

Contemporary Chinese Independent Cinema: Urban Spaces, Mobility, Memory

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September 2016

PhD

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DECLARATION

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, Chinese independent cinema has been at the forefront of documenting contemporary realities for marginalised citizens in Mainland China. This began with the New Chinese Documentary Movement and exploded in the mid-late 1990s with the rise of what is called the ‘Urban Generation’ of filmmakers who mix fiction with documentary to make sense of urban transformations at the street level. Now, with the continued expansion of more affordable and portable digital video production, independent filmmakers have moved beyond their local parameters and urban aesthetic styles to explore, represent and imagine new ways to document reality for the everyday citizen.

In recent years, scholarship on Chinese independent cinema has acquired greater significance in film studies, insofar as it has devoted itself to the analysis of the historical significance and lasting influence of the New Chinese Documentary Movement and the ‘Urban Generation’. However, in the past decade, increasingly active digital video practices in China have proliferated on the independent film scene, including an increase in amateur and grassroots filmmaking which has embraced realism in multiple and innovative ways through documentary, fiction and experimental films.

In this thesis, I will address the question of realism in contemporary Chinese independent cinema, which I argue, remains under-examined and both requires and warrants closer textual analysis. The cultural politics of China’s subaltern voices provides the common thread of this research which is articulated through the tropes of urban spaces, mobility and memory in this alternative filmmaking practice. These films imagine and represent realities through different and original modes of intervention that include performance, self-portraits, re-enactment and participatory filmmaking. In short, my research focuses on film productions from the past decade that challenge China’s official culture but also engage with it, placing it in relief with the ambiguity inherent in representation in film and history.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis began at the University of Leeds in 2011 when I had just completed my Master's dissertation on the subject of migration in world cinema. It was here that I discovered Chinese independent filmmaker Jia Zhangke's films and embarked on a journey that would take me to Nanjing, China for a year through the White Rose East Asia Centre (WREAC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grants and then to the University of Reading. I want to express my gratitude to those filmmakers and artists who offered their time to discuss their work with me since I began this PhD. Special thanks to Xiaolu Guo, Jia Zhangke, Wang Bo, Yang Lina, Zhang Mengqi, Zhao Dayong and Zou Xueping.

Before this process, I possessed an energy that matched the longevity of Methuselah but this thesis humbled my naïve self-beliefs. In exchange, this experience has enriched my life in ways I had not previously imagined. And for that, I must give thanks to certain individuals that were there to activate my creative flow, to push me through uncharted territory and to lift me up when I felt uncertain of myself. I owe a tremendous debt to Lúcia Nagib whose skilled guidance and indefatigable support all the way through this process was what kept this ship running. Also, special thanks to Simone Knox who joined up in the middle of this thesis without a moment's hesitation and who provided critical feedback on my drafts. This would not have been possible without the optimism, support and advice from Li Ruru, Marco, Sandra, Cecília, Shu-Yi, Sufang, Eden, Miles and my family in Canada. And special love and affection to my very patient and trusting partner in life and in crime, Christine.

To all of you. I could not have done this without you.

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NOTES ON TRANSLATION & TRANSLITERATION

This thesis uses the pinyin system to Romanise Chinese characters. Chinese-language names and phrases first appear in English translation followed by Chinese pinyin. Chinese-language film titles all appear in their English translations. However, chapter titles that feature film names will appear in their English translations and pinyin. Names of Chinese authors, filmmakers and individuals appear according to the Chinese convention, with surname followed by first name unless otherwise specified. References included in the bibliography and filmography state the English translation, pinyin and characters according to their original simplified or traditional character format.

INTRODUCTION

Since the death of Communist Leader Chairman Mao Zedong in the late 1970s, Mainland China has experienced a meteoric rise in global politics and economy. The start of this historical new post-Mao era was marked by newly appointed leader Premier Deng Xiaoping's implementation of the 'Four Modernisations' which focused on strengthening the field of agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology in China. Along with these modernising laws and economic reforms, China ushered in a new global and market liberalisation which involved unprecedented physical, social and economic transformations such as constant redevelopment, increased rural to urban domestic migration and a sustained preoccupation with China's future outlook. Inevitably, this has also generated enormous problems for its marginalised population leading to mass mobilisation of the labour force, the breakdown of family dynamics, homelessness, the disappearance of historical places and suppression of collective memory.

In the early 1990s, Chinese independent cinema emerged as an alternative approach to capturing these marginalised realities at the level of the local everyday experience. This began with the New Documentary Movement, an unofficial and underground film culture that sought to challenge the official perspective relating to the impact of economic development on its citizens. With the shift of attitude from 'communist "we" to capitalist "I"', this alternative film practice asserted a subjectivity that Pickowicz once described as 'self-centred (and self-indulgent)' (2006: 15). Leading scholar in the theorisation of the New Documentary movement, Lü Xinyu offers a more nuanced notion of the individual in Chinese independent film at this time. She notes two phases of development: the first involved the filmmaker's shift away from the official rhetoric and towards the individual subject being filmed in front of the camera (Lü, 2010: 24). Giving voice to the subaltern citizen, these filmmakers often chose observational methods of filmmaking over prior conventions of scripted, voiceover narration. For the second phase, documentary filmmakers expanded on the notion of the individual to include performative and reflexive modes of expression (Lü, 2010: 25). Then, with the advent of more accessible and affordable digital video technology in the 1990s, this unofficial documentary film culture materialised into a particularly urban-focused independent cinema that depicted the city's changes using a handheld-camera, natural lighting, unscripted performances and non-professional actors.

In recent years there has been substantial scholarship that has focused attention toward defining and contextualising the history, politics and aesthetics of China's New Documentary

Movement (Wu, 2000; Lü, 2003; Berry, Lü and Rofel, 2010; Robinson, 2013; Edwards, 2015). In addition to the New Documentary Movement, there has also been a growing trend in the interest of the aesthetics within China's urban focused independent cinema which often represents reality by exploring the aesthetic tensions between documentary and fiction (Pickowicz and Zhang, 2006; Zhang, 2007). The question of the impact and disturbances of China's new economic development on its marginalised citizens and the historical emergence of an independent filmmaking practice features in theoretical inquiries on the New Documentary Movement and urban-based independent cinema. However, the question of realism in contemporary Chinese independent cinema remains under-examined. Although literature on the phenomenon is experiencing a growing trend, there has also been a rise in practical works that have yet to be analysed taking into account their marginal situation.

In order to address this problem, this thesis builds on existing scholarship surrounding Chinese independent cinema and focuses on films from 2005, both fictional and documentary and those that problematise that binary to which I argue have reached new heights of experimentation. There are three central questions that I aim to address: How is the marginalised individual expressed in contemporary Chinese independent cinema from the past decade? What are the conditions for iterations of this filmmaking practice and what are its consequences? What is the nature of the relationship between the marginalised individual and contemporary culture and how are these tensions played out in representational terms?

Urban Spaces, Mobility, Memory

This thesis consists of eight chapters that are divided into three key areas. I will respond to my first question by narrowing my research down to these three common tropes situated in contemporary Chinese independent cinema: urban spaces, mobility and memory. Urban spaces, mobility and memory encompass the significant concerns for marginalised citizens and independent voices who have been impacted by the post-Mao conditions. So, my thesis is structured around these contemporary issues which are often contested and negotiated within this alternative filmmaking practice.

In terms of urban spaces, this involves the realities of ongoing demolition and development which has resulted in forced eviction, relocation, poverty and homelessness. Urban spaces provide fertile ground for independent filmmakers who are intent on exploring the transformations, conflicts and anxieties of this contemporary era of modernisation in

China since the late 1970s. Zhang Zhen's anthology *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (2007) offers an essential introduction to the emergence of filmic and non-filmic material that deals with the impact of China's shift toward urban living. In her introductory essay, Zhang argues that the 'cities are the most visible and concentrated sites of this drastic and at times violent economic, social, and cultural transformation' (2007: 5). These essays spark the initial discourse on ways that urban cinema can articulate the effect of economic reforms on the formation of new urban identities at the street level, everyday life experience. In this section of my thesis which consists of three chapters, I will offer critical textual analysis that deals with the most recent observations and experimentations by independent filmmakers who utilise the city space, from the public to the private domestic realm to examine the difficult living conditions for migrants (*Street Life*, 2006), performance artists (*Tape*, 2010) and families (*Oxhide I* and *Oxhide II*, 2005; 2009) entangled in the upheavals of urban life.

Along with contemporary tensions that are played out in urban spaces in Chinese independent film is the question of mobility. More specifically, of China's rise in economic prosperity through its market liberalisation but also the consequence of it. This includes the phenomena of forced rural to urban migration, in which millions of civilians are exploited through a cheap labour workforce. In this section, I will explore the effects of globalisation on rural migrants, in particular the ways in which independent filmmakers examine the notion of the individual through mobility and migration. Since economic mobility for the rural migrant is shaped by movement from rural spaces to urban spaces, my analysis will also examine how landscapes inform and shape migrant identity. Furthermore, I aim to enrich the study of China in general by highlighting films which contribute to the relationship between gender constructions and mobility, more specifically on identity and female agency for the rural migrant.

Finally, China's concerted focus on its future outlook has resulted in a severe gap between individual and collective, unofficial and official memory. In the final section of my thesis, I have selected films which offer an alternative vision to collective memory in China. So far, official discourse on Chairman Mao's disastrous industrialisation and collectivisation campaigns which resulted in the Great Famine (1959-1961) and the violence of the youth-led Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) has been overlooked and considered a taboo subject. Memory is a familiar trope in Chinese independent cinema because it rejects the teleological forward facing agenda in contemporary society. This alternative film practice is vital in documenting, reviving and restoring cultural memory and the lasting historical trauma to the

public sphere. Furthermore, collecting evidence and testimony becomes a more urgent matter when the generation of those who survived and witnessed these calamitous events are no longer alive to tell their stories.

Scholars such as Yomi Braester (2003), Guobin Yang (2007), Jean Ma (2008) and Qi Wang (2014) offer riveting illuminations on memory and trauma, the disappearance of cultural memory and alternative memory discourse in visual media, literature and art. My research will expand on these discussions by examining three case studies which explore cultural memory during Chairman Mao's leadership years from three different generational perspectives. Furthermore, I will show how the contemporary Chinese independent filmmaker approaches memory through vastly diverse modes of representation. The collection of essays in *DV-Made China: Digital Subjects and Social Transformations After Independent Film* (Zhang & Zito, 2015) offer new insights into the impact of DV culture on independent, amateur and activist filmmaking. However, I argue more critical textual analysis can be done in relation to the innovative ways that filmmakers from young generations including those who are involved in an initial process that participate in what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory' (2008). Hirsch's 'postmemory' becomes problematic when applied to Chinese history because it involves 'those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth' (Hirsch, 1997: 22), whereas in China, the clearly established state discourse on historical trauma leaves very little room for deviation from the narrative. This makes it particularly difficult to participate in any alternative discourse. However, this is part of the reason why I argue that these recent films are relevant and innovative: they invigorate theory. Although my study looks at films that cross several generations, I align my research with Qi Wang's study of memory and Chinese independent cinema which identifies a 'peculiar historical consciousness' (2014: 4) in films and visual-related media by creators who were born between eras in the 1960s and early 1970s and whom she refers to as the 'Forsaken Generation'. These filmmakers that I have selected for my study on memory include both the 'Forsaken Generation' and the post-memory generations and participate in the significant practice of observing, reviving and archiving personal testimony on cultural memory in the post-Mao era.

The conditions of filming on-the-spot

For the second question, my aim is to examine Chinese independent cinema through the conditions and consequences of its filmmaking practice. Structuring my thesis within the trope of urban spaces, mobility and memory, the films that I have selected contain within them a certain style of realism that Jason McGrath describes as a ‘documentary impulse’ (2007: 86). These films are grounded in realism despite their constructedness and experimental styles and often employ non-professional actors, natural lighting conditions and are shot in real locations. These conditions and aesthetics share a likeness with Italian Neorealist Cinema which sprang out of the ruins of the Second World War. Founder of realist film theory, André Bazin asserts ‘[t]he aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities’ (1967: 15). Due in part to the destruction of film studios from the war era, Italian filmmakers (most notably Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini) shot fictional films within the ruinous war torn landscapes and with non-professional actors. In effect, they invoked the national conditions of the poor to a realism that tested the limits of representation.

Chinese independent cinema shares similar thematic and formal qualities associated with Italian Neorealism but the historical conditions and context in which it emerged are vastly different. For example, Lü attaches the emergence of the New Documentary Movement to a historical 1989/1992 conjuncture: The Tiananmen Square Democracy Movement (and its suppression) and Premier Deng Xiaoping’s famous ‘Tour of the South’ of Mainland China where he called for increased urban development and an accelerated market economy (Berry & Rofel, 2010: 6). Up until this historical conjuncture, filmmakers worked for the nation-state controlled China Central Television (CCTV) and the mainstream film industry. Those who worked for the mainstream film industry at this time belong to what is called the Fifth Generation which refers to the Beijing Film Academy graduating class since the start of the Post-Mao era when the academy reopened. Some of these internationally recognised names include Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*, 1991) and Cheng Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*, 1993) and their style during this period has been described as a highly stylised art cinema associated with *xianshizhuyi* or ‘representational realism’ (Berry, 2007: 123). Premier Deng Xiaoping’s new reforms increased economic mobility by encouraging entrepreneurship. In effect, it led to a rise in social and economic inequalities because of its insertion of capitalism into its socialist system. At the same time, the student led Tiananmen Democracy Movement culminated in what is now known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre on 4 June 1989. This event involved the killing of hundreds of unarmed civilian demonstrators and resulted in a nationwide suppression of democracy and liberal-minded ideals. Filmmakers

who worked for CCTV and produced documentary programmes at the time were also directly affected by this historical conjuncture as the government seized control of and made budgetary cuts to documentary-style programmes called the *zhuantipian* that focused on special interest topics.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I provide an explanation of the aesthetics of the *zhuantipian* and how documentary filmmakers began to distance themselves from this expository mode of representation by starting a New Documentary Movement. This movement distanced itself from the mainstream film industry and its *xianshizhuyi* style and from the expository style associated with the *zhuantipian* television programming. From this historical conjuncture, a new unscripted style called *jishizhuyi* or ‘on-the-spot realism’ (Berry, 2007) was created. *Jishizhuyi* which utilises low quality and handheld camera aesthetics embraces an on-the-spot spontaneous style called *xianchang*, which derives from the ‘liveness’ of live TV. Chinese independent documentary film pioneer Wu Wenguang defines *xianchang* as being ‘in the “here” and “now”’ (2000: 274) which points to the director’s presence at the scene of the film shoot. In his book *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street* (2013), Luke Robinson provides the most succinct English language translation, definition and theoretical application of *xianchang*. He states,

The techniques that supported *xianchang* – the handheld camerawork, the long takes and tracking shots, the natural sound and lighting – were thus meant to capture the experience of ‘shooting on the scene’. However, they also expressed a desire to describe a changing reality, and to reflect on the evolving relationship between the director, his or her environment, and the human subjects of the filmmaking process. (2013: 29)

By being present on location prior to a spontaneous event that may erupt in front of the camera, attests to the documentary filmmaker’s dedication to being on-the-spot. *Jishizhuyi*’s ‘on-the-spot realism’ and *xianchang* techniques were then embraced by the new generation of emerging urban based independent filmmaking talent who took their cameras to the streets to shoot the social, cultural and political transformations and upheavals that were occurring in the 1990s but were rarely discussed in official news and visual media. Some of the more notable filmmakers of this generation include Zhang Yuan (*Beijing Bastards*, 1993), Wang Xiaoshuai (*The Days*, 1993) and Jia Zhangke (*Pickpocket*, 1997).

These filmmakers and those who continue to emerge in contemporary China operate within dynamic and complex spaces of production, distribution, exhibition and reception of Chinese independent cinema. For instance, some of these filmmakers operate completely on

their own in relation to financing, production and distribution while others rely on private (and often international) sources of funding. There are also filmmakers who have an affiliation or working relationship with the official nation-state film industry. One case in point is Jia Zhangke who is arguably the most internationally acclaimed Chinese independent filmmaker and whose works I will be examining in Part II and III on the question of mobility and memory respectively. Jia has produced films on his own and through private sources of funding in Hong Kong and abroad. He has also had his films both approved and banned by the nation-state controlled film industry in Mainland China. In this thesis, I will also analyse films made by directors such as Xiaolu Guo and Lixin Fan who reside outside of Mainland China and who have received international sources of funding for their works.

So then, how do we adequately define independent cinema and the independent filmmaker? First of all, what makes a film independent requires a personal stance on the part of the filmmaker. I align my understanding of the independent filmmaker in China with Yingjin Zhang who states that these directors ‘resolutely refuse to be messengers of dominant ideology’ (2010: 107). So, while Chinese independent cinema operates on a sliding scale in relation to production and circulation processes, the filmmakers themselves are unwavering in their dismissal and/or disapproval of the dominant ideology. Furthermore, these independent filmmakers aim to capture a perception of truth through personal filmmaking and subjective imaginations of reality that is attached to the marginal perspective. In fact, my case study on Jia’s officially sanctioned film *24 City* (2008) will explore ways in which the filmmaker cleverly approaches the issue of the migrant worker’s erasure from national history through oral testimony and inside a state-owned factory. The film which required approval to be shot on location in this factory was sanctioned and received a short theatrical release in Mainland China. Despite this, I will argue that the filmmaker’s multi-layered treatment of space and time along with the film’s mixture of fictional and documentary storytelling maintains a personal stance that interrogates the dominant ideology.

My preoccupation with Chinese independent cinema is in the most recent decade which has brought about an increase in production with the advent of digital video culture in the late 1990s along with more diversified, experimental forms and modes of representation. For instance, some of these independent filmmakers whom I will be addressing in my research are also educated painters, writers, photojournalists, professors, advertising executives and performers. They still employ handheld gritty aesthetics associated with ‘on-the-spot realism’ and the spirit of a ‘documentary impulse’ (McGrath, 2008: 86) but they also

build on, mix and enhance the visual aesthetic potential of independent cinema in Mainland China.

Modes of representation

For the third and final inquiry surrounding the question of realism, I will address the nature of the tensions of the relationships between the marginalised individual and contemporary Chinese culture. These representational modes of realism will be the central focus of my theoretical inquiry into the pertinence of the individual under the conditions of urban space, mobility and memory. My methodology involves close textual analysis which overlaps with both film and cultural theory. Furthermore, it is informed by discussions with practitioners, producers, critics, distributors and film festival organisers. These discussions alongside my own participation and involvement at London's Chinese Visual Festival, the London Film Festival, Nanjing's Independent Film Festival, Warsaw's Five Flavours Film Festival and the Chinese Film Forum UK have been instrumental in providing insight into research on the business, politics and aesthetics of the most current Chinese independent filmmaking scene. Although the business of exhibition and circulation of these films is an engrossing topic that continues to change, expand and evolve, I argue that this area has been duly studied in recent years, most notably by Yingjin Zhang (2010) and discussed by numerous critics and scholars that include Shelly Kraicer (2011a; 2011b), Luke Robinson and Jenny Chio (2013), Tony Rayns (2014) and B er enice Reynaud (2015b) amongst others.¹ Instead, my central aim is to select films which warrant closer analysis specifically because they offer a fascinating engagement with reality through film form, thereby enriching the history of world cinema films.

My thesis is structured around case studies which will explore the aesthetic tensions between local and global geopolitics, fiction and non-fiction, performance, art and political activism. These tensions result in a complex representation of the historically peripheral subject and is obtained through observational and participatory modes of production, performance and political activism, testimonials and staged representations, genre and experimental narratives. In all, these films attempt to resist the fa ade created by the official reports and instead reveal the realities for struggling artists, activists, internal migrants,

¹ The book *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation* which is edited by Chris Berry and Luke Robinson and includes a selection of essays is a forthcoming publication by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017.

elderly, homeless, women and children who remain unacknowledged in the mainstream film industry. So, the primary theoretical underpinnings of my research refer to documentary realism. As I have already stated, documentary cinema in China has played a different historical role from that in the Anglosphere and in Europe. Furthermore, documentary truth takes on a separate meaning in Chinese independent cinema since it has, from the beginning made efforts to distinguish itself from the documentary truth associated with the official *zhuantipian*. So, my research will first take into account the theoretical contribution by scholars on the subject of documentary realism and the qualities of *xianchang*. Some notable scholars who I will refer to in my study of these qualities specific to Chinese independent cinema include Wu Wenguang (2000; 2001; 2006), Lü Xinyu (2003; 2010), Zhang Zhen (2007a), Chris Berry (2007; 2010) and Luke Robinson (2013).

Along with recognising and utilising the concept of *xianchang* which is specific to China's historical situation, I will also draw on Bill Nichols' influential writings on the representational modes of documentary film which helps to capture the ways in which Chinese independent filmmakers observe, interact and participate with their subaltern subjects (including the filmmakers themselves) in contemporary society. In his analysis of the observational mode of documentary representation, Nichols examines, for example, the work of American filmmaker and direct cinema pioneer Frederic Wiseman to tease out the distinctive differences between unobtrusive and interactive filmmaking methods (1991). Interestingly, Wiseman's documentary films have been discussed alongside the New Documentary Movement in China by pioneer Chinese documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang (2006). Also, Nichols' definition of the observational mode strengthens the capabilities of the concept of *xianchang* as he also speaks of the 'presence of the camera "on the scene" [which] testifies to its presence in the historical world' (1991: 40). So Nichols' assertions will be useful in my analysis of Zhao Dayong's *Street Life* (2006) in Chapter 1 in which the documentary filmmaker follows a homeless community who live on the street. Here the filmmaker commits to filming 'on-the-spot' with a group of rural migrants and vagabonds and attests to the continued ethical and spontaneous imperative of *xianchang* and to Nichols' definition of the observational mode.

With generally low production budgets in Chinese independent cinema, the body becomes a conduit for expressing anxieties and frustrations for artists. Vivian Sobchack's body theory is useful in my analysis of Li Ning's *Tape* in Chapter 2 which involves a five-year project documented by the filmmaker himself. Here Sobchack's theory of interobjectivity becomes relevant in understanding the pain of suffering and the merging of

subject and object where boundaries between public and private become non-existent (2004). At the same time, the artist/filmmaker utilises demolition space and city streets to stage his guerrilla-style outdoor performances. I will also argue that Sobchack's body theory gets stuck in the spectator's gaze when the filmmaker himself is actually in charge of the filmmaking process. So, I will apply Lúcia Nagib's theory of an ethics of realism which pulls body theory away from the spectator and towards the pro-filmic event. In effect, this allows the viewer to understand the artist/filmmaker's physical and artistic relationship with reality.

Other notable cinema-related body theories which I will be using for my analysis turn to excess, both material and indexical. For instance, Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject figure (1982) and Mary Ann Doane's essay (2003) on the indexical and hyperbolic use of the close-up aesthetic device will be integral to my study in Chapter 6 on Hu Jie's revelatory documentary film *Though I Am Gone* (2007). This film unveils the memory of the violence surrounding the Cultural Revolution and uses personal testimony and scrupulous evidentiary material. However, it also explores the creative potential of aesthetic choices which revive and interrogate traumatic memories.

Personal filmmaking which also relates to Lü's theory of the notion of the individual is also a vital and resourceful tool in understanding China's current and past complexities. Since my research is focused on the marginalised subject in contemporary China, I will often consult writings on the participation of the subject in cinema. This includes Renov's influential work on the *Subject of Documentary* (2004) that argues for a critical analysis of subjectivity through autobiographical works. In contemporary Chinese independent cinema, subjectivity and self-representation is a key starting point for addressing the realities for marginalised figures in society. Subjectivity provides agency when there is none. This current pre-occupation of the self in society is a common thread that surfaces and is explored in innovative ways and with expressive potential. For instance, Liu Jiayin's diptych films *Oxhide I* (2005) and *Oxhide II* (2009) experiment with minimalism by placing the camera within the filmmaker's own family's cramped Beijing domestic space. My analysis will draw from Michael Renov's theory on autobiographical modes (2004) as well as work by Alisa Lebow on the topic of first-person narratives (2008; 2012).

Subjectivity and the rise of the individual in contemporary Chinese society is emphasised in films that capture rural migrant youth in transition to adulthood. I will apply cultural theory to films that I address in my section on mobility and which involve the coming-of-age experience for young women. In Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, Lixin Fan's documentary film *Last Train Home* (2009) and Xiaolu Guo's *She, A Chinese* (2008) deal with

female agency and the movement of rural migrants to urban cities to locate work. This is where I will offer a comparative analysis (with Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006) in Chapter 4 and *A Touch of Sin* (2013) in Chapter 5) in order to examine the subjugated conditions and difference between rural migrants and rural migrant women. Here, I will utilise contemporary cultural theory on the dynamic shifts towards individualism in Chinese society for youth and young women (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2003; Whyte, 2004; Hansen and Pang, 2010).

I will also examine the methods and impact of participatory filmmaking in addressing rural memory. More specifically, Zou Xueping's documentary film *Children's Village* (2012), belongs to a grassroots film movement that seeks to address the issue of rural memory by returning to ancestral villages to document personal testimony by elders on the Great Famine. This event had a significant impact on rural communities and has not been adequately addressed by the official government or the public educational sphere in China. What is particularly unique about Zou's film is her method which involves the help of children (specifically girls) in capturing these vital testimonies by the aging population. Zou's participatory method of filmmaking then raises questions about the value of storytelling of a traumatic historical event from a child's perspective. It also opens up possibilities regarding the question of female agency in the future practice of Chinese independent cinema.

Finally, I will address the aesthetic potential in contemporary Chinese independent cinema which creates innovative tensions between presentation and representation. Bazin's realist theory contributes to the basis for my analysis of documentary films that reveal the relationship between representation and actuality. In terms of fictional or quasi-fictional films, Chinese independent cinema interrogates the quest for truth in relation to both the referent and its image. Its resistance through ambiguity demonstrates the ambiguity of the post-Mao moment in history. So, my thesis will consult texts that rethink and reinvigorate new perspectives on documentary film. This includes Williams' writings on contemporary documentary film which should be defined 'not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from a horizon of relative and contingent truths' (1993: 65). These negotiations between reality and representation are most aptly applied to Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke's predominant style which I will be examining in Chapter 7 on his film *24 City* (2008). Although this is a documentary film, Jia imbues the story with ambiguity through a highly stylised construction of reality and through an intermingling of both real migrant factory workers and actors who play them. In effect, the film raises questions about the representation of cultural memory in relation to the often displaced migrant worker.

With the accessibility, affordability and portability of this new age of Chinese independent filmmaking, these visual agents of history range from children to senior citizens, from women to men and they locate their films on urban streets, in rural villages, in cramped apartments, on theatre stages and in historical relics. The spontaneous quality of *xianchang* has become the norm in independent cinema along with an urgency to expand on and respond to the ongoing process of negotiating identity for the marginalised individual in contemporary China. Since 2012, there has been an increase in government banning of Mainland China's independent film festivals which have not been pre-approved by the nation-state authority. So, more than anything, it is my aim to keep Chinese independent cinema in the public sphere where these films deserve to be circulated, celebrated for their aesthetic potential and contribution to cinema and most importantly preserved.

PART I

Urban Spaces

CHAPTER 1

‘On-the-spot realism’ in Zhao Dayong’s *Street Life: On Nanjing Road, Shanghai* (Nanjinglu, 2006)

In Mainland China, the emergence of independent documentary filmmaking in the late 1980s offered spectators a previously unexplored view of the everyday conditions of a country in the middle of phenomenal social, political and economic changes. Wu Wenguang’s documentary film *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990) is often credited as the film which sparked a New Documentary Movement in China (Berry, Lü and Rofel, 2010). The film, which began as a state-sponsored project, was completed at the director’s personal expense. This came after the Tiananmen Square Massacre on 4 June 1989, which led to government imposed budgetary cuts on the national media station China Central Television (CCTV) where Wu was employed at the time. *Bumming in Beijing* documents the lives of Beijing artists living on the margins of urban society and uniquely captures the historical period just prior to and after the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

Not only is the film’s content historically significant, it also experiments with form in a way previously unseen in China. Wu combines traditional ‘talking head’ shot techniques associated with the style of CCTV’s *zhuantipian* (special topic programmes) or journalistic programmes with new aesthetics that include location shooting, long durational takes and tracking shots. The New Documentary Movement in China in the early 1990s also represented a shift in the relationship between filmmaker and subject and offered unparalleled access into the private everyday lives of China’s marginalised citizens. This new production method and style has been defined by the concept of *xianchang* which ‘constructs a particular temporality of “present tense” by virtue of being on the scene’ (Zhang, 2010:105). Although the aesthetics utilised in Wu’s documentary have been employed throughout film history, in China they are uniquely intertwined with the politics of its changing landscapes: from rural to urban migration, from demolition to massive urban development and from the rise to subsequent suppression of the student demonstration movement in 1989.

This chapter examines one aspect of this thesis, contemporary Chinese independent cinema’s relation to the real in urban spaces through documentary filmmaking and ‘on-the-spot realism’. Urban space has provided fertile ground for independent filmmakers to record the impact of China’s transformations on marginalised and vulnerable citizens that include

rural migrant workers, the disabled, elderly, children 'left behind', prostitutes and vagabonds. These issues are highlighted in Zhao Dayong's documentary film *Street Life: On Nanjing Road*, which is shot on location in the bustling and touristic commercial shopping district in central Shanghai. The film depicts the real life struggles for homeless rural migrants in Shanghai as the filmmaker Zhao follows a bottle collecting community who are living on the streets in and around Nanjing Road. Nanjing Road is a pedestrianised walkway that runs from the eastern section of the Huangpu district that includes the world famous Shanghai Bund and extends west from the People's Square to the Jing'an district.

Through a critical analysis of *Street Life*, I will show how Zhao's method acknowledges and reflects the techniques utilised by filmmakers (such as Wu) from the New Documentary Movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. As Berry and Rofel state in the opening paragraphs of their book on this movement, '[a]ny attempt to understand China's visual culture today must start from an understanding of the New Documentary Movement' (2010: 4). As much as filmmakers in the past decade remain committed to an authenticity of documentary truth by shooting on location, otherwise known as *xianchang*, my aim will be to critically interrogate the politics and the liveness of recording on the street.

With that in mind, I will be providing a historical trajectory that starts with the origins of the independent documentary movement with a special focus on *Bumming in Beijing*. Here, I am concerned with the ways in which documentary filmmakers such as Wu were influenced by and separated themselves from the aesthetics and production methods of CCTV. Along with pointing out key influences and relationships from within Mainland China, I will also look at how the early independent documentary movement shows characteristics of *direct cinema*, more specifically, the work of American documentary filmmaker Frederic Wiseman. With this historical background, I will then proceed with a close analysis of Zhao's *Street Life*. This includes the rising trend of the amateur digital video filmmaker, of its aesthetic concepts and of its socioeconomic concerns surrounding rural migrants living in urban spaces. By doing so, my aim for this chapter is to examine how the production and style of *Street Life* builds upon key elements within previous historical movements.

Through a case study of *Street Life*, this chapter will identify three key areas of the current independent documentary scene in China: first, the independent filmmaker's continued concern with the marginalised population in urban spaces. In this case, I will look at Zhao's microscopic view of a homeless community living in and around Nanjing Road in Shanghai. Through an observational mode of filmmaking rendered through a commitment to *xianchang*, the documentary filmmaker records the complexities of the homeless urban figure.

Second, I will examine the filmmaker's efforts to identify these complexities through a marginalised point of view. Here, I will use examples in the film to demonstrate how Zhao privileges the political over the artistic by attesting to the liveness of *xianchang*. Finally, I will aim to show how *Street Life* addresses testimony by oscillating between observation and experimentation. This involves performances by marginalised subjects, physical interventions by the filmmaker and experiments with sound and music. Here, the film mediates between recording the unexpected events on location through the concept of *xianchang* and utilising representational strategies such as extradiegetic sound that dramatise the events taking place in front of the camera. In effect, my goal is to demonstrate how documentary filmmakers have remained committed to the documentary mode of 'on-the-spot realism' (*jishizhuyi*) related to the New Documentary Movement filmmakers while incorporating a new set of aesthetic techniques and experimentation that pushes the observational mode toward a more physical participatory documentary mode.

Historical trajectory: from the New Documentary Movement to *Street Life*

Since the early years of the New Documentary Movement, the practice of documentary filmmaking in China has diversified but all of these films are unified by the concept of *xianchang* (Robinson, 2010: 180). The concept of *xianchang* employs aesthetics and techniques that break away from studio-sanctioned filmmaking. No longer is the artist bound to the guidelines associated with the *zhuantipian* journalistic programming which shares the Communist Party values. In the 1980s, the *zhuantipian* emerged with the nationalised television industry. Generally, these programmes promote topics with heroic principles that includes national achievements, political unity and historical figures and moments in time. Unlike films from the independent documentary field, these programmes were not so much concerned with stories about the individual's situation. It is worth noting that some levels of experimentation in the *zhuantipian* did start to emerge in the 1980s. However, it is notable for its use of voice-over narration and heavily edited sequences. Episodes are also shot using carefully framed compositions, studio lighting and dubbed sound. Conversely, *xianchang* relies on the physical presence of the filmmaker on the scene, recording events as they happen. Some of the methods employed by filmmakers include long durational takes, handheld camera work, tracking shots and direct sound.

In order to understand how early Chinese independent documentary is both connected to and separates itself from the style of the *zhuantipian*, I will turn to a brief analysis of *Bumming in Beijing*. As mentioned earlier, Wu pioneered the New Documentary Movement with this film. No scholarly study on Chinese independent cinema exists that does not also reference Wu's influence on the documentary field in China from the 1990s onwards. This is not altogether to do with his filmmaking; Wu also contributes to the theoretical knowledge of Chinese cinema in several articles, interviews and books (Wu, 2000; Wu, 2001; Wu, 2006). He defines *xianchang* as 'in the present and on the spot' (2000: 274) which arises from the liveness of recording at the scene of an event. *Xianchang* derives from 'live' as in 'live TV' and the ability to capture what Feuer defines as 'an ideology of the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real' (1983: 14). Berry points to the term's usefulness for independent filmmakers who also seek to differentiate themselves from the mainstream sanctioned films and the TV's style of the *zhuantipian* by emphasising the unexpected and unscripted parts of their documentary work (2002: 124).

Despite this live recording and departure from the official film and television medium in China, *xianchang*, like any documentary film is a mediated reality. For instance, Nichols states, 'documentary is not a reproduction of reality, it is a representation of the world we already occupy' (Nichols, 2001: 20). Similarly, Zhang quickly dismisses any generalised notion that independent filmmakers in China occupy themselves with objectivity: 'The question that obsesses them most, therefore, is not "Does my camera lie?" but "How can my camera capture what I *perceive*² as truthful?"' (2006: 28-29). *Xianchang* is achieved through a relationship between the unpredictable nature of filming in actual places and the representation of that story rendered through the filmmaker's aesthetic choices. Some of these choices are made in post-production which I will be focusing on later in this chapter, such as Zhao's use of sound for dramatic effect in *Street Life*. For now, I am examining how *Bumming in Beijing* is an example of *xianchang* and differentiates itself from the *zhuantipian*.

Shooting a scene on actual locations, employing long durational takes and recording real events as they unfold in front of the camera reveals new truths. It is this kind of truth rendered through spontaneous moments that erupt while observing life in action, which attest to the value of *xianchang*. Despite the filmmaker's pre-planned research of the documentary's structure, theme and style, moments do disrupt the original intentions and help shape the overall tone and revelations of any story. *Bumming in Beijing* in its original version is one

² My emphasis

hundred and fifty minutes long and was shot from May 1988 to August 1989. It takes place over a significant historical moment in China and aptly captures the anxieties and uncertainties surrounding events that led to the Tiananmen Square Massacre on 4 June 1989. It was also shot in a traditional *hutong*³ community situated in the centre of Beijing city and right next to Tiananmen Square. The film is divided into sections marked with chapter titles: 'Why Come to Beijing', 'Accommodation' and 'Lifestyles and Dreams'. The first three quarters of the film documents the lives of five freelance artists (two men, three women) and recent university graduates who struggle to navigate the cultural and economic art scene in Beijing. Each one of the artists has migrated from other parts of China to work in the country's capital city. The last section of the film takes place after 4 June 1989 and two artists have moved abroad, while the others are making plans to leave. There is also a follow-up film made in 1995 called, *At Home in the World* that catches up with the artists' lives.

Bumming in Beijing illustrates a dystopian perspective by showing the limitations of contemporary China for marginalised citizens. It is interested in ordinary people and provides an indirect criticism of the official perspective which alludes to the 'absent presence' (Berry, 2007). Larsen emphasises the sensitive nature of this historical period rendered through the film's observational style:

Wu's long takes and emphasis on duration serve as a kind of counterpoint to the suddenness with which Tiananmen was crushed... The prolonged moments of near silence in *Bumming in Beijing* produce the aesthetic effect of outlasting the remembered roar of a government tank. (1998: 53, 55)

Unlike the propaganda style of the *zhuantipian*, the film does not offer any solutions to the issues that arise for the marginalised artists. Although Wu made his film before he became aware of the aesthetics belonging to the observational style in documentary cinema, it shares some of the characteristics of post-World War II American documentary filmmaker Frederic Wiseman. In 1991, Wu contacted multiple film festivals about his new film *Bumming in Beijing* and when he did not receive a response, he accepted an assignment with CCTV in Tibet. So, it was not until 1993 when Wiseman was presenting his film *Zoo* (1993) at the Yamagata Film Festival in Japan, that the two were officially introduced. As described by the Chinese interpreter Akiyama Tamako of the post-screening exchange between the filmmakers Wiseman, Wu and Japan's Ogawa Shinsuke: 'After that screening, Chinese documentary

³ *Hutong* is the general term for a northern Chinese neighbourhood (predominantly Beijing) that is characterised by its narrow alleyways and streets. They are composed of traditional courtyard residences which have been in threat of being demolished. Those few which have survived, have done so in part by converting them into hotels/B&Bs due to their attraction for tourists seeking an authentic experience.

filmmakers came to line up Frederick Wiseman next to Ogawa Shinsuke when they spoke of the directors they particularly admired' (Nornes, 2014: 257). This has also been verified by Wu who has written how both Wiseman and Ogawa Shinsuke have influenced his work since being introduced to them to at the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival (2006).

Like Wu, Wiseman is considered a pioneer of a documentary film movement and his work belongs to what Nichols defines as the 'observational mode' (2001) that emerged in 1960s U.S.A. This American documentary film movement occurred as a result of more portable audio and video technology (most notably the 16mm camera) while Chinese independent documentary was an effect of multiple factors: China's opening up to the global consumer market, the rise in availability and affordability of portable cameras and the events that shaped China after the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Lightweight and increasingly affordable technology allows the filmmaker to navigate locations easily, to follow the action in progress and to experiment with possibilities through long durational takes. This allows the documentary filmmakers to experiment with movement through space while using a 'fly-on-the-wall' approach.

Nichols identifies six modes of documentary filmmaking: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative (2001). The techniques employed in the *zhuantipian*, with their 'voice-of-God' narrations, 'talking head' interviews and studio settings would be classified under the expository mode. The observational mode, Nichols explains, 'emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera' (2001: 34). The 'direct engagement' gives this type of filmmaking its other name: *direct cinema*. The 'American School' of *direct cinema* distinguishes itself from the 'French School' of *cinéma vérité*. While filmmakers belonging to the camp of *direct cinema* unobtrusively observe and allow drama to reveal itself to the camera over time, *cinéma vérité* aims to induce self-revelations for the subjects being filmed. Along with an unobtrusive camera, both Wu and Wiseman concern themselves with topics that highlight marginalised experiences of the everyday. While Wu concerns himself with marginalised artists in *Bumming in Beijing*, Wiseman often focuses on the marginalised within social institutions such as blind students (*Blind*, 1987) and patients living in a psychiatric hospital (*Titicut Follies*, 1967). Typically, the observational mode gives the impression that the filmmaker will not intervene at any point and this, along with long durational takes, attests to the film's 'strength in giving a sense of the duration of actual events' (Nichols, 2001: 112). Committed to this observational mode, both Wu and Wiseman also privilege the long durational take.

Despite both Wu and Wiseman's connection to the same documentary mode of representation, there are some differences in their deployment of this, thereby demonstrating the different ways the observational mode can be applied. For instance, context matters. In Wu's *Bumming in Beijing*, the artists are filmed in 1989 in a neighbourhood situated next to Beijing's Tiananmen Square. The artists' attitudes shift from hopefulness before 4 June 1989 when the Tiananmen Massacre occurred and hopelessness afterward. The film's chapter titles that start with arriving in Beijing and end with 'Lifestyles and Dreams' demonstrate this shift in time and attitude. The final 'Dreams' chapter implies an unattainable or unpredictable reality and future. Despite being located in a neighbourhood that straddles Tiananmen Square in the nation's capital city centre though, Wu's film avoids any mention of the Massacre. However, this could also be related to the fact that the mere mention of the event was considered a serious offence and even remains a taboo subject in present day China. By comparison, Wiseman's films often take place within public institutions that include hospitals and schools and involve extensive pre-production research and formal permission. What concerns Wiseman is the relationships between the individual and the institutions so space takes priority over time. On Wiseman's editing structure, Nichols notes:

[b]etween sequences editing seldom establishes a chronological relationship: sequences follow each other consecutively but without a clearly marked temporal relationship. The whole thus tends toward poetry... (1978: 17)

As a result, Wiseman's specialty emphasises the observational mode through a 'fly-on-the-wall' detachment and long durational takes. In doing so, he forces the viewer to focus on space and the relationships between individuals (both clientele and professionals) and the workings of the institutional system. In doing so, Wiseman's films are not reduced to a dogmatic opinion surrounding these ambiguous relations and so relies on the viewer to make their own judgements on the institution and the wider social context.

Another major distinction between Wu and Wiseman's films is their own presence. As already mentioned, Wiseman employs a 'fly-on-the-wall' approach and does not intervene at all apart from using close-up shots whereas Wu can often be heard talking discreetly behind the camera. Examined in its historical context, Wu's off-screen presence does not serve as a revelation of the documentary genre's artifice. Instead, as Dai points out, Wu's voice heard from behind the camera radiates a 'sense of being "on the scene"' (1999: 225) in early independent documentary filmmaking. Furthermore, a more practical reason is revealed by the filmmaker himself who has confessed that, at the time, he did not know what exactly he

was attempting to create (Johnson, 2006: 51). Despite attempts made by Wu to edit out his voice in post-production (Reynaud, 2010: 167), it still appears throughout the film.

There is also a difference in each filmmaker's framing of their subjects. Wiseman avoids the 'talking head' approach completely whereas Wu is still influenced by the *zhuantipian* with their 'talking head' interview styles. Typically, the *zhuantipian* belong to the expository mode as they emphasise 'commentary and argumentative logic' (Nichols, 2001: 33). What separates Wu's 'talking head' method from the *zhuantipian* and the expository mode, is in its overall purpose and effect. First of all, the 'talking head' interviews do not present an official narrative that is representative of the style of the *zhuantipian*. Furthermore, Wu's voice within the film does not act as 'commentary' or as a voice of authority. Instead, *Bumming in Beijing* captures the voiceless artist living in Beijing during a tumultuous historical period (Fig. 1.1). Unlike the structural logic associated with the *zhuantipian* which drive for a solution to any issues that arise for the subjects, this film does not offer resolutions for the politically and economically deprived artist in Beijing at this time.



FIGURE 1.1: 'TALKING HEAD' INTERVIEWS OF THE FIVE ARTISTS DEPICTED IN BUMMING IN BEIJING. IN CLOKWISE ORDER FROM TOP LEFT: GAO BO, ZHANG CI, ZHANG XIAPING, ZHANG DALI AND MOU SEN.

The lack of polished presentation is also evidenced in the raw sounds of off-screen urban noise and inaudible conversations between artists as the camera records within the studio. Also, Wu's film does not attempt to supply the viewer with an understanding of this inaudible dialogue. Wu's presence behind the camera then radically differentiates itself from the heavily-scripted expository mode of filmmaking in Mainland China during this period.

Wu's framing of his subjects may mirror the *zhuantipian*'s 'talking head' interview styles but those artists who are speaking in front of the camera have previously gone unnoticed in mainstream documentary culture in China. Rather than voices of authority, they become legitimate voices during a time when government cutbacks for film production, security measures and censorship were on the rise.

Despite distinguishing itself from the CCTV's *zhuantipian*, in the initial years of the independent documentary movement, no aesthetic method had been established between filmmakers. However, after the Yamagata International Film Festival in 1993 when Wu and Wiseman met, terms such as *direct cinema*, *cinéma vérité* and Wiseman's observational style began to circulate amongst early Chinese independent documentary filmmakers (Zhang, 2004). Of course, a similar observational style had already been used in films such as Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing*, but it was only after 1993 that filmmakers began analysing some of Wiseman's methods and began fervently adhering to the 'fly-on-the-wall' approach. By the late 1990s however, another shift occurred in which filmmakers began to more consciously turn their backs on the observational style and towards issues far more diverse and personal (Robinson, 2013: 18). In an effort to re-adjust their approach and styles and with increased availability of portable technology, documentary filmmakers pushed for the subjective voice, more mixed reflexive and experimental styles and reframed their attitude towards subjects.

It is at this time that filming on the street in urban settings with its mixture of loud noises, constant development and changing scenery emerged from the New Documentary Movement. Much has been written about the 1990s when the Urban Generation of filmmakers began to capture the constant shifts within the everyday urban space (Pickowicz and Zhang, 2006; Zhang, 2007b). Today, urban filmmaking has expanded to include amateurs and enthusiasts from all different backgrounds who explore the changing cityscapes through various artistic forms (animation, photography, performance etc.) and with more portable camcorders including mobile phones (Voci, 2010). In the introduction of the most well-known text on the historical significance of this Urban Generation, Zhang Zhen states:

The experience and conception of *xianchang*, or 'on the scene', indeed captures the contemporary spirit (*dangxiang*) of the Urban Generation in general and the 'amateur cinema' in particular. (2007a: 19)

The 'Urban Generation' refers to a group of filmmakers who emerged in the shadow of internationally renowned mainstream directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige and who have been directly affected by and bear witness to the ruptures and transformations of

China from a rural to an urban development. These filmmakers often engage with the confusingly complex urban developments by employing the act of drifting or walking on the city street (Chiu Han-Lai, 2007). This drifting trope within urban spaces is an exercise in observing, absorbing and responding artistically to the emergence of new and often uneven socioeconomic developments. At the same time, the characters are anxious about their futures. Some notable filmmakers who are considered part of this 'Urban Generation' and who studied at the Beijing Film Academy include Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan and Li Yang.

In recent years, more affordable and accessible digital video technology which has emerged in China, provides an opportunity for amateurs to step out onto the streets and capture their own stories. More recently, city-based filmmakers have returned to their rural villages to record elders' memories of the 1950s Great Famine, and I will return to this subject when I analyse Wu Wenguang's *Memory Project* in Chapter 8. For now, I would like to shift attention toward the 2006 urban documentary film *Street Life*. In the next section, I will analyse ways in which it addresses the marginalised through the homeless subject living on the streets of an affluent part of Shanghai. After a brief introduction of the amateur filmmaker's role in the depiction of a homeless community in urban space, I will then look at the film's point of view and the filmmaker's physical intervention and commitment to *xianchang*. Along with creating a kind of political intervention in a public space by way of quick digital video practice, the filmmaker focuses on this marginalised group by placing the camera on the actual locations where homeless characters linger and navigate in.

Urban space and *hukou* in *Street Life*

Street Life is a contemporary independent documentary that remains committed to the concept of *xianchang* first launched by Wu's *Bumming in Beijing*.⁴ It is shot entirely on the location where homeless bottle and cardboard collectors live: that is, on Shanghai city's most touristic pedestrianised walkway on Nanjing Road. Rather than shooting the displaced within private dwellings, the film captures a situation in which the homeless are visible in plain sight within one of the busiest internationalised areas of the country. Unlike the subjects captured in

⁴ Although this film is seen as launching an independent documentary movement, Wu's colleagues were also producing at this time in the same manner. However, it is Wu's pioneering film that is viewed as the most influential.

documentaries and fictional films that belong to the 'Urban Generation' of the late 1990s, there is no observational discourse made about the complexities surrounding recent urban transformations. Instead, it offers an intimate look into a community that live out of the waste from the streets. These are the most deprived individuals in Mainland China and they survive by collecting and recycling material tossed on to the street, into rubbish bins and in back alleyways.

Unlike many of the filmmakers from the 'Urban Generation' who studied at the prestigious Beijing Academy before making independent films in the 1990s, Zhao is an amateur filmmaker and *Street Life* is his first directorial feature. He graduated from China's Lu Xun Art Academy in 1992 where he specialised in oil painting. He then worked as an advertising director in Beijing and Guangzhou and in 1997 he founded Guangzhou Dake, a design company. Since the making of *Street Life*, Zhao has continued to make both documentary (*My Father's House* (2011), *Ghost Town* (2009)) and fictional films (*High Life* (2010), *Shadow Days* (2014)) that explore the impact of the market economy on individuals in both urban and rural regions of Mainland China.

Zhao operates in a similar fashion to Wu: he spends a considerable amount of time within the marginalised community and films their daily situation of living in temporary spaces with cardboard beds laid out on the pavement. He interviews the homeless in medium and close-up shots and follows them as they collect material, weigh it and sell it. His camera is also present to witness their leisure time (usually in the evenings) when some of the men are chatting with one another and drinking. Although this kind of trust established between Zhao and the participants filmed requires pre-planned research, the documentary's structure is loosely organised into a series of segments that introduce various homeless figures, sometimes returning in front of the camera to supply updates on the state of the community. This open-structure political intervention requires quick filmmaking by way of a small handheld digital video camera with synchronous sound.

Similar to early documentary filmmakers, Zhao is concerned with the public issues surrounding marginalised populations in China. In an interview with *The South China Morning Post* Zhao reveals that his central concern in all of his work is to represent marginalised perspectives:

The main topic of all my documentaries and films has never changed: lives becoming shallower through economic development, the faith in a culture of cash, the destruction of a natural form of living, and helplessness and ignorance. (Boehler, 2014)

The entire backdrop to the film exposes this uneven economic development as pedestrians stroll along Nanjing Road holding shopping bags with designer labels while tall buildings light up with national and international name brand signage such as Disney. Whilst locals and tourists shop in established Nanjing Road shops, members of the homeless community speak of an illegal market that involves stealing bicycles, state-owned wire and expensive car hood logos. Over the course of a few months, Zhao chronicles the daily activities of this homeless group of men who span across all ages. Through interviews, Zhao highlights the relationship between the impact of economic development and the vulnerable that include; children, migrants, elderly and adult males with physical disabilities and possibly mental health issues.

The film often returns to some members of the community. In one case, it shows the gradual deterioration of a man named Black Skin, who is initially presented as an affable figure in the community but his disorderly drunkenness lands him in prison on multiple occasions and this experience negatively impacts on his psychological state. Over a short period of time, the filmmaker manages to capture events that arise within the homeless community that involve alcoholism, police corruption and mental and/or developmental issues. Of recent Chinese documentary films, Robinson claims that 'an event takes on no significance in relation to the broader picture: it signifies only in and of itself' (2010: 188). Similarly, in *Street Life*, the camera does focus on the particular and everyday such as the way that these men collect bottles, cardboard and wire, then weigh and sell the goods on the back alleyways. For the most part, the film is absent of transitional shots which would lead to a building of narrative action or dramatic tension. However, the filmmaker's interviews with the homeless and observations as they go about their daily collecting and selling of material shows how the homeless and the shoppers connect on Nanjing Road. The film provides the viewer with time to contemplate the events that range from corruption within the community, maltreatment by the police and child neglect. By focusing on these bottle collectors who conduct business and live on the street in an affluent and central area of Shanghai, *Street Life* inevitably raises questions about the relationship between these individuals in the spaces they inhabit.

In China, the rural migrant homeless population are powerless figures within urban centres due to the national requirement of the *hukou* resident permit. This *hukou* system makes it difficult for migrant labourers who must relocate to cities for work but who do not have access to permanent housing rights, medical care or education for their children. This is implicitly illustrated in *Bumming in Beijing*'s opening sequence: in a two-minute-long

segment, each one of the five artists on which the film focuses are introduced to the viewer followed by a short written description of who they are, what they studied and where they come from. Most are introduced as 'officially a resident' of another city in China but have decided to stay in Beijing and work as a freelance artist. Freelance work (as opposed to official work) allows these struggling artists to live in Beijing without a residential permit.

Similarly, in *Street Life* the topic of a residence permit is mentioned only in passing. In one short scene, a member of the bottle collecting community states how another man named Fatty Lee is fortunate to be a resident of Shanghai. Some of the interviews conducted also discuss how the homeless move from one city to the next. One man we discover is nicknamed Anhui because this is his home province. With the massive shift from rural to urban living, the *hukou* system has also had devastating effects for children who have been left behind in villages while their parents seek work in factories located in urban centres. In another interview in the film, a young adolescent boy reveals how his mother abandoned him and his father in a rural town to work in a factory in Shanghai city. Through fragmented conversations and interviews, Zhao raises issues surrounding these migrants who are forced to live in public spaces due to an inability to obtain official housing permit documents required from all residents in every Chinese city. Despite these issues for what is widely referred to as the 'floating population', rural migrants continue to flock to the city when it is no longer possible to earn a living in the abandoned countryside.

In addition to showing rural migrants and the daily hardships they face through a 'fly-on-the-wall' approach, the film also reveals how the *hukou* system along with the newly liberalised Chinese market economy has further increased pressure on those who suffer from physical disabilities brought on by birth or old age and consequently face further alienation from society. For instance, the camera often follows disabled men physically struggling to walk on the streets or begging for money. One man, named Ah Qiao has a physical disability that impairs his left leg. He has little participation in front of the camera but Zhao often shoots his laboured movements from a distance. This also goes for Black Skin, who is looked down upon by his own peers because he may have a developmental disability. Fatty Lee mentions that Black Skin 'is not right in the head' while others attempt to help him when he has difficulty counting his money. Eventually, he is taken advantage of by Ah Qiao who borrows money from him and then flees Shanghai. Here, the individual stories in *Street Life* illustrate how China's new economy has made it an impossible task for men like Black Skin and Ah Qiao.

Zhao also further complicates this relationship between the marginalised individual and economic development by showing how consumerism has created the possibility for rural migrants to find innovative ways to make money, albeit barely enough to survive. For instance, the film shows how the homeless manage to recycle waste and, in effect, how the city relies on the homeless to keep the streets clean. Some of the men interviewed in the film such as Black Skin, Ah Qiao, Fatty Lee, Big Fatty, Longhair, and Anhui all contribute to the system by collecting discarded (bottles and cardboard) and stolen (copper wire, car decals) material and then selling it to either a middle-man or directly to the recycling depot located on the city outskirts.

Like Wu, Zhao approaches the complex identity of rural migrants and the homeless population from within the community and through an observational gaze, he follows the trend of the New Documentary Movement which combines the 'talking head' *zhuantipian* interview styles with long durational takes and direct sound. In the following section, I will be analysing these aesthetics, along with the role of the filmmaker and the participation of the subjects in the film.

Point of view and liveness

The basic definition of *xianchang* relies on the filmmaker's presence on the actual location of the event taking place in real time. Some filmmakers take the *direct cinema* approach akin to Wiseman's unobtrusive observational method, while others choose to be present to participate and perform in front of the camera. For instance, the sound of Wu's voice in *Bumming in Beijing* would have been viewed as a major break away from traditional Chinese documentary conventions at the time. Furthermore, Wu's pre-established friendships in *Bumming in Beijing* with the artists allows him to be able to intervene without disrupting the space and legitimacy of the marginalised voices in the film.

Similarly, Zhao shares and inhabits the space within the homeless community, committing himself to hanging out with them and interviewing them on the streets. However, unlike Wu who had the advantage of filming his friends in their *hutong* artists' studio quarters, Zhao does not interact in the same manner. On only one occasion do we overhear him speaking and he is never present in front of the camera.

Sometimes the filmmaker must conceal himself so as to avoid endangering the subject. The filmmaker's pre-production work then entails building a relationship with the

subject of the documentary which inevitably creates 'a sense of urgency and responsibility' (Zhang, 2002: 116) for capturing testimonies with sensitivity and objectivity. When Zhao does need to conceal from security officials, the long shot testifies to the dangers and realities of living on the street while also maintaining an objective distance. In one scene, Ah Qiao is confronted by the local patrol officers who order him to move elsewhere. While he is being interrogated, told to pack his things and leave, the camera follows but from a safe distance. Having a camera present in a public space during an altercation between Ah Qiao and patrol officers poses a considerable risk to both the filmmaker and the homeless. So, filming from a distance both reveals the difficulties imposed upon those who are homeless and reduces the potentiality of raising alarm from the patrol officers. In addition, and keeping in line with a commitment to filming 'on-the-spot', there is no expository 'voice-of-God' narration and the filmmaker often deploys long durational takes aiming at spatiotemporal integrity. The camera is predominantly fixated on the homeless community's daily experience, while Nanjing Road shoppers are barely aware of it. Yet this invisible relationship between the two worlds, of the affluent and of the homeless, highlights their socioeconomic differences.

