

**A Window To Our Times  
China's Independent Film since the Late  
1990's**

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## Introduction

### Motivation

When I came for the first time to Germany, it was thanks to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which supported me and my fellow students of the East Asia Institute for Visual Anthropology (EAIVA, Yunnan University) to participate in the Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival (GIEFF) 2000. My first documentary film *Qing, the Newspaperman* was selected for the student film competition and awarded “honourable mention” at GIEFF 2000. Afterwards, I co-produced two more documentaries. Although I always knew that documentary filmmaking is my destiny, I have been interested in social science and humanities, too. Before I took part in the Visual Anthropology curriculum at the EAIVA, I had graduated with the B.A., specialized in Chinese Literature at Yunnan University. During my graduate study, I had the opportunity to read many books on social scientific theories, methodologies and paradigms, which helped me building up a solid basis on social science and humanities.

At EAIVA, Barbara Keifenheim guided me into the field of Visual Anthropology, which occurred to me as if it would be a perfect combination of artistic creation and scientific research. Thereafter, I was encouraged to go back and forth between the practice of documentary making and the scientific reflection of ethnographical fieldwork research: As an anthropological filmmaker, I have to work in a shared field situation in order to observe an anthropological issue, that is to say, what happens to the protagonist and impacts myself, as neutral and scientific as possible, and then represent and reconstruct what I document embodied in form of documentary film. Without scientific thinking and methodologies, one anthropology filmmaker can never go further.

This may explain, why I came to Kiel University as lecturer for modern Chinese language in order to simultaneously pursue a PhD dissertation on film. Meanwhile, I came to realize that in Germany as well as in whole Europe, there has been developed a strong interest in Chinese films, but there is still a lack of

historical or theoretical introductions from a native researcher's perspective. That is how it turned out, that I wanted to write my dissertation about contemporary Chinese Independent Film Movement taking place in Mainland China since the end of the 90's. As a native filmmaker as well, I am a part of this movement too, naturally, I hope this study would help me in finding my self-understanding as a documentary filmmaker.

### **Topic and Structure of this Study**

In order to comprehend the New Documentary Movement, it has to be seen in the present context of filmmaking, including fiction, which itself cannot be isolated from the current socio-political context in general: That is the synchronic and horizontal situation. At the same time, it is necessary to investigate, how it came into being, historically: That is the diachronic and vertical line. Eventually, the original motive turned out to be the following arrangement of my study, in which I focus on the so called Independent Film Movement since the end of the 90's, both on fiction and documentary films equally, since being "independent" from the official system and institutions is their most outstanding common characteristic. The fourth chapter is the heart of this study dwelling on various characteristics of the respective independent filmmakers and their films, their thematic concerns and their ways of representation and dissemination. In order to deepen the understanding of the independent film movement since the late 1990's, the fifth and sixth chapters are case studies regarding respectively fiction and documentary films: Chapter 5 concentrates on Jia Zhangke, one of the most outstanding independent fiction filmmakers, while Chapter 6 centers on a very successful independent documentary film festival serving as platform to showcase and disseminate documentaries within China, the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST).

The first three chapters concern the forerunners in both, fiction and documentary domains, during the 80's and 90's. Both phenomena came into being after the Cultural Revolution had been officially terminated in the end of



the 70's. Then China has been opening up and launched the nationwide reform. Chapter 1 concentrates on the so called 5<sup>th</sup> Generation which had become famous first through Western Film Festivals and had a big part in Western interest in Chinese filmmaking. Chapter 2 serves for contrasting the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation with the newcomers, labelled the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation, which initiated the movement of independent feature films outside the official system and institutions. Chapter 3 focuses on the simultaneous development of documentary filmmaking which happened in the first place within the central and local Television Stations.

### **State of Research**

Since more than twenty years, Chinese films have been travelling in various Western Film Festivals. Meanwhile, internationally there is a huge amount of articles written about the China's cinematic scene since the 80's, specifically concerning the so called 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Generations. Among the books, academic thesis, critiques, and translations, most of them were concerning individual or a group of filmmakers, and interpreted from the perspective of political discourse.

About the current situation, we can only find articles in the respective film festivals brochures, in film distributor's press commentaries, in film magazines, in the respective announcements of the various daily newspapers, and, last but not least, fragmental resources in internet. As far as I know, there has never been presented in the West, neither a study concerning both fiction and documentary filmmaking from comparative perspective, nor an inquiry into the socio-political background of the development of the whole contemporary Chinese film -- seen from inside.

Within China, along with Chinese film itself is developing and a movement in the name of independent filmmaking is befallen, discussions and debates concerning the current film scene are flourishing in various channels, such as in film activity brochures, film magazines and presses, and internet websites and BBS. However, few of them had been able to be introduced to the outside and, none academic study had been fulfilled either.

There are five books which helped my research, all published shortly after the turn of the millennium and, thus, they are mainly about the late 90's filmmakers. Two of them are DV handbooks, one was edited by Zhang Xianmin and Zhang Yaxuan, the other one was edited by Zhu Jingjiang. Both of them emphasize the connection between the DV revolution and the its growing impact on independent filmmaking in China.

The remaining three all focus on documentary filmmaking: Lü Xinyu's book anticipated in a certain way positions of the late 90's while discussing the crisis of TV documentary filmmaking since the midst of the 90's.<sup>1</sup> The documentary handbook edited by Shan Wanli assembled, from the perspective of official criteria, articles written by documentary researchers and TV filmmakers. Quite different from Lü Xinyu's academic view and Shan Wanli's official position, the last book to be mentioned was written by one of the pioneer independent documentary filmmakers, Wu Wenguang, who also played a role of innovator introducing new ideas and methods of international documentary filmmaking into China.

### **Methodological Implications**

Born in 1976, I belong to the generation of students whose academic education was influenced by poststructuralist und post-modern theories.

That is why, in this study, Culture as well as cultural or personal identities were no more conceived as static or essentially inherent, but as a constant process of multifaceted discourses negotiated within shared situations. That is why the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation is interpreted as rebelling against the official communist discourse; the 6<sup>th</sup> generation and the following independent filmmakers of the late 90's are interpreted as being moulded their self-understanding in order to differ from the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation's filmmakers: The great legends were replaced by the small world of everybody, the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation's historical concerns were replaced by the concerns with the tiny subjective world here and now.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Chapter 3.

When I try to embed the different generations in a broader socio-political context of the P.R. China, I feel indebted to a poststructuralist modified social history<sup>2</sup> which inquires both, the social context and subjective perceptions:

“From this point of view, any action is undoubtedly, as social history maintains, a response to the pressure and requirements of social context, but it is a discursively mediated, not a structurally determined, response New history never dispenses with social context nor minimizes its importance in explaining people’s actions as traditional history and its revisionist revival do. What it claims is that social context makes its contribution to the configuration of practice, not as an objective or structural instance, but simply as a material support and referent.”<sup>3</sup>

Within the social context, as well as within the subjective perceptions, I would like to distinguish two aspects: The “objective” social context embraces the *individual objective* social context (Jia Zhangke’s growing up in a rural town)<sup>4</sup>, and *collective objective* social context (the DV revolution in China in the midst of the 90’s)<sup>5</sup>. Within the subjective perceptions, I distinguish the *individual subjective* (Hu Xinyu’s statement: “I’m a betrayer of men”<sup>6</sup>) and the *collective subjective* (the self-understanding as belonging to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> generation<sup>7</sup>).

There is another reason, why I like to quote, sometimes in full length, the words of filmmakers themselves. The various situations I am analyzing are so complex and in a way chaotic, that *my* specific explications may seem rather subjective, or even arbitrary, to others who might be explicating along different lines, because of their own different personal and situative starting points. In quoting the filmmakers’ self-understanding without reducing my own interpretation, I pay a sort of homage to the multiplicity of voices.

Convinced that there is no escape from individual approaches, I am not at all confused about the fact that I am part of the filmmaking movement which came into shape since the late 90’s, which is the core topic of this study, and moreover, I am one of the organizers of the first Chinese documentary film festival, Yunnan

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<sup>2</sup> Called “new history” or “post-social history” by the initiators of that paradigmatic turn, such as Miguel Cabrera resp. Patrick Joyce.

<sup>3</sup> Cabrera, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Chapters 4 and 6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chapter 6.2.3.

<sup>7</sup> The collective subjective is not the perception of a collective, but the perception of an individual as a member of a collective.

Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST), which is the subject of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter:

We are always involved in situations, but between a state of mind of , extreme entanglement on the one side, and the extreme detached coolness on the other side<sup>8</sup>, there is a broad scale of possibilities where we can position ourselves in order to realize an investigation as unbiased as possible.

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<sup>8</sup> Called „personal regression” respective „personal emancipation” by Hermann Schmitz.

## First Chapter: Fiction Film -- The Forerunner Generation

In the first instance, it is necessary to clarify the generation concept which is commonly used in China to describe the different groups of filmmakers (1.1). I make use of this concept throughout this study while differentiating at the same time among these respective groups. In the second section, I try to characterize the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation of filmmakers, the first generation after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1.2), since their contribution to the development of Chinese film, and their impact on the following up 6<sup>th</sup> Generation and independent filmmakers, cannot be underestimated.

### 1.1 The Concept of Generations

Commentators were quick to seize this term because the expression “The 5<sup>th</sup> Generation” had become universal currency as a label for the directors, who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1982. That was the first group to graduate from the academy when it re-opened after the Cultural Revolution. Chinese film critics came up with the term “5<sup>th</sup> Generation” in the midst of 1980’s to identify this group, which included such ‘star’ names as Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Wu Ziniu, Zhang Yimou, Li Shaohong, and Hu Mei. The term was taken up in many other countries, as their films began to reach distribution and were written about.

The notion of dividing Chinese film history into a series of “generations” was borrowed from Li Zehou’s book *On the History of Modern Chinese Thought* (Xiandai Zhongguo Sixiang Shi)<sup>9</sup>, which similarly marks the changes and developments of the twentieth century by associating them with successive generations of thinkers. It became fashion to use the generation concept in various fields,<sup>10</sup> the film critics classified Chinese film history into five generations as well.

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<sup>9</sup>Li Zehou.

<sup>10</sup> In Politics, cf. *The Fourth Generation* (Disi dai).

“The First Generation” meant the pioneers who founded the Chinese film industry in the 1920’s: Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Zhengqiu and a few others. “The Second Generation” referred to the filmmakers who produced ambitious and “progressive” work in the 1930’s and late 1940’s: communist screenwriters Xia Yan and Yang Hansheng, plus such directors as Sun Yu, Fei Mu, Wu Yonggang, Richard Po (Bu Wancang) and Cai Chusheng. “The Third Generation” includes the film-makers, who did most to shape the aesthetics of communist cinema in the 1950’s and early 1960’s: Zhang Shuihua, Ling Zifeng, Zheng Junli, Xie Jin, Cheng Yin and others, some of them coming from backgrounds in the Shanghai film industry of the pre-communist years. “The Fourth Generation” meant those film-makers trained in the 1950’s whose careers were derailed by the Cultural Revolution and had only a short window in the early 1980’s to make their mark: Wu Tianming, Wu Yigong, Zheng Dongtian, Xie Fei, Zhang Nuanxin and a few others. “The Fifth Generation” points at those, led by Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, who transformed Chinese cinema in the years 1985-1987.

To characterize these filmmakers in terms of generation underlines their similarities, while emphasizing at the same time their very individual approach. However, comparing the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Generations, it seemed to make sense using the generation concept in order to define the new independent films and filmmakers when they emerged apparently as a common phenomenon in the early 90’s. It was till the end of the 90’s, people and some film critics kept using the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation concept to label the independent filmmakers. But nowadays, the label of 6<sup>th</sup> Generation apparently has lost its legitimacy and validity to characterize China’s independent films and filmmakers emerging since the end of 90’s. This chapter is a review of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation and the follow-up transforming, while in the Second Chapter I’ll try to contrast the 5<sup>th</sup> and the so-called 6<sup>th</sup> Generation.

## **1.2 Fiction-Film of the Fifth Generation**

It is easy to sketch the primary concerns of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation directors in the 1980’s. Marked by their experiences during the Cultural Revolution -- most

importantly, their disillusionment with Maoism and Mao worship -- they felt an urgent need to challenge the orthodox communist “image” of the country. This led them to construct oblique, symbolic dramas which would serve as alternative definitions of the political system. They were also determined to break with decades of Soviet-inspired art, which the state rationalized as “revolutionary-romantic”. This, again, led them into areas of visual poetry and thematic ambiguity, which had been almost entirely missing from China’s cinema since 1949.

After graduation, they had the opportunity to make films at minor studios in the interior of China. Supported by a number of middle-aged filmmakers, they created what is now generally known as the “Chinese New Wave”, a cinema noted for its artistic inventiveness, its reappropriation of the rich cultural heritage of the nation and an eagerness to deal with political issues.

The following sub-chapters deal, firstly, with the prominent thematic concerns (1.2.1) and, secondly, with typical narrative structures (1.2.2). After interpreting these semantic aspects, I will focus on the Film Language, such as the Visual (1.2.3)

### ***1.2.1 Thematic Concerns***

The prominent thematic concerns of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation seem to me are the followings: reappraisal of history, political commitment, national minorities, and the gender issue.

#### ***1.2.1.1 Reappraisal of History***

The interest in history was nourished through their need to put forward interpretations of historical events and personalities different from the dogmatic communist view; most of the early films dealt with historical subjects. The first film of the group was *One And the Eight (Yi Ge He Ba Ge*, Guangxi Studio, dir. Zhang Junzhao, cameraman Zhang Yimou, 1983), presenting Chinese soldiers in

Northern China during the Second World War. On the background of factional disputes within the Communist Party the filmmakers succeeded in playing out the conflict between ideological orthodoxy and the basic human need for freedom and love. This conflict, set in an historical scenario, indirectly reflected the concerns of the people after the Cultural Revolution.

*Yellow Earth* (Huang Tu Di, Guangxi Studio, dir. Chen Kaige, cameraman Zhang Yimou, 1984) was the first prize-winning film of the group. Set in the communist base area in Northern Shanxi in the 40's, it focuses the delicate relationship between the Chinese communists and the peasantry. The story of a communist soldier's encounter with a peasant family, which is full of tensions and ironies, has an allegorical structure that reveals with great subtlety the contradictions within this alliance. Aside from its artistic achievements, its distinctive visual style and narrative economy, its strength as a masterpiece of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation films also lies in the analysis of a set of discords inherent in Chinese society. The filmmakers' search for the primary source of resistance to change in China is present throughout the film.

The reappraisal and reappropriation of history is also one of the concerns of *Red Sorghum* (Hong Gao Liang, Xian Studio, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1986). The film consists of two stories set in two different historical periods crucial to the Chinese revolution: the war of resistance against Japanese aggression (1937-1945) and the civil war period (1945-1949). The film examines the revolutionary potential of the Chinese peasantry in the beginning of this century, an aspect that *Yellow Earth* had left somewhat unexplored. However, beneath its powerful portrayal of the local peasantry, with its virility and creativity, its utopian vision of a society of brotherhood and its rebellious nature, there lies a political allegory, similar to that of *Yellow Earth*.

History also weighs heavily in another work by Chen Kaige (director) and Zhang Yimou (camera), *The Great Parade* (Da Yue Bing, Xi'an Studio, 1986). Using the opportunity provided by the grand ceremony of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of



the founding of the People's Republic, the film looks into the minds of the ordinary peasant soldiers in today's China. There is continuity with *Yellow Earth* despite the difference in subject, for the film is more than a re-enactment of that grand ritual of the parade which aims at binding the nation together after years of political turmoil through the affirmation of certain social values. By focusing the production of the ritual, it examines the ways in which these values are created and maintained. Acknowledging the changes that have occurred in human relationships in contemporary China, the need to preserve traditions in a rapidly changing society is hardly emphasized.

#### *1.2.1.2 Political Commitment*

The political commitment of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers can best be seen in Huang Jianxin's works. His first film *The Black Cannon Incident* (Hei Pao Shi Jian, Xi'an Studio, 1986), last but not least, a story of the friendship between a Chinese and a German, is a satire on the bureaucracy in China. The criticism has a great deal of subtlety, as it is made by examining the difference in cultural values between the East and the West, such as the concepts of time and space, especially social spacing. As such, his critique is more accessible to ordinary people than any other piece by the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers.

The sequel *Dislocation* (Cuo Wei, Huang Jianxin, Xian Studio, 1987) takes the form of a science-fiction film, which, I suspect, is a disguise for its continued criticism of Chinese bureaucracy. The futurist world, in which the film is set, is an unimaginative projection of the present world of that bureaucracy: a world of five-star hotels, Mercedes cars, spacious living quarters, and offices secluded from the workers. The most interesting aspect of the film is its treatment of the present leadership that consists of technocrats trained after the revolution. The film explores their dual personalities: corruption and consumerism, on the one hand, puritan work-ethic historically associated with the rise of capitalism in the West on the other.

### *1.2.1.3 Concern for the National Minority Cultures*

A major contribution to this cinematic discourse on history and culture has been made by another member of the 1982 class, Tian Zhuangzhuang, who, in his films, expresses an interest in the marginal cultures that exist in the border regions of China: Inner Mongolia to the north and Tibet to the southwest. *On the Hunting Ground* (Lie Chang Zha Sa, Inner Mongolia Studio, 1984) deals with the importance of law in structuring social life on the vast Inner Mongolian grassland.

*Horse Thief* (Dao Ma Zei, Xian Studio, 1986) examines the relationship between religion and people in Tibetan society. In both films, there is an implicit comparison between the Chinese and non-Chinese cultures. Despite the documentary quality which succeeds in conveying a sense of spontaneity and authenticity, the portrayal of life in these regions is by no means realistic; rather, the films should be seen as the Chinese projection or perception of these cultures. Tian's creative impulse springs less from a desire to understand these equally ancient lands than from an attempt to evoke, through rich symbolism, pictures of meaningful ways of life, which have either disappeared or long since been repressed by the hegemonic Chinese culture of Confucianism or its modern version.

### *1.2.1.4 The Gender Concern*

In the late 80's the film-makers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation (as Huang Jianzhong, Wu Tianming or Yan Xueshu etc.) had been able to make their first films. They had finished their degrees before the Cultural Revolution. Educated by Russian or by Chinese teachers, who themselves had been educated by Russian teachers they followed the concept of social realism. For them, film making means "to tell realistic stories in a realistic manner". They were not able to get to know western films (as the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation). Their stories follow conventional patterns. Nevertheless I think that they enriched the Chinese film scene with new stories and new topics, such as the gender concern.

They used the village as a central scene of their films (e.g. *A Love- Forsaken Corner* by Zhang Qi). In addition, their films often show the damage and destruction caused by the old social traditions on women. *A Good Woman* (Liang Jia Fu Nü) of Huang Jianzhong starts by the commentator's saying: "In China, women are very respected people, but their situation is especially bad." Huang represents women as strong individuals.

The tendency to see the village as a microcosm of China and to represent women as strong and individualistic personalities is still very prominent in the films of the following 5<sup>th</sup> Generation, which has been influenced by the early films of 4<sup>th</sup> Generation film-makers, such as Wu Tianming. This can be seen in all the films of Zhang Yimou, besides Chen Kaige one of the most famous film-makers of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation (*Red Sorghum*/Hong Gao Liang, 1987; *Ju Dou*, 1989; *Raise the Red Lantern*/Da Hong Deng Long Gao Gao Gua, 1991; *The Story of Qiu Ju*/Qiu Ju Da Guan Shi, 1992, *To Live*/ Huo Zhe, 1993).

The heroines performed by Gong Li in the trilogy are more than erotic images of beautiful brides sold to old men. They are, of course, looked at with pleasure, but these women also look back and in actively looking they also choose their destinies. Jiu'er in *Red Sorghum* chooses her lover, husband and future father of her son from within the sedan chair, leading to the killing of the leprosy old husband. She is killed fighting the Japanese.

Judou secretly and incestuously chooses the future father of her son to escape her brutal and impotent husband. Her son kills both his biological and social fathers. Judou kills herself, burning down the hated dye factory that imprisons her. Both heroines die gloriously. In a different setting we find the heroin Songlian narcissistically gazing into the mirror in *Raise the Red Lantern* on her wedding night. She chooses to torture a servant girl who sleeps with her husband and to feign pregnancy in order to manipulate him and the other three wives through the possibility of an unborn son. There is no young lover to save her like in *Judou*. The plan is discovered. Her red lanterns are doused with black forever. She goes ingloriously mad.

Zhang Yimou encodes gender through color in these three stories. For *Jiu'er*, the red of *yang* (masculinity) dominates the wedding sedan, the wild sorghum, the sorghum wine that supports her family, and the fire that consumes her at the end. This red force quite literally turns into the black-white power of *yin* (femininity) and death under ancestral rules enforced from father to son in both *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*.<sup>11</sup>

The trilogy is probably Zhang's masterpiece. Lu Xun (1881-1936), China's best-known writer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a trenchant critic of Confucianism, especially filial piety. He called on fathers to let free the young and so liberate society. Without such profound change, he wrote, children are socialized into a cannibalistic society in which everyone is gobbled up. Within this framework, young women who challenge the system in social realist Chinese cinema of the 1930's nearly always die. 5<sup>th</sup> Generation cinema, however, recast the Party as political patriarchy in a devastating cultural critique. Zhang goes even further in the trilogy. Old men personify a system that never relinquishes power. Freedom only comes from real or symbolic patricide that is carried out by the son, but instigated by female desire. Women have the active part. Their ability to choose a man is the catalyst for social change, for better among peasants in *Red Sorghum* or for worse in the artisan and literati households of, respectively, *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*. Thus, many commentators call the trilogy a Chinese exploration of oedipality, founded on ancestral controls over female desire rather than on the son's actual desire for his blood mother. The argument is no longer that fathers must liberate their children but that children must kill their fathers to liberate themselves. Its narrative power rests on reworking the early 20<sup>th</sup> century debate on Chinese patriarchy, liberation and modernity.

The female spectacle continues in later films such as Gong Li's portrayal of a sing-song girl in *Shanghai Triad* (Yao'a Yao, Yao Dao Wai Po Qiao) or Zhang Yimou's lyrical portrait of love in *The Road Home* (Wo de Fu Qin Mu Qin).

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<sup>11</sup> In traditional Chinese correlative thinking the color red corresponds to fire, summer, heat, joy, while the white corresponds to metal, autumn, sadness and black to water, winter, fear.

Even when in later films the spectacle seems reduced, a common denominator across Zhang Yimou's work is strong female characters whose deepest individual desires whether for love, sex, sons, justice or simply survival challenge the systems that threaten them. This individualism is a long way away from China's socialist-realist cinema, which legitimized only collective, class-bound desire as the beginning and end of all storytelling. Hence, the liberation of desire in Zhang's films personalizes China's quest for liberation from the collective.

### ***1.2.2 Film Language***

#### *1.2.2.1 Narrative Structure*

The 5<sup>th</sup> Generation makes use of many classical narrative strategies: such as filmizing novels or stories like Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, lineal structured biographies (Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home*), synchronal family conflicts (Zhang Yimou's *Raising the Red Lantern*), changing perspectives (Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* and *Hero*, Ying Xiong), and of course plots, moreover all of their films are highly dramatically constructed and represent an ambiguous mixture of realism and symbolism.

Paradoxically, there is something quite a-historical in the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation's approach: an unusually strong interest in the a-temporal dimension of history and a static, monistic, if not essentialist view of culture. They are more concerned with the basic structure of a society that remains unchanged or resists change than with the contradictions existing within that society which precipitate change. This interest persists even when they venture into contemporary life or the cultural life of the "other" where attention remains focused on the mundane details of everyday life, the sediment of tradition, they both cherish and challenge. However, it is exactly this emphasis on the a-temporal dimension of history that helps the viewer establish connections between the past and the present.

It should be noted, that an exploration of the past as a preliminary step towards an understanding of the present social conditions, is by no means novel. As a matter of fact, Chinese literature and, to a broader extent, Chinese thinking are characterized by this historical consciousness. However, while the earlier thinkers and men of letters from Confucius (551-479 BC) onwards looked back to the past as a model for the present, contemporary thinkers and artists incorporate history and culture as part of their social critique. It should also be noted that these cinematic texts as re-interpretations do not offer us the truth about the “past” or the “other”. Instead, they aim at providing the viewer with a certain political knowledge which might empower him or her to political action.

#### *1.2.2.2 The Visual*

Zhang’s visual power rests on female sexuality as onscreen spectacle. Perhaps what is most distinct about the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers is their approach to film style. In rejecting the dominant mode of filmmaking in China, they have tried to create a new film language. Their ambivalent approach to history and culture is also reflected in their attitude to traditional Chinese aesthetics as embodied in filmmaking. Although they draw on that tradition, the film language they have evolved is drastically different from the mainstream Chinese cinema as a whole.

The most prominent feature of this film language is their cinematography which produces a defamiliarising effect on the Chinese viewer. It explores the tension between an attempt at realism and an obsession with symbolic expression -- between an interest in unusual framing and an admiration for montage. This quality is obvious from their first work, *The One and the Eight*. The emphasis on ambiguity has given their films a look of "emptiness" and “thoughtfulness”. The self-conscious use of film techniques reminds one of the films of the French New Wave.

Zhang’s visual storytelling is evident in his early work as cinematographer. Tony Rayns, one of the earliest and most astute Western commentators on Zhang’s work, credits Zhang’s cinematography with creating the stunning look

of *One and the Eight* and *Yellow Earth*, the two films that pioneered 5<sup>th</sup> Generation cinema. In short, Rayns claims that he was “co-creator” with the directors; *Yellow Earth*, for example, jointly credits Zhang Yimou the director and designer in a single frame. These two films delight in film form. They deliberately break all the established (Chinese) rules, using de-centered compositions, real locations, and stark but stunning imagery to tell stories with minimal plot and ambiguous endings. The ending of *One and the Eight* is symptomatic of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation’s attitude to China’s (cinematic) past and (cinematic) future. In this historical film, the only youth to survive a fierce battle against the Japanese is an ex-convict who leaves the Communist Party hero to go his own way across a deserted landscape. The youth says to the Party member, "I’m just a bum who has run wild for half my life. I respect the revolutionary army and the Communist Party but I just can’t stomach all your rules". According to the cinematographer’s notes by Zhang in the script, this moment is visualized as the final movement in a black and white symphony, reaching personal enlightenment after the darkness of death, war and imprisonment. The film’s aesthetics are explicitly based on wood block carving. The final shot of a vast and raw landscape acts as the empty, reflective space of traditional art in which “words are finite but the heart is infinite”<sup>12</sup>.

The long and empty shots in *Yellow Earth* serve a similar poetic purpose and also come from a particular style of painting, called the Chang’an School<sup>13</sup>. Zhang Yimou’s many discussions of *Yellow Earth* tell how the filmmakers adapted the Chang’an School’s high horizon and warm yellow tones of the mother-earth. Thus the earth fills the frames just as it fills the lives of its peasants, often shown as black, white and red dots against their ancestral land. This look is primarily Zhang’s contribution.

While these early films are collective works, the visuals show a working method

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<sup>12</sup> A Chinese saying.

<sup>13</sup> One of the most important school in the history of contemporary Chinese painting, Named after a group of artists who gathered in Xi’an (named Chang’an from Han Dynasty, Shanxi Province) since the 1940’s.

that informs Zhang Yimou's later films as director. Zhang says, that he always adapts films from stories that he likes. He then decides the big stylistic framework: whether to make a film in expressionist/symbolic mode (*xieyi*) as in the trilogy, or realist mode (*xieshi*) as in *The Story of Qiu Ju*. It is clear that he often works out the look of a film around this stage. In traditional painting terminology this is called *liyi*, the image-idea that animates and gives coherence to a work. The image-ideas of his best-known films include the vibrant red of *yang* (masculinity, marriage ceremonies, blood, fire and red lanterns) in the trilogy, the grittiness of docudrama in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, the shadow puppet motif in *To Live* (1994), film noir in *Shanghai Triad* (1995) and calendar art in *The Road Home* (1999).



## **Second Chapter: Fiction Film -- Contrasting the Fifth and the Sixth Generation**

Not different from other social groups, from generation to generation, artists always present themselves as a sort of “hostage of the history” (Hegel). People have been captivated by the so-called “definitive direction of history development”, coerced by constant wars in the name of politics, suppressed by the discourse powers so that one can only echo what the others say. Living in such circumstances, one’s howl always sounds familiar like some voice from a record. As for the most contemporaries living in today’s China, they were born in similar ages, fed by certain fixed unified ideological nourishments. Along with varying historical circumstances and ideological modes, one generation comes to be able to form a new style to rival with the last generation. This phenomenon is particularly obvious in the reality and history of Chinese film, since film was closely related to the need of revolutionary narrative. However, within the so-called 6<sup>th</sup> Generation, the differences among its individual filmmakers are bigger than their common characteristics as a generation.

In this chapter, I will firstly depict the social background in which the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation came into being (2.1). Secondly, I will illustrate the specific artistic nourishments the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation had (2.2), and thirdly, I look upon and interpret the generation concept as a ritual of naming and self-naming in order to expose the social and cultural complexities behind it (2.3). Before giving some closing remarks (2.6), it is necessary to discuss the paradox characteristic of the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation of their being limited by the official system (2.4) while seeking for possibilities of Self-expression (2.5).

### **2.1 The Political and Economic Circumstances in which the Sixth Generation Came into Being**

By contrast with the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation, it’s not so easy to summarize the concerns of

the independent or 'underground' directors of the last decade. The so-called 6<sup>th</sup> Generation is a group of directors differing from each other on artistic pursuits, perspectives towards life, no need to mention their completed works. The only common they have is the nearly same old age.

They were all born in the 60's, but they all formalized art and political ideologies in the 80's. Apparently the nutrition from the 80's shapes the dominant character of them. I would summarize the ideological and artistic circumstances of the 80's as the following: humanism oriented ideology, modernism oriented art nutrition, and growing commercial culture.

I look upon the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation as the outcome of the 80's. Their whole political, artistic and ideological thinking is rooted in the ten years between 1979 and 1989, the so-called "New Era" in a strict and narrow sense. Jia Zhangke's film *Platform* (Zhan Tai) represents a group of lower class people's life during these 10 years.<sup>14</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> Generation was shaped in the 80's, then went upon the stage in the beginning of the 90's -- this is a period of time in which the Chinese society was in collision with great political and ideological shifts, and people's inner world was splitting and changing. Two factors across the 80's and the 90's are decisive: the political "Disturbance" in 1989, the so called Tian'an Men Incident, and its shocking effects on politics and people's mind, which led the official discourse to draw the border between life and its representation in literature and art. The second, in 1991, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) made his speech during his trip to southern China and opened the prelude of market economy then followed by the country's tumult, anxiety and the rush to the economic development.

## **2.2 The Artistic Nourishments of the Sixth Generation**

The artistic nourishments available to the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation were much richer than that of the elder generations of filmmakers because China was getting to be more and more open and exchanging thoughts and culture with the outside world. All

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Chapter 5.2.4.

those trends of thoughts and the other cultural achievements created by the outside world during the last several decades poured into China and just stroke the Chinese society profoundly. Consequently, every trend and its influence on Chinese literature and art left its recognizable mark. We all agree that the two major trends which influenced the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation directors were: revolutionary narrative and modernistic cinema. However, the literary and art styles having impact on the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation are much more varied.

Let's only talk about the respective favorite films of the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation. Their own respective lists of classic films are very different from each other. Some films which the 5<sup>th</sup> were not allowed to be seen in school were turned out to be the family valuables for the 6<sup>th</sup>. It's the same if we compare the films which the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation watched: the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation used to detailedly watch and read the films such as *Rome 11 o'clock* (1952, Giuseppe de Santis), *Little Soldier Zhangga* (Xiao Bin Zhan Ga) and *List of Heroes* (Hong Qi Pu), but the classic films the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation watched were already much more varied. Almost every 5<sup>th</sup> Generation member recalled his experience that they went every Wednesday to the National Film Library (Beijing) to view and emulate foreign films. Those journeys were for them a kind of "art pilgrimages" and opportunities for learning and looking for fun. As for the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation, their film nourishment was more dependent on video recorder and pirated VCD and DVD copies

## **2.3 The Ritual of Naming**

### **2.3.1 From the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup>**

What happened to the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation when they came into shape in the early 90's can be seen as a ritual of naming. It implicates not only some individuals' self-presentation and self-definition, but also the society's interpretation, predigestion and classification.

What the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation had achieved was attributed to a group of contemporary collectivity. This was the cinematic and systematic circumstance

which the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation was confronting, when they newly arrived in the market. The 5<sup>th</sup> Generation's great achievements, their enormous national and international fame became pressure for the new born independent filmmakers. From the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation's self-naming which was then widely acquiesced, we can sense a kind of anxiety about the impact of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation.

