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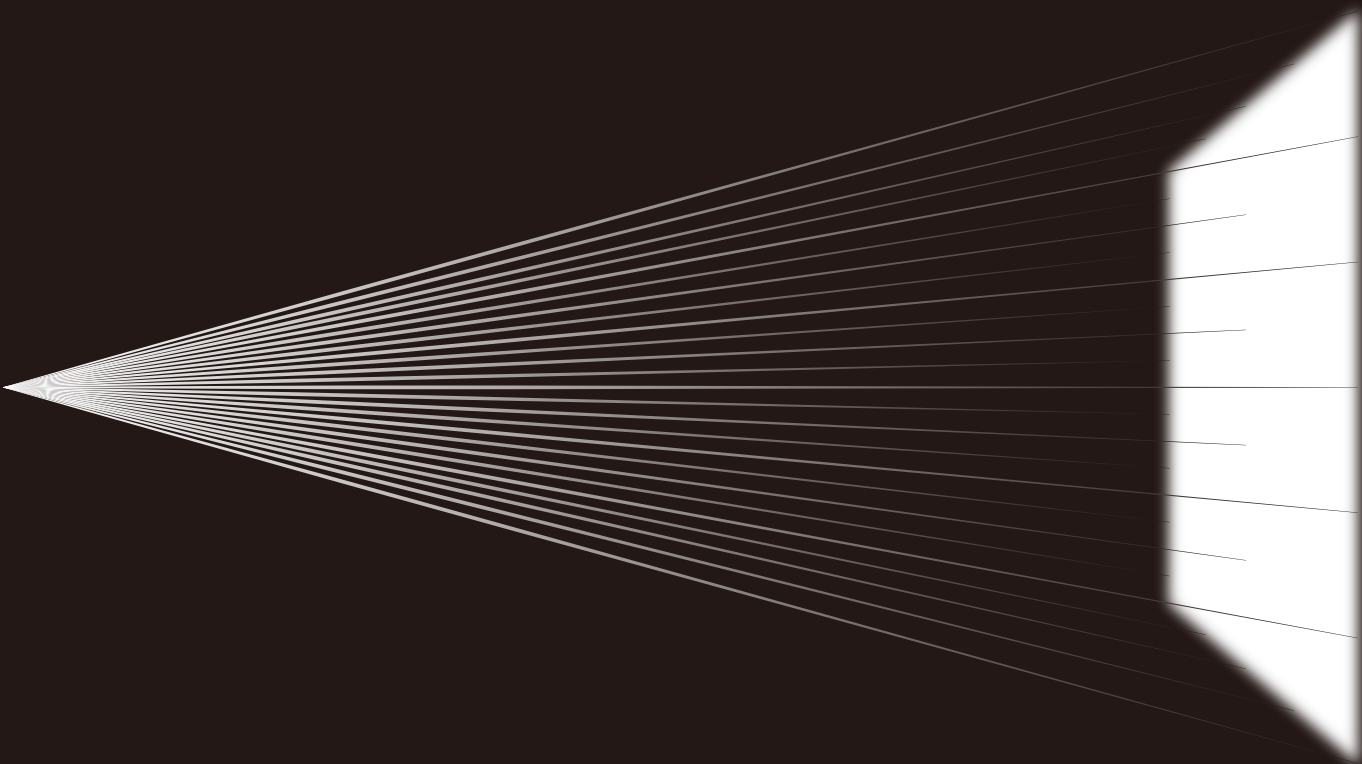
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# Time Traveling Through Asian Documentary's Pasts And Futures

## 穿越亚洲纪录片过往与未来的时间旅行

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### Abstract

This essay examines a very special event that took place immediately following the 2009 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. The director of that festival, Fujioka Asako, stayed in northern Japan and held back the young Chinese filmmakers. They retreated to a tiny village deep in the mountains, a place made famous by in his penultimate film. Fujioka called in the cinematographer of that film, along with several directors of the same generation. They held a 'dojo,' a school where the veteran independent filmmakers from Japan taught the younger generation of independent filmmakers from China. They watched films, shot and hand-developed Super-8 films, and held discussions deep into the night. It was evident that the independent scene of present-day China looked very much like that of Japan in the 60s and 70s—a kind of time slip in the mountains.

