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Styles, Subjects, and Special Points of View: A Study of Contemporary Chinese Independent Documentary

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A Study of Contemporary
Chinese Independent Documentary**

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A Study of Contemporary Chinese Independent Documentary

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Abstract

From a comparative perspective, this study explores the origins, styles, problems, solutions, and possible future directions of Chinese independent documentary. I argue that Chinese independent (or underground) filmmaking actually started with independent documentary in the late 1980s and that the Chinese embrace of the *cinéma vérité* and interview styles represents an attempt to resist the propagandist, voice-of-God approach in the official news and documentary programming. However, self-erasure and misconceived objectivity typical of the earlier works engendered problems in documentary filmmaking, and a subsequent self-repositioning in the late 1990s has reclaimed the subjective voice and readjusted the artist's attitude toward their subjects. The call for returning to the personal is further exemplified in the current euphoria for DV works, and the idea of amateur filmmaking once again highlights the connection between independent documentary and its special points of view on ordinary people's lives in a changing society.

Abandon your so-called sense of responsibility, abandon your concern for the so-called deep structure of culture, and treat your interviewees as you would your friends and loved ones.

— Chen Meng, 1993

My position is fairly individual: it is not an intellectual's position, nor an unofficial position; it is not an underground position, nor an oppositional position.

— Wu Wenguang, 1999

Introduction: Almost a Chinese Documentary Movement

Chinese “independent” (*duli*) filmmaking is generally known to emerge in the early 1990s with Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai, who are now regarded as the key figures of China's sixth generation directors. Zhang's *Beijing Bastards* (Beijing zazhong, 1993), Wang's *The Days* (Dong Chun de rizi, 1993), and other “underground” or “outlawed” feature films—so designated because they were produced outside the state system and exhibited

overseas without official approval (or, in some cases, despite official protests and bans)—caught the attention of the Western media and have generated a sustained interest in alternative Chinese filmmaking.ⁱ However, if we extend the term “independent” to encompass works produced independently of direct state funding and administrative control, we come to realize that Chinese independent productions had actually begun with documentaries in the late 1980s when China was undergoing an unprecedented intellectual transformation. Wu Wenguang, for instance, started working on *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiang zhe, 1990) outside the state system in 1988. In the same year, Shi Jian obtained external funding for the series *Tiananmen* (Tiananmen, 1991) and began the project with some colleagues in spite of discouragement from CCTV (China Central Television).ⁱⁱ

Lü Xinyu describes what happened in the 1990s as a “new documentary movement” that aimed to “document China” (*jilu Zhongguo*), but documentarists like Duan Jinchuan believe that, exciting as they were, their works of the 1990s did not quite constitute a movement or revolution.ⁱⁱⁱ I agree with Duan’s more modest assessment and argue that “movement” may be too strong a word for describing Chinese independent documentary of the past decade, especially when we consider the small number of its participants, the unavailability of its representative works to the public, and its little impact on domestic audiences. Nevertheless, as Lü demonstrates, enough shared aspirations in this body of

works merit our study of them as a special phenomenon, and I treat this phenomenon of “marginality” as an example of what I describe elsewhere as *alternative cultural production* in contemporary China.^{iv}

This study explores the origins, styles, problems, solutions, and possible future directions in Chinese independent documentary. My initial argument is that we should not indiscriminately accept Chinese independents’ typical claims to “truth” (*zhenshi*), “reality” (*xianshi*), and “objectivity” (*keguan*) but, instead, must investigate their preferred means of achieving their perceptions of truth and reality. In this study, therefore, I focus less on claims to the inherent truth content of particular subjects than on the preferred styles in Chinese documentary and the ideological implications of preferring certain styles to others. A comparative perspective is needed for stylistic and ideological considerations, and my observation of the parallels in Chinese and Euro-American documentaries is meant to foreground the historical specificities in the tortuous development of Chinese independent documentary.

Origins: Unofficial Points of Views Inside and Outside the State System

In June 1991 Shi Jian gathered a few close friends of CCTV and organized the first independent Chinese documentary group, “Structure-Wave-Youth-Cinema” (Jiegou-Langchao-Qingnian-Dianying) or, for short, SWYC, which takes one letter each

from their names in pinyin romanization—Shi Jian, Wang Zijun, Kuang Yang, and Chen Jie. To gather momentum, Shi Jian organized a conference on documentary at the Beijing Broadcast Institute near the end of 1991, which attracted around 200 people (including Jiang Yue, who signed his registration card as an “independent”) and indicated considerable public interest. While working on *Tiananmen* and *I Have Graduated* (Wo biye le, 1992) with his group, Shi Jian met Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, Wen Pulin, Hao Zhiqiang, Li Xiaoshan, and other aspiring independents in Zhang Yuan’s place in Beijing in 1991. They discussed the significance of documentary and decided to launch a new documentary movement in China.

Wu Wenguang quickly emerged as a nominal leader of the independents, who defined their *oppositional* stance vis-à-vis the mainstream: to resist the “corrupt” filmmaking tradition and to turn the world of film and television upside down. They set two requirements for the independent documentary: independent production (i.e., raising money on your own and controlling the entire process) and independent thinking (i.e., no longer serving as a mouthpiece to official ideology). Private money, however, was difficult to obtain in the early 1990s. While on the CCTV payroll, Shi Jian did moonlighting work to earn additional money for the eight-part *Tiananmen* and even sold his own refrigerator to make the ends meet. Outside the state system, Wu Wenguang did various odd jobs, producing television programs and designing VCDs for exhibitions.

