” as an unachievable utopia and redefining it as an on-going strive to achieve authenticity. Of course, such redefinition did not happen in a vacuum and was not carried on single-handedly by documentarians alone. In fact, I believe that such renewal needs to be understood across genre distinctions and understood in a transnational context. The “attack to realism” was launched from many fronts. Although with very different styles, directors like Jia Zhangke or Wang Xiaoshuai (mainland

China) Tsai Mingliang (Taiwan) and Wong Kar-wai (Hong Kong) all combine authenticity and subjectivity to complicate and reinvent cinematic realism.

In China, realism in cinema had been defined by socialist realism (especially from the 1950s to the late 1970s) or by a romanticized/melodramatic version of Bazinean realism (e.g., most of the 1930s leftist cinema, Fourth Generation films, and also films like Chen Kaige's *Together* (2003)). The Fifth Generation was not interested in realism, but instead was attracted to aesthetic and mythological representations of the real. It was only with the Sixth Generation and documentary directors that realism was revisited and reinterpreted as a subjective but authentic perception of reality.

Besides an emphasis on authenticity as an alternative to both socialist realist propaganda and the intellectual lectures à la *He shang* 河殤 (River Elegy, 1988), Chinese documentary has also looked for alternative subject matters. Rather than focusing on famous leaders or major historical events, documentarians have chosen to capture fragments of a changing society through the experiences of ordinary people. The work of Cui Zi'en 崔子恩, Duan Jichuan 段錦川, Du Haibin 杜海濱, Jiang Yue 蔣樾, Li Hong 李紅, and Wu Wenguang 吳文光, just to mention a few of the most famous ones, have consistently turned to the not-so-glamorous, not-so-modernized, not-so-successful, not-so-clean, not-so-straight, not-so-confident China as their main subject.

A CLOSER LOOK: AN ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTARY VIDEOMAKING

Chinese Minority Report: No 16 Barkhor South Street

Baguo nanjie shiliu hao 八廓南街 16 號 (No. 16 Barkhor South Street, dir. Duan Jinchuan 段錦川, 1997) chooses a minority perspective but tries not to fall into the visual representation of the opposition between us (the Han) vs. them (the barbaric/ugly or

exotic/beautiful other). In fact, while the point of view of the camera is not hidden and on the contrary clearly revealed as that of the outsider, there is no reference to a Han/non-Tibetan observer (for instance no voice-over). *No. 16 Barkhor South Street* is shot in a purely observational style, without interviews, narration, or added music. The video is part of a trilogy of documentaries all shot in Tibet and released in 1997. The other two films are *Tianbian* 天邊 (The ends of the earth), which is about a truck driver whose truck keeps breaking down in the middle of nowhere, and *Jiadicunde nanren he nuren* 加達村的男人和女人 (The men and women of Jiada village), which looks at a salt farming community.

Barkhor Street is a street surrounding the Jokhang Monastery, in the center of Lhasa. Old courtyards, alleys paved with rocks, newly built Tibetan style houses and shopping centers in Barkhor Street are under political influence. At the Number 16 of Barkhor Street, in an old courtyard, the office of Barkhor Neighborhood Committee, one of the four committees in Barkhor Street, implements government policies and attempts to mediate and solve local conflicts. The video records various stories in 1995.

The video was shot with only one camera and has no linear narrative; one can recognize the influence of Wiseman's observational films and "mosaic" style in the analysis of social institutions.¹⁰ The Barkhor Neighborhood Committee is shown through a variety of special events and daily routines, all captured at one specific point in time and not followed in their chronological development. The committee is involved in party meetings, distribution of wages, mediations of conflicts, interrogations of petty criminals, setting out guidelines for the Sa-ga-zla-wa religious festival and the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Autonomous Region of Tibet, and many other activities. People come

and go to request work permits, licenses to rent out tricycles, or advise regarding personal issues such as divorce, or family litigation. None of the stories shown in the documentary has an ending, least of all a happy conclusion.