In one scene twelve minutes into the film, a burly man named Big Fatty is seen collecting bottles at night on Nanjing Road's pedestrian thoroughfare. In a static long shot, he enters from the right side of the frame and proceeds to walk towards a rubbish bin. At the same time that he is about to reach into the bin, a young couple walking by approach and hand him their empty bottle. Apart from this scene, there is rarely any direct engagement between the homeless and pedestrian shoppers. The bottle collecting community are seen only communicating between themselves unless they are conducting business on the street such as collecting and selling their recyclable material. As the couple walk away and out of the left side of the frame, Big Fatty then continues to dive his hand into the bin. Here, Zhao cuts in to a close-up shot of Big Fatty so that we get a view of his facial expression as he reaches with his whole arm into the bin (Fig. 1.2). As a result of two separate angles and distances from Big Fatty, this scene requires two separate camera setups. Could the couple have known then that their actions were being recorded, and if so, acted accordingly with generosity towards Big Fatty? Here, with the presence of the camera in a public space, the *xianchang* method involves a carefully constructed shooting of the scene. Despite the construction of this shot-reverse shot, the presence of a handheld digital video camera in 2006 on a busy pedestrian road in the cosmopolitan Shanghai city would still have very little influence on the attitudes and behaviours of the shoppers. Shoppers are just as accustomed to the presence of homeless street migrants as to the presence of a video camera. Rather, the close-up shot on Big Fatty's

face as he digs into the bin for bottles serves to show how he survives on the street and how little interaction there is between different socioeconomic groups in public spaces.



FIGURE 1.2: ZHAO CUTS IN TO A REVERSE CLOSE-UP SHOT TO REVEAL FATTY LEE'S FACIAL EXPRESSION.

Placing the camera's perspective through the eyes of a homeless person's experience is an example of the film's primacy of the political over the artistic. It is the filmmaker's role in *Street Life* that I wish to draw upon, when I now consider the ethical implications that are inherent in the relationship between the camera person and the subject being filmed. The role of the documentary filmmaker is pertinent to Nichols' concepts of axiographics which '...address the question of how values, particularly an ethics of representation, comes to be known and experienced in relation to space' (1991: 77). Here, Nichols reminds us, that while axiographics asks the viewer to question the filmmaker's ethical responsibility to uphold certain values within the filmmaker-subject relationship, that decisions are ultimately up to the filmmaker. The camera's gaze is always subjective. Zhao's individual concern with the ethics of representation in his documentary work is addressed in a 2009 interview with Dan Edwards. He states,

A process of self-reflection is for me this essence of filmmaking...If it was just about recording the lives of others, I wouldn't even bother to pick up my camera. That to me seems like a kind of violation or rape, in which the camera becomes the agent of a kind of lascivious act. (Edwards, 2005: 131)

Here, Zhao succinctly responds to the question of ethics as he uses the word 'self-reflection' to demonstrate that his central aim is not to voyeuristically roam the streets for interesting subjects to shoot. Instead, his camera in *Street Life* is always in full view and the rural migrants who speak in front of the camera often direct their gaze towards or near the camera

even when Zhao's physical presence remains mostly absent from the film. Furthermore, Zhao immerses himself within this homeless Shanghai community so that his camera is present before spontaneous events in the everyday occur. He observes, interacts and is at times immersed in the social setting.

In one scene, a camera is positioned inside a cart which is attached to a bicycle that is being pulled by a street collector. The street collector is also with a female friend who rides in the cart with the camera (Fig. 1.3). From the camera's perspective, the spectator is taken on an everyday journey for the collector who navigates on his bicycle and cart through crowded pedestrianised streets and alleys, gathering pieces of cardboard from local businesses. Although Zhao acts as the detached observer, in scenes like this where he physically transports his body within the spaces by situating himself and the camera in the cart, his filmmaking leans toward a participatory mode of documentary. With the camera in hand, he documents the homeless experience of travelling on busy urban streets collecting and selling cardboard. However, the filmmaker never steps in front of the camera to intervene. Here, the image is from the homeless figure's point of view. This is followed by a shot that now situates the camera outside of the cart and following alongside the man and woman as they make their way through the streets and directly address the camera as the man speaks about the trading business. Nichols makes a distinction between the observational mode and the participatory mode. The observational documentary 'de-emphasizes persuasion to give us a sense of what it is like to *be* in a given situation but without a sense what it is like for the filmmaker to be there, too. Participatory documentary gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a situation and how that situation alters as a result' (Nichols, 2001: 116). The latter mode aligns with a filmmaker's personal involvement with the subject in a *cinéma vérité* interventionist style. Having filmed within and then alongside the cart, Zhao does enhance a physical closeness between the camera and the subject's everyday life but he does not seek to manipulate that reality. Therefore, he can be said to be operating somewhere between an observational and a participatory mode. This, Nichols notes in his earlier work, is the interactive mode whereby 'it introduces a sense of partialness, of *situated* presence and *local* knowledge that derives the actual encounter of filmmaker and other' (Nichols, 1991: 44). There is also a heightened sense of being on location on Nanjing Road and the surrounding area, a sense of what Nagib calls 'an ethics of realism' (2011) enabled by the filmmaker's commitment to physically experiencing how this community survives. Therefore, this kind of sensorial experience that draws the image towards a reality expressed through the

filmmaker's closeness to the homeless community is also felt in the film's commitment to direct sound recording and the concept of *xianchang* and being on the scene.



FIGURE 1.3: CAMERA IS POSITIONED IN A CART WHILE THE HOMELESS FIGURE WEAVES THROUGH THE CROWD ON NANJING ROAD.

Direct sound bears witness to the actual reality of living on the streets. For instance, at times when there are several street dwellers who occupy the frame or when there is heavy traffic noise in the background and only some of the material can be deciphered and translated for the viewer. Poor sound quality and indecipherable dialogue is usually referred to as 'dirty sound'. Reynaud describes the mode of listening when 'dirty sound' is used in Jia Zhangke's documentary film *In Public* (2001):

What is really at stake here is not the semantic meaning of what people are saying, but how they are saying it and the way they position and move their bodies in relation to each other and their surroundings; such is the essence of what it means to be in a public space. (2010: 160)

In one scene, 'dirty sound' is captured as a group of men settle in for the night. They have removed their shoes which are placed directly in front of the camera where the filmmaker also positions himself. The men are lying on cardboard, Fatty Lee reads a newspaper and the three talk about taking a friend to a see a prostitute (Fig. 1.4). However, the subtitles are choppy as the noise from the traffic overwhelms the microphone's ability to pick up the group's conversation. The inaudible dialogue is replaced by the heightened awareness of the space that the homeless migrant occupies every day. This direct sound in an actual space filled with urban noise and evening traffic creates a 'dirty' or indistinct sound. The effect forces the

viewer to rely heavily on the visual aspects to make sense of the events unfolding in front of the camera. Shot in one long durational take, this scene offers a glimpse into the reality of leisure time for these men, a realisation of living in public space and the invasive atmosphere brought on by the constant movement of lights, objects and people in this bustling part of Shanghai city. As a result, the filmmaker does not intend for us to be paying attention to the semantic meaning but to the invasive realities of living in public and constantly being bombarded by urban noise.



FIGURE 1.4: WITHOUT SUBTITLES, THIS SCENE ILLUMINATES THE PUBLICNESS OF THE SITUATION FOR HOMELESS MIGRANTS AT NIGHT.

Testimony and performance

While the direct sound and the camera's presence on the scene attest to a liveness associated with *xianchang* and the reality of living on the street, the politics of testimony and the camera's framing of it provide the viewer with an unofficial perspective of the homeless in Mainland China. However, in *Street Life* the Chinese independent filmmaker chooses to capture individual testimony through the traditional 'talking head' style. Part of my aim in this section is to analyse the 'talking head' through both performance and testimony. I will examine how traditional conventions utilised in the *zhuantipian* become a radical aesthetic in the context of the marginalised and within the practice of *xianchang*. As discussed earlier, the radical approach to the 'talking head' was introduced in the early days of independent documentary. However, what distinguishes this aesthetic style seen in *Bumming in Beijing* from *Street Life* is the changed urban scenery. In *Bumming in Beijing*, the film's *hutong*

location (within the artists' studio), the historical context and the heightened anguish of these artists, highlights the shock and trauma during this tumultuous period in China surrounding the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. Whilst in *Street Life*, the camera helps to highlight the living circumstances for rural migrants unable to acquire residential permits by shooting in public on the streets of Shanghai. Therefore, *Street Life* shifts from the private documentary filmmaking in *Bumming in Beijing* to the public sphere.

Street Life opens with a fade in and a medium shot of a middle-aged homeless man whose sleeveless top is adorned with the McDonald's logo. Shot at night and lit by a nearby lamp post, the man is sitting on a bench facing the camera. In the background, there is continuous traffic and beyond the road are shops flashing with global brands that include the Disney trademark (Fig. 1.5). This man, known as Big Fatty sits facing the camera and rather than offer conventional testimony of his circumstances, he expresses the everyday through performance and poetry. He is both a homeless street person who collects bottles on Nanjing Road and he is also a local entertainer for the public. Sometimes when he performs, the camera pans to show that he is also performing for an audience that include shoppers and street cleaners. He utilises Chinese mythology as a way to communicate with the interviewer and the public. The camera is framed in a conventional 'talking head' style but Big Fatty's mixture of direct address and performance through poetry seems to comment on the performance aspects embedded in the official techniques associated with the *zhuantipian*'s interviews. It implies the mediated nature of documentary filmmaking. Furthermore, a liveness of the event is authenticated by the sounds of traffic and by the random pedestrians passing behind him. In this performance, Big Fatty tells the story of the Monkey King who forgot to kneel in front of the Celestial Emperor and as a punishment for being 'ignorant of the rules of Heaven', was forced to look after the Emperor's horses. The Monkey King is a renowned classic Chinese novel written as an allegory for an actual monk named Xuan Zang and his 'Journey to The West' during the Tang Dynasty. The Monkey King is said to embody a rebellious spirit against the feudal lords at that time. The film opens with Big Fatty who directly addresses the camera and begins to perform:

[grunts] Now, where has the Monkey King gone? [laughs] Oh, the great Monkey King! There's no hurry Monkey. The Celestial Emperor has asked you to look after his horses. To look after his horses?! [laughs] But the Monkey King did not kneel down. He didn't understand the rules of Heaven. 'Kneel!', said the Celestial Emperor. 'Monkey is ignorant of the rules of

Heaven. He shall look after my horses.' Oh, how the Monkey ran those horses!
[camera fades to black]



FIGURE 1.5: IN THE OPENING SEQUENCE TO *STREET LIFE*, FATTY LEE DESCRIBES HIS LIFE THROUGH POETRY.

By opening *Street life* with this performance, Big Fatty's story draws attention to the politics surrounding the everyday Chinese citizen. It is also the only scene in the entire documentary that has crisp, clean audio which may suggest that the filmmaker employed a lapel microphone to emphasise Big Fatty's words and voice. Here, he questions the disappearance of the rebellious Monkey King's will to challenge the Emperor's rules. Instead, the Monkey King abides and turns on the horses. Using popular mythology and through his booming voice and mischievous grin, Big Fatty's street performances often draw in pedestrians and local street workers who proclaim him to be 'more famous than a superstar'. The radical nature of these kinds of performances in the film is heightened by its thinly veiled politics that interweave with popular mythology.

If Big Fatty's clearly audible poetic performance in front of the camera can 'speak bitterness' through allegory, it helps to position the homeless subject as an empowered figure in public space. Historically, to 'speak with bitterness' referred to a way for rural villagers to speak negatively about their landlords in the 1940s and 1950s. This denunciative practice within the law courts led to former Communist Party Leader Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s that removed landlords and intellectuals from authoritative roles. In contemporary China, citizens now use the term to denounce any type of suffering endured. Although there is no explicit denouncement of the current government, there are other

moments in the film when Big Fatty is shot 'speaking bitterness' about Mao Zedong's destructive leadership that led to China's Great Famine from 1959-1961 and the death of an estimated fifteen million people. He also performs street poetry that criticises Chang Kai Shek, the oppositional leader of the Kuomintang Nationalist Party (KMT) who retreated to Taiwan in 1950 after being defeated by the Communist Rebellion which resulted in the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). At one point in the film, Big Fatty even predicts a long wait for China's eventual demise by declaring, 'wait 500 years to watch the Communist Party collapse!' He also briefly mentions how he once visited Tiananmen Square but was thrown out by authorities, which alludes to the Massacre that occurred on 4 June 1989, a topic that is still considered taboo today.

While Big Fatty 'speaks bitterness' through popular Chinese Mythology and rhyming poetry, other homeless figures are more direct in their criticism about the enduring hardships of China's rural to urban development that has forced farmers out of the countryside. For instance, the camera shows Big Fatty speaking with an elderly man. This man then turns to the camera and begins to vent his frustration about the way people look down on him when he is begging in Shanghai. 'They say, you goddamned country beggar! And I answer: Back in the 1970s [the Communists] packed you off to Anhui. And where were you damnit! You lived in our cattle pens. We didn't even let you be human beings!' Here, the man is referring to Chairman Mao's campaign to re-educate the intellectual urban masses through manual labour in rural villages. Here, the conventional techniques of the 'talking head' interview provides the homeless with a non-authoritative yet legitimate voice for the voiceless population who has been left behind while the country forges new economic, social and political power.

Interaction, participation and the unexpected event

Big Fatty has built a local reputation for his skilful interweaving of politics and entertainment and with or without the camera's presence on the scene, he could very well be performing the same way so the filmmaking fits itself in with the observational mode. Now, I would like to turn to two events in *Street Life* that move towards the participatory mode or, 'the truth of a form of interaction that would not exist if it were not for the camera' (Nichols, 2001: 118).

The first occurs halfway through the film, after the camera has been positioned inside a cart on wheels that is being towed behind a young man riding a bike (a woman is also inside

the cart). When both the driver and his passenger in the cart have dismounted, the camera then pans away from the pair from left to right and stops at a young boy watching a motorcycle zip past him on a busy side street. In this scene, the filmmaker will have a rare interaction in the film with his interviewee. In fact, this is the only time that Zhao is overheard speaking in the film. So, it is here that I would like to apply Zhao's method to the participatory mode. The boy's name remains anonymous. The camera lingers on this boy who carries a plastic shopping bag over his shoulder and watches the busy rush hour traffic before cutting in to interview him (Fig. 1.6). The interview takes place on a busy street at dusk. The interviewer/filmmaker is situated to the right of the camera and the boy speaks directly to him. What is revealed in the interview is how much the boy has been neglected by the social system. The conversation highlights the burden that neglected and homeless children bear in contemporary China.



FIGURE 1.6: CAMERA LINGERS ON A CHILD LEFT BEHIND IN SHANGHAI

Since most national employment is concentrated in factories within urban areas, migrant labourers who relocate to the city often must also leave their children behind to be raised by the grandparents and sometimes to fend for themselves. The boy points in the direction of where he sleeps at night and tells the interviewer that he has no more memories of home but only longs to visit his younger brother in the countryside. His father is unemployed and his mother abandoned the family to work in a Shanghai factory when the boy was six years old. The boy's desperate circumstances are revealed by the filmmaker's continued questioning:

Zhao: Nobody is going to give you money.

Boy: I'll take care of that problem myself.

Zhao: Do you have any idea how you would do it?

Boy: Well let's see... I don't have any money today... but then maybe... I'll think of some work I can do.

Zhao: You're so young. Nobody is going to give you work.

Boy: I'm sure someone will. Sometimes I just go hungry. There's no other way. If not, I guess I'll starve.

The scene focuses on the plight of children who have been abandoned by their parents in the wake of massive rural to urban migration. Here Zhao, alternates between a medium shot and a facial close-up, sometimes employed by a cut in or a zoom which is rarely used elsewhere within the film. This interview and the additional camera shots that linger on the boy last approximately four minutes. With each question growing more personal, the boy begins to exhibit an emotional response to his mother's neglect. At one point, the boy reveals his attempt to track her down in Shanghai.

Boy: I went to her house. I even showed her my train ticket. She didn't believe me at first that I had taken the train back to Shanghai. So I showed them the ticket. [zoom in to facial close-up].

Zhao: Does your mother treat you well?

Boy: [nods no]. If she did, she'd come looking for me, right?

Zhao: I'm sure she would be good to you.

Boy: Be good to me? [Looks up and away] I wouldn't be like this if she was good to me.

In a close-up shot of the boy's face, the camera observes his emotional response: swallowing, tears welling in his eyes and tilting his head away from the interviewer for several seconds (Fig. 1.7). This scene focuses on the plight of children who have been abandoned by their



FIGURE 1.7: ZHAO'S INTERVENTION LEADS TO AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE BY THE BOY.

parents in the wake of massive rural to urban migration. The effects of this are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 4 with my analysis of Lixin Fan's *Last Train Home* (2009).

Up to this point in the film, the filmmaker has used direct sound only. Even during this interview, the boy sometimes yells to be heard over the early evening traffic noise. However, the filmmaker's voice heard off-screen and his constant questioning to the boy, creates a reflexivity of the camera's presence that pushes towards a *cinétruth* (Nichols, 2001) or situation in which the boy gives an emotional testimony about his life. The filmmaker's choice to make his voice heard off-screen now and nowhere else in the film indicates a disruption in the observational mode. Then, at the end of the interview the sequence concludes with a short piano score musical interlude, with a close-up shot of the boy on the street. This resonates with Renov who explains, 'a presumably objective realisation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention' (1993: 2). The piano score interlude then seems to momentarily suspend the documentary and address our own (or the filmmaker's) emotional response to the reality of the boy's life. Here, he attempts to illuminate the shocking reality for homeless children in Mainland China.

If the documentary promotes a 'real' world, what role does the piano score play here? Some documentary filmmakers are critical of the addition of music in documentary films. Canadian cinematographer and direct cinema pioneer Michel Brault expresses his dislike for adding music to documentary film: 'It's impressionism. I don't think documentary is a form of impressionism. It's realism, and music has no place there' (Ferrari, 2008). Music in documentary is a tool employed for emotional effect through the use of rhythm and tone. I argue that inserting the piano score within this scene momentarily silences the urban noise in order to reflect on the actual dire circumstances thrust upon the boy. Not only is he a child 'left behind' due to the massive rural to urban migration, he has also been severely neglected by his parents with nowhere to go but to the city streets. So, he resorts to stealing bikes to survive and looks up to Hubei, a young man who steals Mercedes Benz vehicle logos and then boasts about how he can sell it to car repair shops from anywhere between four to six thousand RMB (approximately four to six hundred pounds). Here, the observational mode is momentarily interrupted by a musical interlude to a melodramatic effect. Zhao's combination of a socially engaged documentary with aesthetics employed for melodramatic effect belong to an emerging list of Chinese independent films that use expressive forms available through the affordable and accessible use of digital video format (Zhang, 2015: 322). With digital form's capabilities, Zhao inserts a musical score because the boy's vulnerable situation is

palpable. In effect, the scene does not shift away from politics. Instead, it enhances the politics embedded in the situation for the young boy.

The second event in the film in which the filmmaker breaks away from a strict observational mode towards a kind of participation through the pro-filmic reality occurs in the film's final sequence. *Street Life* spotlights the difficulties the homeless and rural migrants face every day from a geographically microscopic view along Nanjing Road and the surrounding area. It also constantly returns to one man, Black Skin, and his daily activities of collecting and selling material on the street. It shows Black Skin carrying heavy loads of bottles and cardboard, weaving through streets with his cart, selling the material he has collected and socialising with the other members (Fig. 1.8). As he walks the streets in the summer heat, the camera zooms in to focus on his sweaty bare chest and his undersize trainers. Unlike some of the others in the community, he does not struggle with a physical disability. However, as the film progresses Black Skin gradually becomes emotionally unsettled which leads to a drunken altercation with the police and several arrests. None of these scenes play out in front of the camera. Instead, what is recorded are interviews with other members of the community who keep the filmmaker informed of Black Skin's spiralling situation that has resulted in jail time. As a result of Black Skin's sudden departure from the film, the filmmaker must rely on these eyewitness testimonies to make sense of his ordeal. At one point, a witness tells the filmmaker that when Black Skin was arrested for stealing copper wire, the police 'beat him all over. He was a total mess. They abused him at the police station. The prison guards did whatever they pleased with him.' Then, shortly after he is released



FIGURE 1.8: THE COVER OF THE DVD SHOWS BLACK SKIN CARRYING BAGS OF BOTTLES THROUGH THE STREET.

from jail, he is arrested for stealing again. This time, the witness explains, 'When he finally got out, he was crazier than ever.'

At this point in the film, the camera cuts to Black Skin screaming and waving his arms on the street. He has just been released from prison and the camera follows him as he seems to be experiencing a psychological breakdown. The 'fly-on-the-wall' method is applied here through long durational takes and the camera's tracking of the subject. Zhao's camera is kept at a considerable distance whilst following Black Skin's movements as he walks through the streets with members of the public moving out his path. Despite the distance and the camera's non-interventionist style, the filmmaker asserts his own presence through a shaky handheld camera. So, he pushes for a more physical commitment to capturing the liveness of the event. All of a sudden, the sounds of the street and of Black Skin's screaming are muted, complete silence ensues thereby shifting attention toward his physical movement through the crowd. At one point, Black Skin enters a shopping centre and rolls around on the floor. The camera moves quickly to catch up with him as he enters through the doors and executes a somersault on the floor while shoppers move away from him or ignore him all together. One woman is captured staring at Black Skin from a distance as he crawls along the shopping centre floor (Fig. 1.9). The camera's presence leads to an expression of unexpected and emotional facets of Black Skin's identity within the community. The long durational take here preserves the spatiotemporal integrity that is favoured in the observational documentary mode of *direct cinema*. The reality of the pro-filmic event is highlighted by the camera's shaky movement through the city space as it follows Black Skin.



FIGURE 1.9: BLACK SKIN ENTERS A SHOPPING CENTRE AND ROLLS AROUND ON THE FLOOR.

The combination of the long take, the shaky hand held camera and the filmmaker's attempts to follow a man having a psychological breakdown in broad daylight in an affluent shopping district further attests to his realist intentions.

This momentary absence of sound in a film that emphasises urban (dirty) noise, creatively intervenes with the moment, highlighting Black Skin's fractured and broken self and drawing attention to his isolation even within the public space. The silence added here in post-production both respects Black Skin's moment of a psychological breakdown and implicitly promotes a dramatic mediation into Black Skin's attempts to break away from the daily struggles of being consistently punished by the authorities and ignored by the public. After a minute of silence, actual sound returns along with urban noise and Black Skin's bellowing voice. The camera continues to follow Black Skin crawling, singing and yelling through an underground metro station, on escalators and stairs. Pedestrians stare and move out of his way while a security guard can be seen watching him from a distance. When Black Skin exits the metro, he climbs onto rubbish bins and floral arrangements on the pavement then crosses the street into a plaza, singing 'Tomorrow will be a brighter day'. The camera then cuts into a medium shot of Black Skin dancing and waving his arms. Once again, the filmmaker creatively intervenes with the absence of sound for another minute. When sound returns, Black Skin is being yelled at by a policewoman to 'stop singing!'. After twelve minutes of following Black Skin in this city centre, the film's last scene captures him dancing alone in an empty plaza that has been vacated, apart from a massive video screen erected on a building that displays an animated cartoon and blares out music. There is not enough room for both capitalism (in the form of a vacant shopping plaza) and the vulnerable subjects in China. The cacophonous sound and colours of the animation flashing on the screen are matched with Black Skin's performance as he continues to roll and dance and sing (Fig. 1.10). The filmmaker's focus on sonic representation, from silence to jarring cacophony and back to silence, reminds the viewer of the difficulty of living every moment in a public space. The filmmaker's long shot illustrates a respectable distance from Black Skin. Having followed him through the streets, into a shopping centre, then back onto the street and to an open plaza, Black Skin is clearly aware of the camera's presence. Although Zhao uses direct sound to creative effect, he does not offer any explanation; he simply observes and attests to an authentic truth with the long durational takes. The camera shares the homeless person's plight and the time Zhao dedicates to shooting within this community is a testament of his solidarity and his sympathy.

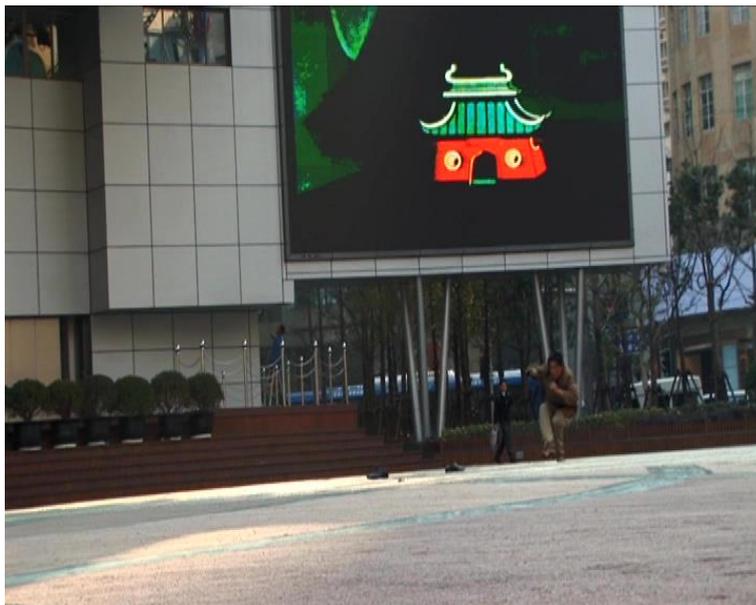


FIGURE 1.10: ZHAO CAPTURES BLACK SKIN DANCING ALONE IN AN EMPTY PLAZA.

The lingering camera and *Black Skin's* psychological lapse from reality shares some affinity with an emotional scene in Wu's *Bumming in Beijing*. During an interview with his artist friend Zhang Xiaping, Wu captures an unexpected event in which she suffers a nervous collapse and begins to scream and roll around on the floor. The long durational take and Zhang's momentary lapse into madness in front of her friend and the camera has an emotional quality to it that is a metaphor for the frustration and hopelessness felt by many artists and students of her generation after the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Larsen describes the scene:

The woman's lostness, her exile from her own mind, her inability to stay whole, seems also like a refusal to accept the burden of sanity. And here again, in the rupture of reason, we revisit the rupture of the lives of a whole generation. (1998: 55)

In a similar vein, *Black Skin* resorts to illegal means in order to survive and develops a mental illness as a result of the systematic punishment by the authorities. Both the fracturing of his psychological state and his inability to push himself out of his hopeless situation are captured through the camera's shaky and lingering presence which commits to *xianchang's* on the scene method. Therefore, the camera's observational gaze becomes a powerful force in capturing the real yet often marginalised migrant figures in contemporary China. In this final scene of the film, the urban noise returns and *Black Skin* is performing alone in a vacant plaza. The contrast between absence and presence of sound illuminates his powerlessness and loneliness against authoritative forces and an uneven economic development.

Street Life begins and ends on Nanjing Road. By focusing on one specific urban district and on a group of bottle collectors, it offers a microscopic perspective on the force of China's globalised market economy. For Black Skin and the others in the homeless community, it is impossible to imagine whether or not they will ever manage to radically alter their living circumstances. Independent documentary is present as a visible witness that offers an alternative perspective on the state of the everyday individual. It highlights the contradictions resulting from the country's new urban utopia and the social and mental realities for the marginalised population. Without this alternative form of filmmaking, the history of marginalised citizens in China would be completely overshadowed by the mainstream's official optimistic perspective. The *xianchang* method has evolved from observational forms reminiscent of (and often influenced by) direct cinema to diverse interventions that experiment with the relationship between the filmmaker and subject. At the same time, the filmmaker remains committed to the authenticity of *xianchang*'s 'on-the-spot' realism. Understanding the limits of representation in the documentary practice, Zhao produces agents of change, pushing for more personal stories from the subjects without the risk of endangering them in relation to police officials and other authoritative figures. Rather than illustrating uneven development in China using a dogmatic approach, Zhao's film calls for an examination of the struggle for marginalised populations that drift, work and live in public spaces in view of everyone.

CHAPTER 2

A Self-portrait in Li Ning's *Tape* (Jiao Dai, 2010)

Since the 1980s, China's major cities have undergone a period of structural transformation and immense growth, as a consequence of its open door policy. By developing and striving for economic power on the global market, Premier Deng Xiaoping's modernisation reforms have led the country into unprecedented economic growth and for some, a rise in the standard of living. On 13 July 2001, Beijing, the nation's capital city, was rewarded for its efforts by defeating bids from Toronto, Paris, Istanbul, and Osaka to become the host of the 2008 Summer Olympics. This marked a historical achievement for a country that had risen out of Maoist egalitarianism and its closed door policy, striving for thirty years to become the global economic superpower that it is today.

In this chapter, my aim is to analyse how Li Ning's film *Tape* (2010) responds to the impact of the Olympic event on his hometown of Jinan city which is located two hundred miles south of Beijing. Li describes his work as a 'self-portrait' aimed at using the 'body as a medium to interpolate with incidents and movements that took place from 2005-2010' (2011). So, whereas in Chapter 1 the aim was to identify the marginalised in urban spaces from an observational point of view and through the concept of *xianchang*, this chapter examines urban transformations through materiality of the medium and bodily engagement. The film opens with white coloured intertitles that appear on screen: 'This is my self-portrait, which I do not want to face, but it is of my life.' Rather than offering a straightforward observational style documentary, Li provokes, performs and provides an intimate documentation surrounding his struggles as a father, husband, son and street performance artist during the years leading up to the Olympics. In an attempt by the Chinese government to project a positive image of modern China, Li's family was one of many urban inhabitants nationwide whose homes were demolished and replaced with new roads and skyscrapers. It is from a street level that Li places his camera in an effort to show a marginalised account of these massive changes in his hometown.

I will seek to analyse Li's radical filmmaking by focusing on three key areas that shape this experimental documentation of the artist's life: materiality of the medium, bodily engagement and self-reflexivity. After a brief introduction to the impact of the Beijing Olympics in China, I will examine the film's literal engagement with materiality in the form

of tape and digital video forms. Here, in search of an aesthetics of life through the labour of his filmmaking practice, Li is inevitably intertwined in what Rancière calls a 'politics of aesthetics' (2004). In effect, Li's impulse to record and experiment with form at the moment of its transition from presentation to representation, strives for a new aesthetics that reflects his own disrupted experience of urban transformations.

At the same time Li engages with the filmmaking process, he also presses for a physical engagement between the filmmaker and urban space. So, next I will examine Li's relationship with bodily acts as he responds to the social realities of his marginal position within the changing urban landscapes through performance and intimate documentation. By remaining faithful to recording the event as it unfolds 'on-the-spot' in real time, Li's film retains the qualities embedded in the concept of *xianchang*. Along with *xianchang*, his radical filmmaking pushes for risky, non-hierarchical, non-self-victimised filmmaking in which the subject and object collapse into an 'irreducible ensemble' (Sobchack, 2004: 4). This collapse is brought about by Li's bodily engagement with the material wastelands and demolition spaces of a city in transition. Sobchack's phenomenological investigations into the theory of embodiment will be crucial to breaking down the filmmaker's self-sacrificial drive toward an experiential consciousness carried out by his exposed bodily acts in front of the camera. However, I will also draw from Nagib's ethics of realism promoted by the artist's self-authorial and physical engagement with the pro-filmic event (2011).

Finally, I will aim to understand the filmmaker's self-reflexive exercise. On the distinction between self-consciousness or self-reference and reflexivity, Ruby notes, 'to be reflexive is not only to be self-aware, but to be sufficiently self-aware to know what aspects of self are necessary to reveal' (2005: 35). In *Tape*, Li creates a self-portrait that exposes himself to critique but not to the detriment of his family's privacy which remains somewhat of a mystery. Furthermore, his self-exposed performances also reveal tonal ambiguities which can be read as a parody to the Olympic event so I will seek to unearth the discursive politics of his artistic creation. Along with identifying how Li's self-display crosses between a fixed identity and self-critical playfulness, I will also examine ways that Li's performance helps revive significant historical events (namely the Tiananmen Square Massacre) by way of concealment and brief exposure. By analysing the film's aesthetic strategies of materiality of the medium, bodily engagement and self-reflexivity, I will show how the city's transformations influence Li's experimental self-inscription into reality. Ultimately, the

filmmaker's commitment to both self-inscription and performance is reflected in his unwillingness to separate his art from life.

Preparing for the 2008 Beijing Olympics

Every Olympic event involves a ceremonial torch relay. After the torch is lit at the birthplace of the Olympic Games in Olympia, Greece, it is carried by carefully selected torch bearers to several locations across the world until it reaches the destination host city. The 2008 Beijing Olympic torch relay followed a route that passed through six continents and exceeded the longest distance ever travelled since the first Olympics was held in 1936. In Mainland China alone, the nationally televised torch relay event travelled through one hundred and twelve cities before arriving at Beijing, the nation's capital city. So, in preparation for the major event, Li's home city Jinan which is located south of Beijing in Shandong Province underwent major redevelopment that resulted in the demolition and construction of new roads and buildings.

The excitement generated by news agencies in Mainland China that include Xinhua and CCTV inspired an optimistic viewpoint of the Olympics for its Mainland citizens. Having been nominated to oversee the creative team for the Games' opening ceremony, internationally renowned filmmaker Zhang Yimou designed a spectacle that offered a harmonious account of Chinese history.⁵ This harmony narrative Barmé notes, 'was crafted to speak directly to the world of China's vision of itself' (2009: 64). However, another artist Ai Weiwei who collaborated with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron to design the Beijing National Stadium for the Olympics chose to criticise the government for the event's disconnection from reality. This led to a declaration of his non-attendance at the opening ceremony:

The "Bird's Nest" National Stadium, which I helped to conceive, is designed to embody the Olympic spirit of "fair competition". It tells people that freedom is possible but needs fairness, courage and strength. Following the same principles, I will stay away from the opening ceremony, because I believe the

⁵ For a scene-by-scene description of the visual narrative that Zhang Yimou created for the 29th Olympiad Games in Beijing, see Barmé, Géremie (2009).

freedom of choice is the basis of fair competition. It is the right I cherish most.
(2008)

Since his voicing of his dissatisfaction towards the government, Ai has been targeted as a dissident by the authorities, which has resulted in an enforced house arrest along with trumped up charges that include tax evasion, bigamy and pornography. The alternative platform by which artists stage the complexity of their everyday circumstances can be viewed as rawer or as amateurish compared with Ai Weiwei's international production team. Their budgets and reputation are minuscule in comparison with Ai's. Yet artists like Li and Ai share a common desire for freedom of thought in their engagement with the everyday issues and realities for marginalised populations in China. In Li's case, this engagement begins with his own meditations on the materiality of tape and medium specificity. What Li shows through his project is an inseparableness between the digital video medium, the artist's personal struggles and his guerrilla street J-Town group performances.

Materiality of the medium in *Tape*

I turn to materiality first in my analysis of *Tape* because it provides a necessary entry point into understanding the filmmaker's conceptual and realist approach to life and art. Before filmmaking, Li was originally a dancer, sculptor and performance artist. It was through his interest in filming his performance pieces that inspired him to make a feature film. In 2000, Li created a forty-minute film that depicted these performance pieces. Eventually this sparked his idea to create *Tape* which stretches to one hundred and twenty-seven minutes long. The film revolves around Li's actual life over a period of five years leading up to the Olympics and indicates duration through many means, including the physical growth of his son Qing Feng from a newborn baby to a young child. However, it does not follow in a strict chronological development and it is not a straightforward documentary. Instead, it jumps from Li's self-portraits, to confrontations with his family, to relationships and public performances with his troupe. This intermingling of his personal life and performance art as well as the film's fragmented structure, create a frenetic atmosphere that reflects the urban upheavals.

Materiality comes in various forms in the film. First of all, the film's title *Tape* points to the adhesive material that Li often refers to in his guerrilla troupe performances which he also titles 'Tape'. In conceptualising his idea of tape, Li explains:

It started in 2002. One day while I was taking a nap, I spotted a spider climbing down my window panel. I hallucinated. I thought I saw it extruding tape, which was actually its silk, from its body. The tape looked sticky, thin, and shiny. And I wondered, what if one day we could witness interpersonal relationship as it manifested itself in the form of tape, instead of something invisible? (Lee, 2011)

The concept of seeing interpersonal relationships as bound by tape features in several of Li's public performances. In one scene early in the film, Li draws a large crowd as he removes most of his clothes, has adhesive tape plastered to his skin and caresses the body of a female mannequin. In terms of the film's visual structure, the various performances (which occur at different times and places) are literally pieced together in a video collage-like framework (Wang, 2015: 227). For instance, in one performance piece that starts four minutes into the film with a diary entry and ends over ten minutes later in an editing sound booth, Li shows how tape as a concept and material is a major feature in his life and art process. In his diary entry, Li writes: 'Today, I found that its stickiness is not important, but the duality: two special qualities existing in one.' He then cuts to a close-up of his near-naked body being pinched by hands and being forced to stand in an upright position by the hands. This is followed by a shot of an office-like room located in a non-descript building with a desk in the centre of the room and a window in the background. J-Town members surround the near-naked Li and proceed to control his limbs, pressing chest and arms onto the desk. These limbs stick like glue to the paper on the desk. At the same time, the performance sequence which continues onto a busy road with several vehicular overpasses hovering above, incorporates the sound of adhesive tape being manipulated and stretched. On the street, Li (now fully-clothed) and the rest of the J-Town members collide with one another and with cars. The camera uses medium shots and close-ups to illustrate the sticky glue that appears when bodies and objects collide with one another (Fig. 2.1). As more bodies collide, Li adds punk music, police sirens and traffic noise to the piece. Eventually, this sequence concludes at night on an outdoor stage where the J-Town group come together and then fold their bodies into the centre.



FIGURE 2.1: A J-TOWN GUERRILLA TROUPE MEMBER ATTEMPTS TO PRY HIMSELF AWAY FROM THE 'STICKINESS' CREATED WHEN HIS FACE COLLIDES WITH A CAR'S WINDSCREEN.

Although the J-Town performance ends here, the sticky sound continues onto the next shot. It is here that Li progresses his conceptualisation of tape to show the materiality of film sound. A close-up shot depicts a ball of adhesive tape being held and manipulated by Li's hands next to a boom microphone. Li is standing in a sound booth wearing headphones and showing the post-production process of his performance piece (Fig. 2.2). There are other shots within the film that illustrate Li's commitment to exposing the labours of his film production. His editing suite is situated in his own apartment and he often returns to 'behind-the-scene' moments in Li records himself at a desktop computer in over-the-shoulder static shots editing his film. In one sequence, Li speaks into the camera explaining how his computer hard drive has crashed but also how he is relieved to know that he still has the hard copy tapes. Then he points the camera to a large stack of digital video tapes and through CGI effects superimposes a miniature version of himself climbing this stack to the top. Here, he is using tape as a motif for his own struggles to complete the film project he has begun. Now that I have described Li's commitment to tape as a material performance piece and as a self-reflexive exercise that blurs the boundaries between Li's personal life, performances and filmmaking, I would like to turn my attention to two examples that demonstrate how materiality helps to attest to the film's realism. This will provide an entry point into the following section which examines the film's approach to bodily engagement.



FIGURE 2.2: LI SHOWS THE POST-PRODUCTION PROCESS IN HIS SOUND STUDIO.

In her essay 'Bodies Too Much', Margulies draws on Bazin's writings that explore the potentialities of realism in film through materiality: 'Images that bear the marks of two heterogeneous realities, the filmmaking process and the filmed event, perfectly illuminate his search for visceral signifiers for the real' (2002: 3). In the opening sequence of *Tape*, Li is filmed swimming under the ice of a frozen ditch in a construction area. As the camera follows Li's movements under the near-frozen water, there is another camera operator visible on the opposite end of the ditch. After Li completes the swim by breaking through the ice and crawling naked onto the bank of the ditch, he converses with the cameraman and they agree to take a break.

Suddenly, as if on a tape loop, Li is back in the ditch and the camera is closer to the performer who kicks his leg through the ice. It then cuts to the camera emerging out of the ditch and Li stating off-screen, 'Oh fuck! I almost drowned!' A man reaches his hand out and asks if he needs help to which Li replies, 'Here, take the camera.' The camera lens is full of dirt specks and water drops having been (we assume) submerged with Li under the water. The camera becomes an extension of Li's human body as it also struggles to climb out of the ditch and starts making a whirring noise to indicate that water has flooded the equipment. A hand then appears to remove the lens and the viewer is caught in an anti-clockwise circular motion (Fig. 2.3). The action then freezes, becomes pixelated and momentarily becomes a white screen. Here, Li gives life to the materiality of the camera as it becomes an extension of his own body. The debris and the water on the lens become 'visceral signifiers' for the camera's own physical journey in a cold icy ditch transforming them briefly into human parts. At the

same time that the camera makes a dangerous journey through water, the artist himself has professed that he nearly drowned during the process of his own art making. His physical engagement with the icy elements is reminiscent of Werner Herzog's own mythical reputation as a filmmaker who risks everything to get the shots he intended from the start of a production. For instance, his film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) is inspired by a Peruvian rubber baron who transported a steamship across an isthmus from one side of a river to another. Herzog focused on re-creating this monumental task by making a film set in the jungle. In the process, some of the film crew were injured and cast members fell ill with dysentery. However, Herzog's commitment to the physical journey brought about a bodily engagement with the historical past.



FIGURE 2.3: LI ATTEMPTS TO REMOVE THE LENS CAP BEFORE THE SCREEN FREEZES, PIXILATES AND BLURS TO A WHITE SCREEN.

Similarly, Li's bodily art practice shows a commitment to his physical reality. In the next scene, Li is naked and running away from the camera on the snowy bank of the ditch. This is followed by a shot of Li who is now holding the camera close while walking in the snow and describing the sensation of cold he feels on his bare feet. As he describes the cold, Li's heavy breathing makes contact with the lens which produces fog. The sight of Li's breath on the lens does more than just call attention to the medium: it gives meaning to human bodily engagement. This dedication is also demonstrated in his risk-taking performance in which he barely manages to break through the icy surface. The realism preserved here when human breath hits the material camera creates a sensorial experience for the viewer similar to

what Marks defines as 'haptic visuality' (2000: 162). There is an insistence on the material world's influence on the filmmaker as the water floods into the lens and the cold weather fogs it up. Here, Li is concerned with experiential forms of embodied observations of the world he exists within. In the wake of urban changes, Li creates a new aesthetic by including the possibilities of material digital forms when they come into contact with human forms.

As described in Chapter 1, the capabilities embedded in handheld DV camera technology promotes an immediacy for Chinese independent documentary filmmakers who remain committed to the concept of *xianchang*. In *Tape*'s opening sequence, the camera comes into direct contact with the elements of an urban construction zone. The handheld DV camera enhances the kinetic experience for the viewer as it pushes beyond any observational style and toward an almost anthropomorphic or performative role. As it insists on cinema's ability to show reality in a specific time and place, it produces an engagement with reality through physicality in front of the camera. This revives Bazin's claim to the potentialities of the incidental and contingent marked by these heterogeneous realities, the process and event filmed. In the next section, I will seek to examine how Li's own bodily engagement through his art practice helps to illuminate individual expression in real urban space.

Bodily engagement

As demonstrated in the opening scene of *Tape*, Li's performance stunt in the middle of a winter wasteland is a risk-taking endeavour. These dystopic urban wastelands have become a prevalent theme in contemporary Chinese independent art since the start of urban development in the 1980s. Beijing based painter and graffiti artist Zhang Dali is well-known for his work on buildings that are set to be demolished. His art projects contain within them a sense of danger as they challenge the status quo and offer, in Foucauldian terms, an 'incitement to discourse' (1980) on spatial transformations in Mainland China and the artist's agency. In one recent interview, Zhang states:

Most of the time, it is like we are defying death and chasing transformation (*bianhua* 变化). There is no time to stop and think about the reason why this is happening. Because for all of us, each single individual, regardless whether one is really willing to stop and think about it, there is no way one can stop this tremendous change (*jubian* 巨变). (Marinelli, 2015: 160)

In pursuit of capturing these transformations, these artists live on the limits of representation. In this quote, the interviewer Maurizio Marinelli also aptly points out that Zhang's usage of the word for 'change' (*jubian*) relates to the changes endured specifically by the Chinese people rather than a general shift. So, by aligning or interrogating human suffering through the dynamic forces of development that have impacted on urban space, Li collapses the self/subject and object into an irreducible whole. His bodily engagement stretches to the limits of suffering that reflects the suffering endured by ordinary citizens who are living in China's cities and who are directly affected by real transformations and upheavals of the home.

In her writings on the interrelation between the body and the brute forces of nature in reality, Sobchack argues that through suffering with an intentional agency, 'the body-subject "suffers" a diminution of subjectivity and, in this diminution, comes to experience - within subjectivity - an increased awareness of *what it is to be a material subject*' (2004: 288). Once our body experiences a subjective recognition of who we are as material objects, it has created a 'corporeal engagement with the material world' (2004: 296) called 'interobjectivity'. When Li dives under a crack in the icy ditch and begins to swim underneath the frozen surface, the camera follows him as he moves in a straight line and then makes a sharp left until he breaks through the ice after having been submerged for ten seconds (Fig. 2.4). While this camera follows Li with a high angle shot toward the ditch below where he is swimming, another camera operator is situated on the opposite side of the bank and filming the swim as well. When Li crawls back onto the bank, he states 'the ice was too thick. And I was almost out of breath there.'



FIGURE 2.4: LI'S BODILY ENGAGEMENT WITH AN URBAN WASTELAND AND WITH DEATH.

In Sobchack's example, she draws on an essay by Lawrence Weschler that describes the remarkable story of a man who suffers from Parkinson's disease, a chronic and progressive medical condition that causes tremors, impaired balance, slowness and stiffness of movement. While living with his condition, the man attempts to design furniture which amazingly became a collector's work of art as the pieces 'seemed to challenge-while articulating- the laws of gravity' (2004: 291). The tension of the man's disease embodied and mimicked the kind of furniture he constructed thereby creating a complex interrelationship between suffering, agency and aesthetics.

Similarly, Li overcomes his own fear through his sheer commitment to his political cause and his film experiment. His naked performance in the snow and under the ice brings him closer to a 'materiality lived' (Sobchack, 2004: 292). Once he dives under the ice and the camera pans from right to left following his movements it quickly becomes apparent that there is no way of determining Li's exit point because the rest of the ditch is frozen. Here, Li's push for the unpredictability rendered through *xianchang* provides him with the tools to interrogate his own existential suffering while highlighting his own determination to document it. This long durational take that follows Li demonstrates a personal suffering and commitment.

When Li dives under the ice, risks swimming under thick ice and runs naked on the snow, it is all real. His self-authorial engagement with the camera detracts from Sobchack's theory of the body that is preoccupied with the viewer's gaze. Instead, it moves toward the artist's physical engagement with his own life and attests to Nagib's 'ethics of realism' (2011). Nagib draws from the common running trope often illustrated in world cinema and highlights a scene in Canadian Inuit feature film *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* (Kunuk, 2001). Shot in the Arctic, with the locals as actors and crew and in the traditional Inuktitut language, *Atanarjuat* is a retelling of an Inuit myth about family betrayal. The film's faithfulness to the story and Inuit culture also extends to the actor Natar Ungalaaq's physicality in one scene in which he runs naked for several minutes across the Arctic snow. As Nagib states, this 'physical engagement...is the true expression of activism' (2011: 41-42) because of its efforts to revive and reinvent a contemporary empowerment of Inuit cultural heritage. Similarly, Li's own physical engagement with his environment is an expression of his art activist project that pushes for an immediate connection between the artist, his film and his present life which is in flux due to his forced eviction. It is not immediately apparent to viewers why he is attempting to swim under the ice of a ditch but as the rest of the film shows, Li's

performances are intertwined with the impact of the upcoming Olympics on his everyday life. In retrospect, Li's staged Olympic swim event also highlights the disconnect between the national utopic dream of hosting an international event in Mainland China and the reality for its dispossessed citizens.

It is also through Li's commitment to a five-year project and his willingness to share his most private moments on screen that the film becomes a testament to the artist's sacrifice. This commitment involves other participants in the project that include Li's family (wife, son, mother) and his J-Town troupe members who consist of university students that gradually move on to pursue their careers. Although Li is the director, editor, producer and the film's central subject, he allows his members to take control of the production. During one filmed outing with J-Town, a member is shooting the urban traffic, wide roads and night sky while carrying a shaky handheld DV camera from a vehicle. Off-camera, Li says, 'Just film anything in there you wish.' The camera wielding member asks, 'Is there anything I need to pay attention to?', to which Li responds, 'Nope.' When a spectator of his guerrilla performance asks, 'So, your group is a bit scattered is it?', Li proudly responds, 'That's right. We come together out of personal interest. We don't have a performance license or anything.' Despite Li's choreography and direction throughout the film, the central objective of J-Town is to encourage spontaneity and individual agency.

Individual agency is not limited to Li and his performers as he also uses the camera to give a voice to the voiceless in the everyday scene. An hour into the film, the camera is positioned behind Li's right shoulder as he is editing his film in a room in his apartment. Suddenly he picks up his camera and exits through the apartment's main door only to be confronted by a demolition in process in his corridor. His apartment building is being dismantled while he and his family are still living there. In the following scene, Li seems to have stumbled upon a struggle that involves a woman being physically held down to the ground in daylight by three men. She is screaming at the men and attempts to free herself while other men are removing a vending machine and other material objects from a ground floor shop. Presumably, the woman and Li are experiencing similar circumstances, having been forced out by the government to make way for new roads and buildings in anticipation of the upcoming Olympics.

The camera then momentarily blurs and readjusts as it quickly zooms into a close-up of the woman's face. She screams, 'Three men against a weak woman, huh? I can't believe that there's no one here who understands law!' The camera cuts to a close-up of a man

speaking calmly to the woman on the ground, 'Look, if we don't do this to you, we will be fired...' to which she responds, 'You will be fired?! How will I get my money? My whole family is living on this!!' There is no indication that Li knows this woman and we are not given enough detail to understand how Li stumbled upon this public altercation. What he films, however, is pivotal to his consciousness-raising theme and to the role digital video plays in illuminating the complexity of the relationship between individuals and the local authority in China through a commitment to *xianchang*. Both the woman who is being held and the men holding and preventing her escape are shown to be in a difficult situation. All of a sudden, the woman directs her gaze towards the camera and proclaims, 'You must keep the videotape for me' (Fig. 2.5). Here the camera becomes part of the event rather than just an observational tool. Soon thereafter, the police arrive and demand Li to turn off his camera. In this emotionally charged scene, the camera's presence offers a helpless woman a sense of evidentiary proof that she has been attacked. Whether or not this proof can be used to overturn her eviction notice is never explained. So, what becomes significant is the way that digital video can act as a tool that allows the individual to enunciate a feeling of injustice.



FIGURE 2.5: THE CAMERA AS AN ETHICAL AGENT AGAINST CENSORSHIP FOR EXPRESSION IN THE EVERYDAY DURING THE DEMOLITION PROCESS IN JINAN CITY.

Fighting for individual expression has a particular significance within the context of contemporary China. This is a country which over the past thirty years has created an independent film sector that provides filmmakers with the ability to move away from national allegorical tales and towards more complex understandings of individual identity in a post-

socialist culture. They are unique to China because as Pickowicz notes, 'these "identity search" films are not the result of Western cultural influence. They are a very logical response to the destructive, collectivist excesses of Maoism' (Ornell, 2014).⁶ These cultural conditions along with the advent of DV culture promotes an impulse to record and explore self-identity through bodily acts. Furthermore, Li's self-criticisms rendered through direct confessions about his inadequacies as a family man and as an artist reject any victimisation. Some of the bodily acts include recording his own masturbation while his son sleeps next to him in bed and vomiting in a public restroom after consuming too much *baijiu* (rice wine).

On his writings of the 'regime of truths' within the notion of an event, Badiou privileges a fidelity to the ephemeral, contingent and unexpected moments that transcend the petty or material (2002). He states, 'to be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by thinking the situation "according to" the event' (2002: 41). A similar kind of realist commitment to the event also appears in Deleuze's ruminations on post-World War II Italian neorealist cinema in which a new urban space emerged 'which we no longer know how to describe'; these new urban spaces were 'deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction' (1989: xi). Together, Badiou's writings on the unexpected and contingent truth regime of the event and Deleuze's description of the post-war cityscapes in ruin as 'any-spaces-whatever' (1989: xi) illustrate Li's own fidelity to reality within his unstable urban environment. For example, through a bodily performance in demolition space, Li demonstrates his commitment to the event, subject and truth. As has been noted, Li often performs his most extreme stunts naked in dangerous urban environments within his hometown. In one scene nearly halfway through the film, Li is wearing barely visible underwear in broad daylight and is crawling and hanging in various poses on a demolition site. His body is covered in dust and dirt from the rubble as he hangs from a forklift, convulses on a pile of loose concrete blocks, chews on stabilising metal rods and crawls along the rocks.

The performance remains faithful to realism through a bodily aesthetic. In one shot, Li is shown rolling around on a pile of rubble and momentarily flinches and shifts his body out of the way when a forklift carrying dirt narrowly misses him and the dust engulfs the shot (Fig. 2.6). The camera then cuts in to Li in a close-up to show the dust enveloping his face. There are also close-ups that reveal Li's bruised legs as he attempts to crawl (naked this time)

⁶ In this interview, Pickowicz shifts away from previous criticisms he wrote regarding the 'often irritating, self-centredness' (2006: 14) of contemporary underground filmmaking in China.

through the hazardous and harsh conditions of the terrain. In another shot, the camera zooms into a close-up that reveals Li has injured his foot as a result of his rambling within sharp and unwieldy objects. So along with succumbing to bruises all over his body and thick chemical filled dust, he suffers a deep gash on the base of his foot that required five stitches. He is the agent of his performance but the physical injuries that he succumbs to during his entanglement with the demolition site are 'in excess of his volition' (Sobchack, 2004: 288). On the theory of interobjectivity, Sobchack states:

[T]he passion of suffering not only forces recognition of oneself as an *objective subject* always immanently and substantially "here" and open to being externally acted on regardless of one's volition – but it also enhances the awareness of oneself as a *subjective object*: a material being that is nonetheless capable of *feeling* what it is to be treated *only* as an object. (2004: 288)



FIGURE 2.6: LI COMES INTO CONTACT WITH A FORKLIFT ON THE DEMOLITION SITE.

So how does Li engage with his interobjective 'passion of suffering'? Li is part of the marginalised group of Jinan residents who have, by government decree, been forced from their homes, losing most of the property equity they had accrued over the years. Through guerrilla street performance, Li engages with his own physical body that helps him to work through a consciousness-raising primordial suffering. As a result, the *xianchang* aesthetic relates to the pro-filmic through Li's direct physical suffering in real urban spaces and more specifically the filmmaker's own city. This authorial subjectivity through physical art activism that is apparent in Li's work and other emerging artistic work in China 'may

potentially serve as responses to violence and injustice experienced in the social world' (Sniadecki, 2015: 61). Furthermore, Li's inability to adequately protect his family from financial and social pressures is counteracted by his agency through public performance art and his fidelity to the unexpected moments that arise within the event. These unexpected moments also serve to expose Li's performances for what they are: performances.

So, in the next section, I will examine another angle of Li's desire to be physically present as a self-expressing figure through self-reflexive strategies. Furthermore, the film shifts between self-critical documentation and performance. This exposure and masking also leads to a brief but distinctive revival of the violence surrounding the Tiananmen Square Massacre in the summer of 1989. Performance and tonal complexities also allow Li to reveal archival footage of a politically taboo subject in contemporary China.

Self-reflexivity

During Li's performance at the demolition site, he is captured sliding down a deconstructed concrete wall while in the background a man and woman stand watching him. All of sudden, a woman calls out to Li: 'Are you doing performance art? I got one better for you... Do you want to see real performance art? Come to my home and see' (Fig. 2.7). He halts his performance and proceeds to listen to the grievances of these two people who have been directly affected by the upcoming Olympic event. The woman informs Li how she has thrown away the gasoline because her husband has contemplated suicide since they lost their home. Another man seated in the rubble is filmed in a talking head shot and explains, 'But now, who bothers to do good? Doing good always brings you something bad.' Li's conceptual performance in the rubble that attempts to collapse subject and object into an 'irreducible ensemble' (Sobchack, 2004: 4) is disrupted by actual citizens who have been directly impacted by this specific demolition site. Instead of editing this section out of the film though, Li remains faithful to the unexpected event that is unfolding in front of the camera. By continuing to record the event when he is interrupted, he demonstrates his indifference to a definitive closure or a particular objective. Instead, this scene begins as a performance but leads to a truth grounded in realism because Li is committed to his words at the start of the film: 'This is my self-portrait which I do not want to face but it is of my life.'



FIGURE 2.7: LI ENCOUNTERS THE UNEXPECTED WHEN HE IS CONFRONTED BY LOCALS DURING HIS PERFORMANCE.

In preserving the authenticity of the scene at the demolition site with the long durational take, this essentially alters the tone of Li's performance and of the film itself. If Li made the decision to edit out this part of the performance where he has been interrupted, how would this affect the film's tone or our attitude towards it? The dramatic effect of Li's bodily encounter with the concrete materials and dust would essentially remain intact. However, in viewing this particular moment through a prism of the film's entire context, what does remain intact is the filmmaker's rejection of resolution and faithfulness to exposure, both in his literal nakedness and his efforts to address the awkward and spontaneous moments during his public performances. Ruby explains, '[r]eflexive elements in documentaries are undoubtedly a reflection of a general concern with self-awareness' (2005: 137). By showing this unscripted encounter between himself and the citizens who have lost their homes, Li may question his own conceptual art practice. However, the act of showing the viewer a self-critical perspective affirms his drive for and authenticity of truth by shooting reality as it unfolds in the present moment.