Given the sensitive political climate right after the June Fourth of 1989, Chinese independent documentaries had a bumpy start. Originally conceived for the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China, the *Tiananmen* series did not pass the censors because its depiction of the daily lives of ordinary Beijing residents was judged to be too "gray" and too "passive."^v By the time *Tiananmen* entered a German film festival in 1994, Shi Jian and his group had already abandoned independent production and, instead, diligently worked for structural changes within the CCTV system. In January 1993, Shi helped launch the "Eastern Horizons" (Dongfang shikong), a program focused on investigating contemporary issues; in May 1993, he inaugurated the "Eastern Talents" (Dongfang zhi zi), a program of in-studio interviews; and in March 1996, he established the first full-scale Chinese talk show, "Talks in Earnest" (Shihua shishuo). All these programs became extremely popular and influential across China due in part to their fresh formats and in part to their appearance of real people, authentic lives, and truthful revelations.^{vi}

These new CCTV programs reflected a radical conceptual change in television programming and an increasing awareness of documentary as a new *strategic method*. Corresponding to what happened in independent documentary, the efforts to distance from propaganda and to address the audience's everyday concerns were clearly visible inside the official institution. Chen Meng, a producer of the popular CCTV program "Living Space" (Shenghuo kongjian), issued the slogan "let ordinary people tell their own stories" and

instructed her crew to readjust their attitude in 1993:

Abandon your so-called sense of responsibility, abandon your concern for the so-called deep structure of culture, and treat your interviewees as you would your friends and loved ones. As a result you will acquire the most sincere sense of responsibility and produce the deepest kind of criticism.^{vii}

Chen Meng's words demonstrate that the shifting of points of view to "ordinary people" (*laobaixing*, literally, "people of a hundred surnames") was a major trend in both official and unofficial documentary in China during the 1990s. For example, Kang Jianing advocated the replacement of high-sounding rhetoric of official documentary by a non-condescending view of lower-class people. For Kang, *River Elegy* (Heshang, 1988), a controversial television series, relies too much on authoritative voiceover commentary and sounds as if a priest were preaching on the clouds. While working at Ningxia TV, Kang spent a great deal of time in a poverty-stricken rural village and produced *Yinyang* (Yinyang, 1997), a documentary that exhibits a distinctive "plebeian consciousness" (*pingmin yishi*).^{viii}

Indeed, a similar attempt at the plebeian points of view was undertaken by CCTV's "Ordinary People's Lives" (Baixing jiayuan), which issued an eye-catching slogan—"this program serves the poor"—for internal use in 1996.^{ix} In its first few episodes, the "poor" (*qiongren*) they covered include a schoolteacher, a handicapped person, someone raising an abandoned child, and a teenage maid—all under-represented in the previous official programming. Significantly, rather than serve "the people" (*renmin*) or "workers, peasants, and soldiers" (*gong-nong-bing*), the urgent mission now was to serve *laobaixing*, which had

been reconceived as more concrete or humanist than *renmin* and less political or propagandist than *gong-nong-bing*.

Obviously, the desires to distance—if not always resist—the official rhetoric and to document the everyday lives of *laobaixing*, especially those from the lower social strata, had united documentarists inside and outside the state system. Indeed, during the 1990s, the boundary between the official and the unofficial was frequently crossed. Just as Shi Jian had directed independent documentaries as a CCTV employee, Jiang Yue was recruited to shoot short documentaries for CCTV's "Living Space" in between his own independent projects. As a matter of fact, Duan Jinchuan's *No. 16 Barkhor South Street* (Bakuo nanjie 16 hao, 1997) was originally funded by and produced for CCTV. After years of censorship problems, a 30-minute version was broadcast in the CCTV's program "Documentary" (Jilu) in August and September 2001.^x

Three things are worth noting at this juncture. First, most Chinese documentarists believed their works were more realistic, more truthful, or at least more objective than any comparable, official news programs. Second, with a few exceptions, full-length documentaries came from independents typically working on their projects over a long period of time. Third, in spite of their passion, most artists were not ready to define documentary. Even years later, when confronted with the questions whether short documentary (or nonfictional) programs produced for CCTV are documentaries in a strict

sense, and whether “special-theme projects” (*zhuanti pian*) qualify as documentaries, producers like Chen Meng and Shi Jian remain undecided. This prompts us to examine the conceptualization of documentary and the sources of inspiration for Chinese documentary in the 1990s.

Styles: Parallels in Euro-American and Chinese Documentaries

Wu Wenguang admits that he did not know what documentary was until he attended the Yamagata documentary film festival in 1991. He brought home some videotapes of Ogawa Shinsuke’s documentaries, which left a deep impression on his fellow independents like Jiang Yue. Jiang specifically valued Ogawa’s persistence in pursuing a project and his intimate acquaintance with his subjects. In 1993 Duan Jinchuan also attended the Yamagata festival and watched works by Ogawa Shinsuke, Frederick Wiseman, and Bob Connolly.^{xi} Documentary concepts like “direct cinema” (*zhijie dianying*) and *cinéma vérité* (*zhenshi dianying*) began to circulate among Chinese independents, and Wiseman’s name was among the most frequently mentioned. In the summer of 1997, Wiseman attended an international conference on documentary in Beijing sponsored by CCTV’s “Living Space” and masterminded by Chen Meng, and as a distinguished guest he was introduced to Chinese cultural leaders as well as independent documentarists.