For instance, a man comes in after getting drunk and being involved in a fight. The Neighborhood Committee's police officer seems sympathetic and urges him to repent and reform, saying "If you don't change, you will end up in prison." The man promises that he will drink less and shine shoes for a living. After he leaves, the audience is left wondering whether the meeting had any impact at all on the man and how soon he might get drunk again. In the same way, we do not get to know what happens to an old man who asks the Neighborhood Committee office to help him move out after fighting with his daughter.

Another open-ended story is the interrogation of a petty thief (a 19 year-old young girl). She sits, head down, and softly confesses the list of items she stole and the names of the other people involved in the robberies; among the reasons she gave for becoming a thief, she mentions that her work was too hard, and she needed money for her sister's hospital. She also says that in the past she tried to sell blood, but had to stop when she developed hepatitis. At the end, she kneels down and asks for forgiveness. The police officer does not respond to her plea and, instead mumbles to himself that he cannot find the ink to seal the confession; he leaves to get it and when he comes back he makes her stand and apply her fingerprints on the confession. They walk out of the room, while she repeats again, "Please forgive me." We do not know when and for how long she will be detained. Or could she really be forgiven?

The interrogation of the young thief is the only scene in which Duan decided to use two cameras. While talking about this scene, he said that he realized that by using two cameras, he might have lost some of the authenticity and observational distance that characterize the one-camera shooting.¹¹ Two cameras allow the audience to have a closer and possibly more manipulated view of the two people involved in the scene. Duan said that, although generally he prefers to shoot with a more detached, almost cold, style, sometimes “one cannot help but let his own personal feelings come out.”¹² Despite the amplified closeness to both the officer and the girl, the scene still allows the audience to maintain a certain critical distance. For instance, the scene uses neither extreme close-ups nor reverse shots, which would increase identification with the characters. Furthermore, since Duan never adds voice-over or commentary music, the scene does not tell or explain what it is shown, but—consistently with the overall content and structure of the documentary—just inserts another tile in the “Barkhor Neighborhood Committee mosaic.” The brusque and unsympathetic tone of the officer further complicates our understanding of the Neighborhood Committee members and their multifaceted role as benevolent advisors, cold bureaucrats, and harsh retaliators.

High Culture and Popular Heroes: *The Other Bank*

Jiang Yue’s *Bi an* (The other bank, a.k.a. The other shore, 1994). *The Other Bank* is about performers who have left home and come to the big city (Beijing) searching for a better life. The documentary records their training, their performance, the enthusiastic reactions of their audience, what happened to the performers afterwards, and captures the performers’ loss of innocence.

In early spring of 1993, Mou Sen—an independent theater director—was invited by the Actors Exchange and Training Center of the Beijing Film Academy to teach a short-term performance workshop. Among the thirty high school graduates who came from all over the country to attend this workshop, fourteen students successfully concluded their intensive training with the performance of “The Other Bank: A Chinese Grammatical Discussion.” The play was written by Gao Xingjian (2000 Nobel Prize Winner) and directed by Mou Sen. Seven performances shocked Beijing artistic and intellectual circles (the documentary also records Dai Jinhua’s comments after she attended one of these performances). The young actors were overwhelmed by the success and the documentary shows them crying and hugging each other at the end of their performance.

The documentary could have ended here; instead, Jiang Yue stays with the actors for many more months. He records their lives as they all choose to stay in Beijing and as they gradually lose the enthusiasm and the passion that animated them during their theater training. He lets them speak in front of the camera and we hear him asking questions. He also follows them in their new “city jobs” (e.g., standing at the door of a nightclub to greet customers). In the end, all fourteen leave Beijing. Three of them manage to continue their dream at least for a while, far from Beijing, in a remote village in Hebei Province, homeplace of one of the three students. There, among a little crowd of curious farmers, they stage a theater piece they wrote together, “The Black Bird that had Flown over Paradise.” The performers act and interact with the public. The villagers’ reactions are captured as part of the performance (and not as separate shots inter-cut with the play) since the stage is set up in the middle of an open field and the

audience stands both around and in the middle of it. At the end of this play, they are pushing a broken tractor, disappearing slowly into the field.