The self-consciousness of his performance on the demolition site also extends to his self-criticism as a father and husband. There are several moments in the film when Li documents conflicts with his wife and her exasperation with the artist's unwillingness to turn the camera off during private situations. In one scene, Li's wife is frustrated that he used her motorised scooter without her permission and had it confiscated by police officers on a routine traffic check. This fear of the traffic police and Li's efforts to evade them is a

recurring theme throughout the film because he cannot afford the traffic offences he has been issued and yet he requires transport for his guerrilla street performances. In her frustration, Li's wife threatens him to turn off the camera or she will throw it out. She then continues with, 'Are you crazy? Is that all you can do is shoot that damn video? Is there something wrong with your brain Li Ning?' Here, the film shows the emotional and financial strain that an artist can place on family members but it also recognises that the real threat to Li's work is the traffic police with their random vehicle plate checks. Navigating through Jinan city while attempting to evade the police becomes an ongoing struggle and process for the 'J-Town Guerrilla' Troupe.

After his argument with his wife, Li wanders the city streets at night holding the camera in a talking head shot. He states, 'in my mother's eyes, I'm a good son. In my wife's eyes, I'm an undutiful husband. In the eyes of my son, I'm an okay dad.' He also confesses how he would like to tear himself from the whole of mundane society 'no matter what the whole is'. There is very little distance between Li and the camera and the city is barely visible in the foreground or background (Fig. 2.8). This sequence is not a performance but a video diary revealing how Li struggles to balance life as a dedicated artist and family man. He then approaches a homeless person, gives him money and explains to the camera how he wished that everyone had food and shelter in the city. Although Li feels trapped by the bureaucratic controls and feels pressured to give up his life as an artist in exchange for a more financially stable work environment, he cannot separate his art from the harsh urban realities. He continues to obsessively record even without the presence of the troupe members or his family.



FIGURE 2.8: LI RECORDS HIS CONFESSIONAL ON JINAN'S NIGHT CITY STREETS.

However, as much as Li pushes for complete exposure of his personal life and of his self-criticisms, I would argue that he also leaves the viewer in the dark in other ways. Apart from his guerrilla style performances, there is an element of performance in the way he engages with his wife. Li never uses her actual name and refers to her only as 'Wifey'. This is not to say that he does not have a wife or this is not his wife, but it is interesting to note that, as much as he pushes for private revelations in front of the camera, there is always a performative element to a film that conceals as much as it reveals as it offers his wife privacy.

This also applies to the filmmaker's relationship with his body and sex. In an interview Li states, 'In *Tape*, I made love with my comforter, not with a female body, not with my wife, not with any real person. I wanted to protect real people, and I wanted to give viewers space for imagination' (Lee, 2011). When Li documents his mobile phone communication with his J-Town members, he always makes the text messages visible to the spectator. In one particular correspondence with an unknown individual, Li alludes to the possibility that he is cheating on his wife. In one scene, Li and a woman are kissing in a hotel room. The camera is positioned at a considerable distance from the pair and the unknown woman faces away making it difficult to tell whether or not this is the wife. When she tells Li to take a shower, he listens and walks into the bathroom. The film then temporally jumps to the woman exiting the room and Li returning from the bathroom with a towel around his waist. Here, by blending personal confessions and self-criticisms with performance, Li complicates his own autobiography but also leaves it to the viewer's imagination.

When Li decides to engage with the urban environment, he places himself in uncomfortable situations that provoke the viewer to question his reasoning for the suffering he may cause himself and his family members who are not financially stable. Yet, the filmmaker's drive to take risks are in line with his commitment to art activism and individual struggle. Li has physical altercations with security officials during his unlicensed public performances and when he attempts to film in demolition sites. There is also a scene in which the camera follows the troupe running away after a voice off-screen warns, 'the traffic police are coming.' When the police catch up and order Li to turn off his camera and accompany them to the police station for questioning, he points the camera to the ground but keeps the tape rolling so that sound is still being recorded. There is an element of activism in this act. Then, suddenly, in a voice-over narration, Li explains how 'right at this moment, two thieves stole the police vehicle' which allows him to escape the authorities.⁷ Here, the actual dangers

⁷ In the film's final credits, Li thanks the two thieves who stole the police car and allowed him to escape.

of the shoot dictate the filmmaker's visual concealment of the moment in which he is confronted by police officials.

In one of the final scenes in the film, Li's performance turns into a physical altercation with a member of the public. One hour and fifty minutes into the film, Li has been hired to dance on stage in a club. He is covered in a silver coloured body suit that conceals his identity and performs an avant-garde style dance on a stage (Fig. 2.9). All of a sudden, the performance is halted by Li who confronts a patron taking a photo of him without his consent. This results in a physical altercation between Li with his cameraman and the patron and his band of friends. Even though this physical and verbal exchange between the two groups is brief, the camera operator continues to shoot for nearly four minutes showing Li struggling to unzip his body out of the sweaty suit and attending to a wound on his head. In an interview, Li states, 'initially I could not lay my eyes on the footage of me being beaten up, but the more I watched it, the more I wanted to laugh at myself. I even thought amusingly that those thugs could hit me harder' (Lee, 2011). Li's decision to include the entire scene and his own awkwardness provides an authorial enquiry of his own place in *Tape*.



FIGURE 2.9: LI'S ALIEN PERFORMANCE IN A FULL-BODY SILVER SUIT.

This self-critical inquiry by way of positioning himself as the fool also continues into the next scene. After this dramatic public confrontation, Li sits alone in his apartment contemplating how he does not react with courage in situations that call for him to be. In a voice-over narration, Li confesses, 'I always think I'm a real warrior who can abandon everything for the fight. But in the crucial moments I am always defeated weakly.' First, Li's

performance in a silver suit makes him alien to the world. Second, although his body is initially concealed by the suit, Li still manages to clash with the public. Similar to the demolition site performance in which Li is interrupted by actual inhabitants who have lost their homes, the camera keeps rolling, allowing the viewer to see how Li (the filmmaker) alienates himself (the performer) from within the film. By doing so, he draws attention to the multiple facets of his self-inscribed authorship. His performances, clashes with officials and the public and his own self-deprecating analysis oscillates between a narcissistic and self-sacrificial exercise. This is emphasised by a film that was shot over five-year period. Ultimately, by documenting the massive restructuring of the urban city to fit in with the Olympic image, Li's ethical commitment to realism 'feed[s] on the utopian search for the coincidence between life-span and creative time' (Nagib, 2011: 226).

So what other attitudes does Li apply to his performance in public space? In the context of contemporary China, Li's physical presence on the street with his J-Town troupe also attests to a political drive for individual and artistic expression in public spaces. Whether locating his performances on a demolition site or in front of a bank on the street, there is usually a security guard present in the background, carefully observing their movements and motivations. When Li does make an explicit mockery of his city's Olympic torch relay, he does so through parody and by juxtaposing national news coverage images of the actual relay with his own comical version on the street. A high level of security would have prevented Li from performing the torch relay on the same day and place in Jinan city. So, he re-enacts the relay and then incorporates it with newsreel footage from the original event. Li's editing is made possible by the emergence of affordable and portable post-production technology that allows him to set up a suite in his own apartment.

There has been much public debate surrounding the social and economic impact that an Olympic bid may inflict on cities that host them. Furthermore, the internationally televised torch relay that travels from city to city provides a public platform for protestors to raise their grievances surrounding the human and animal rights issues and corporate interests attached to the Olympics, an event that historically is supposed to capture a sense of world unity. Winning the Olympic bid was an indication to China that it had achieved its self-prophesised 'economic miracle'. However, there was as much excitement within China as there was widespread criticism outside China for the approaching 2008 Beijing Olympics.⁸ So, by the

⁸ The torch relay, or what China referred to as the 'Journey of Harmony' reported disruptions by protestors of human and animal rights issues in San Francisco, Paris and London. It is highly unlikely that any protests took place within China and even if they had, the national news channel CCTV would not have reported it. For more

time the torch relay reached the participating cities in Mainland China, residents were well informed of its arrival, encouraged to contribute and celebrate in this momentous occasion with a provisional warning that any form of public dissent would not be tolerated. For the marginalised population who were negatively impacted by the much lauded event, there did not exist a safe public forum to express grievances.

Li's re-enactment of the torch relay starts with him glancing at a mobile phone text message received from the actual Propaganda Department of the Jinan Olympic Committee informing its urban citizens the route of the torch relay and also warning them to obey civil order. It then cuts to a series of shots with local supporters holding celebratory banners and lining the streets in anticipation for the torch bearer's arrival. At the same time, an audio recording by the local media is played in the background. A camera is positioned in a moving vehicle that passes quickly under an overpass while the local media reporter can be overheard saying that the 'torch has now arrived at the Yanshang Overpass.' This overpass was one of four to have been built over residential homes in order to accommodate a ten lane route to a newly constructed sports stadium. So, Li juxtaposes media coverage of the Olympics with his own marginalised perspective of the event that impacted on local citizens.

In the next shot, Li is running alongside the moving vehicle, smiling at the camera, holding a handcrafted torch made from water bottles and wearing striped clothing that mimics the pattern of the fence erected behind him as he runs (Fig. 2.10). It is probable that Li would have been unable to get very close to the actual torch relay with his camera crew and van so this shot is most likely set in a quieter corner of the city or filmed at a different time to the actual televised event. However, by re-enacting the torch relay then intercutting Li with the upbeat official torch relay news coverage and the site of the demolition, the sequence becomes a parody of the official torch relay event. In retrospect, Li's swim in the icy ditch also parodies the Olympics while also confirming his political drive to show reality for the marginalised who have been negatively impacted by the event.

information on the specific debates and issues surrounding China as seen by China and by the foreign press in the run-up to the Olympics in 2008 see Kevin Latham (2008).



FIGURE 2.10: LI'S PARODY OF THE OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY.

Along with his public mockery of the torch relay, Li adds a corporeal element to his performance in the next series of shots when he is seen crawling naked on his knees over portions of demolished buildings. Li's body imitates the movement of a forklift in the background that is picking up dust as it scoops up building materials on the site. He also waves a flag on top of the rubble that is constructed with the same striped material he wore in the previous shots. This montage sequence continues with audible recordings of the Olympic news coverage. So, while Li scrambles along the rocks, news anchors are overheard excitedly discussing plans for the new roads that will be built in the city to make way for sports stadiums. In addition to crawling naked on a demolition site, Li also hangs from the arm of a forklift. Wearing the colour-striped clothing and imitating the shape and movements of the forklift, Li inserts his own body into the destructive process.

With the excitement generated by the media and the machinery noise of the demolition site, Li combines a third element: sexuality and eroticism. Li is shown convulsing his body on a pile of rubble and a woman is overheard breathing heavily in a sexualised manner. The series of images then accelerate in speed as it shows Li hanging from a forklift, CCTV's Olympic torch relay coverage and two individuals licking an Olympic torch (Fig. 2.11). In these images, three separate locations are identified and are linked by their connection with the Olympics. First, Li is in a demolition site that is in the process of becoming a road that leads to a new sports stadium. The second is footage taken from CCTV's coverage of the Olympic torch relay in Jinan city. The third features a close-up image of two people licking and breathing heavily on a Beijing Olympic torch. These images and Li's re-enactment of the

Olympic torch relay are an expression of his art activism. The eroticism points to the exaggerated excitement facilitated by CCTV's propaganda surrounding the Olympic news coverage. It highlights the difference between Li's reality and the official spectacle. Later on in the film, the camera moves from one part of the apartment where his mother, wife and son all have their eyes glued to the television's broadcasting of the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony to another where Li has his back turned away from the television and is editing his film on his computer.



FIGURE 2.11: MONTAGE SEQUENCE OF LI'S PERFORMANCE AND THE ACTUAL NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE TORCH RELAY.

Li's political target is not restricted to the Olympics. In fact, there is one guerrilla street performance that briefly revives the violence of Beijing's Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* (1990) which is shot both before and after the Massacre, alludes to it through a 'structuring absence' (Berry, 2007). Now, almost twenty years later, the topic remains taboo yet, here it is revived in contemporary Chinese independent cinema. With the official excitement surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Li makes the political decision to bring it to the surface by intermingling his street performance with a very brief two-second shot of archival footage. This footage occurs thirty minutes into the film and the image is so fleeting that a spectator could miss it on a first viewing. This sequence is a musical interlude with an upbeat melody and is shot with approximately seven troupe members performing on the streets.

Once Li has gathered his members into a van, they drive to an unknown busy road with overpasses zigzagging above their heads. The J-Town troupe have crafted two-dimensional posters of their own bodies stretched out which they plaster onto the pavement. The camera then captures cars and buses driving over these posters and street cleaners sweeping them off the ground and disposing of them. It then cuts to the J-Town street performance on the side of the road. One man dressed in office attire pulls out a cigarette, looks upward and to the right of the camera (most likely to a newly erected block of office

towers) and points his middle digit to the sky, seemingly in an act of defiance. Then, seven troupe members (including Li) cluster together and in unison make robotic rhythmic gestures with their arms and legs.

They are captured in various medium shots clustered together and walking on a sidewalk, under an overpass and crossing a street. In one close-up shot, the members leap together toward the camera with smiling faces. These highly rhythmic participatory street performances in *Tape* which often show J-Town members dressed in office attire creates what Miriam Hansen terms 'sensory-reflexive' (2000: 10) qualities that draw the viewer into the experience. In effect, these rhythmic movements shift from the textual representation of the collective worker to a performative efficacy that animates the performers as objects. Here, we must also contemplate the affective dimensions of this sequence up to this point. If we can separate the film from the performance at this point, what we have are people dressed as office workers collectively smiling and dancing on a busy street in daylight and the camera shoots this performance from multiple proximities that range between close-ups to long shots. It produces an alternative agency outside the rhythms of everyday life and can be termed a participatory performance.

The scene on the streets then cuts to a series of long shots of the group at a busy crosswalk. However, the texture of this shot has changed here as there are lines on the screen that a filmmaker might use in post-production to replicate the look of weathered film or archival footage. Although this is a digital video, the insertion of weathered film indicates another temporality is at work here. Furthermore, and theoretically speaking, by reflecting upon the film's own materiality with the interference of form, Li also 'introduces a politically resonant registration of the unrepresentable or illegible within our social systems' (Ma and Beckman, 2008: 13). A concrete roller rumbles past the group as they glance left and right in unison. Then, all of a sudden archival footage appears and shows an army tank rushing past a crowd on the street (Fig. 2.12). The image is fleeting and the performers appear back on the pavement momentarily stepping out of harm's way of the traffic and then continuing to move together in unison. This backing away from the road subsequently collapses temporalities as it transforms into a reaction to the tank and not the concrete roller. This sequence changes temporalities as the performance on the street shifts to a rhythmic performance on an emptied out bus and then shifts again to the J-Town troupe on a stage at night in front of an audience.



FIGURE 2.12: LI BRIEFLY INCORPORATES TIANANMEN SQUARE FOOTAGE FROM 1989 INTO THE FILM.

At first, the background music is upbeat which either serves as a distraction to the unaware viewer or engages with the sense of alienation that the filmmaker expresses throughout the film, including when he wears his alien costume. However, when the singer finally bursts into song, the lyrics are much more in line with the politics of the Tiananmen image we have just seen: ‘I don’t wanna leave, I don’t wanna be here, I don’t wanna live realistically, I need to leave, I need to stay.’ This alienation and frustration is reminiscent of those artists who feature in *Bumming in Beijing* which reveals that the wounds of the Tiananmen Square Massacre have left an indelible mark on contemporary China. Despite the playfulness of this sequence, it is made politically oppositional to the harmonious rhythmic performance with the addition of angst-ridden musical lyrics and banned archival footage of student protestors in front of military tanks at Tiananmen Square. By juxtaposing new urban spaces in Jinan with archival footage from Beijing, Li’s art momentarily makes visible what has not been able to be seen in public. In the collective community, the violence surrounding Tiananmen in 1989 has been suppressed in exchange for a collective drive toward massive urban development. So, with the help of DV technology, Li makes visible heterogeneous temporalities in an effort to show the historical ruptures between China then and now.

Not only has Li performed naked in public spaces, but he has also parodied the Olympic torch relay and had physical altercations with the police and public, he has made considerable efforts to embed the sensitive material within a musical interlude. Its near concealment seems to echo Chris Berry’s comments with regards to a ‘structuring absence’ (2007). Although *Tape* and *Bumming in Beijing* are separated by a twenty-year time gap (not to mention how many buildings have been replaced since 1989) the subject remains taboo in official spaces. Therefore, the inclusion of this clip is deeply affecting for any viewer familiar with the events surrounding China in 1989.

In the film's final scene, Li is shown affixing his photo with adhesive tape to a curriculum vitae and making his journey to the back of a queue at a job fair. He has resigned himself to join the masses but there is no revelation and no promise that Li will be able to stick to this lifestyle. Instead, he always seems to be striving to remain an artist no matter what the cost. He is constantly shown begging his wife for more money and his troupe members tend to move on while Li is committed to the project until its completion. Once, having been caught by security officers for filming the demolition process of his own apartment building, he is brought in to the local police station for questioning. When he returns home after being dealt a severe warning by the police, Li's mother tells him, 'keep your mind on your art and forget about politics.' However, Li's performances and visual documentation of the city do not separate the artist from his struggles with the system.

Tape captures the life of an artist on the margins who uses performance, documentary and self-reflexive strategies to raise questions about the dialectics of subjectivity and to show real aspects of life for the marginalised inhabitants and artists in his hometown of Jinan city. The film embraces a hybrid mixture of representations that deal with materiality of the medium, bodily engagement and self-reflexivity. It also benefits from a loose chronological format that follows one man's journey over five years in China, a country that is in a constant state of flux and development. In *Tape*, subjectivity is the filter through which reality enters discourse and the artist's experience ushers the project towards a goal of tacit knowledge. Through an avant-garde form that exposes the artist's own body to the violence taking place in his environment, Li introduces a new and highly compelling and signifying practice in contemporary Chinese independent cinema.

CHAPTER 3

Dynamics of Domestic Space in Liu Jiayin's *Oxhide I* (Niu pi, 2005) and *Oxhide II* (Niu pi er, 2009)

This chapter looks at how domestic space in Liu Jiayin's diptych *Oxhide I* and *Oxhide II* informs the spectator about the conditions of urban space in contemporary China. However, the diptych never actually documents life beyond the walls of a cramped apartment. Both films depict the same ensemble of characters, a family of three who live in one dwelling. Within these four walls, this family argue, laugh and cry over finances, family business, food and health. Furthermore, this is not a simple documentation of a father, mother and daughter living under difficult urban circumstances. Instead, the filmmaker employs the use of her own parents and positions herself in front of the camera, re-enacting their daily lives as a cohabitating urban family.

Much like many recent independent films, these films combine both fictional and documentary elements. However, both *Oxhide I* and *Oxhide II* challenge the 'on-the-spot' method of filmmaking that has been typically attributed to urban independent cinema since the late 1990s because the filmmaker adopts a minimalist style that is entirely confined to interior domestic space. So, instead of drifting, performing or documenting the present conditions of urban life from the streets (as the films analysed in Chapters 1 and 2) the viewer is now limited to understanding the marginalised perspective through the depiction of a cramped apartment where Liu (called Beibei by her parents), her mother (Huifen) and father (Zaiping) live. As a female filmmaker who re-enacts her own personal stories, Liu's participation within the film also contests traditional roles of the female as simply daughter or wife. Rather, she highlights the ability of digital video to engage with new forms of female identities that are in line with contemporary Chinese culture.

My central focus for this chapter is to examine Liu's relationship with her home city of Beijing through her films *Oxhide I* and *II*. So, how does domestic space inform the spectator on urban reality in contemporary China? After providing a brief description of the filmmaker's background and of the films themselves, I will first argue that both *Oxhide I* and *II* place emphasis on the family dynamic which articulates the social and economic realities of urban living conditions for marginalised members of the community. The filmmaker's account of the everyday urban experience is a topic that belongs to a burgeoning list of films that began in the early 1990s with the New Documentary Movement, expanded to the urban

generation scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s and has continued to grow with the advent of digital video technology. In addition to positioning her camera in the urban domestic space, Liu's films offer hybridisations of documentary and fiction, autobiography and first-person filmmaking. So, while *Oxhide I* and *II* are shot on location in the family's domestic space and both the filmmaker and her parents are the only participants in front of the camera, the scenes are re-enactments of real life events that have taken place in the past. By experimenting with the documentary genre through autobiographical re-enactments, the filmmaker also reconfigures her own role as author, woman and as a daughter in a contemporary Chinese urban family.

Next, I will look at the filmmaker's method of production and formal strategies which I argue help to capture the sensorial claustrophobic experience of the marginalised urban population. The minimalist style of filmmaking helps to address how the family adapts to these difficult circumstances. I aim to examine how the filmmaker's experiment with minimalism that includes the use of a cinemascope lens format, static and de-centred framing, close-ups and long durational takes challenge the physical aesthetics typically associated with Chinese independent filmmaking yet still respond to the conditions of both Liu's actual production and the claustrophobia of real urban living space.

Along with Liu's production and film techniques, it is through this intimate portrait of domestic space that allows the viewer to draw out the complexities for working class families living in today's Beijing metropolis. In Chapter 1, I examined how *Street Life* focuses on the everyday for homeless people surviving on the streets of Shanghai through an observational (and sometimes interactive) mode of filmmaking. In Chapter 2, the filmmaker's physical engagement with urban life through art activism breaks all boundaries between the public and private as he risks his own body to voice his reaction to his city's transformations over a period of five years. Now, in both *Oxhide I* and *II*, the urban everyday experience is demonstrated through ritualistic patterns and with a considerable focus on the mundanity of objects within the domestic space. At the same time, Liu's diptych focuses on the stillness of the everyday domestic scene in a cramped urban apartment. It does so by emphasising long durational takes and static shots of material objects that produces a figurative or painterly quality through careful framing. The painterly quality elevates the mundane to an object of interest yet the objects are so often shot at odd angles and decentred compositions. This disorienting experience impacts on the viewer's ability to decipher domestic objects from the apartment spaces or rooms. So, the combination of mundanity, repetitive rituals and figurative

qualities construct a paradoxical aesthetic logic that shifts between the indexical reality of low cost digital production and a figurative quality created by the filmmaker's method of production and focus on objects within the domestic space.

With the emergence of digital video production, Liu's diptych introduces a mixed set of aesthetics to capture contemporary Chinese marginal realities. Shot in a manner that both seems to arrest (or escape from) the ongoing urban development taking place beyond the domestic space while also revealing how space is fluid and constantly in flux, these films acutely reveal how the urban family has been impacted by the recent social and economic developments in China.

Oxhide I and II

Born in 1981 and raised in Beijing, Liu belongs to the first generation of the one-child policy, part of a family planning regulation that began in 1978 in Mainland China. Since her parents struggled financially with an artisanal leather handbag business, Liu worked as a televisual scriptwriter for years before she could afford her first camera. She made a short film titled *Train* (2002) that won her the Best Director Award at the Beijing Student Film Festival in 2002. Then, at the age of twenty-three and as a student enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy, Liu produced *Oxhide I* for her graduate project. With the help of her mother Huifen and father Zaiping (who star in both *Oxhide I* and *II*), the filmmaker's feature film debut went on to win two prizes at the 2005 Berlin International Film Festival, including the FIPRESCI Award in the Forum of New Cinema and was picked up by the French distributor MK2.⁹ It also screened at the Hong Kong Film Festival where it won the Golden DV Award and at the Vancouver International Film Festival, where it was awarded the top Dragons and Tigers prize for East Asian cinema.

The title *Oxhide* derives from the material that Liu's father handles for crafting his leather handbags, so it forms a large part of the characters' dialogue and of the story. Since the handbag business is the focal point of *Oxhide I*, Liu focuses much of the film on her father's anxieties regarding the family's finances. The film begins with Zaiping and his daughter printing out flyers for the business and ends with the same man lying in bed at night with a foreboding look of self-disappointment and concern over his family's financial state.

⁹ Both *Oxhide I* and *Oxhide II* are now distributed by dGenerate Films.

Using natural light and long durational takes, *Oxhide I* is very dark and grainy in appearance, often making it difficult to make out objects, people and actions. In both films, the mundanity, the repetitive dialogue between family members, the long durational takes and the real domestic setting point to a formally constructed yet documentary feel. The films proceed with a 'fly-on-the-wall' approach by employing static shots and avoiding reaction shots between people. For instance, in *Oxhide I*, Huifen has just told her husband about a complaint she has from her factory boss. The camera is pointed at Zaiping whose response is not to defend his wife, and all of a sudden he receives a hand slap to the face from her. The scene ends as abruptly as the slap and this altercation between husband and wife is never mentioned again. Although the slap is unexpected to a shocking effect, it is still business as usual with the same ordinariness associated with the banal tone of the everyday domestic home.

Despite the realistic setting, and a somewhat 'fly-on-the-wall' method aided by the inclusion of Liu's actual parents who are non-professional actors, these films are in fact heavily scripted re-enactments of past conversations amongst the family members (Rist, 2009). Speaking of her decision to depict and re-enact the everyday of her family life, Liu states, 'Our lives were very peaceful, but very hard. I wanted to capture the sense of beauty I was able to see according to such a difficult way of life' (China Global Times, 2010). Structurally, *Oxhide I* is nearly two hours long and comprises of twenty-three static shots representing one for each year of Liu's life at the time of production. The story unfolds in a non-consequential manner and a meandering rhythm in which nothing seems to happen. At the same time, the camera's framing is shot squeezed into various unorthodox and de-centred positions within the cramped apartment. For example, in *Oxhide I*, the camera will be positioned at ground height in a low angle tilted up towards the top of a door frame. Often, it is even difficult to tell what we are looking at until subjects appear to move in or past the static frame. The filmmaker also utilises a cinemascope format (a 2.35:1 aspect ratio) which means the frame is horizontally stretched creating a visual distortion that makes it difficult to immediately comprehend the image in front of the camera. It is through long durational takes that the objects and people eventually reveal themselves to the viewer. In terms of storytelling, *Oxhide I* focuses primarily on conversations surrounding Zaiping's market handbag business and the family's tenuous financial situation.

For her follow-up film *Oxhide II*, Liu once again employs the cinemascope format and the static shot. However, this one has a more polished result which is accomplished by restricting the entire film to one room in the apartment and the time frame is over one

evening. The unbearable tension that permeates throughout *Oxhide I* has subsided in the sequel and is alleviated by the convivial atmosphere as the family congregate around a table to carefully prepare, cook and eat seventy-three pork and chive dumplings. The choreography involves nine single static shots in a film totalling one hundred and thirty-three minutes. In each single shot, the camera rotates around a table. Moreover, the structuring principles applied in *Oxhide I* are expanded in *Oxhide II* as the film starts at one end of the table and slowly works clockwise in forty-five degree increments until the camera returns 'home' at the end. In *Oxhide II*, the film pulls focus away from the stress of Zaiping's handbag business and towards an intimate portrait of one family working together to prepare a meal.

Contemporary representations of family

Urban representations of the nuclear family vary widely in China between mainstream and independent cinema. In popular Chinese cinema where there are strict censorship controls in place, it is usually the effects of market economy that threaten to disrupt the nuclear family structure. Often, these threats to tradition include divorce (*Breakup Buddies* (Ning, 2014), *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* (Chan, 1996)) or trials of multiple marriages (*Shanghai Women* (Peng, 2002), *Happy Times* (Zhang, 2000)). Despite the real impact of urban development on families (which has been demonstrated in Chapter 2), in mainstream cinema, the general threat is to middle-class families by capitalism in the form of commodity housing (Lu, 2007: 148). Since the introduction of more restrictive laws on the Mainland in 2014, popular mainstream television and cinema productions are forbidden to show adultery or polyamorous relationships. Therefore, love stories are predominantly reserved for narratives involving young relationships rather than family dramas. Conversely, in China's independent film sector, where there are no restrictions or regulations that enforce traditional and wholesome representations of the contemporary family, these portrayals are often more diverse and complex. These may include but are not limited to relationships that involve adultery (*Still Life* (Jia, 2006)), LGBT relationships (*Drifting Flowers* (Chou, 2007)), generational gaps (*Longing for the Rain* (Yang, 2013)), and disability (*Blind Massage* (Lou, 2014)).

Since the implementation of economic reforms in 1979, upward mobility has become increasingly limited for Chinese urban citizens. In *Oxhide I* and *II*, Liu provides an accurate

depiction of this new era, in which her family survives by living together in a tiny apartment. Rather than experiencing upward mobility through the years leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (which interestingly is not mentioned at all in either film), Liu documents her family's reality of remaining confined to one small space. In fact, previous to the filming of *Oxhide I*, Liu and her parents were directly affected by the massive post-socialist urban development when their Beijing home was demolished (Amato, 2016: 112). They were forced to relocate to this small apartment located near Guangqumen in Dongcheng District or Beijing central where further demolition continues all around their apartment building (Amato, 2016: 112). So while the rise in materialism threatens the model of the standard family in popular Chinese cinema, it is not at all present in *Oxhide I* and *II*. Liu's family belong to the more typical yet underrepresented (in popular cinema) marginalised urban group who struggle and rely on each other for support through economic hardships. While Zaiping is an entrepreneurial craftsman in charge of his own handmade leather handbag business at a Beijing tourist market stall, his wife works at a factory.

The traditional family structure in China has undergone massive transformations since the era of economic reforms in the late 1970s which followed soon after the death of Communist leader Mao Zedong. Due to financial pressures and a rise in rural to urban living, families have been forced to migrate to the city for work and often children are left to be raised by their grandparents or even abandoned completely in rural areas. However much popular cinema demonstrates the impact of capitalism on the traditional nuclear family structure or how independent cinema documents the effects of development in urban space, it is yet to be represented on screen the way in which the domestic sphere has been impacted by remarkable changes since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 when Mao called for a revolution against the Party elite. Along with the purging of Party Officials and intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution pushed the private realm of the domestic space into the public and social space due to Mao's collectivization campaign. Also, approximately seventeen million urban youth were separated from their families and sent to work in the countryside in an effort to re-educate them with practical labour skills. In addition, the inclusion of women in the workplace was encouraged by the Communist Party as it helped to increase productivity.¹⁰ In effect, the Communist Party's politicised public space radically transformed the traditional family structure, gender roles, privacy and communal spaces.

¹⁰ As early as 1955 in his chapter titled 'Women' in the *Little Red Book*, Mao Zedong states his call for women to provide a wider contribution to society by joining the masses in the workplace.

After Mao's death in 1976, there was an effort by the new leadership led by Deng Xiaoping to advocate population control. In 1979, this resulted in both the push for economic growth through the Four Modernisation goals (agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology) and the enforcement of China's one-child policy. This historical period marked the start of the reform era which has propelled the country into a global economic superpower in the twenty-first century. So, in addition to the calamitous effects involving Mao Zedong's leadership and surveillance on the domestic realm (which is dealt with in Hu Jie's *Though I Am Gone* (2007)) the implementation of the one-child policy after his death contributes to an additional transformation of the traditional family structure in China.

In traditional China, the institution of family is the axis of society. The family structure is hierarchical, with the father figure at the head acting as the financial provider and responsible for making the decisions within the unit. In contemporary China, the father still provides the bulk of the financial means for the family but he is no longer endowed with the same power of authority from previous generations. The traditional roles and the contemporary liberal attitudes towards them are at the core of the personal stories provided in *Oxhide I and II*. Zaiping is the main financial provider of the family and his handbag business dictates most of the family's conversations and concerns. In *Oxhide I*, Liu helps her father design and print out publicity flyers to distribute in the local market. Huifen supports her husband by working extra hours at the factory to make up for any business losses and by preparing and serving food to the family.

Despite the traditional family structure, Liu's focus on her father and his business reveals the financial and emotional burden contemporary families face. The story's banality is then punctuated by sudden emotional outbursts as a symptom of the family's stress. Thirty minutes into the film, Zaiping arrives home from work with a bag full of the day's profits. At first, his wife and daughter are delighted with his good fortune. However, the celebratory mood is diffused when Huifen discovers that her husband's profits are the result of slashing his merchandise prices in half. Although Huifen maintains the traditional supportive wife role, she is disappointed by her husband's ineffective business strategies and is openly critical about the topic. In fact, three quarters into the film, Zaiping arrives home again filled with disappointment and rage with his customers who continue to bargain with him for a further fifty percent reduction in price. Instead of providing support, his wife nonchalantly responds, 'All right... Keep your dignity. Wait for death' before she stands up from the sofa and walks

away from her husband out of the left side of the frame. Zaiping then tears apart the flyers he had made at the beginning of the film. In the final scene, Zaiping lies in bed in the dark talking to his wife and daughter who are nearby enough to hear him reassure them that he intends to pay off a business debt this coming year. Huifen responds 'yeah right! You say that every year.' Zaiping asks, 'Are you laughing at me?' and then adds, 'Once everything becomes better, we should never forget this suffering that we're going through now.' Huifen scoffs and replies, 'Even if I wanted to forget, we're still suffering now.' Beibei then yawns and turns out the light. In the dark, the scene cuts to a tight close-up of Zaiping's face (Fig. 3.1). Regardless of the sense of unity demonstrated by the intimacy between the family members, there is a constant feeling that their harmony is being threatened by financial uncertainty and so Huifen reacts impatiently to her husband's complaints. Huifen belongs to a generation of women brought up during Mao's communist ideology which made it obligatory for women to work in the same jobs as men in an effort to increase industrial productivity. By viewing these hardships within a private dwelling, Liu reveals the current state of economic circumstance for many local Beijing citizens.

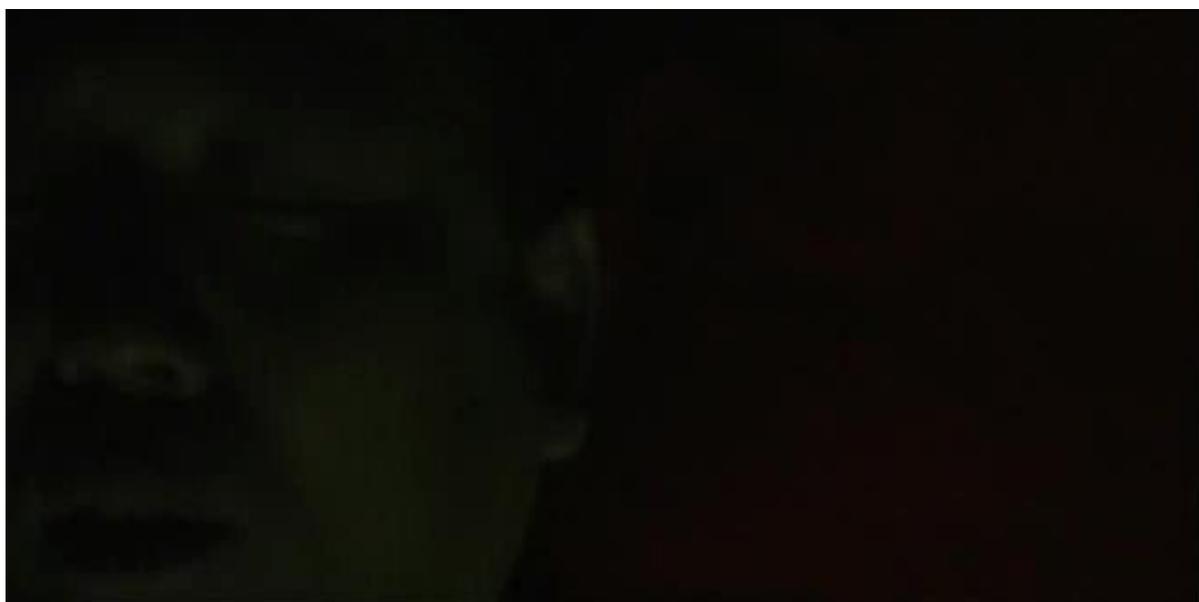


FIGURE 3.1: THE FINAL SHOT IN *OXHIDE I* CLOSES WITH A SUFFOCATING FACIAL CLOSE-UP OF ZAIPING IN BED AT NIGHT.

In the early years of the New Documentary Movement in the 1990s, films were predominantly located in public spaces and focused on issues affecting broader topics on the state and national identity. More recently, films have shifted towards the private domain, 'focusing on individual, sometimes even autobiographical, emotional experience; the familial;

and internal domestic spaces as opposed to external public ones' (Robinson, 2010: 177). Liu's work aligns with the earlier New Documentary movement in which a social unit operates as a metonymy for society more broadly but it also fleshes out the private concerns because it depicts her own family's life strictly within the domestic space. In fact, in *Oxhide I*, the complete absence of public space enhances the stifling experience for a family living in a small apartment with no obvious exit door and with windows that are often covered in dust making it difficult to see outside.

At the same time, the apartment provides a sanctuary and in *Oxhide II*, Liu chooses a more harmonious mood by focusing on the act of cooking where the family takes part in the ritual of preparing chive dumplings or *jiaozi*. There is no specific indication why the family have congregated to make an elaborate meal but it could be a celebration of one of the major holidays such as the annual Mid-Autumn Festival. Although there are conversations surrounding the handbag business, the anxieties are alleviated by the harmony of preparing dinner as a supportive unit. In stark contrast to the stressful atmosphere in *Oxhide I*, Zaiping even goofs around with his wife by moulding eyebrows from the dough. He then places two uncooked dumplings on his eyebrows and playfully asks his wife 'do you think these dumplings look like me?' (Fig. 3.2). When the failing business is brought up, Zaiping seems to agree with both his wife and daughter that it may be time to sell the business. This is also



FIGURE 3.2: THE CHANGE OF ATMOSPHERE MANIFESTS IN ZAIPING'S RELAXED DEMEANOUR IN *OXHIDE II*.

one of the few shots in the film where the camera is positioned at eye level. Since there are only nine shots in total in this film, any facial expressions rendered through the close-up

provide a brief glimpse into the habitual relationships between Zaiping and his wife. In this film, there is an attentiveness to the joys of cooking and sharing during leisure time that is only briefly shown in *Oxhide I*.

Filmmaker and daughter

While Huifen and Zaiping discuss business matters, Beibei is much less involved with the family's financial matters. As the youth of the household, she still runs into trouble with her flagrant disregard for her father's work ethic and commitment to his business. In one scene, she is asked to model one of her father's handbags. With the camera positioned at knee height in a static shot, it is the handbag that is in clear view for the spectator. Beibei walks from left to right in and out of the frame, her mother watching her in the background while her father positions himself to the right and slightly behind the camera. Beibei glides her hand along the handbag, feeling all the different coloured stones her father has sewn into the leather and then remarks, 'This is too ugly'. Immediately, her mother defends Zaiping's painstaking and unique craftsmanship. Beibei also upsets her father at the dinner table and later is scolded by her mother for continuing to poke fun at her father's expense.

Since Beibei is part of the generation belonging to the one-child party policy, all of her parents' efforts are focused on their daughter's future success. Zaiping is obsessed with his daughter's height, marking it on the wall with a pencil and tells her to drink more milk which will help her grow. Even if she grows a millimetre, Zaiping is satisfied. He also encourages Beibei to be physically active by fastening a piece of lumber above a door frame so that she can perform chin up exercises. Despite her parents' efforts, Beibei appears to show very little interest in her own appearance or health. So, when her mother worries that she does not dress like a 'delicate girl', Beibei still chooses to wear t-shirts and trousers and keeps her hair short. This type of female youth rebellion and the parental conflict is also illustrated in Chapter 4 in Lixin Fan's documentary film *Last Train Home* (2009). However, in *Last Train Home*, a rural-based youth argues with her parents over her desire to quit school in order to work in an urban factory with the rest of her classmates. In Beibei's situation, she already lives in the city and there is no indication that she wants or needs to move out of her family's home. The inclusion of these interactions between Beibei and her parents reveals Liu's resistance to traditional notions of femininity and female obedience within a patriarchal order. Here, she subversively re-inserts herself into the family structure with female agency. As I

have already mentioned, these films are scripted re-enactments of the filmmaker's actual family life. So, along with female agency, the film is a creative exercise in the filmmaker's autobiography and minimalist experiment. It offers a new dimension to exploring the self in Chinese independent cinema. Filial piety is the core value in the Chinese family which requires children or grandchildren to respect and care for their parents or grandparents (Lin, 1994; Whyte, 2004). Although Beibei demonstrates, to a certain degree, a respect for her parents, she is part of a new urban generation in China. So, despite her parents' efforts to teach her how to cook, how to present herself and how to be healthy, Beibei slyly rejects their expectations through her lack of enthusiasm.

During the production of *Oxhide I*, Liu's actual age is twenty-three but she is re-enacting events so she could be depicting herself as a youth. She argues with her parents and sleeps with a plush toy in her arms. Although it is difficult to tell what age she is attempting to portray, we can assume that she is at least playing herself as a late teen or young adult. *Oxhide II* was shot four years later and Beibei participates again in front of the camera helping to prepare *jiaozi* with her parents. In this case, she is beginning to mimic her mother's criticism towards her father, recommending he quit the handbag business. Her participation in the sequel with regards to the family business demonstrates her personal development from a youth to an adult. It is pertinent to reiterate here that Liu's parents not only have allowed their daughter and only child to pursue a financially risky career in filmmaking but that they also willingly participate in the production of two films. Like her father, the artisanal craftsman, Liu has chosen to pursue the difficult journey for the independent artist in China. By casting her own parents and situating the films within her family's apartment, *Oxhide I* and *II* were produced on a shoestring budget. For the editing of *Oxhide II*, Liu utilised Final Cut Software and a 2007, 15 inch Apple MacBook Pro computer in her parents' home (Amato, 2016). So, while her films are not documentaries but re-enactments, they provide the spectator with an autobiographical perspective similar to the family home movie genre.

Odin defines a home movie as a type of filmmaking 'made by one member or for other members of the same family, filming events, things, people, and places linked to the family' (Odin, 2007: 256). Odin then makes a qualitative distinction between home movies and professional documentation by arguing for:

family filmmakers [who] are endotic anthropologists: they film those moments of life that professionals ignore. Official reports fail to document entire aspects of society. Home movies are sometimes the only records of some racial,

ethnic, cultural, social communities marginalised by the official version of history. (2007: 263)

By this definition, Liu seems to be capturing the events happening in her personal life in the privacy of her family's home. Liu's films do not mimic the spontaneous conventions associated with a home movie that includes fiddling with the camcorder's control buttons, recording special occasions and family members directly addressing the camera. Yet, in *Oxhide I* and *II*, the subjects, the material objects and the setting all depict the realities of Liu's actual family life. Furthermore, this material documentation of real people and the mundanity of the everyday is what gives her films the effect of peering into a private situation. As Liu explains:

Every corner of the room represents many things, as a piece of our family history. If someday this kind of life is over or changes, I cannot recreate this moment either. I believe that doing so is immoral, meaningless and ineffective. (Mu, 2009)

She also inscribes her authorial voice through the authenticity of the space and time she captures along with her own banal interactions with her parents. This is an example of what Renov calls 'domestic ethnography [which] is more than simply another variant of autobiographical discourse given its explicitly outward gaze' (1999: 141). Here, Liu's films are documents of her own life that involves participation by all member of the family unit.

Despite the autobiographical markers, questions arise here: Can Liu's films be considered first-person filmmaking when they are not strictly documentaries and when the filmmaker herself does not reveal very much about her own life? First of all, these films are still documents of Liu's actual experiences and are situated within the family's actual home. Second, in her own definition of the term 'First-person plural', Lebow argues that it 'enters somewhat fraught territory, wherein the films could be said to engage in a more circuitous route to self-representation' (2012: 8). In Liu's case, her subjective voice is positioned in relation to the family dynamics. What she prefers then is to represent herself through the dynamics of the relationship with her parents. As a female filmmaker who has produced two films, her work must also be acknowledged for its nuanced insight into capturing the contemporary urban woman.

The agency of women in Chinese society has undergone major shifts since the beginning of the twentieth century. Between the 1910s and 1920s, the "new women" or *Xin nüxing* was represented by modern fashion, glamour and Far East exoticism as the city of

Shanghai became a popular international trading port. The intellectual faction of the elite, women who worked as journalists, critics and artists helped challenge these traditional roles in Chinese society (Yu, 2014: 29). From the 1950s, proletarian reforms during the Cultural Revolution sought to grant women an active role in the collective workforce. This resulted in the founding of the Women's Federation or *Fulian* in 1949 that continues to exist today. Although there has always been gendered hierarchy, the Women's Federation seeks to promote the inclusion of women in governmental policies and protect their rights within the government.

In contemporary China, women continue to take an active role in the workplace and the rise of consumerism has opened up a new market for women. Despite the continued presence of the Women's Federation and the introduction of feminism into the mainstream, popular culture still persists in subjugating women to traditional gender roles. This includes the persistence of conventional notions relating to femininity and the passive wife or daughter figure. In the 1980s, personal writings by women emerged which contested these traditional female roles and identities by unashamedly 'exposing personal emotions, desires and sexuality from women's perspective' (Yu, 2014: 29). Despite being denounced by critics at the time, the advent of capitalism and the digital video generation has caused some critics to re-evaluate these personal writings as this new era has seen a shift in subjectivity from the 'We' in Communism to the 'I' in capitalism. Although Liu does not simply document her life, she is part of a new generation of female filmmakers who have started producing personal stories with affordable digital video technology. The interactions with her actual parents in front of the camera reveal the complex dynamics of Liu's role as daughter, as only child and as a female filmmaker. Liu records the most private conversations amongst family members within an average domestic urban space. So, it is through the act of recording that Liu exposes her work and her life to the public realm.

In this section, I have examined how the filmmaker's storytelling informs the viewer of the complexity of the contemporary Chinese urban family by looking at the various roles played by each family member. While some familial traditions have remained, historical transformations in China continue to play a part in the continual shifting of the domestic space. Furthermore, the emergence of digital video and the rise in women's personal writings through the cinematic medium has encouraged filmmakers to push for more diverse and increasingly subjective ways to examine contemporary Chinese urban realities. In doing so,

independent filmmakers like Liu are constantly re-examining the urban experience and in the process, creating an archival document.

In the next section, I will turn toward a textual analysis of Liu's aesthetic choices in *Oxhide I and II*. What is the rationale for Liu's aesthetic minimalism and how do these films provide us with visual information about the marginalised urban life? I will argue that while the filmmaker engages with film language to convey meaning, her films are also inextricably grounded by realism through the conditions and process of filmmaking in urban domestic space. Furthermore, Liu's carefully constructed framing of each scene demands that the material object play as much a part of the everyday event as do the people who inhabit the space captured by the camera.

Format and the defamiliarising effect

Liu's *Oxhide I and II* offer more than just a representation of urban family dynamics through a hybrid mix of documentary and fictional home movie styles. The tensions balanced between Beibei and her parents are further explored in the filmmaker's treatment of domestic space through film form which emphasises the sensorial claustrophobic experience of living in a cramped apartment. In this section, I will analyse Liu's use of the cinemascope format and minimalist aesthetics in an effort to show how the filmmaker responds to and reflects on the impact of urban living conditions on her own family. I will also analyse Liu's particular fixation with and framing of mundane material objects within the apartment which shifts between the indexical reality of the everyday object and the figurative quality of the film's composition.

Cinemascope is a term used to describe a camera frame's aspect ratio of 2.35:1. In its early days, cinemascope was an anamorphic lens series used in the late 1950s and 1960s for shooting widescreen movies. By placing an anamorphic lens on top of the camera lens, this compressed the image within the full aperture of thirty-five millimetres. As a result of this high-quality compressed wide-angle image, cinemascope was often used for long shot panoramic film scenes. In principle, the cinemascope lens allows the viewer to see a wider view of the world presented without the need for lateral camera movement. In effect, the camera bears witness to the authenticity of reality because of cinemascope's wider visual field which is why it is often used for landscape shots in the Western film genre.

At first glance, employing the cinemascope format for *Oxhide I* and *II* which are restricted to a cramped indoor space may seem a puzzling and ineffective aesthetic choice. According to curator and critic Reynaud though, a consequence of the handheld digital video capabilities, is a mixed aesthetic filmmaking strategy within Chinese independent cinema which she describes as ‘hybrid dramatic features courting a neorealist approach’ (2010: 192). That is, Chinese independent filmmakers like Liu, combine neorealist aesthetics — shooting with natural light, in real locations and using non-professional actors — with expert formal and editing strategies which aim to appeal to international film festival curators and arthouse audiences. For instance, both *Oxhide I* and *II* combine documentary and fictional elements with a minimalist style that includes static shots, long durational takes and de-centred framing.

This hybrid approach provides the films with the best opportunity to be chosen under film festival categories that include documentary, dramatic, or experimental features. So, in Liu’s case, after winning the prestigious FIPRESCI prize in Berlin, *Oxhide I* went on to be acquired by the French distributor MK2. Four years later, Liu follows a similar formula with *Oxhide II*: same people in the same location, talking about mundane topics and shot in the same minimalist style. In spite of these similarities, it differs vastly from *Oxhide I* in its image quality, its crisp sound and its highly calculated and restrained shot sequences that shift clockwise in forty-five degree increments roughly every twenty minutes. Now, as an award-winning filmmaker attached to a well-known French film distribution company, Liu’s second film’s more craftily constructed story was selected for a screening at Cannes Film Festival.

Reynaud goes on to argue that ‘the use of cinemascope lenses, so pervasive in digital cinema yet so paradoxical when using a tiny camera, is a symptom of a tension [...] between the “desire for cinema” and “the documentary impulse”’ (2015: 190). That is, the filmmaker uses digital video to record everything possible in front of the camera with the greatest sense of urgency without paying particular attention to its formal potentialities until post-production. On the surface, Liu’s films are positioned within Reynaud’s identification of the Chinese independent filmmaker who record every part of reality unfolding in front of the camera and who apply coherent aesthetic strategies to their films that will appeal to film festival tastes. However, I would argue that the sense of urgency applies more to Li’s *Tape* (2010) as seen in Chapter 2 than Liu’s work. Also, I would like to demonstrate here how Liu’s use of the cinemascope format goes beyond mixing aesthetic strategies to appeal to audience tastes. Furthermore, rather than describing these independent films as ‘courting’

neorealism, I would like to start by reframing it with a quote by French realist film critic André Bazin who once asked, 'Is not neorealism primarily a kind of humanism and only secondarily a style of filmmaking?' (1967: 29). So, despite the fictional aspects of Liu's films (mainly the script), this *is* her life, the passage of real time *does* occur and her family dynamics *are* displayed in front of the camera. With Bazin's recognition of the humanist endeavour in mind, I would like to evaluate how the cinemascope format here enriches the film by revealing reality rather than simply adding to it for marketable intentions and appeal.

As a graduate filmmaker, it is plausible to deduce that Liu's choice of location and cast are due in part to budget restraints. As much as she experiments with the construction of images, Liu works within her practical parameters. In terms of the spaces depicted in *Oxhide I*, much of the action takes place in a living room and at a kitchen table. The living room space is shot facing a sofa that could also double as a bed (it is not entirely clear within the film where the family members sleep). Apart from a cupboard next to the sofa bed, there are no other discernible objects in this room. Although it is difficult to understand the spatial geography, a tiny apartment is indicated in the final scene in *Oxhide I* in which the family continue to have a conversation even after they are nestled in their own beds at night and in the dark. Although we are not given an exact spatial geography we can assume that they must be sleeping close to one another if they are able to carry on a conversation from bed.

In *Oxhide I*, the domestic domain is depicted with unusual angles that often make it difficult to decipher the number of rooms in the apartment space. Now *Oxhide II* is even more restricted in movement and space as the entire film is located in one single room and Zaiping's worktable is shown to function as both the food preparation table and the dinner table. Once again, this practical illustration within the visual story indicates that there is not even enough space to add furniture to the apartment. In both films then, the central benefit of using a cinemascope lens is the wider perspective which allows the camera to remain static while the action unfolds in front and near the camera's view within very tight spatial parameters. Along with this benefit, digital video's ability to surpass film stock's practical limitations makes it possible for the filmmaker to record uninterrupted shots for much longer periods of time. Naturally in Liu's case, using cinemascope allows her to shoot within this tight space, enables a reduction of cuts and perhaps allows her to easily occupy her role as both filmmaker (behind the camera) and Beibei (in front of the camera). Moreover, knowing that the apartment is small by way of a wider lens format, raises the awareness of the conditions for family urban living standards in Beijing.

However, the typically wide peripheral viewpoint of a cinemascope lens format does not help orient the spectator with a spatial understanding of the apartment's layout. This is most apparent in *Oxhide I* which is shot at multiple angles within the apartment and utilises natural light. Despite the apartment's seemingly small size, Liu's format and camera setups make it very difficult for the viewer to orient themselves within the geographical space. Cinemascope, in its use for spectacle, is often selected to increase the viewer's widest visual perspective and is often used in scenes with expansive landscape shots. So, Liu's use of cinemascope is visually contrapuntal: wide but chopped at the top and bottom. Along with the disorienting effect caused by the cinemascope format used within a small apartment, the lack of lateral camera movement and the off-centred compositions in relation to the room make it exceptionally difficult to understand how the space is organised. Instead, the space remains disorienting to the spectator because the cinemascope format within a small enclosed apartment prevents depth or a whole visual perspective. So, in association with and in addition to the cinemascope format employed in these films, the lack of camera movement, the limited number of shots and de-centred positions of these shots contribute to a disorientation of space. Therefore, the cinemascope format is completely inconsistent with the reality she lives in. The visual result of this strategy is to produce a sense of discomfort close to the actual stifling experience of living in a one-bedroom apartment in Beijing. This claustrophobic atmosphere in *Oxhide I* is also exacerbated by the grainy texture of the image sometimes making it impossible to decipher shapes.

This is cinemascope's technical limitation. That is, historically, cinemascope favours the long shot because reducing the proximity between camera and object or character would expose its drawback: 'mumps' or a grainy image. However, this distortion has an expressive potential: 'the expressive work is very often the one which surprises by its formal freshness at the cost of appearing distorted' (Aumont, 1997: 221). One case in point is Hollywood filmmaker Elia Kazan who was one of the first to experiment with cinemascope's emotive potential by employing the close-up in interior scenes of the emotional domestic drama *East of Eden* (1955). Where earlier wide shots emphasised distance, this film's preference is proximity. Against the studio's suggestion to keep a safe distance between the camera and the object so as to avoid the distortions created by cinemascope's anamorphic lens, Kazan and his cinematographer Ted McCord chose to pull the camera in closer to enhance the emotional tension felt by the characters: 'Sometimes I moved the camera very close and used the distortion to help the drama' (in Rogers, 2013: 78). In one emotionally charged scene between

father and son in *East of Eden*, Kazan breaks from the long shot typically combined with cinemascope (Fig. 3.3). At the time, this posed significant risks because combining the close-up with cinemascope could take an emotional scene and take it to excessive heights, rendering the image grotesque, large and imposing. Due to its distortion at close range, it could also be used to convey the fragility of a character's mental state. Yet, in this domestic scene, Kazan aptly captures an intimate portrait that shows Cal (James Dean) pleading one last time to his father (Raymond Massey) for acceptance before he flees the family homestead for good. With the use of cinemascope, Kazan manages to magnify the emotional tenor of a difficult relationship between father and son.



FIGURE 3.3: THIS CLIMACTIC FATHER-SON SCENE IN *EAST OF EDEN* (1955) BREAKS AWAY FROM THE LONG SHOT/LONG TAKE AESTHETIC OF CINEMASCOPE.

Although Liu and Kazan both explore the expressive potential of cinemascope in an enclosed domestic setting, they employ it for different reasons. Whereas Kazan positions characters' faces in front of the camera, elevating the dramatic tension, Liu often avoids showing faces at all to focus on mundane objects. In *Oxhide I*, scenes that contain three family members interacting with one another are shot from a distance. Close-ups of the subjects on the other hand, are composed in odd angles that limit the spectator's view and show partial limbs rather than whole bodies. The camera is positioned so that a subject must walk into the frame where an inanimate object is placed (Fig. 3.4). Since there are a limited number of facial close-ups in the film, it reduces our knowledge of any dramatic tension building between members of the family. Rather, the tension permeating throughout *Oxhide I*

is a result of the banal dialogue, de-centred framing and distorted view that inhibits our understanding that an altercation is about to take place. All of sudden, the banality and stillness within the domestic space is disturbed by family members reacting to situations in quick emotional outbursts. These short upsets are immediately followed by a cut and a new scene is introduced. This repetitive formal strategy is paired with short but poignant upsets within the family dynamic. In *Oxhide II*, this tension is either suppressed or replaced by a convivial atmosphere as the three work together carefully preparing their dinner. There are no longer any emotional upsets and the camera often shoots from a high angle perspective in order to capture the action on the table. Once again, partial limbs and material things are preferred over whole bodies and facial expressions.



FIGURE 3.4: IN *OXHIDE I*, THE CAMERA IS POSITIONED AT FLOOR HEIGHT SHOOTING TWO BOWLS WHERE LIU AND HER MOTHER ARE SOAKING THEIR FEET.

In opposition to Kazan's intention, Liu does not use cinemascope in the domestic space for its emotional effect. Rather, she privileges showing the object over the human. In the early period of China's New Documentary Movement, Robinson argues that films were constructed in a mode in which 'it is not the day-to-day activities represented that actually animate the documentaries, but the larger ideological context in which these events take place' (2010: 184). These films, often referred to as public documentaries, favour the symbolic event over the particular or individual. More recent documentary filmmakers embrace the private and the particular. In the case of *Oxhide I* and *II*, this shift from public to private is apparent in its filming on location in the family's domestic home space and

emphasises the particular and the ritualistic patterns of the everyday. However, the particular is not mundane in Liu's diptych. Instead, she employs the cinemascope format, long durational takes, de-centred framing and low lighting to emphasise the natural and cramped living conditions for poor urban families in China. The unwavering stare of the static camera shot calls attention to the cinematic medium itself, thereby enhancing the pro-filmic event which is immobility and minimalism in domestic spaces. Furthermore, each scene starts with a fixed camera shot that is momentarily devoid of human presence and as I have already mentioned, unrecognisable objects are placed in front of the camera. This creates a painterly abstraction of a still life object. The static camera which precedes each action in every scene demonstrates a certain indifference to the people that cross the camera. In the following paragraphs, I will use examples within *Oxhide I* and *II* that demonstrate how her work is representative of this shift to the particular in relation to material objects captured within the films.