But what made Wiseman particularly appealing to Chinese documentarists inside and outside the state system in the 1990s? To answer this question, we must contextualize what Wiseman represents in the history of documentary. According to Bill Nichols, four major styles exist in Euro-American documentary. First, the *direct-address style* of the Griersonian tradition employed an authoritative or even presumptuous off-screen narration (so excessive sometimes as to be the “voice of God”) and worked toward overwhelmingly didactic ends. Second, when the direct-address style went out of fashion after World War II, *cinéma vérité* and its variants like direct cinema “promised an increase in the ‘reality effect’ with its directness, immediacy, and impression of capturing untampered events in the everyday lives of particular people.”^{xiii} Made possible by the portable cameras and sound recorders, this *observational style* refrains from authorial commentary, prefers filming ordinary people, seeks transparency with synchronous dialogue under location conditions, and entrusts the viewers to reach conclusions on their own. Third, an *interview-oriented style*, which incorporates direct address by bringing the interviewees before the camera and having them talk directly to the viewer as witness-participants of their life stories (often feminist and antiwar), emerged in the 1960s to provide a sense of history otherwise lacking in *cinéma vérité*. Fourth, beginning in the late 1970s, a new *self-reflexive style* experimented with more complex forms, mixing “observational passages with interviews, the voice-over of the film-maker with intertitles” and juxtaposing a range of disparate points of

views to engage the viewer in an active interpretive process.^{xiii}

In the Chinese context, the appeal of *cinéma vérité* as represented by Wiseman's works was tremendous when Chinese documentarists tried desperately to resist the propagandist tradition of the "voice of the Party" implicit in the dominant direct-address style of official documentary and news programs. That appeal was evident at both the formal and ideological levels. At the formal level, the directness of images, the immediacy of the locations, and the deep impression of untampered actions of the people in *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema provided the much-needed "documentary methods" (*jishi shoufa*) for Chinese independents to get closer to reality or truth. For example, Shi Jian highlights the *observational* quality of *Tiananmen* by means of a series of mobile long takes leading the viewer through Beijing *hutong* (back alleys), and he enhances the reality effect by resorting to the synchronous recording and the hidden camera. In contrast to the pre-scripted voice-over commentary, location sound was considered experimental at the time and exerted an extraordinary impact on the viewer. At the ideological level, the alliance of *cinéma vérité* with individuals rather than institutions, as expounded below, perfectly fit the Chinese agenda:

As in Wiseman's films, organizational strategies establish a preferred reading—in this case, one that favors *the personal over the political*, that seeks out and celebrates the irruptions of *individual feeling and conscience* in the face of institutional constraint, that *re-writes historical process* as the expression of an indomitable human essence whatever the circumstance.^{xiv}

Without much modification, this passage can be borrowed to describe the ideological significance of many early Chinese independent documentaries, such as *Bumming in Beijing* and Jiang Yue's *The Other Shore* (Bi an, 1995).

But the pure *cinéma vérité* was hard to achieve, and the majority of Chinese documentarists have preferred mixing observation with “talking-head” interviews. Interviews have been extremely popular among Chinese documentarists because they find in this method an effective way of counterbalancing official views with personal opinions—for, with multiple voices, “interviews diffuse authority”^{xv}—and of substantiating the truth claims with the subjects’ on-camera testimonies. In *Bumming in Beijing*, Wu follows five provincial artists struggling to start a career in Beijing and captures the dramatic changes in their lives over three years. Wu demonstrates his relatively sophisticated use of interviews – they are not simply included as the evidence of personal truth (testimony) but potentially as a space of tension (when one story is modified or corrected by another) or even as a site of irony (e.g., when Gao Bo’s on-camera assertion of his unwillingness to go abroad is contradicted by an indication that he subsequently left for Paris in 1990).

Wu’s interviews are inserted between the observational footage of these artists’ living conditions and their activities, and the most dramatic—and emotionally charged—episode in *Bumming in Beijing* is the one in which Zhang Xiaping goes literally crazy after her solo art exhibit. Similarly, Jiang Yue’s observational camera also captures some dramatic moments

in the staging of an avant-garde play written by Gao Xingjian, who would immigrate to France and win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000. But private emotions in *The Other Shore* irrupt in Jiang's follow-up interviews with the disillusioned provincial amateur actors who had been recruited to Beijing by Mou Sen, the only one of the five struggling artists featured in *Bumming in Beijing* who has decided to stay in China.

As a rare exception to the Chinese preference for interviews, Duan Jinchuan has consistently pursued the *cinéma vérité* style.^{xvi} In his *No. 16 Barkhor South Street*, which concentrates on apparently insignificant Tibetan people caught in their equally insignificant daily routines inside the office of a Lhasa neighborhood committee, the photographer is completely out of the picture, and the seemingly “natural” unfolding of events gives the viewer an impression of “on-the-spot” (*xianchang*) participation and observation. Perhaps due to Wiseman's influence, Duan prefers directing his attention to public spaces: “I am increasingly interested in politics and ideology more than in an individual's fate.”^{xvii} Duan's kindred spirit in this regard is Zhang Yuan, with whom he directed *The Square* (Guangchang, 1994), a documentary observing random activities in Tiananmen Square, the most symbolic public space in China.^{xviii}

Duan continued his *cinéma vérité* style in *The End of the Earth* (Tianbian, 1997), an examination of what modernity—represented by a rundown truck—can and cannot bring to Tibetan herdsmen living a fundamentally traditional life on Phala Grassland. Both set in

Tibet, where he started his career with Tibet TV as early as 1984 before going independent, Duan's two films resemble the observational tradition prevalent in *ethnographic cinema*, which has remained largely an academic endeavor in China.^{xix} Indeed, Duan himself has noticed the parallel between his documentary and anthropological fieldwork as both aim at documenting cultural behaviors and conflicts between human and nature.