The Other Bank is as much about a group of youth who lose their innocence as it is about the avant-garde play itself. The performance of *The Other Bank*, which is concentrated mostly in the first half of the documentary, takes place in an unusual theater stage that the actors have prepared by completely covering an entire room (walls, ceiling and floor) with newspapers. The public sits around the room and the performance happens both within the circle created by the audience and above it. At a certain point of the play, the actors climb on ropes hanging from the ceiling and reach a balcony that looks over the room. A substantial portion of the play is recorded; dialogues and actions are shown from a multiplicity of angles that Jiang most likely selected from the seven different performances (since he shot the documentary alone with one camera) and combined through an extensive and creative editing job. The result is the eighth performance of the play—a version that was never performed as we see it, but only exists as an art video created by Jiang.

Jiang Yue's *The Other Bank* does not simply record a staged play, but rather performs it anew in an innovative mise-en-scène that includes fragments from the original play, scenes from the actors' training and rehearsals, as well as interviews and scenes from the actors' lives offstage. *The Other Bank* moves away from Gao Xinjiang's play and becomes the journey's of the young performers towards their own "other bank." This journey is captured in bits and pieces, both on and off stage, through interconnected scenes (rather than through a strictly chronological editing) in as seemingly disjointed video. In view of this analysis, the actors' countryside performance of "The Black Bird

that had Flown over Paradise” is also the final act of *The Other Bank*’s “eighth performance,” i.e. Jiang Yue’s video version.

In the blurred and heterogeneous grouping of nonfiction film, theorists have tried to draw some divisions and have often separated the avant-garde or experimentalist cinema, which often uses surrealist and abstract images, from the documentary, which relies on a more realistic style.¹³ *The Other Bank* challenges this division by inserting an art video in a documentary production and by using the avant-garde play to comment on the actors’ “real” life, complicating the meaning of reality and its representation even further.

At the Margins of the City: *Life on the Road*

Wu Wenguang’s *Jiang Hu* (Life on the road, 1999) is about a performing group made of farmers led by Old Liu, who manages to keep the troupe together and find places for them to perform, amidst many difficulties.¹⁴ They travel from one place to another and live in a big circus-like tent, where they also set up their show. The troupe members include Liu’s two sons, their girlfriends, Old Liu’s nieces and nephews, and some other young farmers who have left their home villages to look for a better life. We witness their mediocre talent; we see their frustrated ambitions as they are denied permission to perform by city officials concerned about hygiene and security issues; we realize the extent of their poverty when they share their meager meals; we are exposed to their anger when they get drunk and end up fighting and threatening each other. Things get worse when Old Liu leaves to go back to his home village because his wife is sick and leaves his elder son in charge. Tensions rise while the troupe is forced to stay outside the city of

Beijing because of a sanitary inspection and is not allowed to perform. The documentary ends with a shot of a highway taken from the truck on which the performers travel.

Although Wu includes one interview with one of the performers, the documentary radically differs from his first two films, *The Last Dreamers: Artists Roaming Around Beijing* and *1966: My Time in the Red Guards*, which mostly relied on the interview format. Wu uses very few extreme long shots and even when he records the troupe performance, he sparingly relies on long shots; on the other hand, extreme close-ups (of faces, but also other body parts) abound as the camera is placed not only facing people, but behind, or even beneath, in some low-angle shots.

The camera's emphatic closeness reveals details, without organizing them into a meaningful whole. For instance, when Old Liu visits an office to get permission to perform, the camera is placed at the level of the table (covered with papers) at which the bureaucrat sits, while Old Liu stands beside him. The shot cuts out Liu's face and we only see his chest and his hands moving, while he tries to convince the official to decrease the price of the permit. Wu often chooses angles like the one I have just described when he captures details of cell phone conversations, parts of the show, or moments of relaxation. He limits the viewing perspectives rather than allowing a clear vision of what is going on. Nonetheless, at the end of the documentary a clear *perception* of who these people are and what they are looking for has emerged, even if our vision was so clearly limited by both the camera position and the duration of the shots. As we recall details of bodies or words (poor clothes, legs dancing, mouths singing, angry and drunken eyes, or tears while remembering home, conversations about money), we can put

together a picture of marginalized but not yet defeated travelers, who are neither heroes nor villains.