### ***2.3.2 Disordered Naming and Self-naming***

It was in the end of the 80's and beginning of the 90's last century, that the students of the class-85 and 87<sup>15</sup> graduated from Beijing Film Academy one after another. In the year 1990 the first 6<sup>th</sup> Generation film came out -- Zhang Yuan's *Mama* ( Xi'an Film Studio). Thus, their debut film appeared 7 years after the appearance of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation. The similar background and experience the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation members had and their intention to differ from mainstream culture, official discourse, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation forged the common standpoint and values shared by some filmmakers among them, which was then considered as a kind of style of the 6<sup>th</sup> generation.

The 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation all share a lot of common with their own members, in terms of cultural background, art nourishment and ideals about film. However, the differences among them attract much more of my attention.

In the realm of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation's aesthetics, concern for the nation takes up the highest position: In their debut *One and the Eight*, the most used line soaked with emotion is "Oh! Chinese..." Chen Kaige's favorite phrase is "the five thousand years history long China..."<sup>16</sup> National concern is particularly prominent in Chen's works. His later films such as *The Great Parade* and *The Emperor and His Assassin* (Jin Ke Ci Qing Wang), all thematicized it.

In contrast, the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation representative directors, such as Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards*, represents the life of marginalized urban youth; Guan Hu's *Dirt* (Tou Fa Luan Le, 1994, Inner Mongolian Film Studio) memorizes friendship of a group of young rock 'n roll singers; Lou Ye's *Weekend Lover*

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<sup>15</sup> According to the years of graduation.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bai Xiaoding.

(Zhou Mo Qing Ren, 1994, Fujian Film Studio) is a narcissistic gaze at and balderdashing about the lost youth time. By those kinds of autobiographic catharsis, rock 'n roll music, shaking camera, short cut-aways and cut-offs, we see the experience of individuals who live in the marginal space. In the catharsis of rock'n roll music applies a wisp bitterness of cruel youth and anxious self-pity about the lost youth time.

Though, all of above yet can not contain all aesthetic temperament of these young directors. There were still many films different in terms of styles, which had been made within or without the official system and state-owned studios: Zhang Yuan's *Son* (Er Zi, 1993, out-system, played by real personae), Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (Dong Chun de Ri Zi, 1993, out-system), story originated in an artist couple's life and played by real personae. He Jianjun's *Strange Love* and *Postman* (Xuan Lian, 1993; You Chai, 1995, both outside-system) and Hu Xueyang's *A Lady Left Behind* (Liu Shou Nü Shi, 1992, Shanghai Film Studio). Some films make use of a kind of neorealist film language: Along with camera's distant gaze at the trivial matters in everyday life, it is approaching into the trivialnesses of life as well as accessing to the inner world of the ordinary and marginalized people; Hu Xueyang's *A Lady Left Behind* probed into a topic which was sensitive at that time: the gap between love and marriage.

From the midst and the end of the 90's to the beginning of the new millennium, we have seen even more various films made, such as Zhang Ming's *Rain Clouds over Wushan* (Wu Shan Yun Yu, 1995, Beijing Film Studio), Lu Xuechang's *Making of Steel* (Zhang Da Cheng Ren, 1996, Beijing Film Studio) and *A Lingering Face* (Fei Chang Xia Ri, 2000, Beijing Film Studio), Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (Xiao Wu, 1997, out-system) and *Platform* (Zhan Tai, 2001, out-system), Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (Shi Qi Sui de Dan Che, 2001, out-system), and Wang Chao's *Orphan of Anyang* (An Yang Yin Er, 2001, out-system).

The naming of the 6th Generation was a self-identifying process and consciously announced to the public. It was Hu Xueyang, a lucky guy making film within the system and the very first director accomplishing his debut in the

system, who initiated the naming. After he made his film *A Lady Left Behind* (Liu Shou Nü Shi, 1992), he immediately released with following words the naming: “The students of the five classes who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1989 are the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation-filmmakers in China’s film history.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, Zhang Yuan identifies with some kind of generation concept: “Our generation is more passionate...” and he holds some self consciousness about being classified into a generation:

“...to be listed in some generation is a nice thing. We used to have some successful experience shared by being a generation. When we Chinese talk about generation, it makes you feel you have a strong back. Many of my classmates are in my crew, we are about the same years old, and we know each other rather good. But I still think filmmaking is quite a personal thing. I have been trying my best to differ from the last generation, as well as from the fellow directors of my generation. Making a film only for echoing others is not any more your own film...”<sup>18</sup>

Another interesting case: Guan Hu, graduated from the class87, marked the number of “87” in Chinese under the title of his film *Dirt* (Tou Fa Luan Le).

Here, we see that the motivation of the naming was changing. At first, it was the new young filmmakers who intended to make a name for themselves. The most appropriate interpretation would be to break out from the impact of the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation. Apparently, they wanted to be independent and give prominence to their impression in the eyes of audience and film critics. Subconsciously, they might intent to replicate the successful naming which the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers had experienced. But afterwards, it was the need of marketing, precisely the need of producers, which turned the title of 6<sup>th</sup> Generation into a commercial label. Since then, we have been got used to see and hear this word from all kinds of medias.

### **2.3.3 In Their Own Words**

The following interviews with some representative 6<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Film Story*, vol. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

mirror their different handling of the naming.<sup>19</sup>

### **Jiang Wen: Luck**

When Jiang Wen talked about the luck and proud about his belonging to the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation, he obviously identifies with the generation concept:

“This generation is not as lucky as the last [5<sup>th</sup>] generation. Why? If you’d let them speak this out, they probably feel even more unlucky. I think the works of this generation are better than those of the last generation, in terms of content as well as attitude of the authors. These filmmakers’ works are strong and concrete, not like soap foam. This is already something much better. These guys, including myself, what we have to do, is keep on moving forward, make more good films, make film like a real film.”

### **Zhang Yuan: Get Through the Censor**

Zhang Yuan, on the contrary, emphasizes the differences advocating against the generation concept. He is much more concerned with the possibility to have his films screened in China and not only in international film festivals:

“What really matters is, these guys are different from each other. I always don’t like the way of ‘putting everything into one melting pot’, listing a bunch of people together only according to the same age. In fact, it becomes quite clear up to now, every director has his own attitude, direction and understanding about art. The so-called “a generation of directors” is only for convenience.

Nowadays, only filmmakers appeared on newspaper but not their works. That’s why I have to make my mind to let my own film be able to pass the censoring. I have to show my film inside China, I don’t care what kind of critique this will bring me. Because I’m fed up, for years I’ve been traveling from one to another international film festival, either participating in competitions, or being a juror in one jury... but, I never had a chance to broadcast my own film inside China. I’m not talking about to change myself, but try to adapt myself to the censorship... there is no film classification system in China. I, myself didn’t change at all.”

### **Wang Xiaoshuai: Mainstream**

Wang Xiaoshuai, again, identifies himself as 6<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmaker because they were marginalized regarding the mainstream filming and screening:

“My general feeling is our [6<sup>th</sup> Generation] films have been non-mainstream, compared with what the government sparkplugs and what appear in the mainstream media, we have been marginalized. Of course we decided not to compromise.

We made our way so far, after all the years. I guess we will stay on this way in the future, too. It depends on how deep the reform can go into the film system. If the

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<sup>19</sup> Li Hongyu, *Nanfang Daily* 29th of June 2002.

filmmakers like us can get a space we deserve, I'd call that a development. If this is not going to happen, it would not bother me, too. As long as we continue to make films, if only more and more people can insist, I believe we will win more and more notice! I think the filmmakers in our position will be happy to see that all kinds of films, TV programs -- no matter, it is mainstream, entertainment, or commercial -- can be flourishing. Naturally, if we all can be coexisting with each other, it should allow people like us, who share different thinking and make different films to exist. I hope I can see this day comes."

### **Lou Ye: Respect**

Lou Ye's identifies himself as one of the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation, too, and asks for nothing but respect for their life style:

"I think we can all face ourselves and our school. We are all making our films. I think this is already something we should be grateful.

We choose to make films we like. Others seem not quite appreciate our fancy, or maybe they don't accept or understand whatever... In fact, if I see things from the perspective outside my people and my circle, I look upon these people as a bunch who do not care much but only want to make their own films. They only care about their creation and inner world. But if I was an outsider I'll respect their choice. They don't ask for anything from the society, don't extract the society to treat them anyhow. They just feel like living and working in this way. I think, others do not have the right to interfere.

As for me, I just try my best. The whole film system is a mess. If you still can make one film, just make one. I and the others are trying our best..."

### **Jia Zhangke: Self-expression**

Jia Zhangke's point of view seems more subtle. On the one hand, he identifies with the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation as authors seeking for self-expression. On the other hand, he blames not only the system for being marginalized, but he encourages the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers to explore more different cinematic forms:

"Our kind apparently is stuck on self-expression. The distribution of our films is blocked. This not only has something to do with the system, but also has something to do with us. Because of that, we are always misunderstood by others. I think, what I care about, is not going to change, but I will explore more different cinematic forms. Generally to say, the cinematic forms we explored, were too limited and simply."

### **Lu Xuechang: On the Way**

Last but not least, Lu Xuechang expresses his respect for the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation and encourages his own generation to move on:

"The other day the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation had a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I was there too. The atmosphere was ardent. They got together again, speaking and laughing. The first 5<sup>th</sup>



Generation film I watched was *Yellow Earth* (Huang Tu Di). It's been 20 years till now. They've spent 20 years on making films. They achieved such a lot. I was wondering, when we will be able to sit down and celebrate? Compared with them, we are still on the half way. There's still another half left for us. But in fact, we still have a lot to do. Anyway, then just do it, film...

If you talk about luck, it is not up to you. If you talk about difficulty, don't complain. You deserve that, since you chose film.

My attitude is, to express our feeling, attitude about life, about film with film. Up to now, we haven't made many films; we haven't enjoyed the high out of it. I hope some day I'd feel very high after I finished a film, because I expressed something thoroughly."

### ***2.3.4 The Shadows over the Sixth Generation: Be Limited by the System***

Most of the "underground" films and tapes made by the young filmmakers are committedly independent in spirit, and their directors would not have made them inside what's left of the state film industry, even if they'd had the chance to do so. But the movement arose some twelve years ago, because of a frustration with that state film industry: It channeled a desire to make films which could not be fulfilled by the state-owned film studios. The students who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in the summer of 1989, were effectively unemployable, partly because no boss in China wanted to risk hiring graduates who might have been involved in the spring's student-led protests, but mainly because Deng Xiaoping's project to withdraw state funding from state-controlled enterprises (including the film industry) had more or less paralyzed mainstream, studio-based film-making in China. Wanting to begin directing soon after graduating, as their 5<sup>th</sup> Generation predecessors had done, the young filmmakers took matters into their own hands and looked for private funding to make independent films.

Although China's remaining state-owned film studios have had some limited success in co-producing films with private companies in China and abroad (they actually sell the studio's name to the financial investor to smooth the project's way through government bureaucracy and censorship), the fact is that China's cinema has been kept alive creatively in the last decade only by the underground independents. Freed from the pressures of censorship and bureaucracy, they have

responded to issues in their own lives and in the society around them without the usual ideological blinkers. And thanks to their trips to festivals overseas (not to mention the fact that pirate-entrepreneurs producing illegal DVDs and VCDs, have made world cinema more available in China than ever before) they work in full awareness of what their contemporaries in other countries are doing. Again, it's worth stressing, that no previous China-based film-maker has ever enjoyed these working conditions.

In what way your film will be produced or financed: This is a political question; this is the circumstance or reality every filmmaker is confronting. Hearing of someone who is making a film, the first question arisen from friends would be: "Is it up-ground or underground?" This is neither because we like to challenge politics, nor that we care about politics, but because we can not avoid making the choice. In what way your film will be produced or financed, determines a filmmaker's attitude and his understanding about "politically legitimate". If you make your film within the system, then the meaning of "politically legitimate" becomes "politically secured" or "political unanimity". Meanwhile, choosing producing the film independently means that one filmmaker has to confront with such working condition, but to still hold his sense of responsibility and not to stop the reflective thinking about the society. Because many 6<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers and their films kept appearing and being awarded in international film festivals, the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation has become a kind of cacophony watched and suppressed by the dominant official discourse. Once a film was to be banned or could not get the permission, this indicates already the death of the film. After all, filmmakers are longing for showing their films to the local audience and these films are made for the local people, representing their lives, their struggle and happiness. But these independent films could hardly get its access into the local audience. A paradox is, only those elite intellectuals or fashionable petty bourgeoisies are able to see those films representing the life of ordinary people, in bars or exhibitions. Again, in reality, these films' realistic spirit is cheaply sold out. Nowadays, some 6<sup>th</sup> Generation began to try to make film within the official system. It's hard to foretell, whether

they are making efforts to have a dance while wearing the bonds or it is the system that is devouring artists' talent. Lu Xuechang once complained: "We made the films for Chinese audience and in order to let our audience see!"<sup>20</sup> But, to reach the goal of being seen and of communicating, is destined to be a process of insisting and compromising.

Interestingly, the defender side used the same political words to debate. Han Xiaolei, a teacher of Beijing Film Academy, quoted the following words told by Wang Xiaoshuai and Lu Xuechang: "The West tries to label us as anti-government. It's disgusting..."<sup>21</sup>

Leave alone whether the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation independent films are really political or they are misinterpreted by the jurists in international film festivals, the relationship between these directors and China's film system is truly complex. Moreover, they are lingering between up-ground and underground, within and without the system. This condition has a big impact on their film discourse.

### ***2.3.5 The Paradox of Being Independent: Seeking for Possibilities of Self-Expression***

#### *2.3.5.1 To Dialogize with the System*

In the 1980's, the end of Cultural Revolution and the beginning of social and economic reform lead to the collapse of socialist ideology. It brought Chinese society a multiple development in all domains. But since the "Disturbance" in 1989 and coming into the 1990's the political integrating was reinforced. In the film domain, the accordatura of the mainstream discourse was invincible.

When the new millennium was approaching around the corner, Zhang Yimou made *No One Less* (Yi Ge ye Bu Neng Shao) and *The Road Home*, Chen Kaige made *The Emperor and His Assassin* (Jinke Ci Qing Wang), and Hu Mei present the popular TV Play *Yongzheng Dynasty* (Yongzheng Wangchao). All 5<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers were accompanying the dominant discourse with their film works.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Han Xiaolei 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Han Xiaolei 1995.

Meanwhile, the logic of the Market Economy penetrated into life's every level, and consumption became the central topic of life. Mass culture was occupying the space of people's cultural life. In the wave of globalization, the dominant official cultural discourse responded with some voice of nationalism, all of above structured a tension between politics and culture. It made local intellectuals' speaking and writing become more vague and difficult.

In the beginning of the 90's, as soon as the young filmmakers graduated from school, they were facing the situation and had to make their choice: to look for their own voice between the requirement of the official ideology and the commercial trend of the market. "Independent" became the last idealistic banner of these young people obsessed still with the cultural enlightenment of the 80's. Here, these filmmakers' choice of being self-individualized and marginalized was a political issue. If we all agree that the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation initiated their own space of discourse by inheriting the revolutionary topics, the 6<sup>th</sup> built up their own discourse and aesthetics by disengaging apart from official politics. Their apartness is to try to get away from the whole set of lifestyles and ideologies behind collectivistic discourse, dumb millions ethics, and great narrative mode.

#### *2.3.5.2 To Dialogize with Market and Mass Culture*

Although I argued before, that the so-called 6<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers can not be classified as a artists team or generation which shares the same film style, I would roughly divide them into three different groups corresponding with three directions:

1. Former students of Beijing Film Academy, have partiality for the tradition of *Auteur Cinema*, pay attention to interact with the classic or modern classic film traditions.
2. The realistic filmmakers pay more attention to bottom class, have partiality for a natural and inornate depiction about today's Chinese life.
3. Former students of the Central Academy of Drama, gathering under Luo Yi's *Imar Film Company*, are stably exploring making commercial films rooted in mass culture.

In the following part, I will try to define these three groups on the basis of three dialogical relationships:

From the films made by the young directors such as Zhang Yang, Shi Runjiu, and Jin Chen, it's not hard to describe the filmmakers' commitment and strategy for marketing.

The commitment for a "beautiful life" becomes a kind of anacreontic theme of such films. In the films such as *Spicy Love Soup* (Ai Qing Ma La Tang, 1997), *The Beautiful New World* (Mei Li Xin Shi Jie, 1998), *Shower* (Xi Zao), and *All the Way* (Zou Dao Di), we can see these films return to mainstream values and mass culture taste. They place themselves on the point where common people stand, without going against the taste of common people, they tenderly and carefully implant some postmodern techniques into a conventional narrative body structure (*Spicy Love Soup*, *Shower*). Eventually, such films won the favor of majority audience, especially within younger people. There are some filmmakers engage in making film within the system while keeping exploring the joint part of the market and feeding the need of the mass culture.

The most successful case was done by none of Chinese film studios, but by a group of filmmakers led by a "New Yorker in Beijing", Peter Loehr, Chinese name Luo Yi. This American guy used to study in the Beijing Film Academy for two years. Then he became the first foreigner independent film producer in China and initiated Imar Film Company. His company has produced films like *Spicy Love Soup* (Ai Qing Ma La Tang), *The Beautiful New World* (Mei Li Xin Shi Jie), *Shower* (Xi Zao), and *All the Way* (Zou Dao Di). They all have been very successful in box office.

But why? I think there are the following reasons:

1. Their films attach very much importance to film scripts. But the Imar filmmakers are not so much infatuated with the symbolic meaning of the visual as some other 6<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers;
2. They pay very much attention to film's effect on the market, including international market;
3. They are making films under the shield of Imar.

Compare them with some other independent filmmakers, they do not care much about being independent. On the contrary, I have heard of a standard 6<sup>th</sup> Generation young filmmakers who once damned the audience.

Films from Imar are standard within-system films which accord with any criterion of the censorship. But in the way of production and finance, they are truly independent. I call them “within-system independent films”. The significance of their achievement is: They explored non-ideological film narrative on the horizon of life, as far as the present film system can allow them to reach. The Imar films stand on a foundation stone as same as Hollywood’s: It is a kind of universal humanism: The general human feelings and social thinking can be understood by the masses. To this extent, they did find the linkage between inspiration of Hollywood film and the need of Chinese masses.

Perhaps, Imar’s revolution is hidden in its compromise, popularity, and security. So far, we have seen the compromise their films made. Imar films’ sharpness and strength when confronting with reality are weak as some 6<sup>th</sup> Generation films. Nevertheless, I am happy to see none of the bad things ever appeared in their films, in the name of reminiscence: no recovery of feudalism, or the violence of Cultural Revolution. In a word, these films probably are not very smart, but at least they are psychologically healthy. This creation might be called “reduced Hollywood style”.

In *Spicy Love Soup*, the filmmaker abandoned the mode of great narrative and employed a kind of responsible humanistic thinking instead. The film cuts directly into the love life of ordinary people and embodies three love stories in a fashionable 3-subsection-structure. No matter if the story is romantic or helpless; they all end up with a slight tinge of warmth, so that every audience would be touched and feel more or less that life is beautiful. For Chinese audience, this is Chinese people’s story, Chinese style of sensibility, and Hollywood style of storytelling...

Some filmmakers know pretty well the distance between life and their work. Shi Runjiu once talked about this issue:

“Life had given me a slap in the face, but *The Beautiful New World* turned out to be another one even harder... I have to confess, in order to pass the censor. We adapted a

true story for 'such' a film... But reality for me is as important as daily subsistence. Without it, I would starve to death. In the original story, the peasant brought the real estate company to court. But our film could not represent like that. We wanted to show the difference between city and countryside through Zhang Baogen's Story."<sup>22</sup>

Here, we confront again the question: How should we judge of the marketing of commercial film? Is this a surrender or return? The answers made by advocates of market economy and left wing intellectuals are widely divergent.

Some directors identified with the official parlance, become reconciled to the taste of mass culture and tried to acclimate the circumstance of Chinese film market. Interestingly, even some filmmakers who persisted in author's film now turned to be more tolerant toward commercial film. Lou Ye put it in this way: "Now, it seems quite difficult to judge, whether Antonioni's film or Jacky Chan's *Rumble in the Bronx* is more close to the essence of cinema."<sup>23</sup>

#### 2.3.5.3 To Dialogize with Cinema History

Some 6<sup>th</sup> Generation films attach importance to dialogize with existing cinematic languages and schools. This group of filmmakers inherited more of the traditions from avant-garde, experimental, and European art cinema.

These 6<sup>th</sup> Generation films adopt and use classic art films as reference in order to dialogize with and probe into its film language and narrative structure. These filmmakers' own observation about life and social thinking also lies in this kind of dialogic relationship. Li Xin's *Crazy Little Thing Called Love* (Tan Qing Shuo Ai, 1996) employed also the subsection narrative structure to dialogize with Talentino's *Pulp Fiction* and Macedonian film *Before the Rain*. From the perspective of cinematic language, these filmmakers are influenced very much by two traditions: European art film and Hollywood classics. In Luo Ye's *Suzhou River* (Suzhou He), we can see the impact from films like Kieslowski's *Veronica's Double Life*, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, and George Lucas's *American Graffiti*.

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<sup>22</sup> Shi Runjiu, *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 1999, vol. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Lou Ye, p. 16-17.

Wang Quanan's *Eclipse* is a good exemplification, which I am going to analyze in the following. We can see how they represent ordinary Chinese people's life and feeling, by adopting classic films' narrative:

***Eclipse:***

Because of heart disease, Yanan had to give up her career as dancer and got ready for marriage. During an outing with her fiancé, she ran into an amateur photographer Hu Xiaobin. She was told by him that there was a girl Jianiang looked exactly like her; Jianiang was a free and rebel girl and had lots of dreams, but died in a traffic accident after being raped.

Someday accidentally, Yanan did see some photos of Jianiang whose face is identical with hers. At the end of the film, Yanan discovered, that her fiancé was in an affair. She ran away on the streets while disappointed and feeling hopeless. When she came to a road crossing, she witnessed the traffic accident which happened to Jianiang...

*Eclipse* is "a story of two women or a woman's two stories". In the over crossed space-time, from Jianiang's story to Yunnan's, the film touched again the theme of *Veronica's Double Life*: life's multiple possibilities.

In *Veronica's Double Life*, Krakow's Veronica saw a girl (Paris's Veronica), who looked similar to her, taking pictures on the street of Krakow. Then Krakow's Veronica died of a heart attack in the midst of her singing performance. While her body was buried, the film cut in the scene in Paris, meanwhile Paris's Veronica was making love. When Sex was overlapping death: the living Veronica suddenly felt sad. It was like a part of her was dying. Paris's Veronica then was enabled to sense and think more of her being. By chance, she found the other Veronica in the photos she took in Krakow.

Differing from *Veronica's Double Life*'s linear narrative structure, *Eclipse*' narrative structure is more complicated. After breaking life into pieces, it reassembles the normal sequences according to its sub-section narrative structure. According to the normal sequence, Yunnan's story happens and ends up before Jianiang. But in the narrative, it's told as flashback after Jianiang's appearance.



Memories and realities are interwoven in film's parallel narrative. In the end of the film, Yanan and Jianiang appeared, as if by magic, together in the same space-time, the last two reverse shots accomplish this film's narrative as well as construct a kind of multiple interpretation in audience's imagination.

Paris's Veronica is like a shadow, she experienced in her spiritual world the death of Krakow's Veronica. In any society, nobody can avoid the colliding between body and soul. *Eclipse's* story apparently brings the cruelty of the present social reality with it. No matter being raped or becoming rich wife, urban women's life is still going in turbulence. Indeed, this interacting relationship between these two films is consciously designed, not only simply an imitation of form.

Wang Quanan's ability of using freely cinematic languages is precious. A film story has to be told by means of film language instead of literary language. Just because a film story is embodied in a form consisting of meaningful film languages, we can encounter life and reality again on the silver screen. From an audience's perspective, *Eclipse* combines an easy and smooth texture together with life's cruelty, which becomes a strong impact on audience.

In addition, in Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* and Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle*, we can see the same kind of effort.

#### 2.3.5.4 To Dialogize with the Reality of Today's China

This is another group of filmmakers' choice, which leads them to a more realistic approach.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Generation has always concerned itself with urban sub-cultural issues. They paid great attention to depict ordinary and marginalized people's life situation, particularly those confused young people's experience confronting tremendous changes. When the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation films' "representation and reinterpretation of history" has become their strategy to evade today's reality, urban topics were left aside like a vacuum needed to be filled up. This task was fulfilled by the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation who represents us this part of ignored reality. They became the mouthpiece of the "wordless majority".

Their youth films have given light to self awakening and individual consciousness, and fulfilled the vacancy in contemporary Chinese film with some marginal and individual writings. However, some films' concern about and devotion to the reality did not turn out to be reflexive contemplations, but simply got into a narcissistic mood for autobiographic youth. The topics are realistic, but the filmic representations stay distantly on the edge of the reality; they simply indicate a kind of reality and drop the reflexive thinking about it. Films such as Guan Hu's *Dirt (Tou Fa Luan Le)* and Lou Ye's *Weekend Lover (Zhou Mo Qing Ren)* begot the above critique.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Generation has employed the cinematic theories and methodologies of Italian New Realism and French New Wave (Nouvelle Vague) to establish their film aesthetics. To the extent of filmic form, we have seen some 6<sup>th</sup> Generation filmmakers' conscious usage and exploration in terms of film language or film techniques. But if they only got so far, then we can not say, that the principle part of new realistic movement had been built up, no need to say, its identity still stayed unclear:

"Later we came to be able to notice that. Chinese film theorists cut away a half of Andre Bazin's (1918-1958) film theory only left the other half about technique. We seemed to expect that the realistic film technique or language would automatically give us the realistic reflection on the society. Well, its inclusive legitimacy is: the return back to the so-called 'essence of film art' is a kind of rebellion against the instrumentalism of art. This awakening is artists' awakening, or a group of people regain humanity and individual creativity. But, we slide over Bazin's discourse upon an author's judgement about society and history."<sup>24</sup>

Bazin very much attached importance to the reality on social and humanistic levels. When he talked about Italian New Realism Cinema, he said:

"This revolution was touched more about subject, not style; it is about the content a film should tell us, but not in which manner it should be told. Is 'New Realism Cinema' first of all a kind of humanism, secondly a director's style?"<sup>25</sup>

Fortunately, in the independent films since the end of the 90's, we have seen some films' topics and concerns regarding reality have been broadened from some rock 'n roll youth's autobiographic stories into the reality about some weak social groups. For example, in order to begin with Zhang Yuan's *East Palace*,

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<sup>24</sup> Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, in: *Contemporary Cinema* (Dangdai dianying), 2001, vol.2.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *ibid*.

*West Palace* (Dong Gong Xi Gong), Chinese film for the first time touched a taboo topic ---- homosexuality. This film tries to explore the complexity of humanity and human's sex behavior. So eventually, everybody's choice regarding his/her sex life should be respected.

In addition, we also have seen Cui Zi'en, himself a gay, who scripted for Liu Binyan's *Men and Women* (Nan Nan Nu Nu, 1998). This film discussed more deep into this topic. And Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant* (Jin Nian Xia Tian, 2001) is the first film about lesbianism. Apart from these films concerning urban marginalized social groups, Jia Zhangke and Wang Chao went even further on the way of realism. They are the mouthpieces of the bottom class -- the real "voiceless majority".

Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu*<sup>26</sup> (1997) for the first time discovered the reality of China's middle and small-size rural townships. Wang Chao's *Orphan of Anyang* (Anyang Ying Er, 2001) represented prostitute, mafia, and unemployed state-owned factory workers -- these three different kinds of bottom class people's lives.

Not only in *Xiao Wu*, but also in *Anyang Orphan*, we see a kind of trueheartedness. This is precious for Chinese cinema. The both directors dug a scoop into the ground of reality. Wang Chao said:

"I hope this film would be a unique visual documentation about the life of bottom class people. From its conceiving into shooting, I'd been always expecting that my film should be based on the depiction about current situation of their life and their inner feelings. It's a sketch about their current situation, a poem about their 'to be or not to be', about their twisted and stubborn 'being', the name contains both, despair and hope -- Anyang Orphan, this is my experience and comprehension about China, about China's current reality."<sup>27</sup>

From the perspectives of their realistic attitude and mature narrative texture, both films' significance for Chinese film is remarkable: the camera-eye is no more like the eyes of God, but calmly representing the "original" circumstances of life. For example, *Anyang Orphan* used only fixed shots looking at what people are doing in a certain situation. Camera particularly enjoyed itself in open locations. It sometimes was following several protagonists gone into streams of

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Chapter 5.2.3.

<sup>27</sup> Interviewed by Chen Qingsong.

people, while strangers spontaneously passing by in the shot. All of these created a convincing access for audience to get in to the “real” everyday life. The film was not structured from any role’s perspective. I can say that *Orphan of Anyang* kept a balance between its keen reflexive thinking about the society and its calm filmic representation. It contributes a tension between forceful dramatics and self-possessed film language.

The similar artistic pursuit is embodied in *Xiao Wu*: “I’d rather be a witness staying by my camera and observing.” (Jia Zhangke, interview) Life at the bottom of society, ordinary people’s miseries, these are part of the reality.

Chinese film would be more worthwhile to be seen if they can be either realistic or at least entertaining.

## **2.6 In Closing:**

It’s not so easy to summarize the concerns of the “underground” directors of the last decade, that to say the 6<sup>th</sup> generation. Despite their lack of money and resources, the range of their work has been spectacular. They have looked both outwards (providing a documentary-based account of present-day social realities) and inwards (providing psychological insights previously found only in Chinese literature). They have looked at both urban and rural experience, often within the same film.

They have explored modernist ideas of storytelling, including improvisation (*jixing chuangzuo*), lacunary narratives (*youkong xide*) and the use of non-professional actors. They have focused on previously ‘invisible’ minority groups within Chinese society, including gay men and women. They have eliminated all traces of ‘exotic orientalism’ from their work. And they have done away with the notion that a film needs a grand symbolic dimension to prevail as a work of art.

There’s another reason that ‘underground’ cinema is harder to pin down than 5<sup>th</sup> Generation cinema was. It’s that the independents have changed with the times. The earliest independent films were features shot wholly or partly in black-and white: Zhang Yuan’s *Mama* (1991), Wang Xiaoshuai’s *The Days*

(1993) and He Jianjun's *Red Beads* (Xuan Lian) (1993). Although they are very different from each other, these three films share a concern with incipient madness and all three use some degree of avant-garde stylization in their visuals and structure. (For the record, *Mama* was conceived and developed by Wang Xiaoshuai, who was forced to abandon the project, when the Film Bureau obliged him to move from Beijing to Fujian. Zhang Yuan inherited the project, and typically failed to mention Wang's groundwork in the credits.) But all three directors moved away from avant-garde traits in their subsequent work, perhaps intuiting that the decline of the state studio system would give their independent films a more central position in China's film culture. Wang's second feature *Frozen* (Ji Du Han Leng, shot in 1994, although not completed until 1997) explicitly distances its author from the avant-garde of the time, through its cynical account of an avant-garde performance artist as a coward and charlatan.

A brief aside: the video-based documentary current in the Chinese 'underground', inaugurated by Wu Wenguang and Wang Guangli a little before Zhang Yuan made *Mama*, stands somewhat apart from developments in independent fiction films. Since the bulk of the many films produced by the Central Newsreel and Documentary Studio must be classed as fiction, there has been no real documentary tradition in Chinese film culture. This means that the independents have had to invent one -- which they have done and continue to do with admirable clarity and purpose. The form has recently delivered a *magnum opus* in the form of Wang Bing's 9 and 1/4-hour *Tiexi Qu District*, a poetic portrait of a post-industrial zone as a circle of hell.

To return to the question of the changing character of underground features, the last films with visible roots in the avant-garde were Zhang Yuan's *East Palace*, *West Palace* (1996) and Wang Guangli's *Maiden Work* (1997): two explorations of erotic fantasies, both of which essay types of narrative deconstruction. Traces of avant-garde ambition still surface in the odd video work -- most recently, Zhou Hongxiang's *The Red Flag Flies* (2002), a spirited

deconstruction of five decades of communist propaganda, but the dominant current in underground film making since 1997 has been a kind of minimalist realism, generally using wide angle compositions, extended takes and low-key, undemonstrative performances. This fashion was unwittingly inspired by Jia Zhangke's debut feature *Xiao Wu* (1997), the most influential underground feature yet made in China, and the one which enjoys the widest underground distribution on pirated, shop-burned VCDs.

Even more influential than his film was an essay Jia Zhangke wrote for the magazine *Nan Fang Daily* (Nan Fang Zhou Mo) published in Nanjing late in 1998. The essay is a passionate defense of the importance of 'amateurism': a call for a cinema of ethical values and truthfulness to stand against the technically proficient but soulless products of the commercial film industry.

The appearance this year of underground films from cities as far flung as Harbin and Guangzhou testifies the impact Jia's article has had on many young people.