On the surface, the everyday scene is indeterminate, ambiguous and insignificant. However, this has not deterred artists and writers from attempting to signify it in their practice for centuries. Although the quotidian is a slippery category, the act of showing the ordinary in great detail in the realist novel is firmly associated with the notion of the individual and the private within the tropes of domesticity. In Liu's case, documenting material objects and ritualistic practices in domestic space with scrupulous detail is a way for her represent everyday society. In cinema, this practice and fascination with the everyday dates back as early as its origins with the Lumière brothers *actualités* that depicted ordinary scenes at home such as *Repas de bébé* (Lumière, 1895) in which parents feed their baby in a garden. Once the film industry was established and cinematic conventions were defined, defenders of realism once again resurfaced to re-examine the language of cinema with the incorporation of the long durational take to capture the everyday. After World War II, Italian neorealist scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini, famously contended, 'no other medium of expression has the cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things, that we believe worth showing, as they happen day by day—in what we might call their "dailiness," their longest and truest duration' (1953: 65).

Where Liu's films are concerned, they belong to a period of continuous urban development in Mainland China. What is unique about them is that they take place within the nation's capital city but away from this external reality in flux, and with that, offer a glimpse into an otherwise concealed or overlooked part of cultural history. In *Oxhide I*, the passage of

time is depicted by three static shots that peer out of a window into what seems to be a courtyard with an apartment building constructed on the opposite side. In the first shot, Zaiping works with his leather on the left side of the frame and we witness a train passing by the window. We can deduce that it is late autumn or winter because of the lack of leaves on the tree outside and that the apartment must be located at ground level. Next, it is springtime and Huifen and her daughter are wiping off the winter grime from the window so that the light can filter back into the apartment. Finally, near the end of the film the camera is positioned in a separate room but pointing towards the window. The family cat Mao Dou appears in the foreground and the summer light filters into the room (Fig. 3.5). In *Oxhide II*, the passage of time is reduced to one meal and the filmmaker's meticulous attention to aesthetic continuity and long takes in one space elicits realism. In *Oxhide I*, the repeated courtyard shot presents the passage of time by the ways in which the tree changes through the seasons and shows the various manifestations which are occurring outside are contrapuntal to the stagnation and literal stasis of the interior space.

However, this does not mean that the urban world has not made its mark within the apartment. First of all, the apartment is forty-five squared metres which physically aligns our understanding of the typical cramped urban lifestyle. Furthermore, in *Oxhide I*, the Liu family congregate around the dinner table to feast on a typical Beijing cuisine that includes cucumbers, garlic and a mixing of sesame paste and chili. The parents even reminisce about the culinary delicacy of sesame paste during the difficult period of the Cultural Revolution marked by violence, austerity and overall socioeconomic unrest. So despite their current financial issues, the sesame paste indirectly raises the question of the country's recent change in socioeconomic wealth where sesame paste is now readily available in shops. During this conversation, the parents evoke the past in the present which demonstrates a certain persistence of cultural memory through regional cuisine. At other times, the Beijing urban noises are presented when the uproar of trucks passing by the apartment building breaks up the silence within the domestic space. As Costantino states 'it's a matter of a few seconds, and the rumble is not easily detectable, but there is something touching about the sound, as if the outside were meeting the inside in the blink of an eye' (2012: 94).



FIGURE 3.5: THE PASSAGE OF TIME DEPICTED IN THREE REPEATED SHOTS OF *OXHIDE I*.

Although there are no windows in *Oxhide II*, the meal is also momentarily interrupted by the uproar of a lorry or train passing near the home. This provides the moment with an authenticity of urban life thriving just beyond the apartment walls. By placing the spectator within a real domestic location and combining long durational takes with a particular emphasis placed on mundane objects rather than the people themselves, Liu's films present a particular historical moment. These objects which include a computer printer, pieces of oxhide leather material, dumplings and even to a certain degree the family's cat are part of the specific attached to the mundane every day. In the second scene of *Oxhide I*, there is a high angle static shot pointing down at a square object (Fig. 3.6). Off-screen, the spectator can hear

Beibei helping her father design a flyer concept for his handbag business. She is overheard typing down a fifty percent reduction sale flyer and then paper shoots out of the object which is in fact a printer. These promotional flyers will be displayed in the local market stall. Here, the printer is the focal point of the action and the contrapuntal visual style created by the cinemascope lens makes the image simultaneously wide and close.

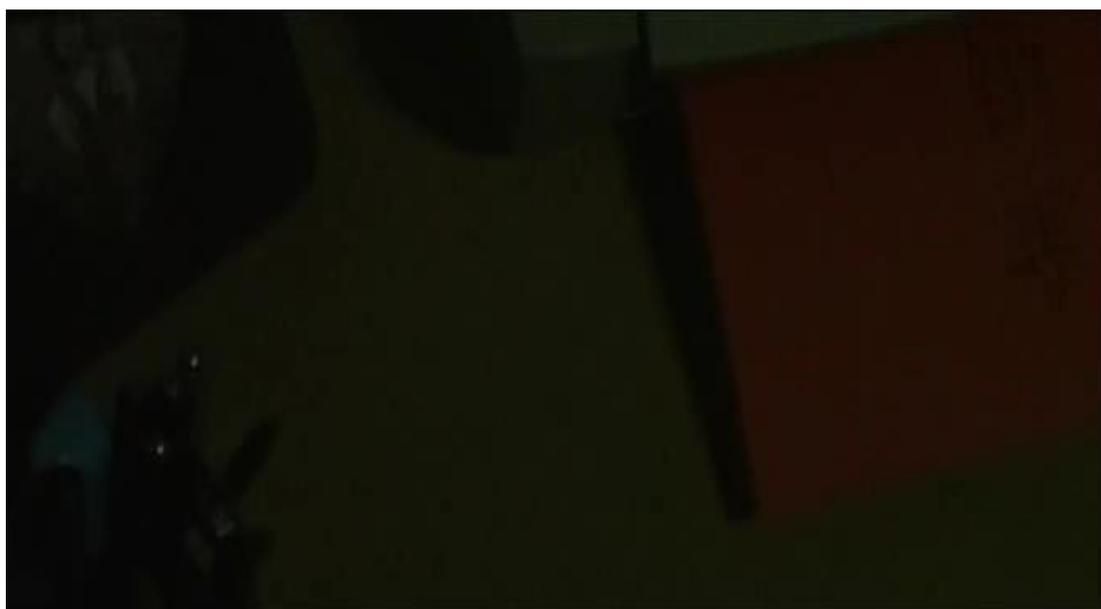


FIGURE 3.6: IN ONE LONG TAKE, BEIBEI AND HER FATER PRINT A PROMOTIONAL FLYER FOR THE MARKET.

Liu's formal strategy of the static camera in a domestic setting in front of everyday material object is similar to the experimental film by Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Here, Akerman meticulously follows the protagonist Jeanne and her ritualistic behaviours in the domestic realm. On the defamiliarising and sensorial effect produced by her static camera work, Margulies notes,

[d]isplaced onto sets and objects, the camera's gaze enhances the effect of defamiliarisation...[and] imposes a sense of gravity and physicality on both people and objects as they are anchored on screen. And as these images stimulate our awareness of the texture of domestic objects, it is as if we had gained an extrasensorial dimension. (1996: 70)

In both Akerman's film and Liu's diptych, the stationary camera's fixation on the inanimate domestic setting emphasises the materiality and brings the viewer closer to a phenomenological experience of a particular event rarely visible in mainstream popular cinema. By emphasising the domestic setting to hyperbolic forms, Liu is experimenting with the capabilities of DV in Chinese independent cinema.

Halfway through the film, Zaiping returns with his flyers and tears them up in his frustration with customers who continue to bargain him down below his fifty percent off promotional offer. As a result, Liu's mother Huifen must resort to working longer hours at the factory in order to recover her husband's losses. Despite the absence of exterior light or space, conversations and objects usually relate to pressures of reality beyond the parameters of the apartment. And it is these ordinary material objects within the domestic space that give Liu's family its distinctive texture and even though we cannot grasp a lifetime, instead we are invited in to a private family domain that evokes a combination of sharing, harmony and stress all bundled together.

Another object of interest in both *Oxhide I* and *II* is the ox hide leather used to fabricate the handbags. Halfway through the film at shot eleven (of twenty-three), Zaiping is inspecting a piece of leather and discovers that there is a mark on it that makes it unusable for crafting a handbag. In an extreme close-up and low light conditions, the camera is focused on a long take of Zaiping's hands inspecting the leather while off-screen he explains to his wife the origins of the unusual marking on the leather. At first he suspects that the animal was whipped and this created the marks on its skin. Then he realises that the mark was actually 'branded on the cow while it was alive'. Huifen responds 'that's very painful' to which Zaiping adds, 'no matter what. The cow is killed in the end.' He then rolls up the ruined leather and the scene ends. This single shot static close-up illustrates a hierarchical system in the animal kingdom and is symbolic of Zaiping's own sense of powerlessness. The treatment of cattle at the hands of a dehumanising capitalist system is also alluded to in this shot which reveals the branding and skinning of the ox hide and finally the production process involved in creating a consumer product, the handbag.

In *Oxhide II*, almost the entire story revolves around the family's preparation of a dumpling dinner. However, for the first twenty minutes of the film, a table height static shot illustrates Zaiping's handbag making process. This time the medium shot is sharp and clear so the process is easy to follow. Zaiping stands at his table working, stretching, puncturing, and sewing into the leather with his tools. In the background, there is a doorway leading into an unlit room from which Huifen emerges to help Zaiping thread a needle into the leather. The objects are the focal point of the scene (which also applies to the rest of the film in terms of its focus on the dumpling creation) which is apparent by the way the static shot maintains a clear view of the tools while the family members' limbs are usually chopped above the shoulders and below the waist. After twenty minutes, Zaiping clears the table and his wife

returns from the back room to help him rotate and shift the table until it is positioned in the very centre of the camera's frame (Fig. 3.7). The shot remains static except when the table momentarily bumps into the camera causing a slight jitter. There is very little dialogue between Zaiping and Huifen apart from short directives: 'one, two, three, heave. Turn it clockwise. One, two, three, heave. That way. I'll do it.' This minimal dialogue emphasises the naturalness and longevity of their marriage and gives the film a documentary feel. For the rest of *Oxhide II*, this workstation becomes the table which the family uses to prepare and eat their special dumpling dinner. Once again, the topic of the market stall and Zaiping's extortionate customer discounts form a large part of the film's minimal dialogue.



FIGURE 3.7: THE TABLE IN *OXHIDE II* WHICH DOUBLES AS A WORK STATION AND FOOD PREP/DINING SPACE.

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène is a key component of film style and gives meaning to the text. It encompasses all of the contents within the frame (lighting, composition, objects) but it also involves a

relationship between on-screen and off-screen space created through camera framing and movement. By examining the mise-en-scène of *Oxhide I* and *II*, there are some discernible differences between the two films, despite featuring the same people in the same location discussing similar subject matter. In *Oxhide I*, the lack of natural and artificial light combined with a distortion rendered from the cinemascope lens format makes it incredibly difficult to make out the shapes and subjects in the background. The long take combined with a static shot allows the viewer to eventually make out that there is a cupboard and sofa bed in the living room.

In stark contrast, in the opening twenty minutes of *Oxhide II*, the clarity of the shot allows the viewer to see all of the tools in the foreground and two paintings posted on the back wall. As if to emphasise the clarity of the objects in both the foreground and background, Zaiping twice turns away from his worktable to re-adjust a painting on the wall. Once the worktable becomes the dumpling preparation base, Liu often employs a high angle camera tilted down toward the table dressed with dumpling ingredients, a chopping board, a knife and a gas cooker. Less than half of the nine total shots in this film are positioned at eye level so a larger proportion of the film demands the spectator to read the situation and relationships between Zaiping, Huifen and Beibei through the material objects positioned in front of the camera on the worktable. Throughout the film, only one shot breaks away from the table. The family is busy preparing dumplings for nearly three quarters of the film. Much of the film is shot at a high angle which allows the filmmaker to focus in on hands preparing the food through chopping, dicing, mixing and kneading. When the dumplings are prepared and ready to be boiled, the camera shifts away from the dumplings to a frontal shot of Zaiping and Huifen who are sitting next to each other. Since the camera is no longer pointed at table level, the action is concentrated on this interaction between the two parents.

All of a sudden, the camera shifts its perspective to their feet below the table and Huifen screams out, 'the cat bit me!' The cat is nowhere to be seen but may have escaped the camera's gaze. However, this action leads to Zaiping and his daughter Beibei congregating under the table to cook the dumplings in a wok on the floor (Fig. 3.8). Despite having dropped the camera from the table-top to the floor, the film's construction of movement in space still remains consistent with shifting forty-five degrees clockwise around the table. However, why was the stove located on the floor? Is it also simply adapting to the filmmaker's intention for the camera to rotate around the table three hundred and sixty degrees? In an interview with *Offscreen*, Liu reveals how there was actually not enough room

to fit the stove and the cylinder on the worktable and the height of the table also made it awkward to boil the dumplings. Furthermore, she adds that it was not possible to cook in the kitchen because the natural gas stove was actually broken at the time: 'So for a while we had to prepare food on the table and we had a little portable gas cylinder, which we used. In this case it would be difficult to justify doing everything, and cooking on the table. But, this actually happened to us' (Rist, 2009). So, while *Oxhide II* is heavily constructed, shifting forty-five degrees until it comes full circle, it is also very much concerned with real facts. Cooking on the floor of the apartment is a very real circumstance for the family who do not have access to a functioning kitchen. In the same interview, Liu also reveals this shot allowed her to keep the action at the table because it meant that she could suspend the boom microphone from the lamp above the table. By containing the action and sound in one place in *Oxhide II*, the quality is noticeably much crisper compared with *Oxhide I* which squeezes into different spaces throughout the apartment.



FIGURE 3.8: THE CAMERA MOMENTARILY SHIFTS FOCUS AWAY FROM THE TABLE AND ONTO THE FLOOR.

In her diptych, the privileging of material objects over whole bodies through mise-en-scène strategies preserves an ontological ambivalence of reality in domestic space. Representing the duration through long durational takes and through a repetition of shots is also key to the film's realist intentions. If *Oxhide I* shows the passage of time through shots that highlight the changing annual seasons, *Oxhide II* shows the passage of a very short period of time over one evening dinner where Liu's family members focus on the preparation of a dumpling dinner. The film's meticulous staging, attention to continuity editing and highly constructed compositions play out in real time. In fact, the script and staging of *Oxhide II* took several months to rehearse and in the end less than five percent of the dialogue and action was left to improvisational work (in Amato, 2016: 113). In his review of the film, Kraicer praises Liu for understanding 'how to make time itself the subject [...] she stretches and repurposes cinema in ways no[body] else yet has imagined' (2009). In effect, the staging and the de-familiarisation propelled by the filmmaker's privileging of the dumpling making process over facial expressions resists comparison with any conventional representation of the urban family dynamic. While shooting in a real family dwelling, Liu scrupulously examines the mundanity of the everyday through time, objects and space and brings the private domain into relief with images that tend toward abstraction.

As discussed in Chapter 1, temporality and the tendency to emphasise the liveness of an event has its origins in the early documentary movement led by pioneer filmmaker Wu Wenguang in the late 1980s. The theory and practice of *xianchang* became one of the ways in which filmmakers at that time distinguished themselves from the heavily constructed state-sponsored television productions (Lü, 2003). In his 1996 essay, 'Return to the scene: a documentary form I understand' ['huidao xianchang:wo likie de yi zhong jilupian'] Wu theorises the practice by listing the long take as essential to maintaining the essence of reality that unfolds in front of the camera (2001). He points out the significant temporal relationship between *xianchang* and the long take by stating:

'Time' as it is embodied in the documentary is time manifested as an integrated [*wanzheng*] temporal unit. Time manifests itself in process [*guocheng*]: this is the practical expression of '*xianchang*', and what is specifically meant by the words 'to document'....While news reporting is also live, its emphasis is on outcome, not process. (2001)

This bears resemblance to the way that Bazin praises the long take for 'the actual duration of the event' (2005: 65). Although Liu indulges in the image of objects which gives her films a

figurative quality on the margin of abstraction, it is her commitment to natural settings, sounds and the long take that provides her work with the essence of reality. Her work aligns itself with an aesthetic relationship between temporality and spatiality that is always informed by real urban living conditions for marginalised citizens.

Liu's style also bears resemblances to some well-known Chinese independent filmmakers that include Mainland China's Jia Zhangke and Taiwan New Cinema's Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-Liang and Hou Hsiao-hsien. The predominant aesthetic characteristics embedded in Taiwan's New Cinema and led by these auteurs include long takes, long shots and highly restrained camera movements (Rawnsley, 2009). Similar to early documentary filmmakers of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Liu and Jia have adopted a method of production associated with the concept of *xianchang* by shooting in real locations, with non-professional actors and favouring aesthetic realism associated with the long take. Along with New Taiwan auteurs, Jia and Liu fit in with the aesthetics of global art cinema that is anti-commercialist and breaks away from the blockbusters, spectacle and action of Hollywood cinema. Their long takes and static camera shots are unconventional and force us to see what would have been otherwise absent from edited footage and aesthetic choices related to montage that includes multiple shots, quick cuts, cross-cutting and reverse-shots.

Liu experiments with domestic space by combining the long take with a cinemascope format but pushing the static camera so that it is much closer to the object than typical of this format. Furthermore, the lack of actual physical space to manoeuvre within the family's urban apartment in *Oxhide I* and *II* means that the camera's proximity to the character is uncomfortably disorientating and stifling at times. The camera's fixed framing, chopping the top and bottom of figures and stretching the left and right edges produces a sense of claustrophobia. As a result, and despite limiting the film to the interior domestic space, Liu's aesthetics respond to the realities of a nuclear family living in overcrowded urban quarters. In *Oxhide I*, the sense of family unity and harmony is threatened by a real fear of poverty. Since much of *Oxhide I* and *II* privilege the inanimate object, when the films do switch to close-up facial expressions, it heightens the films' emotional tension. So, when the final shot in *Oxhide I* cuts to a close up of Zaiping's face in the dark, the atmosphere quickly shifts from harmony to an unnerving claustrophobia forcing the spectator to participate in it through visual discomfort.

While *Oxhide I* experiments with more shots and unusual angles that disorient the spectator's understanding of space and emphasise the reality of living in small quarters, the

aesthetic choices in *Oxhide II* convey realism through extra-long durational takes and the family's authentic preparation of the chive dumplings from the start to the end of the film. Although there is tension that arises from Zaiping's continued anxiety about the business, he and the rest of the family seem almost resigned to the idea that keeping the handbag business open is no longer a viable option. *Oxhide II* was filmed in 2009, one year after the Beijing Olympics which would mean that the rising cost of leasing business properties could have made it increasingly difficult for small businesses to survive. Since Zaiping crafts handmade ox hide leather handbags using traditional tools, the decline of the business also points to the threat of cosmopolitan industrialism on individual artisans.

However, unlike *Oxhide I*, there is no longer any outburst of violence or emotional breakdowns from Zaiping with regards to his business. There are no tight close-ups that magnify the character's feeling of hopelessness and unbearable responsibility as the patriarchal figure of the family. Instead, once the family have cooked and eaten their dumplings, they exit the frame. Off-screen, the dialogue continues as Zaiping and his wife Huifen decide to take a stroll outside to work off the food they just ate. So, while there is a sense of failure in relation to the family business, there is also the assumption that life will carry on despite the hardships that the family have endured as an effect of China's phenomenal changes in such a short period of historical time.

PART II

Mobility

CHAPTER 4

Mass Migration in Lixin Fan's *Last Train Home* (Guitu lieche, 2009) and Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren, 2006)

This chapter examines two Chinese independent films which are illustrative of the phenomena of mass mobility in contemporary Mainland China. Lixin Fan's *Last Train Home* is a documentary film that involves the mass mobility of peasant labourers who work in cities and make their journeys home during the annual Chinese New Year holiday. This annual event marks the mass exodus of over one hundred and thirty-three million migrant labourers every year who travel from urban cities to their hometowns.¹¹ Fan documents one family's dilemma which involves parents Zhang Changhua and Chen Suqin who have been working in a garment factory in the south eastern city of Guangzhou for the past sixteen years while their seventeen-year-old daughter Qin and twelve-year-old son Yang have been raised by their paternal grandmother in a rural village called Huilong just north of Chongqing in south western China's Sichuan Province. The distance between the locations is over eight hundred miles and involves a train, bus and boat journey and the filmmaker documents this movement between urban and rural centres. The second film, Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, is a fictional story which offers two narrative strands that involve two individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds who travel to the south eastern town of Fengjie which is located along the Yangtze River in Sichuan Province. In search of their respective spouses whom they have both lost contact with, the film is shot on site during the actual transformation of this area from a two-thousand-year-old riverside town into the world's largest hydroelectric dam called the Three Gorges Dam Project. The project which began in 1994 and was finally completed in 2012 has resulted in the forced relocation of over one million local citizens and this ruinous landscape forms the backdrop of a fictional story involving two failed marriages.

My aim for this chapter is to explore how each film depicts mass migration for the marginalised populations in Mainland China. Although the films use different modes and methods of representing and presenting the issue of mobility and migration, they both raise the question of the individual in relation to China's economic ambitions. In *Last Train Home*, the individual in the director's focus is Zhang and Chen's daughter Qin who yearns to join her rural classmates that have quit school to earn money in the city. To Qin, who develops an

¹¹ This is the estimated figure illustrated in *Last Train Home*. In 2012, the National Bureau of Statistics in China shows that this figure is now approximately one hundred and sixty million (2012).

increasingly strained relationship with her parents and who is bored with her life in the countryside, the only route to individuality and freedom is through mobility. Fan documents both Qin's journey toward that individuality and how it impacts on the entire Zhang family. In Jia's *Still Life*, two fictional characters, Han Sanming (played by the filmmaker's cousin) and Shen Hong (Zhao Tao) have arrived in Fengjie from the Northern Shanxi province (the filmmaker's own home province) with the intent to track down their estranged spouses. Deriving from disparate socioeconomic backgrounds, the film deals with the question of individual identity in relation to economic class. However, I will also explore the filmmaker's subtle illustration of gender issues that arise in the film.

Second, I will examine the conditions and contingencies involved during the process of filming 'on-the-spot' in two distinct yet separate historical events that are also specific to China's circumstances. In *Last Train Home*, I start by analysing how the filmmaker structures and illustrates the relationship between urban and rural living. Then, I will focus on his filmmaking methods during the chaotic and dangerously crowded annual journey between Guangzhou and Huilong village and during the tensions that arise amongst the Zhang family members. In *Still Life*, I will analyse conditions of filming in the epicentre of an ancient town which is soon to be completely submerged underwater. The mass relocation of Fengjie's local residents is nearly complete and many of those who remain are involved in the final phases of the Three Gorges Dam project. Since much of the town has disappeared, the theme of displacement is illustrated in the filmmaker's aesthetic treatment of time and space.

Documenting unprecedented events in Chinese history, both films won international acclaim and in Jia's case, placed him at the centre of the Chinese independent scene in China and abroad. Lixin Fan grew up in China and worked as a journalist for China Central Television (CCTV) before moving into the film sector. He worked as an editor and associate producer before migrating to Canada where he teamed up with EyeSteelFilm, a Montréal City based film Production Company to make *Last Train Home*. For his research, in 2006, Fan spent two months in Guangzhou city interviewing migrant workers until he found the Zhang family (Sventvilas, 2010). After Chen recounted her family's story, Fan returned every year for three years and spent five months at a time filming them (Sventvilas, 2010). This kind of access provides Fan with an amazing portrait of one rural family's physical and emotional hardships over a three-year period. The film received several international awards including Best Feature Documentary at the 22nd annual International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA).

Jia's film *Still Life* follows from his *Hometown Trilogy* which were a trio of gritty independent films set in his childhood town Fenyang in Shanxi Province and which portray his own ordinary experiences as a youth growing up at the tail end of Mao's Communist Leadership and witnessing the reform era changes through the 1980s. Not only is *Still Life* Jia's first film to be shot outside Shanxi, it was also co-produced by Shanghai Film Studio, a mainstream production company, which means it was approved by the censorship authority and received a short theatrical run in Mainland China. This is Jia's second film to have been made with the Chinese government's approval.¹² Like Fan, Jia's film also received a warm reception in international film festivals, most notably winning the 2006 Venice Film Festival Golden Lion Prize.

Individuality and bitterness: *Last Train Home*

The rise in the exploration of the individual subject in Chinese independent cinema is a symptom of the country's push towards a new market economy. However, the trope of self-preoccupation is not new to Chinese culture. For instance, Shanghai's most decadent age of modernity in the 1930s sought to break the individual away from traditional Confucian family values. Now, in contemporary China, the rise in the preoccupation of the self is the consequence of abandoning Chairman Mao's collective dogma in favour of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. In *Last Train Home*, what we are dealing with is both the role of the migrant at a historical moment of ongoing mobility and the rise of the individual. Understanding the complex position of the Chinese migrant under the present historical context requires an understanding of the individual and self-identity in China. As Yunxiang Yan remarks in the introduction to *iChina: The Rise of the Individual in Modern Chinese Society* (Hansen and Svarverud, 2010) :

[t]here has yet to emerge in China the kind of life politics or self-politics that defines the individualization trend in European societies, because for the majority of Chinese individuals the dominant goal of everyday life is to improve life chances instead of self-realization through choice of lifestyles.
(2010: 14)

Here, Yan, along with other scholars in the book take up what European theorists Beck and Beck-Gernheim term an 'individualization thesis' and examine whether and how it may apply

¹² The first film to be made with the approval of the Chinese government was *The World* (2004).

to their own empirical research on the rise of the individual in twenty-first century China. While recognising a notable rise of the individual in society is not unique to China, Yan explores the possibility that China's new era of capitalism with Chinese characteristics influences the country to follow a different path toward the process of becoming an individualistic society.

Last Train Home depicts a peasant family who struggles to maintain a traditional cohesive structure due to the economic pressures placed upon them through rural poverty. When Qin was one year old, Zhang and Chen left their daughter to be raised by Zhang's parents while they relocated to work in a clothing factory in Guangdong Province. The massive rural to urban migration of rural peasants since the 1980s has impacted on the traditional family structure in the countryside in which children and elders are often left to fend for themselves for most of the year while the parents/adult children work in cities (Wang & Mesman, 2015; Connelly & Maurer-Fazio, 2016). Since this is an issue concerning marginalised people, it is often touched upon or illustrated in Chinese independent cinema. For instance, I have already discussed this in Chapter 1 in relation to the boy who is interviewed by Zhao Dayong in *Street Life*. In that situation, the boy reveals to the filmmaker how his mother's abandonment and his father's neglect forced him to migrate to Shanghai city and live in poverty on the streets. In Chapter 8, I will be discussing Zhou Xueping's *Children's Village* (2012) and the role children play in the documentation and archiving of rural memory. In relation to *Last Train Home*, I examine the impact on the adolescent rural peasant's quest for freedom and individuality through mobility. Since the parents work in a factory eight hundred miles from home, the impact of forced migration in China has caused a dissolution from the traditional social family structure (Giddens, 1991). At first, the mother Chen reveals how she was apprehensive about abandoning her daughter and it is this tension between mother and adolescent daughter which permeates throughout the documentary film. As the film progresses, Fan shifts focus from the parental dilemma to Qin's push for self-autonomy with her decision to quit school and move to Guangdong Province. Qin then inhabits a new era in which individuals in China are seeking to liberate themselves from the family dynamic and the pressures of the educational system.

The first ten minutes of *Last Train Home* involve two scenes: the first is a slow pan and tripod shots that record a large crowd in a train station and the movement of migrant workers to their destinations during the Chinese New Year. This is followed by a shot of the Guangzhou city skyline with the titles 'Winter 2006' to give the film context. This is preceded by a few city street shots of migrant workers sewing jeans and carrying large boxes

labelled 'Made in China', before the camera arrives inside a clothing factory. Many of the shots taken of the migrants working on the sewing machines are handheld while those that document Zhang and Chen in their dormitory after work use static shots, presumably with a tripod at knee to waist height. Incredibly, Fan and his crew were granted unparalleled access to the factory where Zhang and Chen work and often spent entire work days filming the migrant labourers (Sventvilas, 2010). In the film's opening sequence, there is no dialogue between the filmmaker and the subjects being filmed. This 'fly-on-the-wall' approach is applied throughout the entire film even when the subjects directly address the camera.

While Chen and Zhang converse with each other in the film's opening, it is not until ten minutes into *Last Train Home* that they directly address the camera. Coincidentally (or not), the individual who first directs her conversation towards the camera is Qin. At minute ten, the camera shifts from the factory in Guangzhou to a series of images depicting the idyllic greenery of the countryside and Yang, Qin and their grandmother Tang picking vegetables in the field. The titles appear with 'Huilong village Sichuan Province. 2100 km to Guangzhou.' Logically, choosing to add the physical distance existing between Guangzhou and the countryside gives the viewer a sense of that gap between rural migrants who are forced to live and work in the city and their families in the villages. Curiously, it also alludes to a geographical signpost, an achievable travelling distance or goal. In the case of the rural migrant who is constantly faced with this distance between home and work, the notoriously difficult journey every year to visit family during the Chinese New Year is filled with hope and struggle.

Qin is crouched in the front space of her concrete house and is chopping green leaves with a butcher's knife while chickens cluck around her. Without directly addressing the camera, Qin states, 'In our village, only the elderly stay at home. Almost all the young people have left.' Here, she points out the isolation she is beginning to experience due to the fact that most of her classmates have left Huilong to work in urban centres where they no longer need to rely on their parents for money. What follows this is Qin's parents own journey by train, bus and boat from Guangzhou to Huilong. On the boat, Zhang directly addresses the camera by stating, 'we were so eager to leave home sixteen years ago.' Structurally, Fan positions these first two interview scenes—of Qin in the countryside and her parents on the annual route home—side-by-side. By doing so, he places Qin and her parents in an indirect communication with one another. Their statements also foreshadow Qin's eventual escape from Huilong to join her peers and follow in her parents' footsteps despite their adamant protestations. Qin shares similar qualities with the fictional protagonist Li Mei (Lu Huang) in

Xiaolu Guo's *She, A Chinese* (2008) which I will be analysing in Chapter 5. Both girls are reaching adulthood, are bored with their rural circumstances and their relationships with their parental figures have become strained.

At no point in the film does Fan show himself physically intervening in the scene nor is his voice overheard behind the camera. Having been filmed for three years, all of the participants are aware of the camera's presence which shifts between static and handheld camera shots. Fan's prolonged commitment to the documentary project also makes for an interesting *direct cinema* style which combines an observational 'fly-on-the-wall' method with a calculated understanding of how to best articulate the tension between the different members of the family. As a result, the story revolves around Qin's personal quest for freedom and during much of the Zhang family gatherings, the camera is focused on her relationship with her parents and grandmother.

When Zhang and Chen finally arrive in Huilong village after a long journey from Guangzhou, the camera follows behind the parents. As they approach the family's house, Qin runs out to greet her father. Chen pays close attention to her daughter and attempts to make an emotional connection by touching her hair and giving her a mobile phone. However, Qin makes a point to thank her father and not her mother for the gift. At the dinner table, all of the members of the Zhang family — Zhang, Chen, Qin, Yang, Tang and extended relatives — gather for the Chinese New Year dinner.¹³ Much of the conversation revolves around the children's schoolwork and the camera focuses mainly on those who speak. Chen obsesses over her son's school marks and when Grandma Tang tells the children that 'your parents should benefit from your success', Qin responds 'I will listen to you Grandma. Thank you for looking after us.' Chen then begins talking about how she and her husband ask nothing of the children except for good school marks. In a close-up shot, she adds, 'no matter how hard it is, we never complain', then proceeds to cry. This is followed by a medium shot that reveals Chen is sitting next to Qin who does not respond or react to her mother's emotional speech.

The camera then cuts briefly to Zhang who gazes down at the table and confesses his own inadequacies as a peasant before focusing on a facial close-up of Qin. When Zhang adds, 'you should avoid anything that will harm your studies', the camera continues to focus on Qin's reaction while she stares down at her plate of food. With the filmmaker's knowledge about the family's circumstance and Qin's uneasy relationship with her mother, the documentary becomes more than just a simple observation. Instead, it is able to build upon

¹³ In fact, Qin was given to these relatives as a baby but has been raised by her grandparents (grandfather too until he died) since that time.

existing conflicts through a non-intrusive method. Since the film is shot in a chronological format, the filmmaker and his crew prove here and in other parts of the film, the level of pre-production planning and research that went into the documentary project. As a result, the story is a meditation on Qin's internal dilemma as a seventeen-year-old girl who yearns for her independence in the city.

The Zhangs' central issue is their struggle to maintain the traditional family structure while living apart for most of the year and Qin's resentment towards her parents is a symptom of that problem. The rural to urban migration of people since the start of the economic reform era has increased the rise in children and elders left to fend for themselves in the countryside. Without the ability to obtain a *hukou* permit in Guangzhou, the Zhang family are prohibited from enrolling their children in urban schools and without employment in the increasingly abandoned villages, they are forced to live apart. With regards to education, there is a dominant perception in rural China that with successful grades and a university degree, the family will be able to liberate themselves out of poverty (Hansen and Pang, 2010). Since Zhang and Chen cannot be present to raise their children, the daily responsibility to provide Qin and Yang with a stable family structure and with parental boundaries falls on the shoulders of the grandmother. The three are often depicted gathering vegetables in the open fields and eating meals together. So, the documentary presents both rural and urban parts of the Zhang family.

After Zhang and Chen have returned to the city, Grandmother Tang is eating dinner with her grandchildren. She tells her grandson Yang to eat the bitter melons because they are good for his health: 'Taste the bitterness first, the sweetness will follow and then you will know which is better.' Bitterness is a word often used by rural elders to convey life's hardships. Often to 'speak bitterness' in China relates to what Rey Chow calls the 'logic of the wound' (2000: 4-5) in which the nation is punctuated by traumatic historical events. Grandmother Tang has lived through calamitous historical events in her lifetime including the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution which she briefly alludes to in one interview while she is hand washing clothes in an outdoor basin: 'Life was tough back then. We never had enough to eat. At that time, I wanted to leave the countryside. But the country needed farm labour.' What she is referring to is Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward Campaign in the 1950s that sought to industrialise the country but resulted in the Great Famine in China's rural countryside. I will be discussing this event more thoroughly in Chapter 8 which is a significant part of China's individual and collective memory but is still considered a taboo subject in the public domain because it would tarnish Chairman Mao's iconic status. In

comparison with her Grandmother, Qin has not had to struggle with starvation or abject poverty. When her elder speaks of the dualistic notion of the bitter melon, she is naive to the hardships she most likely will face and of which her parents consistently warn her of if she decides to quit school for the city life. Despite attempts by her parents and grandmother to convince Qin to stay, she longs for freedom and is part of a generation that has become dislodged from the traditional family structure. Eventually, as a migrant caught up in ongoing mobility, she will experience her own individual bitterness.

Once the parents have returned to Guangzhou, the film shifts focus towards Qin's predicament, documenting her frustration with school and rural life where 'all the classrooms are empty'. Then all of a sudden, the camera cuts to several urban landscape shots with the title, 'Xintang, Guangdong Province'. Qin has quit school to join her friend in the city to work in a jeans manufacturing factory. In China, the relationship between a dutiful offspring and the traditional family structure has been drastically altered since the 1980s as the individual no longer serves the needs of the family (Yan, 2003). In fact, recent research on young rural migrant factory workers indicates that the leisure time spent in dormitories provides them with an opportunity to develop meaningful partnerships and relationships (Yan, 2003) (Fig 4.1). In Qin's case, her loneliness is a contributing factor to her exodus from the village and reuniting with a friend (despite complaining that it is the only friend she has made in the factory) gives her a sense of freedom she did not have before.



FIGURE 4.1: ON HER PATH TO INDIVIDUALITY AND FREEDOM, QIN MAKES FRIENDS WITH GIRLS IN HER DORMITORY.

This freedom is Qin's attempt to connect with the consumerist globalised era in China. In a series of images, Qin is observed sewing in the factory, eating food alone in a canteen and scrubbing her clothes with a bucket in the dark. At one point, she looks up to the camera and states, 'Am I happy? After all, freedom is happiness.' The filmmaker also interviews other young factory workers who express their views of the world through the clothes that they manufacture by responding, 'Americans have forty-inch waists'. In another scene in which Qin and her friend are clothes shopping, they are dismayed to discover that the jeans label they produce is not available to them. Qin then arrives at a hair salon and the stylist ensures her that the new trend is the 'Barbie look'. After her visit to the salon, she waves goodbye to the staff and proceeds to walk the urban streets. With her new hair and with the camera following her, Qin is self-consciously fulfilling a celebrity fantasy. Here, the camera's presence in public and focus on Qin shifts from an observational mode to a participatory mode as pedestrians are captured looking bemused and curious at the spectacle created by an anonymous woman walking the streets. In contemporary China, there is a growing tendency for young villagers to indulge in a destructive type of individualism that is linked to a consumptive drive (Yan, 2003: 234). What the film conveys in its brief observations into Qin's journey into adulthood is that her 'consumptive drive' is linked to a combination of naiveté and her inability to fulfil her dream of freedom through individualism in the city.

Despite the dissolution of the traditional family structure, recent empirical research indicates that there is not a complete liberalisation from family duties or the collective mentality even if the rural youth quits school to work (Hansen and Pang, 2010). Not only do they openly shoulder that decision as an individual responsibility, they almost always still remain connected to the family, sending money home and visiting every year (Hansen and Pang, 2010: 49). In retrospect, many of these individuals who choose to work instead of completing their studies and fulfilling their parents' wishes, have regretted that decision when they realise there is no chance for upward economic mobility (Hansen and Pang, 2010: 50). In Qin's case, she is only seventeen years old and has not had enough life experience to understand the implications of her actions. Yet, through her interactions and friendships with her peers, she is learning from her experiences. In one conversation with her dormitory peers, Qin reveals that she is uncomfortable with her boss' sexual advances and they reassure her not to worry about him. In another conversation, one of the other girls explains that all of her earnings are sent home to her family. At this point, it is unclear whether or not Qin sends money to her parents or grandmother. Instead, she simply responds 'work is tiring but you make your own money' and exclaims that the factory life is better than going to school. No

matter how much Qin is determined to present herself in front of the camera and in front her family as a self-actualised individual, there is a sense that she is beginning to taste the bitterness that Grandmother Tang spoke of to her at the dinner table in her isolated home village.

Individual and economy: *Still Life*

The focus on the marginalised individual in relation to mobility in *Still Life* actually begins with Jia's initial source: his documentary short film *Dong*.¹⁴ Jia's decision to shoot in Fengjie was linked to his initial interest in painter Liu Xiaodong's project which involved hiring twelve migrant labourers to pose in front of the ruins and the river that was slowly engorging an entire town. Other filmmakers had come before Jia to shoot documentaries and fictional films that depicted the various stages of the dam project along the Yangtze River. For instance, Zhang Ming's *Clouds and Rainclouds over Wushan* (1996) is set against the backdrop along the impending Three Gorges Dam Project. The title itself refers to a poem 'Swimming' written by Mao in 1956 who fantasised about transforming China's landscape by building a bridge that connects the north and south of the famous river: 'Walls of stone will stand upstream to the west/To hold back Wushan's clouds and rain/Till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges.' In the film itself, there is an ominous tone regarding the eventuality of the dam project and this knowledge seems to be affecting the lives of local inhabitants. However, as the Three Gorges Dam project actually progressed in the 2000s, the locals clashed with corrupt officials. This inevitably led to endless bureaucratic disputes on compensation of lost property and these battles were filmed in Yung Chang's documentary *Up the Yangtze* (2007).¹⁵

Having just created *Still Life* out of his documentary short film about a painter's representation of migrant workers, the title of the film fittingly suggests an association with art and still life images. Historically, still life painting depicts objects and landscapes without the presence or emphasis on human life. It can be a celebration of material things or point to the ephemerality and mortality of organic objects. *Still Life* is filmed on a location that is being demolished and the camera focuses on the ruins of the landscape and the temporary nature of this historical area that is about to be submerged underwater forever. For instance,

¹⁴ *Dong* is available on DVD with *Still Life*.

¹⁵ Lixin Fan worked as the associate producer, sound recordist, and translator for *Up the Yangtze*.

the camera often lingers on newly erected painted signs on walls that indicate a building is set to be demolished. However, unlike typical still life paintings which privilege objects over human life, Jia's *Still Life* raises the issue of the migrant worker's position and relationship with the landscape.

Liu Xiaodong's paintings are highly choreographed illustrations of migrant labourers during their leisure time. They combine real people in the actual locations set to be demolished by migrant workers yet they also distance themselves from the politics of the unequivocally imbalanced nature of ongoing migration without any chance for upward mobility. As a result, the distanciation technique raises questions about how the voiceless, nomadic migrant fits in with national history despite being part of a phenomenal historical event (Fig. 4.2). Taking from Liu Xiaodong's paintings of migrant labourers, Jia's central concern is to illustrate how domestic migrants fit into China's new economic superstructure emphasised by the world's largest hydroelectric dam. Shooting in high definition for the first time, Jia introduces a new aesthetic style, literally pulling focus toward the bodies of shirtless and tanned migrants in medium and close-up shots and incorporating his signature wide angle long shots of miniscule size men working on gigantic buildings. One of the film's main characters is Han, a coal miner from Shanxi Province who travels down to Fengjie to search for his estranged wife. Interestingly, the film's English title relates to art and painting which has an obvious connection to Jia's source inspiration for the film. The exact Chinese to



FIGURE 4.2: IN DONG, JIA FILMS MIGRANT LABOURERS POSING FOR LIU XIAODONG ON A TERRACE IN FENGJIE.

English translation of 'Sanxia Haoren' is 'Good People'. Since much of the film is concerned with marginalised Chinese citizens, the title suggests these are the 'Good People'. However,

the marginalised also get caught up in corrupt practices which illustrates a more complex notion of good people.

In the opening sequence to *Still Life*, the camera pans from left to right on a local ferry boat filled with these 'good people'. As the camera starts from one end of the boat, it pans slowly yet closely to the faces of children, adults, elders and shirtless and tanned workers who are laughing, smoking, playing cards, fortune telling and engaging in conversations. It also dissolves in and out of clear and blurred images creating a sense of multiple perspectives of the everyday scene. On his use of the pan method in this opening sequence on the ferry, Jia notes, 'the river, the mountains and the fog are taken from the fundamental elements in Chinese Painting. That is why I use those panning shots, recalling the gesture of unrolling a classical scroll painting, opening it out in space' (2008: 15). For much of *Still Life*, Jia employs tracking shots that further illustrate his gesture toward classical landscape painting and cinema's ability to physically traverse through the ephemeral ruins of this space set to be submerged underwater.

Classical Chinese painting during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) uses wide open vistas and a range of compositions and perspectives that weave a story. In the opening credits to *Still Life*, Jia drops the iconic Three Gorges landscape in exchange for the close-up and pans along the everyday faces of people crossing on a local ferry. He also subtly evokes multiple perspectives by drifting from a blurred image into a clear, intimate and lively image of the 'good people' of Three Gorges (Fig. 4.3). So, he adopts the migrant labourer subject matter portrayed in Liu Xiaodong's contemporary paintings and the principles of Classical



FIGURE 4.3: THE 'GOOD PEOPLE' OF *STILL LIFE* RENDERED IN A PAN SHOT IN THE OPENING CREDITS.

Chinese painting with the use of the pan shot and the shifting between clear and blurred images.

Still Life draws from documentary practices as it is shot on the actual demolition site where local inhabitants were being displaced but it also combines non-professional actors with real demolition workers. Migration and labour is a central theme in the film as temporary workers are tearing down and removing all valuable materials from a two-thousand-year-old area along the Yangtze River. Unlike *Last Train Home* which focuses on one family's life over a three-year period, *Still Life* includes a diverse number of fictional characters with their own particular stories. I will be focusing my analysis on the three central characters in the film: first, the coal miner Han who has arrived by the local ferry in search of his estranged wife of Fengjie named Missy and his sixteen-year-old daughter. Second, the nurse Shen who is attempting to track down her estranged husband. Finally, I will make comparisons between Qin from *Last Train Home* and a young migrant labourer Brother Mark (Zhou Lin) in *Still Life*. By doing so, I will show how Jia's film raises questions about the individual and mobility in relation to China's new globalised economy.

When the camera pans from left to right on the local ferry, it stops at the end of the boat and focuses on a man sitting alone and away from the others. This man is Han. He has travelled all the way from Shanxi Province located in the north near Beijing and is now crossing the Yangtze River by boat and carrying one small handbag of luggage. When he and the other male boat passengers arrive at the dockyard, they are forcibly ushered into a room. The nostalgic tone of the scroll shot during the boat passage abruptly ends with the arrival on land. Here, a magician performs in front of his nervous audience members demonstrating how he can transform blank paper notes into euros and then into Chinese renminbi banknotes. The magician singles out Han by holding the transformed stack of banknotes in front of his face, then slapping them across his forehead and saying, 'You get it? Now pay up.' Han contains a stoic expression throughout, leaving the viewer to question whether he is nervous or simply accustomed to everyday corruption. At the end of the performance, the audience members are expected to 'pay up' but Han refuses by declaring simply 'No money' and this ends in his dramatic removal of a pocket knife from his trousers which implies his readiness to fight.

No sooner has he arrived, Han is confronted by multiple scenarios that illustrate the complex levels of corruption that have trickled down from the country's socioeconomic transformations since Deng Xiaoping's era of reforms. Directly after the card trick, Han is cajoled into hiring a motorcycle taxi driver who agrees to take him to Missy's home address. However, when they arrive at the bank of the river with no houses in sight, the driver points

to clumps of grass sprouting to the water and says 'All that's left of 5 Granite Street. Get off'. When Han responds, 'you cheated me out of 5 yuan', the young driver retorts, 'I didn't order it flooded!' For a moment, the driver becomes another potential roadblock for Han but then he changes his attitude and offers to drive him into town to the relocation office that might help find Missy. As they are proceeding to leave the area, the young man matter-of-factly points out to the water where a boat is moored and explains that this is the location where his own house has been buried. In his own words about the film, Jia notes, 'If destiny has been written, then what matters most is the trajectory, the pathways' (2008). In this brief and somewhat dispassionate exchange between strangers, the film points out the historical trajectory of a location that now only exists in memory. It does not dwell on the psychological or physical impact but instead leaves the spectator to deal with the jarring effect of loss and displacement. At the relocation office, the corruption shifts from the locals who have been personally afflicted by the forced eviction to the official administration in charge. Several local Fengjie residents are in a corridor protesting that they have not been given compensation for the homes that they have lost.

Instead of positioning local inhabitants in the foreground, *Still Life* focuses mainly on two outsiders — Han and Shen — who both arrive from the northern province Shanxi in search of their spouses. Furthermore, these two characters who never meet but who nonetheless arrive in the same area and leave around the same time, are also from separate economic backgrounds. When Han arrives in Fengjie, he must search for work when he is unable to track his wife Missy straightaway. Through word-of-mouth, he finds a physical labour job, joining the other migrants who use their bodies rather than machines to dismantle the buildings. It is not until thirty-eight minutes into the film that Shen arrives. Han stands in his blue underwear on a grey concrete terrace. The camera zooms in from a long to a medium shot and follows the subject's gaze to the left and up above the mountain range. The river bank is littered with a large heap of rubbish. All of a sudden a UFO appears over these mountain ridges, crosses Han's line of view and continues to fly off to the right of the sky. In a pan and cut shot, the UFO then appears in Shen's line of view as she stands on a separate terrace situated higher up in an area along the same river.

Shen watches as the UFO appears, passes her line of view, then carries on to the right and away into the distance. Shen has lost all contact with her husband Bin two years ago, when he relocated to the area to work on the Three Gorges Dam project. Shen and Han originate from the same province and are in search of absent spouses but they do not share the same life experience. For instance, while Han's quest to reconcile his family matters is

constantly interrupted by financial concerns, Shen appears out of nowhere and wanders in a leisurely fashion throughout the film. Han is forced to work nearly as soon as he arrives and there are long durational shots showing him using the force of his body and a pickaxe to break through concrete building floors. In stark contrast, Shen traverses the ruins in her clean clothing while migrant labourers continue to work in rhythmic patterns in the background. Han has found cheap local lodging and pays nightly while Shen manages to track down an archaeologist friend of her husband (played by regular cast member Wang Hongwei) and he invites her to stay at his apartment. She does not form any new relationships in the migrant labour community and converses only with managerial staff in the area.

In terms of Shen's mobility, she is associated with a moderately elite economic class in comparison with Han. She is a nurse and she is married to a prominent businessman working in the community. When Shen does track him down, she attends one of his business party gatherings on a terrace of a high rise building. In the distance, a new bridge is timed to light up for the guests. Despite being a stranger to the city, Shen belongs to the elite group of people in Fengjie. Although it is unclear how Shen's husband Bin came to work in Fengjie, it is assumed that he was offered employment by the state. Having established himself in Fengjie for so long, he has effectively abandoned his wife and is engaged in a sordid affair with a successful business partner working on the dam project.

While Han is cordoned off into the migrant labour group, Shen and Bin are part of the intellectual elite. So, what role do they play in relation to the rise of the individual and the economy in contemporary China? On the topic of the rise of the individual in China, Svarverud applies Beck and Beck-Gernheim's European-based 'individualization thesis' to the Chinese intellectual (2010). She traces tendencies that emerged at the beginning of twentieth century China in its first phases of modernity and how the connection between the individual and responsibility, self-discipline and autonomy can also be seen in contemporary China. Svarverud argues that, in this new modernity, a trend emerged that was:

to disembed the individual from previous social categories and attitudes attached to the Confucian tradition, such as the ethics of family relations, and envision a project where the Chinese individual as a citizen was to be re-embedded in an imagined national collective, in line with strong historical currents for a focus on the state in China. In a process of intellectual liberalization, the individual was simultaneously strongly attached to the aspirations of the nation through the idea of individual self-discipline.

(Svarverud, 2010: 196)

In relation to the intellectual class in *Still Life*, Shen and Bin are married but do not have children. They also demonstrate a level of self-discipline in terms of their careers and their official ties with government jobs. When Shen manages to locate her husband's office, she temporarily shelves her personal issues to aid an injured worker hired by the local government to demolish homes. He has been beaten by a group of protestors or local vigilantes. Similarly, Bin may be engaged in an adulterous affair but the woman in question is a colleague whom he met on the job, most likely occurred as a result of working away from home and working long hours for the government. Through a network of local government officials, Shen eventually locates her husband and their discussion of divorce is civil and final. Soon thereafter she leaves Fengjie. For Han whose wife fled sixteen years prior to her hometown of Fengjie, he must confront the family first who view this situation as a case of spousal abandonment.

The issue of gender arises subtly in Shen's circumstances and some might argue that she is liberated by her ability to divorce Bin (once she has found him). Despite the rise in divorces and single women in China, there are very little support systems in place for them. Furthermore, Chinese women still struggle within the confines of traditional patriarchal values which discourage divorce. Even though Shen's status contains more economic stability and mobility than Han, she is still a woman.

While the issue of gender arises with more subtlety through Shen's character, it emerges more poignantly with Han's wife Missy. This insertion of gender politics creates a more complex and stratified understanding of mobility and individuality. For instance, as a child bride, Missy fled from her husband in Shanxi sixteen-years prior with her daughter and over the course of the story, it becomes apparent that he had actually purchased her. Furthermore, the commodification of women has not improved in the area as Han's young friend Brother Mark reveals: 'you paid too much for yours! There's so many women here now. You could have gotten a better deal today!' When Han does finally locate his wife, she has actually been sold to an elderly man because her uncle owed the man a financial debt. In a room with a barred window, Missy serves Han and the elderly proprietor food while the men deliberate over her monetary value. When Missy steps outside the room, she stops and stands behind the barred window peering in at the conversation (Fig. 4.4). Here, she is literally framed behind the window as if to emphasise her imprisonment and lack of agency. Eventually, Han is forced to admit that he cannot yet afford to reclaim his wife but that he plans to return in near the future. At no point in the film does Missy reveal any desire to

return to her husband and in fact she is very confused as to why he has returned at this point in their lives. This remains a mystery.



FIGURE 4.4: MISSY SILENTLY WATCHES THE MEN NEGOTIATE HER MONETARY VALUE.

When Han arrives in Fengjie, he finds lodging in an apartment building that is set to be demolished. Soon, he befriends another lodger, a young man named Brother Mark who is enraptured by gang culture and mimics Hong Kong gangster films. In one scene, Brother Mark watches John Woo's classic gangster film *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) on a television in the elderly landlord Mr. Wu's apartment. On the television, Chow Yun Fat lights a cigarette using American counterfeit dollars. At this point, Han enters the apartment and offers Mr. Wu a cigarette, then proceeds to ask him if he knows where he can find his wife's family. Imitating Chow Yun Fat, Brother Mark turns away from the television and uses a hand gesture to suggest he is holding a gun, points it at Han and says, 'word of advice. This is my territory.' Still in character, he then puts on sunglasses and asks for a cigarette, then a lighter. So, when Han gestures for a lighter, Brother Mark grabs a scrap of paper, sets it on fire and uses this flame to light the cigarette.

Brother Mark has gangster aspirations and accepts jobs with local gangs in the Fengjie area. However, Brother Mark is perceived as an outsider and a buffoon in the community. Along with his playful demeanour, he is also sentimental about old pop music and suggests to Han that the two are nostalgic figures caught up in the past. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Qin equates independence and freedom with money, consumerism and escape from rural life. Similarly, Brother Mark's interest in gangster culture represents his own effort to attain freedom through money and pop cultural icons. Both Brother Mark and Qin aspire to be

independent and free from societal expectations. However, unlike Qin, Mark is old enough to have tasted the bitterness of life and when he gets involved in the local gang, he winds up dead. So, his obsession with gangster films is linked with his eventual (but short lived) gangster reality. Brother Mark embodies the cinematic and the real through mimicry but his gangster performance is essentially his inability to come to terms with the mundanity of his migrant identity. He becomes a nostalgic figure representative of a 'loss of epistemological grounding in the current age of market reforms and breakneck development in China' (McGrath, 2008: 34). As a young man without an education or any real aspirations for hard labour, there is no room for him in contemporary China apart from a very short life in crime. In the end, his body is wrapped up by Han and other migrant workers and after a day of private mourning by Han, his body is ushered through the rubble to the water where it is carefully placed on a small motorised boat and taken across the Yangtze River.

Han, Shen, Brother Mark and Missy are confronted by various challenges in love, marital relations and independence due to contemporary China's fast, liberalisation of its market economy. Through these characters, Jia demonstrates how the conditions of the nation have impacted on relationships and on marginalised populations. Furthermore, he questions the very idea of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Deng, 1984) which has resulted in all levels of corruption through flexible economic policies. By situating the film on an actual site that is set to be inundated by water forever, Jia emphasises these corrupt practices and the individual's displacement from both Fengjie and the rest of the country.

Conditions of space: *Last Train Home*

There are three worlds depicted in *Last Train Home*: The urban, the rural and the pathway that links these dichotomous spaces together in Chinese contemporary society. As I have already mentioned, the film opens with an establishing shot of Guangzhou's cityscape then cuts in to a series of images that depict the everyday domestic migrant life from the street level. Zhao Dayong's *Street Life* observes the homeless living on Nanjing Road in Shanghai. Now, in *Last Train Home*, Fan inserts outdoor street shots to establish a general location before narrowing in to the dark dormitories and noisy garment factory where the Zhang parents work every day. The camera's restricted view of Guangzhou city is repeated when Qin relocates from Huilong village to Xintang city in Guangdong Province where she also works at a factory. In both cases, the filmmaker presents the limited scope of reality for

domestic migrants who work long hours with little leisure time or money. Despite being located in two separate cities, the factory settings are nearly identical as the filmmaker conveys the repetitive daily tasks that include sewing, eating in a canteen, scrubbing clothes and talking in dormitory bedrooms. Qin's short interlude at the shopping centre with her friend is the only difference between her and her parents' experience.

Having access into the actual day-to-day experience within the factory reveals a much more specific understanding of migrant identity in urban spaces. For the Zhang parents, the documentary in itself is a case study on their struggle to maintain a social collective structure while being forced into working so far away from the rest of their family. Inside the factories, very little action occurs apart from work, eat, sleep and then repeat. The monotony of factory life is one of an ongoing lack of economic mobility or equality. What Fan captures with the Zhang parents is their consistent efforts to endure this monotony over the years for the sake of their children's future. They are fulfilling a national dream towards making China a global economic superpower and it is widespread belief that education for the children will ensure that Qin and Yang will have a better chance than their parents ever did. Despite their sacrifices, the children feel abandoned and have difficulties coping in their rural village which has been literally emptied of its community.

In stark contrast to what Fan depicts of urban life, the rural Huilong village is lush, green and serene (Fig. 4.5). Although there are a few indoor scenes with Qin, Yang and Grandmother Tang sitting at the dinner table, much of the rural shot part of the documentary is characterised by wide and picturesque landscape shots, children collecting vegetables from the large green spaces and close-ups of colourful insects on branches and leaves. So, Qin's perception that she is deprived of the freedoms associated with a lively urban scene stands in opposition to the filmmaker's shots of a vibrant and colourful rural landscape versus enclosed, dirty, grey urban realities. Hansen and Pang argue that despite the lack of upward mobility for rural youth working in factories the notion of freedom is attached to the individual's desire to assert economic independence from their parents and that the term 'freedom' is often used to describe the urban experience despite its limitations (2010: 51). In *Last Train Home*, I would add that Qin's description of freedom is also linked to her connection to the global consumer market and travelling away from home. She and her friends search for the American jeans label in the shopping centre, she receives an international hairstyle and she naively proclaims, 'Let's just roam around the world!'. Unfortunately for Qin and other domestic workers without a secondary school diploma or a

post-secondary degree, travelling will most likely be limited to China and to low wage migrant employment.