BEYOND THE MOVIE THEATERS: DOCUMENTARY DISTRIBUTION AND RECEPTION

Audience: the crucial connection with TV

Just like their feature-film counterparts, documentarians have also commented on their own work. For instance, Wu Wenguang has been among the most vocal directors and his views on documentary have been published both in Chinese and English.¹⁵ Cui Zi'en has toured many American universities in order to present his films and comment specifically on gay filmmaking in China. A common denominator in the documentarian's view of their work is the necessity to include the audience as an essential part of their work. In other words, while they are not willing to give up independent thinking in order to gain an audience, they see no point in making films that nobody would watch.

In a 2002 interview, Jiang Yue commented on his dual activity as an independent documentarian and his work for CCTV.

Since CCTV is the largest broadcasting system, if we all leave TV and we only make documentaries to be shown in movie theaters, what's the point? In China there is no tradition of documentary filmmaking and there is no documentary conception. [...] Therefore, there is no need to emphasize "independence." These days, what counts is what you have expressed, to what you have paid attention. CCTV perhaps pays attention to its own agenda, I pay attention to mine; when I shoot maybe they become compatible. A documentary is just a film, it is a personal hobby. I just like making documentaries, and my goal is not *going against* anybody else. [...] Being independent is not a term, but a state of mind.¹⁶ [emphasis added]

The connection with TV is crucial. Unlike feature films, the main outlet for documentaries remains TV broadcasts. Since the early 1990s, TV reforms have allowed documentarians to sell their works to CCTV and other national broadcast channels.

Furthermore, in house productions have increasingly become more daring and provocative and have also addressed some of the challenges pushed forward by independent documentarians.

For instance, in 1998 one could see evidence of such renewal in TV production in documentaries like *Hai xuan* 海選 (Village head election), directed by Hu Jingcao 胡勁草 and produced by CCTV and *Weihai lu ershihao* 威海路二十號 (20 Weihai road), directed by Zhu Xiaoqian 珠曉茜 and produced by Shanghai TV.¹⁷ Both these TV documentaries set out to expose a fragment of China through private stories (rather than public histories). In both cases, authenticity is achieved through a non-invasive but careful observation of details with no invasive commentaries. For instance *20 Weihai road* explores the changes of the People's Square, from the perspectives of people living in the vestiges of a stable built by the British in the beginning of the 20th century by simply collecting many unfinished individual stories without attempting to create a main narrative.

[T]he documentary never becomes propagandistic and its visual conjectures complicate and confront the apparent optimism of the speaker's words. The camera shows a decaying building, with broken walls and mostly old people; we see their crowded rooms, their simple meals; we notice their sad looks. Furthermore, a slightly melancholic music is often briefly inserted among the various first-person narrations and the same music is the only commentary to the very last shots, in which the camera moves away from the inhabitants of No.20 Weihai Road and ends on a shot of the Square, seen from the old stable's perspective. The documentary ends as it has begun, as an open journey into a smaller corner of China. (Voci 2004)

The broadcast of a documentary such as *20 Weihai Road* on national TV does not only comment on the new ways Chinese localities are represented on screen but is also evidence of renovations in TV productions and programming and, more broadly, of the changed power dynamics between political/economic forces and mass media in China.

In fact one can trace the birth of the new Chinese documentary back to 1988, when the groundbreaking TV documentary, *Tian'anmen* 天安門, began its shooting. This eight-part documentary series (written and directed by Shi Jian 時間 and Chen Jue 陳爵, 1991) was in fact produced for CCTV, although it was never broadcast.¹⁸

One needs to point out that only a relatively small number of TV documentaries have totally departed from the propagandist/educational style and fully embraced the style of *20 Weihai Road*. Indeed national TV often still delivers a bright/optimistic overall picture and most controversial independent documentaries have not yet been broadcast. However, since everybody would agree that no medium is free from the control, limitations, and directions imposed by political and economic constraints (which of course occur in China as elsewhere), the impact of these “disturbing” images cannot be underestimated.