There are a few underground films which directly imitate *Xiao Wu* with small town settings, marginal protagonists, non professional actors and lengthy takes, but what is more striking is the way that Jia's films have presciently identified an agenda for Chinese independents in this new century. How can we define this agenda? It's difficult, because its forms are so many and varied. It includes everything from Wang Xiaoshuai's return to independent film-making with *Drifters* (Er Di, 2003), a small-town sub-drama which nails the Chinese working-class dream of a better life overseas and distantly evokes its cinematographer Wu Di's debut feature *Goldfish* (1995), to Cui Zi'en's *Feeding Boys*, *Ayaya* (2003), a response to the sudden proliferation of male prostitutes in Beijing and other big cities, which blends improvised acting with stylized imagery in a way that parallels Jia's *Unknown Pleasures*. Or, we could choose different examples: such as Wang Chao's *Orphan of Anyang* (2001), which gives small-town formalism a wry, comic spin; or Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant* (2001), which normalizes lesbian passions and jealousies by juxtaposing foreground melodrama with well-observed background street-life; or Andrew Cheng's *Shanghai Panic* (2002), which laments the pretty, vacant lives of the city's "child

emperor” generation<sup>28</sup> -- the spoiled, solipsistic products of the government’s single-child policy -- through freewheeling, hand-held improvisations.

Two things cement such films together into what we can call a “movement”, despite the many disparities between individual filmmakers: the blend of social and psychological observation. These films center on characters that are essentially ordinary, doing ordinary jobs in ordinary cities, towns and villages. Even when they are marginalized, like Liu Bingjian’s *Crywoman* or the lonely and insecure Xiao Jian in Diao Yinan’s *Uniform*, they are never less than typical. The film-makers anchor these characters in their settings, using close (but not necessarily close-up) observation of their work, their leisure, and their relationships with family, friends and lovers to reach for Bresson-like insights into their minds.

It’s the connections forged between the surfaces of everyday life and the workings of ordinary minds which are crucial. This could not be more different from 5<sup>th</sup> Generation’s cinema, which could only conceive of a psychological dimension as an exploration of derangement and could only visualize it in full blown expressionist terms.

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<sup>28</sup> Spoiled children from one-child family are called child emperors.

### **Third Chapter: TV Documentaries in the 80's and Early 90's**

This chapter deals, firstly, with the rising of the first wave of Chinese documentaries within the TV stations (3.1). In the sub-chapters 2 and 3, I will discuss theoretical aspects of these TV documentaries followed by some closing remarks (3.4), such as, the dominant paradigmatic approaches (3.2) and, the agenda of TV documentaries among fiction films, news, and special reports (3.3). In this chapter I often referred to Lü Xinyu's book *Documenting China – Contemporary Chinese New Documentary Movement*, one of the most important theoretical books about Chinese documentaries, which consists of talks and interviews made in the midst of the 90's and published in 2003.

#### **3.1 The Coming into Being of the First Wave of New Chinese Documentaries**

For a long time in Chinese TV media, TV documentaries had been mainly made and broadcasted in form of special report (*zhuanti pian*) -- in TV programs such as CCTV's (China Central Television) *Oriental Horizon* (Dongfang Shikong) or *Around China* (Zuguo Gedi). Special report's content is mostly about specific people, a specific city or ethnic group, folk customs or cultural topics. It inherited former Soviet Union's narrative style of documentary, in which commentary dominantly overlaps images. It makes documentary work become the appendage of literature. In early 90's, some TV station, especially CCTV, began to explore more possibilities of TV Documentary forms in order to keep up with the development of international documentary production and to export Chinese documentary to the outside world. This became the breakthrough and upgrowth-point of new Chinese TV documentary.<sup>29</sup> Since then, new Chinese TV documentary was born and arisen out of the former special report (*zhuanti pian*). In 1991, CCTV (China Central Television) made a big 4-chapter documentary *Seeing the Great Wall* (Wang Chang Cheng). This documentary series adopted a kind of realistic style. It has an open narrative structure full of spontaneous

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Lü Xinyu 2001, p. 690-691.



occurrences with synchronized sounds and dialogues. This documentary series became the turning point and milestone in the history of Chinese TV documentary. In 1993, CCTV (China Central Television) initiated a new documentary program *Life Stories* (Sheng Huo Kong Jian) and Shanghai TV Station opened a “Documentary Editing Room” (*Jilu pian bianji shi*), too. Since then, TV documentary has been successfully programmed and gained its respected position in Chinese television.

A collective concept, similar to the one employed for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> generation of fiction filmmakers cannot be applied to the TV documentary producers of the 80's and early 90's. The above discussed individual fiction filmmakers have in common that their visual productions had not been widely screened in mainland China, if at all. The documentary filmmaking scene of the same period, however, was by and large confined to TV stations. Enjoying a huge audience, the TV documentary filmmakers had a big part in the producing of what Lü Xinyu calls a new mass culture, quite different from the corresponding phenomenon of the Cultural Revolution, when Chinese mass media had been under strict control of the central political machinery. How this popularization came about is vividly touched upon by Guo Jing with regard to the spread of TV sets, first in black and white and then in colour:

“I was born in 1955, and from that point until the early 1980's it is no exaggeration to say that we lived in a time of film, most films treating themes such as war or the political movements of the time. Once in a while, foreign films would also make an appearance, and these made a very deep impression on me. During the Cultural Revolution, films were few and far between, but after the operatic-ballet pieces of that period, we found ourselves moving from a time of film to a time of television. At first, only a few homes had a black and white set, and on New Year's Eve, all the neighbourhood would gather around to watch it. At that time, only people returning from outside China, or those well connected, could obtain the special ticket necessary to buy a ‘big thing’ such as a TV. Having a TV in the home was something to be proud of. I remember in 1985, my father managed to get one of those precious tickets and bought a black and white set; four or five years after that, my family graduated from black and white to colour...”<sup>30</sup>

However, now as before, mass media like TV in China are part of the national ideological machinery. This applies specifically to news and special

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<sup>30</sup> *Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival Brochure*, 2003, p. 5.

reports, mouthpieces of the political mainstream -- or, in the words of Lü Xinyu -- mouthpieces of the official culture, as compared to mass culture and elite culture.

The more TV documentaries kept distance to the actual ideological mainstream, the more they were susceptible to both, influence the growing mass culture and draw fresh impetus out of the masses:

“The success of Chinese TV documentaries was based in its first phase [i.e. during the 80’s and early 90’s] on the evolution of a Chinese mass culture and the employment of documentary techniques. With the Politics of Opening and the beginning of a [new] mass culture in China, the TV documentaries were for the first time accessible to a broad audience. Focusing on humanism and the point of view of the common people, including the underprivileged, ‘telling them their own stories’, the documentary became a reservoir for the moods and emotions of the common people, became a mirror, in which they could watch themselves. Moreover, the documentary at the moment of its moving into a TV landscape -- concerned, above all, with viewing figures --, had taken up the banner of ‘reality’. Under this banner of documenting actual occurrences, the new visual genre was highly esteemed and frequently used. Due to its specific form, the TV documentary started to be distinguished from the traditional special report (*zhuan ti pian*), thus contributing to a concept of documentary.”<sup>31</sup>

The relative freedom TV documentary enjoyed, in spite of its distance to official ideology, had to do with its contribution in consolidating national unity during a period of social reorientation and growing regionalism.<sup>32</sup>

Chinese documentary film apparently had its roots in TV productions. This might explain why it started without any strong foreign impact, except perhaps Japanese aesthetics, the influence of which is discernable in films like *The Story of Wu Pingtai’s Roaming* (Wu Ping Tai Liu Zhuan) and *Father’s Letter from the Battleground* (Fu Qin Cong Zhan Chang Shang Lai Xin)<sup>33</sup>

### **3.2 Paradigms: Documenting Reality vs. Constructing Reality**

The following rather theoretical reflections about the development of TV documentaries are mainly based on talks and articles by Lü Xinyu, a professor of journalism at Fudan University in Shanghai. These talks and articles were given respectively written in the second half of the 90’s. In 2003, they have been edited

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<sup>31</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 273.

<sup>32</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 268.

<sup>33</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 253.

in the book *Documenting China -- The New Documentary Movement in Present China* (Jilu Zhongguo. Dangdai Zhongguo Xin Jilu Yundong). Her arguments were put forward in reaction to the crisis of the TV documentary obvious since the midst of 90's:

“Meanwhile the number of people daily increases, writing ‘in the name of the masses’ upon their banner, causing the problem that the mere form of documentary is no more guarantying its success. The documentary film has to think about its reason for existence. Does the Chinese television landscape needs documentaries and why do we need them? The actual problem of the Chinese documentary filmmaking arises from a nowadays upcoming stiff labelling reducing the aesthetic style of documentary filming to a mere wrapping almost unable to hide the lack of significance, colour, and thematic concern. For instance, among the applications for the award competition organized in 1996 by the ‘Academy of Documentary Filming of Chinese Television’ (Zhong Guo Dian Shi Ji Lu Pian Xue Hui), there were up to ten documentaries concerned alone with abandoned babies.”<sup>34</sup>

Chinese filmmakers, fiction or documentary, coming to the foreground after the Cultural Revolution, easily jumped upon the global postmodernist train, most of them thus abandoning the objectivist representation paradigm -- the more easily as, in fact, neither traditional Chinese art nor the propaganda films with their model heroes had manifested much interest in objective reality.<sup>35</sup>

In the *tabula rasa* situation after the official ending of the Cultural Revolution, some Chinese documentary filmmakers, however, stuck to the paradigm of objectivist realism, convinced that the new technical possibilities, more than ever before, allowed the simultaneity of event, shooting and screening, and thus authenticity.<sup>36</sup> Lü Xinyu calls this position essentialist (*benti lilun*). Others, like herself, recognizing the crisis of representation, predicate that

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<sup>34</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 273.

<sup>35</sup> Documentaries par excellence based on the realistic paradigm preceding the crisis of representation had been produced in China before the Cultural Revolution, for instance, in the context of the so called Scientific Documentaries Project of the Minorities filmed between 1957 and 1966 by Yang Guanghui, Cai Jiaqi and others. These films were part of the Nationwide Nationality Survey. All that is left are eleven pieces put into an English version by the German Institute for Scientific Filmmaking (IWF) in Göttingen. For a homage to these early Chinese ethnographic filmmakers cf. *Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival Brochure*, 2003, p. 15 ff. as well as the Ph. Dissertation of Karsten Krüger, an ethno-sinological analysis dedicated to this impressive project.

<sup>36</sup> The last time this position was put forward by Zhong Danian in the *Scientific Journal of Beijing Television* in the early 90's launching a fervent debate; cf. Lü Xinyu 2003, pp. 254.

“documented reality has nothing to do with truth” (*jishi bu shi zhenshi*)<sup>37</sup>.

Other positions, discussed by Lü Xinyu -- variations of the postmodern constructivist paradigmatical approach -- can be summarized with the following two slogans: “Documentary is a sort of aesthetic style related to truth” (Zhong Danian) or “Documented reality is an instrument to come near to truth” (Sun Yanbin). These positions obviously are not very reasoned out and probed when compared with the various sophisticated theoretical approaches introduced by Elisabeth Mohn from Garfinkel’s “Documentary Method of Interpretation” via “Strong Documenting” (Klaus Wildenhahn)<sup>38</sup> and “Anti-Documenting” respective “Constructionism as ascetic Refraining from Documenting”<sup>39</sup>, “Paradox Documenting”, -- exemplified by the “speaking nearby”-approach of the Vietnamese director Trinh Minh Ha -- to, last but not least, a sort of “Instrumental Documenting” or taking realism as “useful fabrication” advocated by Mohn herself. Mohn also suggests to pull all the stops.

Lü Xinyu, teaching in Shanghai and thus having special connections to Shanghai TV, participated in these debates since the midst of the 90’s, dedicated to mark out a fertile terrain of documentary filming among fiction, news, and special report.

In the never ending discussions about reality, truth<sup>40</sup>, and authenticity, she is defending an unequivocal opinion:

“Philosophically, ‘objective reality’ is only a metaphysical problem. This theory... has neglected that that the observer’s angle of view influences the result. There is only one God, only God is all-knowing ... Any observer is standing with his personal experiences on his own cultural background... and is limited by a specific history and culture... To ignore and deny this, is the consequence of a metaphysical standpoint separating subject and object...

Truth is an absolute state which can not be proved by human practice or observation... If the world was an apple and we were drawers, we always perceive only one side of the apple; that is why the drawings are different from each other... at least the angle in which the light spreads on the apple would be different. And yet all the angles are true...”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Originally the title of Zhong Danian’s article; cf. Lü Xinyu, pp. 254-256.

<sup>38</sup> Also labelled Documenting as ascetic refraining from constructing meanings.

<sup>39</sup> Refer to Clifford and Geertz, Berg and Fuchs.

<sup>40</sup> Sometimes specified as or subjective or objective truth, the former identified with an individual’s conscience; cf. Zhong Danian, in: Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 256.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Lü Xinyu 2003, pp. 266, 257.

In order to prove that authenticity cannot be measured nor determined, she takes the decisive role of the camera as example, illustrating it with a documentary screened by Shanghai TV/East (Shanghai Dongfang Tai) entitled *Endless Emotions* (Bu Liao Qing): The journalist had arranged the coming of a daughter from far away Yunnan province to Shanghai in order to see her father, whom she had never seen before. Lü Xinyu is convinced that because of the influence of the camera it was impossible that the dreams of the girl and her father came true:

“The camera standing between both hindered them to exchange their tender emotions. The author and director steadily held the camera on to them waiting for the flow of bitter tears – with the result that the camera has only deepened the distance and strangeness between them... In my opinion, the camera is responsible for a violent intervention in a sensitive emotional situation... The changing of the situation, caused by the camera, is a problem we cannot ignore, but have to take serious. It doesn’t matter, if one tries to use the camera as clandestine as possible or consciously have her participate in the process, as was the case in the [TV film] *Watching the Great Wall* (*Wang Chang Cheng*), it always has, because of its fundamental presence, a disturbing/destroying effect on natural life processes.”<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3 TV Documentaries among Fiction, News and Special Report

Lü Xinyu never tires to scrutinize the cinematic and media concepts, such as truth, reality, and authenticity, like checking coins. This applies, as well, to the other TV genres, such as fiction, news and special report.

She seems not to have a positive opinion of commercial fiction films (*gushi pian*). For her, these are nothing but phantasy and utopia, escape from real life leading to loss of reality:

“Fiction films are day dreaming. The unconscious demands fulfilment of its genuine needs. In the dark of the cinema our voyeuristic desire is breeding. In the darkness people loose their normal capacity of judgement, they become babies again and the cinema is their uterus... Newspapers report about children, who sprang from skyscrapers after having seen many Kongfu films, relying on the capacity of flying, as they had witnessed in the films... These youngsters can no more distinguish reality from fiction being unable to cope with life.”<sup>43</sup>

With regard to *news* she denies any vicinity to documentation at all. TV

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<sup>42</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 258.

<sup>43</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, pp. 276-77, 273.

stations choose so called facts only when they are considered media relevant according to their own and normally non-transparent criteria. This applies not only to China's TV productions, but it is especially true for the People's Republic, where social and cultural phenomena contradicting the mainstream ideology cannot be openly screened:

“Inspectors [and censors] decide upon the fundamental yardsticks. Behind the yardsticks we find the principle of profit, economical as well as political... Only news having passed the machinery of the mass media will be considered as news by today's journalists. For that reason news are products of news institutions. Mere facts cannot be news.”<sup>44</sup>

If it is true, that news never represent mere facts, Lü Xinyu simultaneously insists, that they should not be twisted, making appeal to a sort of professional morality:

“News report incidents which cannot be distorted according to the journalist's taste. This [apart from the above mentioned media relevance] makes news to news. The professional ethics of those, working in the mass media, and laws, regulating the respective professions' basic behaviour, are supposed to guarantee this inalienable fundament. That is why, abroad, laws referring to professional morality and media communications represent a specific research topic.”<sup>45</sup>

The genre of TV *special report* is brought up, as well, sometimes labeled as focus interviews. A heated debate between Shanghai TV and Shanghai TV/East was sparked off after the latter successfully had initiated a so called documentary program. The directors of Shanghai (documentary) TV reproached the newcomers to ruin the essence of documentary. Lü Xinyu sided with Shanghai TV Station distinguishing special reports from TV documentaries in the following way:

“In news, broadcastings like the so called focus interviews (*jiaodian fangtan*), the journalists always actively intervened in the respective occurrence,<sup>46</sup> for instance when peasants had difficulties to sell their grain, or teachers didn't receive their sold etc., thus contributing to the solution of the problem. This form of special report differs from the documentary insofar as it represents, due to the mass effectiveness, a force of [poetic] justice and at the same time an authority. Defending the officially accepted value system, the angle of view of special report is situated high above the earth.

The documentary, however, is in search of the individual, takes care of past

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<sup>44</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 265.

<sup>45</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 265.

<sup>46</sup> The above mentioned story of the arranged encounter of father and daughter is another example.

experiences on the heart's tracks. That is why a broader angle of view is used in order to research more qualified and deeper."<sup>47</sup>

Of course, in Lü Xinyu's opinion, people always are more or less affected by news, special reports, and documentaries, in like manner. Yet, the latter is supposed to go beyond feelings and emotional involvement:

"The concern inherent in documentary films is to give food for thought to the audience, thought about reality, the camera, and the cooperating of reality and camera."<sup>48</sup>

To realize this cooperation between camera and reality helps to understand the documentary filmmaker's intention:

"Thus, the audience is able to investigate [the respective] documentary filmmaker's view of point. To succeed in that, should be the aim of any documentary filmmaker. The documentary has developed from the naive belief in reality towards a critical observing and dealing with reality... Thus, it has become an open space offering the audience the possibility to participate in the incident viewed and to form their own opinion. A documentary produced in this spirit is more democratic and has more weight. This sort of documentaries have lately been called 'reflexive documentaries',<sup>49</sup> in the West."<sup>50</sup>

When Lü Xinyu is advocating that documentaries are not merely explaining the world, but require a judging participation on behalf of the audience, she is emphasizing the task of documentaries to enlighten, if not educate the people to be both, reflexive and self reflexive:

"If the viewers examine themselves again and again, the film director cannot lead them up the garden path. Spectators should be alert and have their eyes widely open, in order not to delude themselves. Thus, documentary films are a sort of patriotic night watch guarding our homes, our children, our relatives... -- a night watch guarding all things and people we love and take care of. Documentary films, hence, are a commitment, a duty obligating to be responsible for our age."<sup>51</sup>

She even goes so far as to take the state of the possibilities of documentary filmmaking as an indicator of the "state of health" of the respective society:

"Restless societies only worrying about money, commercially oriented, dictatorial, and autocratic societies do not care for the existence of documentaries. Seen from this point of view, the Chinese documentary film had, when it came into being..., a strong social support."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 258.

<sup>48</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 275.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Jay Ruby as well as Elisabeth Mohn.

<sup>50</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 275.

<sup>51</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 277.

<sup>52</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 277.

Again and again, she touches upon the interaction between the documentary filmmaker and the respective reality:

“The producer of documentaries cannot longer hide himself behind the ‘objectivity’ of the film; he himself has become an important part of the film, and the interaction between himself and the reality has become significant: the exchange between the documentary filmmaker and reality within reality.”<sup>53</sup>

The metaphor of splashing water illustrates this interaction:

“The exchange between both [filmmaker and reality] corresponds to the relation between humans and reality during the process generating the documentary, given the fact that it changes reality while intermingling with it. That is why [the exchange] should be part of the documentary.

It’s like a child, standing in front of a pond, into which the child had always desired to throw a stone. The child develops a curiosity towards the water: When the water is rising and splashing and then stirring waves, then the child’s knowledge about the water has deepened.

In the reflexive documentary, the filmmaker takes over the role of the stone, a stone with eyes and mind thrown into life’s water-like face, in order to startle and unveil its hidden secrets.”<sup>54</sup>

Due to the fact that the filmmaker and his camera basically are constructing reality, there is a creative moment in the process pushing documentary into the vicinity of art:

“Documentaries may have a plot, but not necessarily, and they should not depend on plots. In the context of documentaries, we discuss the problem of plots only because it corresponds to the viewing habits the audience is used to from fiction films. Yet, documentaries deal with real problems, whose interpretation requires, in the words of Grearson, <sup>55</sup> a ‘creative dealing with actuality’. What does it mean, in this context, to be creative? According to my opinion, it means to examine oneself, to avoid schematizations, it means to judge or interpret reality neither in a simplistic manner nor abusing it as an instrument. Creativity means to attach great importance to recognizing the multilayered, different significations and contradictions. Reality cannot be reduced to patterns of plot.

In spite of the similarity of fiction and documentary films with regard to this creative process, and in spite of documentary influencing fiction films as a specific aesthetic style in the last years, Lü Xinyu insists in the differences between the two genres, again using a metaphor of two trees interweaving with

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<sup>53</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 275.

<sup>54</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 275.

<sup>55</sup> John Grierson (1898-1972) is said to be the father of the English documentary film.



each other:

“Fiction films make use of the power of fantasy, in order to push forward the plot; documentaries make use of observation and analysis. Considering documentaries from a purely artistic point of view, amounts to missing its specific character, according to my opinion. Even if, abroad, many people think that the boundary between fiction and documentary films becomes more and more blurred, to me it seems rather, that if the boundary between fiction and documentary films becomes more permeable -- like the branches of two trees are interweaving with each other -- roots and kernels are still quite different. They just have a broadened interface.”<sup>56</sup>

To give weight to her argumentation Lü Xinyu takes the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens (1898-1989) as a shining example, many of whose productions were made in China:

“Recently, a lot of good films have been screened oscillating between fiction and documentary, without a complete overlapping. It is, strictly speaking, the tension between both poles conferring specific significance to those experimental films. Wonderful examples are the early experimental films *Rain* and *Bridge* of the, among Chinese very popular, Dutch filmmaker Ivens, as well as his later film *Wind*<sup>57</sup> - all in all, a real mixture of documentary and fictional elements. What, however, finally consolidated his position among the top documentary filmmakers, was the series of political documentaries<sup>58</sup>, attracting attention world-wide. According to his opinion, the most important task of a film worker is *to participate in the simple things of life*<sup>59</sup>, and in my opinion, this is the fundament of any documentary film. We have to understand that the Chinese documentary is just at the beginning of its development.”<sup>60</sup>

In spite of the vicinity with art, documentary filmmakers should be on their guard against the exaggerate search of aesthetics:

“Art may be at the basis of a documentary’s style, but not at the basis of its scaffold. Documentaries might be involved in art, but not exclusively. Too much involvement with [details and] minor matters disguises the look at the essential; the documentary might run the risk to die out, or at least to waste away.”<sup>61</sup>

In the following Lü Xinyu is summarizing in a few items the basic preconditions of documentaries, while consciously avoiding concepts reminding the objectivist and essentialist paradigm of “pure documenting”<sup>62</sup>, such as truth, reality, and authenticity:

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<sup>56</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 276.

<sup>57</sup> The complete title is *A Little Story of the Wind*.

<sup>58</sup> Some about China and Cultural Revolution.

<sup>59</sup> Emphasis by Yi Sicheng.

<sup>60</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 276.

<sup>61</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 276.

<sup>62</sup> According to Elisabeth Mohn.

- The topic of the documentary should focus real people and real incidents.
- The documentary should be historically relevant and significant beyond his actual effect and repercussion.
- The documentary should not be concerned with facts, but with sensations and emotions of the respective people, thus making possible an empathic exchange between protagonists and the public.
- Underlying the documentary is a specific understanding of humans and humanity.
- In spite of the flow of emotions between protagonists and the public facilitating empathy and identification, the documentary filmmaker is supposed to build up a “rational shield/screen” in order to instigate self reflection on behalf of the audience.<sup>63</sup>

### **3.4 In Closing**

Lü Xinyu’s definition of TV documentary filmmaking among fiction filmmaking, TV news and special report, reflects the crisis TV documentaries went through in the midst 90’s. If we look at her positions on the background of what has been said in the preceding and following chapters, one may even say that she anticipates somehow the inclinations of the second wave of Chinese documentary filming characteristic for the Late 90’s. The crisis of the first movement of [TV] documentaries became obvious, at the latest, in the midst of the 90’s, with the result that TV stations’ documentary filmmakers started to discuss how to overcome the crisis. Lü Xinyu, as part of the academic world thinking over the new genres of mass media, had a very important part in these discussions, not only in Shanghai.

Meanwhile, inside and outside the TV stations, the second wave of Chinese documentary filmmaking, the so called New Documentary Movement, consisting of the independent filmmakers of the late 90’s, was about to take shape, last but not least, pushed forward by the digital revolution.

As a matter of fact, “TV Documentary” and “New Documentary

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<sup>63</sup> Lü Xinyu 2003, p. 279.

Movement” have always influenced and stimulated each other. The initiators of “New Documentary Movement” such as Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan all used to work in state-owned TV stations.<sup>64</sup> And TV Documentary Movement’s representative program *Life Stories* (Sheng Huo Kong Jian) profited from mainstream TV station incorporated some marginal documentary filmmakers into its own force. Take Shi Jian as example, he was one of the most representative filmmakers of the early New Documentary Movement and made documentaries like *I’m Graduated* (Wo Bi Ye Le) and *Tian’an Men*. In 1993, he became one of the initiators of China Central Television’s (CCTV) program -- *Oriental Horizon*. Meanwhile, some other “underground” documentary filmmakers signed the contract and were absorbed in mainstream TV stations, too. The new documentary movement filmmakers labeled “marginal”, “folk” or “underground” accomplished their displacement upwards to the “central”, “official” and “up-ground”. The boundary between inside and outside system became blurred.

From “underground” to “up-ground”, from outside to inside the system, as long as the identification was changed, it brought the naissance of CCTV documentary program *Life Story* (Sheng Huo Kong Jian) and the starting point for an insight into the cultural ecology of the 90’s. Why did the cultural circumstances offer new documentary its tolerance? Why could new documentary suddenly gain its legitimacy? It might be a result of China’s TV stations’ “marketization”:

In 1993, “Literature and art should close with life and public opinion” was put forward as a slogan by political leaders; meanwhile, as long as the planned economy was transforming into market economy, CCTV (China Central Television) was trying to change its program producing mode from simply depending on state finance and funds, into the new one which allows producers by themselves to prepare and promote program, such as *Oriental Horizon* (Dong

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<sup>64</sup> Wu Wenguang used to work in Kunming TV Station from 1985-1988; Duan Jinchuan used to work in Tibetan TV Station (Xi Zang Dian Shi Tai); cf. Wang Weici.

Fang Shi Kong). Just in time, the idea of *Life Story* was: “Life consists of people, and people consist of everybody.”<sup>65</sup> Hence, the naissance of *Life Story* was not due to any change of the propaganda strategy, but should attribute to TV documentary filmmakers’ self-conscious effort just to meet the opportunity of market economy. Meanwhile, from this perspective, we can also reflect the New Documentary Movement labelled “underground”, “folk” and “marginal” as not a completely free chosen standpoint, but somehow that mainstream discourse “incorporated rebels into its own force”. Indeed, because underground documentary was affiliated to mainstream media, documentaries about everybody eventually appeared in state-owned media.

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Wang Weici.

## **Fourth Chapter: Independent Film Movement since the Late 1990's**

This chapter is a panorama view and sum up of the whole independent film scene, concerning all characteristics of the filmmakers and their art, thematic concerns, and strategies of local and international dissemination. It embraces both fiction films and documentaries, both professional and amateur filmmakers.

### **4.1 Access**

To find an access to the specific scene of independent filmmaking I will approach three verges which are: first, the space of time (4.1.1); second, the naming of this movement (4.1.2) and, third, an incomplete filmography (4.1.3), i.e. a survey over fiction films and documentaries.

#### ***4.1.1 The Times***

These days, the vivacious reality of mainland Chinese film is attracting increasingly widespread attention; it would seem that we are in the midst of a “new wave” of film. This reality is the reality of independent film, and the films that construct it are all created outside the methods of the official system. It is impossible to trace its arrival to a symbolic time or event, because its appearance did not arise from reforms in the higher ranks, nor was it catalyzed by any certain social or cultural event. Looking back across this brief history, there is only one rough concept of time, the late 1990's. If we must set a specific time, I would be most willing to begin with the year 1997. That was, when Jia Zhangke released *Xiao Wu*, and people like Yang Tianyi and Zhu Chuanming were making documentary films with DV cameras and similar portable home cameras. Their works became known two years later, and *Xiao Wu* became the model: Most importantly, it was successful, and, it could be copied; the media age

expanded and magnified his and his director's influence. In some respects, it resembles Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (Dong Chun de Ri Zi) and Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* (Liu Lang Beijing) from the early '90's. *Xiao Wu* turned the attention of Chinese film, and led countless film youths (well, not just youths) to understand a value of life and the world; they may have once resided in this life and world, or maybe not. But regardless whether or not, it is related to the artist's personal experience. Localized narratives had already become the mainstream of Chinese independent film. In a broader sense, they are all part of the expression of the current Chinese experience.

#### **4.1.2 Vocabulary**

In mainland China these days, there is no set vocabulary to designate these films, aside from the terms "independent" and "underground" that have been in use since the 90's, or the grandiose term "art films", for new creations. But the most frequently used terms are "folk films" and "personal films". However, reality is always more complex than words, or words are always more futile than reality. In the face of specific and numerous works, the generalizing power and exacting process of these terms appears suspect. They can only attain significance within set contexts. Their appropriateness is more apparent on the operational level: non-system indicates that their creation and existence didn't undergo a program of regulation or gain approval from the bureaucracies that oversee Chinese film; the vast majority of them have no relation whatsoever to the state owned film production houses. As they exist, except for a few limited special cases (when the influence of the artist and work transcend that of film itself), the majority of methods and works were neither supported nor prohibited; those, that were banned, were ineffectual all the same.

The use of these terms has never been limited to the operational level. They include a sort of implication regarding a type of attitude or standpoint; these hints are quite clear, such as with "personal" and "folk", or sometimes they are even stronger, such as with "independent" and "underground". But rather than say that these are accurate descriptions of the content's attitude and standpoint, it

would be better to say that they are a form of ideological hope and imagination. They point to a spirit, but whether the content encompasses that spirit and to what extent it encompasses that spirit is left unclear. In this sense, the only fact that can be determined is the difference: the difference with the films that are invested in by the government for use in educating the people, and the ones they sponsor for entertainment that also have good market returns such as New Year's films; and if a film is "truly" independent, then, at least, it is not devoted to the whitewashing of reality.

This is where these terms, though not necessarily correct, are appropriate; they may be strategic, but they have provided an expression about the relation of Mainland China independent film and rights and illuminate the oppositional qualities that they are endowed with. This is not an opposition to the commercial system represented by market gains and popular culture, it is a struggle for the independent personal voice to cast off the limitations and pressures in a situation, where the means of expression and content have already been clearly stipulated. Because of this, in the language environment where it grows and exists, independent film has no motives or aims, only postures and effects. And for every day that this country's cultural environment and film policies go unchanged, this struggle can only exist as a fact. To enter this is the so called "third world situation", and one who becomes an independent film worker is left without options the moment he or she makes the choice.

#### ***4.1.3 An Incomplete Filmography***

I have written out an incomplete filmography, divided between documentary and features, of films that are related to the terminology that appeared above. This list can be found in the appendix after the bibliography. Though it is incomplete, but it is enough to evidence that what we're discussing is a reality.

All of the films in the list include author, medium and date of production. The feature films begin in 1997 with *Xiao Wu* and *Mr. Zhao*; the documentary films begin with *Jiang Hu* (Life on the Road), *Lao Tou* (Old Men), *Beijing Munitions Worker* (Beijing Tan Jiang) and the films by Ji Dan and Sha Qing

regarding Tibet. They were all completed in 1999. The list attempts to include all of the finished films that I know of, all the way up to the time it was written; it does not stop at a certain time.

There are several short films of less than 60 minutes, that I have recorded with the documentary films, mostly because they have won awards at film festivals. I have also taken into account the artists' identities and the local extent of the film's exposure, regardless of the size of the screening facility or audience, they were, at the very least, shown before in a public space. There are also some charged short films that fit the above requirements, but keeping in mind that they are student films and that they are too numerous to properly select, I have left them out altogether.

There are two perplexing works -- *Hong Qi Piao* (Red Flags are Waving) and *San Yuan Li* (San Yuan Village) -- they're neither features nor documentaries, but more like visual experimentations. They were made to be shown in art spaces, not theatres; *San Yuan Li* is really just the film segment of a complete work that includes other materials. It may be more appropriate to see them as video art. But since they are of the proper length, they have been screened at some film festivals together with the films on this list.

This ambiguity is not to say that there aren't other such works, just that there is variation in degree. The current categorization is for convenience in discussion. For the time being, I have placed the above two films at the end of the documentary category.

There is a rough balance between the number of documentary and feature films that are currently on the list. But that internal imbalance is hard to place -- maybe it is my own impression; in the past two years, the vitality of documentary film creation seems to have been subsiding. Though there have been some classics produced, such as *West of the Railroads*, but compared to the sincere and grassroots works by those young artists, two years ago, there have been no conceptual breakthroughs or technical progress. Maybe this is just a phase of building power, or maybe this impression is just in contrast to feature film. Feature films have been continuing along the track that was laid out before,



but not in terms of any special personal experience or viewpoints, rather the majority of them are maiden works.

The limitation of this list is in that my personal field of vision is inevitably narrow. Its draw is in that these are the ones that in this time have not been buried in the trends of film creation. They have been discovered, seen and discussed through various channels; some of them possess a lasting vitality, while others are doomed to rapid decline. These are decided by the piece's intrinsic perfection and degree; at this time art is not the only standard. Because of just these issues, the list has not undergone any selection based on conscious personal preferences or any level of valuation.