FIGURE 4.5: FATHER ZHANG CHANGHUA SEWS CURTAINS IN A GUANGZHOU URBAN FACTORY WHILE QIN CARRIES A BAG OF CORN HUSKS ON HER BACK IN THE OPEN RURAL HUILONG VILLAGE LANDSCAPE.

So what are the conditions of filmmaking during the Chinese New Year when millions of domestic migrants travel home? How is subjectivity addressed during these moments when the working members of the Zhang family are immersed within the crowded entrance of Guangzhou railway station and the train journey to and from Huilong village? How does the filmmaker's intimacy with the Zhang family impact on the stressful situations when the family members spend time together? It is these questions that I will address in this section.

Behind Beijing and Shanghai, Guangzhou is the third largest city in the country and migrant workers from other provinces account for forty percent of its population. For most of these domestic labourers, the Chinese New Year holiday provides them with the only opportunity to return home. The colossal effort that is involved in acquiring train tickets is

evidenced in the film's opening twenty minutes but also in the fact that the filmmaker returns to shoot the migrant's journey for three years in a row. So, Fan spends a considerable amount of time documenting the migrants' efforts to make it home. Indeed, the film opens with a sweeping panoramic shot of a throng of people waiting in the rain with their umbrellas. This is followed by a series of shots of large crowds of people rushing past security and running into a tunnel (presumably the route to a train platform). Then, it cuts to a skyline view of Guangzhou city before cutting into the factory where Zhang and Chen work.

The topic of the trek home continues as the Zhangs discuss with their work colleagues the difficulty in ascertaining train tickets. Chen attempts to speak to her daughter on the telephone explaining that they might be delayed by two days. Once they arrive at the train station, they discover that all tickets have been sold out. This process requires patience as the Zhangs wrestle their way through unbelievably large crowds of people all attempting to make it home. After several days of waiting, they eventually manage to disembark on their journey and the camera follows the efforts involved in their transit which includes a train, bus and boat. Although it has taken them several days to reach their destination, there is only one short dinner scene before the parents are back on the train to Guangzhou city. There is no indication to the viewer the duration of the visit but the film emphasises the imbalance of time between travelling and being in Huilong.

When Qin relocates from her village to Xintang city in another part of Guangdong Province, she experiences the holiday chaos for herself. Luckily, she is accompanied by her parents. It is Chen's hope that quality time with her daughter and a first-hand witnessing of the stressful pilgrimage will propel her to reconsider returning to school. Both parents arrive at Qin's factory and together they embark on the adventure back to Huilong village. The entire sequence occurs forty-seven minutes into the film, lasts ten minutes and involves the film crew setting up shots within the crowd. According to Fan, he did not require any permission to shoot the documentary in Guangzhou train station:

It wasn't as difficult as I would have expected, but we had an all-Chinese crew. Also, I used to work for CCTV. I had some friends helping me, and they talked to people. We had been filming there for three years. The first year was difficult but we came back the second year and they were less cautious.

(Sventvilas, 2010)

This commitment to shooting the migratory event for three consecutive years and the crew's experience of working in public spaces in China made it possible for the film to capture unanticipated moments. The Zhang family is central to the film's structure. So, the camera

captures Qin's first experience travelling home during the most chaotic time of the year. She is bewildered by the sheer magnitude of the moment, being caught up in the spectacle of the crowd as people attempt to push past official guards and jump over barriers. The camera follows the interaction between Chen and her daughter within the crowd. While members of the public are curious of the camera's presence and stare directly back and smile, Chen, who has suffered through decades of this stressful experience, tells her daughter, 'I don't think anyone else would find this amusing'.

The film is concerned with the tension building between a mother and daughter but the filmmaker is also committed to capturing unexpected situations unfolding in front of the camera. In her essay on the filming of crowds in contemporary Chinese documentaries, Shen writes, '[t]he vexed relationship between socialist and postsocialist aesthetics is registered in crowd representations' (2015: 99). Historically, the socialist aesthetics of crowds in China are associated with the tradition of the collective and 'importance of the masses (*qunzhong*) in shaping the political theory of the Communist Party' (Shen, 2015: 98). For example, in 1966, Chairman Mao managed to overthrow the intellectual elite through a collective revolution of the masses. Postsocialist aesthetics refer to crowds that have formed since the beginning of the economic reform era. That is, the rural to urban migration through these economic transformations has resulted in an increase in migrant crowds travelling once a year. With the emergence of handheld digital video culture and Chinese independent cinema, filmmakers are documenting the underrepresented mass migrant and activist population and the unexpected and tense moments that emerge.

So, in addition to shooting the Zhang family's movements in the crowd, Fan and his crew are concerned with other anonymous figures within the crowd. He interviews migrants who criticise the severe lack of organisation and who have been stuck in a queue for five days without food. He shoots women crying and screaming for their lost family members. From a high angle, he captures the hundreds of thousands who are waiting to go home and also within the crowd to get a sense of the tension at street level. Several hours pass, it rains, the crowd gets more impatient and people begin to push their way to the front of the queue while guards attempt to manage the tenuous scene. At one point, the camera which is positioned within the crowd is knocked around and in the distance, one of the crew members holding a boom microphone is seen being pushed further away from the camera. Here, the camera is subordinate to the chaos that ensues which inevitably draws the spectator into the chaos of the moment and bears witness to the 'liveness' of the recorded event (Robinson, 2010).

In addition to migrants, the camera also observes the police officials who are attempting to deal with the frantic and increasingly agitated public. Sometimes they allow people to cross barriers. When the military arrive to control the unstable situation, the camera films the group lining up in formation and receiving instructions by their captain on how to assert control by standing tightly side-by-side. In another shot, a man is yelling at an officer who is preventing him from crossing over the fence barrier. In his frustration, the man yells in the officer's face, 'Today, you work behind the fence. Tomorrow, you'll be standing here in my shoes.' The camera zooms into a facial close-up shot of the police official's reaction. The officer blinks and looks away as if to suggest a mixture of fear and self-doubt. There are several moments during this ten-minute documentation where the chaos reigns over calm for both the civilians and officials. As Fan reveals, 'There was one moment in the railway station when the situation got really tense. A girl was carried over the tops of people's heads. At the time, a high-ranking official saw us shooting and stopped us from filming' (Sventvilas, 2010). So, along with documenting the underrepresented yet massive migrant population, the camera is also present to witness small eruptions of chaos between officials and the people. In effect, it brings to the surface the uncertainties and notion of instability in this postsocialist era.

The Zhang family members are momentarily separated from one another but eventually they are reunited and by evening Chen proceeds to lecture her daughter on her inappropriate reaction to the tense situation: 'I don't know anyone else who would find this amusing. It is pitiful. We are sad and worried we won't make it home for New Year.' Chen attempts to show Qin how much they have struggled to come home every year and what she would expect to experience if she decides to join the migrant masses instead of completing her studies. After several days, the Zhang family do ascertain train tickets and proceed to the platform. Finally, Zhang must assert physical force to ensure his wife and daughter make it safely on the train.

Despite considerable efforts to provide Qin with a safe passage home, she does not express gratitude and distances herself from her parents on the train. This persistent tension builds and erupts once the three arrive back in Huilong village. Similar to the filming of the crowd at Guangzhou station, Fan's commitment to shooting the documentary over several years allows him to establish an intimate relationship with the Zhang family that facilitates the filming of unexpected moments. After the Zhangs return to Huilong, the entire family gathers in one room. Chen is sitting next to her son Yang on a bed and telling him she is now considering returning to the village to raise him. Qin who is facing away from everyone is watching television. She momentarily swings her head around and says, 'Don't worry,

Brother. She won't stay home for you.' The situation quickly escalates as Zhang intervenes and then threatens to kick Qin out of the house. Qin responds with, 'I'll walk out of your fucking house.' It is at this point that both Qin and Zhang begin to push and slap each other. At one point, Qin stops and addresses the camera, 'You want to film the real me? This is the real me. What else do you want?' Here, the camera shifts from an observational mode to one that participates in Qin's own self-discovery. Qin is incapable of communicating and articulating her fears and anxieties surrounding her literal and emotional life altering move and so she turns to the camera to act out her unprocessed emotions and frustrations towards her family. Therefore, the camera participates and enables Qin to address these issues.

Fan reveals that this scene provided a personal dilemma for him because he had built an intimate relationship with the family: 'I was never sure if it was the right thing or the wrong thing to walk into the scene. It really changed the dynamic of the film' (Sventvilas, 2010). In light of this, Fan did ask Zhang's permission to include the footage in the final documentary and he also previewed the film. In the final scene of the film, Qin has decided not to return to school and has now moved to another job, this time working as a waitress in a bar. In this short sequence, Qin and the other bar employees stand together to watch the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics on television. Fan captures staff members watching the crowd on the television and once again raises questions of the migrant's position within the collective and national dream. This shot illustrates the disjointed link between the migrant worker and the nation-state's economic dreams realised in the globally recognised Olympic event. Since the production of *Last Train Home*, the filmmaker and family have kept in touch (PBS, 2011). It was revealed that Qin was briefly enrolled in a vocational school in Beijing but quit and as of 2012 she was working in the northern Hubei Province where she rarely has the opportunity to visit home. Yang continues to progress in his secondary school education but it is unclear whether he will go to university. As for the parents, the worldwide 2008 economic crisis had an impact on the security of their factory jobs and eventually Chen was forced to quit. She now resides in Huilong with her mother while Zhang is still employed at the Guangzhou factory. The family dynamic has been further fragmented even if Qin obtained her wish for freedom from the isolated rural life.

Conditions of space: *Still Life*

Still Life was shot in 2006 during the final stages of the Three Gorges Dam construction. As one of the administrative staff at the relocation office tells the protagonist Han when he arrives in Fengjie, most of the local inhabitants have already left the area and moved on to nearby Guangdong Province and other places in the country. Both *Last Train Home* and *Still Life* are filmed on location at the site of a massive migratory event. In *Last Train Home*, the documentary switches back and forth between rural and urban locations in order to emphasise a space that has been forgotten and one that is increasingly on the rise. While the rural life in Sichuan Province offers unparalleled natural beauty, the urban life is part of China's present and future. Fan and his crew also show a third space occupied by the domestic migrant which is that of the journey that links the two dichotomous regions. The crowd that gathers at the Guangzhou railway station during the Chinese New Year holiday season demonstrates the effect of the country's economic boom which forces mass migration at an unprecedented scale. While *Still Life* also conveys mass migration, it is carried out through the theme of displacement because many of the Fengjie residents have already been relocated to other parts of the country. Rather than simply inserting a fictional story with a backdrop of changing sceneries, Jia raises questions about the migrant's experience through his highly constructed aesthetics. I will analyse the conditions of filmmaking and the aesthetic treatment of time and space in order to show how *Still Life* reflects on mass migration through displacement and through the real ruinous landscape.

In order to grasp Jia's aesthetic treatment of time, I will first address the unique filmmaking conditions in Fengjie. Having been inspired by the transformations occurring in the area during his shooting of *Dong* and knowing that the landscape would soon be submerged under water, Jia used his primary creative team and talent. First, he cast regular contributor and wife Zhao Tao and his cousin Han to play the main characters. So, the script which coincidentally involves two northern Shanxi foreigners (Jia's own birth) arriving in this southern Chongqing Province is presumably the result of the lack of local inhabitants with local dialects left in the area and a lack of time to acquire acting talent. It also signifies that displacement is an issue not limited to one specific location in China. In the documentary film *Jia Zhangke: A Guy From Fenyang* (Salles, 2014), Jia's film crew reveal the conditions of shooting *Still Life*. Jia's regular artistic consultant and editor Lin Xudong notes, 'he barely had time to work on the screenplay. One major reason was how quickly the town was changing. If he took too long, he'd have nothing to film.' Cinematographer Yu Lik Wai jokingly reveals that he was conned into working on a production site where there was a severe lack of electricity and water in any of the buildings. As a result, the cinematographer

resorted to using a Sony Hi-8 camcorder which he credits for its manoeuvrability on a site without adequate resources and of near complete devastation. Finally, the sound designer Zhang Yang admits that the unorthodox conditions meant that it was impossible to predict the sound that would be emitted but was pleasantly surprised when he heard the playback recording of a 'beautiful wave of sound' bouncing off buildings in the Three Gorges area. In his polemical work on the theory of film and redemptive realism, Kracauer states, 'films may claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties, like photographs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality' (1997 [1960]: 37). For *Still Life*, the actual conditions of the zone set to be engulfed by a water reservoir dictate the method applied to the film production. Reality presses upon a fictional story with boat horns periodically bouncing sound waves off the mountains and buildings and actual migrant labourers in charge of dismantling a geographical zone that has been emptied of its local inhabitants. However, the filmmaker also experiments with CGI effects by adding a UFO to connect two otherwise disparate characters in one city and at one point a building shoots like a rocket out of the ground and into the sky. As Jia argues, he evaluates his perception of truth in reality with a 'subjective imagination [zhuguan xiangxiang]' (cited in Zhang, 2010: 108). *Still Life* is a meditation on time as destruction of the old and indication of the eventual birth of the new permeates the film. The impending and coldly calculated future is shown in various long shot long durational takes of men posting signs on apartment buildings warning that it is set to be demolished. Locals then emerge from the apartment units to read the signs that indicate the impending destruction of their own homes. Clashes between residents and officials are referenced throughout the film but the camera eschews any dramatic observations of them.

While *Last Train Home* raises the question of space and mobility by highlighting the dichotomies between rural and urban space, *Still Life* explores space and the migrant's displaced temporal and spatial experience through the ruined landscape. In early cinema, the Lumière Brothers' single shot film *Demolition of a Wall* (1895) captures workers using sledgehammers to tear down a brick wall. They demonstrate cinema's capacity to relive the moment a wall buckles and topples over onto the ground. However, it was what the brothers did next that would have created astonishment for spectators: the single shot is played in reverse and the wall reconstructs and lifts back to its original form. The reverse special effect makes the irreversibility of time possible through a cinematic device. In *Still Life*, a similar situation occurs. In one long durational take, Han walks through a site of ruins and towards the camera. In the background is a free-standing wall perched on the first floor of a building. All of a sudden, the wall behind Han is completely destroyed. Han protects his head and looks

back cautiously as the demolition's damage and dust fills the sky at the location where the wall once stood. The difference here is that in *Still Life* there is no reversibility of time. The Lumière Brothers' spectacle provides the production of magic that reverses time to the delight of a bewildered audience who had previously not seen this kind of optical trickery before. The wall being demolished in *Still Life* however, captures the temporary nature of the moment and its realism enforces the idea that time is in fact irreversible but that contemplating time in motion is significant in creating dialogue between the past, present and future. By positioning Han in this otherwise empty *mise-en-scène*, the film also addresses the question of the migrant alongside the movement of historical time.

This dialogue between multiple temporalities provides a historical trajectory of events that have passed and those that will shape the future. As I have already mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, filming on or near the Three Gorges Dam project has been a popular locality for film productions. The site embodies the fulfilment of China's economic destiny and makes it possible for filmmakers such as Jia to capture, contemplate and imagine this development in motion. Sheldon Lu states:

Contemporary China consists of the superimposition of multiple temporalities; the premodern, the modern and the postmodern coexist in the same space at the same moment. Paradoxically, postmodernism in China is even more spatial and more postmodern than its original Western model. (1997: 66)

So, how does Jia's treatment of space comment on the superimposition of temporalities? First of all, through the motif of currency. For instance, the passage of time is depicted in the opening sequence. As soon as Han arrives in Fengjie, he is immediately confronted by multiple levels of corruption in the form of currency. When he steps off the boat, he is forced to watch a performer 'magically' transform blank notes into euro banknotes and the migrant labourers who he encounters share their historical knowledge of national landscapes by showing each other the pictorial drawings printed on Chinese currency. When a labourer asks whether or not Han travelled overland to Fengjie and he responds, 'I came by boat', the man takes out a banknote and points to the image asking if he managed to see the 'Kui Men' (Three Gorges) on his route. Han responds that he did not and then he proceeds to take out his own banknote with the pictorial image of the Hukou Falls of the Yellow River which is the area that he originates from. He tells them this as though he is holding an actual photograph of the landscape and the men all clamber around him to see the pictorial image.

This is followed by a shot of Han holding a ten-yuan banknote of the scenic Three Gorges in front of the actual landscape depicted on the banknote (Fig. 4.6). Furthermore, as man-

made objects are being demolished in *Still Life*, national landmarks such as the Three Gorges are commodified into consumable products that are in constant motion. What is revealed in this superimposition of images is a mismatch between what is real and what is imagined on the banknote. Perhaps with Jia's own admission that he is attempting to revive a Chinese scroll painting through his pan and tracking shots (2008), the banknote offers an ideologically influenced national narrative in the same way that Chinese scroll painting might have done for the marginalised people at the time it was produced. The weather is grey and polluted and so it is impossible to see for real the majestic Yangtze River. Even without being able to visit the actual landscapes, these imagined landscapes will continue to circulate through commodity and tourism. Mobility then belongs to those who can afford it. Those who cannot afford it (the rural migrants) are left out of the national imagination and its official history. This type of superimposition with regards to the displacement of local inhabitants is also illustrated when Han's motorbike taxi driver points to a location where his home once stood but is now completely submerged underwater. This scene persuades the viewer to contemplate the past within the present.



FIGURE 4.6: MISMATCH BETWEEN THE REAL LANDSCAPE AND THE IMAGINED ONE LOCATED ON THE BANKNOTE.

Bazin uses the term 'Nero Complex' to describe the spectator's pleasure in watching war reports and disaster films (1997: 188). The term is associated with a decadent Roman Emperor who played a symphony while watching his city burn. However, he also associates this Freudian psychological pleasure with the individual's 'need to observe history-in-the-making' (Bazin, 1997: 188). Although the images in *Still Life* are captivating and belong to a

selection of other films that depict a historically significant event shot at different periods during the construction of the Three Gorges, the use of the tracking shot moving through the ruins is more closely associated with a traveller's ruin aesthetic. A static shot of ruins points to historical closure because, like a photograph it represents what has been. Also, the aesthetic use of the slow tracking shot through these ruins implies a relationship between migrant mobility and an inevitable time lag. This movement within the ruins then challenges the viewer to engage with history and what it means for it to disappear, what could arise in this journey forward and how to recollect history when it has been erased.

In addition to travelling through the ruins using the tracking shot, Jia also incorporates multiple perspectival shots of the migrant in space. For instance, Jia captures the migrant worker Han looking out across the landscape, walking from street level within the ruins and hammering into the concrete surface of a building set to be demolished. Migrant workers are also shot from a distance tearing down massive structures with the use of a single pickaxe which simultaneously conveys the strength of the individual and the dispensability of the human body. This disposable body is also often seen as a comment of socialist realist art in which the human figure is perceived as the heroic body. So, this spatial practice rendered through the film's multiple perspectives places the migrant at the centre of historical displacement. Therefore, in the absence of the voiceless inhabitants who have already been displaced elsewhere in the country, the tracking shot and the multiple perspectival shots meditate on time and force the viewer to contemplate the fate of the local inhabitants.

Along with its emphasis on past, present and future, the film also incorporates science fiction through the reality of the demolition. In one scene, migrant workers are hammering buildings when all of a sudden, masked figures walk along the ruins spraying chemicals all over the fallen rocks and walls of buildings (Fig. 4.7). The camera follows these men as they silently make their way through the surreal landscape. On the topic of ruin cinema and the science fiction genre, Von Moltke states, '[w]here historical ruins memorialise abandoned utopias, science fiction sketches out a future in which the present will have been abandoned as so much historical debris (2010: 409). Now, the ominous figures spraying chemicals amongst the ruins are presumably part of the actual process of the demolition site. They are not hired extras who are fabricated in order to hypothesise on a future anterior. Here, the camera traverses through the ruins following the masked figures using smooth tracking shots and alternating between long and medium shots. Unlike the reverse single shot depicted in the Lumière Brothers' wall demolition, this scene eschews any special effects in exchange for the eeriness of the present reality. However, accompanied by an extradiegetic science fiction

score, what the film captures is the alien-ness of a historical event that seems to occupy past, present and future. This is accompanied by a melancholic tracking shot that traverses the terrain in a slow and rhythmic movement allowing the spectator to observe the destruction from street level while remaining powerless to do anything about it.



FIGURE 4.7: ALIEN FIGURES OCCUPY THE RUINS.

The multiple spatio-temporalities of contemporary China are a result of the nation-state's persistent drive toward a national economic dream and the Three Gorges Dam Project is one such event that indicates a historical milestone for the country. Jia plants his film crew on the scene in Fengjie where most of the locals have relocated and where much of the landscape is ready to be submerged under water. However, the film's style does not just utilise the ruinous environment as a backdrop to tell a story about two citizens searching for their spouses. Neither is it a documentary shot in an observational mode which Fan employs in *Last Train Home*. Instead, Jia employs a stylistic reconfiguration that rejects any absolute objectivity and pushes for an aesthetic realism that confronts the problem of the migrant in relation to mobility and space.

The dichotomies of the rural and urban landscape in *Last Train Home* reveal the complexities of the notions of self in relation to mobility and space. It demonstrates how complicated life is for the rural migrant both young and old and how ongoing migration in contemporary China is a consequence of nation building in relation to economic reforms. Urban living provides the young with a sense of feeling connected to international trends and the migrant community while the more experienced workers and parents have tasted the bitterness of life, struggling with finances and with the loss of a nuclear family structure.

Similarly, but less microscopic and more varied, *Still Life* deals with the consequences of migration and displacement for people of diverse socioeconomic circumstances.

CHAPTER 5

Mobility and Gender in Xiaolu Guo's *She, A Chinese* (Zhongguo gu niang, 2008) and Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (Tian zhu ding, 2013)

This chapter focuses on the question of gender and the way it articulates with the subject of human mobility in contemporary Chinese independent cinema. In Chapter 3, female agency was examined in relation to a female filmmaker (Liu Jiayin) whose intimate portrait of her family in a cramped Beijing apartment reconfigures the role of the daughter in a postsocialist one-child family dynamic. This chapter will re-visit female agency through mobility by looking at Xiaolu Guo's¹⁶ *She, A Chinese* and Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*. Both films respond to the question of mobility and gender through the marginalised character. The rebellious and marginalised male figure is a common trope that has been explored in numerous Chinese independent films (*Beijing Bastards* (Zhang, 1993); *Pickpocket* (Jia, 1997); *Spring Fever* (Lou, 2009)). In many of these films, women often play conventional roles such as the dutiful wife, girlfriend, daughter or prostitute. *She, A Chinese* and *A Touch of Sin* are part of an emerging list of films that aim to challenge these conventions and attempt to articulate female agency for the subaltern in contemporary China.

First, *She, A Chinese* is a fictionalised account of one young woman's journey from a rural part of Southeast China to the sprawling metropolis of Southern Chongqing city. At first glance, the central protagonist Li Mei (Lu Huang) resembles the young woman Qin in the documentary film *Last Train Home*. Like Qin, Li originates from a very rural part of China and is captured carrying a basket of vegetables in the rural grasslands. She quarrels with her parents and then she leaves her rural countryside with her friend in a quest for freedom and individuality. However, in stark contrast to Qin's situation, she is quickly fired from her job at a garment factory and stumbles upon a job working at a hair salon (which doubles as a brothel). Then through a combination of tragedy and good fortune, Li winds up travelling to London, United Kingdom. She seems to embody Qin's own fantasy to tour around the world but she also fulfils the reality of an undocumented migrant in a foreign country. Therefore, Guo resists any simplified definition of female agency and mobility in relation to a young woman from rural China. Interestingly, Guo, herself was also born in rural China and now

¹⁶ Guo is a family name, but this is how the author chooses to sign her name.

resides in London, UK. So, along with examining Guo's resistance to traditional notions of agency and mobility, I will also analyse the effect of her semi-autobiographical narrative.

Similarly, Jia approaches this question by resisting any typical depictions of human mobility. *A Touch of Sin* is divided into four separate stories all located in different regions of Mainland China. These stories are based on real news events in the country and shine a spotlight on the impact of China's economic reforms on the conditions and constraints of the marginalised population. That is, all characters are in flux emotionally and physically as they struggle with various levels of corruption and inequality in China. Their struggles eventually lead to violent incidents. For this case study, I will focus on the stories within the film that involve female agency. In particular, I will examine the character Xiaoyu (Zhao Tao) whose story is based on a pedicurist in Hubei Province who killed the director of the local township's business promotions after she attempted to rebuff his sexual advances. Although Xiaoyu's agency is central to my analysis, I will also relate her situation with the supporting female roles in the film who are also part of the marginalised population and are confronted by corruption.

Next, I will examine the filmmakers' attitude towards reality and female agency through their methods and aesthetic choices. How is reality framed and what is the effect of the filmmakers' aesthetic choices? While Guo addresses the question of mobility and female action through a transnational and semi-autobiographical narrative and gritty realist aesthetics, Jia approaches national issues through actual news stories of violence that are familiar to national audiences. Unlike his previous films such as *Still Life* and *24 City* which offer more contemplative, restrained depictions of everyday life in China, *A Touch of Sin* deals with violence by employing aesthetics associated with the Chinese martial arts *wuxia* genre in order to tell a story of modern corruption. In response to the actual rise in violent incidents in China, the film positions these central characters who commit violence as knight-errants rather than simply as villains or heroes. My aim will be to address the film's question of female agency through its humanist approach to violence by way of the knight-errant figure from the martial arts genre.

Context: *She, A Chinese*

Xiaolu Guo was born in 1973 in a rural fishing village on the southeast coast of China. Her father was a fisherman-turned-artist who was labelled as bourgeois and subsequently sent

away to work in a labour camp during the Cultural Revolution which occurred between the years 1966-1976. Her mother was a Red Guard whose duties forced her away from parenthood and from as early as infancy stage, Guo was sent to live with strangers, eventually leading her to be raised by her impoverished grandparents from the age of four. Her rural upbringing, her cold relationship with her grandparents and estranged and violent relationship with her mother are themes that are also explored in her poetry, her writing and her films. During adolescence, Guo wrote poetry that illustrated the Misty Poets style, or *Minglongshi*, an obscure form of writing that flourished during the first decade after Mao's death. This was a kind of poetry that was influenced by Western poets and challenged the Maoist artistic ideology of social realism. Guo has revealed that she was influenced by writers such as Sylvia Plath who 'she viewed as radical at the time for China as a woman writing about suicide and who was published in translation only after censorship laws were relaxed in the 1980s' (Lý-Eliot, 2013).

By seventeen, Guo had moved away from the isolated fishing village to Beijing where she enrolled in the capital city's prestigious Film Academy. She also continued to write and in 2000, she published her first novel *Fenfang's 37.2 Degrees* (2000). The story revolves around a twenty-one-year-old woman named Fenfang who left her rural village to work in Beijing. After three years working in manual labourer jobs, she enlists as a film extra talent at the nation-state's film archives in Beijing. Much like the heroine Li in *She, A Chinese*, Fenfang has an attitude of facing life forward and refusing to look back into the past. Although she is a non-conformist, like Li, she often must resort to the financial and emotional security provided to her by her sexual partners. Guo's earlier novels are first-person narratives marked by this mixed character, both fiercely independent and reliant on the help of others. In her most recent novel *I Am China* (2014), Guo retreats from the personal to explore greater themes such as isolation, mobility and politics from the perspective of a musician named Jian and his absent love Mu.

Since Guo's films and novels bear autobiographical features, she also presents portraits of Chinese youth (like herself) who have been raised during the era of globalisation and development. She self-describes as a 'modern peasant' who, like her heroine in the novel *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2008), had 'something in [her] that's too rebellious, too spiky, anarchist, and angry to fit in a conventional system' (Zhang, 2008: 461). So, rather than take the conventional educational route and enrol in literature at university, Guo attended the Beijing Film Academy. Jia who was born in 1970 and belongs to the same generation as Guo also was educated at the prestigious film academy but as a student of film theory. The

two even attended the same literature and criticism class and acknowledge being influenced by some of those filmmakers who they learned about at the academy: Ozu, Truffaut, Godard and Hou Hsiao-Hsien (Zhang, 2008; Robinson, 2013). However, after graduation Jia returned to his hometown village in Fenyang, Shanxi Province to produce three films known as the *Hometown Trilogy* that re-enact his own experience of the changes brought on by the death of Mao and birth of the country's economic miracle. Guo received a scholarship in 2002 to study abroad at the UK National Film & TV School in London. Since then, she has lived in Germany but now resides in London as a filmmaker and a writer.

Although Guo is an award-winning writer with over ten books completed and translated into several languages, her film output since 2003 is equal to her productive writing career. *She, A Chinese* is her eighth film and was produced in both Mainland China and London, UK. It has been described as a '*bildungsroman* in cinematic form' (Doloughan, 2015: 11) as it is a coming-of-age story about a girl Li, who is making the shift to adulthood by choosing to move further away from her rural and seemingly dreary home village. The film is roughly divided into fifteen minute segments which are indicated by the chapter titles running through the film to project to the viewer Li's life and choices. Some of these chapter titles include: 'Li has never been 5 miles from home', 'Can you love a man with big glasses?' and 'The name of their queen is Elizabeth'. These chapter titles indicate an essayistic structure that provides a personal portrait of Li's coming-of-age experience. It also points to Li's own relationship with space and movement as a way of expressing her nomad and drifter sensibilities. According to Rascaroli, the 'filmic essay points to the enunciating subject, who literally inhabits the text' (2009: 33). Often this involves a narrator or voiceover narration. The chapter titles that appear throughout *She, A Chinese* point to the self-reflexivity associated with the essay film which signifies a relationship between the spectator and the enunciator. As Rascaroli remarks: '[t]he presence-absence of the enunciator is a key point of the essay film [...] it can be indirect, for example through the use of a narrator/spokesperson, or of intertitles, musical commentary, camera movements and the like' (2009: 37). Li's opaque characteristics makes it difficult to pinpoint her personal ambitions and desires. Despite Li's nearly impenetrable emotions and will to drift, the chapter titles act as a narrative navigational tool for the viewer and indirectly comment on Li's connection to her relationships and the spaces she inhabits throughout the film. Having already built a reputation for the autobiographical traces in her novels and films, Guo's inclusion of titles closes the proximal distance between filmmaker and spectator. In effect, Guo channels Li's personal travels.

According to Guo, *She, A Chinese* is a response to the Jean Luc Godard film *La Chinoise* (1967) (Crousse, 2009). *La Chinoise* is the story of a Maoist group of militants in Paris and was released the summer before the historical student uprisings in the spring of 1968. At the same time in China, Chairman Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution called for a revolution against the traditions of society, including patriarchy. As discussed in Chapter 3, during the Cultural Revolution, Mao's communist ideology pushed for gender equality through the workplace and women were given the opportunity to participate in industrial work. The propaganda posters of this period depicted women with muscular bodies similar to the male physique. Shuqin Cui states: 'The political and mass visual culture of socialist China concealed the female body behind the concept of gender equality and the identity of a collective entity' (2016: 58).

In her words, Guo describes *She, A Chinese* as a 'version of *La Chinoise*. A version going in the reverse direction, since my Chinese woman journeys from East to West. It is a slightly cynical reference to Godard as his Chinese woman no longer exists' (Crousse, 2009).¹⁷ Li is not explicitly political in the way that the militant youth perform in *La Chinoise*. She is self-involved, listens to indie music on her headphones and reads fashion magazines. However, her struggle and her politics are personal and part of the fabric of her everyday experience. Unlike the bourgeois attitude depicted in Godard's film, she has escaped her life of poverty and violence and has managed to circumvent her limitations as a Chinese peasant and as a female through constant mobility and by facing forward in every step she takes.

Context: *A Touch of Sin*

Jia and Guo were born in the 1970s in rural Mainland China and relocated to the capital city to study. While Jia is based in Beijing, Guo now resides in London, UK. However, Jia's international links include his reputation as one of the best known Chinese independent filmmakers on the worldwide film festival circuit and he has had two documentaries made about his work.¹⁸ While both Guo and Jia explore similar themes in their films that include migration, mobility and identity politics from a marginalised everyday perspective, they differ

¹⁷ My translation.

¹⁸ *Xiao Jia Returns Home* (2007) which was directed by Damien Ounouri after Jia received his Golden Lion Award at Cannes Film Festival for his film *Still Life* (2007) and *Jia Zhangke, A Guy From Fenyang* (2015) which was directed by Brazilian filmmaker Walter Salles.

in their choices of geographical spaces. As I have already mentioned, Guo's work is often influenced by her own life experiences. In his early filmmaking years, Jia followed a similar trajectory by producing films which were shot in his hometown Fenyang and explored themes and stories related to his own experiences growing up at the end of the Cultural Revolution and beginning of the era of economic reforms. In more recent years, Jia predominantly focuses on the rural migrant's plight in the wake of economic development within Mainland China.¹⁹ By comparison, Guo's Chinese-British identity is reflected in a film such as *She, A Chinese* that expands the topic of the rural migrant to include a transnational perspective of the Chinese migrant.

A Touch of Sin is distinct from Jia's previous work. First of all, it is based entirely on actual national headline news stories and raised significant interest by netizens and online chat forums, most notably Weibo.²⁰ Jia's personal concern with social and economic issues are continuously examined in each of his films but he also often raises these questions on his own Weibo account which has over nine million followers. Although Jia's previous films examine migrant labourers and the impact from rural to urban migration, this is the first time the filmmaker locates his story in four separate regions of China and involves outbursts of violence and corruption. While the film's subject matter focuses on real events in Mainland China, it has an opera-like structure that includes a prologue, multiple acts and an epilogue. Furthermore, it employs the *wuxia* film genre and action pace and animal symbolism by way of the Chinese zodiac to tell the story of modern corruption. A literal translation of the film's title is *Destined by the Heaven* while the English language version pays tribute to *A Touch of Zen* (1971) by King Hu, who is one of the most influential filmmakers to make *wuxia* films, a swordplay subgenre of martial arts. The term *wuxia* is the pinyin Chinese to English translation of two characters: *Wu* refers to martial arts, weapons and artillery. In the Pinyin Chinese-English dictionary, *xia* refers to 'a person adept in marital arts and given to chivalrous conduct in olden times.' (2010: 297). The compound word *wuxia* combined with *pian* (film or movie) encompasses any martial arts film that involves some sense of chivalry. Jia's inclusion of *wuxia* characteristics in his film illustrates the relationship between fundamental violence and the country's social problems. He explains, 'I though[t] these four stories were just like the martial arts films made in the past except that they were set in contemporary China' (Wong, 2013).

¹⁹ Apart from Jia's most recent film *Mountains May Depart* (2014), his films are all situated within China and examine the impact of internal migration on the everyday experience.

²⁰ China's version of Twitter.

The prologue in *A Touch of Sin* begins with a man on a motorcycle riding on a highway in an isolated mountainous region. As he approaches the top ridge of a steep hill, he is confronted by a gang of youths armed with axes and intent on mugging him. The camera circles around the motorcyclist to convey that he is surrounded and without hesitation, he pulls out a handgun from his left chest pocket and kills each one with precision. His final kill is particularly merciless as he chases the frightened young man down on his motorcycle. The gunman continues up the hill on his motorbike. This cuts to an accident scene further up the highway in which a lorry full of tomatoes has toppled over on its side and a civilian is dead on the ground. The man on the motorbike approaches slowly navigating around the loose tomatoes and continues on into the distance. The camera remains at the scene of the accident and in a medium shot focuses on a middle-aged male onlooker in a large brown trench coat biting into one of the loose tomatoes on the road. This man Dahai (Wu Jiang) is the subject of the first story in the film. For now, though, he is simply a witness. All of a sudden, the lorry explodes and the man flinches and pulls his body away from the action.

This opening sequence shows some similarities with Jia's previous films. First, Jia has cast an independent actor Wang Baoqiang to play the part of the hitman Zhou San and he will reappear again in the second story within the film. On the independent cinema scene, Wang is best known for his role in the multi-award winning film *Blind Shaft* (Li, 2003) for which he won a best New Performer award at the Golden Horse Film Festival. Other signature Jia elements in this opening sequence include an illustration of disenfranchised youth in a rural part of China and the issue of migration in relation to the gunman travelling on a motorbike. However, the violence depicted in the prologue hints at much less of the contemplative narrative that Jia's spectators are accustomed to. The pyrotechnics of the explosion are jarring and foreshadow the uneasiness of the film's pervasive violence.

The prologue is then followed by the four central stories. The first is set in Wujinshan, Shanxi Province in Northern China and involves the aforementioned coal miner Dahai (Wu Jiang) who is angry that the manager of the mine illegally sold the business to a private enterprise and stole the profits from the local townspeople and workers. Although his analysis of the situation is most likely accurate, he becomes increasingly isolated from the community when he attempts to expose the corruption. Eventually, he takes revenge on the accountant and the owner of the mine by shooting and killing them in broad daylight.

The second story is based on a gunman named Hu Wenhai from Chongqing who was responsible for the murder of several citizens from different parts of Southern China. In the film, the man Zhou San (Baoqiang Wang) travels alone on his motorbike to cities where he

robs and kills for money. He then returns briefly to his hometown near Chongqing where he celebrates his mother's seventieth birthday and pays a visit to his wife and son. In reality, authorities have confirmed that Hu was shot and killed by police officers. However, several sources reveal that Hu has never been captured and that the body of the deceased belonged in fact to a police officer who was shot by accident.

The third story re-enacts the Deng Yujiao incident from 2009. Zhao Tao plays the twenty-one-year-old pedicure worker from the Dream Fantasy City (梦幻城) bath center at Xiongfeng Hotel (雄风宾馆) in Hubei Province. After rebuffing advances from the director of the local township business promotions office who had come to the Hotel seeking sex services, she stabs and kills the man in an act of self-defence. The re-enactment is told with fable and myths by depicting Zhao as the knight-errant of *wuxia* films and using animal symbolism on numerous occasions. The significance of the actual Deng Yujiao incident relates to the overwhelming support by netizens for the woman. As a result of their response, the actual Deng was granted a fair trial and her murder conviction was overturned.

The final story in the film revolves around the life of youth factory workers and the unprecedented rise in suicides at the Fox Conn factory, the world's largest electronics manufacturer, where big name brands such as Sony and Apple products are produced. This final segment of the film takes the perspective of one young man Xiaohui (Luo Lanshan) who is unable to cope with the monotony of his life as a factory worker and drifts from job to job. When he starts working at an exclusive nightclub, he befriends a co-worker Lianrong (Li Meng) and professes his love for her. However, when he discovers that she has to prostitute herself at the club, he becomes increasingly disillusioned. The story focuses on their friendship and Xiaohui's inability to cope with the corruption, financial struggles and banality of his everyday life.

One defining characteristic of the *wuxia* genre is its heroes who are always on the move. Similarly, Jia's film captures movement of characters and stories from north to south of China along with various dialects and landscapes, from the humidity of the south to the dry dusty winds of the north. Movement can also be imagined in the way of popular media since the stories which are told in the film are well-known due to the internet and Weibo. Although the characters in each story do not know each other personally, they often cross paths en-route to destinations. For instance, a coal miner and friend of Dahai's from Wujinshan is on a boat on the Yangtze River, making his annual visit to see his wife when he speaks briefly to Zhou

San who is on his way home to celebrate his mother's seventieth birthday.²¹ Zhou San then connects with Zhao Tao's boyfriend Zhang Youliang (Jia-yi Zhang) on a bus and when Zhao Tao's murder of the business official goes viral, Xiao hui and Lianrong are sitting together reading the news story on their iPad.

The attempt by the filmmaker to connect these stories together implicitly illustrates the unacknowledged connectedness between citizens of China despite the violence, corruption and lack of communication in a country that consists of the world's largest population and third largest geographical territory. Jia states: 'The biggest impact I think is that now if something happens, no matter where it is in China, it can be seen by people immediately' (Wong, 2013). When it comes to violence that erupts within the country, the film is less concerned with the individual or with the particular news story. Rather, the film poses the question of collective responsibility and an inability to make connections between China's rapid development and injustices and events that have arisen from this historical period.

Li: Migrant and drifter

In *She, A Chinese*, the central protagonist Li represents a bored rural youth who seeks excitement and escape from her reality by migrating from one city to another. Li's character takes the travelling motif one step further: she flees the countryside for Chongqing city but miraculously winds up in London, UK. At the same time, Li's movement often occurs as a result of her personal circumstances and relationships with men. In fact, the chapter titles could be substituted with: 'Friendship and rape', 'Love and death', 'Marriage and dependency', 'Pregnancy and uncertainty'. In the first twenty minutes, Li becomes friends with a local lorry driver who eats lunch at the outdoor café where she works. Li also has a brief romantic encounter with a local boy named Qiang who has recently returned from Shenzhen and who has a reputation amongst his peers that he is a successful entrepreneur. Guo offers distinct differences between Qiang and the lorry driver who is a large, unattractive, uncommunicative man. He drives a lorry but remains within the rural community unlike Qiang who is cool, handsome and lives in the city. Qiang's arrival from Shenzhen sparks Li's desire to leave the village and the objects within the spaces the two inhabit together also signal an urban invasion and disintegration of the rural village.

²¹ Interestingly, this scene is a nod to the opening scene in Jia's *Still Life*. He also recasts Han Sanming holding the same carrier bag when he crosses the boat to Fengjie.

For instance, during one outing, Qiang and Li ride together up a hill on a shiny red scooter. In the foreground is the grassy rural countryside while in the distance a new development is being built. Qiang and Li are two youths riding on a new motorised scooter between these two opposing landscapes, on the interstices of two temporal and spatial events (Fig. 5.1). While most of Guo's film privileges close-ups and medium shots, this long shot establishes the literal encroachment of the city on the countryside. When Qiang confesses to Li that he is not a successful entrepreneur and that he runs a pirated DVD shop instead, she is completely disinterested and lost in her thoughts. While Li focuses on a future outside the village, Li's return iterates the lack of power a rural youth has in a new era of globalisation. As the scene unravels, the two lie down on a grassy mole and Qiang attempts to make a sexual advance but Li interrupts the moment by asking him what kind of tree he would be if he could choose. He is annoyed but plays along by responding 'I'd be a pine tree'. Li continues with 'I'd be a cherry tree. I read a story once about a girl who thinks she is so beautiful. She feels her youth is like the blossom. So she jumps off a cliff.' This line suggests Li's innermost feelings about losing her virginity and her childhood. It also foreshadows Li's eventual rape by the lorry driver which will ultimately impel her to leave her village for good.



FIGURE 5.1: IN A LONG SHOT, QIANG AND LI RIDE ON A SCOOTER WHERE DEVELOPMENT ENCROACHES UPON THE VILLAGE.

Other objects that appear in the story also prefigure Li's migration to London. For instance, when Li's mother attempts to match her with a professional man from the Cultural Bureau, she reluctantly travels by bus to the nearby city to meet him. The middle-aged man Xiao Gao transports Li by bicycle to a local exhibition to show her his photographs of

Sichuan province's devastating earthquake from 2008. He then invites her to pose for a picture in his photography studio and she chooses to stand in front of a backdrop of London's Big Ben clock. Although neither the spectator nor Li are aware that she will eventually see the historical clock in person and live in London, the various sceneries she scans through before choosing this one indicates Li's restlessness within space. In another scene, Li delivers a lunchbox to her father who collects objects in a large waste dump. Here, she picks up a miniature bottle of London's Dry Gin and asks her father where it comes from. He responds 'Europe' and she places the bottle in her back pocket. The image of Big Ben will reappear again when Li moves to Chongqing city and spots the clock on a wall calendar.

Soon after Li loses interest in Qiang, the lorry driver offers to take her to see a new *Superman* film. Once on the road though, he has an ulterior motive and rapes her then abandons her in a field. After this violation, Li decides nothing remains for her in her hometown and she relocates with her friend to Chongqing city to work in a garment factory. She is making a journey through space as much as time as her village is representative of the past and the city offers something tangibly in the present and connected to a globalised era. Similar to the rural youth in the documentary film *Last Train Home*, Li believes that this rural to urban move will bring her more independence from her family and offer her more than a traditional life. However, she is almost immediately fired for her poor performance and abandons her friend to work in a hair salon. Interestingly, Guo casts herself as the quality control manager who silently oversees the garments. Jia also appears in *A Touch of Sin* as a sleazy and wealthy client on a cruise ship sex fantasy boat.

Similar to the spa that is depicted in *A Touch of Sin*, this hair salon doubles as a sex service establishment. The topic of the shady business dealings of salons in China has been addressed in recent years in independent cinema. In addition to the spa in *A Touch of Sin* (2013), the filmmaker Zhao Dayong (from Chapter 1) also explores small business corruption in his first fictional feature film *The High Life* (2010). The story centres on a small-time scam artist Jian Ming who takes advantage of migrant workers by setting up a fake employment agency and becomes obsessed with one of the applicants whom he assigns to work at a local salon. Like Li, the girl comes from the rural countryside in search of work but is quickly pushed into prostitution. In one scene, Jian attempts to rescue his love interest from the shady hair salon business but ends up in jail for other unrelated reasons.

Unlike the rural youth from *The High Life* who is visibly exploited by the hair salon, Guo's film refrains from showing Li as a sex worker and instead it is not entirely clear whether Li participates in any prostitution while working there. Despite this, there are

attempts to groom her when the salon ladies mock Li for her lack of fashion sense. Li is put in charge of cleaning the salon and she spends most of her time smoking outside and obsessing over a young man named Spikey (Wei Yi Bo) who lives in a room next door. Soon she is wearing glossy lipstick, dyes her hair blue and spends time gazing at the reflection of her new look in the mirror (Fig. 5.2). In one scene, Li's growing intrigue in Spikey's dangerous lifestyle is illustrated by the deployment of over the shoulder, point-of-view shots. From their first encounter, the camera is often situated in this manner. The handheld camera work enables more freedom of movement on the part of the filmmaker and so the camera cuts between the POV shots and close-up shots on Spikey's mysterious abrasions on his arms. After watching him from the mirror, Spikey enters the salon to receive a hair treatment by Li. Li is attracted to Spikey's nomadic lifestyle and mysterious gang-related job. Instead of focusing on a conventional narrative of a young rural woman toiling through low-wage factory work or being forced into the sex industry, *She, A Chinese* concentrates on Li's self-willed determination to be independent from the others.



FIGURE 5.2: LI STARES AT HER REFLECTION AND THEN WATCHES SPIKEY THROUGH THE SAME MIRROR.

Spikey represents a visceral and physical intrigue in her life. He carries a machete and often returns from his jobs with cuts and abrasions on his body. Then, after a nearly non-verbal yet very brief and passionate love affair between the two, Spikey returns to his room one night with life threatening stab wounds. He collapses in front of his bed where Li's sleeping and dies. This scene is followed by a slow-motion shot of Li walking on the street showing an uninhibited emotional reaction to Spikey's death. The slow motion shot conveys the depth of Li's grief towards a man she barely knew yet felt a strong connection. Then, on

the surprising discovery of stacks of money that Spikey had hidden under his mattress, Li flees Mainland China. In the very next scene, she has arrived in London UK with a Chinese tourist group.

In his discussion on the metaphors of mobility in the Western canon, John Durham Peters delineates between exile, diaspora, and nomadism. The exile is isolated and longs for the homeland and the diasporic figure imagines a community for people who reside away from their country of origin. In the case of the nomad, Peters states '[n]omadism transcends the notion of a place of origination [and dismantles] the notion of home from a specific site or territory being homeless and home-full at once' (1999: 20, 21). Li and Spikey are independent figures who transcend any conventional or secure notion of home and live in the present. When he is alive, Spikey reveals his violent past to Li and shares his domestic space with her. However, the room itself resembles a temporary shelter. When she enters his apartment, she declares, 'You have nothing. There's not even a chair to sit on.' The only object pasted on the wall is a calendar with an image of Big Ben, once more reifying Li's subconscious desire or destiny to travel to the UK. When she flippantly tears off March from the calendar because it is April 'and you're still living in March', it symbolises Spikey's inability to break away from his past and could also be foreshadowing his premature death.

When Li arrives in London, she spots the Big Ben clock from a boat on the Thames. She immediately separates herself from the tourist group and further demonstrates this desire to create a distance from China and from any notion of home as a specific place. As a concept, nomadism 'allows the construction of an imaginary that circumvents the limitations that are set against identity politics and narratives, and also provides a description of transnational patterns of mobility' (Tay, 2009: 111). She is a young woman who does not speak English or yet understand how to navigate the London streets but her nomadism allows her to move across geographical boundaries. Despite being a fictional story, the heroine's migration from rural to urban China and then further afield to London mirrors the filmmaker's own migration.

Not only do Li and the filmmaker share the experience of moving to London, Guo also explores this topic in her book *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers* (2007). Inspired by Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1979) and written originally in English, the book involves the story of a twenty-three year old Chinese student Zhuang who arrives in London to learn English and starts a romantic relationship with an older British man from Hackney, East London. The story is written in a journal style with each chapter titled with a new word Zhuang is learning and its dictionary meaning. These chapter titles

correspond with the heroine's education into the linguistic and cultural differences between herself and England and between the literal dictionary meaning and how it is used in the everyday. With each chapter, Zhuang's English improves. Not only does Zhuang struggle to navigate through the linguistic maze in London but she also discovers that love is just as complicated as learning a new language.

For Li in London, she must first learn how to survive. She finds temporary lodging in an illegal housing unit where other Chinese migrant workers live but similar to her attitude at the factory and the salon, she isolates herself from other migrants. Soon, she also discovers the logistical barriers of her undocumented status and seeks out a British husband to solve these issues. Guo casts Royal Shakespeare Company veteran Geoffrey Hunt as retired maths teacher and widower Geoffrey Hutchings. Geoffrey is a regular client at a local massage parlour where Li works. Soon after meeting the widower, she spots him sitting at the bar of a pub called Adam & Eve in Hackney. She enters and introduces herself. Geoffrey offers to buy her a drink and she chooses 'only hot water' as opposed to hot English tea thereby reinforcing her Mainland Chinese heritage. Rather than engage in small talk, Li promptly questions Geoffrey as to whether or not he has a bank account, to which he responds in the affirmative. Undocumented migrants cannot open a bank account so this becomes an important goal for the young industrious woman. Despite the significant age gap and the language barriers, in the very next scene the two are standing together in Town Hall with the Adam & Eve bartender present as witness to the couple's wedding nuptials. What this demonstrates is that when Li's nomadic lifestyle is threatened by the limits of her illegal status, she does not waste time and seizes the opportunity to marry Geoffrey. At the same time, she does not put on pretences and unashamedly uses the legal system to help her case to stay in the UK. For instance, during the vows, she sputters out 'Why I may not enjoy living in matrimony with Geoffrey Hunt'.

In Mainland China, Li rejects her mother's wishes to marry a male suitor. Instead she flees her rural life and then China all together. However, the barriers she faces in her homeland are the same in London. In order to maintain her nomadism, she must first insert herself within the institution of marriage. Marrying Geoffrey is simply a means to an end. The relationship proves to be a more taxing experience than anticipated for both people involved. Li resents Geoffrey's civilised demeanour and his personal attempts to normalise the unconventional agreement by focusing his new wife's efforts and hobbies entirely on his own desires and interests. For instance, he does not encourage her to learn English. Instead, she must adapt to his lifestyle, his food preferences, interests and hobbies. At first, the marriage

has benefits for both parties involved: Geoffrey seeks companionship and Li requires a resident visa. However, when Li spots the delivery of a queen sized bed from her bedroom window, she knows that she must either consent to these new arrangements or leave.

Li then seeks out a man named Rachid (Chris Ryman) who runs a nearby Pakistani café and allows her to stay with him in the back of the establishment. Rachid is young, handsome and the two share a mutual migrant identity. Before long, they have consummated the relationship. However, they are culturally divided: Rachid is Muslim and Li eats pork and is not religious. Furthermore, Rachid fetishises his new girlfriend by giving her a traditional Chinese dress to wear when they have sex. This relationship abruptly ends when Rachid announces he is returning to Pakistan. At this point, Li has just discovered she is pregnant.

In the film's final sequence, Li is heavily pregnant, alone and in a foreign country. In London, she has lived in a crowded room with other illegal migrants, in an affluent East London neighbourhood and in the back of a café. Now she is homeless. Rather than view this as a tragic ending, I argue that Li's pregnant body has multifaceted and political implications. As noted above, female agency during the Cultural Revolution meant that women took on masculine characteristics. In 2009, during an era of globalisation, Li could easily be described as a product of a new individualism, as she demonstrates no remorse for having left her family and her new British husband Geoffrey who could have provided her with an economically stable life. However, as a pregnant woman, she:

Challenges the visual conventions that once accorded primacy to the larger-than-life figure of the political leader, the collective body of the working class, and the government –controlled socialist landscape. (Cui, 2016: 58)

Li wanders alongside a busy UK motorway carrying her unborn child and a backpack (Fig. 5.3).²² She is bombarded by the traffic noise and passes by a billboard that reads 'Save the Youth!' indicating that social issues are not just confined to Mainland China. This is followed by a shot of Li walking on a beach. The camera cuts into a close-up of her face, smiling and looking forward. The song playing in the background is Feist's 'Lonely, Lonely' and has a sombre tone, but cannot be so easily read as a symbol of Li's melancholy. Instead, it emphasises her will to forge new frontiers despite the inevitable struggles within China and London and those ahead of her. Similarly, after her one year in London is over, the heroine Zhuang in Guo's book *Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, writes: 'I think of those days when I travelled in Europe on my own. I met many people and finally I wasn't so afraid of being alone. Maybe I should let my life open, like a flower; maybe I should fly, like a lonely

²² According to Guo, this sequence was shot in the East Midlands and not London.

bird' (2007: 325). In *She, A Chinese*, movement from the East to the West is a continuation of the same economic limits for the female Chinese migrant. Despite the continued suppressions of Li's freedoms, this does not impede on her fiercely independent attitude.



FIGURE 5.3: LI IS PREGNANT AND FACES FORWARD INTO HER FUTURE ON THE STREETS OF LONDON.

Female agency in *A Touch of Sin*

Although *A Touch of Sin* and *She, A Chinese* are stylistically and structurally disparate films, they position the rural Chinese female as a dispossessed figure. Moreover, Jia's depiction of the marginalised woman in contemporary China originates from a cluster of real news interest stories that are representative of economically deprived civilians who struggle with corruption in their lives. Along with these legitimate news stories, Jia inserts mythical *wuxia* elements and animal symbolism in order to further articulate the conditions of the rise of violence in everyday China. Historically, *wuxia* is tied to Peking Opera in which women feature as acrobatic fighters and *wuxia* films usually portray women as active warrior figures. Indeed, the martial arts techniques of swift, rhythmic movements are operatic in form. As described earlier, the title to the film is a direct homage to *A Touch of Zen* which is unique within the *wuxia* film movement because it relies on the female knight-errant hero as opposed to the typically male hero convention. *A Touch of Zen* follows Ku, an unambitious scholar and painter who is asked by a stranger to paint him a portrait. However, the stranger's real objective for coming to town is to return a female fugitive for execution. When Ku befriends the fugitive woman Yang, together they plot against the corrupt eunuch Wei who wants to kill

off Yang's family after her father attempts to warn the Emperor of the eunuch's corruption. What is original about the film is that Ku is ineffectual and clumsy until he sleeps with Yang who embodies a power that Ku does not possess on his own. Fittingly, Chinese martial arts (*wushu*) are influenced by the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang in which the boundaries are fluid in duality. This fluidity has in turn made it possible for women in *wuxia* films to be depicted as strong confident heroines.

In his discussion of the *wuxia* genre films of Hong Kong action cinema made from 1965-1971, Stephen Teo argues that despite there being a female knight-errant during the *wuxia* film movement, scholarship on this hero, otherwise known as *nüxia* (*nü* means female) has been vastly ignored or overlooked: 'Apart from Hu's film and one or two others, the films of the *nüxia* movement have generally been hidden from view, remaining unseen for a very long period until fairly recently' (2010: 144). Teo criticises the Shaw Brothers' Studio for not having capitalised on the unexpected success of female-heroine *wuxia* films made by King Hu during this period of strong masculine *wuxia* hero figures (2010: 145). By examining *A Touch of Sin* through the characteristics and gender politics associated with the *wuxia* genre, my aim will be to show how the film is transgressive in its approach to female agency in China. In addition to the filmmaker's efforts to raise questions regarding corruption and the responsibility of netizens to publicly address it, the film also reinvigorates the female heroine through the *wuxia* genre that subsequently revives the pertinence of duality yin and yang forces in contemporary Chinese culture. I will first address *wuxia* elements and animal symbolism in relation to violence in the film before focusing on female agency and the knight-errant figure.

The first story involves a coal miner Dahai in a northern Chinese town called Wujinshan in Shandong Province. He is battling with the moral bankruptcy of corrupt officials in his village. After having sold the local mine to a private enterprise, the miners are confronted with a severe economic downturn. When the mine owner and village chief returns to the town by a private airplane and the townspeople greet him with praise, Dahai takes matters into his own hands and seeks revenge for the loss of his community. In one scene leading up to his revenge, Dahai watches a farmer flogging a horse until it lies down. This animal flogging is similar to the victimisation of the ox depicted in Liu's film *Oxhide I* (2005). The violence stirs something revolutionary in the broken man who has diabetes, has lost his girlfriend to another man and is perceived by the community as a valued member but with an emotionally unpredictable nature. It is one thing to have an opinion about the local corruption but to take action is frowned upon. Before creating rampage, Dahai visits his ex-

girlfriend and she attempts to dissuade him from taking action into his own hands. Here, Jia positions the female as a mature non-violent figure. She is also a mother to a teenage son and her husband works away while she raises him. Despite her attempts to dissuade Dahai from seeking revenge, he has already made his decision. So, in a long brown trench coat, Dahai walks through the dusty desolate streets with a hunting rifle that injects the sequence with Western genre stylistics. Dahai embodies the chivalrous hero. The hunting rifle is wrapped in a towel with the face of a tiger which shows he is breaking away from the pathetic horse symbolism. He brutally murders the chief, the accountant and his wife.