Documentary's impact on Chinese film culture therefore needs to be understood in relation to both the emergence of urban cinema and the renewal of TV. If we look at both the silver screen and the small screen, we can find surprising similarities at least in the overall trend towards fragmentations of places and narratives, stress on authenticity, minimal intervention (in terms of commentary voice-over) and focus on marginal communities, the poor, the “outsiders.” On the one hand, intricacy and convolution have become visually apparent traits in the representation of Chinese localities. On the other hand, stories are simply partially uncovered rather than fully narrated; people's are shown rather than explained.

Because of their focus on contemporary Chinese realities, documentarians seem to remain relatively outside the debate about Orientalist and Occidental distortions

about China or Chineseness supposedly perpetrated by both Western and Chinese feature filmmakers. Such concern continues to dominate the discussion on feature films coming out of China or having anything to do with China (i.e., sometimes merely featuring a Chinese actor or including Chinese locations). The result of this emphasis on cultural constructs or mis-constructs is that Chinese cinema and its directors are often “trapped” in the increasingly artificial boundaries of “national/ethnic” cinema (i.e. defined by its “Chineseness”—or, at best, allowed a slightly broader identity such as “transnational Chinese cinema”) and rarely discussed from other equally relevant perspectives (for instance one finds very few comparative analyses with non-Chinese directors). For instance, Zhang Yimou’s *Yingxiong* 英雄 (Hero, 2003) did not fail to stir the old controversy about his misrepresentations of Chinese culture and history—which allegedly were caused by Zhang’s desire to please a not better defined “western” market.

While in the past (up until the late 1980s), Chinese documentary was viewed as a simple tool for political propaganda, since the 1990s on, it has gained the reputation of being a domestic construct with no ambitions at conquering any western market, but rather focused on reaching a larger Chinese audience.

Documentary in China is a newly born art and/or popular culture form of expression. As Jiang Yue pointed out, in China “there is no tradition of documentary filmmaking and there is no documentary conception”, which fully developed only after the 1980s renewal of Chinese cinema and the Fifth generation phenomenon.¹⁹ Given the short history of documentary videomaking and the limited audience (even more limited than the so-called “underground/urban” urban cinema of the Sixth Generation), one can

speculate that it is natural that Chinese documentary has been mostly received and analyzed as a domestic product.

However, like their feature film colleagues, documentarians have already found themselves “trapped” in another western-originated debate which tries to categorize any Chinese cultural product within the dichotomy of *official propaganda* vs. *counter culture*.²⁰ Such dichotomy still views dissent as mainly politically defined and fails to look at the changing identities of those who “make culture” in China.

Refusing to be framed in such a dichotomy and by looking at “independence” as a state of mind, documentarians have resented the whole notion of dissent as a limiting and misrepresenting category. Instead they have chosen a pragmatic approach in their search for funding and outlets for distribution (which include national TV) and have managed to redefine Chinese localities, gain new public spaces also outside China, and contribute to the development of cinema, beyond feature-length films.

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¹ Metz, p. 69. Christian Metz, "From Film Language. Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema.", in Gerald Mast, Marshal Cohen, and Leo Brady, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, Fourth Edition, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 68-78.

² Interviewed in the winter of 1990.

³ “Jiang Wen: A Good Film Tastes Like Strong Liquor.” *China Daily* (11/04/03): http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-11/04/content_278149.htm

⁴ I use *movie-making* rather than *filmmaking* to emphasize that, increasingly, “film” is neither the only nor the main medium for cinema.

⁵ I take the term “independent” as merely describing documentaries produced outside the boundaries of Chinese national TV, with a variety of funding that can include both domestic and foreign capital. I am not taking it as a synonym for “free” or “dissenting.” In 2003, Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, and Wu Gong 武宮 (aka Kang Jianning 康健寧) produced a series of four documentaries, *Interesting Times*, sponsored by a group of international broadcasting companies (including the French ARTE, the English BBC and the Danish TV2).