## **4.2 Artists**

In terms of age, these filmmakers do not all belong to the same generation. The largest age difference among them is over twenty years. In terms of gender, the males vastly outnumber the females, though, since 1990 there have been more and more women engaging in film creation. There are more than five women on the list, in both features and documentaries.

Roughly two thirds of the films are maiden works, and most of the artists were born in the late sixties and early seventies, with the youngest hailing from the late seventies. They began making independent films around the year 2000, and were either closely or remotely related to film before that. Wang Chao and Sheng Zhimin have worked as assistant directors for Chen Kaige and Chen Guo respectively; Li Yu and Hu Shu made documentary films at television stations; Zhu Wen and Cui Zi'en began as novelists; Yang Fudong is an artist; Cheng Yusu and Li Yang could be called returning Chinese emigrants; Wang Bing, Liu Hao, Du Haibin, Ning Hao and Zhu Chuanming were trained at film institutes, but Yang Tianyi and Wang Fen were just theatre and advertising actors who knew little of film before they began making them, and knew nothing of DV... Each of them has their own lifestyle and situation. Some of them have jobs, even at TV stations or government bureaus, but most of them are in the same boat as their films are floating far outside the margins of the system. They make their

livings in all manner of ways, making commercials, music videos and TV shows, or some of them may have no stable source of income at all. Some of them have no lack of ideals regarding film and would love to make it their life's work, but some of the others are entirely unsure of whether to continue making films. If they differ from directors of before, it is in this vacillation or non-professional aspect; they didn't emerge from this field, and won't necessarily be able to survive in it -- some have their own reasons, and other reasons are due to outside factors. And now, their works stand out as the most seductive among the lot.

Before these filmmakers, there was the first group of independent film directors, such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye in features and Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan and Jiang Yue in documentaries. The works in the list show that since they began in the early nineties, they've never stopped their work. Whether it is in terms of age, time in the field or actual works, Jia Zhangke is the great connector, and cannot be left out. There are also even older filmmakers of the same age as the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation, such as Lu Yue, Ning Ying and Kang Jianning. They began filming documentaries or features from within the system, though they have works that would be hard for the system to accept, but they are a case in themselves. Their work gave them a dubious identity, and they can't be properly labeled as non-independents.

It would be hard to find continuity among these works. The only reason for placing them together is that they are all a part of the film scene of the late nineties. So, if we discuss the films of this time starting with *Xiao Wu*, we must begin with a rejection: All of these works and the work of all these filmmakers are of the same process and at the same stage, the continuation of history. We should especially use this view of continuation to view the works of those directors, who were already making films before, because they had no intention of participating in trends, but the coincidence of time put them together here in a way.

Another type of ambiguity is hard to avoid. The crux of this problem is: What is the meaning of the system? Those directors who have just started out usually use their own money, as with *Xiang Huo* (Incense), *Shan Shang* (On the

Mountain), *Shan Qing Shui Xiu* (The Only Son), *Xin Xin* (Heart.Heart) and the vast majority of documentary films; the more skilled ones can take advantage of some domestic forms of folk-based funding, as with *Seafood* (Hai Xian, though a Hong Kong company came in during the post-production film transferal) and *Jin Nian Xia Tian* (Fish and Elephant), *Dong Ci Bian Wei* (Conjugation) and *Zhi Fu* (Uniform) were funded from Hong Kong. These films are all low-budget, though the degree of lowness varies. This issue will be discussed below. More experienced directors have an easier time obtaining better production conditions. Their sources are usually foreign foundations, production companies, and even mainstream media outlets, such as television stations. In specific reference to the works on this list, Ning Ying got support from a Japanese foundation. Wang Bing paid for the filming with his own money and finished the post production with a subsidy from the Rotterdam Film Festival. Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue and Kang Jianning were filming for European television stations. Among the feature filmmakers, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke, Liu Bingjian and Li Yang's movie productions were international from the production to the distribution. This scene didn't just materialize today; it is a reality that has been taking shape in Chinese independent film for a long time. This reality brings the discussion of non-system films to a paradox -- because if the so called system is not here, then where is it. Supposing that this is another embarrassing unavoidable situation, then it is reminding us that the Third World and Globalization are nothing more than just two sides of the same lens.

#### **4.3 Regarding DV: the Diffusion of Power, Quantity of Works, Scale of Film Crew, Budget**

If it weren't for DV, this filmography would be unimaginable. DV has been extremely important in the Chinese mainland new wave of film creation; to those who picked up a camera and made a film, it is more direct and real than the national situation and the circumstances of the times. Because, in this scene, we have always been indebted to it, it was DV that gave us the power to act. The revolutionary significance of DV does not merely apply to filmmakers. On a

broader scale, it has made many more people aware that the use of film for expression is a sort of power. In this country, such a power was once very hard to obtain. It is closely linked with family status, received education and social position, not just with the desire to express. DV could never affect the disappearance of power, but it has brought about a diffusion of power, thus negating it.

All of the films on the list – except for *Xing Fu Sheng Huo* (This Happy Life) and *Lin Qi Da She Tou* (Interesting Times: The Secret of My Success), filmed on Beta SP cameras and *Beijing de Feng Hen Da* (There is a strong wind in Beijing), filmed on expired 16mm film – were made in DV. It could truly be said that it poured new lifeblood into Chinese independent documentary production. It changed the entire working situation for documentary directors, making them more personal -- the majority of filmmakers work alone, from shooting to post production. One of China's earliest independent filmmakers, Wu Wenguang was excited beyond words by the advent of the DV era. This excitement is not hard to understand: In those days, all filmmakers worked and grew in the margins of the television stations -- using the station's cameras and equipment, making their own films outside of work -- this situation made their independence doubtful. This problem is nonexistent for young filmmakers -- there are television station workers among them, like Hu Shu, Chen Weijun, and some others who may work intermittently for the stations, but this has become an ignorable element in discussing their documentaries. These people are scattered across all corners of society. When compared with the previous generation, their works cover different groups and areas, and their works are devoid of the intellectual's touch. DV first attracted people's attention and was dubbed "personal" and "folk" because of just such documentaries. These are rather focalized terms: They touch upon the production methods for these works and their grassroots nature.

Digital cameras got more and broader tries in feature films, especially after 2002. There are no less than 15 feature films in China that were created in digital, no less than 10 of which were made in DV, with the others made using D-Beta or

HD. Aside from some films, made with foreign capital, such as *Ren Xiao Yao* (Unknown Pleasure) and *Ming Ri Tian Ya* (All Tomorrow's Parties), most of the other films were never completely transferred to film. *Seafood* is the only exception.

The making of feature films is much more complicated than documentaries, so it is still a collaborative work. Depending on the money situation, the above films had crews ranging from a few people to ten, with even twenty to thirty people being normal. The film crew of less than ten basically retained only the most essential people, such as director, photographer, sound technician, producer, assistant director or scribe, as well as one or two central actors, but they are all surely non-professionals; the other people, who appear or may have lines, can only be picked up on the spot. *Xiang Huo* (Incense), *Shan Shang* (On the Mountain), *Ke Cun Jie* (Ke Cun Street) and Cui Zi'en's films are all examples of this, with the latter cutting down to just the director, photographer and actors.

We can't say that this method is wholly unrelated to the aspirations of the film project, but it is more decided by economics. This situation mostly pops up when someone spends his own money to make a film, making for the most limited budget. The money is used as much as possible to pay for materials, equipment rental and accommodations for the cast and crew -- there is usually no compensation, and all of the workers are friends just helping out. Whether or not money is spent on post production, is decided by whether they have a friend who owns a computer with editing capabilities. Among such feature films, none cost more than 50,000 RMB (6,000 USD). Cui Zi'en spent a paltry several thousand RMB on his film.

Those other non-invested films, not counting film transferal, range from a few hundred thousand to a few million RMB. But these numbers are lower than for film, 16 mm is cheaper than 35 mm, and documentaries are cheaper than features, though there are always exceptions. Such monumental [documentary] works as *West of the Railroads*, due to extremely long production periods and massive quantities of materials, cost at least 400,000 RMB (50,000 USD) according to the filmmaker.

#### **4.4 Thematic Concerns**

The prominent thematic concerns of the independent filmmakers in the Late 90's are: the meaning of the local narrative (4.4.1); an obvious identification with their protagonists -- all kinds of marginalized -- or, to say it with different words, a sort of self-recognition expressed in their films with the risk to fall into a morality trap (4.4.2). Their distance to the forerunner generations is especially obvious in their gender films and portrays (4.4.3).

##### ***4.4.1 The Meaning of Local Narrative***

The local narrative acts as the temporal and spatial judgement of the work; it is the here and now, the relevant moment and the worldly setting. Most of these works show a specific China of the now, rather than an imaginary one. This is something that is primarily decided by the filming method: dialect speaking non-professional actors, go anywhere cameras, virtually undecorated backgrounds, natural light... They are like Italian neo-realism from a half century ago. But in contemporary China, rather than to say that there is an artistic movement afoot in the realm of film, it would be more accurate to mark it up as a coincidence of circumstances.

This judgement misses only a certain few exceptions, like *Mo Sheng de Tian Tang* (The Strange Paradise). It and *Xiao Wu* were filmed in the same year (1997), and it was only finished with a post-production subsidy from the Kaiser Cultural Exhibition five years later. Expired film, black and white images, off-screen monologues -- it contained enough ambiguity, wavering and tongue holding. It appeared to be more traditional yet more modern -- all of this gave it an estrangement from that world outside of film.

The vast majority of films are works of realism. Those films gain their significance from their close relationship with the roundabout world; the lens never tries to transcend the people and events in front of it, not providing any more or any less. But the entire reality is never there, some of them are mere

understanding of reality and the scenes related to it. What those films extract, are the part that the small cities, towns, countryside, factories, coal mines and streets present; they have constructed the world in which, the majority of the people in this nation live.

If we can use the word concern, then it is aimed at the people who move around in these settings; they are unemployed workers, homosexuals, companion girls, cripples, old people, migratory laborers and aimlessly floating lives. The films present their ignored existence, memories and inaudible voices, and testify to their unsettled bodies and souls and their hopeless dilemma. These are people at the end of their rope; distinguishing through the eyes of class, the proletariat vastly outnumbers the petty bourgeois and the intellectuals. They are petty like dust, able only to drift with the tides. As for themselves and things around them, they are uninterested in understanding them, let alone changing them.

Their fates, that have been or are being abandoned by the times, are not figurative, but are a direct part of the modernization process that this country is undertaking; their cramping and awkwardness are the situation of this country in the midst of globalization. In this sense, some of these pieces, as art, do not have a lasting vitality. Because of their recording and description of the times they have become filmic ethnography -- these images and the settings that they are placed in point out a thread; through them we can catch a glimpse of the truth about this era.

#### ***4.4.2 Self-Recognition and the Morality Trap***

Not in all of the works, but in definitely more than one, the filmmaker expresses a strong recognition of the person they are filming, showing a deep regret for that kind of life. The works of Jia Zhangke, Wang Bing, Zhu Chuanming, Zhong Hua and Tang Xiaobai are all examples of this. Those films show us that they are not strangers to what they film. In their subjects, they see their own pasts or lives that they have rubbed shoulders with -- most of them bumped around society for many years before going to college, some within the system, and some with no set position. This type of experience had a deeper moulding effect than their

education, remaining unforgettable -- it is the source of deep emotions and inerasable memories, not only of youthful hopes and dreams, but also mixed with the experience of pain. Their earliest works are a way of reacquainting with this. This imbues these works with an obscure or evident trend towards catharsis.

Attending to the lives of others and attending to one's own are both equally reasonable; when talking of current Chinese film, it would seem that the latter are more exemplary. The most typical examples of films, where maker and subject are of different backgrounds, are *Anyang Orphan* and *Mang Jing (Blind Shaft)*, which are about unemployed workers, prostitutes and miners. As a re-emergent image of independent film, they and their identities can not be separated and have become a symbol of the underclass and underclass life. As people who have not had this experience or emotion, Wang Chao and Li Yang's commonly occurring principle is: The true lives of unemployed workers, prostitutes and miners are nothing like in the movies, their "real" them has already been obscured by movies.

This is not just talk, this is the morality trap. It may be very hard for someone in this situation -- let alone filmmakers -- to transcend. These films, including some DV documentaries, presented what had to be presented, and at the same time have been transformed by suspicion into exploitation of the downtrodden. Out of habit, they are called weak or marginalized groups, not just because of their numbers but because they have not grasped their rights. The script and the artist's morality should be separate; though they are not wholly unrelated, they cannot feed off of each other. The latter's possible moral emotions towards the subject -- be it sympathy or indifference -- cannot provide the former with its answers. For those independent films that focus on social groups this is a dangerous and difficult topic. How to discuss it, depends on the speaker's personal leanings and standpoint.

#### **4.4.3 Gender**

There are two works in the filmography that are made by women and focus on the topic of lesbians, a first for Chinese film. *He Zi (Box)* is a documentary and



*Jin Nian Xia Tian* (Fish and Elephant) is a fiction film, and the two main characters have the same sexual orientation in life as in the films. Maybe because the artists have their own relation to this sexual orientation, they have gone out to explore the issue of homosexuals and their interaction with society. Most Chinese films about homosexuality are along this line. In comparison, in Cui Zi'en's -- an open homosexual -- work, the feeling of societal oppression is not so strong. It seems freer, yet more closed off. Those people have created their own world which is full of their own words. These words are intrinsically closed to exchange, as they are self-sufficient. There are also a few other maiden works by women filmmakers, documentaries such as *Lao Tou* (Old Men) and *Bu Kuai Le de Bu Zhi Yi Ge* (They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple), and features such as *Dong Ci Bian Wei* (Conjugation). Gender is not the central topic of these films, although they have what in China would be called "feminine quality", they do not present a personal gender consciousness or a clear gender standpoint. On the contrary, women filmmakers often try their best to avoid stamping their works with their gender identity if they haven't simply forgotten to do so. The only exception is *Ye Ying Bu Shi Wei Yi de Ge Hou* (Nightingale, Not the Only Voice). This documentary -- who's editing showed unwillingness to cut anything -- spends three hours constantly seeking and making personal statements to present a woman's individual life experience from the corporeal, roundabout and deep psychological wounds. The filmmaker Tang Danhong is a poet; she attempts to use film to cross over that enigmatic psychological wall.

Chinese independent film, when it comes to gender issues, inevitably walks side by side with real Chinese society's communal consciousness. Most of the films are still displaying a state of existence, and have trouble reaching the level of gender politics -- this kind of overall obscurity might just be their gender politics. On the other hand, the works of some male directors can sometimes display a level of intensity, as with Zhu Wen's *Seafood*.

#### **4.5 Presentation and Dissemination**

Placed outside the system, the most critical problem for the filmmakers was to

screen and disseminate their films. Besides the possibility to be selected for Western, mostly European Film Festivals (4.5.1), there is another strategy of local film distribution (4.5.2). As beneficiaries of the digital revolution, the medium of dissemination *par excellence*, of course, were disc (4.5.3) and specific dialogue spaces, such as cafés, bars, and local festivals (4.5.4).

#### **4.5.1 Western Film Festivals**

The presentation and dissemination of non-system films primarily depends on western film festivals. Presently, the path remains quite open. The film selectors from the western festivals come to China and can directly contact the filmmakers to obtain the films they need; this part of the work is sometimes done through a local intermediary whether on behalf of a director or by Chinese cultural worker representing the festival. However it is done, there is never any interaction with the governmental film bureaucracy, and both sides act as individuals.

There, these works and their makers gain audiences, recognition and access to the market and resources -- Chinese independent films enter this realm from the day they are produced, so in a way, they are born international. From then on, it no longer has any relation to the environment which produced it.

For this reason, these works spread their international influence through these festivals. A select few of these works -- especially the ones financed internationally -- have opportunities for art house distribution, such as Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai's films, *Anyang Orphan*, *Crywoman*, *Blind Shaft* and *All Tomorrow's Parties* are mostly made on 35mm. Those personal handycam pieces have a less solid future; *Old Men* and *Fish and Elephant* are exceptions, having sold screening rights to ARTE. It is said that *West of the Railroads* will hit the European theatre circuit, but as it is in DV format and nine hours long, how will it enter? Other finer details are unknowable.

The acceptance of Chinese independent films abroad is a complicated process and topic. In talking of just the past two years, the vitality of these creations has attracted growing interest from western film festivals. One of the most striking examples was the 2002 Berlin Film Festival New Film Forum,

where the selection juror chose 10 mainland films for the segment “Focus China”, in which only one film was from the mainstream film industry, two thirds of the remaining films were in DV format.

Other international film festivals, that support Chinese independent filmmaking, are Rotterdam, Switzerland, Vancouver Canada, Pusan South Korea, and the Hong Kong Film Festival. The festivals Cinema Du Reel (Paris), Marseilles, Yamagata Japan and Amsterdam are important in the field of documentaries, and their important awards have been repeatedly won by Chinese films.

Mainland China’s newfound film power is continually being emphasized by specialized exhibitions. Between 2002-2003, Hong Kong Art Space, Macao Pozaiwu Art Space, the Pompidou Art Center in France and the Pusan Film Festival in Korea have all held Chinese independent film exhibitions. Some are historical retrospectives, and others are more closely focused on the current.

From the early 90’s until now, western film festivals provided Chinese non-system film works with the most important, actually the only real way out and room to prosper. They have developed a very close relationship, with the former serving as the strongest hope of the latter. This situation has not only remained to this day, it has become even more pronounced.

This has made the question of how and to what degree Chinese independent film has been shaped by western film festivals -- a topic that no one wishes to face. If it is brought up, any filmmaker will respond without hesitation: All of the effects are positive -- the meaning is straightforward: They have got everything they need there and have lost nothing.

As a simple and superficial reality, the pressure caused by this type of beneficial relationship is in that it makes further discussion difficult and unwarranted.

But if we can temporarily disregard this material aspect, the questions that must be asked are: Who is defining Chinese film, defining independent, which ones are more important, which ones are more valuable? How are these judgements being made, politically, artistically or other? Which is the most

important standard, and is it correct? In what context is it correct? To what degree are the selection committees' tastes and preferences affecting which films are chosen for the festivals and given awards? How do we balance against their personal preferences, make it public and gain the advantage?

It is not the job of this text to answer those questions, and it has surpassed the realm of the filmmaker's abilities. As it specifically pertains to current Chinese independent film, we cannot ignore that film festivals are a type of system that encourages and emphasizes certain things, but also creates constraints. On the one hand it constrains those apparently unimportant artists and works, on another side it constrains other dialogues.

#### ***4.5.2 The Localization of the Film***

The localization of film began around 2000, specifically evidenced by the rise of folk-based film viewing communities in every city. The most influential are Shanghai's Studio 101 (Shanghai 101 Gongzuoshi), Guangzhou's Yuanying Group (Yuan Ying Hui), Beijing's Practical Community (Shi Jian She), Nanjing's Back-window Film Watchers (Hou Chuang Kan Dian Ying), Shenyang's Free Film (Zi You dian Ying), etc. Some that are on the way are the Kunming Film Study Group (Kunming Dian Ying Xue Xi Xiao Zu), Beijing's Phenomenon Workshop (Xian Xiang Gong Zuo Shi); Chengdu, Wuhan, Changchun, and a host of smaller cities all have similar organizations. These community groups are all enthusiasts and film hobbyists, and in a broader sense could be called petit bourgeois and young intellectuals. They first came together mostly to watch the works of the great western masters, and they usually operate in an agreed upon bar. At the time, pirated DVD's and VCD's were already popular, and the creative atmosphere of domestic folk films was weak enough to warrant ignorance.

The Practical Community, owing to its location, was the first to take on the work of promoting independent film, specifically by screening one or two domestic independent features or documentaries each weekend, and inviting the director to speak with the audience. Non-system films began their entry into the

public realm in this manner.

A year later, in September 2001, Practical lined up with film groups in other cities, and the *South China Weekend*, based in Guangzhou -- possibly the newspaper in China that most emphasizes concern for reality and informative news -- joined with the Beijing Film Institute to hold the first Independent Film Exhibition; the key words for the event were “folk” and “independent”. It brought together over one hundred works made since 1996, including shorts. The exhibition lasted for a week and met a strong response from the audience and media. On the last day the event met with interference from the relevant authorities, and the planned events were cancelled. After a delay, they held a touring exhibition of ten cities (Shenyang, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing, Kunming, Hefei, Xi’an, etc), mostly in cooperation with local universities.

After the exhibition, a Beijing University student film group held what was dubbed the “first” homosexual film festival, covering the few homosexual films that existed at the time. This event was also stopped in the duration.

After 2002, Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou and other cities began holding screenings of all sizes and times as well as interactions with the filmmakers. The sites expanded beyond bars to include bigger, more formal spaces such as universities, libraries and bookstore event spaces. Art galleries and museums around the country also began exhibiting and screening all forms of films, as well.

Independent films have thrived without constraint in the above realms since 2003. Though an annual independent festival scheduled for Beijing was cancelled after the first day because of SARS, events were successfully held in Nanjing and Macao a few months later. In Guangzhou, Yuanying Group’s “Independence Day: Pearl River Delta Film Festival” brought emphasis to the creative power of independent films in the south.

It would be hard to avoid a loss of details if we spoke about every specific event. But they have created an atmosphere, expanded the folk influence of non-system films, and inspired countless youth to go make their own. In this atmosphere, the term “folk film” has been used more and more. Compared with

other terms, it isn't very penetrating, but it is enough to make a distinction between oneself and other things. Of course, because of the artists' identities and working methods, folk is appropriate for describing the works themselves. Most of these types of activities are either completely free or have a symbolic admission fee, so whether talking about the artists or the promoters, for the time being there is no tangible benefit to be had.

Most of these screenings use projectors and VHS players. If they have the right equipment, they can also play DV and Beta, but there have never been film screenings. It is not because the law clearly forbids it, but because of the equipment limitations, not to mention that many of these works do not exist on film within China.

There are many signs to indicate that society's toleration of these events is increasing. They no longer carry so many connotations that evoke irritation. Aside from the above forms of dissemination, more than a few legal film festival events could accept such vastly different films, but this difference suggests that they were intended to be ignored. It is hard to say, whether this is just the curators' tactics or a conspiracy, whether it is enlightened or stupid. Take for example the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST) held in Kunming in March 2003 and in 2005. The producers were a museum and the anthropology and film departments of a university. The festival was along the theme of its name, and it brought together all kinds of documentaries from various channels. Some were produced within the system, some were independent works, and some were student works. The international film festival held in Guangzhou in December 2003 established a domestic screening with the participation of the Yuanying Group. Though the artists were from diverse ages and backgrounds, their documentary work was discussed on the same level and in the same forum. From this we can say that no matter under what auspices they are carried out, it is no longer important, whether the screening content has been mixed together; pure and impure have no real essential difference here, their goal is contact. All that can be really seen is nothing more than that this society already has enough fissures; these types of films will continue to grow and survive.

### **4.5.3 Discs**

Aside from at public screening facilities, some non-system films gain dissemination through VCD's and DVD's. In the beginning, this sort of activity was carried out entirely underground. Some works, such as *Along the Railways* (Tie Lu Yan Xian), *Testimony from the Edge of Freedom* (Zi You de Bian Yuan), *Men and Women* (Nan Nan Nü Nü), and *There is a strong wind in Beijing* (Beijing de Feng Hen Da), as parts of underground culture, were burned into VCD's home-production style under the perquisite of an agreement with the filmmaker who used the producer's -- one music critic and another free youth with no particular career -- own routes to sell all over the country, mainly in large and medium cities. It is an effective method, only limited in that its scope is very narrow. If a film can sell 500 to 1000 copies, that is already quite an accomplishment.

Because of the entry of businesspeople in recent years, it could be said that competition has already appeared in this field, though it lacks any real strength. The businessperson may be short of a standpoint when it comes to the selection of specific works -- they aren't as underground, but they hold a larger market, distributed throughout many large and medium cities across the country. There is something else that must be explained: they reach those markets through legally published materials. It may be bizarre, but such cracks are everywhere. There are some films that are published in such a manner which do not appear on the filmography at the end of this article: *Rain Clouds Over Wushan* (Wu Shan Yun Yu), *Bumming in Beijing* (Liu Lang Beijing); the ones included are *Old Men*, *Heart.Heart*, *Figurants* (Qun Zhong Yan Yuan) and *Fish and Elephant*. But in this process, the filmmaker's moral economic benefits are extremely limited.

### **4.5.4 Dialogue**

Future practice will show, as a type of participation and involvement, the work of localizing films has had a positive effect on the expansion of Chinese

independent film's living space as well as the space of culture overall. This is a process of sowing seeds. It changed the whole handwritten dissemination method of 1990's independent film, which was entirely limited to the minute circles of intellectuals and incapable of opening to the masses -- at the time they were often referred to as "underground", which made sense; this term described a reality.

The work discussed above established a route for non-system films to connect with local audiences, though this so-called "public" is still rather limited in number and social standing in the overall scope of society -- most are artistic youth, liberal arts students and some media workers, but it has at least allowed independent film and related talk to become more than a dream. They timely became a cultural reality that could be shared, and as a part of this cultural reality, contributed as to their own ability.

Discussion of non-system films has distributed and infiltrated through different dialogue spaces, and the trends of theme differ with the nature of those spaces. As stated above, the work of localization has raised a young audience for independent film, and their experiences and critiques are often posted on internet BBS services. One of the longer-lasting and more influential BBS sites is "Back-window Film Watching" ([www.xici.net-http://b2467.xici.net](http://www.xici.net-http://b2467.xici.net)). Here can be found a collection of very young, but not necessarily professional, film buffs. Their critiques are often emotion based. What the internet provides is a free dialogue space, and one's orations there can be considered to represent only one's views.

With few limited exceptions, magazines and newspapers published by the national bureaucracies in charge of film, such as "China Film Digest", "Contemporary Film" and "Film Art" maintain strict unity with their higher authorities. They never take notice of these films; most of the media is of the same attitude and never waver. Comprehensive magazines will sometimes cover a few independent films alongside their coverage of big international movies, quickly making them a subject of public discussion. Some cultural magazines have set aside columns dedicated to introducing such films, such as "Art World"



and “Book City”. Fashion magazines have come to see DV as a sort of popular lifestyle. Though it shows a broad interest, the artists and their works are a bit labeled, at least that is the impression that it leaves.

A large part of the screening activities, mentioned above, are organized by student groups, and held in university lecture halls. But these films are far from entering the campus intellectuals’ fields of vision. As for what has been accepted into their critical dialogue and teaching system, Chinese film history ends off with the 5<sup>th</sup> generation filmmakers -- nothing whatsoever about this strain of filmmaking or the entire history of independent filmmaking in the 1990’s. This is not without exceptions, but a tiny amount of attention cannot change the overall waste. In over a decade, independent film has never been short of powerful works, but it has almost never enjoyed powerful or effective critique. The ineptness of critique is not solely due to systemic isolation, it is more the inertia of intellectuals becoming systematized.

Other forms of media, such as television stations, are extremely limited in their acceptance of these works. Some DV documentaries, such as *Along the Railways*, *Old Men* and *Figurants* have been shown on the DV segment of Phoenix Television (Hong Kong), and were re-edited by the requests of the segment; nothing like this has occurred in Mainland China, though in May 2002, CCTV (China Central Television) held a China Documentary Film Forum, and DV documentary films were included in the topic of Chinese documentary film. This shows in a way that within the system there are a few people whose attitudes are not completely ignorant of this.

Just as with the creation of independent films, the localization of film begins not with words, but with actions. The response of bureaucratic organizations towards these actions is still a form of prohibition. Aside from stopping film festivals, they also meddle in the activities of film cooperatives. Yuanying and Shanghai Studio 101 have all had this experience. In the past year, the relevant prohibitions have far from disappeared. Beijing’s Box Coffee House quietly ceased all folk film screening activities, and Yu Liwei (Yu Lik-wai), a Hong Kong filmmaker, was subsequently banned from participating in any filming

activities within China's territory. It has been said that the film authorities have created a directive regarding DV, but for now it seems like just a fairy tale. For most of the time, the system remains cold and silent as ice. For many filmmakers and their works, there are neither words nor actions, as if they do not exist at all.

#### 4.6 New Trends

Has this situation loosened? Has this isolation begun to slowly break apart?

Past examples of independent filmmakers moving aboveground, Zhang Yuan being a typical one, only happened after the artist had been involved in this work for over a decade. Now it seems that this process of role transformation is not as slow as before. By 2003, Zhu Wen, Wang Chao, Liu Hao and Li Yu had all either finished, or were in the process of creating their second films, all of them within the system. In what guise will they appear in the future? We have no way of foretelling, and can only wait for it to become a reality. What leaves people guessing is not the choice of which path to take, but whether along that path you face certain emptiness. Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke's scripts are now being audited for approval; in a recent meeting memo, the Film Commission leaders stated that they will not bear past grudges, but support the creations of young filmmakers for the flourishing of Chinese film.

Several new policy changes regarding film have appeared in recent days. As regards to filming, there has been a simplification of the script approval process; aside from in a few special topics, the producers now are only required to provide a general script outline to the Film Commission. This could mean that we may no longer face that situation, where Wang Xiaoshuai had to revise his script of *So Close to Paradise* (Bian Dan Gu Niang) for three years before he could begin filming. In the end, one of the officials said, "Xiaoshuai, I really have no idea how to change this script". After waiting for one year, Jia Zhangke got the response: "This film isn't suitable for filming at this time".

While a true classification system of film is far off in the distance and the power to investigate films remains in the hands of a few individuals, what will a finished film encounter in the examination process? It is impossible to foresee.

The questions of how film reform will be carried out and which elements determine each step are riddles; not just for each department involved, but for each person.

The maturity of independent filmmakers is in that they have finally come to realize that in the face of the system, collective power is more effective than that of the individual. In the same meeting, seven independent filmmakers and critics (see *Tianya Magazine*, first issue, 2004, writings from around the world) collectively produced a topic for debate, hoping that the film bureaucracy would examine works that hadn't been examined before, so that those films not breaking national laws would gain the right to be screened; hoping that the film examination system and the future classification system would be made public. They believe that the current examination system should be quickly replaced by a classification system (age, violence, sexuality) and hope that creative local films would receive policy protection. As an effort towards building a dialogue across a river, whether this type of method will survive and become effective will have to be put into practice to be proven.

#### **4.7 In Closing**

As to the domestic status and acceptance of independent film, the discussion above can only provide limited information. There may be different directions of understanding towards this information, but the author is in the midst of it. My personal experience is that there is space for expansion. If this space were to expand to within the system over the next years, none will be overly shocked or surprised.

What people are hoping for and believing in is not some sudden change one day, but that through the efforts of a generation, mainland Chinese independent film can attain its own vitality. This vitality is not buried within any of the above described phenomenon, its power is not something that anyone can pull apart or suppress. Some say that the democratization of film has already arrived.

## **Fifth Chapter: Jia Zhangke and His Films -- A Case Study regarding Independent Fiction Film**

In this chapter I will focus on the most representative Chinese independent filmmaker Jia Zhangke and his films in order to illustrate some exemplary characteristics of the fiction independent film by means of a case study concentrate on one individual filmmaker. As Jia is a very conscious filmmaker and played a role of mouthpiece of the independent filmmakers, I would combine my interpretation with some interviews (5.1), and then focus on interpreting three of his films in order to illustrate the cinematic characteristics of current Chinese independent film (5.2.2 - 5.2.4).

### **5.1 Self-understanding**

The interviews quoted below were made by me, in April, 2004, Beijing. Jia's words are quoted in full length in order to pay homage to the polyphony of voices. The main topics are concerning: the generation concept, the difference between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Generation, and the specific style of documentary aesthetics in independent fiction films.

My first question was about his new film entitled *The World* (Shi Jie). This is his first film about city: two dancers who come from a village to work in a Theme Park called "The Window to the World".

Without going too much in detail, Jia talked about the narrative structure he made use of in this film:

"Following the two protagonists as the film's main thread, other figures are emerging like in a panorama show. I tried to make use of a new narrative style being as light as a dragon-fly brushing against the water<sup>66</sup>. The film was shot in Beijing and Shenzhen, [in Southeastern China, near Guangdong, Kanton] has the two big cities as background."

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<sup>66</sup> An idiomatic expression we find also in Chinese Music and Calligraphy, evocating that one does a familiar work with ease.

Though Jia was born in 1970 in Fenyang, a small rural town in Shanxi province, his family was not of peasant origin; they were sent to the countryside because of his grandfather's experience as a surgeon in Europe. By looking at Jia's films, all set in Shanxi, and listening to his words one perceives that his rural upbringing has had a profound effect on his aesthetics.

Compared to *Xiao Wu*, the new film's background space moved from the village respective small town to the big city:

“To change the background space is not an essential change. The basic problems and predicaments we experience right now, are almost the same overall in China. It may be Shanghai, Guangzhou or Shanxi, everywhere our vision of the world is rooted in our rustic origin...