### 概要

本文回顾的是2009年山形国际纪录片电影节落幕后随即进行的一次非常特别的活动。当时任职影展主席的藤冈朝子让一些年轻的中国电影作者继续留在日本北部。他们一同暂时隐居到古屋敷村——这座曾经因小川绅介生前倒数第二部纪录片作品而广为世人所知的小山村。藤冈把纪录片《日本国古屋敷村》(1982)的摄影师以及与小川同世代的数位独立影像作者请到了现场。他们共同组建了一个“道场”，也就是日本资深独立电影人教授年轻中国影人的临时学堂。数日之间，参加者们一同观赏电影，也一起拍摄和冲洗超8毫米胶片电影作品，并长谈至深夜。这场近乎时空交错的山中奇谭，也在当时印证了为什么当代中国独立电影的状况与日本六、七十年代独立影像制作的景观是如此地相似。

We often think of film festivals as ephemeral places where filmmakers show their work and, at the same time, meet their audiences. However, those audience members may not realize that outside of the theaters, the festivals are crowded with filmmakers busy meeting each other. Since its first edition in 1989, the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival 山形国际纪录片电影节 has served as an important site where Chinese filmmakers could meet their colleagues, enabling the swift creation of a complex network of pan-Asian connections. The 2009 festival was no different, except for something that occurred *after* most of the filmmakers and audience members returned home.

The then-director of the festival's Tokyo Office, Fujioka Asako 藤冈朝子, spearheaded a unique retreat deep into the local mountains for a group of young Japanese and Chinese filmmakers. They stayed in abandoned buildings in the old village of Furuyashiki 古屋敷村, hearing lectures, watching and discussing films, and

even making films themselves. Before going into more detail, I'd like to back up and consider this event in light of its historical context. It is the connection between these filmmakers—the artists of the future—with their past, and in connection to this particular place, that made this retreat such a brilliant idea.

Most people tend to think of documentary as less market driven than fiction film; however, a quick look at its history reveals that nonfiction film is subject to many of the same economic and political forces that inform mainstream feature filmmaking—if on a smaller scale. In the days of celluloid production, documentary was largely the domain of the state and the PR mechanisms of the business world. This is true across the globe, but in Asia it was especially difficult for independent filmmakers to sustain themselves, or to make films in the first place. Most Asian countries struggled under authoritarian states, dictatorships, or varying states of warfare, colonization and occupation. Furthermore, the GDPs in most countries were low enough that 16mm film was out of reach for artists with independent inclinations. Before the Yamagata era, there were a few exceptions, notably Kidlat Tahimik 奇拉·塔西米克's experimental films, the 8mm film culture in the Philippines, and some documentary work in Hong Kong. However, nothing in Asia quite compares to the historical experience of Japanese documentary filmmakers.

Japan had enough wealthy camera fanatics to have a lively amateur scene from the 1910s through to the present. Its first independent film movement was the Proletarian Film League of Japan, which formed in 1929 and was active until 1934 when it folded under police pressure. Nonfiction filmmakers subsequently worked at both major studios and independent production companies through the China and Pacific Wars and the American Occupation. Documentary enjoyed great prestige throughout this period. After the Occupation ended in 1952, a stridently independent documentary swiftly emerged, led by great filmmakers like Kamei Fumio 亀井文夫 and Matsumoto Toshio 松本俊夫. However, small production companies working on PR films for government and business were still producing most documentary. And with the economy enjoying its high-growth spurt, business was very good indeed.

The most important of these companies was Iwanami 岩波, a massive publishing house with its own film unit. Thanks to smart leadership, the press assembled a great staff of directors and cinematographers. However, by the mid-60s many of them chafed under the strictures of the PR film, and the best filmmakers fled for the uncertain world of independent filmmaking. These included directors like Hani Susumu 羽仁进, Tsuchimoto Noriaki 土本典昭, Ogawa Shinsuke 小川绅介, and Higashi Yoichi 东阳一, as well as cameramen like Suzuki Tatsuo 铃木达夫, Tamura Masaki 田村正毅, and Otsu Koshiro 大津幸四郎. Their departure around 1963-4 marked a turn in the history of independent documentary in Japan. In fact, it initiated a period with remarkable similarities to present-day China. This was an era of land expropriation, revelations (and cover ups) about the environmental costs of the high growth economy, expanding free speech plus state surveillance and spectacular cinematic resistance. Between 1965 and 1975, Japan had one of the most thrilling documentary scenes in the world. However, after that it became increasingly difficult to make independent documentaries. Not because of censorship; rather, the audiences transformed and the indies failed to create a durable distribution network that could support the high cost of film production.