⁶ See Chris Berry, “Facing Reality: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism,” in Hung Wu, Huangsheng Wang, and Boyi Feng, eds., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990–2000* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 121–131. See Lü Xinyu 呂新雨, *Jilu Zhongguo: dangdai Zhongguo xin jilupian yundong* 紀錄中國：當代中國新紀錄片運動 (Recording China: Contemporary Chinese new documentary movement) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2003).

⁷ “在我那儿没人教你，一切事情都要自己做。那時候什么都拍過，專題片、晚會、電視劇、天气預報、電視藝術片” The quote is from Duan Jinchuan’s question and answer meeting with students in *Renmin daxue*. For an interview in English with Duan Jinchuan, see Chris Berry 1997; for an extensive discussion of Duan’s views about documentary and his own work, see his conversation with Wang Weici (Wang 2001: 123-154).

⁸ *Black Harvest* (1992) is the last part of a trilogy (that also include *First Contact*, *Joe Leahy's neighbours*), on the troubled relationship between the Ganiga tribe and Joe Leahy, the mixed-race owner of a coffee plantation built on land sold cheaply by the tribe. A power struggle erupts when their joint effort to expand operations is foiled by a drop in world coffee prices

⁹ He also produced *Bei jingzhide he* (A river is stilled, 1999) and *This happy life* (2002) which was part of the previously mentioned series of four documentaries, *Interesting Times*.

¹⁰ Bill Nichols uses the idea of “mosaic” describing Wiseman’s style. See “Frederick Wiseman’s Documentaries: Theory and Structure”, in *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 208-236.

¹¹ Duan Jinchuan discussed this scene during the question and answer meeting with students in *Renmin daxue* (People’s University), Beijing 1996.

¹² “我”說的，我就把它不加選擇地端給觀眾，當時認為這是所謂的真實。有些時候你內心的東西是你按不住的。這個時候讓觀眾看到一些你內心的東西也未嘗不可” (Ibidem).

¹³ Jack Ellis (1989: 46-57) lists under this category films like Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Mannahatta* (1921), *Ralph Steiner's H2O* (1929), *Rien que les heures*, Joris Ivens' *The Bridge* (1927), and Dimitri Kirsanoff's *Ménilmontant* (1926)

¹⁴ In Chinese “*jiang hu*” literally means “lake and river” and is a metaphor for being away from home.

¹⁵ Wu Wenguang’s article “Just on the Road” is included in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000*; Wu also published on *Shibao* and *Wenxue zazhi*; a long talk with Wu opens the section on “independent documentarians in Wang Weici’s collections (Wang 2000: 91-122).

¹⁶ “因為電視是最大的傳播手段，如果我們放棄了電視，而僅僅在電影院里欣賞紀錄片，那又有什么意義？中國沒有紀錄片的傳統，沒有紀錄片的觀念。…所以我覺得沒必要強調什么獨立，這個時候不是強調獨立的時候，關鍵是你表達了什么，關注的是什么。中央電視台可能關注的是他們的，我關注我的，可能我在拍攝的時候會兼容一下。紀錄片就是個片子，就是個個人的愛好，我喜歡它我就去做了，沒有非要用它來反對另外一個什么。…獨立不獨立不是一個名詞，它是指你心中獨立不獨立” (Jiang Yue interviewed for Filmsea.com, <http://www.filmsea.com/newsreel/celebrity/200302110015.htm>).

¹⁷ For an analysis of *Hai xuan* (Village head election) and *Weihai lu ershihao* (20 Weihai road), see Voci 2004.

¹⁸ For an in-depth analysis of this TV documentary, see Voci 2004.

¹⁹ Jiang Yue, interviewed for filmsea, <http://www.filmsea.com/newsreel/celebrity/200302110015.htm>.

²⁰ For instance, at the time of *Hero*'s release, another issue of debate concerned Zhang's political stance in relation to the Chinese government (the old and frankly annoying question about whether Zhang—or any Chinese artists, for that matter—supports or criticizes the Chinese government).