This is China's reality and truth. Everyone in the streets has a strong rustic origin, even in the cities. It is true that there is a big gap between the thinking mode of the agricultural society and the other one of the information era. Many people might know how one should live in a modern way. However, when we come to deal with specific issues or personal relations, we often and easily turn back to rely on our roots. Everybody is experiences a process of growing up, during which his capacity of realizing and thinking gradually grow as well. This is what I called ‘gap’ in our life. For me it's interesting to live in such a gap [between rustic origin and urban existence].”

When I asked him about his understanding of the generation concept, I was expecting precisely to know what factors helped in building up the shared collective characteristics of the independent filmmakers, and formed the generation phenomenon. Jia mentioned two factors: the DV revolution and the change of ideological trend after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989:

“This had to do with the fact, which young filmmakers eventually obtained their access to filmmaking as medium of art. Filmmaking formerly was an officially monopolized art. Few artists were able to present themselves and express their experiences onscreen. But since the end of the 90's, the idea of independent filmmaking has been deeply anchored in the mind of the younger generations. It was DV camera made this possible. Thanks to DV, normal people obtained their access to filmmaking and a new generation of filmmakers came into being.

On the other hand, it has to do with a great shift of the ideological trend happened after 1989, in Chinese society too. The elite culture experienced a set back thus its legitimacy was questioned and debated. In those days, all the cultural domains found themselves in a critical state. This is another cause led to the establishment of the new independent film.”

Both DV revolution and the crisis of ideological shift caused the arising of generation consciousness, that the younger generation filmmaker were eager for self-expression and bring their own life experiences into film:

“Under such a circumstance, many young filmmakers entered into the film circles. Naturally they grasped immediately their experiences of growing up and represented it into their films. Take me as an example: It is not, as some critics stated, that I am the first Chinese filmmaker who selected the small town as a space for aesthetics. It’s just the opposite: A young man like me who grew up in this spatial background, at the end of the 90’s finally got the chance to represent himself through filmmaking. It is very natural that we bring our life experience together with us.

This is not an individual task and success, but due to the common effect of economic and cultural development.

Today I became more and more conscious that the filmmakers of our age are the result of this era and we carry with us many limitations of this era too. China has drastically changed since 20 years. The emergence of our generation is a phenomenon just like to the arising of Xie Jin’s<sup>67</sup> and Zhang Yimou’s generations. It is not only the growing up of a single author, but of a whole generation in a certain time.”

When I asked him, if he considered himself as one of the 70’s generation<sup>68</sup>, his explained the generation phenomenon as a phenomenon of shared collective memories or, in other words, a phenomenon of the collective subjective:

“This is a matter or fact. From the point of view of collective memory, we, as Chinese, share many common memories or characteristics of different epochs. For instance, pop culture and pop music definitely are part of the common memory of our generation. We have experienced the society’s great changes: from autocratic to pluralistic, from poor to rich in goods, from the revolutionary style to the self-representation in terms of art form. All of this, today, is part of our shared collective memory which shaped who we are.”

Concerning the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> generations appeared alternately, I asked, if the new generation and the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation were rivalling with each other for the power of discourse. Jia answered:

“If there is a rivalry between us, it is a natural fact. But as far as I know, most film directors of my generation did not share any common consciousness to fight against the fifth. This is not the starting point of our work; on the contrary, the starting point is the desire deriving from our experiences in order to represent ourselves by means of cinema. If such a desire, such a lust results from my inner world, then I almost have a kind of physiological reaction to express it. If it is true that, compared to the older generations, we concern ourselves with more different themes and different narrative structures, it just happened naturally.

I am sure, that the aim of my filmmaking was, in the beginning, rather blind. I neither knew to whom I was telling something nor what effect my film might have. I think, such an individual state of mind suited my way of filmmaking. Rebellion might be very problematic: The danger is, against whom I am rebelling, into which I am turning.”

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<sup>67</sup> One of the most representative 4<sup>th</sup> Generation directors.

<sup>68</sup> He was born in the 70’s.

However, Jia affirmed the difference between the 5<sup>th</sup> and his generation. The difference is embedded that, the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation focuses on “legend” concerning history but the younger independent generation focuses on daily life respective subjective experiences:

Once, Chen Kaige said: “Film should be legend!”

But Jia put it in this way:

“Some 5<sup>th</sup> generation filmmakers ignore daily life, despise daily life and only manipulate their films in order to make a legend out of history. The new filmmakers don’t try to be the spokesperson of their generation anymore. Nobody has the right to speak for the others. One has only the right to represent oneself, and, basically, one can only represent oneself. There are not so much legends, but everybody of us does have so many his/her own experiences.”

While recognizing his contemporary filmmakers and himself benefited from being labelled as new generation, Jia was worrying at the same time about the problem of how to get rid of the generation label in order to become an individual author:

“However among my fellow filmmakers there is a big limitation, which is the continuity of our art creation. Seen from the point of view of my generation, the problem is not, that we accomplished some films so far, but, if we could maintain our creativity to make more films in the next decade.

As long as time is changing, we have to become mature too, so that we may still be extremely sensitive to what is going on in our life and be able to represent it in our films. It is a great challenge for us filmmakers between 25 and 30 years old today, to reform ourselves from being a temporary result into some strong and determined individual authors.”

To focus the subjective inner experiences could be the right approach to achieve the goal of becoming an individual author:

“I remember when I was student of the Beijing Film Academy, I witnessed that some students used the “peasant” to abuse each other. Hearing that, I was very surprised and hurt, because I myself have a strong rustic origin...

But later I came to realized that, it was the abuser who behaved rude and uncultivated. Since then, I found the value of my own [rustic] experience too. This experience had been ignored by the [elite] filmmakers and had not been respected by the elite film system. I had even the impression that some Chinese filmmakers didn’t want to look at this society’s rural reality nor did they respect that. This is in fact a habit of this business since a long time and the existent film system did not encourage filmmakers to look for the voice in their hearts, since this voice absolutely has something to do with the reality. That is why, from the beginning, I dissociated myself from the system. I had seen so many films, but there was none directly corresponding to my experience. And then I

thought, let me make a film myself.

At that time, I had no idea of film, quite different from most of my fellow students coming from the cities rich in information. And it was not like today, that you can easily buy and watch DVD films anywhere. You couldn't even buy books on film in my home province. The masterpieces in the film history were to us only known from hearsay. After I got in Beijing Film Academy, on every Tuesday and Wednesday, when I was queuing for get in the National Film Library to watch the so called "internal films", I felt quite unfair. Film resources were in those days a dessert for only a few people. The monopoly to dispose film resources had changed into a privilege. Masses' right to make film and to represent themselves in film was not recognized. When a few people squash into the system, they just became the new "elites" and again stick up for maintain new legends. I always ask myself why film cannot become a medium of self-expression just like literature or painting which you can choose by yourself. From this time on, I accepted the idea of independent filmmaking and knew vaguely in which direction I would make my own film."

If a filmmaker wants to express his thinking, his own sensations and life experiences, he cannot be far away from a documentary style which, in fact, is another characteristic of the independent generation, specifically Jia Zhangke:

"What was important to me was to bring my own emotions into the film. The more I am making films, the less I want that something happens in the film. It is so trivial to live in the world. This is a challenge for the audience too, to challenge their expectation and habit of film receptivity."

About why documentary style film language became a part of the individual film movement, is explained by Jia:

"After 1949 Chinese filmmaking was dominated by revolutionary realism. Nearly all films were highly dramatic and expressionistic, particularly the 'Eight Model Ballet' [of Cultural Revolution]. In fact, revolutionary realism isn't realistic at all. For a long time, Chinese film had been poor in realistic form. Up to my generation, I have been trying to abandon the impact from revolutionary aesthetics. How come that current aesthetic pursuit returns to realism, documentary aesthetics and documentary style? Basically, it is a rebellion against revolutionary literature and art.

Reality can be depicted with different methods, even with surrealism... For a long time we have been poor in realism. That is why our aesthetic taste naturally tends toward realism; that is why we always emphasize the truth; that is why we make use of realism and documentary aesthetics to represent reality.

Talking about my own taste, I am particularly interested in the method of expressionism. I wrote a lot of poems in a style of expressionism, but every time when I came to make a film, I make use of the method of realism, in order to depict a realistic situation or story.

Sometimes, that is difficult to balance, but if you are affected by something in reality and want to talk about it, you think you should describe it with nothing but the method of realism -- just being seized by the restlessness of the society.

I have been influenced and moulded not only by film but also by various [other] forms of art and artistic styles. During my studies, I was specifically enthusiastic about



the Russian montage aesthetics<sup>69</sup> and studied that devotedly. I appreciate these films. But it's strange, as soon as I am making a film I am departing from my original interest."

Asked why he is departing from his original interest, the topic of ethics and social responsibility was coming up:

"It is the potential morality which influences the filmmaker. If I deal with a difficult problem, for instance the theme of death, or migrant workers got licked up by cities, I feel limited by morality. That is why I cannot make use of post-modern and surrealist methods. In one word, this is my own taste: I just don't want to use dramatic methods to picture a realistic problem full of sorrow and misery."

Last but not least, I wanted to know, how did Jia Zhangke's experience of film reception influenced his thoughts about film:

"What I most looked at, in the beginning, were Hongkong films. Those days I was in Middle School and watched Hongkong films almost every day, but just as a fan, never thinking that I might want to work as a film director. Only after I saw Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, the idea came to me that I would like to make a film of my own. Our cultural life was narrow then and very poor in events and films, that is why these few experiences have become a shared memory. For instance, my fellow students in the Beijing Film Academy in 1985 have all been especially enthusiastic about the film *Once Upon a Time in America*, compare to my enthusiasms about *The Yellow Earth*, just because we people from Shanxi get used to eat farinaceous food and like to eat noodles. In those days, we could not choose our film life just as we could not choose our food. But now, we are rich in cultural life, everybody has his own taste and can decide which films he wants to watch. Being different, is based on diversification."

Talking about the influence of watching other people's films, we also touched upon the potential influence of Hou Xiaoxian (Hou Hsiao Hsien), the internationally acclaimed Taiwanese filmmaker:

"He is like a filmmaker of the silent film era and has established a new original film aesthetic style. His method conforms exactly to our Chinese mentality and aesthetic taste.

So it's very natural that we have been influenced by him just like some [early] filmmakers had been influenced by the brothers Lumière and followed their tradition of non-drama narrative and some others were those influenced by Méliès<sup>70</sup> following his tradition concentrated on drama narrative. One can judge in this way, what Hou Xiaoxian has created with his films. Hou's model is the extension of traditional Chinese culture. When I watched his film for the first time, I felt strange and yet connected. I felt strange, because we had never seen before in our films that a filmmaker depicted time

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<sup>69</sup> What he meant here are filmmakers like Eisenstein (1898-1948) and his contemporary Potoschkin.

<sup>70</sup> Georges Méliès (1861-1938).

and life from his individual perspective based on his own experience; I felt connected, because his method of filmmaking fits our landscape painting, our ethics.”

One might be surprised realizing Jia Zhangke’s diversified self-understanding: first, to be part of a generation different from all former generations of filmmakers; second, to desire to become an individual author beyond the limitations of generation and time; and third, to feel connected with a modern filmmaker from Taiwan because of a shared Chinese traditional culture.

Far from advocating a constructed hollow Chineseness, Jia is obviously self-conscious that an individual always embeds in changing situations respective collective identities he shares with others: No matter how individualistic one may be, one has a lot of common with those of the same generation due to the shared memories; and that is true, as well, for the shared memories within the same cultural tradition. For an artist, like Jia Zhangke, Chinese traditional landscape painting is an important and highly appreciated shared cultural memory, just like for the filmmakers concerning themselves with marginalized and victimized people, Chinese traditional ethics might still be a point of reference.

## **5.2 Interpretation**

After some general remarks about Jia Zhangke as a independent filmmaker (5.2.1), I would like to introduce the following three of Jia’s films *Xiao Shan Returning Home* (Xiao Shan Hui Jia) (5.2.2), *Xiao Wu* (5.2.3), and *Platform* (Zhan Tai) (5.2.4).

### **5.2.1 General**

When it comes to describe Jia's aesthetics, the critics and scholars seem disinclined to compare him with the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation forerunners. Instead, they summon an assortment of international auteurs as points of reference. Kent Jones describes Jia's use of lengthy camera as being indebted to Hou Xiaoxian (Taiwan)

and Yasujiro Ozu,<sup>71</sup> while Jonathan Rosenbaum links that same quality to the films of the Hungarian filmmaker Miklos Jancso. Jones also associates Jia to Jean-Luc Godard and Robert Altman in what he describes as a common ability to encapsulate the life styles, dreams and behaviors of their respective generations, while others invoke Raul Ruiz to explain a quality he sees in both Jia and Ruiz's depiction of the empty lives of youth. Jia himself cites Hou and Ozu, as well as Robert Bresson, Federico Fellini and Vittorio De Sica as having influenced his work.

Without denying these international influences on Jia's filmmaking, I would like to stress in my interpretation the Chinese context and what I have never seen before in the history of Chinese film. Since the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the late 1980's (when Jia's film *Platform* takes place), tremendous socio-economic changes have occurred in China, generated primarily from the urban centers along the coast, but gradually rippling into the rural, inland areas, such as Shanxi, where Jia comes from. The rural areas are not only geographically but governmentally, economically and even culturally distanced from the sources of change. As depicted in Jia's films, the process of social reform acquires a surrealistic quality of cultural incongruity. A favorite example of mine occurs in *Platform*, when a farmer chastises his son for wearing skin-tight bell-bottoms: "How are you going to do any lifting in that?" The imposition of cultural forces on an unprepared rural community can be discerned in the film Jia claims to have inspired him to become a filmmaker, Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984). This state of incomprehension, of being unprepared to deal with cultural reforms and the new rules they require, is a theme that resonates throughout Jia's work.

As mentioned above, some film critic claimed that Jia Zhangke uncovered China's rural town.

Indeed, all of Jias' films take place in the small and medium rural towns of Shanxi Province. The films *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* are produced in his home town Fenyang and the latest one in Datong, Shanxi Province.

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<sup>71</sup> Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963)

In both films, we recognize the characteristic atmospherical setting of small rural towns in Today's China. It is for the first time that this world had been described in a film. Seeing the people, the streets, the buildings of such towns in these films I asked myself, how it came that this world was unknown to me until today, although I should be acquainted with it, by reading books and watching TV. It cannot be possible: The existence of this world had been forgotten by former filmmakers or simply been taken as a beautiful aesthetic background, full of "orientalistic" sentimentality. Jia's films, however, are speaking a documentary film language. Using natural light, hand camera, lengthy shots, the films display the life world (Lebenswelt) straightaway and in detail. We are confronted with the geographical and cultural atmosphere characteristic of these small and middle-sized rural towns in the midst of China. This was what I am familiar with in life. What was unfamiliar to me, was the specific description in Jia's films.

And what do these films tell us? Let's take *Xiao Wu*, for example, the story of a pickpocket -- if we want to call it a story what is going on with Xiao Wu, his people, his life, and his emotions. All is displayed as a slow presentation of daily life.

No legend! Rarely dramatic incidents! To think about politics or history is not his interest. What Jia is interested in, is to display reality.

Jia talked, during the interview, about his feelings regarding what he called "China on the spot":

"In the 90's, China's economy, society, and culture experienced a magnificent turning. Time had stepped into a chaotic, unsettled, unruly period. Each of us had been exposed to many probes. In this critical period, a point of no return, I had the feeling of being in a chaos, as if in war.

In this 'China on the spot' I feel like experiencing a surrealist atmosphere, since the whole country and the whole society are developing tremendously fast, pushed forward by a strong and unconceivable driving force. People are bearing a pressure never experienced before. You can't imagine anymore how human relations had been before, and in which way we are supposed to handle problems now."

And these feelings "chaotic, as if in war", "surrealistic" helped him to cherish the hope,

"...that departing from my own simple feeling, I would be able to make films like

*Xiao Wu*. I hope to depart from my own creative working, I would be able to come back to 'China on the spot'. I am documenting what I see, hear and think; I am documenting what happens in this very moment in China. I love the word 'to be on the spot'; it gives me the feeling to be at hand where I am."

### 5.2.2 *Xiao Shan Going Home* (*Xiao Shan Hui Jia*, 1995)

Jia's need to depict this cultural bewilderment permeates the screen in his startling one-hour short *Xiao Shan Going Home* (*Xiao Shan Hui Jia*, 1995), which he completed as part of his examination at the Beijing Film Academy. Xiao Shan, played by Jia's film school classmate, Wang Hongwei, is an unemployed cook living in Beijing. The film follows him, as he plans to return to his rural hometown for the Chinese New Year's Festival: He accompanies a fellow home-towner to shop for gifts to bring with them and asks a friend for help in buying train tickets. These seemingly harmless episodes are rife with unexpected obstacles, leading Xiao Shan to encounter frustration and even violence. This simple story of a country boy stuck in the "big bad city" may have autobiographical undertones for the director. It also embodies the experience endured every year by hundreds of millions of Chinese who, like Xiao Shan, have migrated from the countryside into the huge urban agglomerations<sup>72</sup> in order to seek better living and working situations. Jia makes the connection between Xiao Shan's personal odyssey and the broader social conditions by presenting the full text of a newspaper article about the New Year mass-traveling phenomenon as an intertitle. It is one of several remarkable intertitles throughout the film, the only film to use such a device in Jia's career to date. Most of the titles are reproductions of the texts found in everyday Chinese life: The first is a resume listing the protagonist's vital statistics, as well as his career aspirations; another announces, in an officious tone of literary narration, that Xiao Shan is visiting his friend to watch television, which is followed by a title of the TV program schedule for the evening. Unlike most student films that seem intend to show off their bag of tricks, this experimental technique uncovers an everyday

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Christian Harnischfeger's Master thesis about the phenomenon of migrant workers, just finished at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Chinese Studies, at Kiel University as well as Sonia Schoon's dissertation thesis in progress about Shanghai.

China that has never been depicted onscreen, while humorously mocking the officious tone of both, media broadcasts and high literature, by placing them in the context of a mundane existence.

*Xiao Shan Going Home* provided Jia with an opportunity to cross borders when he screened it at the 1997 Hong Kong Independent Short Film & Video Awards, where it won the top prize. There he met Yu Lik-wai (Yu Liwei), who would serve as cinematographer in all of his subsequent features. Together with Yu's production partner Li Kit Ming, they collaborated on Jia's feature *Xiao Wu* (1997) which would establish their international reputation as being among the most important filmmakers working in China at present.

### 5.2.3 *Xiao Wu*

#### **Synopsis:**

The protagonist Xiao Wu was a thief living in a small town in Shanxi Province, Northern China. An old friend of him, Xiao Yong, who had been a thief but later successfully promoted to be rich business man, was supposed to get married soon. Xiao Yong did not invite Xiao Wu to join his wedding, which made Xiao Wu very sad and felt discriminated.

Once more, Xiao Wu wanted to steal in order to offer his friend an honourable gift in form of money, what is common in China. When Xiao Wu was about to present the red envelope, his friend refused telling that he did not want stolen money because it might damage his reputation.

Xiao Wu left disappointedly and then jumped into a Karaoke bar. A *xiaojie*<sup>73</sup> working there tried to enjoy Xiao Wu with her songs. In this evening, Xiao Wu was especially generous. Later, the *xiaojie* accompanied him for a walk on the streets in the night full of Karaoke songs. They chatted with each other like old friends.

The next day, Xiao Wu went to visit the *xiaojie* at her home, which located in a town quarter where many cheap prostitutes live. She was ill and lying alone

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<sup>73</sup> A waitress and prostitute, lit. corresponding to the German word "Frollein".

in bed. Xiao Wu's visit surprised and enjoyed her. They sat on the bed, while chatting awkwardly out of words. At this moment there was an unusual calm between them. Spontaneously, she started to sing again, she was shy, pale and without any make-up...

In the town, meanwhile, there was officially launched a movement against thieves. More and more thieves got arrested. The gang, Xiao Wu was the head of, was still "working" under this difficult condition. He wanted to buy a ring for this *xiaojie*. After the theft, he threw the stolen identification card in a mail box, like he always did. Wishing to hand over the ring to *xiaojie*, he came to find out that she had gone to another province with a rich *laoban*<sup>74</sup>...

Due to the movement against thieves, Xiao Wu returned home in village in order to go underground. In spite of his family taking him as a "good for nothing", he presented the ring to his mother as a gift. But later he saw that his sister-in-law was wearing it. He got angry with his mother and they began to quarrel. Finally, his father kicked him out as an unfilial son.

In the end, Xiao Wu was arrested. In the last scene of the film, he was handcuffed against a pole downtown. As the camera was zooming away, Xiao Wu was minimized into a point in the midst of the spectators.

### **My personal note:**

Shot on 16mm and made for 400,000 Chinese RMB (equivalent to US\$50,000), *Xiao Wu* has the peculiarly endearing quality of inventing and evolving itself on the fly, in its use of narrative conventions and its cinematic techniques. While the film stays resolutely focused on the title character, a pickpocket, and the city of Fenyang in which he conducts his business, the anti-hero's milieu is constantly shifting, revealing new aspects of his personality, just as the film style takes on new aspects from one sequence to the next. Two of the film's main themes, the act (and the art) of stealing and the transient possession of identity (personal, cultural or aesthetic) become entangled over the course of the film's meandering narrative. The story keeps shifting in tone and narrative, from a terse

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<sup>74</sup> Businessman, lit. boss..

Bressonian study of pickpockets to a more character-driven story of broken honor among-thieves, from a romantic interlude reminiscent of Godard's *Breathless* (1959) to a rustic family drama whose staid observations on farm life recall a Frederick Wiseman<sup>75</sup> documentary. Through this series of unpredictable episodes, Xiao Wu's manifold personality is reflected in a rich variety of social contexts and personal relationships: pickpocket, craftsman, organizer, bully, exploiter of juvenile thieves, lonely schoolboy romantic, rebellious son.

Xiao Wu's negotiation of his various identities is symbolized by an assortment of objects that change in significance, as he ventures from one milieu to another. A ring intended for his girlfriend is presented to his mother after he is jilted, only to land on the finger of his sister-in-law as a "gift from the family"; he buys a pager to keep in contact with his girl, only to have it sound off in the midst of a pickpocketing attempt. His inability to reconcile his identities leads to his loss of all of them: When he finds the ring on its unintended wearer, he reacts vehemently against his family until he is banished from the house; the pager of his handy, the last vestige of his failed relationship, leads to his capture after its ill-timed sounding.

If Xiao Wu's identity is in constant revision and negotiation, one can say the same for Jia's aesthetic identity in this film. Mirroring Xiao Wu's engagement with multiple identities, Jia's technique employs different approaches towards his camerawork, mise-en-scene, and narrative tone from scene to scene. One could say that Jia assumes his alter-ego's identity by "stealing" cinematic styles from a host of influences, such as Bresson, Godard, and De Sica. He even explicitly "steals" the soundtrack from John Woo's *The Killer* to provide a surreal ambience for an extended middle sequence set in a public square. But as with his protagonist, Jia's working with multiple surfaces ultimately leads to the abandonment of all of them: in the end, both the filmmaker and his hero are left utterly naked, exposed and devoid of artifice. The film's project, described by Tony Rayns as the stripping away layer after layer of his loser's armour until he's

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<sup>75</sup> A contemporary American documentary filmmaker who is famous for films like, *Hospital* and *Zoo*.



left as "naked" as a person can be is made explicit in a scene midway through the film, where he is shown standing fully unclothed and alone in a public bathhouse. Outside of the context of any social interaction, he starts to sing gleefully off-key, and it seems that for a fleeting moment, he has found his true self.

But the story does not settle for this moment of being satisfied as the one that defines Xiao Wu's identity. Instead Xiao Wu's ties with friends and family are dissolved until in the final scene he is left in a startling and cinematically rich moment of "nakedness" for both, the director and his hero. Apprehended by the police, Xiao Wu sits handcuffed to the side of the road, branded as a criminal. A crowd gathers and, within the realm of the story, gawk at Xiao Wu. The fabric of the film's reality starts to tear when it becomes apparent that the crowd -- consisting not of paid extras but passers-by -- is staring at the movie crew as well as the "prisoner". The camera swings to assume the same perspective as Xiao Wu, close to the ground, gazing up at the gawking crowd, so that both, the camera and the actor -- and the act of cinematic production itself -- have become public spectacles. Again, the idea of "stealing" informs the work of Jia's camera. It cops a gaze at the crowd, some of whom turn away, while others stand transfixed by what is looking back at them. The power of the camera's gaze brings to mind a variety of gazes in and around Chinese society: those of the government, of neighbors, and of foreigners seeking an inside look at an exotic world. This moment of mutual gazing brings attention sharply towards us, the audience, locating our own act of spectatorship within the spectacle. We are implicated in a collective urge to look, and are captured in a moment that inverts the positions of spectator and spectacle so that they become one and the same in a panoptic society that describes China, the world, and the cinema.

#### ***5.2.4 Platform (Zhan Tai), the monumental experience of time***

*Xiao Wu's* success on the global festival circuit led to a partnership with Japanese director Takeshi Kitano's production company. Jia's expanded international funding base allowed him to film his most ambitious project to date, *Platform* (2000). The film charts the span of a decade in which the adolescent

members of the state-sponsored Peasant Culture Group of Fenyang face the immense economic and cultural reforms of the 1980s, leading to their privatization and reincarnation as the All-Star Rock n' Breakdance Electronic Band. The lengthy time span covered in this epic results in a sprawling, yet dense work that can be interpreted in many ways: an exploration of the role of the artist in society; a critique of the late 20th century ideals of capitalism, freedom and popular culture, especially for those living in emerging economic regions who are ill-equipped to handle the realities behind their allure; a meditation on the progressive -- or regressive -- relationship between history, economy and culture; and an examination of the problems of personal fulfillment and creative individual expression in a society long governed by communal relationships and family responsibilities.

If Wang Hongwei's role as Xiao Wu is an onscreen correlative for Jia's directorial identity as an artisan/thief, stealing candid glimpses of Chinese life, in *Platform* Wang's character Cui Mingliang personifies Jia as an aspiring artist, seeking a mutually fulfilling relationship with his Chinese audience. It's telling, then, that most of the onscreen spectators in *Platform* regard the performances with baffled looks. That entanglement is reciprocated by the overwhelmed and frustrated troupe; for much of the film, they have great difficulty expressing their inner desires and frustrations; they find their most direct emotional release when the music starts to play. The bewilderment of encountering the inexpressible is also discernible in Jia's camera-eye -- the film's uniqueness has much to do with how it captures the mysteriousness of empty spaces, not only of desolate industrial landscapes but of things left unsaid between friends and lovers. For the most part, the rest of the film is a cautious procession of emotions suppressed by environmental confusion and daily necessity, of increasing burden of responsibilities that heap steadily and unremittingly as these children enter an adult existence of subdued ambitions and diminishing returns.

The most emotional outbursts involve the playing of pop songs whose sounds and voices convey the hope and dreams of a world of disenfranchised youth. Such an outburst occurs when a young girl (Zhao Tao), who has quit the

group to take up a tax collecting job at her father's behest, is sitting at her desk at a late hour, when a song on the radio suddenly provokes her to give herself away to the music and dance in utter rapture.

These elements contribute to *Platform's* grand achievement, the monumental experience of time: how periods in one's life seem to pass at a glacial pace, until they inexplicably vanish, and one has slipped irreversibly into a new stage of being. In *Platform* Jia uses rhyming patterns to mark the effect: The sound of a train whistle, the lengths and looks of hairstyles and the increasingly distressed cadences of pop music are all elements that recur in varying forms through the course of the film. It is with *Platform* that Jia joins the ranks of contemporary filmmakers like Tsai Ming-liang, Hou Hsiao-hsien (Hou Xiaoxian) and Wong Kar-wai, who have all been at the vanguard of analyzing the qualities of cinematic time and its relationship to time in one's non-cinematic experience.

#### ***5.2.5 The Significant Effect of Music and Pop-Songs***

One more word is necessary about the music in Jia's films.

If Jia's intent is to restore reality to China's cinema, his objective is perhaps most fully realized in the film's evocative soundtrack. Over the opening titles a woman chatters in an unidentified dialect, without even Chinese subtitles to interpret her words; the experience is as alienating for most Chinese audiences as for non-Chinese. The audience listens to the sound of her voice without understanding, which becomes an act of understanding how foreign one's own culture can be.

Jia's technique of aural alienation acquires an explicitly personal significance when he himself appears as one of Xiao Shan's friends during an extended dormitory party sequence, and (bolstered by several rounds of liquor) his character unleashes a torrent of words in Jia's native Shanxi dialect. It is as if Jia is personally compensating for seven decades of Chinese movies that have been dubbed in the standard Mandarin dialect in accordance with Government language policy. Jia's unapologetic use of dialect, comparable to Hou Xiaoxian's groundbreaking work with multiple dialects in Taiwanese cinema, identifies him

as a cultural minority in his home country, which paradoxically speaks on behalf of a majority of Chinese -- particularly those in rural areas -- who speak in their own local, non-standard tongues. Jia's universal insight is thus rooted in his insistence on the uniqueness of the local.

But if acknowledging both the strangeness and the familiarity of the diversity, that exists in one's own country, involves finally giving screen time to indigenous subcultures, there's also the matter of acknowledging cultural influences from abroad.

Again, the realm of sound becomes the cultural battleground, with songs like The Carpenters' sugary 70's hit "Yesterday Once More" (a song that is very popular among students throughout China), a muzak version of Edith Piaf's "Hymne à l'amour," and 90's MTV hits "Runaway Train" by Soul Asylum and The Crash Test Dummies' "Mmm Mmm Mmm Mmm" serving as potential cannon fodder for the viewer. Their presence may merely be incidental; Jia's technique in his films often involves letting his camera and microphone pick up whatever happens to be present. It evokes the awareness that the world we live in is saturated with cultural influences. What's most fascinating about these selections is how well they service the themes of the story. The Carpenters' nostalgic elegy for a more innocent past, Soul Asylum's plaintive ode to derelict lives, and the Crash Test Dummies' anecdotal ballad of inexplicable ironies all connect to Xiao Shan's experience.

Jia's cinema is a dynamic, unsettled process of interpretation and dialogue across cultures, both between and within national borders.

It happens very often, not only in *Xiao Shan Going Home*, that we are listening to pop songs, in the Karaoke scenes or as background music. This is not accidental, in my opinion, since pop music is an unalienable part of this film of which Jia makes use in order to build up a specific immediate atmosphere, the atmospheric ambiente of the last ten years. Songs and music are the signature of different spaces of time.

Different from the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation placing their films in a legendary historic past, Jia Zhangke likes to locate his films in the contemporary historical

background, thus describing the time and space of the filmrolls. These scenes can commonly be seen today everywhere in China, in the cities or in the countryside.

As part of pop culture during the last ten years, pop songs were introduced into modern life in China and played an important role. First, there were the pop songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan which moved the people. In the most cases, these songs talked about love, but not in a traditional or conventional way, but in a modern comprehension, more open, more expressing own experience and feeling. That is why young people were very sensitive towards them. Under this impact, countless and fruit-bearing songs came into being in Mainland China, as well. Such music extended fast and everywhere: in the village as well as in the towns and the big cities one listened to the same music. For the young rural people, this music carried along the atmospheric feeling of modern life, a feeling originating in the cities. Listening to this music one could jump across the gap between countryside and city. Hence, this music was a huge common ribbon connecting village and town.

## **Sixth Chapter: YUNFEST – A Case Study on Contemporary Chinese Independent Documentary since the End of the 90’s**

In this chapter, I will focus on YUNFEST as a case study to reflect what was achieved in the second phase of the independent documentary movement since the end of the 90s. The first section deals with some of its various aspects in the context of the development of contemporary Chinese film (6.1), before I select two films for a deeper analysis. (6.2)

### **6.1 In the context of the development of contemporary Chinese film**

Since the end of 1990s, in the name of independent film movement, a great shift of the whole Chinese film discourse is becoming more and more obvious:

In the domain of fiction film, the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation and independent filmmakers went upon the stage, then became Chinese film’s tower of strength rather than the former 5<sup>th</sup> Generation.

In the realm of documentary film, arose the so-called new documentary movement.

Both phenomena originated in an inspiration, which is to rebel against and escape from the mainstream Chinese film discourse ruled by official propaganda, political ideology and great narrative, in order to pursue a kind of independent spirit, an author-oriented free and individual expression. However, this wish could only be fulfilled by means of independent production. In the actual context of Chinese filmmaking system, “independent” contains many layers of meaning.<sup>76</sup> Most of these films reached the audience and distributed firstly through international film festivals.

As a concept labeling a group/generation of different filmmakers, “independent” is often overlapped and mixed up with the so-called “6<sup>th</sup> Generation”, “new documentary”, or “underground” filmmakers.<sup>77</sup> However, an “independent” film doesn’t guarantee an independent soul and consciousness.

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Chapter 4.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Chapter 4.

Many independent films were only independently financed. I do not want to deny that all these concepts are valid to a certain extent, but the connotation of any specific concept should be clarified when we make use of it. Here, when I talk about an independent film, at least it should not cater to official and mainstream ideology, but in pursuit of an individual expression.