Apart from Tibet, Chinese independent documentary has found a fertile ground in Yunnan, a mountainous southern province with a multi-ethnic population and rich cultural resources. Lesser-known to the outside world, Yunnan's independents differ from their Beijing counterparts in that they give more attention to nature, culture, and community than to individuals. Zhou Yuejun's *The Cormorant and the Lake* (Yuying, 1998) examines an old couple's training of cormorants for fishing and their changing economic life. Tan Leshui's *Baka Village* (Baka laozhai, 1998) observes the dilemma of Jinuo people, the most recently classified minority group in China, who were suddenly deprived of their agricultural tradition when the government forbid them from burning hillsides for farming. Liu Xiaojin's *Mask* (Mianju, 2000) is an elaborate story of the rediscovery, performance, and altered meanings of a traditional village dance-play. Interestingly, like their Beijing counterparts, Yunnan independents have also preferred mixing observation passages with interviews, although they still reply on voiceover narration in their exploration of ethnic cultures.

Problems: Self-erasure, Misconceived Objectivity, and Subject Exploitation

The predominance of the interview-oriented style and a misguided faith in the observational camera's objectivity generated a number of problems in Chinese independent documentary. First, because the majority of Chinese independents are amateurs who learn their trade while shooting documentaries,^{xx} their works contain obvious *technical insufficiencies*, ranging from shaky or gyrating camera, blurred or racked focus, disproportionate frames, to grainy images and muddy sound. Ironically, precisely due to their marked difference from slick state productions, critics have interpreted these insufficiencies as signs of truth, as effects of reality, as means by which the viewer is supposedly brought back in contact with the very tissue and texture of life. A series of international film festival prizes awarded to Chinese independent documentaries seem to have authenticated a new "documentary aesthetic" derived initially from technical insufficiencies, and the impressionable newcomers are then enticed to align with this perceived "tradition" of rebellious independent documentary.^{xxi}

Second, since nearly everyone in the early 1990s subscribed to the same documentary methods, especially strings of interviews and excessive long takes, the ensuing stylistic resemblance make these works look rather "cheap, insubstantial, and unimaginative," to quote Duan Jinchuan's judgment.^{xxii} By moving from one extreme (an assertive spokesperson for the people) to another (a passive listener to the interviewees), Chinese

documentarists have revealed a conspicuous *lack of self-confidence*, so much so that they would eagerly erase themselves from the picture and depend completely on other people's words to express their views.

Third, Chinese documentarists are rarely interested in theoretical issues and take for granted the seemingly indisputable objectivity in documentary methods. Working like ethnographic filmmakers, they endeavor to "interpret the behavior of people ... by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the camera were not there."^{xxiii} This pursuit of the "invisibility" of the camera resulted in the *self-erasure* of the documentarist. Similarly, in an effort to reduce or eliminate authorial interference, the documentarist entrusts the interviewees to speak truths and forget a truism that words, like images, are not always trustworthy.

Again, a detour through critiques of Euro-American documentary may help us better evaluate the Chinese situation. In David MacDougall's opinion, misconceived objectivity in much of ethnographic cinema results from "the fallacy of omniscient observation," which ignores the inevitability of *subjective* input in filmmaking: "Observation cinema is based upon a process of selection. The filmmaker limits himself to that which occurs naturally and spontaneously in front of his camera."^{xxiv} In other words, it is the documentarist who decides what to film, whom to interview, and which segments to delete; consequently, the finished documentary is never a natural or spontaneous unfolding of life as is.

Thomas Waugh takes the persistent pretense of impartiality as the most serious liability of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema in his critique of their naïve claim to “the new accessibility of ‘truth’—truth in the surface texture of audiovisual reality, in the immediacy of present time, and in the nuance of spontaneous behavior.”^{xxv} Using Emile de Antonio as a primary example, Waugh believes that the new American documentary of the 1970s—what Bill Nichols classifies as the self-reflexive style—bypassed the “pseudo-objective” *cinéma vérité* of the 1960s and recognized the camera’s undeniable subjectivity.

A similar concern with subjectivity compels Bill Nichols to criticize those documentarists in the *cinéma vérité* camp who “forfeit their own voice for that of others (usually characters recruited to the film and interviewed)” and who “disavow the complexities of voice ... for the apparent simplicities of faithful observation.”^{xxvi} The loss of voice Nichols notices in *cinéma vérité* parallels the abundance of monologues (i.e., one-way communication) MacDougall discerns in observational cinema. MacDougall’s critique of the quest of invisibility in observational cinema prompts him to envision a “participatory cinema” whereby the filmmaker not only acknowledges his or her encounter with the subjects but also creates a process of collaboration in the production of knowledge.

The question of “encounter” brings us to a touchy issue in Chinese documentary: *subject exploitation*, which can be divided into three types. The first type involves a

complete disregard of the subject's human value and dignity by pursuing a sensational or objectifying investigation. Such exploitation is most evident in official television programs. For example, Beijing TV's "Documentary" (Jilu) program aired an otherwise touching story about an HIV-positive migrant worker in Tianjin who had returned home to Henan only to find himself completely estranged by his villagers and even his wife. But this 50-minute documentary was aired in a peculiar way—divided in small sections and interrupted by "expert" comments from a program host, a reporter, and a sociologist—and the story was repackaged in an "entertaining" live show, in part to offer it as a public education forum and in part to boost the program's ratings.^{xxvii} The HIV-positive subject's miseries were exploited on camera and sensationalized in the studio.