Although the timeline slips a decade or two here, the invention of DV—accompanied by sweeping political transformations—changed everything for independent artists across the breadth of Asia. Digital video enabled relatively poor artists to afford production, and also work under the radar where necessary. In the 1980s, video collectives appeared across the continent—notably in Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. Elsewhere, individuals created and distributed their own work as best they could. One of these was Wu Wenguang 吴文光 in China, who was followed by a handful of television and film producers who made independent documentaries on the side. It was in this context that the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival appeared in 1989, and it fulfilled a number of functions in this regional film scene. It allowed filmmakers to show their work, and sometimes even win prize money. Yamagata's New Asian Cur-

rents programme, organized for many years by Fujioka (with shorter collaborations with Aaron Gerow, Darrell William Davis and Stephen Teo 张建德) was a main hub of this activity. Asian filmmakers could finally meet their colleagues from across Asia and beyond. Programmers from other international festivals picked up their work. And Yamagata's historical retrospectives gave them the opportunity to see canonical films they could only read about in this era before Internet piracy.

Each year, the festival saw the Chinese contingent steadily grow in numbers and power. It was in Yamagata where they encountered the influential figures of Ogawa Shinsuke and Fredrick Wiseman 弗雷德里克·怀斯曼. And in the 2000s the Chinese documentary exploded. DV put high quality video capture within reach of a growing middle class of well-educated rabble-rousers. PCs became ubiquitous enough to make non-linear editing easy and cheap. The government loosened strictures on public speech and allowed an independent documentary scene to flourish. It wasn't long before the films started taking all the awards back at Yamagata.

The parallels between 1960s Japan and present-day China caught the eye of Fujioka Asako. And in a stroke of brilliance, she dreamed up the 2009 retreat. She would hold over the best young Chinese and Japanese filmmakers at Yamagata and bring them into contact with veterans from Iwanami and Ogawa Productions. The veterans would offer master classes over the course of five days, and they'd call it the Nitchu Eiga Dojo 日中映画道场 Japanese-Chinese Dojo (dojo 道场 a school to study martial arts). The filmmakers included:

- Mao Chenyu 毛晨雨, China (*Ximaojia Universe* 神行像, 2009, awarded a special mention in New Asian Currents that year)
- Ji Dan 季丹, China (*Spiral Staircase of Harbin* 哈尔滨回旋阶梯, 2008, awarded a special mention in New Asian Currents)
- Sato Leo 佐藤零郎, Japan (*Nagai Park Elegy* Nagaiseishun yoiyume uta, 2009)
- Kawabe Ryota 川部良太, Japan (*The Memory of Being Here* Koko ni iru koto no kioku, 2007)
- Cong Feng 丛峰, China (*Doctor Ma's Country Clinic* 马大夫的诊所, 2008, winner of the Directors Guild of Japan Award)
- Huang Weikai 黄伟凯, China (*Disorder* 现实是过去的未来, 2009)
- Omori Hiroki 大森宏树, Japan (*Memory of Spider and Moth* Kumo to hamushi no kioku, 2008)
- Nagaoka Noa 长冈野亚, Japan (*Hongara—Sacred Torch* Hongara, 2008)

This was the core group of 'students'. Their 'teachers' were veterans of the independent documentary scene from an era before. They included Iizuka Toshio 饭塚俊男 (director, former Ogawa Productions member), Otsu Koshiro (cameraman for Tsuchimoto Noriaki, Iwanami, and Ogawa Productions), and Naito Masayuki 内藤雅行 (cameraman, Iwanami). One scheduled teacher, producer Yoshiwara Junpei 吉原顺平 from Iwanami, had to bow out at the last minute; but they did screen a Tokieda Toshie 时枝俊江 film on China which he produced (*Yuake no koku*, 1966).