YUNFEST is the abbreviation of Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival. Before introducing it as a successful case of an institution disseminating independent documentaries (6.1.4), I would like to outline three predominant aspects of YUNFEST: the prerequisite of the digital revolution (6.1.1), the phenomenon of multivocality (6.1.2) as well as an organizational aspect: networking (6.1.3).

### ***6.1.1 The Significance of Digital Revolution***

In the second chapter of this study, I have argued that in the midst of the 90s independent filmmakers tried to identify and differ themselves from their forerunner 5<sup>th</sup> Generation.<sup>78</sup> In the third chapter, I also demonstrated the crisis which the inside-system TV documentary filmmakers experienced in the midst of the 90s. Thereafter, from the second half decade of the 90's till now, the inside-system TV documentary makers and the outside-system independent documentary makers together initiated the so called New Documentary Movement paralleling what the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation did in the realm of fiction film. One more word is necessary, however, in order to understand both phenomena we should put them under the light of the digital revolution to be observed.

When the chef-director of the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST) Guo Jing<sup>79</sup> pointed out that this issue is embodied in the technology revolutions, he accompanied with his point some vivid life stories: Time changes, in the early 80's the mono vocal of Cultural Revolutionary film was replaced by the time of television; soon his family happily graduated from the time of black and white TV set and then embraced a colour one; he leads the

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. Chapter 2.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Chapter 3.1.

reader into the midst of the digital age. The time of “artificial image”<sup>80</sup> started much earlier, it was during the 90’s that people worldwide came to realize the tremendous impact of this predominant virtual construction of cyberspace:

“Oceans, flying fish, towering skyscrapers, bikini-clad beauties and tropical fruit -- all reaped from the vastness of cyberspace at the click of a button. All this to pleasure our last necessary organ: our eyes. Eyeball economics, visual culture, DV fashion, video games and all the electronic information of the net are making the rest of our body redundant. Even war and adventure seem made of virtual images, and face to face communication seems to have dematerialised.”<sup>81</sup>

As long as the digital technology keeps changing our life, to some extent, it also democratizes this world in terms of filmmaking. It offered filmmakers another cheaper tool to record and document the changing world -- DV or Digital Video Camera --, particularly in China, where the need is vast but filmmaking had been controlled by the official media. Now, with digital camera, everyone, not only professional filmmakers but also amateur, can pick up a DV camera whenever he/she wants to make a film without big budget or relying on any power institution. Indeed, you can call it a revolution which profoundly changed this country’s visual expression in terms of quantity as well as quality.

With the emergence of DV camera after the mid-nineties evolved the diversification of documentary expression. For the new generation of filmmakers of the late 90’s, the impulse to resist autocracy had already lost its driving power. Nor did the creators any longer orbit and appear around television. From the realm of avant-garde art, from the students of film, art and media to those with no professional ties whatsoever, it was those youths with the simple desire for a personal cinematic expression that emerged as directors. They brought the experimental spirit of avant-garde art and the exploration of film language into their documentary works, and with attention to form and the individual, they could squeeze out of the focus on society and politics. At times, it seems that there is a more direct impulse to rebel against form. But as for the topic, the focus on marginalized groups has maintained its old direction, and even moved further along: sexual identity, ethnic minorities, disabled groups, lowlifes,

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<sup>80</sup> Guo Jing, in the preface he wrote for the *Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival Brochure*, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



miners, sex workers, landless peasants and all sorts of labourers; the scale has broadened and the face of society covered has become vast.

### ***6.1.2 Multivocality: Reality, Utopia and Nostalgia, Collective memory***

#### **Reality:**

This fast changing environment, however, induces a sort of anti-trend: It seems as if the more we are overwhelmed by this virtual world surrounding us and the more we are risking to be drowned in artificial images, the more we are longing for face to face contact with each other and with the outer world. This leads to a call for making sure that we are still alive. Yang Kun, one of the Yunnan Province documentary filmmakers of the late 90s as well as one of the coordinators of the YUNFEST, has put this experience into the following words: “Life itself is a process which I must often make myself believe I possess as my own.”<sup>82</sup>

The more anonymous and anaemic the virtual creatures are -- the more we yearn for subjective and intense sensations. No wonder, the main incentive of these late 90’s documentary filmmakers is to record one’s own subjective reality. In this sense, they share the same motivation with the late 90’s fiction filmmakers: the individual subjective dynamic in life.

Thinking about new documentary film, the first sentence occurs to me is: “My camera doesn’t lie!”

It could be carved on the tombstone of this generation of filmmakers as the epitaph. In their vocabulary table, words such as “truth”, “real”, “reality” or “authenticity” appear constantly, too. Though, world widely due to the change of paradigm, the death of objective truth has been announced and been updated with the emptiness of postmodernism. In the context of Chinese documentary discourse, however, to legitimize the validity of “truth” or “reality” and then be enabled to seek for “reality” with cameras, is still the most critical obligation for most filmmakers living in this historical time. People living here just awoke

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<sup>82</sup> “Every Creature under the Sun”, in: *Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival Brochure* 2003, p. 35.

from the lingering dense fog filled with nationalistic ideology, traditional ethics, and idealism. Therefore, the most critical need for them now is to regain, to re-identify, and to re-represent the social truth and personal (private) truth.<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously, these filmmakers are self-reflexive enough to know about the situational and subjective access, when they are representing social truth and not only private truth.

Thus, I roughly divide the present Chinese documentary films into 2 categories:

Seeking for (uncovering) social reality and seeking for (uncovering) private reality. The seeking for social reality documentaries deal with the topics such as exposing/documenting social problems or social events.

Internationally acclaimed contemporary Chinese documentaries like *West of the Railroads* (Tie Xi Qu) and *Before the Flood* (Yan Mo) can be put into this category. I will discuss more *Before the Flood* as the sample film of this category in this chapter (6.2.1);

The seeking for personal reality documentaries deal with topics such as family history or personal experience or privacy. The internationally acclaimed Chinese documentaries such as Yang Tianyi's *Old Men* (Lao Tou) and *Home Video* (Jia Ting Lu Xiang), and Hu Xinyu's *The Man* (Nan Ren, see 6.2.2) can be put into this category.

A very important variation of these films focus on sub-cultural or marginalized people and social groups, such as avant-garde artists, rock 'n roll musicians, drug-addictives, and homosexuals etc. Why films about marginalized people have been so popular? On the one hand, they've been overlooked or denied by the mainstream or official culture. Their existence and presentation had been absent in official media; on the other hand, the existence of these social communities implies that present Chinese social lives mirror all alternative lifestyles and uproars of any modern society. Moreover the representation of such lives in form of documentary film enables present Chinese art to deal with all sorts of modern topics in form of film art. Thus, corresponding China's modernization, Chinese film gained also its legitimate and updated modernity.

### **Utopia and Nostalgia:**

More films since the end of the 90's take a current tense approach to reflect on the changes taking place in Chinese society and walk in the shoes of the people involved and their fates. In the third chapter, I described early new documentary movement's resistance and deconstruction of the old utopia, namely that of political ideology, which includes traditional socialism and the imagined utopia of the West during the 1980's.

At the same time when the old utopia was deconstructed and laid to waist, the opposing force contained the search for a new utopia. I thought at first that Duan Jinchuan's film, *Barkhor South Street No.16* had already declared the bankruptcy of travelling afar in search of utopia, but I realized that this energy had never been cut off; in fact under new conditions it has found new power and extension. Tibet has been a symbol of a far away place both separate and aloof from modern civilization; its significance has not dissipated; rather it has gathered new power as a critique of modern civilization and culture.

This trait is not only embodied in symbolic Tibet, but has emerged in the meaning of the countryside of China in general, which stands as an alternative to the city. It has been hotly excavated, displayed and eulogized by a new generation of directors. One of the outstanding directors at YUNFEST 2003, Ji Dan, went out that year in search of utopia just as Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan did. She learned the language of Tibet and lived for a long time among a local Tibetan family. Her films, *The Elders* and *Gongbu's Happy Life* are just the result of such a pilgrimage way. Ji Dan chose to use the word "happy" to wrap up the daily lives of those Tibetans. Coincidentally, Jiang Yue's film that showed last time was called *This Happy Life*, and was about a rail worker who faced the pressures of unemployment. In the selection for YUNFEST 2005, a piece by a young 1980's director, *Blossoming in the Wind*, has inherited this tradition, telling the tale of the director travelling along with a senior Tibetan monk and two disciples on their pilgrimage to Mountain Kawakarpo, in Yunnan. In the film they sing and dance; it is overall very light-hearted. And a film that

chosen for the youth category even makes direct usage of this title. The film, *Cicheng's Happy Life*, in the director's words, is:

“... the story of old man Cicheng's six- member family in a village called Jidi (prosperous land) in Yunnan's Diqing Prefecture, told against the great backdrop of the market economy. It expresses the Tibetans' diligence, bravery, honesty and intelligence...”

What I want to say is a kind of level of being, that level of being where life is lived under the state of nature.”<sup>83</sup>

This type of trend is reflecting, from the margins of modern civilization, that the meaning of life as we are pulled into globalization and modernization has not been lost; on the contrary, it has gained new strength in the persons of this young generation of directors. Just when the city and modernization are no longer the source of utopia, Wu Wenguang from *Bumming in Beijing* to *The Sea as Home* ends up not just a parasite of the urban utopia, but also destroying the West as a source of utopia. In the face of this destruction of modernization in the imagination, homesickness or nostalgia for the countryside that stands as a refusal and digression from modernization has gained an extension of meaning. From Ji Dan, who began filming in the late 80's, to the new generation with their DV cameras, though leaving the city and going to the countryside in search of a spiritual utopia is a continuation from the 80's. Today it is more a show of respect for those living in the countryside or in hard times and an expression of their worth. That is why I would refrain from labelling these films as “exoticising” or “othering”.

One such film won an award at YUNFEST 2003: Sha Qing's *Wellspring*. At YUNFEST 2005, there were also many such films chosen for the competition and youth categories, such as *In the Background*, *Guirong Theatre*, *White Tower*, *Great-Grandfather* and *Floating*. They cover all kinds of topics and a wide range of styles, but they all express an affirmation of the vital and emotional power of people through the idea of the lowly and tempered life; it could even be called a poetic affirmation. In this type of film, the religions and customs of traditional life are renewed as objects for exploration. The director of *Between Life and Death* grew up in a closed off village rife with traditions of shamanism. As an

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<sup>83</sup> According to my festival diary at the YUNFEST 2005.

adult, however, he was never content in the modern metropolis with the modern way of life. Eventually he went home to seek out his family's shamanic history. The film embodies that feeling of seeking out one's roots and the ambition of completing the definitive film of an ethnicity. Another film that was selected for the competition category is a young director's first work, *Crow in Winter*. With an uncontrollable slow pace and method, the director uses the camera to complete his infatuation with the countryside. Zhang Yaxuan says that this film has the appeal of the author's films; that's true, regardless of all the immaturities.

### **Collective Memory:**

Since more than twenty years, China never stops amazing the world with its incredible speed of changing mainland China's material, economic, social, and cultural face. And here lies another concern of the late 90's documentary filmmakers driving them to capture what is disappearing. Thus, their concern for history is quite different from the television documentaries and official media.

"With the skin gone, what can the hair adhere to?" This is a Chinese old saying refers: "A thing can not exist without its basis". Hence, without shared cultural memory, people's collective identity exists not any longer. That is why many of documentaries turn the attention to vestiges of tradition in smaller towns, even more often in the countryside. To some extent, it implicates a latent nostalgia for the past utopia.

However, looking at the urban mega cities, such as Shanghai, modernization expands with an appearance that the world has never seen before, in terms of architectural, demographic, economic, and social metamorphosis. Nobody knows the aftermath, even if many alarming side-effects can already be discerned. And here lies a third concern: to sculpture the life of marginalized people, victims of the high speed modernization.

The independent documentary filmmakers are engaged in documenting marginal people's condition of life logically extends to China's many national minorities. In fact, a great bulk of the documentaries regards cultural uniqueness respective cultural diversity.

The result is a multivocality as the outstanding characteristic of the late 90's documentary scene. The multiplicity of perspectives is, however, not limited to take stock, but is supposed to gain influence on China's future in form of visual proofs.

### ***6.1.3 Networking***

The desire to impact upon China's future development has one important precondition which is not yet satisfyingly fulfilled: The documentary filmmakers obviously have difficulties to reach an audience.

Screenings, very often, take place in cafés or private homes. This is especially the case with more unconventional films. If it is true that mainstream media programming in central and local TV stations are dominated by propaganda and advertising, an increasing number of local TV stations now have their own more or less ambitious documentary programs even newly opened documentary film studios.

Talking about strategies to reach a broader audience, a very promising development of the last years is the increasing cooperation between these central and local TV stations on the one side and documentary filmmakers respective their main forum, Film Festivals on the other side. Meanwhile other institutions are joining in, thus enlarging the space for cooperation and impact, for instance in Yunnan Province the Provincial Museum and the Provincial Library and in Guangzhou the Government-sponsored commercially oriented festivals, to name only two in the south-eastern and south-western border regions of China. The successful case of the Yunnan cooperation is worth to be learned from: Since Museums, existing all over the country, are specifically appropriate for cooperation in this field as soon as they start to extend their focus from material culture to intangible culture, from human artefacts to Visual Anthropology in its broadest sense, including photography and film.

Networking is, again in Guo Jing's terms, "creating a space for dialogue", not only between institutions and independent filmmakers, but between festival organizers and the people, the expected audience:

“Leaving the big talk and wheeling and dealing aside, festival organizers are opening the theatre doors for people from all walks of life -- from the blue collar worker to the cadre -- to see the fruits of their painstaking efforts and experience for themselves what documentary films are. In some cases, viewers are realizing there is a form of cinema that is closer to their lives than blockbusters. Overall, such exposure to documentary film has raised the level of public awareness and even encouraged some to use it to speak out. That in itself is an achievement.”<sup>84</sup>

### ***6.1.4 YUNFEST: A Successful Scene of Dialogue and Dissemination***

#### **Introduction Activity**

Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST) came into being in 2003 as a breakthrough to serve as a multifaceted platform of communication among filmmakers, visual artists, cultural researchers, community activists and the general public. The festival is operated by a civil organization dedicated to independent documentary filmmakers in the country and has drawn a large number of entry films from all over the country -- 93 entrants for the first edition of YUNFEST in 2003 and 98 for the second one in 2005. Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival consists of five parts:

Part one is a communicative platform for some outstanding documentary filmmakers from different regions and different cultural backgrounds from the country. It forms a seminar dedicated to introduce alternative approaches in terms of documentary filmmaking, which serves as an opening visual forum for the other parts of the festival. Part two is an assembly of young filmmakers from film academies or local television stations, from autodidacts or indigenous filmmakers. The assembly is for the viewing of young filmmakers' first video works and for the interactive exchanges of experience of filmmaking with other filmmakers from different channels. Part three is a retrospective of documentaries, which the YUNFEST Organizing Committee chooses to be screened to show respect to pioneer filmmakers who dare to express the ongoing social changes in their own personal talents and courage. Part four is called Media M $\acute{e}$ langes and dedicated to the introduction of worldwide outstanding documentaries to reflect the experimental spirit of documentary filmmaking in

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<sup>84</sup> Guo Jing, *ibid.*, p. 8.

recent years. Part five is Participatory Video, aiming at opening up a dialogue among visual specialists, project coordinators, villagers and the general public. The Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival is to be integrated into a local community by renting a living compound and introduce the festival into the daily life, the festival participants are supposed to encounter filmmaking by personal engagement in the progress of the festival.

### **Summary of Project Goals/Objectives**

The Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival is an interactive engagement in filmmaking, with the aim of increasing the reach of documentaries made in China and to promote the dissemination of films and filmmaking in China and the neighboring Great Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries. Documentary films made by different filmmakers reflect the region's huge differences and similarities in regard to regional cultures, socio-economic development, natural environment and history. The main goal of the festival is to add to the available media and learning institutions an open forum reflecting the diversity of real life, offering information otherwise not accessible, and showing artistic means of expressions and thereby contributing to an alternative education.

The Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival opens eyes by offering a face-to-face learning experience about different ideas and methodologies by documentary filmmakers dealing with current challenges. Through discussion of individual experiences, impressions, means of representation, and ideas, the YUNFEST is dedicated to facilitate changes through the work of independent filmmakers, mainstream media workers, academics, DV amateurs and the ordinary people. The specific objectives are:

- To increase awareness and knowledge voiced via multifaceted visual media in China.
- To encourage participation in and reflection on current social issues by new approaches.



- To even the path for documentary films to be screened in local communities and to increase the impact and understanding of documentary filmmaking in different cultural contexts.

### **Rationale**

To increase awareness and spur positive social changes, it is essential that visual information is screened and viewed by as many people as possible. Documentary films shouldn't start from a research or commercial production project and to end up in an inaccessible video library. Documentary filmmaking should open up to the rapid social changes of our time; there should be a wider choice and access not only to diverse techniques and theories, but also openness to other approaches to viewing reality generally given in documentary filmmaking education or curricula in film academies.

In China, the mainstream media mainly focus on the preservation of a historical theory of society, idealization of reality and marginalization of many social groups and communities. Anthropological films' pioneer efforts reflect on current social changes. Ethnographic and documentary films as well as visual art help introduce new perspectives and methods of learning.

### **Some historical aspects concerning film activities in Yunnan**

The festival was set in motion in mid-2002, yet some of the ideas behind it had been fermenting for some time. Related events were already being organized for some years, such as the film screenings held by the Compound Eye Circle in 2000, the Digital Video Film Festival organized by the Yunnan Art Institute in 2001, or the Kunming Film Study Group set up by students of the EAIWA, which convened every week for two years. In 2002, the visual events in Kunming began to flow together, beginning with the setting up of the Provincial Museum Exhibition Evenings. Following this, the Film Study Group, Yunnan Provincial Museum, the Institute of Nationalities and the Yunnan Art Institute collaborated for a four-month "Kunming Visual Forum", thus providing a platform for

Yunnan documentary makers.

The origins of Yunnan documentary can be traced back much further, however. I remember last year chatting to Alison Lewis from England over dinner, and learning that her father had worked as a missionary in Yunnan during the 1940s, and had himself shot a short film on Kunming. The paper she presented in YUNFEST 2003 was also spurred by that conversation. A few days ago, Andy Wilkins, a friend from England, showed me a few dozen old pictures of Yunnan from a French missionary library. In fact, over the past few years there have been many discussions and exhibitions on “Pictures of Old Yunnan”, uncovering a corner of China’s documentary images.

As for the remaining majority of pictures still sleeping in archives and stores throughout the world, I hope that, once sorted out, they will become the starting point of a real understanding of “Images of Old China”.

From the 1950’s, China’s documentary making was incorporated into the (new state's) campaign of nation-building. Following the investigation on minorities’ socio-history the “Chinese Historical Ethnographic Film Series”<sup>85</sup> were undertaken to record ethnic minority life. This project continued until the 1970’s. Although it follows certain views and principles no longer endorsed by academia, filming continued for two decades and left an enduring record of China in the midst of great changes, and provided priceless records of ethnic society and history in Yunnan. Because of this, these pieces receive ever closer attention from anthropologists the world over. They are the foundation of Chinese documentary, and their artistic and theoretical value is truly irreplaceable. Two of the pioneers of this period are the Yunnanese Yang Guanghai and Cai Jiaqi.

The 1980’s saw the development of films with a greater concern for personal expression and preoccupation with cultural uniqueness. Very personal pieces were created during this period, regardless of whether the directors were from central television stations, or whether they operated on the periphery. A

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Karsten Krüger; a duplicate was produced by the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, Göttingen (IWF).

turning point was the collaboration of Yunnan University and Germany's Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, Göttingen (IWF) from the late 1990's and the subsequent creation of the East Asia Institute of Visual Anthropology (EAIVA)<sup>86</sup>. Students were offered the possibility to make their own films in digital video, and theoretical research and structural facilities in Yunnan progressed tremendously.

Today, Yunnan is a centre of documentary production. Friends joke that if you stand by Lugu Lake<sup>87</sup> for one year, you will see a hundred film crews scurry past you. The cultural heritages as well as the environmental diversity of Yunnan provide extraordinary resources for mass media image creation, and these images in turn become substance for academic research. All the specialists involved in Yunnan, whether from Yunnan University, Yunnan Art Institute, or the Institute of Nationalities, and the NGO's involved in myriad projects throughout the province, through their attention and commitment to rural and minority life and culture, are all contributing to an outstanding cultural environment. Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival is itself a product of this unique environment.

The director of YUNFEST, Guo Jing was once asked: "There must be a visual festival every other day, why make yet another one?" This reminded him of a letter he received from the American documentary maker Somi, introducing his own Kentucky-based group, Appalshop:

"The Sharing of geographical distance from traditional centers of cultural production (New York / Los Angeles here, and Beijing / Shanghai over there for instance) as well as the presence of distinct cultural and / of ethnic entities' histories and identities are two of the foremost shared characteristics of these two countries. A discussion of these issues, comparing and contrasting the experiences, especially in the light of recent globalization and expansion of media and information technology would be very interesting for us."<sup>88</sup>

Somi nudged him in the right direction: Because we are far from the centre, far from the influential broadcasting nerve centers, we need an original

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<sup>86</sup> See further down.

<sup>87</sup> It is situated on the border between Sichuan and Yunnan Province and is famous for its beautiful landscape and its inhabitants, the Mosuo minority.

<sup>88</sup> According to my personal talk with Guo Jing.

perspective. The region south of the clouds (Yunnan<sup>89</sup>) is a border area. Neither in the political nor in the commercial mainstream, it provides its impressions from the margins. This allows for a space where a multiplicity of perspectives can coexist, and different voices can be heard, different voices allowing for the development of real dialogue. “Different voices” and “dialogue”: These can be taken as two central themes in the Visual Festival.

Over the past few years, film exhibitions have become commonplace, following two basic directions, either avant-garde or official. Both have their advantages and disadvantages, but they lack communication between them. Hence there is a necessity of a middle ground allowing them to come together, a framework in which they may dialogue constructively. A museum is uniquely placed to play this role, because it is not subject to the pressures of commerce. It also has a role to play in bringing together official culture and popular culture. In other countries, museums often organize ethnographic film festivals. In China, however, museums tend to focus on “tangible” culture, and not on “intangible” culture of the kind portrayed in ethnographic film. Yunnan Provincial Museum would like to explore these prospects and try to take advantage of the museum's privileged place in society.

From the outset, our aim was not only to organize one festival, but to set up a system, a framework. We drew upon our experience in setting up intercultural projects and followed principles of fairness, openness and cooperation, and a methodology taken from project management. This approach attempted to integrate museums, universities, art groups, web design companies, TV stations and filmmakers, involving them in a same project. This integration forms a network in which the participants can both contribute and develop their abilities, stimulating their inspiration, and favoring the circulation of visual productions. From mid-2002, preparations were made in an atmosphere of dialogue, debate and concrete action. This kind of atmosphere made collaboration easy and productive.

China is in the midst of momentous change. Documentary making serves as

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<sup>89</sup> *Yun* means cloud and *nan* means south.

a kind of tool, which we may employ to influence in some small way China's future direction. Visual records give voice to the many differences within society, and preserve the memory of what would otherwise be lost.

Yunnan Province, in south-western Chinese borderlands, is the province where 26 of China's 56 national minorities live. Not only because of this special historical and geographical situation, the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (Yunfest) became one of the most flourishing scenes of the late 90's documentary film, other reasons can be found in the words of the Shanghai documentary theorist Lü Xinyu<sup>90</sup>:

“The Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Forum is the only such forum in China to focus primarily on folk documentary films. This makes it as precious as the peacock. Here, all directors, both from within and without the system, are equal. Film is their only means of expression, not some kind of god-given right. As the juror of the first edition of Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Forum, having participated in all the viewings and forums, I feel that I've truly seen the new developments and the new powers of Chinese documentary film. It became a challenge to existing theory in a big way.”<sup>91</sup>

The theoretical challenge Lü Xinyu is referring to, might be the result of the specific conjunction of research and practice in doing Visual Anthropology, which is the approach of the leading initiators and organizers of YUNFEST. This alliance of research and practice is not very widespread in the world, since most universities' Departments of Ethnology and Anthropology are busy with nothing but theory while cameramen and editors are only involved in practical filmmaking.

This alliance started in China, precisely in Yunnan Province, in 1999, when some of today's YUNFEST initiators and leading organizers became M.A. students at the East Asian Institute for Visual Anthropology (EAIVA), affiliated to the Department of Ethnology of Yunnan University in Kunming.<sup>92</sup> Barbara Keifenheim,<sup>93</sup> professor for Ethnology as well as filmmaker, was the person

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Chapter 3.

<sup>91</sup> Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival 2005, p. 169.

<sup>92</sup> The EAIVA originally was initiated as a sponsoring project of the German Volkswagenstiftung, in its initial phase from 1999-2000 under the management of the Institute of Scientific Film (IWF) in Göttingen and in its consolidating phase from 2001-2004 under the administration of the Center of Chinese Studies at Kiel University.

<sup>93</sup> Today professor at the Department of Cultural Sciences of the Viadrina University in Frankfurt/Oder where, again, she was initiating a students' program of Visual Anthropology in

responsible for the curriculum. She emphasized the specific characteristics of post-modern Visual Anthropology in contrast to text-based Anthropology criticizing the widespread semantic reductionism in the latter and propagating research with the camera. In other words, documentary films are supposed to picture concepts, theories, and problems of a globalizing world, thus contributing an anthropological discourse about human behaviour through the Visual. Othering and Exoticising should be abandoned in favour of dialogue and self-thematicizing<sup>94</sup> and Visual Anthropology should be changed into Anthropology of the Visual, focusing gestures and mimics, body and movements, emotions and atmospheres.... Li Xin, one of the EAIVA students, is memorizing the formative influence of Barbara Keifenheim during his study at the EAIVA with the following words:

“Barbara Keifenheim, one of the best teachers I have ever met, in her last lesson before graduation told us: ‘You are not making films for me, but you are making them for yourselves.’ Suddenly I felt the teacher’s concern was no longer for my work but for myself.”<sup>95</sup>

Besides screenings on various European film festivals<sup>96</sup> where three films were prized, all of the EAIVA student films have been showcased at the last two editions of Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival.

The following statistics might illustrate the popularity of Yunfest. In 2003 respective 2005, out of 90/98 submitted documentary films 22/15 had been selected to compete for the three prizes. Both editions of festivals were characterized by a surprising coherence of themes and a multitude of voices, referring to the topics of biodiversity, cultural pluralism, and ethnic coexistence, according to the specific geographical and historical situation of Yunnan Province.

Yang Kun, former EAIVA student, when talking about the philosophy to be

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theory and practice; cf. Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival Brochure 2003, pp. 64-65, 89.

<sup>94</sup> Jean Rouch

<sup>95</sup> Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival Brochure 2003, p. 65.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. After 2000: Göttingen International Ethnological Film Festival, Freiburg Ethnological Film Festival, Leipzig Documentary Film Festival, The Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) International Festival of Ethnographic Film, University of Durham, England, Amsterdam International Anthropologic Film Festival.

followed by the YUNFEST, touches the difficulty of film selection and awarding:

“... We are upset about our decision to have the films compete among themselves because we intended to avoid any value judgement. For us it is never a question of wrong or right, we want to exchange ideas, open the floor for discussion and stimulate initiative, originality and creativity. If Yunnan is valued as a land of great biodiversity, cultural plurality and ethnic coexistence, then it is a place of many colours and great fun! The Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival should follow this philosophy and we planned it to be an occasion on which documentary filmmakers can get together and enjoy each other’s company.”<sup>97</sup>

## **6.2 Highlight Documentaries of YUNFEST 2005**

Below, I will only focus on the documentaries selected for the Competition Program in YUNFEST 2005 to reflect the thematic concerns, the explorations in film language and narrative achieved in the second phase of the independent documentary movement since the end of the 90’s. After discussing some general aspects of the YUNFEST’s documentary cinematic scene (6.2.1), I would like to dwell in some length in the analysis of two films illustrating at the same time two distinguished concerns of the late 90’s independent documentary makers, which are the seeking for social truth/reality (6.2.2) and the seeking for private truth/reality (6.2.3).

### **6.2.1 General**

A total of fifteen films have been selected for the competition category of the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival 2005. These works hold within them the energy that has accumulated in Chinese documentary film over the past two years. It is not that each individual film is itself cutting edge, but together they have a testimonial power. In the face of these concrete films, use of the word “progress” is not at all unfounded.

Maybe the term “domestic (Chinese) documentary film” is a concept, a bit too broad and obscure. But as for the Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival, it is almost self- evident that what has been excavated and gathered are those forces

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<sup>97</sup> Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival Brochure 2003, p. 36.

that have been scattered among the folk realm. That these works do exist in China as a fact attests that the most vibrant aspects of Chinese documentary films are those that were born and nurtured in that realm, rather than depending on some institution or some groups of career documentarians. And “that realm” is always some nameless, intangible, unimaginable and inconceivable definition of spheres; they are spread out along a large enough territory, and are tolerated in the omnipresent life. Whether due to curiosity, chance or some sense of responsibility, the camera has become immersed in the lives and behaviors of the people, and has grasped onto their very breath. These fifteen films just happen to have emerged at the same point in time. If we see them as a unified whole, then through them we can get a basic idea of the stage and level (including existing problems) to which domestic documentary films have reached: Because they are sufficient to disseminate strongly emotional renderings of the realities of society and man's survival in similar images of this time. They also extend upon the DV documentaries of the late 90's and the turn of the century: the most precious grassroots spirit.

Then, what is the meaning of this word, “progress”? Progress means an inheritance of the past and, transcending the present, a move towards the future. It implies more than mere continuation, it also contains other threads, hinting at the possibilities of growth in even more directions. In this respect, these fifteen films are equipped with that type of power. The majority of the works, from *Before the Flood* (Yan Mo) and *Floating Dust* (Xuan Hua de Chen Tu) to *Guirong Theater* (Gui Rong Xi Yuan), *The Man* (Nan Ren), *Floating* (Piao), *In the Background* (Bei Ying) and *White Pagoda* (Bai Ta) could all be examined under the strictest lens of realism, while they also embody an extension of that vision. If people get the feeling that this vision is widening, that is because the scenes being presented are constructed of more specific, partially realistic and much more deeply detailed narratives. But they haven't created another isolated world that exists beyond the average life experience; it's more like the parts of these experiences, just too trivial to be integrated into the Grand Discourses about reality. Sometimes they have developed a different type of narrative for the



same subject. This is the inclination of the documentary practices in this period. Perhaps it's lack in awareness but distinct enough.

Though not in the strictest sense, the films *Between Life and Death* (Sheng Si Zhi Jian), *Blossoming in the Wind* (Feng Jing) and *Song of Nanlin* (Nan Lin Cun de Ge Sheng) could be considered ethnographic in nature. They have established the relation between documentary films, the land, and the way of life for those who live off of it. The first two films demonstrate that the traditional belief in religion or spirits is the most important organizing component of a way of life. Spiritual beliefs, however, are not what these films emphasize. They first and foremost set out to document the lives of the people living in these areas. This is not ethnographic research either; it more resembles an expression of nostalgia and respect for these declining or disappearing entities. The heavy emotions classify these films as poetry or song, though the poet or musician never appears or is heard from in the film. This depiction can also be applied to *Crow in Winter* (Han Ya), which filmed an ancient hamlet along the Beijing-Kowloon (Beijing-Hong Kong) Railroad. If it wasn't the already non-existent hometown of the filmmaker, why would he be so enamored with every little aspect of the place? His vision has filled the film with a rarely seen mark of a filmmaker as a auteur.

A piece that requires special attention is *Gai Shanxi and her Sisters* (Gai Shanxi he Ta de Jie Mei Men). This is a historical testimonial based on the filmmaker's ten-year investigation and aide regarding the issue of comfort women<sup>98</sup> for the Japanese soldiers during the war. These old women are already in the twilight of their lives, and when they can finally utter their broken memories out in pieces, it is about the body. Their bodies, first humiliated then disgraced, carried the burden of shame for an entire nation, and this is one of the reasons that their stories can now be told. It is always the responsibility of documentary film to use fieldwork methods in unearthing history and connecting with memory. The body is taken as evidence, and the truth must be sought out of

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<sup>98</sup> For the Korean comfort women, cf. Koreanische Frauengruppe in Deutschland u.a. (Ed.).

the forgotten and indifferent. But in the context of current Chinese image-making (or each every aspect of cultural manufacture), it's always relegated to the realm of the forgotten and the covered. In this sense, this documentary regarding the history of the War against Japanese Aggression would be expected an important beginning.

### ***6.2.2 Seeking for social truth: Before the Flood (Yan Mo, 2004)***

2004/Color/DV/150min

Location: Fengjie, Chongqing

By: Li Yifan & Yan Yu

#### **Synopsis:**

In order to build the world's largest hydroelectric dam, the area surrounding the Three Gorges will be turned into the world's largest reservoir. Beginning in 2003 and to be completely filled by 2009, the flooding will wipe towns, villages, fertile land, archeological sites and natural sights located along the Yangtze River off the map forever. Even Fengjie County, famous for being the home of the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai, will disappear under the waves. This film faithfully follows the whole devastating process as the advancing waters submerge Fengjie County in the first trial flooding in 2002. It relates the story of an ex-volunteer soldier owner of a coolie hostel who is about to lose his livelihood and the story of a Protestant parish in decline because its members are slowly moving away. It also relates the stories of the cadres in charge of the resettlement and the subsequent erupting disputes and emotional turmoil. *Before the Flood* is both directors' first film.