The second type of subject exploitation involves a largely sympathetic treatment and therefore is benign in nature and in a sense unavoidable. While shooting *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (Huidao Fenghuangqiao, 1997), an intimate study of women migrant workers in Beijing, Li Hong befriended her subjects by staying overnight with them in their cramped living condition, much to her own discomfort. Although she had won their trust, in the end she developed a sense of guilt and admitted that her documentary functioned very much like a city dweller's "looting" (*lüeduo*) of migrant rural workers.^{xxviii} Documentary is a "brutal" (*canren*) method, she confesses, and she is aware that she shot the documentary for herself and not for her subjects, to whom she was able to show merely part of the documentary.^{xxix}

Similarly, even though Du Haibin had befriended his homeless subjects in *Along the Railroad* (Tielu yanxian, 2000), an acute sense of exploitation made him feel like a “looter” (*lüeduoazhe*) once the documentary was completed and he was in sole possession of his subjects as documentary images.^{xxx}

The third type of subject exploitation, which is rather rare, involves the unequal relationship between various subjects (or characters) in a documentary, on- or off-camera. One case in point is *The Other Shore*. During shooting, Mou Sen completely changed his attitude towards his amateur actors after seven successful performances of Gao Xingjian’s play. A high point in their life was over, and Mou experienced a hard time raising funds for additional performances. One rainy day, Mou flew back from Guangzhou empty-handed and vented anger on his spiritually and financially “dependent” group, going so far as to blame one pretty girl for not prostituting herself. Jiang Yue regretted that he had not captured this emotional scene on camera, but he did managed to record Mou’s complaints about his students’ dependency. For Mou and Wu Wenguang, who was closely associated with Mou’s group and was pestered by their frequent requests for money, these naïve actors had been dragged too deeply into utopianism and did not get the essence of “deconstruction” in Gao Xingjian’s original play. At this juncture, Jiang suddenly realized that these poor amateurs had all along been exploited in a spiritual quest that would fulfill Mou’s dream of avant-garde theater but not their dreams of securing a career in Beijing.^{xxxi}

Solutions: Self-repositioning, Personal Styles, and Subjective Voice

Jiang Yue admits that shooting *The Other Shore* was a process of purification for himself, after which he acquired an entirely new attitude, new perspective and new understanding. When he heard about the off-camera incident in which Mou had disgraced his students, Jiang discovered that the real subject of Mou's documentary was not an independent artist's staging of avant-garde theater but these amateur actors who were forced to abandon their dreams and disappeared in anonymity after a brief moment of enlightenment. For Jiang, self-repositioning was inevitable: "when you chose a subject, you have formed your position."^{xxxii} And Jiang's new position was to question the entrenched elitist position of Mou and his fellow idealists in the 1980s.

Like Jiang, Kang Jianning also expressed his displeasure with the "aristocratic" attitude implicit in Wu Wenguang's early documentaries. When Jiang caught Wu's complaints about Mou's students on camera, Wu said in embarrassment that documentary was really "brutal" (*canku*), inadvertently echoing Li Hong's comment mentioned above.^{xxxiii} But if documentary was brutal in Li's case because of subject exploitation, it was so in Wu's case because of self-exposure conducive to, hopefully, self-criticism.^{xxxiv}

Sure enough, Wu Wenguang experienced such a process of self-criticism and self-repositioning after 1995, a time when independent documentary faced something like a dead end in his assessment. By 1999, Wu was to completely reposition himself and go so

far as to dismiss as “junks” (*feipin*) or “trash” (*laji*) his earlier works, in particular *At Home in the World* (Sihai weijia, 1995), a 170-minute sequel to *Bumming in Beijing* that follows his five marginal artists from Beijing, Kunming, and Tibet to Belgium, France, Italy, Austria, and the United States. In retrospect, these artists now appear to him like a group of “weaklings” engaged as if in “a collective masturbation” (*jiti shouyin*), and his earlier life in Beijing becomes “illusive and unreal.”^{xxxv}

After working with “tent” (*dapeng*) performers in an itinerant troupe between rural towns and small cities—the subjects of his *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* (Jianghu, 1999), Wu has arrived at this new vision of self-positionality: “You scrutinized yourself and discovered that you no longer belonged to any group, not to the stage nor to the audience—you belong to yourself.”^{xxxvi} Wu further clarifies his call for “returning to one’s own self” (*huidao zishen*): it is not the official position, not the “unofficial” (*minjian*) position, not the people’s position, not the intellectual’s position, not an underground position, nor even an oppositional position, but simply a “personal style” (*geren fangshi*)—“a more personal point of view, a more personal type of writing, and a more unrestricted (*ziyou de*) style.”^{xxxvii}

Wu’s call for returning to one’s own self and being more personal can be understood as a new vision of the artist’s subjectivity in the late 1990s: the subjectivity in question now consists not in an elitist sense of the intellectual mission for enlightening the masses but in a commitment to one’s own personal vision and style. In this sense, Wu shares Duan

Jinchuan's view on the diversification (*duoyuanhua*) of documentary styles. As indicated above, Duan has established his personal style by committing to the *cinéma vérité* tradition and by attending to the ideological more than the individual. But he enhances his own subjectivity by adding some voiceover narration in his next project, *The Sunken Ship: a 1997 Story* (Chenchuan—97 nian de gushi, 1999), thereby showing flexibility in pursuing personal styles.^{xxxviii} Likewise attempting at stylistic changes, Wu Wenguang favors medium and close-up shots and stays away from extremely long takes in *Jiang Hu*.