The entire event was led by Fujioka Asako and indie director Kawaguchi Hajime 川口肇, with help from Onishi Kenji 大西健儿 (filmmaker), Akiyama Tamako 秋山珠子 (translator), Sato Ken 佐藤贤 (translator), Nakayama Hiroki 中山大树 (translator, recent employee of Li Xianting Film Fund 栗宪庭电影基金), and several staff members from the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival, including Mabuchi Ai 马渊爱 (program-



Figure 1: The traditional potato soup party that kicked off the Dojo, with (left to right) poet Kimura Michio 木村迪夫, director Iizuka Toshio 飯塚俊男, Cong Feng 从峰, and Akiyama Tamako 秋山珠子. CC BY-SA.

mer of New Docs Japan) and Wakai Makiko 若井真木子 (present programmer of New Asian Currents). There were shorter visits from a number of filmmakers and programmers, such as Oki Hiroyuki 大木浩之, Kato Itaru 加藤到, Daishima Haruhiko 代岛治彦, former Ogawa Productions cinematographer Kato Takanobu 加藤孝信, the Li Xianting Film Fund's Zhu Rikun 朱日坤, Yunfest's Yi Sicheng 易思成, and Kidlat Tahimik.

This entire crowd piled into a bus at the end of the Yamagata festival, and headed for the hills. The destination was perfect: Furuyashiki Village. This is a tiny, quaint village deep in the mountains and the site of Ogawa Productions' *'Nippon': Furuyashiki Village* 日本国 古屋敷村 (1983). This three-and-a-half-hour film was one of Ogawa's finest. It examines the brutal impact of modernity on this little corner of village Japan. At its height, Furuyashiki had eighteen families. There were only half that when Ogawa Pro arrived in the late 1970s, charmed by the lovely collection of thatched-roof homes. The film they made records the life history of the village at a moment when it seemed delicately poised between its lively past and a possible collapse.

Indeed, the intervening decades were not kind to Furuyashiki. The Nitchu Dojo arrived to find the thatched roofs rotting and riddled with holes. Most of the old farmhouses were in ruins. The rice paddies had returned to the jungle; one could see their vague outlines through the weeds. A handful of homes had been maintained. Some were kept by the descendants of Ogawa's 'movie stars', who grew vegetables there in the summer. And two new, back-to-the-earth families had moved in, seeking solitude and cheap real estate. The Dojo stayed in two large houses, men sleeping in one and women in the other. They had been part of a 1990s attempt to attract tourists to the pretty village. This theme park strategy failed, but a small citizens' group kept the buildings while it tried to preserve what it could.



Figure 3: Kawaguchi Hajime 川口肇 (left) holds a workshop on the Super-8 camera. From l to r: Naito Masayuki 内藤雅行, Otsu Koshiro 大津幸四郎, Mabuchi Toru 马渊彻, Sato Leo 佐藤零郎, Nakayama Hiroki 中山大樹, Nagaoka Noa 长冈野亚. CC BY-SA.

On the first day, this preservationist group met the festival contingent with an imo-no-kai, a traditional potato soup picnic Yamagata is known for (Figure 1). Farmers from adjacent villages came to welcome the filmmakers, including one of the villagers from the Ogawa film—probably the last surviving ‘cast member’. That evening they gathered in one of the buildings and watched Ogawa’s *‘Nippon’: Furuyashiki Village*. After the film, the young filmmakers heard from farmer poet Kimura Michio 木村迪夫 and Iizuka Toshio. Kimura was the host of Ogawa Productions in the nearby village of Magino 牧野村, while Iizuka was Ogawa’s assistant director on the film.

It was uncanny watching the film in Furuyashiki. Onscreen, the village was vibrant and very much alive, but the old villagers complain to Ogawa about the evacuation of young people to the cities and the probable fate of the village. The Dojo now inhabited the future they feared. From the very first evening, one began to feel a slippage in the flow of time.