In the second story, the female figure is a passive mother figure. She is estranged from her husband Zhou who travels constantly for 'work'. This is the hitman who mercilessly kills the youth in the film's prologue. What is particularly disturbing about the relationship here is the spectator's pre-existing knowledge of his cold killer demeanour when he is travelling around the country. He robs and kills citizens for money. Zhou's wife is unknowing but suspicious of the continuous flow of money in their bank account and informs him that she no longer wishes to accept his money. However, she holds very little power in a patrilineal structure in which a rural married woman traditionally must rely on her husband financially. When Zhou arrives in his hometown located in the South, the village is filled with locals who have returned to celebrate Chinese New Year. Then, after only a one day visit, Zhao is already setting out on his next trip to an unknown destination, with no mobile phone or identification. Here Jia associates Zhao's disconnect (and ultimate violence) with the forced migration for rural migrants. Zhou is not a chivalrous figure nor does he use *wuxia* swordplay when he commits acts of violence. Instead, he conceals his face and shoots people in the back without remorse. In *wuxia* tradition, the hero is a wanderer and an assassin. Zhou fulfils these two criteria but lacks Dahai's chivalry to his community. He chooses to wear a Chicago Bulls toque thereby insisting his animal totem is the strong bull. In the first two stories, the female characters play supporting roles for the men who commit acts of violence. I would argue though that these women are powerless rather than passive figures.

The first two stories position women as mothers and essentially passive figures in isolated rural communities. Now, the third story involves Xiaoyu, a single woman who works at a spa in Southern China. She first appears in a medium shot sitting at a table waiting for her lover, a married man named Zhang Youliang. This is a bus rest stop and Zhang steps off a coach that has journeyed from Beijing to Southern China. When he arrives at the table, she intends to give her lover an ultimatum: finish with me or end your marriage. She asks, 'Have you told her?' to which he weakly responds, 'I hinted at it.' Xiaoyu explains how her parents

want her have a baby and so this affair cannot continue. The two are planning to travel together via rail from Yichang to Guangzhou. Xiaoyu warns her lover that he has six months to make his decision. When they arrive at the train station, Zhang's fruit knife is confiscated by security officials and Xiaoyu uses this as an opportunity to back out of the journey, leaving him to make the trip on his own. By shooting these scenes at a rest stop of a bus station and then a train station, the couple's relationship belongs to a 'non-place' (Augé, 1995) or spaces of transit in contemporary China. The lack of definition in this reflects the liminal spaces that the couple inhabit when they are in the presence of one another. This decision marks Xiaoyu's attempt to claim her own agency and break away from patriarchal norms.

In Laura Mulvey's famous psychoanalytical approach to feminist criticism, she argues that in Hollywood cinema, voyeuristic activity produces pleasure in looking, thereby positioning male as active and female as passive figures (1975). Through unconscious structures at work during the cinematic experience, the phallogocentric order is enforced while the 'woman is still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' (Mulvey, 1975: 7). The homogeneity of Mulvey's text has been criticised by feminist scholars, most notably bell hooks who argued for a critical intervention of feminist film theory that highlighted race: 'many feminist film critics continue to structure their discourse as though it speaks about 'women' when in actuality it speaks only about white women' (1992: 123). Since then, feminist film theory has expanded its critique to include diverse representations of race and sexuality in the understanding of the cinematic experience.

If we are to examine the Chinese female warrior using Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach, we are confronted not only by a racial difference but the very characteristics that define the warrior presents as problematic. In order for her to fight, climb walls and wander the land, the female warrior in popular cinema seems to contest the conventional roles attributed to her: femininity, maternity, family, sexuality, class, race and age (Cai, 2005). So, when Xiaoyu chooses to take the fruit knife rather than abandon it for her lover, she subsequently exchanges the knife for any chance of becoming the mother of his child (Fig. 5.4). The knife also signifies the sword that she will later be forced to use when she is assaulted at work where she is the front-desk receptionist. Here, Cai illustrates the sets of significations developed within the martial arts imagination:

When the female knight is placed in a domestic environment, her chivalric pursuits create tensions in her gender identity, jeopardizing her status in traditional society. This often results in her removal from family and

motherhood, two institutions that structured, regulated, and gave meaning to women's existence. (2005: 446)

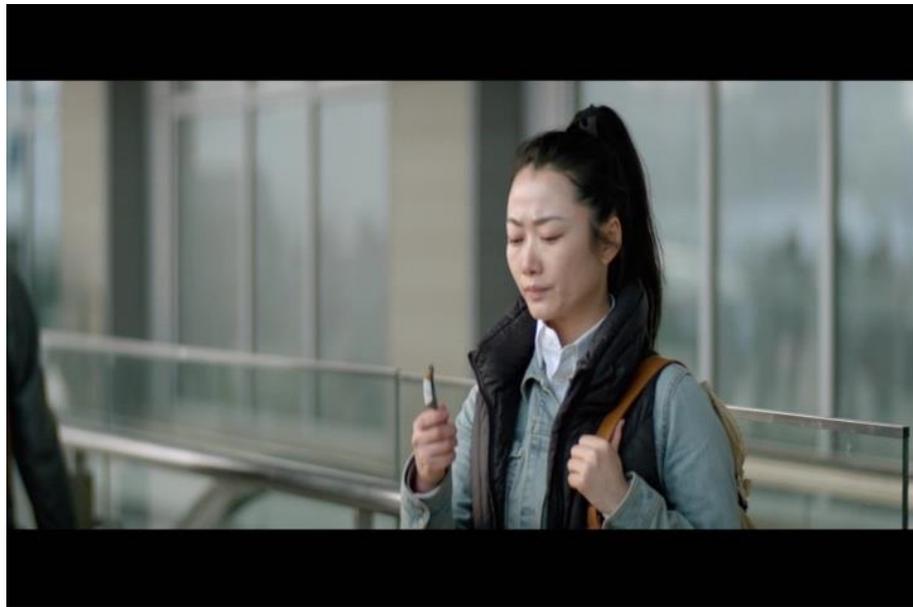


FIGURE 5.4: XIAOYU CHOOSES THE PROVERBIAL SWORD (FRUIT KNIFE) OVER THE MAN.

On the surface, Xiaoyu's rejection of a relationship in exchange for a knife seems to reaffirm conventional paradigms surrounding the female warrior figure. However, she is abandoning a relationship with a married man whose cowardice is demonstrated in his inability to be honest with his wife about his adultery. In contemporary Chinese society, she no longer accepts the role of the 'other woman'. Therefore, she may be punished for her sordid affair with a married man but she has not rejected or exchanged one for the other. Similar to Li in *She, A Chinese*, she chooses to embark on her own journey of self-discovery.

Xiaoyu's character is a fictional account of actual events that happened to Deng Yujiao on 10 May 2009 at a salon of a hotel in Hubei Province. Up to this point, she has been discussed in relation to popular cinema and mythical *wuxia* imaginaries which are categorically different from Chinese independent cinema and its realist themes and aesthetics. The gritty realism and handheld camera work are associated with low budget productions such as *She, A Chinese*. Conversely, Jia's international recognition allows him to produce a film with a larger budget. *A Touch of Sin* employs the smooth control of the Steadicam aesthetic style and uses some recognisable talent such as Jiang Wu who launched his career in Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1994) and continues to thrive in the mainstream cinema industry.²³

²³ Jiang's most recent film *Monster Hunt* (Hui, 2015) grossed approximately three hundred million pounds worldwide.

When questioned about his inclusion of the *wuxia* characteristics and animal symbolism, Jia responds, 'there is no metaphor in this: there is only reality' (Pan, 2013). After providing a detailed account of the event that leads to Xiaoyu's murder of a prominent local official, I will then examine how invoking an archetypal character in a contemporary context surrounding a real-life event provides the damaged yet wilful marginalised rural Chinese female migrant with subjectivity and moral agency.

After leaving her lover at the station in Yichang city located in Western Hubei Province, Xiaoyu returns to her rural home. The film provides a striking difference between the cosmopolitanism of the urban space and the quiet isolation of Yuanshan town. Walking down the main hill into the town centre, Xiaoyu passes a man on a megaphone yelling 'see the holy snakes. See the beauty!' This a traveling performance and the man attempts to entice the locals into entering his van where he promises both snakes and a young beautiful woman. At the spa where she works, Xiaoyu is responsible for welcoming guests and setting them up with the desired services. She gives the customer an option of a sauna or overnight room so it doubles as a sex industry such as the one depicted in *She, A Chinese* but on a much larger scale.

Soon after she arrives at work, Xiaoyu greets a male customer but he does not respond to her. Instead a woman enters and slaps Xiaoyu across the face. Here, she is confronted by her ex-lover's wife who has clearly uncovered the truth about her husband's sordid affair. The man chases Xiaoyu out of the spa where another man is waiting to violently throw her against a vehicle. When she escapes, Xiaoyu passes two female onlookers eating peanuts (Fig. 5.5). By inserting these spectators into the *mise-en-scène*, Jia re-enacts the public's passive ingestion of drama which promotes a disengaged audience. In effect the scene engages critically with our fascination with and creation of spectacle, thereby returning the viewer back to reality with a critical eye. Xiaoyu enters the back of the travelling van and is shocked to discover a young woman in a dress sitting on a chair that is enclosed by a box at her feet. Beyond the box are snakes that slither around the woman who is trapped by both the box and the snakes. The young goddess woman is an idol who is reduced by the snakes that encircle her body. Since she is meant to be seen and not heard, she is also commodity object. To reiterate Mulvey's description: she is 'not the maker of meaning' and plays a passive role in her own life decisions.



FIGURE 5.5: THE PASSIVE SPECTATOR WITNESSES XIAOYU'S BRUTAL ATTACK.

This shot in the van is followed by a shot of Xiaoyu in the salon again completing her night shift. She and the rest of the staff lie around on lounge chairs in a semi-conscious state until a customer arrives and their number is called. At dawn, Xiaoyu leaves and walks up the hill until she has reached a construction site where a new airport is being built and where she lives with her mother. She greets her mother who is washing lettuce leaves outside under a sheltered accommodation. Xiaoyu's impoverished situation contradicts with the cosmopolitan and commercial spaces she has occupied up to this point. Her mother is working on the site and explains that she will leave with the other rural migrant workers when the airport's new runway has been constructed. Xiaoyu and her mother are part of the migrant underclass in China who survive through constant mobility, seeking temporary homes wherever they can find work. Xiaoyu often hitches rides from local airport construction workers who drive company trucks down the hill and into the town centre. Regarding her line of employment, Xiaoyu's mother warns 'You have been there a long time...you know the ropes. If you don't know the ropes you won't earn much'. In other words, she must prostitute herself in order to survive.

In the following sequence, Xiaoyu hitches a ride on the back of a lorry full of local construction workers. The lorry is stopped at a temporary checkpoint that has been set up by local corrupt officials who demand a toll charge to pass into the town. When Xiaoyu's driver refuses to pay without a receipt to show to his employers, a group of thugs chase him down and beat him up. At the salon, Xiaoyu watches a television programme in the reception, stating that animals may have the capacity to commit suicide. When her co-worker arrives for

a shift changeover, Xiaoyu tells her about the programme to which her friend responds, 'I guess they aren't familiar with the saying that it is better to live miserable than die happy.' Xiaoyu then comes to the defence of the animal by stating, 'Animals would disagree.' Here, she is asserting the animal's free will and by siding with the animal, she also aligns herself with the caged snakes she stumbled across the night before.

She then walks away just as two men enter the spa. They are the same corrupt officials who had ordered a toll for anyone passing into the town. Xiaoyu is in the back of the spa when she passes the men in a hallway. They glance at her but she does not take notice and enters one of the rooms where she proceeds to wash her work shirt. The boss of the two men enters the room and politely asks her for a massage. She tells him that she is not a qualified masseuse and closes the door on him. The man reopens the door and informs her that money is not an issue and she can expect a decent tip. She refuses but this only escalates the situation as the man's thug comrade (Wang Hongwei) enters into the situation and is much more ruthless with his approach. He proceeds to beat Xiaoyu with a large stack of one hundred yuan bills while she screams she is not a prostitute and that money cannot buy everything.²⁴ When the man retorts, 'Not a prostitute? Who is then?', he insists that money is the ultimate value in contemporary society.

All of a sudden, Xiaoyu pulls out her knife and Jia inserts the diegetic piercing sound of a sword being drawn. She swivels from right to left and slices the man across the chest. Blood begins to spill out of the deep cut embedded across his chest. The man attempts to flee the room. The camera is positioned from the man's point of view which is of Xiaoyu with a right arm raised and wielding a knife. Xiaoyu operatically twirls the knife in her hand before stabbing him in the stomach and screaming out as she does so. She then pulls the knife out (Fig. 5.6). Typically, the sword is a representative image of masculinity. Here, Xiaoyu is re-imagined as a female warrior as she slices her assailant with 'both *wu* (physical prowess) and *wen* (cultivation and grace)' (Cai, 2005: 450). With her operatic *xia* movements and her scream she briefly asserts her own agency. Xiaoyu then proceeds to exit the salon wielding her knife in warrior preparation mode and walks into the night on her own covered in blood. From the quick slashing to this posture as she exits the building, Xiaoyu embodies the *wuxia* style that balances between a 'pose stilled and a swift attack or defense' (Bordwell, 2001: 82). Furthermore, in *wuxia* imaginaries, a nocturnal backdrop provides opportunity for the unfamiliar and uncanny to happen: '[t]hrough their common link to the yin in Chinese cosmology, ghosts, the nocturnal, and women are allied to become one another's reference.

²⁴ Approximately ten pounds sterling is equal to a one-hundred-yuan bill.

Night is thus a sphere of the feminine...' (Cai, 2005: 452). Xiaoyu passes random livestock in the night as she cautiously manoeuvres her body up the hill in a defensive posture. She then stops to call the emergency services to confess her murder. Inevitably, Xiaoyu pays for her murderous 'sins' and by the end of the film, she is searching for employment in Shanxi Province. At a panel interview, an employer recognises her name. This alludes to the real Deng Yujiao whose murder conviction was overturned by the court after a major public outcry and demonstrations all over the country that called for her pardon. They ask her if 'all of that is behind her now' and she assures them that it is.



FIGURE 5.6: XIAOYU IN WUXIA STYLE COMBAT POSE.

If the viewer is left doubting Xiaoyu's murderous act as self-defence, the next and final story in *A Touch of Sin* reinforces the subjugation of rural migrant women in Mainland China. Xiaohui is a young man who drifts from one factory job to another in Guangdong Province. When he lands a job at an exclusive nightclub, he befriends another girl he meets in the cloakroom. Her name is Lianrong and the two are from the same town making them immediately inseparable. However, he is still naive to the realities of his job as a host and overlooks the fact that the girls must wear costumes and perform for the wealthy clientele from Hong Kong and Taiwan. On an afternoon break from the club, Lianrong invites Xiaohui to join her in a Buddhist ritual in which she will set her fish free. As she drops the fish into the pond she warns him that her line of work involves 'illicit traders. So we have to do a lot of good deeds.' Later when Xiaohui attempts to kiss her, she recoils, confesses she has a daughter and then states, 'there's no true love in sex work'. What is revealed is Lianrong's

desperate situation in which she must prostitute herself to financially support a daughter she rarely sees.

In the scene that follows, Xiaohui crosses paths with Lianrong at work. While Xiaohui provides refreshments for the clients, Lianrong provides the sex service. She is dressed as a conductor and enters a train carriage that has been placed on a stage. Playing the role of a train conductor, a patron is waiting for her and instructs her to address him as chief leader. Xiaohui peeks through the window and watches Lianrong kneeling on the floor in front of the patron. When Lianrong asks 'Where are we going?', the patron sighs and responds, 'Young people nowadays have no sense of direction.' This scene demonstrates the impossible situation for youth and for women such as Lianrong who must perform sexual services in order to support her family. When the actual Deng Yujiao from Hubei Province was initially convicted for murdering her assailants at the spa, she was hailed as a national hero by netizens who flooded Weibo with their comments and outrage about the abuse of power. In one protest that took place in Beijing, demonstrators made banners that read 'Anyone could be Deng Yujiao'. The same universality is exhibited in Lianrong's character, a rural migrant, a mother and a devout Buddhist who is forced to prostitute herself to survive.

In *wuxia* imagination, wish fulfilment of the non-conformist order is realised. In the case of Deng Yujiao, *A Touch of Sin* interweaves her story within the *wuxia* genre which allows the imaginary world to co-exist with the real world. The imaginary world of the *wuxia* genre is particularly compelling in the physical altercation between the spa worker and her attackers because she is armed, in a heroic sense, with a spirit of resistance. Jia does not condone violence but explores a connection between the rise in violence in Mainland China in recent years and the social ills at play for marginalised citizens. In the film's epilogue, the camera follows Xiaoyu as she walks through a crowd standing watching an outdoor Peking opera performance located at the edge of a city wall relic. Here, she walks from the open, dusty terrain toward the staged performance, showing a historical trajectory as she physically moves from the present to the past. In this performance a woman who is in court sings: 'he brands me a murderer. I cannot defend myself. I am forced to confess. My tears flow.' The camera cuts to the performance of a woman crying in court. The judge then slams his hand on the table and asks the woman, 'Do you understand your sin?' The camera focuses back on Xiaoyu's grief stricken face then cuts away to show the whole crowd facing the camera. Xiaoyu has now disappeared but the crowd remains. At the same time that the film confronts female migrant agency, this shot also challenges the viewer to be an active participant of these realities.

While *Touch of Sin* calls attention to the relationship between violence and the impact of China's socioeconomic issues in a postsocialist era, Guo's transnational narrative calls attention to the global and uneven circuit of culture and capital. *She, A Chinese* zooms in on the specific movements of a young rural migrant within China and the UK. More importantly, it reveals the persistence of economic limitations placed on young women in vulnerable coming-of-age situations. Through a transnational approach, the film alludes to the multiple historical factors that have impacted on young Chinese women: China's open door policy since the 1980s, the continued rise in national economic development and the forced rural to urban migration. Along with these factors, the film also exposes the ongoing subjugation and fetishisation of women in a patriarchal structure and economically vulnerable Chinese women in particular, both inside China and abroad.

PART III

Memory

CHAPTER 6

Reconstruction, Embodiment and Memory in Hu Jie's *Though I Am Gone* (Wo sui si qu, 2007)

Some events or historical periods such as China's Cultural Revolution are concealed or remain under-acknowledged in the collective realm. So, Chinese independent cinema, as an alternative platform, helps to revive, expose and re-examine cultural memory through individual testimony.

When a historical event is captured in the moment by the photographic image, it leaves an indexical trace which film theorist André Bazin in his essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' (1967) likens to fingerprints, moulds or death masks. This trace or evidentiary proof of a violent act that impacted on one family during the start of China's Cultural Revolution in 1966 is what Hu Jie examines in his documentary film *Though I Am Gone* (also known as *Though I Was Dead*). This chapter engages with the representation of cultural memory through an alternative site and demonstrates the difficulties in exposing an event that occurred before China's socioeconomic reforms and which the existing Communist Party members would prefer to overlook. Utilising testimonies, legal documents, newsreel footage and photographs, the filmmaker reconstructs and rearticulates the details surrounding the murder of Vice-Principal Bian Zhongyun by her students at the All Girls Beijing Middle School on 5 August 1966.

The central aim of this chapter is to assess how the independent film *Though I Am Gone* contributes to a qualitative change in the way in which cultural memory is experienced in Mainland China. First, I will look at the role of the documentarist who helps to raise questions concerning the gap between the official and unofficial story and the difficulty involved in approaching a historical event that has yet to be thoroughly examined by the government in the public sphere. Not only is there a gap but the cataclysmic events that led to Bian's murder in 1966, connected to Mao's disastrous Cultural Revolution that lasted until 1976, are in desuetude and in danger of being forgotten altogether. *Though I Am Gone* is particularly unique because it provides testimony from various generations (students, administrators and family members) and photographic evidence from Bian's husband Wang Jingyao, a retired photojournalist who documented events surrounding that violent historical period.

In this chapter, I will address the filmmaker's observational documentary style which does not seek to interrogate witnesses or attempt to capture a complete historical illustration

of a violent event in public history. The filmmaker does not appear in front of the camera and allows unrelated material to surface from time to time within the film. However, I argue that the filmmaker deals with the difficulties in restoring and representing a neglected and politically sensitive historical event through a particular choice in the film's setting, its structure and its aesthetic devices. These choices include the privileging of private over public space, an elliptical story structure, the inclusion of still photography and archival footage, intermingling of monochrome and colour filmmaking, emphasis on facial close-ups, camera zooms and slow-motion. Although *Though I Am Gone* is shot in an observational mode, Hu is often heard behind the camera asking his interviewees questions and he frequently eschews long durational takes for a quick succession of images. The film then, does not adhere strictly to observational mode's purest form otherwise referred to as *direct cinema*.

Furthermore, by focusing on the specificities of Bian Zhongyun's life and violent death through personal photographs, artefacts and testimony, the film intervenes at the point where the objectivity of historical fact meets the subjective personal memory for her family and colleagues. As a result, cultural memory is addressed in *Though I Am Gone* through a persistence of subjectivity and haunting emotion that transgresses the unspoken boundaries between public and private spaces. So, through personal testimony and reconstruction of Bian's murder, the film explores the residual psychological trauma that transpired in 1966. At the same time, it exposes the limits of representation when dealing with the subject of personal memory and trauma in present-day China.

Documenting cultural memory

Hu is a documentary filmmaker who, in 1977 at the age of nineteen years old, began his career as a soldier for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This period marks the transition from Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution to the inauguration of Premier Deng Xiaoping's massive socioeconomic reforms that would propel China into today's influential role in the world's economy. In the army, Hu learned the tools of video editing when he was assigned to the propaganda department. Immediately after the 4 June 1989 events at Tiananmen Square, Hu enrolled at the PLA's arts college in Beijing where he studied oil painting between 1989-1991. During this period, he travelled to the Qinlian Mountains in the Qinghai Province and made sketches of the coal mining area. When he became a documentary filmmaker in 1995, he returned to this area to film the lives of these miners. Committing himself to documenting

the harsh conditions for these migrant workers, Hu camouflaged himself by dressing as a miner and shooting underground until the authorities caught up with him and threw him out of the area (Shen, 2005).

When Hu left the PLA, he began travelling around the country filming documentaries with an 8 mm camera (Johnson, 2015). At the same time, he was employed at Nanjing's state-run news agency Xinhua which enabled him to access video and audio equipment that he utilised in his spare time to create his documentaries. After producing and directing several short films based on the everyday lives of marginalised citizens that include matchmakers, custodians, garbage collectors, and miners, the filmmaker spent five years researching and making his first feature length documentary, *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul* (2004).

The film is based on a Beijing University student named Lin Zhao who was imprisoned in the late 1950s for defending the rights of students and intellectuals during Mao's anti-rights campaign. She continued to write letters and poems in prison and was executed in 1968. Similar to the production of *Though I Am Gone*, Hu's documentary uncovers the violence and tragedy of Lin's death through interviews and artefacts. Since the Cultural Revolution remains a politically taboo subject in contemporary China, Hu continued to research her life and record testimonies without his employer's knowledge. Hu states:

Working at Xinhua, I knew how the government likes to keep secrets, and doesn't want ordinary people to know about this sort of thing. But I felt it was too important. In China at that time, no one dared say anything, but one person did. Everyone was scared of death but one person wasn't scared to die.

(Johnson, 2015)

In his third year of research, he was forced to resign from Xinhua when news of his secret project raised concerns by the Bureau of Public Safety (Shen, 2005). *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul* marks the first documentary to record and reflect the historical periods of the anti-rights campaign and the Cultural Revolution in China.

At this point, his work (over thirty films) has garnered attention within the independent circuit and more recently he has become an advocate for other documentary filmmakers and students who feel compelled to record events that are paid little attention to in China's official history. In a university lecture Hu states, 'Go ask your parents and grandparents how they starved, how they took part in weapon fighting in the Cultural Revolution. Go record their words. If we can do this for five years, we will make a great contribution to Chinese history' (Shen, 2005). Like many other aspiring documentary filmmakers in China, Hu produces films on a shoe-string budget and in the past has shot

wedding videos to fund his films. Having recently retired, he and his wife Jiang Fenfen now rely on government pensions to continue his work as a documentary filmmaker (Branigan, 2014).

Although Hu believes that there is more opportunity now for individuals to express themselves and their experience of personal hardships endured during Mao's reign, he has been visited in his home by state security agents on several occasions. According to Hu, 'the police know everything. They know your every move. They call me and say "Teacher Hu, where are you going? We can drive you there"' (Johnson, 2015). Furthermore, this perception that the nation-state tolerates the political work embedded in independent cinema is contradicted by the rising number of independent film festivals that have been shut down by authorities since the 2013 inauguration of China's President Xi Jinping.²⁵ Although independent filmmakers in China have always worked with the knowledge that what they are doing is technically illegal because they don't have official permits, independent filmmakers were able to work quite freely under the radar. There is a strong correlation between the steady rise in the number of films made and distributed since early 2000s and the severe drop since 2013 when President Xi Jinping came into power and when independent film festivals were being (and continue to be) shut down by authorities in Mainland China. *Spark* (2013) is Hu's most recent documentary film and focuses on events surrounding the Great Famine which occurred between 1958-1960 (I discuss this historical event in detail in Chapter 8). Since 2013, he has turned to art with the creation of traditional woodblock prints but he continues to provoke controversy. For instance, his prints depict scenes from personal stories told by survivors of the Great Famine. When his art was scheduled to be exhibited in a gallery in Tianjin, a city located approximately an hour south of Beijing, authorities deemed it too politically contentious and the event was subsequently cancelled (Johnson, 2015). So, there is a possibility that films Hu has made in the past such as *Though I Am Gone* may have been more difficult to make now with the present government.

Wang Youqin who is a colleague of Bian's husband (Wang Jingyao) from the Modern History Research Institute in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, approached Hu about the story of the Vice-Principal's death (Edwards, 2010). Initially, Wang Jingyao was reluctant to be part of the film but this was overridden by his determination to produce a

²⁵ From 2012-2013, every independent film festival in Mainland China experienced disruption by the authorities and/or was eventually forced to shut down or relegated to private screenings. The trend continued in 2014 when the country's most prominent independent film festival held in Beijing for eleven years, was cancelled. This decision was made after authorities shut off the electricity, confiscated documents and held organisers until they agreed to sign a contract promising that they would not open the festival.

historical record of the events which impacted on his family. I would argue that there is also very little evidence in the film that demonstrates any kind of apprehensiveness. In fact, from the start of the film, Wang welcomes the filmmaker into his home and produces comprehensive evidentiary material he has accumulated over the years that includes his own attempt to prosecute the government. Furthermore, he provides individual testimony along with photographs through the years that starts with his early career training as a photojournalist, an intimate portrait of his marriage, the family becoming a target for Mao's counterrevolutionary campaign, the details of Bian's death and the relocation of their children for working on rural farms in 1968. Wang also returns to the family's former apartment before his children were sent to work away from the city and to Bian's school to show where her murder took place. Although the film provides multiple accounts by capturing testimonies from Bian's eldest daughter Wang Xue, former colleagues, the school's former custodian Lin Mang and a few students who witnessed youth violence in Beijing at the time of her death, most of the story centres on her husband Wang and his determination to obtain justice for his wife's murder. In effect, it is Wang who uncovers an unsettling relationship between China's historical past and present and between a citizen and the government.

In China, the site of national memory has been affected in multiple ways by the country's phenomenal economic growth since the death of Communist Leader Mao Zedong in 1976. For instance, in 2003, the construction of the Three Gorges Dam along the Yangtze River was officially celebrated for being the world's largest hydroelectric dam and a national symbol of China's superpower status. Yet, it also resulted in an unprecedented physical restructuring of its natural landscapes that caused over 1.4 million residents to be displaced, over one hundred towns and one thousand archaeological sites to be submerged under water or lost. The country's concerted focus toward the future and hesitancy to properly examine the past has resulted in its inability to memorialise or reconcile with disastrous periods such as the Cultural Revolution. The crimes committed during this era, from public humiliation to torture, displacement and starvation of innocent people, was described by Premier Deng Xiaoping on 27 June 1981 at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China as a 'grave blunder' (1981). Yet, apart from oral testimony and personal archives preserved in the private domain, there exists very little public information about the victims of the Cultural Revolution.

The task of reviving personal memories embedded in the Cultural Revolution has proved especially difficult due to a lack of personal photographic evidence of this time and a rapidly decreasing number of survivors who are willing to tell their individual version of

events.²⁶ Present-day China's paradoxical position oscillates between a capitalist drive since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the sustained Communist rhetoric attached to Mao Zedong's legacy.²⁷ So, in an era where economy threatens to override culture, a film such as *Though I Am Gone* attempts to address national memory through individual testimony and archival traces. It is the witnesses, most notably Bian Zhongyun's husband Wang, who provides the film with documented proof of the injustice surrounding Mao's leadership and his enthusiasm for the youth revolt over the establishment in 1966.

During school hours on 5 August 1966, Bian Zhongyun, Vice-Principal of the All Girls Beijing Middle School²⁸ was beaten to death by her students who formed part of an organised youth rebellion that became known as the Red Guard Movement. This movement was supported by Mao Zedong and his accusations of capitalist infiltration from the highest ranking government officials were transmitted through radio broadcasts in the summer of 1966. The mobilisation of youth resulted in the overthrow of the establishment and a decade long dictatorship that involved public humiliation, property seizures, purging of senior Communist Party officials, torture, murder and eventual transfer of urban youth to rural areas for collectivisation programmes in 1968. Having been publicly humiliated, beaten and left to die in broad daylight at the All Girls Middle School which is located in the northwest area of Beijing's city centre, Bian's death signifies the publicness of the violent act. That there has never been a trial by the government, that the crime took place in public in the capital city's centre and that this school still continues to flourish as an institution that enrolls the province's academic elite and children of the current Communist Party members makes the violence of 1966 and its subsequent cultural erasure all the more disturbing.

The year 2016 marks fifty years since the Cultural Revolution began in May 1966. Despite the mass chaos and violence during Mao's decade long cultural revolutionary campaign, only two museums in Mainland China exist that commemorate this historical period. The first which opened in 2005 is located on the outskirts of Shantou, a south eastern port city in China. Shantou's Cultural Revolution museum is privately funded and is a

²⁶ On 12 January 2014, Song Binbin, a former student and daughter of a prominent member of the Communist Party made a public apology for having witnessed Bian's murder but would not reveal the murderers' names. However, there has not been any sign by the government to investigate further. For more information on Song's apology and involvement in Bian's murder see Raymond Li (2014).

²⁷ Mao's sustained reputation as omnipresent cultural leader of the citizens of Mainland China has also been attributed to the sense of a loss of faith in modern China which is more focused on economic development than spiritual fulfilment. For more on this trend see Matt Sheehan (2014).

²⁸ This middle school, now a co-ed experimental private school, is attached to Beijing Normal University which is located in the northwest area of the city centre.

memorial commemorating local citizens who were punished or killed during this tumultuous period.

The second, Jianchan Museum Cluster, also opened in 2005 but is funded by the government and is located near Chengdu. It offers a much more palatable version of events and boasts the largest museum complex in Mainland China with twenty-seven venues depicting glorified versions of various historical periods in China. Instead of a memorial for those who were killed or severely punished during the Cultural Revolution, the exhibit is filled with thousands of collectible objects and everyday items that correspond with a nostalgic trend toward Maoist propaganda in recent years. Furthermore, in the month leading up to the fiftieth anniversary, the Chinese government banned any public remembrances or activities surrounding the violent decade. At the Shantou museum, the Communist Party covered archways and signs with propaganda banners and posters that read 'Core socialist values propaganda exercise' (Fan and Long, 2016). This is an example of the current Communist Party administration's continued efforts to engage in a collective forgetting of a traumatic historical event and reveals the dangers for people like Wang Jingyao and filmmaker Hu who insist on creating a subjective space of cultural remembrance.

Along with telling the story surrounding Bian's death and her family's reaction to it, in the next section, I will examine how the filmmaker combines an observational style that captures Wang's meticulous investigation into his wife's death with aesthetic devices that address the temporal and spatial gaps in this traumatic memory. Through textual analysis, I will examine how the filmmaker reconstructs and intermingles personal with collective memory surrounding the events that led to Bian's murder and to the start of the Cultural Revolution.

Reconstruction

For the production of *Though I Am Gone*, there are two key issues that arise for Hu in his role as an independent documentarist. First of all, how can he adequately represent a traumatic event that occurred fifty years ago? Second, how does he bring to light an event if it has failed to be examined in the public sphere? Hu relies on witness testimony and material evidence to create historical context and illustrate the people involved including the victim Bian, her husband Wang and their colleagues and family members. In terms of structuring the evidence such as people, places, and documented proof, Hu employs aesthetic devices that work to

represent the intractable event of both memory and death. As stated above, any public discussion of the Cultural Revolution still remains a taboo subject in China. This may explain why much of *Though I Am Gone* is shot indoors in the private homes of the witnesses, family members and colleagues.

The film opens with a close-up shot (in colour) of a pendulum swinging on a clock, then cuts to an old 35 mm photographic camera (now in black and white) held by hands that fiddle with the object until the lens flips out of the leather case. The lens now faces forward in an extreme close-up shot as the hands take a photograph (Fig. 6.1). When the photographic camera clicks, the film's title appears in black lettering on a white screen then fades into a medium shot of an elderly man who is standing by a window in a room filled with books. Similar to a photographer who chooses a shutter speed that will control the aperture's amount of light required to snap an image, the man momentarily adjusts the window blinds, allowing light to filter in then turns and directs his gaze towards the camera. Once again, the 35 mm camera reappears, clicks and then cuts to a three second close-up of a black and white photograph depicting the upper torso of a woman's body. She is lying naked on a floor with her eyes closed and her hair tousled. The still body indicates she could be sleeping but this naked exposure on a concrete floor suggests otherwise.



FIGURE 6.1: IN THE FILM'S OPENING SEQUENCE, A 35 MM CAMERA APPEARS IN A CLOSE-UP SHOT.

This is followed by a return to the apartment and a facial close-up of the elderly man who is now sitting silently on a sofa directing his gaze towards the camera. A caption appears on screen: 'Wang Jingyao, 85 years old. Scholar of Modern History Research Institute, the Chinese Academy of Social Science' (Fig. 6.2). Again, the 35 mm photographic camera

reappears to take another photo which then cuts to a close-up stilled image of the same woman who is now fully clothed and is still lying on the floor with her eyes closed. Like Wang, a caption is superimposed that reads: 'Bian Zhongyun, Vice-Principal of the Girls Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University' (Fig. 6.3). The elderly man whom we now know as Wang is shown from behind shuffling through the apartment, turning on a light in a hallway and walking into a room. At that moment, a voice behind the DV camera (presumably the filmmaker) remarks, 'It must have been traumatic for you, to take pictures of your wife's body.' Wang responds, 'But I was determined to record the truth of history.' It then cuts to a static shot of another photograph of Bian. This time, she is lying naked on the floor with a cloth covering her genitals. Suddenly, the camera zooms in to the photograph and focuses on Bian's naked lower limbs which are covered with bruises.



FIGURE 6.2: A CLOSE-UP SHOT OF WANG JINGYAO.



FIGURE 6.3: A CLOSE-UP SHOT OF BIAN ZHONGYUN.

Apart from this brief interaction between the filmmaker and Wang in the first two minutes of the film, there is no dialogue, intertitles or captions to explain the connections between the woman in the still photographs and the elderly man in his cluttered apartment.

However, the camera's restricted focus on Wang and Bian and the gradual shift from medium shots to close-ups indicates that the story will centre on these two individuals. Furthermore, through Hu's aesthetic choices, there is a heightened sense of temporality and indexicality in the opening sequence. For instance, the filmmaker chooses black and white over colour which indicates a representation of events in the past. The lack of dialogue or communication to the viewer is replaced by both the ticking clock's rhythmic pendulum in the opening shot and the hyperbolic and repetitive click of the 35 mm photographic camera. When this clicking camera is followed by black and white still photographs, they are not nostalgic images of the past. Instead, the still photographs provide an indexical imprint of Bian's still body. In a way, these photographs resemble the Egyptian mummification death ritual that Bazin revives to describe the human desire to overcome death by preserving its likeness through the photographic image (1967: 10). Hu's organisation and circular loop of these images in the opening two minutes of the film — Wang, 35 mm photographic camera, Bian, then Wang again — illustrates a photographic link between Wang and Bian that serves to 'embalm' or hold the flow of time (Bazin, 1967: 10). The two individuals are bound to each other through the photographic camera's ability to stow time away and Hu demonstrates this through the careful structuring of his images.

Following this, the film cuts to a series of photographs taken during the late 1950s and 1960s. There are family portraits depicting Wang, Bian and their three school aged children smiling towards the camera. There are also photographs taken by Wang who was a photojournalist and who documented events such as Mao's Four Cleanups Movement, a campaign to cleanse economy, politics, organisation and ideology which involved intellectuals being forced to the countryside to be re-educated through manual labour. One photo in a rural setting shows a group of men lined up in a row with rifles aimed at their backs by another set of figures. This movement which lasted until 1966 led to the start of the Cultural Revolution when youth mobilised as Red Guards to overthrow the establishment which included educators such as Bian who was a vice-principal of an elite middle school. The historical images Wang captured during his time as a photojournalist are interspersed with propaganda archival footage that depicts youth standing and singing in unison with Mao's Little Red Book in their hands as well as destroying Buddha monuments with a crowd cheering nearby. When archival images of Mao appear in the film, the filmmaker slows the image down, suspending the historical figure in his own separate temporal space. Mao is neither fully in motion nor completely stilled. In effect, he occupies a separate space altogether.

Along with the images and archival footage is Wang's voice describing the atmosphere in 1966 and his wife's situation that grew more dangerous leading up to her death in the summer of that same year. Here, Wang's voice creates a historical context while Hu's quick succession of images and footage provide the professional, personal and propaganda photographs and footage during this tenuous period in China. He also specifies the names of staff at the school who were involved in slandering Bian's reputation which may have contributed to her severe beating that resulted in death. The camera then cuts back to Wang in his apartment showing an official document created by the inspection team who summarised Bian's life like this: 'born in to a big landlord's family, she boasted of joining the revolution with gold jewels.' The camera then cuts briefly to another happy smiling family portrait.

As described above, the opening sequence of *Though I Am Gone* addresses the concept of cultural memory through a mixture of photographic images that include private and public collections. The repeated shots of the photographic camera's body and the scene of Bian's own lifeless body along with the aural magnification of this camera's clicking sound that contrasts with the lack of dialogue or narrative in the opening two minutes, stresses the importance of the visual medium in unearthing the relationship between official and unofficial memory. The filmmaker allows Wang to tell his own story with his own personal collection of images as a photojournalist and as part of the family. However, the film's style is neither an explanatory mode whereby the filmmaker addresses the viewer directly with a well-informed judgement, nor is it a pure form of observational documentary which refers to *direct cinema*, an eschewing of interviews and captions or intertitles for a 'fly-on-the-wall' approach to storytelling (Nichols, 1991: 34-35). Instead, the independent filmmaker's role is to record Wang's personal testimony, to document his own findings and to bring this forensic evidence from the private dwelling to a public space of knowledge. The urgency of recollecting, reconstructing and archiving violence associated with the Cultural Revolution is made more crucial by the realisation that Wang's overwhelmingly large stacks of evidentiary proof will soon disappear with this aging generation of witnesses.

If collective remembrance is located within a context of repression of historical trauma (such as is the case here), then the documentarist's role is to provide material traces that the event happened in the first place. As mentioned above, the opening sequence of *Though I Am Gone* does not offer any explicit information that would allow the viewer to understand the filmmaker's motive. The viewer engages with the images in silence which intermingles an elderly man in a banal domestic space with black and white photos of a naked woman's body lying motionless on a concrete floor. When the camera zooms in to examine

the still photographs in detail, the filmmaker shows how Bian's body was subjected to torture. In his reflections on the photographic image of an intractable event, Barthes explains that 'the trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning' (1977: 30). In these first few moments within the film, the message behind the image of Bian is mystifying to the viewer because there has been no language or context constructed yet. It is only as the story progresses that the spectator can make sense of the violence and trauma in Wang's personal memory. For now, the repetition of Wang, the 35 mm photographic camera and Bian's body represent a temporal and indexical link between the two individuals.

In order to shift a private, individual memory into a public, collective site, the camera follows Wang from the interior, domestic apartment space, into the actual sites where the family lived during the 1960s Cultural Revolution. To demonstrate this shift from the past to the present and from the private to the public realm, the initial black and white apartment sequence closes and then opens in an exterior colour shot as the camera follows Wang through an archway that leads into the old apartment building. As Wang enters the building, he provides a voiceover commentary relating to an incident on 23 June 1966 in which over one hundred students and a school staff member named Yuan Shu'e stormed into the family's home and pasted threatening *Dazibao* or character posters on all of the walls. *Dazibao* are large handwritten notes utilised as a means to accuse and threaten individuals with propaganda slogans. Their origins date back to imperial times and they witnessed a revival during the Cultural Revolution. While Wang is providing an account of the incident that occurred in his home, the film interweaves still black and white photographs that depict the actual character posters which were once pasted all over the walls of the apartment that Wang is walking through in the present tense.

One inflammatory poster reads: 'Hold up your pig's ears and listen carefully! We'll hack you to pieces if you dare act wildly.' Here, the poster refers to Bian as a pig because she 'trembles like a leaf' at school during 'struggle meetings' where her 'mouth is full of mud, just like a pig in the water.' During this period in 1966, Bian and her colleagues were subject to public intimidation and beatings by other staff members and students. The threatening handwritten posters which also depict a figure holding a dunce cap (referring to a re-education of intellectuals) and another with a severed head demonstrates the level of intimidation that Wang's family (and Bian especially) endured during this time. In present day, Wang proceeds to walk up the building's vacant stairwell and Hu asks him to point out the exact angle and position in which he photographed the posters. Here, the camera zooms in on a blank white door and then intercuts an image of the original photograph that he took of

the posters on 23 June 1966 (Fig. 6.4). In an effort to reconstruct personal memory, the present banal space and the past violence depicted in the photographs of the inflammatory posters creates a dislocating temporal gap. As a result, this space of memory is caught between Wang's emotional return to a physical place that evokes traumatic memories and the excavation of the cultural memory's amnesiac space.

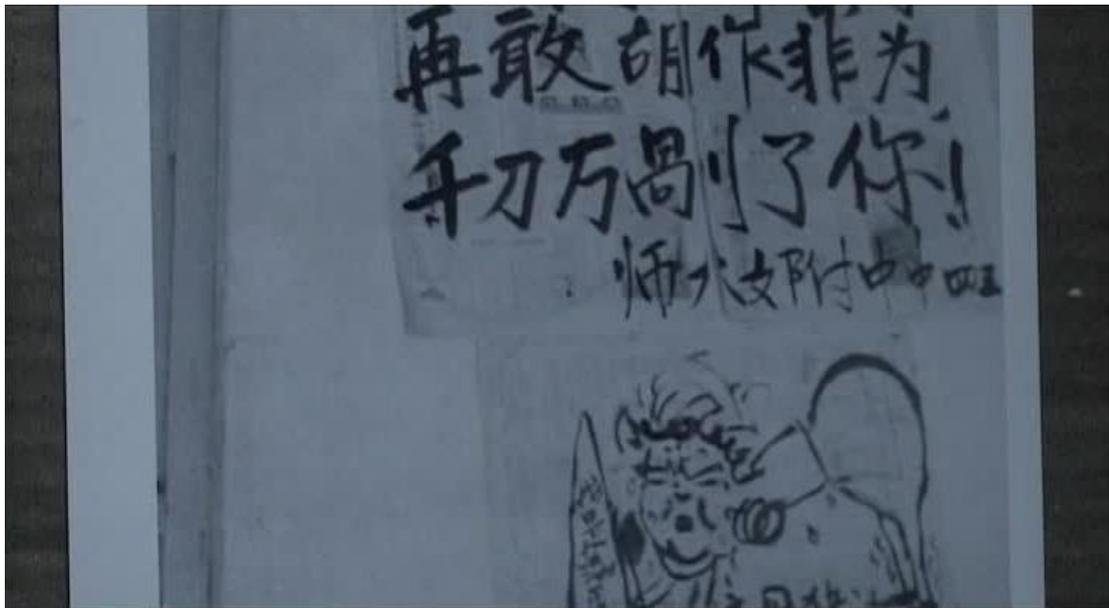


FIGURE 6.4: THE CAMERA ZOOMS IN ON A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE DAZIBAO OR CHARACTER POSTER.

The combination of returning to the old apartment and reconstructing the home invasion that would culminate in Bian's murder less than six weeks later, serves to emphasise the need to uncover and record an event that has been overshadowed by the country's drive toward economic prosperity since the end of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's death. In this scene, Hu reconstructs the past by returning to the original site of Wang's traumatic memories. As Hu shows, in a culture of forgetting, there is no monument or palimpsest of space that bears a marking or trace of the calamitous events surrounding the Wang family's trauma. Instead, it is the responsibility of the filmmaker to reconstruct time through careful editing that produces a trace between past and present. On his writings on the cinematic representation of the Holocaust and the palimpsest of memory within Resnais' film *Nuit et Brouillard* (1956), Silverman describes the filmmaker's aesthetic superimposition of images as a 'concentratory memory - rather than traumatic memory [that leaves an] invisible but ever-present (2013: 46) trace. He then reconsiders the question concerning the ability to contain an event within a particular place or time. Instead, superimposing images or creating a collage creates a third in-between space because of its uncanny connection between present and past. He notes:

The merging and re(e)merging of traces gives us a way of understanding the concentrationary not as belonging to any one time or place nor as a universal phenomenon but as occupying a new space and time in-between the two, composed of overlapping a superimposed sheet of time... (2013: 46)

When Hu returns to the actual site of personal memory, he follows Wang and then juxtaposes the present-day handheld digital video image with the graphic black and white still photographic evidence from the Cultural Revolution. Through Hu's editing strategy, the present-day vacant apartment space merges with the photographs and reveals a silent erasure of cultural memory. In his attempt to merge past and present through digital video and still photographs he also promotes a disturbance and creates a 'time-in between' both past and present temporalities that emphasises the politics of representation while simultaneously producing a haunting presence of time. It unsettles time and the individual's relationship with the event and with cultural memory.

Embodiment: close-up and family portraits

So far, I have discussed the filmmaker's reconstruction of memory in *Though I Am Gone* through an organisation of evidence provided by Wang's individual account and photographs and Hu's return to the family's prior apartment. In both situations, the filmmaker employs aesthetic strategies to make connections between private and public space, individual and collective memory. Next, I will examine the filmmaker's efforts to magnify the emotional affect with the use of the close-up shot during testimony. Then I will explore the haunting, supernatural effect of Wang's family portraits and the photographs of his wife shortly after her death (or beyond representation). Following the thread of an intractable representational image, I will show that even with the meticulously detailed evidence which Wang provides for the filmmaker, there is another kind of excess which exists. This kind of excess, which on the surface provides no determinant function to the story's central objectives is related to Hu's commitment to the concept of *xianchang* which is a defining feature in Chinese independent cinema. Ultimately, these excess characteristics that the filmmaker chooses to include yet also chooses not to interrogate in *Though I Am Gone* reveal an embodiment of memory through excess.

As described earlier, much of the film takes place indoors in private dwellings where witnesses provide testimony. The near total absence of exterior space points to the sensitive

nature of the topic of memory and the Cultural Revolution. In fact, the only exterior shots taken throughout this sixty-minute film occur when the camera follows Wang briefly walking on the street, entering through the archway of his old family apartment and inside the school hallway leading into the bathroom where his wife suffered in the final hours before her death. Exterior shots of the school and surrounding area are shown in still photographs rather than in long durational takes. Since much of the film is shot in indoor settings, it also creates a claustrophobic atmosphere for the viewer which is emphasised by Hu's extensive use of facial close-up shots.

When Hungarian cultural theorist Béla Balázs wrote of the emotive potential of the close-up image in early silent cinema he claimed that because of it, the filmic medium was 'more "polyphonic" than language' (2010: 41). Decades later, Mary Ann Doane upholds Balázs' praise of the close-up by stating how its 'here it is' status 'requires no language' because it 'demonstrates the deictic nature of the cinematic image, its indexicality' (Doane, 2003: 93). While Balázs was referring to the dramatic performances of the goddesses in silent film and Doane uses American cinema in her exploration of the scale and detail of the close-up aesthetic device, I would argue that its potentialities also play a role in the testimonies of traumatic memory. I want to also argue that the close-up offers more than a view into the witness' suffering. Instead of a spectacle of trauma, the facial close-up in *Though I Am Gone*, with its maximum annihilation of depth, captures an embodiment of memory that makes visible an excess of emotion that goes beyond mere testimony.

So far my analysis of testimony has been restricted to Wang's personal experience as a survivor of trauma. Now, I would like to turn to another key witness of Bian's murder: the custodian of Beijing Middle School, Lin Mang. In a medium black and white shot, Lin Mang sits in a chair in a room which is presumably his apartment. As soon as he begins to speak of the torture he witnessed on the day that Bian was killed, the camera zooms into a facial close-up. Lin describes seeing how Bian and another educator were forced to endure humiliation by having slogans printed all over their bodies and their faces with black ink while they were forced to shout: 'I am a capitalist-roader! I am a counter-revolutionary revisionist! I should have smashed my own damned head!' As Lin recounts his personal memory, he immediately begins thrusting his whole body towards the camera, gesturing with his arms and re-enacting how Bian was forced to strike a dustbin every time she shouted self-criticisms. When she did not shout loud enough, the Red Guards beat her with spiked clubs. When Lin pushes his body towards the camera, each twitch or micro-facial movement is magnified and intensified (Fig. 6.5).

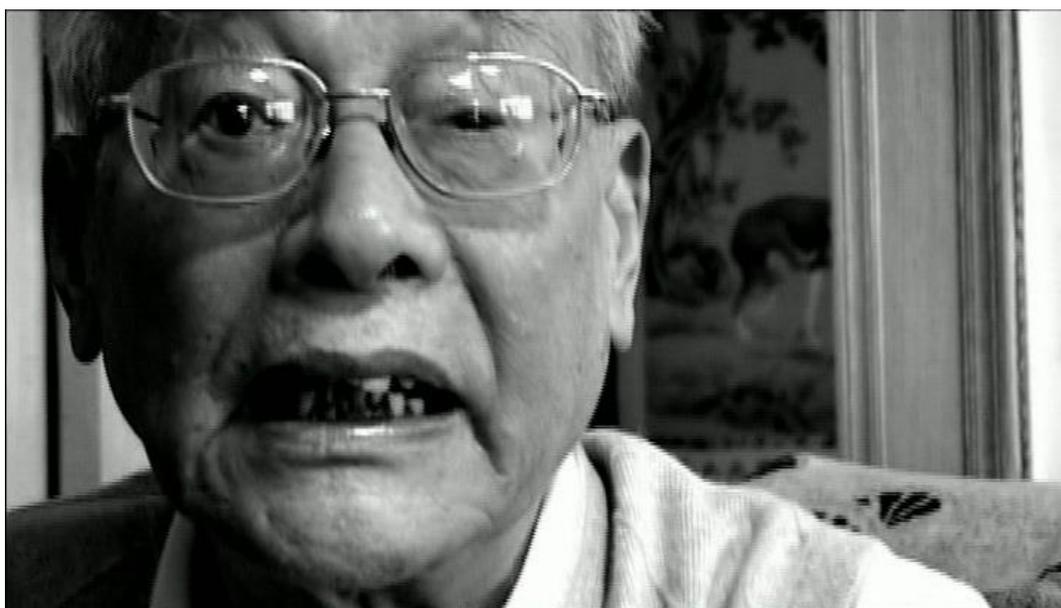


FIGURE 6.5: AN EXTREME CLOSE-UP MAGNIFIES LIN MANG'S TESTIMONY.

Doane defines the experience of the close-up as 'transform[ing] whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence' (2003: 94). The experience is heightened by the close proximity between the camera and Lin's face, the intimacy of his testimony and the interiority exposed by what Balázs defines as a 'microphysiognomy' (2010: 103) of the facial characteristics and gestures. Lin's traumatic memory is resurrected and a 'phenomenological experience' is brought about by the ability for cinema's close-up to transform testimony into more than just language. What is experienced is an indexical image of an inner gaze into the unconscious reflexes of the interviewee.

Here, in the introductory moments of Lin's testimony, Hu chooses a long durational take, focusing on the subject's every movement and his terrorised look directed towards the camera. Lin then describes how he watched the school courtyard scene from a window in the library, as a Red Guard wearing black boots threatened to step on Bian's body and then carried out her threat. This resulted in Bian's fall down the stairs outside the school where she was then trampled on by the rest of the all-girl Red Guard gang. He explains how fashion had changed overnight with girls wearing uniforms and boots for the purpose of kicking the accused 'capitalist-roaders'. Similar to Lin's story, other witnesses recount their surprise at how quickly the Red Guard movement accelerated and transformed girls into violent gangs. The incredible speed at which youth were mobilised is re-imagined through the image of the interviewee who is shot in an extreme close-up, making it impossible to distract the viewer with any action or object beyond the edges of the face of trauma. The viewer's experience of

these micro-movements associated with the close-up is that of an intense phenomenology of indexical presence.

The sequence then cuts back and forth between Lin's testimony in the apartment and Wang's actual presence within the hallways of the original school where he details exactly how his wife was beaten and collapsed here just prior to her death. After the courtyard scene, Bian was forced into the schoolgirls' dormitory. The camera follows Wang down a hallway of that dorm that leads towards the toilet where the gang threw an entire wash basin of water on Bian. Wang states, 'Lin Mang saw Bian supporting her body with one hand against the wall'. The image cuts back to Lin remarking in a close-up how 'there were blood stains on her clothing' and to Wang stating how the 'Red Guards ordered Lin Mang to bring a broom for Bian to clean the toilet'. Lin's testimony is conveyed in an extreme close-up, as he states how Bian had slid down the wall and became unconscious: 'She was still alive, her eyes full of whites.' The camera then cuts back again into the school toilet and zooms onto an extreme close-up of a bathroom sink tap that was utilised in Bian's torture. This is followed by a shot of Lin explaining how 'there was foam and traces of blood at her mouth and she was twitching.' Eventually, the Red Guards ordered this school custodian to carry Bian out of the building and toss her body into a dumpster. Lin then explains that they burst out laughing because 'a living Rightist [was] carrying a dying capitalist roader.' In this sequence, the close-up detail of Lin's face along with his testimony creates an embodiment of memory. At the same time, by including Wang in the interview and by shifting between the apartment and the school, the event is revealed in graphic and forensic detail. With his editing, he also visually transports Lin's trauma from the interior domestic space to a public space.

So, what kind of emotion is being stressed by this close-up shot and by this interview with the school's custodian? In one respect, the close-up shot reveals a tear behind Lin's eye glasses which may participate in the melodrama and effect of the trauma he has experienced. The close-up aesthetic recalls Zhang's article on the melodrama inserted in recent activist documentaries of Mainland China (2015) that I also argued for in Chapter 1 on *Street Life*. However, Lin's participation (albeit forced) in the death of an innocent person to which Hu has been investigating throughout the entire film also points to an inquiry into the truth of his testimony. This testimony is juxtaposed with Wang's return to the scene of the crime and in effect, pushes for detailed evidence surrounding Bian's final moments before she died. At one point, when Hu asks Lin why he was standing at the window of the library watching the violence unfold on the street, the custodian aligns himself with the other staff members who were too afraid to confront the female students. Hu's interview is thorough and attempts to

revive the truth with both testimony and re-enactment. At the same time, Hu's use of the close-up shot demands to be read as an inquiry into truth. The close-up shot of the human face is the site at which the subject is seen but cannot see himself/herself. So, while the close-up creates an 'experience of presence, simultaneously, that deeply experienced entity becomes a text, a surface that demands to be read' (Doane, 2003: 94). Just as Hu helps Wang recover and uncover truth by recording testimony and re-enacting Bian's beating, so too does the aesthetic use of the close-up image, 'a surface that demands to be read' (Doane, 2003: 94) manifest into an embodiment of presentation. It produces an overwhelming emotional affect and it also acts as a silent interrogative force at the moment that Wang attempts to articulate his testimony.

Along with the embodiment of memory through the close-up, Hu inserts themes of time and death with the 35 mm photographic camera and Wang's family portraits. As already mentioned, the film opens with a repeating pattern that links Wang, the 35 mm photographic camera and his wife Bian. Due to the absence of dialogue or voiceover in this opening sequence, the relationship between these figures has not yet been established. So, the viewer's knowledge is constructed by a flow of documented evidence by Wang to the filmmaker. What the viewer discovers is that Wang snapped the photos of his wife on the concrete floor of a crematorium soon after she was killed.

In his book *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes investigates the essence of photography and the emotional impact it has on the spectator. Mourning the recent loss of his mother, Barthes positions himself as an object of inquiry as he observes portraits of her when she was alive. Here, he reflects on the historiography of photography and the fact that the photographic medium emerged as the interest in religious death rituals were in decline. What he suggests in this association between religion and photography is that the theme of death and the supernatural embedded in the death ritual was replaced by the deathbed photograph in the nineteenth century. As a result, photographers unintentionally also capture death while trying to imitate life through the indexical marker of photography. Barthes explains:

Photography may respond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an symbolic death, outside of religion, outside of ritual a kind of abrupt dive in to literal death. Life/Death; the paradigm is reduced to a single click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print. (1981: 86)

The photograph is proof of life. Yet when Barthes observes photos of his mother, it also simultaneously marks her death.