The pursuit of a personal style is carried on in a radical fashion in Ju Anqi's *There is a Strong Wind in Beijing* (Beijing de feng henda, 2000). The artist goes around Beijing and tirelessly poses the same, almost silly question to different people in different situations—"Is there a strong wind in Beijing?" The artist's unmistakable presence highlights the moments of encounter, not just the encounter between the artist and his random interviewees but also the encounter between these interviewees and the viewer, for the viewer is forced to contemplate: what would be my reaction if I were one of them?^{xxxix} Indeed, the viewer is invited to think beyond immediate answers, because what are more significant here are not the answers themselves but the ways people choose to answer or not to answer. In this sense, the moments of no answers and no images (when some interviewees did not allow the camera) become unique moments of encounter: when the dialogue carries on in complete darkness on screen, the viewer cannot but ponder the symbolism of such darkness.

The distinct subjective voice in Ju Anqi's radically personal style generated heated debates after *There is a Strong Wind in Beijing* was screened in a few bars in Beijing and Kunming. Wu Wenguang concedes that Ju's style represents something his generation may find repulsive, but he values the strong audiovisual impact of Ju's documentary, even when the screen is pitch dark.^{x1} To say the least, Ju's formal experiment has explored those options otherwise falling outside the usual parameters of documentary.

Ju's work brings us to the much-discussed relationship between truth and subjectivity. According to Chen Meng, what Michelangelo Antonioni suggests in *Beyond the Clouds* (1995) is a vision of inexhaustible truths—one truth lies behind another, which lies behind yet another, so on and so forth—visually symbolized by a black hole. Chen's argument is worth quoting at length:

What is truth? The ultimate truth is invisible. In terms of space, truth is a point of view. In terms of time, truth is getting infinitely closer to a point. As early as the 1960s, world documentary theory has made it clear that we not only need to see them [the subjects] in front of the camera but also you [the artist] behind the camera.^{xli}

There is a Strong Wind in Beijing is one such work that lets us see the documentarist behind the camera and hear his subjective voice.

Interestingly, Wu Wenguang himself may be moving closer to re-asserting one's subjective voice and reclaiming self-reflexivity in documentary. His newest work, *Fuck Cinema* (Caotama de dianying, 2004), which follows an unknown writer trying desperately to raise funds for a film based on his screenplay, ends with the disillusioned writer's on-camera

criticism of Wu the documentarist for not be able to help him out. By shifting attention to the artist behind the camera in its final sequence, *Damned Filmmaking* has achieved a measure of self-reflexivity unseen in Wu's previous work.

Conclusion: Toward Amateurism in a DV Age

Fifteen years have passed since Wu Wenguang and Shi Jian first started independent documentary in the late 1980s. The process of repositioning in the late 1990s has convinced documentarists like Wu that special points of view are as crucial as documentary styles and that these points of view apply not just to their subjects but to the artists themselves as well. Ultimately, Wu admits, it is "a question of self-liberation, a question of self-reflection."^{xlii}

Jiang Yue's self-reflection has empowered him to speak for his fellow artists:

We are rather disgusted with the term 'underground'; one can describe us as marginal, but we are not underground. We do not want to oppose something; rather, we just like documentary and want to use it as a special way of expressing our views about the society."^{xliii}

Independent documentarists, in other words, share the same desire to document the present.

But what differs in the late 1990s is that documentarists have chosen to emphasize their personal styles and individual views rather than engineering some kind of a documentary movement. This is why Wu Wenguang asserts, "Documentary does not equal Wu Wenguang, nor does Wu Wenguang equal documentary... I don't shoulder a sense of mission for documentary."^{xliv} Instead, Wu sees his desire to document as a *personal* habit:

“I just like the positivist stuff like materials, locations, documents, archives and so on.”^{xlv}

As a matter of fact, Wu has moved to the audio and print media to document the interviews with the tent subjects he has not been able to include in *Jiang Hu*.^{xlvi}

Ironically, contrary to Wu’s imagination, the personal has been resurrected to propagate a new fashion, the so-called amateur DV movement, which is in part derived from the younger generation’s similar desire to document ordinary people’s lives. The connection between the 1990s independent documentary and the new DV movement is apparent in the way the latter’s leading sponsor, the Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite TV, envisioned their program, “Chinese Youth Image Competition: the DV New Generation,” open to college students in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in 2002. First, the amateur DV is anticipated to be more personal, more individualistic, more truthful, and more honest; second, due to disparate personal points of view, the DV movement itself will achieve diversity and provide unofficial texts for understanding contemporary Chinese society. In a manner similar to Jiang Yue’s self-reflection cited above, the Phoenix program’s editorial group declares in the name of the potential DV practitioners: “We have nothing to do with the so-called ‘underground condition,’ ‘marginal discourse,’ ‘independent position,’ or ‘unofficial voice’.

We are just a group of ordinary people passionate for DV, and we care for whatever we like to care for.”^{xlvii}

Democratization and individualization stand out as two central ideas among the expert views the Phoenix TV gathered from its weekly interviews with writers, directors, and professors in the attempt to promote its amateur DV program. Among them, Jia Zhangke emerges as the most outspoken promoter of amateur DV making. In two articles widely circulated in the Chinese websites, Jia celebrates the arrival of the age of amateur film and encourages DV fans to reclaim their right to filmmaking. In the spirit of equality and justice, Jia announces that film originally belongs to the masses and filmmaking should not be the exclusive right enjoyed only by a minority of professionals. The DV camera has moved film closer to individuals rather than the industry, and it will democratize the spirit of Chinese film by facilitating more and more people to try documentary and experimental film. Documentary possesses a humanist spirit while experimental film contains a desire for the new, and Jia contends that these two are exactly what are missing in contemporary Chinese cinema.^{xlvi}

Jia's manifesto for a new age of amateur filmmaking borders on exaggeration, and the current excitement over DV occasionally meets with caution if not suspicion. Duan Jinchuan, for one, remains unconvinced that the latest technological invention is a panacea to all: "The problem now is that film lacks artistic power as it has become more and more amateur, more and more nonprofessional, and therefore more and more insignificant."^{xli} Nonetheless, no matter how the DV movement evolves in the future, one thing is certain: the

desire to document and to experiment will persist. With the advent of DV and the participation of a new generation, Chinese documentary has entered a new chapter that requires our continued attention.