In the next couple days, the group would hear from two other veteran filmmakers. Otsu Koshiro is a cameraman of great renown (Figure 2). He started in Iwanami, and shot the first films of Ogawa Shinsuke before becoming Tsuchimoto Noriaki’s main cameraman. He also worked with directors like Iizuka, Hara Kazuo 原一男, Sato Makoto 佐藤真 and Alexander Sokurov 亚历山大·索科洛夫. One of Otsu’s most interesting themes was the relationship between individual artist and collective endeavor. Because all of the younger filmmakers were working primarily on DV, using low-end camcorders and personal computers for editing, most were accustomed to individual work rather than crew-based production. (A significant exception was



Figure 4: Kawaguchi Hajime 川口肇 (right) teaches the Dojo how to hand-develop Super-8 film. From l to r: Kubota Keiko 久保田桂子, Cong Feng 丛峰, Ikeda Sho 池田将, Kawabe Ryota 川部良太, Huang Weikai 黄伟凯, Akiyama Tamako 秋山珠子, Miyake Nagaru 三宅流; crouching is Omori Hiroki 大森宏树. CC BY-SA.



Figure 5: Master class by former Ogawa Pro member Iizuka Toshio 饭塚俊男 (left) with (left to right) Nakayama Hiroki 中山大樹, Ji Dan 季丹, Huang Wenkai 黄伟凯, Lian Xiaonan 梁小楠, and Cong Feng 丛峰. CC BY-SA.

Sato Leo, who worked within a political collective.) Otsu spoke eloquently about the different modes of production, and one sensed some of the virtues of a division of labor drawing on the talent of specialists.

This impression was even stronger in the presentation by Naito Masayuki. Naito learned his craft from the great documentary cinematographer Segawa Jun'ichi 瀬川順一 after getting into the film world as a child actor and doing special effects work on Tsubuya Eiji's 圆谷英二 *Ultraman* series. Naito has experience with every format from 8mm to Imax, and he screened a documentary on silk dying that he had recently shot for a young filmmaker. The cinematography was stunning, but the sound was equally impressive. Naito revealed that all the sound was wild, captured separately and then synched up with the image during the editing stage. Since most of the recent work of young directors is shot on camcorders and without crews—especially in the Chinese case—Naito offered one of the stronger lessons of the Dojo.

In between these master classes and the delicious meals of local cuisine cooked up by Suzuki Ume 铃木梅 and her team, the Dojo participants actually made films in these relatively rough conditions. These sessions were led by experimental filmmaker Kawaguchi Hajime, who brought several boxfuls of Super-8 film equipment (Figure 3). In the first session, Kawaguchi asked for a show of hands of people who had made 8mm films. Nearly every Japanese participant—filmmaker and programmer alike—raised their hands, an index of 8mm's important place in Japanese film culture. None of the Chinese had touched the format, speculating that as celluloid it would fall under the ministry in charge of film and would probably be illegal. Kawaguchi broke out the cameras, and all the Dojo filmmakers formed teams. Each received a camera, several rolls of film, and a CD with (mostly urban) sounds to use as a soundtrack. They were to plan and shoot a short film using in-camera editing.

The groups set out, scouting locations around Furuyashiki. Some went as far as storyboarding their films. Others simply decided on a look and feel. The village was abuzz with crews collecting their images. As they did this, Kawaguchi and his assistants were in the kitchen brewing up an array of chemicals for home developing. When all the filmmakers had run through their rolls, they assembled outside the kitchen. Kawaguchi demonstrated how to pull out the film in a dark box, drop it in a light-tight container, and then pass through one chemical after another to develop and fix the images (Figure 4).

When they were done, they hung all their film strips to laundry lines and let them dry in the air. While the films dried, the Dojo participants returned the good will and support they had received from the Furuyashiki preservation society. The entire crew trudged up the mountain and spent the afternoon cutting thatch for the dilapidated buildings. Everyone worked hard, sharing Chinese and Japanese working songs as they cut and bundled the tall grass. When they were done, the film was dry and the workers got wet—either taking a dip in the village stream or heading down to Kaminoyama Hot Springs 上山温泉 for a quick soak. After a marvelous feast of mountain food, the Dojo members shared their short films and chatted around the coal-burning hearth until the wee hours.

The Nitchu Dojo was a strange and wonderful event. It was something like time travel. Strolling through the village, the narrow lanes lined with ruins, one could not help thinking that Furuyashiki represented the probable fate of village China as well. One stood in Japan's past, looking at China's future. And as for the young Japanese and Chinese filmmakers of today, they communed with the Japanese representatives of independent documentary's history as they contemplated their present practices and their own potential futures.



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