In the context of Wang's situation, the photographs taken of his wife at the crematorium in the summer of 1966 do not inadvertently or symbolically capture death by shooting life because Bian is already deceased. Neither does this situation emulate Barthes' description of deathbed photography in relation to religious rituals. Instead, Wang's consciousness-raising photography captures the proof of his wife's death at the hands of her torturers who committed a violent public act that is still shrouded in anonymity. Even Wang and the other witnesses do not or cannot name the Red Guards who were responsible for Bian's death. Also, the repeated clicking and showing of the 35 mm camera along with the clock's rhythmic pendulum throughout the film addresses Wang's inability to move forward. Hu's elliptical documentary structure that oscillates between past and present documentation does repeatedly 'dive in to literal death' (Barthes, 1981: 86). Unlike Barthes who is in the process of mourning his mother's death, Wang has never been granted the right to mourn his wife's death in public because it remains a taboo subject in China. Therefore, this aural and visual repetition throughout *Though I Am Gone* and the constant temporal juxtaposition between images depicting the past and present illustrates Wang's personal engagement with Bian's death and his inability to accept it or adequately be able to mourn the event.

When Sontag states, 'photography is essentially an act of non-intervention' (1977: 11), she is referring to the role of a photojournalist. Yet, she also states that the photographic image bears 'witness to the real—since a person had been there to take them' (2003: 26). As a photojournalist in the 1960s, Wang travelled to the countryside taking photos of the Four Cleanups Movement in which intellectuals were shipped to rural towns to re-educate through manual labour. Hu juxtaposes one of Wang's photographic 'act[s] of non-intervention' with a photo he took of Bian at the crematorium. The treatment of intellectuals during the Four Cleanups era was a precursor to the Cultural Revolution which began in Beijing in the summer of 1966 and led to an estimated 1,800 peoples' deaths between July and August in the capital city alone (Philips, 2016). When Hu places Wang's photo of the movement next to a photo of his wife's lifeless body, it is at this moment that the traumatic event transforms Wang's photojournalism into an act of pure intervention because it is both a personal and political act. Knowing that Wang is the maker of these disturbing photographs taken merely hours after Bian's murder also effectuates an emotional response. However, Sontag also acknowledges that 'there can be no evidence, photographic or otherwise, of an event until the event itself has been named and characterized' (1977: 19). So, while Wang's photographs do punctuate a personal truth in his story, the lack of official discourse makes it impossible for him to reconcile with the trauma he and his family have endured since Bian's death.

This failure to reconcile with the traumatic memory is also reflected in Wang's family portraits which have an uncanny effect that haunts the image. In the following paragraphs, I will aim to demonstrate the uncanny effect and emotional magnitude of these family portraits. In his essay *The Uncanny* ([1925] 1955), Sigmund Freud wrestles with the contradictory sensation of familiarity and unfamiliarity pertaining to objects that resemble us but make us feel uncomfortable or threatened if we look at them for too long. For instance, we eventually become estranged to a photo of ourselves because it questions our own 'aliveness'. The paradoxical feeling of fear and familiarity by an image of ourselves in a photograph or in front of a mirror is defined by Freud as the 'uncanny'. The uncanny can also be read in the paradoxical relationship between indexicality and the magical properties imbued in the photographic image.

For instance, Mulvey's re-examination of Barthes' and Bazin's ruminations on photography and cinema (respectively) reveals a common thread that runs through their work despite their different subject areas. What arises is the question of the uncanniness of the supernatural quality alongside an insistence on the image's mechanised indexicality. She states, 'For both Bazin and Barthes, the photograph's beauty and emotional appeal, lies in its "thereness" the fleeting presence of a shadow, which is captured and saved' (2006: 56). For Bazin, the 'thereness', or its association with temporality is inscribed in the moment the camera's rays of light capture the presence of the object or subject which 'embalms time' (1967: 14). Here, Bazin uses the example of the family album to articulate this suspension of time: 'Those gray or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost indecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny' (Bazin, 1967: 14).

Similarly, Barthes' reflections on still photography and the 'thereness' quality indicates a dislocation (albeit linguistic) between past and present tense and between presence and absence. In his early writings, he considers the impact of photography on consciousness, concluding that the photograph is 'an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then' (1977: 44). As already stated above, Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is also a personal eulogy to his mother so his writings indicate this irretrievable loss. His relationship to photographs of his mother also becomes a heightened tension between presence and absence: 'it has been here and immediately separated; it has been absolutely irrefutably present, and yet already deferred' (Barthes, 1981: 77).

Both Bazin's and Barthes' reflections on the ontology of the photographic image allude to a disturbance or tension in this paradoxical association between the mechanical

objectivity and authenticity and a recognition of death. According to Bazin, it is a recognition of death in suspension of life but also 'destiny' (1967: 14), which may be associated with his Catholic beliefs in the afterlife. To Barthes, he mourns the fleeting moment of time depicted in a photograph of his mother when she was alive. In *Though I Am Gone*, it is the family portraits that accurately illustrate Bazin's and Barthes' meditations on the tension between objectivity and the recognition of loss or death. While the photographic images of Bian in the crematorium point to the violence she endured and the emotional magnitude attached to her husband as the photographer, the family portraits show the historical shifts and subsequent divisions between public and private memory.

For instance, the Wang family portraits are taken both before and after Bian's death. Wang shows Hu several family portraits that include Bian when she was alive and smiling with her family and that also illustrate the unheimly absence after her death. Those family portraits that Wang took after her death have an *unheimlich* or unheimly effect to them. First of all, not one member is smiling. Despite Bian's physical absence in the photographs after her death, the family gathers around a framed picture of her. In one family portrait, Bian's photograph is on the wall. In another, the family members congregate in front of a bookcase. The bookcase has two doors opened on either side and Bian's photograph is situated inside the bookcase. During the ten year long Cultural Revolution, it would have been dangerous to display a photo of Bian in the home because she was labelled as 'a capitalist roader' or a traitor to the communist movement. So, the bookcase provides a way to conceal her portrait from the public. These family portraits inform us of the strange reality surrounding Chairman Mao's powerful rhetoric that negatively impacted on the family unit. Wang's insistence on taking these photographs after his wife's death is considered very risky. At one point, Hu selects a series of family portraits in a row, while Wang provides a description of their historical context in voiceover. It begins with the repetition of the camera's clicking then opens with a black and white photo Wang posing beside his late wife's portrait. This is followed by a family portrait with Bian's photograph situated centre-background on a bookcase (Fig 6.6). Typically, after death, the body is cremated and an ash box is placed on a mantelpiece to commemorate the deceased. In this case however, Wang explains, '[t]here was nowhere to place her ash box, because she had been condemned as a "black gang", enemy of the people.' So, in memory of Bian, the family portraits show Wang and his children posing in front of her portrait that is carefully situated in the family shrine, in the middle of the bookcase. Wang notes, 'When closed, it looked like an ordinary bookcase. When we were alone, we kept it open.' The shot of an old family portrait is followed by a shot of the elderly

Wang near a bookshelf in his present apartment. Wang's portraits attempt to memorialise a mother and wife while Hu's camera attempts to revive it from private into a public space of mourning.



FIGURE 6.6: A HAUNTING PHOTOGRAPH OF THE FAMILY AFTER BIAN'S DEATH.

At first glance, Wang's photographs which were hidden away (along with Bian's portrait) during the Cultural Revolution forced the family to commemorate her memory in a private setting. However, the ritualistic staging of these family portraits also resembles the ritual of public burial gatherings. As I have already mentioned, Bazin compares the photographic image to the Egyptian mummification process of loved ones after death. Barthes goes further by suggesting that the Egyptian death mask was replaced by the advent of visual technology in the form of deathbed photography. This kind of staging is also seen in Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989). A historical Taiwanese drama, this multi award-winning film tells the story of the terror endured by those who migrated from Mainland China in the late 1940s to Taiwan after Japan was defeated at the end of World War II, effectively terminating its colonial rule over Taiwan. The film's main character Wen-ching (Tony Leung) is a photographer who is also deaf and so Hou uses the absence of sound and the photograph to demonstrate the tensions embedded in the representation of this cultural event. In the beginning of the film, family portraits taken by Wen-ching just before the family's move to Taiwan 'serves to capture an image from a vanishing present and to preserve a visual record of relationships soon to be severed' (Ma, 2008: 102-103). Later in the film, after the murder of one of the members of the family in Taiwan, there is another portrait taken at the funeral pyre thus suggesting a link between

photography, death and historical memory (Fig. 6.7). Similar to Wang's family portrait in *Though I Am Gone*, a group gathers together with a photograph of the deceased. However, their ability to mourn the loss of Wen-heung (Sun Young Chen) through a public memorial is unlike Wang's family.



FIGURE 6.7: WEN HEUNG'S FUNERAL RITES RITUAL IN *A CITY OF SADNESS* (HOU HSIAO-HSIEN, 1989).

There are some stark differences in context and meaning in these portraits. First, the ritual in *City of Sadness* takes place at a public burial site and second, the character is shot holding the portrait of the dead. Bian's portrait is positioned in the centre of the group and her smiling expression contradicts the solemn faces belonging to her family members. During the Cultural Revolution, traditional funeral customs and funeral specialists were banned for the entire decade (Whyte, 1988: 300). Shrines dedicated to family members were replaced by Chairman Mao's portrait (Whyte, 1988: 300). Religion was also taboo and Mao's Little Red Book became the religion. So Wang's continuous photographic documentation of his family portrait during this period of great anxiety and violence carries an incredible risk and would have been rare. Unable to publicly mourn this loss, each portrait becomes an attempt at a deathbed photograph.

In addition to Wang's insistence on memorialising his wife's death during the Cultural Revolution, he also reveals his personal fascination with Christianity. Even though Wang is a self-professed atheist, he relates his personal trauma and his wife's death to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Hans Belting discusses the historical role the image in the cult of death plays and points out that 'images preferably three-dimensional ones, replaced the bodies of the dead, who had lost their visible presence along with their bodies' (2005: 307). Just as the ritual

staging of the family portraits help to reintegrate the dead into the community of the living, so too does Wang's fascination with Christian icons contribute to keeping Bian in the present. For example, at the beginning of the film when Wang is showing a photograph of a wisp of smoke coming out of the crematorium, he explains that his wife's 'tormented soul turned into a wisp of smoke'. Later in his apartment, the filmmaker questions Wang's interest in Christianity and he draws a comparison between the weight of his wife's memory and the cross he has carried for forty years. The camera zooms in on religious iconography that clutters his apartment bookshelves and walls. Then, at the end of the film, he lays out objects on a table: Bian's watch, her party badges and a book containing Michelangelo's famous sculpture of the Pietà which depicts Jesus being held by his mother after his crucifixion (Fig. 6.8).



FIGURE 6.8: WANG'S RELIGIOUS DISPLAY OF CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY.

The material excess and the abject

While the photographs in *Though I Am Gone* are key pieces of evidence in Wang's case against the government, there are additional artefacts that create an affective embodiment of memory and death. Furthermore, the film builds emotional tension attached to these artefacts by dropping narrative hints through personal testimony. For instance, Wang describes the morning Bian left for work for the last time and hints at the possibility that his wife was aware of the gravity of her situation because she was adamant on bathing herself that week. Halfway through the film, Wang's eldest daughter Wang Xue discusses the moment in 1966

when they entered the morgue. According to Wang Xue, her father dropped to his knees and tore apart a bamboo sheet in his grief when he discovered his wife had urine and excrement on her clothing as a result of the severe beating she had received. Later in the film Wang reads out a letter sent anonymously in August 1966 by a teacher of the school who describes witnessing the moment his wife had lost control of her bodily fluids when being beaten by the students. Finally, in the film's climax, Wang produces a bag that has been sealed since her death. For the first time, Wang unveils the pieces of clothing worn by Bian which contain the mud, blood and excremental remains (Fig. 6.9).



FIGURE 6.9: WANG UNVAILS A MATERIAL TRACE OF HIS LATE WIFE'S CLOTHING.

Sobchack argues that despite all of the transformations we see in film of the lived body, witnessing the subject at the moment of death still remains taboo (2004). This taboo also extends itself to bodily excretion that 'challenges both the unity and security of the subject [...] that indexically point to and foreground the essential mystery of being and non being (2004: 232). Bian's memory is contained within the material excrement that was, to her, the ultimate act of public humiliation. So far in *Though I Am Gone*, traces of memory include photographs, archival footage and testimony. The hinting and then unveiling of this bodily material for the first time since 1966 creates a shocking validation of Bian's suffering. These bodily fluids and excrement become the death masks that revive both the subject in the afterlife and the horror in the way she died. According to Kristeva, an abjection occurs when a human reacts involuntarily to a situation that causes a breakdown of meaning and results in a loss of distinction between self and other. As Kristeva puts it, '[a]bjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a

body becomes separated from another body in order to be' (1982: 10). Bian becomes the doubly abject figure: first, as a corpse in the crematorium and second, through the excremental remains of her bodily fluids.

While death exceeds the limits of representation and collapses all meaning into a 'pre-objectal' (Kristeva, 1982: 10) relationship through abjection, the traumatic experience of death is enveloped in the viewer's awareness that the photographer, who is also Bian's husband was present to take pictures of her corpse. Furthermore, Wang is a man who has been fighting for forty years against the government to bring justice to his wife's killers and the enclosed spaces of his small apartment are cluttered with books, stacks of legal paperwork and religious icons. As I have illustrated, there is overwhelming evidence—realistically, aesthetically and thematically—that Wang's continued obsession with every detail of the case is consistent with the traumatic memory of Bian's untimely death. Almost every single scene is dedicated to articulating the trauma in meticulous detail. However, there are moments that stand apart from this obsession with the reconstruction and embodiment of memory.

After fifty minutes of forensic investigative work that shows Wang's unwavering dedication to find justice for his wife, Hu chooses to include a scene in the film that conveys his own efforts to preserve the authenticity of the moment, in the spirit of the concept of *xianchang*. Wang is sitting on his sofa and states how his children see things differently because of their experience with corruption and death. He states: 'If I did not tell the truth, then my life would be meaningless.' It cuts briefly to a shot that observes Wang swallowing his medication then to a shot of him sitting at his kitchen table with a bowl of soup. The camera is positioned at one end of the kitchen and points toward Wang who is sitting next to a doorway that leads into a hallway in the apartment. All of a sudden, a woman saunters in with a bowl of rice and places it next to Wang. No words are uttered between them and the camera cuts in to an extreme facial close-up shot of Wang who declares that this is his second wife. He goes on to mention that his wife is supportive of his motivation to find justice for the death of his first wife. When Hu asks him how long the two have been married, Wang responds, 'thirty years'. Since Wang's second wife has been absent from the entire film, her late entrance is immediately jarring. However, by including elements that are in excess of the central objective, Hu creates a more realistic depiction of everyday life.

Though I Am Gone combines cinema and photography to comment on the presence and absence of the subject in memory. As Doane observes, these two visual media 'produce the sense of a present moment laden with historicity at the same time that they encourage a belief in our access to pure presence, instantaneity' (2002: 104). Both photography and

cinema have the representational capacity to capture the fleeting moments of historical events and in this case, the haunting quality of death in life. So, the ritualistic component in Wang's family portraits seems to endow Bian (who is absent) with the presence of those living despite the inability to commemorate this moment in a public setting. In Bazin's formulation of the 'mummy complex', the act of embalming a human being, he recognises the unparalleled capacity for photography to preserve life in the image and a drive to deny death so that it has 'the last word in an argument with death by means of the form that endures' (1967: 10). Similarly, the repetitive image of the camera lens and the clicking sound it makes in *Though I Am Gone* raises the status of the photographic image. With the aid of Wang's photography and the film's incorporation of Bian as subject throughout the story, the film shows the central role of death in the rewriting of national history.

Here, history and memory emerge as countervailing resources against the amnesiac culture of the Chinese government's capitalist agenda. By returning to the locations where the violent event took place, the film captures both the need for making it public and simultaneously reveals the gap between individual and collective memory. It refuses to conform to reductive definitions of cultural memory and instead raises questions about the meaning of the subject as the very end of representation. The irreparable loss of this mother, wife and vice-principal along with the photographic juxtapositions created by the filmmaker through editing exposes the limits of documentary discourse on the theme of death and mourning. However, the explicit focus on intimate photographic and oral retelling of Bian's death promotes a space of public commemoration for those individuals who were affected by this event. Furthermore, it is the film that testifies to the truth of the materiality of Bian's body. Chinese independent cinema gives voice to individual memory while also revealing and articulating the troublesome nature of representing and returning to historical spaces. Those who feel the need to oppose official memory and risk punishment do so in fear of the annihilation of memory. What Hu Jie creates in China is a part of a broader set of activist aesthetics that are beginning to emerge through the creation and continuation of unofficial personal testimony.

CHAPTER 7

Testimony and Re-enactment in Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (Er shi si chengshi, 2008)

This chapter seeks to explore the fabric of Jia Zhangke's construction and framing of migrant testimony in his documentary film *24 City*. The film is predominantly set within a gated community in southwest China's urban city centre of Chengdu. Built in the 1950s during the Korean War, this compound housed nearly one hundred thousand people, thirty thousand of which were employees at a top secret military armaments factory called Factory 420. As a self-sufficient community that comprised of a local hospital, shops and schools, the residents were born, raised and worked inside the walls that lined the perimeter of this micro-city and blocked itself off from the rest of Chengdu. Now, *24 City* records testimony by previous employees and their children while simultaneously capturing the dismantling of the factory and the surrounding apartments and buildings. The title of the film *24 City* suggests a temporal link. However, it refers to an ancient poem about Chengdu city's connection with the hibiscus tree that was once said to have spread as wide as twenty-four cities.²⁹ More importantly, it is the name given by the private developers to the new complex that will be constructed by the end of the film. So, naming the film *24 City* illustrates how the factory's demolition is already a foregone conclusion.

Although *24 City* employs an observational method that includes the filmmaker's lack of presence and filming on location in the actual Factory 420 space and its surrounding community, it is also a highly constructed and stylised documentary. It shoots witness testimonials in large vacant rooms within the factory, employs static shots, smooth tracking shots, long durational takes and music with an elegiac tone. However, it is also a film that is imbued with ambiguity and one which raises questions about personal and collective memory for the domestic migrant worker. This ambiguity is further emphasised with the incorporation of testimony from both real factory workers and professional actors. By moving beyond a rhetoric of objectivity, the film produces a tension between presentational and representational strategies in order to address cultural memory. This entanglement of documentary and artifice also runs parallel with the film's relationship between its official and unofficial storytelling.

²⁹ The number twenty-four in China also carries significance because there are twenty-four solar terms in a year and twenty-four hours in a day, all of which expresses circulation and energy of life.

After a short historical introduction of Factory 420 and the making of *24 City*, I will first address the film's chronological format that starts with the factory's closing, progresses into a record of its demolition and then shifts toward a new city which exists only in the form of a miniature-sized model by the film's conclusion. Through the camera's careful observation of the event, it overtly captures the nostalgia associated with the national history of the armament industry and celebrates the future model of technology and economic growth. At the same time, it subverts ideological documentary codes and conventions to show tension between representation and presentation.

Then I will examine the camera's deliberately constructed framing of testimony and its use of the frontal pose which disavows the naturalism of a snapshot. I argue that the careful framing and intermingling of actors and real factory workers suggests a provocation of the viewer from the filmmaker. These testimonies which involve citizens whose ages span across several decades give agency to the migrant worker. Yet, there is also an ironic playfulness brought about by the *mise-en-scène* and the mixture of professional actors and real factory workers. This acts as the film's meta-communicative tool for questioning that same agency. In effect, *24 City* examines the difficulty in representing a cultural subject — in this case the Factory 420 worker — who both belongs to and is alienated from Chinese national history. In doing so, I argue that the film not only raises questions about the portrayal of a marginalised subject in national history but also highlights Chinese independent cinema's contribution to the ongoing debate concerning the question of memory and representation in contemporary China.

Factory 420 and the making of *24 City*

During the Korean War and under Chairman Mao's labour directives in the 1950s, over four thousand engineers and technicians from Factory 111 in Beijing were recruited to build Factory 420 and live within this enclosed community. Since that time, the factory has recruited more workers from other parts of the country to live and work within its micro-city that also consists of a hospital, schools and shops. Although Factory 420 is located in the city centre and next to Sichuan University, many of its original inhabitants never stepped outside the gates of the factory grounds. At the end of China's Cultural Revolution and the beginning of a new economic era in the 1980s, the factory switched from aircraft armament manufacturing to consumer appliances and managed to stay afloat until 2007 when the

property developers China Resources Ltd acquired it from the state. The development of this micro-city work unit from the 1950s reflects the Party's continued ideological aspirations that combine labour, security and communal values.

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Chinese migrant labourers must relocate from their hometowns to cities to find employment and do not have the required household registration permit (*hukou*) to live where they please. Instead, they often live in dormitories attached to their place of employment. What is unique about Factory 420 is that an entire self-sufficient micro-city was built around the workplace and the migrant labourers belonged to what is called a *danwei* or work unit. Although the term *danwei* is still commonly used to describe a workplace in China, it is more correctly used to define how workers were bound to the state-owned enterprises for life before Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. So, the site of Factory 420 is a communist relic that is being demolished and replaced by a private enterprise. *24 City* gathers and records testimony from three generations of workers and family members who tell of their personal migration from their hometowns and life experience in Factory 420 from the 1950s to present day. These testimonies take place within a site that is closing its factory doors, being torn down and replaced by a new concept of urban living.

Unlike most of Jia's films which are privately and independently funded, *24 City* had as official support joint investors Chengdu Municipal Government and property developers Chengfa Investment Group and was co-written by Chengdu native and poet Zhai Yongming. In preparation for the film, Jia conducted one hundred and forty four interviews with former factory workers and in the end chose five former employees of the factory and their children and four well-known actors 'whom everybody [in China] knows, to make the public aware that this is a film comprising of both factual and fictional parts' (Lee, 2013). So, testimonials are provided by both real retired or ex-factory employees and their adult children and fictional characters (some of which are based on actual workers' stories) who are performed by Lü Liping, Chen Jianbin, Zhao Tao and actress Joan Chen. Usually, Jia casts non-professional acting talent, some of whom have become recognisable simply because they often reappear in his other films. Here though, apart from casting his wife Zhao Tao to play the daughter of factory worker parents, Jia has uncharacteristically cast several professional actors for this film in an attempt to reach a larger national audience. Indeed, unlike many of Jia's films which are restricted to screenings at international film festivals, *24 City* received a limited theatrical release in China.

The actress Lü Liping is internationally known for her role in Tian Zhuangzhuang's controversial film *Blue Kite* (1993) which was banned in Mainland China for its politically sensitive content on the Cultural Revolution. Lü also works in Chinese national television, often portraying characters in epic period drama series'. Chen Jianbin is also familiar to national audiences, having worked on historical television series' such as *Qiao's Grand Courtyard* (2006).³⁰ The Chinese-American actress Joan Chen is arguably the most famous actress in *24 City* because she has made films and won awards both inside China and abroad. Most recently, this includes the American romantic comedy *Saving Face* (2004), Ang Lee's espionage thriller *Lust, Caution* (2007) and Jiang Wen's surrealist depiction of the Cultural Revolution in *The Sun Also Rises* (2007).

24 City is not a historical film in the sense that it is not a fictional account of an actual event that takes place in the past but it does demonstrate how useful cinema is in the restoration of personal memory through oral storytelling. However, to produce *24 City* required permission by local officials and the private developer Chengfa group. By working within these legal and official filmmaking parameters, the filmmaker risks alienating himself from independent audience supporters and filmmakers which is made evident by Paul G. Pickowicz's claim that, '[f]or every Jia Zhangke now courted by the state, there are a thousand underground filmmakers who will never be wooed' (2006: 4). Here, Pickowicz's criticism implies that Jia is now colluding with the PRC (People's Republic of China) to create works that satisfy the censorship bureau, yet without the permission of the PRC, Jia would never have been granted the opportunity to document within the Factory 420 space.³¹ Furthermore, the filmmaker's position as an independent director working within an officially sanctioned production breaks away from the false perception that independence requires and insists on complete freedom from the film market to be socially conscious. In fact, I argue that Jia's self-repositioning in this case sustains an independent filmmaker's truth claims precisely because it encourages an alternative film style that still addresses marginal subjects, sensitive subject matter and subjective storytelling. Furthermore, *24 City* is a film that is concerned with reception. That is, the filmmaker must rely on the audience's discerning eye to distinguish between the fictional and documentary elements of storytelling which further leads to the spectator's engagement with a factory worker's individual testimony rendered

³⁰ Although Chen Jianbin is the least recognisable character in *24 City*, in recent years he has garnered several Golden Eagle awards from the China Television Artists Association for his work as an actor and as a new director.

³¹ Jia has made several attempts to make films more accessible to the domestic audiences by navigating through official channels of exhibition and distribution. However, as stated in Chapter 5, his most recent film *A Touch of Sin* was banned in Mainland China just prior to its national release.

through re-enactment by actors. Jia's decision to cast mostly nationally recognised talent demonstrates a distancing away from the international audience as he attempts to communicate with a local audience. His unwavering motivation to raise the issue of China's historical narrative from the perspective of citizens on the periphery and his desire to reach a local audience in the process, demonstrates a personal stance that is independent from the ideology of the state. Yet as an internationally renowned independent filmmaker Jia also questions his social role within contemporary China and promotes cinema's contribution to the historical experience via subjectivity. The film both complicates and interrogates the migrant's position in national history and the filmmaker's own relationship to the nation-state and to his audiences nationwide and worldwide.

Presentation of Factory 420, its demolition and its future model

24 City opens with a wide angle shot of the factory's entrance gates and a massive sign on the roof of the building that reads 'Chengfa Group'. This property development group is in charge of the site's reconstruction and is also a partial sponsor of the film. The production credits in the opening shots include Chengfa Group, Shanghai Film Group Corporation and China Resources (Holdings) Co., Ltd and immediately reveals the filmmaker's cooperation with local officials and private enterprises. Similarly, the opening credits also include acting credits which are not concealed from the spectator. In this long shot, a group of blue overall wearing cyclists enter from the bottom of the screen making their way through the entrance gate. This shot also occurs midway through the film as an abandoned space and then at the end with the workers exiting the factory one last time (Fig. 7.1).



FIGURE 7.1: REPEATED SHOTS OF THE FACTORY'S ENTRANCE GATE SHOWS THE FILM'S PROGRESSION AND CAPTURES THE WORKERS' EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE OF ENTERING AND EXITING THEIR PLACE OF WORK.

The opening credits then roll into the next set of shots which include several medium and long shots of factory workers performing repetitive tasks on gigantic and loud machinery. Here, the camera pays close attention to the production process, showing human arms placing metal into the machines that are responsible for heating and moulding them into cylinder sized shapes. The camera also offers long shots that demonstrate a relationship and differential size between the industry equipment and the human. The workers feed the metal into the machine, shape it, toss it into a pile and then repeat this motion over and over. This is followed by a shot of a blue uniformed crowd of factory workers filing through entrance doors and up into an auditorium. Within the auditorium, the camera alternates its position. First, a waist-high shot on the stage directs its observational gaze towards the factory workers (mostly women) who are standing and singing in unison 'Ode to the Motherland'. This song was composed at the beginning of the founding of the PRC (1949-1951) and is often considered the country's second national anthem. Then, for a brief moment, the camera is

positioned behind the back row of the auditorium showing a banner draped over the stage that reads 'Celebration for the Transfer of Land from the Chengfa Group'. Back on the stage, the camera is now positioned behind and slightly to the left of the podium. A senior manager of the Chengfa group approaches the microphone and addresses the audience:

29 December 2007 marks a new and glorious chapter in the development of the Chengfa Group. For nearly fifty years we have faced difficulties and challenging breakthroughs of economic reform. Now, a revitalised Chengfa Group is about to move from the site of the old factory....

Without warning, the camera then cuts to an empty concrete stairwell somewhere within the vicinity of the auditorium and the manager's voice drifts away becoming inaudible to the cinematic audience.

This opening sequence of *24 City* begins to reveal several things to the viewer that demonstrate how the film is positioned within an official mode of storytelling. First, the opening credits overtly link the production with the factory via the large sign located above the gates that reads Chengfa Group. By documenting this habitual scene of workers arriving at a factory, *24 City* evokes the memory of workers who exited the gates of the Lumière Brothers Factory in 1895. *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895) is a forty-six second long black and white early silent cinema *actualité* that depicts workers exiting through the gates at the end of the day, exiting left and right out of the frame. An *actualité* is a non-fiction film mode that pre-exists the documentary codes and conventions. Since it is shot in front of the Lumière Brothers' factory, it involves a particular deliberateness in location and self-promotional motive that is associated with ideologically driven industrial films.

Historically, industrial documentary films are sponsored by companies and utilised to promote a narrative of technological and industrial innovation. Levin argues that industrial films are 'non-fictional films that use codes and conventions of documentaries to construct a reality that is not fictional but heavily ideologically and rhetorically interested' (2006: 89). Although they are documentaries, industrial films are attached to specific agendas by their corporate sponsors. In relation to *24 City*'s co-sponsored situation, Jia straddles both the independent filmmaking sector and responsibility of capturing the historical value of Factory 420 and the Chengfa Group. In the opening sequence, he fulfils the ideological propaganda associated with the factory, showing a huge crowd of blue uniformed factory workers filing into the building at the sound of a horn, singing patriotic songs and listening to the manager's official address which celebrates Factory 420's historical contribution to the enhancement of Chinese society through collective work. Also, the specific positioning of the camera within

the workplace, in the hallways and onstage in the auditorium would have required permission from the company. It seems to fulfil the company's aspirations for documenting a momentous occasion.

However, by shooting onstage and from the back of the auditorium, the film emphasises two kinds of perspectives that include the official manager of the company and unofficial factory worker. Having been educated at Beijing Film Academy and most likely familiar with the pioneers of early cinema, Jia's opening long shot of the factory gates also nods to the utopic vision driven by the Lumière Brothers' publicity film. However, with Jia's previous film record, there is bound to be tensions stirring beneath the surface that serve to undermine any categorically unquestioned promotional service that celebrates the machine over marginalised citizens.

First of all, the opening shots of the workers labouring within the factory distances them from the coded camera shot in industrial films that 'privileges the mechanical over the human' (Levin, 2006: 95). Unlike conventions used in industrial films, there is no voiceover commentary in *24 City* that comments on the industry's accomplishments and the mammoth-sized machines are not the focal point of the film. While camera shots in industrial films frame close-up and medium shots of machines conveying the idea that they 'seem to operate independent of human intervention' (Levin, 2006: 95), *24 City* shows the migrant labourers always working alongside the machines. There are no human limbs chopped off from the filmmaker's intended composition of the machines and when the camera lingers on the process of production, it is the monotony of the task and the intense heat from the machines that are stressed, not the technology itself.

Second of all, between the establishing shot of the unidentifiable bodies entering and exiting the factory and the senior manager's speech, there is no indication to the viewer where these migrants are planning to go after the closing of the factory doors. The nostalgic tone and collective camaraderie associated with the film's opening song 'Ode to the Motherland' is undercut by a particular neglect and uncertainty of the situation for these factory workers who have lived and worked in this micro-city for most (if not all) of their lives. The manager's speech becomes inaudible at the moment he is revealing how the 'Chengfa Group is about to move from the site of the old factory....' to a destination unknown. So, despite the official celebratory atmosphere within the auditorium, there lies an uncertainty in the future for the citizens and workers of Factory 420. Throughout the film, the camera observes the machines and factory being dismantled with care. By comparison, the opening sequence shows the

migrant worker's collective and consistent silence and dedication to the Party's economic reforms.

It is significant to note here that the collective official celebration illustrated in its opening sequence is unravelled and critiqued in other parts of the film. For instance, by repeating the establishing shot of Factory 420's front gates, Jia shows the historical movement of faceless migrant labourers who crowd in and out of the factory to a destination unknown. Through the careful framing and repetition of this establishing shot, the film shows the lack of concern by the companies toward the fate of the migrant workers who provide the backbone of that labour. Furthermore, later in the film, Jia reconstructs a crowd singing another familiar national anthem. This time, a smaller group are shot singing the 'Internationale' in a non-descript room in the factory. For a non-Chinese speaker, the sequence stands out because there are no subtitles to describe the lyrics of the song that is being sung. The singing continues into the next shot which shows the final demolition of the factory. As the wall from the building plummets to the ground and smoke rises from the rubble, the women continue to sing, 'this is the final struggle, Unite together towards tomorrow, The Internationale shall certainly be realised.' Similar to 'Ode to the Motherland', this is a communist anthem. However, it was also used as a rallying slogan during the Tiananmen Square Movement in 1989 which in present-day China is still considered a taboo subject. For this reason, this portion of the film was actually censored and was not screened within Mainland China.³² It only appears in the full format DVD version. In this case, Jia confronts both the realities of contemporary China and national memory through song.

Chris Berry points out that Jia's films are distinctive from other independent works because their construction of time is 'neither in-the-now loss of history nor modern linear progress, but instead an uneasy in-the-now (and then) that invokes history and questions the present' (2009: 113). The temporalities that are illustrated in this opening sequence and the subsequent unravelling of the ideology throughout the film reveals the complex positioning or 'uneasy in-the-now' of the factory worker within the national narrative. It also demonstrates the filmmaker's self-positioning as one who documents 'on-the-spot' the radical changes for the worker and for the factory. It captures the film's multi-layered narrative strands in which the workers both belong to and simultaneously are displaced from national history.

When the factory has been dismantled and the surrounding apartment complexes and buildings have been demolished, the camera focuses on the new phase of development by exiting the ruins of Factory 420 and entering *24 City* which is revealed only as an imaginable

³² In an unpublished email interview with Cecilia Mello on 03 March 2015.

future by the end of the film. At one hour and eighteen minutes into the film, the camera returns to the opening shot to show a newly erected sign at the factory gates that reads 'China Resources Land Ltd: 24 City'. This is followed by an extreme long shot of the luxury apartment complex still being constructed in the distance, wrapped in scaffolding and a real estate sign advertising the sale of *24 City*'s properties. Then it cuts to a close-up shot of a reporter at his newsroom desk praising the new development on a local Chengdu TV channel: 'Soon a modern, living community, named 24 City will arise on this site. Factory 420 will use its money to modernise technology. Its aeronautics technology will not become obsolete.' Although this news anchor, Zhao Gang, states that the factory will continue to be relevant in the future, there is a sense that both the migrant workers and the factory's machines have become equally usurped by new technological forms.

This kind of retrospection is also examined in Levin's chapter on old industrial films of the past: 'We should consider that our dependence on technology today is far more totalized and coercive than the anonymous filmmakers...or the automotive technocrats who sponsored the films could ever have imagined seventy years ago' (2006: 100). The rhetoric of old industrial films embraces modern technologies and insists that innovative technology will collapse all economic and social class structures and subsequently benefit society overall. Similarly, *Factory 420*'s ideological aim in the 1950s was to provide for a community that shared in the collective work and life balance. So, how valuable is the materialist culture of contemporary China to its citizens and what does this new technology offer? Visually, *24 City* shows the evolution of modern technology by observing the chronological progression from the end of the *Factory 420* era to present-day China. At the same time, it questions the value and speed of this economic and cultural leap.

In a quick succession of shots, the news anchor Zhao Gang has now appeared in a white and beige building lined with floor to ceiling glass windows and is being introduced to the *24 City* model by a representative from the China Resources Land company. The camera cuts from Zhao and the company's representative walking through the sleek and modern facility toward a table featuring the *24 City* model. Using a laser pen, the woman points to the various parts of the model structure: 'these white bits are for housing developments. The grey bits are for commercial use. And in the southwest corner, these bits are the buildings from the old factory that we'll retain.' It then cuts to Zhao giving testimony about his own personal association with *Factory 420* where his father was once employed. According to Zhao's testimony, his father belongs to the last generation of factory workers, a profession that he himself showed no interest in pursuing. The accelerated pace is emphasised through the

sequential ordering of images, that cuts from Zhao on the television screen, to Zhao speaking with a representative of the *24 City* development and the model structure, then finally to Zhao being interviewed (Fig. 7.2). This montage sequence visually captures a moment where time and space collapse and it reflects the official rhetoric associated with the celebration of modern China. Zhao Gang, who is reporting on the city's celebration of *24 City* and who is next captured observing the model structure of the new complex is literally a model for contemporary Chinese society.

Although Jia's films encourage an interpretation through a historical or national framework, the emphasis of movement to an unknown place of history is also part of his visual project. This is emphasised in the film's final scenes with the physical model structure of *24 City* and also with the character Su Na. Although Su is a fictional character, who is played by Zhao Tao (from both *Still Life* and *A Touch of Sin*), she and the news anchor Zhao Gang belong to the same generation. Like Zhao, Su is a daughter of Factory 420 workers and



FIGURE 7.2: A QUICK SUCCESSION OF SHOTS THAT SHOW ZHAO GANG IN MULTIPLE SPACES AND TEMPORALITIES.

has traded in her parents' physical labours for a materialist lifestyle. She dresses in the latest fashion, drives a modern white Volkswagen beetle and spends most of the film on the phone speaking with clients. She is employed as a personal shopper and often travels between the Mainland and Hong Kong to source fashionable products for her clients. Situated in the Southwest Sichuan Province, the distance between Chengdu and Hong Kong is over a thousand miles, but the high speed rail system in China and flights have significantly reduced that time. Although Mainland China recognises Hong Kong as part of its country, the autonomous territory's unique connection with other parts of the world (through business,

technology, fashion and immigration) makes it a desirable and accessible place for wealthy Chinese Mainland residents to trade material goods.

Despite her declaration of satisfaction with a consumerist lifestyle, Su is also a contemplative subject. She appears midway through the film, silently wandering the vacant factory rooms, staring out into Chengdu city from a balcony and standing at the gates of Factory 420. Beaumont notes, '[r]ealism approximates reality not by mirroring its external contours, but by enstaging it' (2010: 147). Similarly, Su does not mirror reality but 'enstages' it through contemplative scenes. For instance at the end of the film, Su has parked her vehicle in the middle of a field filled with tall green grass and bright yellow flowers (Fig. 7.3). There is no particular reason given to explain why she is parked here. The city skyscrapers are beginning to encroach upon this idyllic countryside space and Su sits and stares out of her window. Like the news anchor Zhao, she is situated within the last part of the film and fits in with the new consumerist generation. This association between Zhao and Su and the camera's framing that depicts the city and rural hybrid landscape (similar to landscape shots in Xiaolu Guo's *She, A Chinese*) invokes a contemplative mental state. As Su ambivalently stares out of her window into the field, two older women cross from the left to the right of the camera's frame wielding a gardener's hoe. Although this scene is shot in actual space and in one long durational take, it also exploits this landscape's allegorical potential which raises questions about the transitional stages of contemporary China into an unknown future.



FIGURE 7.3: SU NA (ZHAO TAO) AS THE CONTEMPLATIVE SUBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LANDSCAPE.

Although *24 City* starts with a nostalgic treatment of an old factory, it progresses towards a stylistic observation of its excavation and dismantlement and then leaps towards new, sleek and fast technologies. According to Williams, documentary films should be defined 'not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from that form

a horizon of relative and contingent truths' (1993: 65). *24 City* is concerned with the perception of truth and its documentary project aims to illustrate the construction of reality through a meaning making process. The truth lies somewhere between a concrete organisation of the text and the way the viewer constructs meaning within the world. As the representative of *24 City*'s new development points out with her laser pen, 'the red bits are' what will remain of Factory 420. Nora speaks of commemorative objects as 'lieux de mémoire [which] are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it' (1989: 12). Although *24 City* depicts the shift from Factory 420 into an actual model for this land's future it does so by observing reality in chronological time, through a kind of time lapse. By the end of the film, the factory has been stripped of all of its machinery and the complex has been completely demolished. From the speaker's address in the auditorium in the film's opening credits to the description of the new *24 City* model, Factory 420 evolves from commemorative speech to commemorative object. Nora notes that 'without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away' (1989: 12). So, while the factory lives on in national memory 'with commemorative vigilance', it is the people who remain displaced, forgotten and pushed aside. In the following section, I will turn my attention toward the film's treatment of the migrant and marginalised subject through frontal poses and framing of testimonials.

The frontal pose

What stands out in *24 City* is how the film negotiates between the image presented and its referent, particularly with subjects who do not have speaking parts in the film but who are included when there is no oral storytelling by ex-factory workers. These anonymous individuals whom we must assume are inhabitants of Chengdu are framed in a way that mimics a still photograph with a frontal pose (Fig. 7.4). So, what is the meaning of this self-conscious pose that disavows the naturalism of a snapshot which you would typically associate with a documentary film? When Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni was given unprecedented access into Chinese culture by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1972, he made the documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972) which recorded the everyday lives of working class people. Made during China's Cultural Revolution, the film is now viewed as a rare piece of ethnography. However, during its release, the director was accused by the Chinese authority and its public of pandering to American imperialism by showing China's poverty. The film

was subsequently banned in China until 2004 and the Chinese crew members were criticised as traitors and counter-revolutionaries. Years later, in a documentary directed by Jia titled *I Wish I Knew* (2010), a party cadre who had worked on the set of Antonioni's film recalls: 'It struck me that he was filming a lot of bad things, things that reflected our backwardness.' *Chung Kuo, Cina's* three hours and forty minutes' duration shows various events that range from the banality of food shopping to the extraordinary experience of childbirth and catches people in the moment, unaware of the camera's presence at times when they are partaking in private matters such as using the bathroom. So, in comparison with *24 City*, Antonioni's way of conveying the everyday Chinese culture seems to differ greatly from Jia's highly constructed and intentional frontal poses.



FIGURE 7.4: FRONTAL POSE OF ANONYMOUS FIGURES IN CHENGDU CITY.

According to Susan Sontag, the reason why the Chinese public reacted so negatively to *Chung Kuo, Cina* was because they felt deprived of 'their right to pose, in order to look their best' (1999 [1978]: 89). Sontag comments on how this desire to pose for the camera 'is the characteristic of visual taste of those at the first stage of camera culture' (1999 [1978]: 89). Chow then accuses Sontag's ethnographic reading of positioning the Chinese as primitive and turning photographic discourse 'into a yardstick for cross-cultural comparison and evaluation' (2014: 19). Using Pierre Bourdieu's insight into social norms, Chow suggests that we should first understand the social practice of photography and be mindful of class distinctions when making meaning of the frontal pose. She states that historically peasants were uncomfortable in the act of posing for the camera because they 'have been condemned to internalise the pejorative image that society has of them' (2014: 21). So, producing a frontal pose with an alert expression and upright body demonstrates a transformation from the pejorative to an agreeable image that is equipped to challenge an internalised negative self-image.

If we analyse the camera's direct gaze on the anonymous subjects' postures and demeanours in *24 City*, they do signal a readiness and willingness to be recorded. This is in

stark contrast to Antonioni's narration of the people he photographs and to which he notes in the film: '[t]hey come out and stand in front of the camera, often motionless, as if petrified' (Antonioni, 1972). Whereas Antonioni relies on the invisibility of the camera to make meaning, Jia relies on the visible, self-aware, self-reflexive static portraits for the effectiveness of their presentations. Despite these formal differences, Jia's subjects are no more empowered solely because they stare directly into the camera. These subjects may contribute to the discursive project of identifying China through the photographic medium but they do not offer testimony and they only appear for a moment before they are swept up into the ephemerality of the film's narrative and the radical urban transformations.

Jia does not explicitly associate his film to political cinema yet he does concern himself with the issues surrounding the marginal everyday subject while using an independent platform to convey his conceptual project. He states:

Filmmaking is a way of remembering. Yet our film screen is almost all filled up with official discourse. People often ignore ordinary life. They belittle everyday experience. They like to play with legends of history...But I want to speak about the feelings buried deep in time, those personal experiences teeming in unnameable and undirected impulses. (2009: 100)

These 'undirected impulses' capture the subject in time mediated by the digitised image which mimics the indexicality of the photographic frieze. So, the documentary project of *24 City* becomes a balancing act between recording and raising our awareness of the contemplative subject. The stilled frontal pose does not necessarily empower the migrant subject and is not defined by its absolute objectivity in comparison with the denotative and connotative meanings of cinema.

Barthes recognises that the still photograph is not neutral or objective: 'this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is *read*' (1977: 19). Shifting from the filmic flow to the stillness of the frontal pose, *24 City* arrests details of the migrant worker, allowing the frame to contemplate both the constructed and spontaneous details of the moment. For instance, in one frontal pose, two men dressed in blue overalls are standing in the factory's canteen and one has his arm draped over the other's shoulder. While standing in silence and directing their non-expressive gaze toward the camera, one man briefly tickles the side of the other man's neck, causing him to involuntarily laugh. Here, the frontal pose is lifted out of its arresting image and put back into the filmic flow. By doing so, the migrant labourer reclaims a sense of his own autonomy through the spontaneous event.

Framing testimonials: actual

Along with framing frontal poses in a way that mimics a photographic still image, *24 City* frames testimonials in a highly constructed manner. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are nine interviews in the film, consisting of both actual and fictional factory workers and their children. For the real factory workers, the film places them within actual locations within Chengdu city and the site. However, the *mise-en-scène* creates meaningful readings of the testimonials that either symbolise the life conditions for the migrant subject in collective memory or contest official memories. First I will analyse three of these interviewees who raise questions regarding the tension between presentation and representation of reality. Then I will examine two fictional interviewees, Hou Lijun and Joan Chen, whose testimonials employ distancing techniques and a playful irony that reveals the difficulty in representing cultural memory and migrant identity.

Having been co-sponsored by local and official companies, *24 City* manages to depict three generations of testimonials. Interestingly, these generations which include the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s, leave a significant gap in history relating to the calamitous years during the Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966-1976. Instead, the events are only briefly alluded to by the first and eldest interviewee He Xikun, who is a retired aircraft repairman. Born in 1948 in Chengdu, He Xikun began working at the factory in the 1960s right at the start of the Cultural Revolution. This sequence begins with a series of images: He Xikun's frontal pose, a piece of machinery loaded onto a moving lorry, steam rising in a factory room, a close-up shot of a temperature gauge and a dissolve back into the room where He is sitting on his own on a bench (Fig. 7.5).



FIGURE 7.5: HE XIKUN SITS ALONE IN THE EMPTIED FACTORY.

There is an elegiac tone constructed by the background music of a string orchestra and the transition between each shot is accomplished with a dissolve. There are no material objects in this emptied out space to recuperate the memory of migrant or factory work. However, He goes into great detail describing the specific tool he used called 'the scraper' during his early apprenticeship years with his boss Master Wang. Despite the lack of actual machines or tools in the excavated factory space, He revives the material object through his personal testimony about his experience during the factory's more formative years. At the same time, he also avoids talking explicitly about the Cultural Revolution. Instead, he refers to this period only briefly as 'the clashes' and commends Master Wang's work ethic during this time when, as he explains, 'most factory workers did not show up to work' at all. Then, feeling guilt for not having visited Master Wang for several years, He is shown in the following shot reuniting with Master Wang. Master Wang is now very old, partially deaf and lapses in and out of confused moments (possibly associated with aging). The camera lingers on this brief exchange between the two elderly men. Although He's testimonial does not directly address his memory of the Cultural Revolution, it does capture the man's actual human connection with his former boss.

In recent years, there has been a grassroots movement developing that attempts to revive and archive personal memories in China. This I will go into greater detail on this in Chapter 8 on the Caochangdi Memory Project. Here though, the question of memory and the trope of displaced memories is exemplified through Master Wang's struggle to maintain his concentration for the duration of He's visit. Instead, the personal memories and individual personalities are evoked by He's testimony surrounding the topic of his factory tool or 'scraper'. Although the factory space has been completely excavated and the material objects cannot be reclaimed, it is this unofficial testimony that brings to life the migrant worker's identity. While some sense of the past is reconstructed through He's description of the aircraft tool and his reunion with Master Wang, the emptied out factory space and Master Wang's inability to effectively communicate with He, also symbolises a post-nostalgic coming to terms with the irretrievable loss of memory.

This first interview with a retired aircraft repairman is followed by a testimony by the retired Head of Security named Guan Fengjiu. This interview takes place within the same auditorium where workers gathered in the beginning of the film and is captured in two static shots: first, with Guan standing and smiling under a banner that reads 'Always follow the path of development appropriately - work loyally for the army' and second, with Guan sitting in a

spectator's seat and recalling his move to Chengdu while two men play badminton on the stage in the background (Fig. 7.6). The staging of Guan Fengjiu's testimony illustrates how the camera captures unofficial and official ways of interpreting the migrant's experience. Guan is part of the original group of the four thousand Factory 420 employees who migrated from northern China to the Sichuan Province in the 1950s and after retiring he became Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee. He represents a success story in the country's grand narrative in that he followed Mao's directive by migrating from a northern province to a southern province and over time moved up the socioeconomic ranks from technician to a managerial role.



FIGURE 7.6: BADMINTON BEING PLAYED OUT IN THE BACKGROUND DURING GUAN FENGJIU'S TESTIMONIAL.

So, what is the textual meaning behind this interview? It is shot in the factory's auditorium which has already been illustrated in the film's opening sequence as a location of collective and official memory. By shooting in deep focus that allows the spectator to watch Guan in the foreground and the two men playing badminton in the background, Jia also creates a dialectical image between truth and illusion and dramatic irony that seems to position the spectator in an awareness-narrative. Here, Jia's reflexive aesthetics helps to amplify the complexities of migrant dispossession in China. Although Guan migrated from Beijing to Chengdu he is separated from workers like He, the retired repairman, because of his socioeconomic distinction.

Nichols argues that formal strategies can open up possibilities which expose the 'incommensurateness between representation and historical referent' when they bring to light 'live contradiction itself, those tensions and conflicts that exist between the text and its word,

that give form to its context and also inform the text in ways that can be apprehended' (1991-241). If we apply this to the way in which the camera frames Guan's testimony, we can begin to view his story as part of an official legacy rather than only a representation of the migrant worker's experience. Whether through depth of focus or framing, the camera also captures the filmmaker's unintentional events. It is difficult to avoid reading this scene as playful or ironic. It is also impossible to draw any definitive conclusions because there are two visual narrative strands operating here: both leisure time and Guan's factory duties. Guan does not fit into the idea of a migrant dispossessed but rather into the mythical idea that is spun from the nation-state's ideology. Having been granted permission by the PRC to shoot at Factory 420 and knowing the site will soon become part of a luxury apartment complex that also aims to build shops and a cinema, this image is politically subversive because it emphasises the incongruity between leisure time (associated with commodity culture) and the knowledge that migrant workers will be effectively unemployed. Having been very suddenly uprooted from the northern eastern region of Liaoning in the 1950s, Guan is part of the ongoing movement of migrant people through generations of Chinese history but his decorous and long lasting career with the factory positions him as a model citizen of the *danwei* and China's ideological memory project.

While Guan's testimony casts a positive light on the effects of history on the domestic migrant (at least on the surface), the film cleverly switches to a testimony that acts as a cautionary tale of migrant displacement. Once again however, Jia employs a Brechtian technique that conceives of representation in a way that prevents the spectator from identifying fully with the dramatic testimonial. The scene starts with a long shot at night of a bus idling at its transit stop. As a group of peasants (possibly migrants) approach the city bus, it proceeds to drive away and leaves the group puzzled and stranded (Fig. 7.7). The next image is an interior shot of the empty bus with one sole passenger looking out the window: Hou Lijun. Is it possible that this is the same bus and that it left the workers behind? How much is staged and how much is real? Hou sits on the bus alone and is symbolically isolated from the community and the urban public but there is no explanation or acknowledgement of the abandonment of the workers. This questioning of fact or fiction is never explained in the film but it does illuminate the idea that all testimonies in the film create a distancing effect.



FIGURE 7.7: HOU LIJUN SITS ON THE BUS AT NIGHT AS IT PULLS AWAY FROM THE CURB AND ABANDONS A GROUP OF PEOPLE.

The *hukou* system prevents the migrant labour force from receiving housing permits and basic healthcare and this results in the forced movement of citizens who are aptly identified as the *liúdòng* or ‘floating’ population. During Hou’s testimony, she describes her childhood experience of having migrated from Shenyang in 1958 so that her mother could work at the factory and how emotional it was for her to visit her grandparents several years later knowing that it would probably be the last time they would ever be able to see each other again. Travelling on a bus, Hou’s testimony comes the closest, out of all the interviews, to a re-enactment as she describes the experience of moving away from her hometown to live in Factory 420 with her mother. On Brechtian distanciation techniques in documentary film, Nichols notes:

the deflection away from realist representation allows, paradoxically, a stronger link to historical specificity to come into play through the filmmaker’s choice to go through the motions of gesturing to the historical rather than representing it as an illusion. (2016: 46)

Here, the bus symbolises the transient space which Hou occupies as a migrant labourer. Considering that nobody else is on this bus apart from Hou and Jia (who surprisingly speaks for the first and only time in the film), there is a distanciation effect taking place in this well-lit scene on a public bus at night. Hou details the hardship of being laid off from the factory and how she has resorted to selling flowers on the street and providing a sewing service from her home. Her testimony is emotional and at times she cries in her retelling of separation from her grandparents and her economic difficulties at present. By staging this scene inside a

public bus Jia isolates Hou from any fixed temporality and positions her within a transitory space, or as Marc Augé characterises it a 'non-place' (1995), a transient place encountered by the act of travelling. The film illustrates the dislocating effect of the conditions for the migrant subject in contemporary China. Physically capturing this reality through a bus in motion, enables an epistemic view of the consequences of mobility for the floating population.

Framing testimonials: fictional

Up to this point in my analysis, oral storytelling has been told from real factory workers even when the camera's composition and *mise-en-scène* creates an ambiguity which promotes a productive engagement between documentary and fiction rather than a dogmatic approach to representation. However, the film also combines professional actors who provide personal stories based on testimonials by actual factory workers. I will focus on two of these testimonies which use distanciation techniques and irony to raise awareness of unofficial and official memory. Jia casts actors from various places in China and so the film mixes regional accents in a story that takes place in one fixed location in the Southwest Sichuan Province which inevitably would confuse a spectator who is familiar with Mandarin.³³ Nichols notes that '[d]ocumentary relies heavily on the spoken word [and] the recounting of a situation or event by a character or commentator in documentary frequently has the aura of truthfulness about it' (1991: 21). So, why does the filmmaker risk credibility by replacing factory workers with actors who re-enact events and use various dialects?

In the first instance, applying multiple dialects to an aware audience highlights the movement and displacement of China's labour force. By casting professional actors, *24 City* also appeals to its official co-sponsors who agreed to allow Jia to shoot on the Factory 420 site. Furthermore, having recognisable actors to play the parts of real workers makes the film more widely marketable to the national audience who may not be familiar with the filmmaker's previous independent work. Even so, documentary films are not very popular in China and *24 City* which was released on 5 June 2009 and spent nine weeks in two cinemas across Mainland China received very little attention by national critics and audiences. Domestically, the film made approximately £4500 in its opening weekend and £23,000 in

³³ This deliberate mixture of dialects has become a signature device associated with Jia's previous migrant films that include *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006).

total compared with £280,000 in the foreign box office market (IMDB, 2009). Furthermore, there was very little difference between the performances of the actors and the real workers so this artifice may have been overlooked by an international audience who may not be as familiar with all of the Chinese actors. Despite this possibility, I would argue that the aesthetic decision to cast professionals who provide testimonials (some of which are based on true accounts) is with deliberate intentionality to create a distance between the text and the life to which it refers. By including commercially well-known talent in the film, Jia befuddles the aware viewer with playful irony. That is, by subverting documentary conventions, the film provokes an engagement of the migrant identity as an embodiment of the national myth and as a real displaced citizen from that national story.

Hao Dali (played by experienced actress Lü Liping), is a retired employee who still lives within the micro-city. In a long shot, the camera captures a woman who is sitting in a first floor window and knitting. The title 'Dormitory Area of Factory 420' briefly appears on the screen. The sound of both chickens and traffic conveys the impression that the city centre and this isolated community are within close proximity of one another. This shot of the woman at her apartment window is followed by a shot of another woman who exits from the same building while holding an intravenous drip above her head. The camera then observes and follows this woman who weaves through the alleyways passing a row of bicycles and a disused airplane. Having started the sequence with one woman and switching to another reveals a deliberate scene construction.

Eventually, Hao Dali's name appears on the screen. Hao is an extremely loyal Factory 420 worker who was employed by the company for fifty-one years before she retired and she still resides in the dormitory unit. After visiting an administrative office, Hao returns home and sits near a window next to the kitchen. Here, like the previous testimonies with actual factory workers, she recounts a personal story regarding her original journey from her hometown to work at Factory 420. During her boat trip from Shenyang to Chengdu, Hao reveals a tragic story (a re-telling of a true story) that involves how she lost her young son on a crowded loading dock while en-route to her destination. Hao recalls the moment the boat horn blew and she was forced to make a decision to either search for her son or return to the boat. Shot in a medium close-up near a window of her apartment, the story is tragic but Hao's stoic testimony is proof of her character's strength and endurance in the film. Once she has given her testimonial she sits motionless in her chair looking away from the camera and out the window. This is immediately followed by a shot of Hao's bedroom and the camera pans from right to left across the room, showing a bed and ceremonial sword on the wall until it

reaches a door frame where it stops and is looking again at Hao from a distance sitting in a chair watching an old war film on television and now in the kitchen (Fig. 7.8). The camera remains static and positioned behind the door frame so that Hao is composed in a portrait-like manner.



FIGURE 7.8: THE CAMERA IS POSITIONED BEHIND THE DOOR FRAME CREATING A DISTANCE BETWEEN THE VIEWER AND THE SUBJECT.