Filmography (Titles arranged by directors; all documentary unless otherwise indicated.)

Du Haibin (b. 1972):

Along the Railroad (Tielu yanxian), 137 and 98 min., 2000

Duan Jinchuan (b. 1962)

The Square (Guangchang), with Zhang Yuan, 35mm, 1994

No. 16 Barkhor South Street (Bakuo nanjie 16 hao), 100 and 30 min., 1997

The End of the Earth (Tianbian), 140 min., 1997_

The Sunken Ship: a 1997 Story (Chenchuan—97 nian de gushi), 1999

Jia Zhangke (b. 1970):

Public Spaces (Gonggong kongjian), DV, 31 min., 2000

Jiang Yue (b. 1962):

The Other Shore (Bi an), 140 min., 1995

Ju Anqi (b. 1975):

There is a Strong Wind in Beijing (Beijing de feng henda), 49 min., 2000

Kang Jianning (b. 1954):

Yinyang (Yinyang), 180 min., 1997 (shooting started in 1995)

Li Hong (b. 1967):

Out of Phoenix Bridge (Huidao Fenghuangqiao), 1997 (shooting started in 1994)

Liu Xiaojin:

Mask (Mianju), 120 min., 2000

Ning Dai:

Banned (Tingji), 1994

Shi Jian (b. 1963) et al.:

Tiananmen (Tiananmen), 8 parts, 1991 (shooting started in 1988)

I Have Graduated (Wo biye le), 1992

Tan Leshui:

Baka Village (Baka laozai), 30 min., 1998

Wang Bing (b. 1967):

West of the Tracks (Tiexi qu), DV, 3 parts, 450 min. total, 2002 (shooting started in 1999):

Part 1, "Rust" (Gongchan), 240 min.; Part 2, "Remnants" (Yanfen jie), 175 min.; Part 3, "Rails" (Tielu), 135 min.

Wang Xiaoshuai (b. 1966):

The Days (Dong Chun de rizi), 35mm, black/white, feature, 1993

Wu Wenguang (b. 1956):

Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers (Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiang zhe), 70 min., 1990 (shooting started in 1988)

At Home in the World (Sihai weijia), 170 min., 1995 (shooting started in 1993)

Jiang Hu: Life on the Road (Jianghu), DV, 58 min., 1999 (shooting started in 1997)

Fuck Cinema (Caotama de dianying), 2004

Yang Tianyi (b. 1972):

Old Men (Laotou), DV, 94 min., 1998 (shooting started in 1996)

Ying Weiwei:

The Box (Hezi, 2001), DV, 88 min., 2001

Zhang Yuan (b. 1963):

Beijing Bastards (Beijing zazhong), 35mm, color, feature, Beijing Bastards group, 1993

The Square (Guangchang), with Duan Jinchuan, 35mm, 1994

Crazy English (Fengkuang Yingyu), 35mm, color, 87 min., 2000

Zhou Yuejun:

The Cormorant and the Lake (Yuying), 30 min., 1998

Endnotes

- ⁱ See David Chute, “Beyond the Law,” Film Comment 30.1 (1994): 60-62; Linda Jaivin, “Defying a Ban, Chinese Cameras Roll,” The Wall Street Journal (Jan. 18, 1995): A12.
- ⁱⁱ In April 1988 Jiang Yue and Wen Pulin started shooting a documentary on art scenes related to the 12th anniversary of the Tangshan earthquake, but the project did not finish. See Zheng Wei, “Jilu yu biaoshu: Zhongguo dalu 1990 niandai yilai de duli jilupian” (Documenting and Expression: mainland Chinese independent documentary since 1990), Dushu 2003, 10: 76-86.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lü Xinyu, Jilu Zhongguo: dangdai Zhongguo xin jilu yundong (Documenting China: the new documentary movement in contemporary China) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2003), p. 97.
- ^{iv} For a study of the marginality of Chinese independents, see Yingjin Zhang, “Rebel Without a Cause? China’s New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking since the Early 1990s,” in Zhen Zhang, ed., The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century (Duke University Press, 2004). For a broader overview of Chinese cinema during the 1990s, see Yingjin Zhang, Chinese National Cinema (London: Routledge, 2004).
- ^v Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, p. 151.
- ^{vi} See Liang Jianzeng and Sun Kewen, eds., Dongfang shikong de rizi (Days with the Eastern horizons) (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003); Liang Jianzeng, Sun Kewen, and Chen Meng, eds., Dongfang zhizi (Eastern talents) (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003); Liang Jianzeng, Sun Kewen, and Chen Meng, eds., Shihua shishuo (Talks in earnest) (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003).
- ^{vii} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, p. 230.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 57. See also Wu Wenguang, ed., Xianchang (Document), vol. 1 (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2000), pp. 70-102.
- ^{ix} The program’s earlier incarnation was “Living Space.” See Liang Jianzeng, Sun Kewen, and Chen Meng, eds., Baixing gushi (Ordinary people’s lives) (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003).
- ^x Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, p. xix.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 107.
- ^{xii} Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” in Bill Nichols, ed., Movies and Methods, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 259-60.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 260.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 261; emphases added.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 265.