#### **Festivals and Awards:**

Wolfgang Staudte Award, Berlin Film Festival, 2005

Cinema du Réel International Documentary Film Festival, France, 2005.

**Li Yifan: Director**

Born in 1966 in Chongqing, Li Yifan studied at the Central Drama Academy in Beijing from 1986 to 1991, after which he worked in advertising in Guangzhou. In 1996, he returned to Chongqing to become a writer. From 2000 to 2001 he was the Editor in Chief of Yu Zhou Fu Wu Bao. In 2001 he began working in documentary film production and co-founded Fan Yu Studio.

**Yan Yu: Camera**

Yan Yu was born in Chongqing in 1971. He launched his career as a photojournalist at the Chongqing TV Station News Center where he worked from 1994 to 1998. Afterward, he moved on to Beijing and worked in documentary and advertisement photography. He began working in documentary film production and co-founded Fanyu Studio in 2001.

**Director's note:**

Before I went there, many of my friends suggested that my film would capture the beauty and sentiment of Fengjie, so-called "the town of poetry". Some of the most-recited poems in Chinese history were born there, the Three Gorges is the poem of the nature, and the local natives create poems everyday. I said, sure! The poetry is the key of my arts and will be the theme of my film.

But, when I really was there, the thing I was not sure was how the poetry could react to the tears of an aged Korean-war veteran, and depict the everyday life of a gang of miserable cargo-movers who live like dogs there. Everyone was talking about one thing, house. House is the only thing beyond all things, and only value above all values. Even in the church, each chant that has ever been sung echoed for house.

Poverty and unemployment prevailed, social justice and civic rights were often forgotten, dog-fighting against each other by all kind of means was the only rule left in the ruins, and life goes on there. However, I had to deal with the fear growing in my heart, when each attempt of my camera failed to spot the resumption of human dignity before the flood.

After on-field shooting, I went back to Chongqing for post-production editing. My friends asked me, how was it going there? Have you captured the sentiment of poetry? I said, no! They asked, why? Why not? I was in a bad mood, and answered: Since now, I am an enemy of all poetry!

**My personal note:**

This documentary is based on a huge canvas, that is to say the Three Gorges Dam Project. But the documentary's depiction did not go directly to tell us how great or complex the project was, but focused on an old town's disappearance. This documentary's shooting started from the spring festival in 2002 and finished at the end of the same year. During this period of time, the filmmakers documented the whole process that this old town was tearing down. Loaded with 147 hours footage shot within 10 months, they started the editing and postproduction 6 months later. In 2005, they worked out this 180-minute documentary. .

*Before the Flood* attributes to two filmmakers' teamwork. Apparently, the way how they divided each other's work and how they collaborated with each other contribute this documentary a sense of order. As an extreme realistic documentary, which can be called classic, *Before the Flood* is like some other contemporary documentaries -- each of them a piece of lens: it focuses on people or event in a specific scene and shows us changes and struggles, it tries to open a window to our times. And, the real purpose of opening this window is to let us look deeper, and further background emerges. In this sense, each of this kind of documentary is a metaphor. However, what makes *Before the Flood* more distinctive among them is: It is not satisfied with drawing only a sketch of one group of people or one event, but insists all along on a kind of macroscopical view and panoramic depiction which suited the huge topic.

Both filmmakers entered the locale without any official authority but independently. They had only one camera. Therefore, this makes their panoramic depiction more difficult. Even though they had lived in the old town during the whole shooting period, they could hang around there all day long, to listen and

observe, but compared with such a huge event -- the whole town was destroyed and moved -- their sight could never be omnipresent. But this was exactly their ambition: try to unfold and represent all complexes the old town's collapse affected. In this sense, *Before the Flood* is a documentary with endeavor. All related complex relationships outspread in order of several spaces and characters. And all the relations became more and more aggravated while more and more people got involved the town's move: As a principle and attitude, the filmmakers emphasized that they only entered into public spaces, such as hostels for hard workers, a Christian church, a migrant office, a community of poor people, a community residents' committee, and a suburb village. They met among these spaces not only residents who had to move away from home, but also officials in charge of migration and aftercare. All of them had gained the vocality to speak in front of the camera. Their different attitudes, reactions, activities, even their conflicts all happened in front of the camera, too.

*Before the Flood* accomplished its great narrative to this extent: Under its strong realistic texture is contained its profound historic intention. The filmmakers made a great visual documentation, not only for the contemporary audience, but also for the future ones. They intended to enable all outsiders to obtain a complete knowledge about this old town's situation before the flood. Both filmmakers did not feel like using the word "responsibility" to describe their work. The director Li Yifan put it in this way:

"What I regard as important is, by means of our visual depiction, to document the costs China paid for its process of modernization (this includes the whole advantage of the lower classes, the whole society's moral and cultural standard, and reliable relationships among different social states."<sup>99</sup>

Basically, the "flood" which the film means has nothing to do with its physical meaning.

Because this documentary dealt with an extreme chaotic locale and event, the oppression from the reality was extreme stringent. However, without being inconsistent with the film's macroscopical depiction and panorama view, what the filmmakers paid attention to and documented was micro and complete -- they

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<sup>99</sup> According to the interview made by Zhang Yaxuan at YUNFEST 2005.

achieved a kind of humanistic point of view. As audience, I could not help myself being moved or deeply concerning about the stories of the protagonists such as: on the one hand, the retired old soldier who ran a hard worker hostel, his living condition and experience broke my heart; on the other hand, those Christians gathered round the local church kept quarreling for some tiny profit, without dignity; and many other nameless people, including those most ordinary local workers -- Bangbang<sup>100</sup> were carrying heavy stuff for everybody's move, the local villagers who had to choose their future dwellings by drawing cuts, and the residents who persisted not moving away. These people stayed voiceless in the film, meanwhile, we, the audience, constantly heard the voices of official propaganda came out from the louder speakers all over the town...

*Before the Flood's* detailed and considerate filmic depiction breathes into its huge narrative body some temperature of sensibility. In order to deal with the biggest change happened to their lives, these uprooted people were speaking and reacting in front of the camera, they were presented just as themselves, as human beings, not only some symbols of victims of social change.

*Before the Flood* is a living documentary because it embodies people's real struggles, anxieties, and sufferings.

The filmmakers placed themselves in the midst of the move. They made use of the method of Direct Cinema: they just observed and documented what happened in front of the camera. Meanwhile they always tried to maintain self-possession and never tried to interfere or intervene; they obeyed the classic method – following the protagonists – so that they achieved their investigation and observation by following them. However, they kept a distance between them and the protagonists. I might call this distance “objective”, if we only use this word to describe that kind of attitude: do not interfere or intervene; do not express filmmaker's personal opinion about what is happening in front of the camera, do not judge people you are filming. It seems as if the filmmaker is neutral, but it is not completely this way.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> The word “BangBang” means stick pole in Sichuan Dialect, indicates local workers who make their living by carrying heavy stuff on their shoulders with a stick pole.

<sup>101</sup> This corresponds to the middle position of a scale where a specific state of mind is situated

Because this attitude does not mean that the filmmakers' feeling could be below zero, or they really have no opinion. One of the most impressive scenes in

*Before the Flood* is: When the old retired soldier was crawling down the hillside then wandering under those gigantic cement constructions while looking for a piece of land for his hostel, the camera followed this old man with a lengthy shot, without changing camera's perspective, till he became a small spot in the shot then disappeared in the cement forest. If we agree that this shot is the most meaningful one, then this is not only because it indicates the relationship between the surrounding and him, but also it conveys the filmmakers' sympathy which just went without saying.

*Before the Flood's* humanism is embodied in filmmakers' attitude and point of view. They turned the focus of their camera on people, whose favoring circumstances were affected and not satisfied during the process of the old town's move. The filmmakers spent most of their time and energy staying together with these people. Apparently they realized that, these people's feeling and their activities for rebuilding up their own lives, which should be the key point of this documentary.

However, this kind of so-called "objective" attitude has its limitation, too. In the current context of Chinese documentary, filmmakers treat everybody in front of the camera indistinctively, without involvement or intervention; they only let the audience see, who is paying the cost for China's modernization, but without questioning or pointing out who should be responsible for that. As documentary filmmakers, they witnessed people struggling and opposing, however they did not completely stand together with them, but tried to minimize their own attitude, so that they actually diluted the power which every individual's story could have released.

### ***6.2.3 Seeking for Private Reality: The Man (Nan Ren, 2003)***

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between two extreme poles of behavior: personal regression (emotional involvement, high resonance) and personal emancipation (distance, coolness, even un-responsiveness). Cf. Hermann Schmitz, pp.153-158.

2003/Color/DV/95min

Location: Shanxi

By: Hu Xinyu

**Synopsis:**

With nothing better to do while he waits for a new job, Su, an unemployed bachelor spends his time attending to his love life, making phone calls to a matchmaker and hooking up with women. Shi, also a bachelor, often comes over to stay with Su and the filmmaker to enjoy a hot meal while he waits for his girlfriend to call from Guangzhou. Aiming his camera at the story unfolding around his apartment, the filmmaker captures youth as it comes of age in all its contradictory glory, full of hormones, arrogance and endurance.

**Festivals and Awards:**

Singapore International Film Festival, 2004

Nomination for the Kodak Award (Cinematography), Shadow Festival, Amsterdam, 2004

Premier Geste Award for Best First Film, Les Ecrans Documentaries, Paris, 2004

Brooklyn Underground Film Festival, New York, 2005

Infinity Festival, Alba, Italy, 2005

**Hu Xinyu**

Hu Xinyu (b.1969) is an independent producer. In 2000, he began to shoot the DV film *Transition*, which unfortunately came to a premature end. *The Man* is his only completed work.

**Director's note:**

“I am betrayer of the men.”<sup>102</sup>

“Documentary is voyeurism!”

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<sup>102</sup> This phrase and all the following quotations were said at YUNFEST 2005.



### **My personal note:**

*The Man* portrayed three marginalized bachelors who all came to a frustrating period of time in their lives: Su, who became unemployed and found no job; Shi, who had to be apart from his girlfriend; and the filmmaker himself, who was suffering from his hemorrhoids... and above all, they were poor, in terms of money, sex life, and social security. They seemed to be losers. On the other side, they are artists, their minds were rich in stuff like anger, sexual desire, and many self-developed cynical thoughts and philosophy against the society including women. They share a same apartment, they share food, alcohol, and they share their hunger for women, but even more often their rude insults and contempt towards women...

Due to the filmmaker, Hu Xinyu, was one of “the men”, he could document the most personal and private scenes, talks, and behaviors among them and present this to the audience. Before every screening of *The Man*, Hu Xinyu would warn the audience, particularly women audience that “this documentary would be offensive for women, please consider the filmmaker’s goodwill warning, then decide if you really can stand it”. He put this warning onscreen at the beginning of the documentary, too. He is obviously challenging all female audience. We could argue that “these men” are actually very weak. They had some unsuccessful love history and were ever hurt by women. Su once emotionally recalled how he got dumped by his girl friend: He invited his girl friend for a decent dinner while she put forward to split up with him. His experience just coincides with a scene from the American classic film *Once Upon A Time in America*<sup>103</sup> starred by Robert De Niro. Not coincidentally, twice in *The Man*, we did see that Su was watching this film. And at both times, what Su was watching were the same episode that Noodles alias De Niro raped his girl friend Debra (Elizabeth McGovern) after his proposal for marriage being refused by her because she wanted to go to Hollywood for a better career. Not only once, Hu Xinyu was asked why he put scenes from *Once Upon A Time in America* in his documentary. He answered:

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<sup>103</sup> Co-written and directed by Sergio Leone in 1984.

“Su was graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1985. All students were fascinated by this film. For Su, *Once Upon A Time in America* is a classic. His experiences, his attitude towards women, all come from De Niro’s Noodles. I put this episode into *The Man* as reference about Su. Besides, in *Once Upon A Time in America*, the female leading role (Debra) gave up Noodles’ love in order to promote her career in Hollywood. This story is a mirror in *The Man*. Su once mentioned that he brought a girl he liked to Beijing and invited her to a good restaurant. But the girl turned him down due to the same reason just exactly as it had happened to De Niro’s Noodles... In my documentary, at first Su was reluctant to talk about this issue even when he got drunk, after some time, since we had been staying together, he finally spoke it out. In fact, why his opinion towards women was so extreme negative was due to pressures from his life.”<sup>104</sup>

So, one could argue that these man are very weak, they were hurt by women and now they pretend to be strong and use violent words against women in order to defend themselves. Hu Xinyu told us more about Su, or should I say about the man:

“Actually how Su presents himself in front of the camera was not hundred percent truly himself. Because I was filming him with my DV camera, he put his words in some expressionistic way, like statements. He is so good at words! Actually when men stay together, they just act in that way. Their wisdoms all run off through tongues. Sometimes, I would occasionally stimulate him a bit or just gave him applause. Men are different from women, we are like animals, and we tease each other with ironies instead of bites. If I made you ‘bleeding’ then I became more exited. It is impossible for men to show their weakness to others. I prefer animal’s world. It is no use for men to sympathize with each other. We never express ourselves with sentimental words, but try to be tough. Loss of face is not allowed!”

Well, one can argue that this kind of toughness is fake or actually very fragile, but for “the men”, this is the “truth” they believed in, so that they could build up a defense to shield them from being hurt again. In this sense, “The Man” could be representatives of many men. And this documentary exposed a kind of reality existing in men’s society. This kind of reality is what I called “private (personal, individual) reality”. It is personal or individual, because it is only a “minority report” of a few people in the society; it is private, in the sense of both intimate and subjective, because this reality had not been explored or recognized by the majority of the society, particularly the female majority; it is “reality”, because it does exist among some people in this society, but hardly been explored or represented in form of media, no need to mention ever in terms

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<sup>104</sup> All interviews with Hu Xinyu were made by Cui Chen, *Art World* magazine (Yi Shu Shi Jie).

of documentary which immediately deals with “reality”. In Hu Xinyu’s words, “Women you’d have a look, what the fuck ‘The Man’ is!”

As a documentary, *The Man* is rude, annoying, and provocative, just like the filmmaker Hu Xinyu and his fellows. However, I look upon this documentary as one of the most important and outstanding documentaries made in the last couple of years.

When being asked why he made such a provocative documentary, Hu Xinyu answered:

“Why filmmaker must have to hold a banner of justice, but does not dare to touch the ‘truth’? There are already plenty of such filmmakers. I’m not able to change the society but I did say something out, and to my way of thinking, my documentary has its conscience. That’s reality. My standpoint is: do not be false or hypocritical. Actually what you see about these men was only their appearance. ‘The Man’ is neither good nor bad, just the natural man.”

“According to my philosophy, I basically do not care about the society. I can only hang around in my own small circle of relations. I think, to take good care of myself and make good film about myself is much better and important than care about society. I do not like big event or big social topic. According to my experiences, ‘big’ is always doubtful, no matter you get close or keep away from it; but ‘small’ is reachable, is vulgar but more trustable. Everything can be read as propaganda or abetment. Sometimes I think freely: one has no moral standards, no belief, or even no thoughts at all, he/she still has right to cry or make trouble!”

Again, I see from Hu Xinyu’s words very clearly the motive to seek for what I called “private reality”. None of Chinese documentary filmmakers had ever declared this motive as bravely or clearly as Hu Xinyu before. This is a declaration of individual’s awakening after the collapse of socialistic ideologies and great narrative.

Moreover, if I put this declaration in the context of contemporary Chinese documentary to be interpreted, I would point out that the absolute majority of contemporary documentaries deal with social or political issues, which fit for my category of “seeking for social reality.” But, just like “big” can not defile “small”, contemporary Chinese documentary’s agenda and exploration must not only be limited to big heavy social and political issues, but should focus on individual lives, too. *The Man* is one of the most remarkable works of the other

direction.

Internationally, Chinese documentaries which deal with social and political issues are particularly welcomed by international film festivals. It is not fair to say, all Chinese filmmakers intend to attract film festivals with politics, but international film festivals' criterion for selecting and evaluating Chinese film entries is comparatively political oriented due to the thinking mode left behind by Cold War still has its impact. If we agree that the purpose of trans-cultural communication is for building up a wiser and updating understanding between different cultures, then the contribution from Chinese side should not only cater to the occidental taste which is often dominated either by orientalism or politicalism.

**“Documentary is voyeurism!” – *The Man’s Film Language and Narrative Style:***

Eighty percent scenes in *The Man* were shot inside Hu’s apartment. It used to be a school classroom and has a very high ceiling, but underneath was in a mess full of books, discs, and man’s stuff. It seemed the room smells of them. It was in this room, the three men were mostly pouring out words while smoking and drinking. Su was the leading character among them and most of the stimulating words came out of his mouth. Hu Xinyu occasionally appeared in frames, but mostly he was staying behind his camera, observing and constantly reacting to his protagonists with questions or words.

However, *The Man’s* film language is powerful and poetic. This should attribute to the filmmaker’s excellent reining the film languages and narrative style.

As the filmmaker and one of “the men”, Hu Xinyu got deeply involved in this documentary, he interfered and intervened in the relationships among three of them. In stead of concealing his involvement and interference embodied in a conventional documentary narrative, Hu Xinyu intended to reveal the existence by all means, not only as a protagonist, but also as the filmmaker. In this sense, *The Man* is indeed a reflexive documentary.

As bold as he always intends to be, Hu Xinyu once claimed that documentary is voyeurism.

“My films are all about my friends or the people around me. To film people close to me I can have more freedom for a creative work.”

“My friend and I had a common understanding: ‘Documentary is subjective’. I was mostly shooting indoors and sometimes just put the camera on the tripod so that you can see me occasionally in the camera too.”

He did not deny but confessed his offensiveness:

“Su is the main protagonist and the leading character of *The Man*. Only footage about Su was more than forty hours. For twenty days, I just documented whatever he did. He just got fed up with my camera and even threw his cloths to get rid of my focus... In order to finalize this documentary, I edited out twenty five different versions!”

“Many people think that the episode that Su got thrown up was too coarse and irritating, but without this episode, I would never show my film. It is all about a kind of communication between man and man. Without alcohol, we speak nonsense; but what we babble after drinking is always true. The fragility Su opened out after he got drunk was the truest side which he did not want to let others see.”

We saw several times that Shi was fooling around while constantly aiming his air gun at birds. These episodes were represented with slow motion and were constantly cut into this film. Whenever this episode was repeated, it brought a kind of surrealistic atmosphere with it. It makes you feel that young lives are wasted in absurdness.

“In my favorite film *The Days* (Dong Chun de Ri Zi, 1993, directed by Wang Xiaoshuai) there is a scene while the man was playing gun. I think this scene can particularly mirror our state of mind. So I just made up the scenes that Shi was fooling around with his air gun. It makes you feel that life just goes round and round in nothing.”

In *The Man*, we only heard a woman’s voice once coming out of the telephone. So in this confronting relationship between men and women, Hu Xinyu wrote off women’s right to rival or speak. It only leaned to men’s side.

“Some people said: ‘no women, no film’, but I just wanted a film without women.”

“In fact, what I wanted to express was my emotion about women, and I just spoke it out with Su’s tongue. We just happened to have the same view about women.”

In YUNFEST 2005, *The Man* was awarded the Jury’s Prize despite one of female jurors disclaimed her vote. The Jury’s statement for *The Man* is:

“The filmmaker represented a couple of men’s confusion about life, in a style of black humor; with powerful and imaginative film language, it portrayed three antihero figures for contemporary Chinese documentary gallery.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> According to my own festival diary made during YUNFEST 2005.

## Conclusion

Now I would like to summarize my research findings in the following:

1. In China, power discourses are often negotiated among different generations. This phenomenon implies apparently the change of paradigms in the history of contemporary Chinese film. Filmmakers grasp the generation concept to build up their self-understanding and collective identity. However, the generation concept only makes sense, if the differences among individual filmmakers are appreciated.
2. As rebelling against the official Marxist historiography and communist ideology, the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation of contemporary Chinese fiction filmmakers stood up to reappraise history, gender, and minorities in terms of a new humanism.
3. Their enthusiasm for the Grand Narrative -- film is legend -- makes the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation step in with their concern with the individual, the subjective, the local, and the current reality.
4. The 6<sup>th</sup> Generation grasped their own youth experiences and transformed them into their films. Filmmaking for them is a kind of self-expression.
5. They initiated the movement of independent filmmaking. Trapped between the limitation of the official film system and the desire for self-expression, independent filmmaking was their strategy to break through.
6. Paralleling to what the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation achieved in the domain of fiction film, the TV documentary of the late 80's and 90's updated the documentary propaganda within official TV stations, with a new form documentary concerning daily life.
7. In order to survive within the official media system and to rival with news, special reports, and commercial films, TV documentary filmmakers had to explore what makes documentary indispensable. Lü Xinyu, the chronicler of the TV documentary crisis since the midst of the 90's, pointed out that TV documentary should be reflexive and self reflexive, and serves as a sort of responsible "patriotic nightwatch".
8. With this definition, Lü Xinyu somehow anticipated the standpoint of the

following late 90's filmmakers, fiction and documentary, in like manner.

9. The DV revolution, which began in the midst of the 90's, was the prerequisite for the independent filmmakers emerging since the late 90's.

10. Their films are labeled "folk", "art", "personal", "underground", and "independent". In this study, I make use of "independent", because all filmmakers position themselves outside the paths of official system and struggle for the independent personal voice.

11. Being "independent" means lack of money, low budget films, and small crews.

12. Concern for marginalized and excluded people, losers and victims of modernization and globalization, is the drive of the late 90's filmmakers.

13. In fiction films of the late 90's a kind of documentary oriented film language has been a dominant aesthetic style.

14. Apart from showing their films in international film festivals, the predominant channel of dissemination in China is via discs.

15. Localization and actualization are strategies contributing to a local narrative by means of local settings, local dialects, and local issues in a present ambience.

16. When film critics acclaimed: "Jia Zhangke discovered China's rural town", they hit the point: He and his films contribute to a best exemplary case study, not only regarding localization; his features embody most of the thematic concerns and aesthetics of the late 90's filmmakers.

17. Just like Jia Zhangke and his features illustrate all characteristics of the late 90's fiction film, YUNFEST is the most representative documentary festival in today's China. It serves as a platform to showcase the most outstanding independent documentaries and to pave the way for communication and dialogue among filmmakers, visual artists, cultural researchers, community activists and the general public.



## Annex

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**Wu Wenguang** 吴文光:

Jiang Hu 《江湖》 DV 1999

Dance with Migrant Workers 《和民工共舞》 DV 2002

**Ji Dan** 季丹 & **Sha Qing** 沙青:

Gongbu's Happy Life 《贡布的幸福生活》 1999

The Elders 《老人们》 1999

**Sha Qing** 沙青:

Wellspring 《在一起的时光》 DV 2002

**Duan Jinchuan** 段锦川:

Interesting Times: The Secret of My Success 《拎起大舌头》 SP 2002

**Jiang Yue** 蒋樾:

This Happy Life 《幸福生活》 SP 2002

**Kang Jianning** 康健宁:

Be a Soldier 《当兵》 DV 2002

**Li Hong** 李红:

Dance with Myself 《和自己跳舞》 DV 2002

**Yang Tianyi** 杨天乙:

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Home Video 《家庭录像带》 DV 2001

**Zhu Chuanming** 朱传明:

Beijing Munitions Worker 《北京弹匠》 1999

Figurants 《群众演员》 DV 2002

**Du Haibing** 杜海滨:

Along the Railways 《铁路沿线》 2000

Under the Skyscraper 《高楼下面》 DV 2002

**Ju Anqi** 睢安奇:

There is a strong wind in Beijing, Short film 《北京的风很大》 16mm 2000

**Hu Shu** 胡庶:

Leave Me Alone 《我不要你管》 DV 2001

**Wang Fen** 王芬:

They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple 《不快乐的不止一个》 DV 2001

**Ying Weiwei** 英未未:

The Box 《盒子》 DV 2001

**Sun Zhiqiang** 孙志强:

Testimony from the Edge of Freedom 《自由的边缘》 DV 2001

**Tang Danhong** 唐丹鸿:

Nightingale, Not the Only Voice 《夜莺不是唯一的歌喉》 SP 2001

**Chang Qing** 常青:

Lao Tian 《老田》 DV 2001

**Jia Zhangke** 贾樟柯:

Public Space 《公共场所》 DV 2001

**Zhao Liang** 赵亮:

Paper Plane 《纸飞机》 DV 2001

**Zhong Hua** 仲华:

This Winter 《今年冬天》 DV 2001

**Feng Lei** 冯雷:

Falling Snow in Yili 《雪落伊利》 DV 短片 2001

Island 《岛》 DV 2002

**Chen Weijun** 陈为军:

To Live Is Better Than To Die 《好死不如赖活着》 DV 2002

**Zhou Hao** 周浩 & **Ji Jianghong** 吉江红:

Hou Jie Township 《厚街》 DV 2002

**Wang Bing** 王兵:

West of the Railroads 《铁西区》 DV 2003

**Xiao Peng** 晓鹏:

Mine 8 《八矿》 DV 2003

**Lola** 罗拉 & **Zhang Yang** 张扬:

Post-Revolution Age 《后革命时代》 DV 2002

**Cui Zi'en** 崔子恩:

Night Scene 《夜景》 DV 2003

**Su Qing** 苏青 & **Mi Na** 米娜:

White Tower 《白塔》 DV 2003

**Zhou Hongxiang** 周洪湘:

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**Ou Ning** 欧宁 & **Cao Fei** 曹雯:

San Yuan Li 《三元里》 DV 短片 2003

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**Lü Le** 吕乐:

Mr. Zhao 《赵先生》 35mm 1997

Poetic Times 《诗意的年代》 35mm 1999

**Jia Zhangke** 贾樟柯:

Xiao Wu 《小武》 16mm-35mm 1999

Platform 《站台》 35mm 2000

Unknown Pleasure 《任逍遥》 35mm 2002

**Lian Feng** 廉峰:

Who's ever seen a Festival for Wild Animals? 《谁见过野生动物的节日》 35mm 1998

**Tang Danian** 唐大年:

City Paradise 《都市天堂》 35mm 1998

**Liu Bingjian** 刘冰鉴:

Men and Women 《男男女女》 35mm 1999

Crywoman 《哭泣的女人》 35mm 2002

**Lou Ye** 娄烨:

Suzhou River 《苏州河》 35mm 2000

**Wang Xiaoshuai** 王小帅:

Beijing Bicycle 《十七岁的单车》 35mm 2001

Drifters 《二弟》 35mm 2003



**Tang Xiaobai** 唐晓白:  
Conjugation 《动词变位》 16mm-35mm 2001

**Li Yu** 李玉:  
Fish and Elephant 《今年夏天》 16mm 2001

**Cheng Yusu** 程裕苏:  
Shanghai Panic 《我们害怕》 DV 2001  
Destination Shanghai 《目的地上海》 2003

**Zhu Wen** 朱文:  
Seafood 《海鲜》 DV-35mm 2002

**Liu Hao** 刘浩:  
Chen Mo and Mei Ting 《陈默和美婷》 16mm-35mm 2002

**Yang Fudong** 杨福东:  
Strange Paradise 《陌生天堂》 35mm 1997-2002

**Cui Zi'en** 崔子恩:  
The Old Testament 《旧约》 DV 2002  
Enter the Clowns 《丑角登场》 DV 2002  
Keep Cool and Don't Blush 《脸不变色心不跳》 DV 2003  
Ayaya, Feeding Boys 《哎呀呀 去哺乳》 DV 2003

**Sheng Zhimin** 盛志民:  
Heart.Heart 《心 心》 2002

**Gan Xiao'er** 甘小二:  
The Only Son 《山清水秀》 DV 2002

**Li Yang** 李扬:  
Blind Shaft 《盲井》 16mm-35mm 2003

**Yu Liwei** 余力为:  
All Tomorrow's Parties 《明日天涯》 HD-35mm 2003

**Diao Yinan** 刁一男:  
Uniform 《制服》 35mm 2003

**Zhu Chuanming** 朱传明:  
On the Mountain 《山上》 DV 2003

**Nin Hao** 宁浩:  
Incense 《香火》 DV 2003

**Fu Xinhua** 符新华:  
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## **Zusammenfassung in deutscher Sprache**

### **1. Motivation, Fragestellung und Forschungsstand**

Selbst Teil der Neuen Dokumentarfilmbewegung in China lag es für mich nahe, meine Dissertation über die jüngste Filmemachergeneration in der Volksrepublik zu schreiben. Hinzu kommt, dass ich mich seit meinem Studium der chinesischen Literaturwissenschaft mit den verschiedenen Angeboten an theoretischen Ansätzen und den Paradigmenwechsel auseinander gesetzt habe. Abstand zu nehmen und die Produktion so genannter unabhängiger Filmemacher seit den späten 90er Jahren wissenschaftlich zu untersuchen, konnte zugleich auch für meine Selbstreflexion als Dokumentarfilmemacher förderlich sein.

Um die Neue Dokumentarfilmbewegung zu verstehen, ist dreierlei notwendig: Erstens, die Dokumentarfilme stehen in einem bestimmten Kontext mit den zeitgleichen Spielfilmen, so dass das Thema der vorliegenden Arbeit beide Genres, Dokumentar- und Spielfilme, gleichberechtigt in den Blick nimmt. Beide bilden miteinander einen horizontalen Kontext. Zweitens stehen sie zugleich in einem historischen (vertikalen) Film-Kontext, ohne den die Entstehung der Neuen Filmbewegung nicht zu begreifen ist. Drittens sind beide Genres, Dokumentar- und Spielfilme, in ihrer Entstehung und Entwicklung wiederum abhängig von bestimmten synchronen und diachronen soziopolitischen Kontexten der weiteren Gesellschaft, die ebenfalls zu berücksichtigen sind.

Daraus ergibt sich folgende Gliederung: Im 1. Kapitel wird die Vorläufer-Generation, die so genannte Fünfte Generation, behandelt, die erste Generation von Absolventen der Filmakademie in Beijing nach dem offiziellen Ende der Kulturrevolution und dem Beginn der Öffnungs- und Reformpolitik zu Beginn der 80er Jahre. Das 2. Kapitel untersucht die so genannte Sechste Generation von Filmemachern, wie die Fünfte ausschließlich Produzenten von Spielfilmen. Im 3. Kapitel steht die erste Dokumentarfilmbewegung nach der Kulturrevolution zur Debatte, die sich ausschließlich im Rahmen zentraler und lokaler Fernsehanstalten entwickelte. Das 4. Kapitel, das Herzstück der vorliegenden Arbeit, nimmt die unabhängigen Filmemacher und deren Werke (Spielfilme und Dokumentarfilme), die seit den späten 90er Jahren von sich Reden machen, in den Blick. Sie sind bereits die Kinder der digitalen Revolution und ohne diese nicht möglich gewesen. Die Kapitel 5 und 6 sind als Fallstudien (*case-studies*) konzipiert, wobei im 5. Kapitel exemplarisch Spielfilme von Jia Zhangke untersucht werden, während im 6. Kapitel exemplarisch für die Entwicklung und Verbreitung des Dokumentarfilms das Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival

(YUNFEST), sein Anliegen und seine Aktivitäten im Mittelpunkt stehen.

Der Forschungsstand zur 5. und zur 6. Generation ist, wenn man die vielen Artikel, einige Dissertationen, Sammelbände und Übersetzungen, weniger Monographien, zugrunde legt, international gesehen, gar nicht so schlecht zu bewerten, wenn auch zwei bis drei Monographien bisher nur als akademische Prüfungsarbeiten und unveröffentlicht vorliegen. Anders verhält es sich mit der jüngsten Filmemachergeneration, die allenfalls in Festivalbroschüren, Pressemappen des Filmverleihs, Filmzeitschriften oder auch in der Tagespresse sowie im Internet eher oberflächlich besprochen worden sind. Eine die verschiedenen Filmemacher-Generationen vergleichende Untersuchung in der gegenwärtigen Volksrepublik, die zugleich die jeweiligen sozialpolitischen Hintergründe mit berücksichtigt, liegt meines Wissens weder im Westen noch in China vor. Immerhin konnte ich bei der Abfassung dieser Dissertation auf fünf chinesische Bücher zurückgreifen, die alle nach der Jahrtausendwende erschienen sind. Zwei davon sind so genannte DV-Handbücher, in denen es vor allem um den Zusammenhang zwischen der digitalen Revolution und der Entstehung der Neuen Filmbewegung seit Ende der 90er Jahre geht. Die anderen drei Bücher drehen sich ausschließlich um den chinesischen Dokumentarfilm, wobei Lü Xinyu's Sammelband aus Vorträgen und Interviews, das für das 3. Kapitel verwendet werden konnte, einen akademischen Standpunkt vertritt und vor allem die erste TV-Dokumentarbewegung kritisch beleuchtet. Shan Wanli's Handbuch für dokumentarisches Filmen wiederum ist aus der offiziellen Perspektive geschrieben und stellt entsprechend offizielle Kriterien für dokumentarisches Filmen in der VR China bereit. Das letzte Buch stammt von Wu Wenguang, selbst ein unabhängiger Dokumentar-Filmemacher der neuen Bewegung, der eine wichtige Rolle spielte in der Vermittlung internationaler Ideen und Methoden zum dokumentarischen Filmen.