Here, any melodramatic conventions that have been hinted at by Hao's harrowing story and the medium shot are not fulfilled due to this cut. Any emotional effect of Hao's tragedy is de-emphasised by the framed composition. The camera does not cut in to see Hao's facial expression as she watches television and eats noodles from a bowl. This physical distance created by the camera's framing and the objects in the *mise-en-scène* positions Hao amongst the historical and national relics (sword, CCTV war drama and dormitory) and illustrates her own separation from contemporary China. As Donald aptly notes, this scene illustrates 'her spiritual and ideological alienation from the present day as much as from the viewer' (2014: 5). The distortion of reality that has been produced both through the multiple framing and by Jia's addition of an actor into his film shows both the impossibility of an authentic representation of the subject in documentary film and in China's own official history.

The second and most internationally renowned actress to appear in *24 City* is Joan Chen. She plays a seventy-eight-year-old factory worker named Gu Minhua and like Hao Dali, she is also a resident of the dormitory unit. However, she plays a much more active role in the community, socialising and dressing up in classic Sichuan Opera costumes to perform Cao Xueqin's story *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1897) in front of her fellow residents. Unlike the other professional actors in *24 City*, Chen's role is metatextual and intermedial. For

instance, after her public Sichuan Opera performance, Chen is shot walking through the alleyways still dressed in her costume. As I have mentioned in my analysis of *Still Life* in Chapter 4, Jia was first educated as a painter before he became a filmmaker. Due to his father's involvement with the local theatre in his hometown Fenyang in Shanxi Province, Jia often also adds theatrical scenes within his films, intermingling past and present. So, in this scene, when Gu walks through the alleyways of the Factory 420 complex in her classical Sichuan Opera costume, she becomes a nineteenth century goddess walking in the contemporary landscape. Her body acts as a *tableau vivant* through a cinematic re-enactment of a scene onstage or a classical Chinese painting.

Along with her participation within the local theatre, Gu is also the owner of a hair salon. The salon is situated on the corner of a cross street and is composed of three walled sides, leaving the fourth completely open and exposed. Initially, the camera is placed on a sidewalk facing opposite to the shop and with a long shot observes Gu sitting alone in her salon while a barber trims a customer's facial hair to the left of this building. Gu's body is turned away from the camera but she is facing a mirror and it is through this reflection that the viewer can see her expression. Meanwhile, a television hovers above her head and is playing a programme. The camera then cuts in to a medium shot and Gu is now directing her gaze toward an area located slightly left of the camera.

During her testimonial, Gu reveals how she became known as 'Little Flower' by the factory workers because of her uncanny resemblance to the actress Joan Chen. Interestingly, Chen rose to fame in 1979 with her starring role in the film *Little Flower* (1979). She is one of the few actors who became famous during the Cultural Revolution, a historical period notoriously known for having caused a nationwide halt to the film industry. Chen was discovered by Chairman Mao's wife Jiang Qing for her marksmanship skill in the school rifle range. She was then selected in the Actor's Training Programme by the Shanghai Film Studio in 1975 and *Little Flower* is the film that won her the prestigious Hundred Flowers award.

Most of Gu's testimony involves how she was close to being matched with a suitor in her youth but never married. In her salon, she discusses a personal disappointment in her failed relationships and inability to choose a suitor which has left her unmarried. The camera then cuts from a medium shot to an intertitle stating: 'Gu Minhua, born 1958 in Shanghai. Worked as a quality inspector for Factory 420.' It then cuts back to the salon but this time to a close-up of the television screen above Gu's head that, coincidentally, is playing *Little Flower* (Fig. 7.9). Chen as 'Little Flower' in the 1979 film is displayed on the screen and the music belts out, 'A girl is looking for her beloved. She is sad, tears in her eye...'. Here, the film

repeats the same method of showing a facial portrait on television of a person who is being interviewed. In the first instance, it was the actual news anchor Zhao Gang reporting on the *24 City* development. Now it is the actress Chen playing an entirely fictional factory worker Gu. In terms of the film's organisation of the interviewees, Zhao's interview takes place right after Gu.



FIGURE 7.9: AN IRONIC PLAYFULNESS IS EMPHASISED IN THIS SCENE THAT REVEALS GU MINHUA AS JOAN CHEN.

The self-reflexive manner that presents Gu as Joan Chen and Joan as herself becomes doubly self-reflexive. On the effect of re-enactment in film, Margulies states:

Inflected by a psychodramatic (or liturgical) belief in the enlightening effects of literal repetition, re-enactment creates, performatively speaking, another body, place and time. At stake is an identity that can recall the original event (through a second degree indexicality) but in so doing can also re-form it. (2002: 220)

Up to this point, *24 City* offers testimonials by both actual factory workers and actors who play them. Now, Chen plays Gu who reflects back literally (by way of the mirror's reflection

in the salon) and figuratively (through her resemblance to Chen and the character's story in the film *Little Flower*). This reflection and mimicry confounds the viewer and deliberately destabilises the representation of reality. Through meta-communicative forms of cinematic medium reflexivity, Jia simultaneously casts doubt on the representation of reality and the representation of the migrant's unstable identity in China's past and present.

24 City meditates on the issue of Chinese history and how contemporary problems are rooted in the past. In an interview on the production of the film, Jia states:

Our political institutions discourage us from confronting and interrogating our history, but I think that kind of work is absolutely necessary. There are three areas of modern history that I'm especially interested in: the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976; 1949, when the PRC was established; and the last years of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century. In a historical film the techniques must be different, and I think I'd need the help of professional actors to bring that history to life. (Chan, 2009)

Although *24 City* was produced with local official sponsors and received a limited yet national theatrical release, it still manages to tackle the issue of migrant identity and representation by subverting documentary conventions with the inclusion of both actual factory workers and professional actors. Furthermore, when sensitive topics such as the Cultural Revolution cannot be directly addressed, they are alluded to or are notably absent from an otherwise careful description of the worker's historical data throughout the film.

Like many Chinese independent films, the question of truth in documenting the problem of the marginalised is central to the filmmaker's concerns. The structural, formal and thematic strategies employed by Jia offer new ways to mediate and explore the gaps between what reality presents to the camera and how we interpret that reality. As a result, meaning is produced through presentational and representational aesthetics, through oral storytelling and through acting and re-enacting that enrich an understanding of the multi-layered spatial and temporal complexities embedded within national memory. Without falling into the often didactic or rhetoric trap when documenting issues concerning the migrant, Jia's attention to realist aesthetics and careful framing opens up discourse on the social and political complexities of this floating population.

CHAPTER 8

Participating in the Folk Memory Project: Zou Xueping's *Children's Village* (2012)

This chapter focuses on the ways that Zou Xueping's film *Children's Village* engages with remembrance, testimony and the memorialisation of a severe famine that impacted on her rural community Li Chao Gan Village from 1959-1961.³⁴ This is a small rural town located in Yangxin County in China's north western Shandong Province. Chairman Mao's implementation of the Great Leap Forward Campaign sought to transform China from an agrarian economy to a socialist society through collectivisation and massive industrialisation. Instead, it resulted in a terrible famine in which over seventeen million lives were lost.³⁵ In fact, the disastrous campaign led to the Cultural Revolution of 1966 in which Chairman Mao sought to purge intellectuals and party cadres he felt had become disloyal to the Communist Party ideology.

My overall aim in this chapter is to examine how local residents engage with the social realities of contemporary China that enables a critique and political intervention. Here, I will examine how personal memory is being documented by a young media graduate who has returned to her family's rural village. Zou deals with the politics of memory at the grassroots level through interviews and oral testimony. Furthermore, she employs the help of several school-aged children from her community to collect village data on the Great Famine. Ultimately, the resulting film raises questions about the interviewer's methods of retrieving information from her community and about the value of storytelling from a child's perspective.

First, I will look at how *Children's Village* is situated within a larger ongoing alternative project for pioneer documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang. *Minjian jiyi jihua* (Folk Memory Project) was launched in 2010 and involves the collaboration of over one hundred filmmakers.³⁶ As this thesis has shown, Wu's own films have been extremely influential on Chinese independent cinema. Now with the Folk Memory Project, he imparts his documentary knowledge to new filmmakers. Since the project's launch, these filmmakers

³⁴ Throughout the film, Zou only refers to her village as Zhujia which roughly translates as the house one's family resides in. I will use this term of endearment in this chapter.

³⁵ The estimated death toll count varies widely within and outside of China due to an effort by the government to suppress vital information that may reveal the calamitous errors made by Mao towards the rural communities during this time. Instead, the Great Leap famine is poorly understood and is shrouded in silence and censorship. For more information, see Zhou, Xun (2012).

³⁶ English translations of this Project (including Wu Wenguang's) often replace the Chinese characters *Minjian* with 'folk' or 'unofficial'. *Min* means 'people' and *jian* implies 'social space'.

(including Zou) have collected more than nine hundred interviews from their rural communities spreading across eighteen provinces and one hundred and thirty villages. After providing a brief introduction on the events surrounding the Great Leap Forward Campaign, I will show how collective memory and trauma is being revealed in the social realm through this grassroots approach.

Then I will examine the involvement of participatory subjects within the community. This includes Zou's own position within the community, the elders who give testimony and the school-age children who have been granted the opportunity to shoot most of *Children's Village*. Like other films in the Folk Memory Project, it captures an unpolished vision of rural China through the perspective of filmmakers who have ancestral links to the countryside. However, it is unique because it incorporates the perspectives and participation of rural children in collecting witness accounts of the Great Famine. Therefore, the film engages with local history through a child's vision who is also at a generational remove from the subject. It also raises critical questions with regards to the child who participates as amateur filmmaker but also inevitably becomes the subject of the documentary. The film oscillates between the child's inability to grasp the seriousness of the material they have been asked to investigate in their home village and their own personal revelations in the process of becoming filmmakers. I will argue that while there are issues with the film's interviewing techniques, its reflexive production method unwittingly yet effectively opens discourse on the relationship between the generation gap and cultural amnesia as a whole in China.

Finally, I will look at the role gender plays in the collection of cultural memory. Despite having been overlooked through official history, Zou's film highlights women's contribution throughout history, from the period of rural expansion during the 1950s collectivisation period to the disappearance of rural culture from the 1980s economic policies that focus on urban production and development. There is growing literature on the subject of how women in rural communities during the period of the Great Leap Forward contribute to an alternative memory archive in China. Hopefully, this chapter will demonstrate how female filmmakers, both professional and amateur, are making a significant contribution to and continuing with the work of collecting evidence through oral testimony.

Children's Village is the third instalment of Zou's Village film series. This documentary series which centres on her village includes *Mom* (2009)³⁷, *The Starving Village* (2010), *Satiated Village* (2011), *Children's Village* and *Trash Village* (2013). Although I will provide a brief synopsis of this series, my textual analysis focuses on *Children's Village*

³⁷ *Mom* is her first film but is not part of Zou's Village series.

because it reflects the complexities of the Folk Memory Project through a child's perspective and with an untamed amateur filmmaking method. This film in particular also contributes to notable efforts made by girls and women to document rural China both past and present.

Caochangdi Workstation and Hunger: Memory Project

Children's Village is part of the larger project based at the *Caochangdi Gongzuozhan* (Caochangdi Workstation) in Beijing city. In 2005, Chinese independent documentary filmmaker pioneer Wu Wenguang and choreographer Wen Hui opened up *Shenghuo Wudao Gongzuoshi* (Living Dance Studio) for young aspiring artists and performers. The first collaboration between Wu and Wen was *Huiyi I* (Remembering I) in 2008, which involved an eight-hour performance piece about the memories of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and featured individuals who were born in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s (Zhuang, 2014: 125). It combines ritualistic performance created through an interaction between dance and documentary.³⁸ By remembering as a collective through performance and re-enactment, those involved in the project are bonded by their post-Mao social and cultural experience. In 2010, Wu and Wen launched the Folk Memory Project at Caochangdi Workstation (Fig. 8.1). This art district is a multi-building complex situated in the city's northeast near North 5th Ring road, a neighbourhood filled with a diverse group of residents that include artists³⁹, students, art dealers and migrant workers.⁴⁰ One part consists of Wu's documentary studio and editing suite and the other of Wen's Living Dance Studio. *Children's Village* is part of the larger project based at the *Caochangdi Gongzuozhan* (Caochangdi Workstation) in Beijing city. Whereas *Remembering I* contributes to a social commemoration of those who lived through the Cultural Revolution with a single collective piece of work, the Folk Memory Project expands on this idea by sending artists and filmmakers to their rural ancestral villages to document personal memories.

³⁸ *Remembering I* juxtaposes live performance on stage with the screening in the studio of *Wo de Hongweibing Shidai* (My Time in the Red Guards, 1966), a documentary made by Wu Wenguang. All of the performers (Wu, Feng, Dehua, and Wen Hui) and interviewees were born in the 1950s and early 1960s.

³⁹ Until 2015, Ai Weiwei remains the most internationally renowned artist in residence at Caochangdi Workstation.

⁴⁰ Despite the growing public interest in the area's flourishing independent art community, this alternative neighbourhood has been undergoing continual rural to urban construction that may eventually result in its cultural disappearance (similar to Beijing's well-known but now excessively developed art district 798).



FIGURE 8.1: CAOCHANGDI WORKSTATION PERFORMANCE IN BEIJING.

The project's aim is to produce pieces that facilitate a memory archive on the events of the Great Famine. This famine which took place from 1959-1961 was largely the result of Chairman Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward programme and is still rarely spoken or written about in China.⁴¹ In an attempt to increase agricultural and industrial production in the country, Mao's initiatives of the Great Leap Forward encouraged highly exaggerated reports on levels of grain harvest. Ruthless governing of rural communities by city officials who had no prior knowledge of proper farming practices and who were more concerned with maintaining grain quotas than taking into account the health and welfare of local peasants, cattle and soil led to a movement of grain from rural to urban communities that left millions of countryside civilians without adequate food (Pickowicz, 2007). Rather than eating in individual homes, the family dynamic was destabilised and meals were restricted to communal canteen halls that controlled and withheld food to the rural villagers. Any concerns raised by civilians and deputy members to the party committee were often ignored or the whistle blowers were subject to investigation and often imprisoned for being reactionary to Mao's campaign (Yang, 2008: 290). Today, millions of victims have not been acknowledged and the fundamental flaws associated with the Great Leap Forward have not yet been addressed by the state. Unfortunately, research access to unofficial histories from the

⁴¹ So far, Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine* (2008) is the most well-known unofficial record of this event. As a longstanding journalist at China's Xinhua news agency, Yang was given access to restricted archival material yet was denied permission to publish the book on the Mainland. The title of his book is a tribute to his own father who died of starvation in 1959 and who has not been publicly acknowledged as a victim of the state's policies.

countryside continues to be suppressed and severely limited by the government. Moreover, the official history taught in educational institutions continues to reinforce the belief that the famine was the result of a natural disaster.

The Folk Memory Project addresses these collective issues through a grassroots approach. For the films, Wu does not impose any strict guidelines for the way they are created. Instead, experimentation by the filmmaker is encouraged which has resulted in a diverse range of films that express the need to commemorate through film and performance. This experimentation has opened up unique ways of cinematic storytelling in relation to the filmmakers' aesthetic and historical perspective on collective memory. Filmmakers return to their rural villages to record the personal memories of their grandparents and elders who experienced the traumatic events of the famine. Since launching the *Minjian* Memory Project in 2009, over fifty films have been created and screened mostly within university settings and some film festivals throughout Canada, China, the U.K and the U.S.A. There have been two stages of the Folk Memory Project. First is the Village Democracy Project which consists of twenty-six films. The second, which *Children's Village* is part of, is the Hunger Memory Project and consists of thirty-six films.

'Hunger' refers to the famine but also implies the desire for a young filmmaker who is essentially starved of an education on the events experienced by their elders. Wu explains:

The vast majority of them were not only completely cut off from the "hunger history", but had almost no knowledge of China's true history during the 30 years following 1949. The pallidness and poverty of historical memory and a sense of uncertainty and confusion in the present have created a "spiritual hunger", and this group of people set off on their journey in hopes of satisfying this hunger. (2014: 37)

There is great urgency in China for first-hand accounts about the Great Famine to be documented because the official history has gone unquestioned in Mainland China since the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's massive reforms that followed the death of Chairman Mao. There are also major discrepancies between official and unofficial data records about the number of victims who succumbed to the famine. During the resolution which was passed by the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP on 17 June 1981, the Party Committee unanimously agreed that the errors committed were 'due to our lack of experience in socialist construction and inadequate understanding of the laws of economic development and of the basic economic conditions' (Marxists Internet Archive, 2009 [1981]). On the one hand, the Party recognizes the shortcomings of Mao's disastrous agricultural production

campaign that led to the famine: 'we were far from meticulous, the changes were too fast' (Marxists Internet Archive, 2009 [1981]). However, the Party concludes that 'on the whole, it was definitely a historic victory for us to have effected, and to have effected fairly smoothly, so difficult, complex and profound a social change in so vast a country' (Marxists Internet Archive, 2009 [1981]). Even though the Party acknowledged Mao's errors, it determined that overall his achievements outweighed his mistakes.

Contributing to the Folk Memory Project

While Wu provides the filmmakers with a social atmosphere, a performance space and an editing suite, his goal is not to teach but to allow them to discover their own individual structure and style through the act of filmmaking. Unlike those individuals involved in *Remembering I*, artists involved with the Memory Project are predominantly university students who were born between the 1980s and 1990s and so they seek to understand this part of history in rural China through personal information from their parents, grandparents and local elder townspeople. Therefore, the project is part of an ongoing effort to engage with commemorative genres that retrieve memories of peasant survivors through oral narratives, performance pieces and documentary films. It serves as both a cultural archive and a vehicle for public sharing.

In the past decade and with the help of digital video technology, there has been a small but growing number of Chinese independent films that address the loss of local culture. Both the rise in individual economic wealth and the advent of handheld digital video technology have also contributed to a grassroots movement. For instance, the Tibetan DV movement is led largely by Beijing Film Academy graduates such as Pema Tsenden and Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering. These Tibetan filmmakers, Barnett explains, 'require us to recalibrate notions of how social tension is experienced, conceptualized, and debated in a context such as Tibet' (2015: 120). Although Barnett argues that recording Tibetan culture and heritage has its origins in the cassette tape, he also sees these new DV filmmakers moving beyond binary approaches to questions of identity and culture because they have returned to their hometowns.

Similarly, the Folk Memory Project consists of aspiring film graduates from prestigious academies who have returned to their home villages to record and reflect on the gap between official and unofficial memories. Zou is part of a generation in China who has no

personal memory of the hardships endured by parents and grandparents during the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution which followed. They may also have limited knowledge about what happened in their villages during this time because of the lack of official information and because these are often painful memories that their rural family members would prefer to forget. Filmmaker Zou Xueping was born in Bingzhou City, Shandong Province in 1985 and then spent her childhood years in a small rural village. Her parents still live in the village but Zou has been educated in Beijing and resides in the nation's capital city. In 2009, she graduated from the Department of Media at the China Fine Arts Academy and is now a resident artist at the Caochangdi Workstation in Beijing. *Children's Village* is the third instalment that documents the Great Famine through an interview style. In addition to examining Zou's role as filmmaker in the making of her own film and highlighting some of the testimony given by the elders in her community, I will address the filmmaker's method to involve village children in her work through participatory filmmaking that is both reflexive and raises key questions about the experience of memory for those at a generational remove from the traumas of the Great Famine.

Starving Village is the first of a series of films Zou has made that deals specifically with the events surrounding the Great Famine by interviewing elderly villagers. After shooting in the village, she returned to Beijing's Caochangdi Workstation where she worked on the post-production of the film. This also involved three to four workshops in which other artists in residence offered suggestions and feedback. Once she completed *Starving Village*, she returned to the village and recorded the reactions from the elderly residents to her finished product. This is the subject of her second film *Satiated Village* (Fig. 8.2). In this film, there are mixed reactions by the townspeople who show genuine interest in understanding their local history but worry about how viewers outside the town (and more specifically outside of China) will respond to their personal memories of a calamitous event. Some of the testimony includes outright criticism of Mao and the way townspeople suffered and died as a result of a disastrous ideological collective labour campaign. On more than one occasion in the film, the elders express their discomfort and tell Zou that viewers may 'laugh at us'. Audiences in other parts of China had similar reactions to the film. According to Zou, in both film screenings of *Starving Village* in Beijing and Shenzhen, spectators were concerned with the film's 'betrayal' of China and accused her of 'airing [her] dirty laundry'.⁴² Projecting a positive cultural image of China to the rest of the world became a prominent part of Chinese media's national debate during the making of this film partly due to the fact that China had

⁴² This is a statement made by Zou at a Q&A session at King's College London on 1 December 2014.

just hosted the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Her film was also fiercely opposed by her family members, including her parents who were born in the 1950s, her elder brother born in the 1970s and younger brother born in the 1990s.⁴³ What emerges is a collective anxiety that highlights a wider debate about how contemporary China positions its self-image within a globalised framework.



FIGURE 8.2: ZOU POSING WITH THE ELDERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN *SATIATED VILLAGE* (2011).

As a member of the Living Dance Studio and Caochangdi Workstation and under the tutelage of Wu, Zou's works have toured extensively at film festivals and universities throughout Europe, North America, Taiwan and some parts of Mainland China.⁴⁴ There has also been an effort by Wu to create an online archive so that Zou's films and those of the other artists in residence can be made available to the general public. However, there is still a veritable risk in distributing these films in public when the official history does not reflect the unofficial testimonies.⁴⁵ In fact, official research tends to focus on the numbers rather than the circumstances surrounding a historical event that resulted in millions of deaths. So, individuals who provide witness accounts are taking a great risk in allowing their oral

⁴³ Revealed by Zou at a Q&A session at King's College London on 1 December 2014.

⁴⁴ Despite the lack of national commemorations, *Starving Village* was able to be shown at Nanjing's Independent Film Festival in 2012. Then on 18 April 2015, Zou's films along with those from fellow Caochangdi female filmmakers were screened at Shanghai's New York University (A Sino-US institution). The title was 'Body, Memory, Reconstruction: Body Workshop and Documentary Screenings with Wen Hui, Zou Xueping and Li Xinmin'.

⁴⁵ In a Q&A session at London King's College UK on 3 December 2014, Wu Wenguang expressed his concerns with creating an internet accessible archive that could pose a danger to those witnesses who give public testimonials in the films. His internet site can be accessed at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/ccdworkstation>. While there is an ongoing issue with creating a domestic archive, there is now an online archive at Duke University, USA.

histories to be documented. Many who are willing and capable of retrieving memories surrounding this historical period may not pose as a threat to the government because of their age. However, there is an overall sense that the offspring of those who lived through the Great Famine could be negatively impacted by the testimonies.

What makes it particularly difficult for someone in Zou's position, is that her urban upbringing and education at a prestigious academy positions her as an outsider to her *Zhujia*. Although Zou's films focus on testimony concerning the Great Famine, her village is part of a wider issue affecting rural inhabitants who are struggling to cope with staggeringly high unemployment rates, devastation of natural resources, corrupt local officials and overall neglect from the government. Pickowicz criticises this urban filmmaker or 'alien' who seeks 'truth claims' by returning to the home village and intruding in the community with their cameras (2011: 164). However, it is important to note that Zou's family are well-known within the community. As noted earlier, her father, who appears in the film and who ends up helping Zou raise funds to erect a stone memorial that commemorates those in the community who perished, is a respected party cadre in the village. Since Zou returns to her *Zhujia* on repeated occasions to document the people in her community, the film series becomes its own archive of the village. Furthermore, the villagers, as I will show, play an active role in the making of *Children's Village*.

Reflexivity and cultural memory

Participatory art seeks an audience's involvement in the process of creation. This allows the audience to actively take part in wider debates on historical memory or the environment an individual inhabits. In *Starving Village*, the elders within Zou's community offer testimony but do not participate in the production process. Then, in *Satiated Village*, Zou records the responses and reactions by the elders to her documentary work *Starving Village*. Through the use of a television screen, the elders offer criticism and therefore participate in the construction of the filmmaker's aesthetic choices.

Here, the filmmaker's encouragement and documentation of the community's involvement in her work resembles a similar method approached by anthropologist and filmmaker of *cinéma vérité*, Jean Rouch. Although it is considered an observational mode of filmmaking, *cinéma vérité* does not aspire to invisibility in the same way as *direct cinema*. Instead, as Barnouw notes of this filmmaker's mode, 'The Rouch *cinéma vérité* artist was

often an avowed participant' (1974: 255). In his field work on West Africa after World War II, Rouch's film *Chronique d'un été* (Co-directed by Edgar Morin: 1961) is concerned with anthropological expression through the cinematic form. Through interviews, it also raises questions of public memory in relation to both the France's relationship with the Holocaust and French colonialism in Africa. Structurally, the film first shows both Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin discussing the possibility or impossibility of capturing the subject's sincerity in the presence of a camera. Rouch then interviews individuals on their opinions about the French working class. At the end of the film, Rouch shows these interviewees the compiled footage and together they discuss how much the film managed to capture reality. Ruby notes that Rouch's film is 'concerned with the personal: philosophical problems of doing research and the possible effects of filming research' (2005: 40). Zou employs the same participatory method utilised in *Chronique d'un été* by recording herself showing the elders' reaction to *Starving Village* yet it does not concern itself with the issues that arise for anthropologists who use a camera to conduct their field research. Instead, her method is more demonstrative of her efforts to both build trust within her community and to emphasise the topic of personal trauma and memory in a collective public gathering. Here, Zou attempts to take private and individual memories and push them into the social and public realm.

This community engagement in Zou's third instalment *Children's Village* is further explored when she hands over the filmmaking responsibility to the children who actually live in the village. *Children's Village* is a documentary film set entirely in the *Zhujia* village. This time, Zou has returned to raise money for a memorial tombstone which will commemorate the villagers who perished during the Great Famine years. Instead of doing it all herself, Zou decides to hand over the cameras to the local children who are given the task of interviewing their relatives and raising verbal and monetary support for the tombstone. In the end and with the financial support from her father, Zou manages to raise the funds to create the tombstone and together the children and elderly villagers gather to unveil it and commemorate the lives of those they lost during the famine years. The film ends with the children listening to the stories told by their elders.

Like Wu, Zou passes her tools and knowledge to the next generation of amateurs as a way to facilitate communication on historical memory from a microcosmic level. The film also contributes to a new way of engaging with the local memory of the Great Famine. In the opening credits of *Children's Village*, a group of children gather in front of the camera and exclaim 'Welcome to Satiated Village!' (Fig. 8.3). As I have already mentioned, Zou filmed the reactions by the elders watching the first instalment *Starving Village*. Now she returns

with the finished product of her second instalment *Satiated Village* and records the children watching it on a television screen. When she introduces *Satiated Village* to the children she states, 'This film is about me interviewing the old people in the village. It's about the Three Years Famine from 1959-1961'. She then asks the children whether they know the history of their village to which some respond with an emphatic yes ('Shi De!') while others seem confused or shake their heads.



FIGURE 8.3: OPENING OF *CHILDREN'S VILLAGE* WHEREBY THE PARTICIPANTS SHOUT 'WELCOME TO SATIATED VILLAGE!'

Both the film's opening portrait and its shooting of people watching a film demonstrate that Zou applies the same method as in her previous film. However, here Zou has shifted her focus away from the trauma embedded in the elders' testimony and their reaction to the filmmaker's work and toward the children's knowledge about their grandparents' rural history. As the children watch *Satiated Village*, the camera pans from left to right recording both those children who are actively engaged with the documentary and others who are noticeably more curious about the fact they are being filmed. After the film screening, Zou and a group of approximately ten children remain. Then, the filmmaker questions their knowledge surrounding their local history and more specifically about the famine that impacted on their grandparents' lives. The lack of knowledge on the subject is revealed when most of the children are silent, one of them professes she does not understand *Satiated Village* and another named Ya Nan vaguely explains how 'those peoples' lives were really hard.' The children who participate in Zou's project are then given simple instructions: go home, collect the names, births and deaths of their relatives who died as a result of the famine and ask for

monetary or verbal support to erect a marble tombstone in the village engraved with the victims' statistics. Zou stresses that 'donations are voluntary, not obligatory' (Fig. 8.4).



FIGURE 8.4: CHILDREN POSE IN FRONT OF THE MEMORIAL TOMBSTONE IN ZHUJIA.

So, how does the method of using local village children to record testimony and statistics act as public intervention into remembering the Great Famine? First, with the introduction of affordable and easy to use handheld DV technology, school age children can engage with and explore local expressions of cultural memory. Unlike Zou, these children (apart from Zou's niece Ruyi) were born and raised in this *Zhujia*. So they offer potentially new material with their knowledge and position within the community. When the children set out to record names and testimony, they seek out their own relatives who may reveal more to them than to Zou. They fill a gap that Zou may have been unable to fulfil without their help.

Second, the open-endedness and unstructured guidelines passed down from the Caochangdi Workstation to Zou and then her mentorship towards the children is what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define as a 'rhizome'. As a cultural concept, the rhizome rejects binary or hierarchical systems of rational knowledge and embraces the *intermezzo* or middle. Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as something that can be mapped but not traced, unlike the roots of a tree 'which plot a point, fix an order' (1987 [1980]: 7). The rhizome concept can be utilised to define resistance movements (such as Daesh or ISIS) that has no fixed point and with unpredictable and multiple results.⁴⁶ Even though Caochangdi

⁴⁶ The rhizome was once a term often used to define the internet but in recent years it has been argued that the URL link belongs to hierarchical systems.

Workstation has a fixed address and explores a specific topic of the Great Famine, the filmmakers and artists involved in the Folk Memory Project are spread all over the country. Furthermore, the growing archive is available on multiple platforms such as the internet, DVDs and in personal or institutional libraries all over the world. However, it does not belong to a commercial distributor because it is part of a grassroots movement. The independent resistance aspect of the Folk Memory Project is demonstrated by its attempts to engage with cultural amnesia surrounding Chinese rural memories of the Great Famine. Furthermore, revealing the atrocities of a government blunder that resulted in millions of deaths, poses a significant danger for local residents who share their stories. The elders' current worries are addressed in *Satiated Village* in which they fear for the safety of their immediate family and friends and their concerns extend into their international reputation.

While *Satiated Village* explores the resistance movement by collecting sensitive material, *Children's Village* provides an interesting example of the rhizome concept because of its digital multiplicity and unpredictability of the filmmakers who shoot the film. For instance, Zou asks the group of children to pair up together. Each pair is responsible for tracking down their elderly relatives and recording individual testimony with handheld camcorders. Sometimes they switch roles as camera operator and as interviewer. This participatory exercise expands on Zou's previous films because it multiplies and expands on camcorder numbers and individual, undisciplined points of views. The unpredictability of *Children's Village* starts with the children's amateur filmmaking practice. By allowing the children to participate within their own community's memory-retrieval, they become part of their ancestor's oral histories. Oral testimony offers an alternative account to the hegemonic account written in official history books. Meiling Cheng argues for the force of unofficial history or *yeshi* that contributes to the remembrance of 'those accounts of putative happenings and alleged reminiscences that are untamed and largely untameable by the powers that be' (2012: 45). The 'untamed' power of unofficial history in *Children's Village* is demonstrated in both the elders' oral testimony and in the children's participation and their flexible and inevitably reflexive documentary filmmaking practice. It is the reflexive qualities of this practice that puts into relief the rural child's disengagement or generational remove from the memory of the Great Famine and their situation in contemporary China.

Children's Village distances itself from direct cinema's observational style because it does not disguise itself from the production process. It shows how the children are learning to use the camera, conduct interviews and record data that will be used for the memorial tombstone that will be inscribed with the names, births and deaths of the victims who

perished from 1959-1961. By showing the processes of production, the film employs reflexivity. The camera footage shows the children speaking on and off-screen about this process: 'Is my camera shaking?', 'Am I holding this camera correctly?', 'Am I recording?' Typically, reflexivity in documentary cinema conveys to the audience that it is a self-aware, self-conscious act. However, more importantly, it should reveal something about the creator/subject. Ruby argues that while 'accidental reflexiveness is a contradiction in terms and that reflexivity depends on intentionality and deliberateness' (2005: 44), some documentary filmmakers do employ reflexive techniques without intentionality. Zou's decision in post-production to edit in the children's engagement with the production process, reflects a decision to focus the film on the child's experiencing of memory rather than simply the elders' testimony.

The emphasis on reflexivity is placed in relief in consideration to the child's understanding of the past from a 'postmemory' position. What is the relationship that the generations after the Great Famine bear to the personal and collective trauma of those that experienced it first hand? Hirsch describes 'postmemory' as 'the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (2008: 103). For instance, for the children and grandchildren of Holocaust family members, their memories are mediated by televisual and video documentaries on the historical event. Conversely, in rural China, the memory of the Great Famine, which impacted millions of lives in the late 1950s and early 1960s complicates Hirsch's definition of 'postmemory' because it involves an event that has been largely ignored by the nation-state. Today, the tenuous link between memory of the famine and the local people is further endangered due to its aging population and the mass migration of labourers from rural to urban centres.

When the children interview the elders, they frequently interrupt during emotional testimonies and often lack a sensitive approach to their interviews. In the first interview, a group of girls arrive at Uncle Xisheng's brick and clay rural farmhouse. They bang on the doors and kick at the building yelling 'Uncle Xisheng! Open up!' Eventually, with the help of Zou, the elderly deaf man opens the door to the girls. The children are delighted when they have collected a large number of names that will be inscribed on the tombstone yet overlook the importance of accurately marking down the correct spelling of names and birthdates. This becomes visually apparent when the tombstone is erected at the end of the film and contains several question marks beside victims' names. They are also obsessed with collecting money

for the construction of the marble tombstone, often forgetting Zou's explicit instructions: 'monetary support is secondary to verbal support'.

Although the children are at a generational remove from the Great Famine, the elders also prove how difficult it is to represent cultural memory. Many of the elders are illiterate, deaf or suffer from memory loss because they are so old. For example, Zou's niece Ruyi is interviewing her grandmother. The elderly woman sits and weaves on a large loom in an otherwise vacant room. After Ruyi explains her project and asks for her grandmother to spell out the names of her family members who died during the Great Famine, she laughs and responds 'I am illiterate'. She also follows a traditional twelve zodiac animal Chinese calendar which complicates attempts made by the children to accurately record data. In this way, the film shows the difficulties in representation for both children belonging to a separate generation and for elders who are too old or illiterate to articulate their responses.

The young filmmakers in *Children's Village* were born several decades after Deng Xiaoping's massive economic reforms and may not have the knowledge or be sensitive to the testimonies given by their elders. Their unstructured documentary process provides a new experimentation with the topic of the Great Famine. In effect, these children who are entrusted with a camera and with the role of collecting statistics become the central subject of the documentary rather than the elders who provide testimony. In fact, the accidental self-awareness brought about by the film's reflexive elements bring to the foreground the relationship between these children and the elders which reveals the difficulties in representation for both parties. Young expands on Hirsch's definition of 'postmemory' by arguing for the constructive potential in recognising limits of representation and the fragmentary nature of personal memory. Through a reflexive practice, representations of post-traumatic memory should not be stagnant: instead, 'they acknowledge both the moral obligation to remember and the ethical hazards of doing so in art and literature' (2000: 6). The children may lack experience as filmmakers, interviewers and local memory, yet by showing the haphazard production process, the film calls attention to the fragmentary nature of memory recall. It also creates a dynamism that enunciates cultural memory from a contemporary space. In this way, reflexivity offers a new way of understanding the gap between China's culture of forgetting and remembering, of unofficial and official memories. In the following section, I will explore the dynamic continuation of and future role for girls and women who contribute to the documentation and archival memory of marginalised rural inhabitants.

Participatory role of girls and women

Historically, Chinese women have participated in liberation movements of the rural everyday situation since the women's rights organisation, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), was established in 1949. With the mobilisation of collectivised rural labour practices in the 1950s, the ACWF played a prominent role in creating a women's emancipation movement. In 1950, the ACWF sought to address structural long-term gender inequalities by celebrating women's pervasive contribution to society and by promulgating a new Marriage Law that provided women with the legal capacity to divorce on grounds of spousal abuse.⁴⁷ The traditional practices of concubinage and child-marriage were also abolished. With Mao's efforts to increase productivity during the Great Leap Forward, women were now encouraged to participate in physical labour jobs alongside their male counterparts while also maintaining their role in the domestic realm.

However, contrary to official records that show the emancipation of women through the collectivisation years, recent oral testimony given by rural elderly women also reveals this double burden women faced during this tumultuous period (Hershatter, 2011: 83, 87). Collecting testimony from elderly rural women reveals the role of gendered politics in socialist collectivisation. Officially, government records show that Mao was not initially made aware of the famine taking place and that the deaths were the consequence of poor weather conditions and grain production practices. Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine* (2008) is one of the most detailed unofficial accounts of the Great Famine and offers first-person accounts of the corruption taking place in the countryside and numerous attempts by civilians and even some party cadres to inform Mao of this event. It also includes testimony by party officials' wives who belonged to the ACWF and witnessed the famine while touring around the countryside to raise women's issues surrounding health.

Although all federations, unions and societies worked under Mao's chain of command during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, members of the ACWF also attempted to expose the reality of the famine. As a result, many of the ACWF activists were imprisoned during the Great Leap Forward for their efforts to reveal the difficult realities facing women at this time. For instance, Zhang Shengshi, who was the wife of a party cadre, and chair of the Gushi County Women's Federation until 1960, was imprisoned with her

⁴⁷ It is during this time that Mao Zedong famously declared 'women hold up half the sky'.

husband and subjected to self-examination by Mao and thousands of other party members after it was discovered what had been going on for nearly three years. Mao's purging of Party members deemed as counterrevolutionaries and corrupt officials helped to shift blame away from the head of the Party. Zhang states: 'As the chair of the Women's Federation, I knew very well what women were suffering. At that time, 60 percent of the women stopped menstruating, and some 20 to 30 percent suffered uterine prolapse. There were no more births until 1961' (Yang, 2008: 67). She also reveals that the grain was kept in locked storage units while rural civilians were left to starve. This issue is also raised by the elders in *Children's Village*. These unofficial testimonies provided by rural peasants and by ACWF members and leaders in recent years reveal discrepancies in the official records.

By recording testimonies from both elderly men and women, *Children's Village* contributes to the knowledge of the woman's particular experience during this time. Furthermore, it expands on past trauma and testimony by shifting attention toward the rural girl's difficult relationship with local history and the film shows a continuation of governmental neglect of rural inhabitants in contemporary China. As I have already mentioned, Zou privileges a reflexive practice throughout *Children's Village* and provides the viewer with a perspective of what it is like for a child to live in *Zhujia*. The village is small, the roads are unpaved and dusty. From the camera's/child's point of view, much of the film conveys the rural village life as a relatively bleak and uneventful experience. Sometimes, there are children playing hopscotch in the alleyways. Twice, the filmmaker and children are shot playing children's games outdoors such as musical chairs and clapping rhyming games. Most of the time though, the streets are virtually empty and buildings are dilapidated or deserted.

A migration of labourers from rural to urban centres has been steadily increasing since the end of the Cultural Revolution and start of economic reforms. This adds more social urgency for the independent documentary filmmaker to document rural life. What remains in the contemporary rural village (and is shown in *Children's Village*) are the neglected populations that include elders, those with disabilities, children left behind and stray dogs. School age children are often brought up by their grandparents in villages while their parents work in the city. Often, parents return home once a year during the month of Chinese New Year which results in a mass human migration phenomena.⁴⁸ When filmmaker Zou returns to her home village to gather information about the numbers and names of those who died during the Great Famine, it is fitting that she should employ the help of the village's children,

⁴⁸ See discussion in Chapter 4 of Lixin Fan's *Last Train Home* (2009).

some of whom have been abandoned by their parents who are forced to relocate for work. To the residents and children, Zou's presence as urban filmmaker generates immediate curiosity. More specifically, Zou becomes a mentor for the young village girls (who refer to her as Sister Ping) because they are the ones who she employs as her filmmakers and interviewers.

At the start of the film, both boys and girls congregate together to discuss their personal knowledge about the Great Famine. Even though the project begins with an equal distribution of boys and girls, once the children embark on their investigation, equipped with cameras, a filmmaking partner, pen and paper, the girls are shown participating in the documentary production while the boys are playing in the neighbourhood. It is unclear to the viewer whether Zou has just chosen to focus on the girls' efforts or whether the boys have lost interest. In the very first interview, a group of girls shadow Zou who is speaking with the elder Uncle Xisheng and they sit together in a dark room of Uncle Xisheng's mud house constructed with hay and bricks and newspaper clippings pasted to the walls to keep the draught out. As with most interviewees, he is nearly deaf so Zou must speak loudly and repeat her questions. At first, the Uncle is reluctant to speak about the Great Famine and asks Zou why she bothers to interview the elders. She responds, 'We're doing this so that the young people can know what the elders went through'. Eventually, Uncle Xisheng opens up and offers a surprisingly frank account of his experience during the famine referring to Mao as a 'Mother's Cunt' for all the trouble he stirred up when rural civilians began to starve to death. Similar to other recent unofficial testimonies of the famine (Yang, 2008), he reveals how there was plenty of grain locked in the storage unit and that the deaths occurred as a result of Mao's emphasis on unrealistic grain production quotas for the urban masses. Here, the camera captures a re-enactment of the trauma of memory by a resident of the village. What we are witnessing as viewers is a connection that helps forge a relationship between generations that would otherwise be left as a gap in history. The interview pushes memory into the social realm through the cinematic medium and provides an unarticulated yet poignant politics of memory.

For the rest of the film, the young rural girls of the *Zhujia* community are in charge of locating interviewees, recording their testimony and collecting verbal and monetary support from them. In the next scene, the girls gather in a semi-circle holding hands. They each take a turn stating their name, age and classroom grade. Zou then sits with the girls in a room as they organise themselves into pairs for the filmmaking project. Twelve-year old Ruyi exhibits the most knowledge surrounding the history of the famine. She knows how to operate the camera and her professional interview techniques are much more polished than the rest of the girls.

Equipped with a notepad from the start of the film, Ruyi seems to understand the significance of recording details throughout the project. She is also unique amongst the group of girls because she no longer lives in the village. Instead, she returns to visit her relatives and help Zou with her project.

Zou aptly pairs Ruyi with Yuqian, a girl of similar age who, it is revealed, lives with distant relatives she barely knows. In their first interview together, Ruyi is in charge of questioning her grandmother and holding the camera while Yuqian shadows her peer. When Ruyi asks if her Grandma had lost anyone in the famine she responds matter of factly 'my mother and my father'. Yet Ruyi is acutely aware of the sensitivity of the topic and allows for silence to envelop the room before carefully asking if Grandma can remember her parents' names. In comparison with Ruyi's professional interview style, Yuqian is scolded for her 'brain turning to porridge' when she attempts to speak with the elders. When Yuqian holds the camera, it often shakes and she accidentally presses buttons she does not know how to use. After an interview, Yuqian is holding the camera and walking down a dirt road in the village when Ruyi runs off to catch up with the other girls. In a panic, Yuqian is overheard behind the camera: 'Sister Ping [Zou], I pushed the YT button by accident. I always do this and I am not doing a good job of filming our walk home. I hope you can forgive me.'

Although Yuqian is inarticulate with the interviews, forgetful with the instructions she has been given and clumsy with the camera, her enthusiasm for the project and her curiosity about having a filmmaking career becomes a central feature of *Children's Village*. Yuqian, to a larger extent and the other girls, to a smaller extent, becomes the filmmaker's subject of the documentary. Yuqian's daily circumstance represents the disparaging and rising number of girls left behind in rural China while parents are forced to work thousands of miles away in factories. Halfway through the film, Zou records Yuqian walking along one of the unpaved and unmarked streets. Yuqian has just interviewed her own grandmother and tells Zou that in reality, 'She's never seen me...I've never gone inside [her house]'. She goes on to describe how her grandmother's memories of one of her daughters (Yuqian's aunt) during the Great Famine 'really moved me to tears' (Fig. 8.5). So, as much as *Children's Village* offers a continuation of the elders' testimony, it also helps transform the lives of the young filmmakers. It does not seek to fill the historical gap but raise key questions about understanding the complex relationship between local history and the generation removed from that historical event. Furthermore, by documenting this process through a reflexive method, personal memory becomes enunciated in the present. Later in the film, Yuqian continues to look up to her mentor Sister Ping: 'When I grow up, I want to be just like you'.

She also asks, 'Will you continue to make films after you get married?' Sister Ping leaves an indelible impression on Yuqian who is looking for some guidance and perhaps for something more exciting outside of the confines of her stagnant village life.



FIGURE 8.5: YUQIAN LIVES WITH HER RELATIVES AND IS PART OF THE GENERATION OF CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND.

Along with Yuqian, there is an indication that the other girls who participate evolve through the process. This is best articulated in the moments in the film when Zou reconvenes with the girls to discuss the project and offer her advice and possible feedback. Forty-five minutes into the film, Zou asks what they think of the project so far. One girl states, 'What I like is collecting the names. I am consumed with this tombstone business. I want to know the circumstances of how they died. How old, what year they died, what year they were born. What did they eat that killed them?' She then ends with, 'Sometimes I'm interested. Sometimes I get it. Sometimes I don't. I can't really explain why.' Here, the girls are beginning to understand their roles and it is often difficult for them to sit patiently waiting for the elders to respond to their questions or to respond at all. Some are very old and find it difficult to focus on the questions for very long. Other elders become agitated by the barrage of questions. At first, the girls are only interested in holding the camera and collecting the most number of names and money. However, as the interviewing progresses, the girls begin to slowly become more self-conscious and self-aware of their investigative work. For instance, Zou sits down with two of the participants, Zhi Ruo and Wang Mengren to discuss the footage they have captured. The girls are sitting on each side of her when all of a sudden Zhi Ruo begins to cry. When Zou asks why she is getting

emotional, Zhi Ruo responds '[my grandpa] thinks what I am doing is nonsense'. The other girl to Zou's left named Wang Mengren then states 'My grandma told me to learn from you so that I can become a journalist'. Here, the filmmaking experience is providing a space for the rural girls to examine their own position and identity within their local community. At the end of the film and with help from thirty-three members of the community and Zou's father, they are able to raise enough funds to create a memorial that commemorates those villagers who perished during the Great Famine. Together, Zou and the girls choose the best location to place the stone memorial. Once the names have been inscribed on the tombstone and transported to the *Zhujia* village the children and elderly villagers honour the occasion by gathering at the spot where the stone memorial has been erected. It is situated between a few sparse trees and some shrubbery. Each child takes a turn introducing themselves to the elders who are seated. The children also perform speeches and listen to the elders tell their individual stories about that historical period. This time, the children sit quietly listening intently to the oral storytelling. By showing the various stages of the film's development and the feedback given by the children along the way, *Children's Village* participates in both a recollection of elders' testimony and an archival record of the child's own individual evolution through time and through the documentary process. Zou's mentorship role with the girls is a reflection of Wu's own mentoring relationship with Zou. She encourages the girls to join in on her project, she equips them with the knowledge and technology to interview members of their community and she also reconvenes with them afterwards to provide feedback on the footage they have captured (Fig. 8.6). Although Zou appears intermittently throughout the film, she acts as more of a guiding presence for the girls, providing them with the basic tools to conduct interviews on their own.



FIGURE 8.6: ZOU AND THE GIRLS DISCUSS FOOTAGE POST-INTERVIEW.

Zou's film *Children's Village* is a continuation in the untamed and alternative oral history in China. First, Zou herself has disappointed her family by pursuing a career as a documentary filmmaker who will most likely struggle financially and makes films with a considerable risk attached to them. Her parents have left the village to pursue careers in the city and she admits that their support has improved with her international success but not to a degree that they are satisfied with her decision to be a documentary filmmaker.⁴⁹ Second, Zou's presence as a female urban filmmaker seems to resonate with the young girls in the village. *Children's Village* is part of a growing Memory project on collective rural history during the years 1959-1961. Digital filmmaking has arrived just in time for young amateur filmmakers to return to their family roots to learn about their unofficial and raw stories surrounding the Great Famine that impacted millions during Mao's Cultural Revolution. In an effort to move towards massive economic development while still maintaining 'socialist characteristics' embedded in China's collective physical labour, this event has been largely overlooked by the nation-state. Through an open-ended and undisciplined visual storytelling, Zou's film opens up new questions about the independent filmmaker's role in the process of returning to the rural village and raising awareness about a historically taboo subject matter. By employing the help of girls in the project, Zou also emphasizes the role that women can play in the persistence of cultural memory at the grassroots level.

What is significant about the work done here is the exploration of alternative visions in China that seeks to address the past through a collective process of remembering within a community. If there is apprehension by the public or by the nation-state in revealing the circumstances surrounding the Great Famine, then the project will continue to be a significant force in China's counter-memory. This community is also endangered by the forces of economic development that have resulted in the mass migration of farmers to urban factories. In a way, *Children's Village* is a process of remembering and archiving both the Great Famine and what is left of the wastelands of rural village life.

⁴⁹ This was revealed during the Q&A session with the filmmaker at London King's College on 1 December 2014.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I sought to investigate how the digital video era has witnessed a rise in independent video production in Mainland China that warrants our scholarly attention for the ways in which it addresses the marginalised individual within common tropes of urban spaces, mobility and memory. In contemporary China, the mainstream film and television industry is controlled by the nation-state authority whereas independent cinema can offer stimulating alternative approaches to reality that may otherwise be unacknowledged, overlooked and forgotten. Although the marginal figure functions within the globalising structures of cosmopolitanism, mobility and popular history, the banality of the everyday reveals this individual experience as heterogeneous, immobile and counter-historical.

As China's market economy is now fully immersed within global politics, marginality embodies a set of new tactics that allow Chinese independent filmmakers to open up a discursive space for tackling social issues, exploring individual subjectivities and envisioning different futures. While it is independent from the hegemonic nation-state system, it is also subversive as it challenges a conventional understanding of realism. I have examined these shifting configurations of the local experience within China's contemporary globalised structure through critical textual analysis of films made after 2005 and I have argued that with these transformations, new subject-positions and aesthetic practices have emerged within contemporary Chinese independent cinema.

My methodology was simple: to source, select and investigate films that enhance the filmmaking practice by going beyond the parameters of representation, often experimenting with film form and charged with political and artistic energy. Sourcing the material for my textual analysis on contemporary Chinese independent cinema brought about some challenges at times as there is no specific route to acquiring some of these films which circulate for a short period of time and then often are difficult to find. However, this also meant that I needed to actively engage with the community of artists, producers, East Asian cinema enthusiasts and like-minded researchers who helped shape the framework of my study. In effect, my research is informed by these events, forums, festivals and discussions. However, despite the invigorating field of exhibition and circulation which also illuminates the many challenges facing Chinese independent filmmakers, the focus of my research was to examine through close textual analysis, those films which enliven the discussion on ways that filmmakers are engaging with social and economic realities through digital video aesthetics and politics.

In recent years, attention has focused towards China in every academic field as it has steadily become the world's fastest growing economy. Lately, the scholarship on Chinese independent cinema has assumed a much more significant role in film studies, most notably on the history of the New Chinese Documentary Movement (Berry, Lu & Rofel, 2010), on its pertinent and lasting thematic and aesthetic influence (Robinson, 2013) and on the impact of digital video filmmaking in China (Zhang & Zito, 2015). My contribution to the field was to critically engage with textual analysis on films that have been under-examined in the past decade, that are representative of the diverse field of Chinese independent cinema and which contribute to the study of world cinema. My thesis is a comprehensive study of China's current transformations rendered through critical textual inquiry that contribute to a national debate (and sometimes wider debates) on poverty, homelessness, *liudong renkou* or the rural migrant 'floating population' and on the erasure of cultural memory. I argued that the tensions in reality are played out in contemporary Chinese independent cinema through relationships between non-fiction and fiction, performance and representation, art and activism, the local and global.

In Part I, I addressed the common trope of urban spaces in contemporary Chinese independent cinema and how these films engage through theme and form with the struggles, upheavals and even the aesthetic potential within the mundane of the everyday urban experience. In Chapter 1, my overall aim was to create context by starting with a textual analysis of Zhao Dayong's documentary film *Street Life* (2006) which is illustrative of the aesthetic influence and persistent relevance of the New Chinese Documentary Movement. The filmmaker's commitment to capturing the everyday homeless experience and the spontaneous event of *xianchang* was also highlighted in scenes that depicted the noise of urban street life and the troubling lack of privacy for the homeless.

Chapter 2 continued with shooting in public urban spaces but this time, my aim was to show how filmmakers like Li Ning voluntarily blur the boundaries between the private and public in an effort to make life and performance art inseparable ways of living. Using Sobchack's and Nagib's theories on realism, I argued that *Tape* (2010) demonstrates an ethical commitment to reality through the filmmaker's physical exhibitionist methods of self-portraiture and through the sheer length of a video project that was shot over a five-year period, leading up to the historical 2008 Beijing Olympics. Along with the physical engagement with reality, Li also explores the potentialities of realism in film through a bodily engagement with the materiality of the digital video medium. This monumental film project is

ambitious, innovative and politically charged with art activism through performance, self-portraiture and through experiments with film form.

This potentiality for the artist to address and engage with urban realities through film form brings me to Chapter 3. Here, Liu Jiayin's diptych films *Oxhide I* and *II* offer an urban perspective on the filmmaker's life with her family from the confines of a cramped Beijing apartment. My aim for this chapter turned away from the spontaneity and physical realism depicted in Chapters 1 and 2 (consecutively) to the expressive potential of minimalist aesthetics along with Liu's clever use of the cinemascope format and close-ups that convey the working class urban family dynamics in domestic spaces. The film also provides insight into the potentialities of first-person female filmmaking in contemporary China.

In Part II, I explored the issue of mobility which is a central concern for rural migrants who take an active role in China's recent economic boom and globalised structures but from the subaltern position. In Chapter 4, I made a comparative analysis between Lixin Fan's *Last Train Home* (2009) and Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006) which are representative of the phenomena of mass migration and forced relocation of local citizens in the wake of the country's new economic wealth and private enterprises. *Last Train Home* focuses on the rural migrant's experience and the annual mass migration of the rural physical labour force during the Chinese New Year. Due to Fan's own commitment to a realism that spans three years of intermittent filmmaking on one family, the film intelligently illustrates the tensions between traditional family structure during the Chinese New Year celebration and the separation of family members between rural home localities and urban factories for the rest of the year. *Still Life* explores migration surrounding the monumental transformation of the Yangtze River into the Three Gorges Dam. Filmed on location, in the middle of the construction of this dam, the film offers a cogent representation of the impact of economic mobility and on rural migrants. My research findings in this chapter revealed the complex identity issues surrounding rural migrants (particularly woman and youth) and the filmmaker's creative treatment of space which articulates these internal migrations and displacement of Chinese citizens.

In Chapter 5, I turned to two independent filmmakers who often contest and negotiate the parameters of mobility for rural migrants. The marginalised female is often depicted as a powerless figure cast in a supporting role and subordinate to the male protagonist in earlier Chinese independent films. My aim for this chapter was to compare two films – Xiaolu Guo's *She, A Chinese* (2008) and Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) – that offer new constructions of female agency in relation to mobility. In both chapters within this section, I analysed the contribution of recent Chinese independent filmmakers who explore economic mobility and

the notion of the individual from the position of rural migrants and with a particular focus on female agency in contemporary China.

In Part III, I examined the significance of digital video practice in restoring cultural memory into the public sphere. I selected films that depict different historical periods or events that have been overlooked or unacknowledged in the official Chinese culture of collective memory. Furthermore, they illustrate marginalised memory utilising diverse modes of representation. For example, Chapter 6 scrupulously investigates a specific act of violence during the youth-led Red Guard movement at the start of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1966. This documentary film *Though I Am Gone* (2007) follows one man's obsession with finding justice for his wife's ruthless murder by her students at an elite Beijing secondary school. Although Hu employs an observational method through witness testimony, he also enhances the study of trauma and memory with his innovative use of film form. Employing aesthetic choices that include the close-up shot, aural repetition, black & white images and image juxtapositions, the filmmaker both restores and imbues a haunting illustration of memory that seeks to reveal and simultaneously show the difficulty in representing trauma.

Chapter 7 returns to Jia Zhangke's work. This time, cultural memory is located at the site of an ex-aircraft armaments factory in Chengdu that belongs to Mao's era of the *danwei*. Set to be dismantled, Jia and his crew were given official permission to shoot this process of excavation and demolition. Instead, Jia creates a complex representation of the rural migrant in collective history through careful framing, frontal poses and by staging testimony with famous actors who re-enact through personal storytelling. Rather than investigating through evidence as seen in *Though I Am Gone*, Jia complicates and makes ambiguous through film form, the rural migrant's position within both the nostalgia of the *danwei* factory site and national history.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I explored a new type of grassroots documentary movement emerging in Mainland China. Fittingly, the Caochangdi Memory Project's film programme is run by Wu Wenguang who pioneered the New Chinese Documentary Movement. In line with most of my previous critical analysis, I focused on one filmmaker's work. Zou Xueping's *Children's Village* (2012) involves gathering rural testimony surrounding the Great Famine (1959-1961). Furthermore, it is enriched by the filmmaker's decision to entrust young rural village girls with the task of collecting testimony. This participatory mode of filmmaking pivots towards the role women and girls play in the restoration of personal memory through an alternative filmmaking practice. Although my thesis does consider and analyse some recent

contributions by women filmmakers (Liu Jiayin, Xiaolu Guo, Zou Xueping) to Chinese independent cinema, it was beyond my scope and purpose of my research to focus entirely on that topic. Nevertheless, it was my aim to situate my textual analysis of *Children's Village* (2012) at the end of my thesis in order to demonstrate the potential growth in women's independent filmmaking which, I hope will continue to invigorate and expand on the future study of Chinese independent cinema.

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