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- ^{xvi} Another unusual case of cinéma vérité in China is Wang Bing's West of the Tracks (Tiexi qu, 2002), a three-part study of the death of a factory town in northern China that runs a total of 450 minutes and offers an emersion experience of epic proportions.
- ^{xvii} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, pp. 85-86.
- ^{xviii} A some time documentarist, Zhang Yuan directed Crazy English (Fengkuang Yingyu, 2000), a documentary more about fanatic public responses than about Li Yang, a “god-like” individual who tours around China to sell his method of learning English. In other words, Crazy English is more about political symbolism than about personal achievements. Like Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke also did a documentary, Public Spaces (Gonggong kongjian, 2000), which dwells on places like railroad stations and bus terminals. See Zhang Xianmin and Zhang Yaxuan, Yigeren de yingxiang: DV wanquan shouce (Personal images: a complete DV handbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2003), pp. 96-103.
- ^{xix} Ethnographic cinema emerged in China as early as 1927 and fieldwork was conducted with the assistance of European anthropologists. Between 1956 and 1965, ethnographic cinema had been institutionalized as an academic practice, which assisted the government in the classification and documentation of at least fourteen ethnic minority groups. In 1979 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences established a film group, which subsequently changed to a research unit on visual anthropology. In 1994, supported in part by a German grant, Yunnan University set up a center for East Asian visual anthropology. For details concerning the history of Chinese documentary, see relevant selections from these two volumes: Lin Shaoxiong, ed., Duoyuan wenhua shiyu zhongde jishi yingpian (Nonfiction films from a multi-cultural perspective) (Shanghai: Xuelin, 2003); and Shan Wanli, ed., Jilu dianying wenxian (Compendium of documentary studies) (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2001).
- ^{xx} Among a few professionally trained independents are Wang Bing, who graduated with a major in photography from Shenyang Lu Xun Arts Institute in 1995, and Du Haibin, who graduated with a major in still photography from the Beijing Film Academy in 2000.
- ^{xxi} See Zhang and Zhang, Yigeren de yingxiang, p. 2.
- ^{xxii} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, pp. 88-89.
- ^{xxiii} David MaDougall, “Beyond Observational Cinema,” in Bill Nichols, ed., Movies and Methods, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 278.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 281.
- ^{xxv} Thomas Waugh, “Beyond Vérité: Emile de Antonio and the New Documentary of the Seventies,” in Bill Nichols, ed., Movies and Methods, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 234.
- ^{xxvi} Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” 261.
- ^{xxvii} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, pp. 95-97.

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- ^{xxviii} Yang Tianyi uses a milder expression and feels as if she were a “thief” (xiaotou) stealing from the old retirees she documented in Old Men (Laotou, 1998). See Fenghuang weishi (Phoenix Satellite TV), ed., DV xin shidai 1 (DV new generation 1) (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2003), p. 259.
- ^{xxix} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, pp. 209-10.
- ^{xxx} Wu Wenguang, ed., Xianchang (Document), vol. 2 (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2001), pp. 218. I would suggest that the class factor might have played into the documentarists’ guilty feeling, which typically result from a situation when the subjects are from lower social or economic strata and appear completely helpless or hopeless, as in Out of Phoenix Bridge and Along the Railroad. On the contrary, when the subjects appear to be equal with the documentarist in socio-economic terms, the feeling of guilt does not seem to occur. For instance, mutual friendship has taken roots between two lesbian subjects (who volunteered their story initially through online contact) and Ying Weiwei (who traveled away from her home city to live with them for a week); when she completed The Box (Hezi, 2001), Ying was so moved by her experience that she cried repeatedly. See Zhang and Zhang, Yigeren de yingxiang, pp. 124-40.
- ^{xxxi} See Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, pp. 111-20.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 54, 116.
- ^{xxxiv} Another case of self-exposure did not result exactly in self-criticism. Ning Dai cut a version of independent filmmakers’ discussion of the government’s ban on Zhang Yuan’s Scattered Chicken Feathers (Yidi jimao) in 1993, but Zhang Yuan was furious about Ning’s portrayal of him in the documentary. Duan found it interesting and asked Zhang, “Isn’t documentary brutal?” However, Ning Dai did not want to provoke her husband Zhang Yuan any further and cut another version, Banned (Tingji, 1993), which was screened overseas at some film festivals. This episode should suffice to dispel the myth of documentary objectivity. See Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, p. 209.
- ^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9, 18.
- ^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 30-31.
- ^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ^{xxxix} Neither does Du Haibin hide the presence of his camera and his encounter with his homeless subjects in Along the Railroad, but the way he presents his encounter does not compel the viewer to identify with the homeless but rather to sympathize for them. See Zhang and Zhang, Yigeren de yingxiang, pp. 104-21; Wu Wenguang, Xianchang, vol. 2, pp. 132-218.

- ^{xl} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, pp. 28-29; Yan Jun, “Kan dianying, ting yinyue, guang gongyuan” (Watching films, listening to music, and visiting parks), posted on April 15, 2002 at <<http://xueshu.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=xueshu&id=kandianying>>.
- ^{xli} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, p. 241.
- ^{xlii} *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ^{xliii} *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- ^{xliv} *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ^{xlv} *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ^{xlvi} See Wu Wenguang, ed., Xianchang, vol. 1, pp. 242-73; Wu, Xianchang, vol. 2, pp. 276-93.
- ^{xlvii} Fenghuag weishi, DV xin shidai 1, pp. iii, 1.
- ^{xlviii} Zhang and Zhang, Yigeren de yingxiang, pp. 306-11.
- ^{xlix} Lü, Jilu Zhongguo, p. 99.

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