## **2. Methodische Überlegungen**

Von Anfang war mir klar, dass die subjektiven Wahrnehmungen der Filmemacher auf der einen Seite und die gesellschaftspolitischen Kontexte auf der anderen und -- zwischen beiden vermittelnd -- verschiedene Diskurse gleichberechtigt in die Analyse einzubeziehen sind. Interessanterweise verlaufen in China die ausgeprägten Diskurse nicht zuletzt entlang der Generationslinie bzw. prallen als sozial relevante Energien die der Generationen aufeinander, anders gesagt: Generationswechsel bedeutet bei uns häufig Paradigmenwechsel. Mit dem hier gewählten Ansatz, soziale Kontexte und subjektive Wahrnehmungen zu verknüpfen, fühle ich am ehesten der New History verbunden, die sich wie folgt gegen die



alte Struktur- und Sozialgeschichte abgrenzt:

“From this point of view, any action is undoubtedly, as social history maintains, a response to the pressure and requirements of social context, but it is a discursively mediated, not a structurally determined response. New history never dispenses with social context nor minimizes its importance in explaining people’s actions as traditional history and its revisionist revival do. What it claims is that social context makes its contribution to the configuration of practice, not as an objective or structural instance, but simply as a material support and referent.”<sup>106</sup>

Doch stellte sich im Verlauf der Arbeit bald heraus, dass eine weitere Differenzierung sinnvoll ist: Die subjektiven Wahrnehmungen lassen sich nämlich unterscheiden in das individuell Subjektive (z.B. Hu Xinyus Feststellung, er sei ein Männerverräter) und das kollektiv Subjektive (z.B. die subjektive Wahrnehmung einzelner Filmemacher als Teil einer Generation). Der soziale Kontext wiederum umfasst das individuell Objektive (z.B. Jia Zhangkes Kindheit und Jugend in einer ländlichen Kleinstadt) und das kollektiv Objektive (z.B. das Ende der Kulturrevolution bzw. die digitale Revolution).

Wenn ich mir zutraue, eine wissenschaftliche Abfassung über die jüngste Filmemacher-Generation zu schreiben, obwohl ich mich selbst als Teil dieser Bewegung betrachte und darüber hinaus einer der Organisatoren des im 6. Kapitel untersuchten Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST) bin, so möchte ich auf den Kieler Philosophen Hermann Schmitz verweisen, der zwischen Empathie bzw. Verstricktsein (personaler Regression) und reflektierender Distanzierung (personale Emanzipation) unterscheidet und das beständige Hin und Her in allen möglichen Situationen des Lebens behauptet. Teil einer gemeinsamen Situation zu sein und mich immer wieder zum Zwecke der Reflexion und Selbst-Reflexion herauszuziehen, ist mir als Dokumentar-Filmemacher eine selbstverständliches Vorgehensweise. So und nicht anders verstehe ich die Teilnehmende Beobachtung.

### **3. Das erste Kapitel: Spielfilme -- die Vorläufer-Generation**

Dass sich die Fünfte Generation, die erste Filmemacher-Generation nach dem Ende der Kulturrevolution, gegen die kulturrevolutionären propagandistischen Ballettfilme sowie gegen sowjetisch inspirierte Filmkunst abzusetzen suchte, also insgesamt gegen den kommunistischen Diskurs, liegt auf der Hand. Dies zeigt sich in der Thematik der Filme ebenso wie in der Filmsprache. Für Chen Kaige und Zhang Yimou, um in dieser Zusammenfassung nur die beiden auch im Westen bekanntesten Repräsentanten zu nennen, kam es thematisch vor allem auf eine Neueinschätzung der Geschichte (Einer und die Acht, Gelbe Erde, Rote Hirse, Die große Parade) und historischer Figuren an (Der Kaiser und sein

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<sup>106</sup> Cabrera, p. 91.

Attentäter, Hero). Geschichte gerät ihnen dabei zur „Legende“, wie Chen Kaige es auch programmatisch formulierte. Umbewertet im Vergleich zur kommunistischen Ideologie wurde auch die Gender-Frage. Vor allem Zhang Yimou hat in seinen Filmen (Rote Hirse, Ju Dou, Die rote Laterne, Qiu Ju und Leben) die Kommunistische Partei als Inbegriff patriarchalischer Gewalt gegeißelt und den realen oder symbolischen Vätermord, ausgelöst durch die Lust der Mutter thematisiert. Andere Vertreter der Fünften wenden sich, zuweilen verklärend, den nationalen Minderheiten zu, die in der kommunistischen Ideologie als zurückgebliebene Völker der Menschheitsgeschichte gewertet worden waren.

Die Filmsprache der Fünften bedient sich aller möglichen narrativen Strukturen, ist dort aber innovativ, wo es um visuelle Techniken geht. Diese speisen sich z.T. aus der traditionell-chinesischen Ästhetik, wirken dabei in ihrer expressiven (Farb-)Symbolik auch für chinesische Zuschauer oft ambivalent und verfremdend. Am ehesten erinnern sie an Filmtechniken der Nouvelle Vague.

#### **4. Das zweite Kapitel: Spielfilme -- Vergleich zwischen der Fünften und der Sechsten Generation**

So wie die Fünfte Generation ihren eigenen Diskurs etablierte gegen die dominante kommunistische Ideologie, so suchte sich die Sechste Generation wiederum ihren Weg in der Abgrenzung gegenüber der Fünften. Die Vertreter der Sechsten, alle in den 60er Jahren geboren, wurden durch die zunächst hoffnungsvollen 80er Jahre geprägt, betraten die Bühne aber zu Beginn der 90er Jahre, d.h. nach der Erfahrung von „Tiananmen“, die als traumatisch empfunden wurde.

Im Vergleich zur Fünften konnte die Sechste auf eine sehr viel größere Vielfalt an künstlerischen Einflüssen und Anregungen, nicht zuletzt aus dem Ausland, zurückblicken. Allein schon Zahl und Titel der Lieblingsfilme sind verräterisch in dieser Hinsicht. Hinzu kommen die Einflüsse von Videofilmen und Raubkopien von Filmen auf DVD.

Die Namensfindung, die in der Selbstbezeichnung „Sechste Generation“ mündete, kam einem Prozess der Identitätsfindung gleich, selbstverständlich in Abgrenzung gegenüber der inzwischen weltweit berühmten und erfolgreichen Fünften Generation. Spielte für die Fünfte die „5000 Jahre alte chinesische Kultur“ (ein Lieblingssatz von Chen Kaige) und die „Nation“ eine entscheidende Rolle, so wandten sich Vertreter der Sechsten Generation zunächst der marginalisierten städtischen Jugend zu, jedenfalls den trivialen Dingen des Lebens oder der Innenwelt von ganz normalen Menschen. War zu Beginn die Namensgebung auch ein Label für den Abgrenzungsdiskurs gegenüber der Fünften, so wurde die Selbstbezeichnung bald zu einer kommerziellen Markenbezeichnung.

Die meisten herausragenden Filmemacher der Sechsten identifizieren sich zwar mit diesem

Generationskonzept, legen aber zugleich Wert darauf, dass andere Aspekte für sie selbst entscheidender waren und sind als Rebellion oder Abgrenzung gegen.... Vor allem ging es ihnen um Selbstbehauptung um des Selbst-Ausdruckes willen.

Die Sechste Generation ist aber auch unter den Namen „Untergrund-“ und „unabhängige Filmemacher“ bekannt, und diese Bezeichnung lässt schon Probleme und Zwänge bei der Selbstbehauptung im heutigen China vermuten. Nicht nur, dass sie Filme produzierten, die so nicht von staatlichen Filmstudios hätten produziert werden können; man konnte ihnen auch keine Stelle anbieten, standen sie doch alle unter dem Verdacht, in irgendeiner Weise an den „Tiananmen-Ereignissen“ von 1989 beteiligt gewesen zu sein. Ein Ausgleich bot die Rezeption und Anerkennung auf westlichen Film Festivals, die ihnen zugleich die Gelegenheit gab, andere Lebens-, Dreh- und Produktionsbedingungen kennen zu lernen. Grundsätzlich stand jeder von ihnen vor der Entscheidung, „innerhalb des Systems“ zu arbeiten mit den Kompromissen, dass die Filme als „politisch korrekt“ „politisch sicher“ oder „politisch einmütig“ gehandelt wurden, oder „außerhalb des Systems“ zu bleiben unter den entsprechend schwierigen Bedingungen und immer frustriert, dass ihre Filme nicht im eigenen Land gezeigt werden können, es sei denn vor einem kleinen ausgewählten Publikum intellektueller oder kleinbürgerlicher Herkunft in Bars oder auf Ausstellungen, wobei letztere Gefahr laufen, auf halber Strecke geschlossen zu werden. Die Kompromissbereitschaft lief auf Versuche hinaus, mit dem offiziellen System, mit dem innerchinesischen Markt und der Massenkultur in Kontakt zu kommen. Interessanter für mich als Filmemacher sind die Schritte einzelner, sich immer wieder in der Wahl narrativer Strukturen auf die internationale Filmgeschichte zu beziehen, Beispiele hierfür sind die Filme *Eclipse* von Wang Quanan und *Suzhou River* von Luo Ye, die von Kieslowski's *Veronica's Double Life* inspiriert sind. Vom Interesse der Sechsten an individuellen Schicksalen, die von Marginalisierung oder Exklusion bedroht sind, war schon die Rede. Zuweilen gerät diese Beschäftigung mit der aktuellen Realität in den großen chinesischen Städten im Sinne des Selbstaudrucks allerdings zu einer narzisstischen Beschäftigung mit der eigenen Jugend. So fehlt mir z.B. in Guan Hu's *Dirt* und Lou Ye's *Weekend Lover* Reflexion und Selbstreflexion.

Dass die Sechste aber auch mutig Tabuthemen der chinesischen Gesellschaft aufgriff, belegen die Filme über Homosexualität aus männlicher *Men and Women* und *Fish and Elephant* aus weiblicher Sicht. Die besten und zugleich aufrichtigsten Filme wahrhaft unabhängiger Filmemacher sind für mich *Xiao Wu* von Jia Zhangke, auf den im 5. Kapitel noch eigens einzugehen ist, und *Anyang Orphan* von Wang Chao.

Trotz der vielen Unterschiede zwischen den einzelnen Filmemachern der Sechsten Generation möchte ich als eine gemeinsame Herangehensweise dieser Generation oder

Bewegung herausstreichen: die Verknüpfung zwischen den Oberflächen alltäglichen Lebens und den inneren Denk- und Gefühlsabläufen einfacher Menschen. Hier liegt auch die größte Diskrepanz zur Fünften Generation., zugleich aber ein Anknüpfungspunkt für die nachfolgende jüngste Filmemachergeneration seit den späten 90er Jahren.

5. War bisher nur von Spielfilmen die Rede, so kommen im **Dritten Kapitel: Fernseh-Dokumentarfilme der 80er und frühen 90er Jahre** zur Sprache. Hier lässt sich keine Einheitlichkeit ausmachen, außer dass sich die erste Bewegung von Dokumentarfilmen nach der Kulturrevolution innerhalb des Systems, nämlich im Rahmen der zentralen und lokalen Fernsehanstalten, entwickelte und sich, analog zum Programm der Sechsten, auf die Fahnen geschrieben hatte: „den einfachen Dingen des Lebens auf der Spur zu sein“. Voraussetzung dafür war die Verbreitung des Fernsehens, die erst ganz allmählich in den frühen 80er Jahren begonnen hatte. Das Zusammentreffen zu Chinesisch Neujahr in der Nachbarschaft, wo solch ein kostbares Teil vorhanden war, gehört zu den Kindheitserinnerungen meiner Generation. Erst Ende der 80er konnten privilegierte Familien sich sogar einen Farbfernseher leisten. Dann aber setzte seine Massenwirksamkeit ein. Der gegenwärtige chinesische Dokumentarfilm begann so jenseits aller ausländischen Einflüsse, mit Ausnahme vielleicht von Anleihen japanischer Ästhetik. Filme, wie *The Story of Wu Pingtai's Roaming* und *Father's Letter from the Battleground* sind hier zu nennen. Mit dem zunächst geringen internationalen Austausch mag es zusammenhängen, wenn viele Fernsehfilmemacher an einem objektivistischen und essentialistischen Paradigma festhielten, also das *reine Dokumentieren* nach wie vor für möglich hielten. Andere sprangen jedoch auf den Zug der postmodernen Paradigmenwechsel auf und formulierten ihre konstruktivistische Position wie folgt: „Dokumentierte Realität hat nichts mit Wahrheit zu tun“, ist allenfalls „eine Art ästhetischer Stil, der sich der Wahrheit annähert“ (Zhong Danian und Sun Yanbin). Den Diskussionen, die darauf folgten und an denen Lü Xinyu, eine promovierte Literaturwissenschaftlerin und Professorin für Journalismus in Shanghai, ganz entscheidend beteiligt war, fehlte gewiss die Differenziertheit der „Spielarten des Dokumentierens“, wie sie Elisabeth Mohn<sup>107</sup> formuliert – von der *Dokumentarischen Methode der Interpretation* nach Garfinkel über das starke Dokumentieren (Wildenhahn) und dem *Anti-Dokumentieren* (Konstruktivismus) bis hin zum *Paradoxen Dokumentieren* (*speaking nearby* von Trinh Minh Ha) und einem *Instrumentellen Dokumentieren* als nützliche Fiktion. Dennoch wurde die Krise der Repräsentation in Rechnung gestellt und Begriffe wie Realität, Wahrheit und Authentizität auf ihre weitere Brauchbarkeit hin überprüft.

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<sup>107</sup> *Spielarten des Dokumentierens nach der Repräsentationskrise*, Stuttgart (Lucius und Lucius) 2002.

Die schon erwähnte Lü Xinyu, die seit Mitte der 90er Jahre eine Krise im Selbstverständnis der TV Dokumentarfilmemacher diagnostizierte, setzte sich in ihren Vorträgen und Interviews, die sie in einem 2003 publizierten Sammelband vereinigte, dafür ein, dem Dokumentarfilm im Fernsehen neben den Genres von *Nachrichten*, *Reportagen* und *Fernsehspielfilmen* zwischen *offizieller*, *Elite-* und *Massenkultur* einen legitimen Raum zu sichern. Dabei kommt sie zu Positionen, die zum Teil diejenigen der nachfolgenden Dokumentarfilmbewegung, die seit den späten 90er Jahren in Erscheinung tritt, vorwegnahmen:

- Thematisch sollte ein Dokumentarfilm mit realen Menschen und realen Ereignissen befasst sein.
- Er sollte historisch und gesellschaftlich relevant und signifikant sein, ungeachtet seiner aktuellen Wirkungen und Flüchtigkeit.
- Er sollte nicht Fakten, sondern die Gefühlswelt der betreffenden Personen in den Mittelpunkt stellen, damit ein Austausch von Empathie zwischen Protagonist und Publikum möglich ist.
- Jedem Dokumentarfilm liegt ein bestimmtes Welt- und Menschenbild zugrunde, das deutlich werden muß.
- Trotz des Gefühlsaustausches zwischen Publikum und Protagonist müssen Filmemacher einen *rationalen Schirm* aufbauen, der das Publikum zum Nachdenken über die Gesellschaft und über sich selbst bewegt.
- Die Filmemacher haben die Pflicht, ihr Anliegen und die Tatsache, dass es sich um eine subjektive Interpretation und zugleich um einen nicht zuletzt auch durch die Kamera bedingten Eingriff in die Wirklichkeit handelt, transparent zu machen.

## **6. Das vierte Kapitel: Die Bewegung des unabhängigen Filmes seit den späten 90er Jahren.**

Diese Bewegung ist ohne die digitale Revolution, die seit Mitte der 90er Jahre in China Fuß fasste, nicht möglich gewesen. Einige Repräsentanten waren schon als Vertreter der Sechsten Generation hervorgetreten, hielten aber bei ihren weiteren Produktionen konsequent an der Unabhängigkeit vom System fest, so dass sie auch zur nachfolgenden Bewegung zu rechnen sind. Dazu gehört in erster Linie der Spielfilmemacher Jia Zhangke, dem als Fallstudie das 5. Kapitel gewidmet ist. Auch die Fokussierung auf das Lokale, die schon bei der Sechsten Generation deutlich wurde, setzt sich fort bzw. wird weiter voran getrieben bis hin zum Gebrauch von lokalen Dialekten, die unübersetzt bleiben und dem chinesischen Publikum ebenso fremd sind wie den meisten Deutschen das Chinesische. Analoges gilt für das Anliegen des Selbsta Ausdruckes, der filmischen Verarbeitung eigener

Jugenderfahrungen, ohne in den Narzissmus einiger Vertreter der Sechsten Generation zu verfallen.

Erneut wird das Generations-Konzept für die Selbstverständigung bemüht bzw. das Vokabular „unabhängig“ und „Untergrund“ von der Sechsten übernommen. Auch von *art film*, *folk film* und *persönlichen Filmen* ist die Rede. Ich ziehe allen Vorschlägen die Bezeichnung als „unabhängig“ vor. Sie wurden vom offiziellen System nicht unterstützt, auch nicht verboten, aber bisher ignoriert. Offensichtlich gibt es jedoch genügend Risse und Schlupfwinkel im System, wo diese Filme entstehen, existieren und sich verbreiten können. Allerdings zeichnet sich derzeit eine kleine Hoffnung am Horizont ab, dass mehr Toleranz möglich sein könnte und diese Filme ein breiteres chinesisches Publikum erreichen würden, der Traum aller dieser Filmemacher.

In diesem vierten zentralen Kapitel sind Spielfilmemacher und Dokumentarfilmemacher der jüngsten Filmemachergeneration gleichberechtigt vertreten, denn die Gemeinsamkeiten überwiegen, ob es sich um die verworrenen Lebensverläufe der Einzelnen handelt oder das geringfügige Budget, die damit zusammenhängende relativ kleine Filmcrew, die digitale Handkamera, die Thematik der lokalen Narrationen, der Selbstaussdruck, der zwar Narzissmus vermeidet, aber etwas zuweilen moralistisch ausfallen kann, das Genderthema, das kleine Publikum in Cafés, Bars, Restaurants und neuerdings lokalen Film Festivals. Dabei geschieht die Verbreitung der Filme hauptsächlich -- wie könnte es anders sein -- über die Diskette. Nach vor zeigen die Organisatoren westlicher Film Festivals ein großes Interesse auch an diesen jüngsten Produktionen, was die Frage aufwirft, für wen diese Filme eigentlich gemacht werden, wer sie nach welchen Kriterien eigentlich bewertet.

**7. Das fünfte Kapitel: Jia Zhangke und seine Filme -- Fallstudie eines Spielfilmemachers** ist, wie schon angekündigt, dem Vermittler *par excellence* zwischen der Sechsten und der jüngsten Generation gewidmet. Zugleich steht er exemplarisch mit seinen sehr gelungenen Filmen *Xiao Shan kehrt nach Hause zurück*, *Xiao Wu* und *Die Bühne* (engl. Platform) für das Anliegen der unabhängigen Filmemacher.

In meinem Interview mit Jia Zhangke im April 2004 kam es mir vor allem auf sein Selbstverständnis an, auch im Hinblick auf das Generationskonzept, also auf das *individuelle Subjektive* und das *kollektiv Subjektive*<sup>108</sup>, obwohl ihm ja gerade das Spagat zwischen der Sechsten und jüngsten Filmemachergeneration gelang. Jia Zhangke ist zugleich Schriftsteller, was sein Experimentieren mit verschiedenen narrativen Stilen erklären mag. Den großen Unterschied zwischen seinen literarischen und seinen

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<sup>108</sup> Immer verstanden als Identität des Einzelnen als Teil einer Gruppe und nicht etwa Identität einer Gruppe.

Filmproduktionen sieht er selbst darin, dass erstere vom *Geschehen und Tun* leben, während er beim Filmen eigentlich nur *Da-Sein* möchte und „China on the spot“, d.h. China gerade hier und jetzt, „dokumentieren“ möchte. Dies erklärt den dokumentarischen Stil in seinen Spielfilmen, wo der Zuschauer, z.B. in der Endszene von *Xiao Wu* auf eine Weise in den Film hinein genommen wird, dass Realität und Fiktion verschwimmen. Das dadurch ausgelöste Befremden, wenn nicht gar von Schock die Rede sein kann, setzt unmittelbar die Reflexion und Selbstreflexion in Gang.

Den Generationen- und damit Paradigmenwechsel von der Fünften Generation zu den unabhängigen Filmemachern interpretiert er zum einen als Folge des *kollektiv objektiven* Kontextes, der durch die digitale Revolution und die Ereignisse von „Tiananmen“ markiert ist. Zum anderen erklärt er den Generations- und Paradigmenwechsel, d.h. das jeweils *Kollektive Subjektive*, mit dem Verweis auf die analogen Jugenderfahrungen bzw. analoge Sozialisation (z.B. pop-Musik, internationale Filmgeschichte und -szene), d.h. mit dem gemeinsamen kulturellen Gedächtnis. Auch der dokumentarische Stil gehört zu diesem spezifischen Generationsphänomen. Von einer bewussten Rebellion gegen den Diskurs der Fünften wollte er jedenfalls nichts wissen, zumal es der Film *Gelbe Erde* war, der in ihm den Wunsch weckte, selber einen Film zu machen.

Alle drei von mir interpretierten Filme haben international Anerkennung und Preise gewonnen und bestechen durch ihre narrativen Einfälle: so genannte *intertitles* in *Xiao Shan...*; die multiple Persönlichkeit des professionellen Diebes Xiao Wu in dem gleichnamigen Film, die in unterschiedlichen sozialen Kontexten zum Vorschein kommt, die Überraschungen im Schicksal seiner „Geschenke“ für andere (das gestohlene Geld, Ring und Handy), die ihm selbst zum Schicksal werden; und nicht zuletzt, in *der Bühne* (engl. Platform) die vielen Leerstellen (wüste Industrielandschaften, Schweigen) und in allen Filmen pop songs und pop Kultur -- ein breites Band, das die städtische und ländliche Jugend Chinas miteinander verknüpft.

## **8. Das sechste und letzte Kapitel: YUNFEST -- Fallstudie über den aktuellen unabhängigen Dokumentarfilm seit Ende der 90er Jahre.**

In diesem Kapitel kam es mir zum einen darauf an, den gegenwärtigen Dokumentarfilm an zwei exemplarischen Filmen zu illustrieren. Zum anderen sollte das Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST) vorgestellt werden als ein Beispiel für ein gelungenes Projekt der Verbreitung dieser Filme sowie für nachahmenswertes Networking zwischen Filmemachern, TV-Stationen, Publikum und Organisatoren lokaler Film Festivals, innerhalb China, aber auch über die südchinesischen Grenzen hinweg.

Selbstverständlich gilt für die zweite Dokumentarfilmbewegung das, was schon im 4.

Kapitel für alle Filme dieser Zeit gesagt wurde: Ohne die digitale Revolution wäre sie nicht möglich gewesen.

Das thematische Interesse könnte man mit „Vielstimmigkeit“ (*multivocality*) umschreiben. Um diese zu präzisieren, bieten sich folgende Konzepte an: Realität, Utopie und Nostalgie sowie kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Vielfalt.

Die Nähe zur „realen“ alltäglichen Lebenswelt betrifft in erster Linie das Schicksal und die subjektiven Empfindungen von Minderheiten, Opfern und Verlierern der Modernisierungs- und Globalisierungsprozesse in China. Diese Nähe zur Realität wird immer noch als Gegendiskurs gegenüber der offiziellen Ideologie begriffen. Dabei steht für die meisten außer Frage, dass es letztlich immer nur um subjektive Wahrnehmung handeln kann. So ist auch der Satz „Meine Kamera lügt nicht“ gemeint, da ich letztlich nur das, was ich selber wahrnehme, als Wahrheit bezeichnen kann, während ich als einzelner die so genannte objektive Wahrheit gar nicht ausmachen oder gar überprüfen kann. In diesem Sinne ist es auch zu verstehen, wenn ich die aktuellen chinesischen Dokumentarfilme in zwei Kategorien einteile: Die Suche nach sozialer Realität und die Suche nach privater Realität. Als Beispiel für ersteres Anliegen habe ich den Film *Vor der Flut* (engl. *Before the Flood*) analysiert, wo es um das groß angelegte Drei-Schluchten-Staudammprojekt geht. Als Beispiel für das zweite Anliegen steht der Film *Der Mann* (engl. *The Man*), wo der Regisseur über einige Monate hinweg mit zwei Freunden Alltag, Alkohol und die Geschichten über Frauen bzw. den Frauenhass teilt.

Den thematischen Schwerpunkt „Utopie und Nostalgie“ illustrieren vor allem Filme über die tibetische Minderheit sowohl in der Autonomen Region Tibet als auch in den angrenzenden chinesischen Provinzen, vor allem Yunnan. Aber auch das ländliche China erscheint als bessere Gegenwart gegenüber den Megastädten an der Küste, in denen der einzelne verloren geht und jede Sinnstiftung im Überlebenskampf abhanden kommt. So würde ich die betreffenden Filme auch nicht als exotisierend oder Beispiele für „othering“ interpretieren, zumal die Filmemacher z.T. auf der Suche nach ihren eigenen Wurzeln sind, auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies ihrer eigenen Kindheit. Auch lassen die Filmemacher mehr als Utopie den Respekt durchblicken angesichts einer dort vorgefundenen sinnstiftenden Art und Weise zu leben und zu überleben. Nicht zuletzt steht hinter diesen nostalgischen Filmen das Bedürfnis, diese Welten, die vom Verschwinden bedroht sind angesichts der alles durchdringenden Modernisierung, zumindest im kulturellen Gedächtnis aufzubewahren.

Als Fallbeispiel für eine unabhängige Institution die ein untrennbarer Teil dieser Neuen Dokumentarfilmbewegung ist, habe ich das YUNFEST gewählt. M.E\$. ist es vorbildlich mit seinen verschiedenen Aktivitäten, von der Organisation der alle zwei Jahre stattfindenden Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festivals bis hin zur Schaffung eines Forums für



gleichberechtigten Dialog zwischen Filmemachern, Vertretern der lokalen Fernsehanstalten, des Provinzmuseums und der Provinzialbibliothek und allen möglichen NGO's vor Ort und nicht zuletzt dem Publikum. Auch die Auseinandersetzung mit methodischen und technischen Entwicklungen im internationalen dokumentarischen Filmen gehört dazu. YUNFEST ist auch nicht nur mit Filmen befasst, sondern bezieht sämtliche Dokumente einer Visuellen Anthropologie ein (inkl. der in ganz Europa verstreuten Fotos aus dem alten Yunnan).

**Meine Zusammenfassung in Thesen lautet:**

1. In China werden Machtdiskurse oft entlang der Generationen-Linie ausgetragen. Dies gilt auch für den chinesischen Film nach der Kulturrevolution. Filmemacher ergreifen das Generationen-Konzept, um ihr Selbstverständnis und eine kollektive Identität zu begründen. Doch macht das Generationen-Konzept nur Sinn, wenn man zugleich auch die Unterschiede zwischen den einzelnen Filmemachern derselben Generation nicht unterschlägt.
2. Aus der Rebellion gegen die offizielle marxistische Historiographie und kommunistische Ideologie war die Fünfte Generation der chinesischen Spielfilmemacher angetreten, um Geschichte, historische Persönlichkeiten, Gender und nationale Minderheiten im Sinne ihres Verstehens von Humanismus neu zu interpretieren.
3. Ihre Begeisterung für die großen und immer wiederkehrenden Narrationen kommt in dem programmatischen Satz von Chen Kaige zum Ausdruck: Film ist Legende. Dieses Programm wiederum holt die Sechste Generation auf den Plan, um dem Diskurs der international äußerst erfolgreichen Fünften ihren eigenen Fokus auf das Individuelle, das Subjektive, das Lokale und die aktuelle Realität entgegenzusetzen.
4. Die Sechste Generation ergreift ihre eigenen Jugenderfahrungen und setzt diese in filmisches Schaffen um. So wird Filmemachen für sie zu einer Art Selbstaussdruck.
5. Der Sechsten ist die Entstehung des unabhängigen Filmes außerhalb des offiziellen Systems zu verdanken. Unabhängigkeit war ihre Strategie um aus der Klemme zwischen dem offiziellen System und dem Anliegen des Selbst-Ausdrucks auszubrechen.
6. Analog zum Programm (Nähe zum Alltag der kleinen Leute) der Spielfilmemacher aus der Sechsten entwickelt sich im Rahmen der zentralen und lokalen Fernsehanstalten die erste Bewegung des chinesischen Dokumentarfilms nach der Kulturrevolution. In dem Maße, wie der Fernsehapparat in die chinesischen Familien einzog, entfaltete der TV-Dokumentarfilm eine noch nie da gewesene Massenwirksamkeit.
7. Um im offiziellen Mediensystem überleben und mit anderen Genres wie Nachrichten, Reportagen und kommerziellen Filmen konkurrieren zu können, machten sich TV-Dokumentarfilmemacher seit Mitte der 90er Jahre, als eine Krise nicht mehr zu

übersehen war, daran, herauszufinden, was eigentlich den Dokumentarfilm zum Dokumentarfilm macht und damit unverzichtbar sein lässt. Lü Xinyu, die Chronistin der Krise und Medientheoretikerin, erwartet vom chinesischen Dokumentarfilm, dass er reflexiv, selbst-reflexiv sei und als eine Art „patriotischer Nachtwache“ zu diene.

8. Mit dieser Definition nimmt sie in gewisser Weise Positionen der nachfolgenden Generation der Filmemacher vorweg, die seit den späten 90er Jahren in Erscheinung treten.

9. Die digitale Revolution, die in China in den 90er Jahre einsetzte, war die Voraussetzung für diese zweite Welle unabhängiger Filmemacher.

10. Ihre Filme werden mit den Begriffen „folk“, „art“, „Untergrund“, „persönliche“ und „unabhängige Filme“ belegt. Ich habe in dieser Untersuchung die Bezeichnung „unabhängig“ vorgezogen, weil die betreffenden Filmemacher sich sämtlich außerhalb der Wege des offiziellen Systems positionieren und darum kämpfen, ihrer eigenen unabhängigen Stimme Gehör zu verschaffen.

11. Unabhängig zu sein bedeutet, kein Geld zu haben, *low budget* Filme zu produzieren und in relativ kleinen Teams zusammenzuarbeiten, wenn nicht allein.

12. Was die Filmemacher seit den späten 90er Jahren umtreibt, ist ihre Sorge um marginalisierte und ausgeschlossene Zeitgenossen, Opfer und Verlierer im Modernisierungs- und Globalisierungsprozess.

13. Die Spielfilme der späten 90er zeichnen sich durch einen ästhetischen Stil aus, der dem dokumentarischen Filmen sehr nahe kommt.

14. Außer, dass die Spiel- und Dokumentarfilme in westlichen Film Festivals auf der Tagesordnung stehen, geschieht die Verbreitung in China in Cafés, Restaurants, vor allem aber über Disketten.

15. Lokalisierung und Aktualisierung der Filme -- im Gegensatz zur Fünften Generation und entschiedener auch im Vergleich zur Sechsten -- bedeuten lokale Geschichten im lokalen Ambiente, lokale Dialekte und Themen aus dem Hier und Jetzt in Festland-China.

16. Als Filmkritiker begeistert ausriefen, Jia Zhangke habe „Chinas kleine ländliche Stadt entdeckt“, trafen sie den Nagel auf den Kopf: Er und seine Filme stehen exemplarisch nicht nur für Lokalisierung und Aktualisierung, sondern für die charakteristischen thematischen und ästhetischen Vorlieben der späten 90er Jahre Filmemachergeneration. Deshalb sind Jia Zhangkes Selbstverständnis und die Analyse dreier seiner Filme Gegenstand einer Fallstudie im Rahmen der vorliegenden Arbeit sind.

17. So wie Jia Zhangke und seine Spielfilme die Merkmale des späten 90er Spielfilms verkörpern, so kann das Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YUNFEST) im heutigen China als ein vorbildliches Forum für Dokumentarfilme dieser Generation gelten. Hier werden Dokumentarfilme nicht nur im Rahmen größerer Festivals gezeigt und so einem

größeren Kreis bekannt gemacht. Gleichzeitig verstehen sich die Organisatoren -- weitgehend ehemalige Studenten des East Asia Instituts für Visuelle Anthropologie (EAIVA) -- als Vermittler, um den Dialog zwischen Dokumentar-Filmemachern und anderen visuellen Künstlern, Forschenden aus der Kulturwissenschaft, Vertretern der lokalen Fernsehanstalten, von Provinzialmuseum und Provinzialbibliothek und nicht zuletzt dem allgemeinen Publikum anzustoßen und lebendig zu halten.