



PROJECT MUSE®

DV-Made China

Zhen, Zhang, Zito, Angela

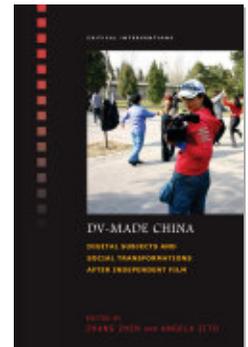
Published by University of Hawai'i Press

Zhen, Z. & Zito, A..

DV-Made China: Digital Subjects and Social Transformations after Independent Film.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.

Project MUSE. Web. 20 Sep. 2016. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39962>

Marking the Body

The Axiographics of the Visible Hidden Camera

ABÉ MARK NORNES

One of the most exciting documentary scenes on the planet has appeared in the People's Republic of China. One reason is that there is no lack of compelling subject matter. The scale of the problems and transformations facing this society are consonant with the vastness of the geographical space the filmmakers work within. Just as important is the stance these filmmakers take in the face of the historical world. It is a place where anything goes, and filmmakers clearly believe they can do anything. No holds barred. Nothing will hold them back, even if they possess only the most rudimentary of skill sets for making films, or if they have little knowledge of or access to the long history of the documentary form.

In such a situation, it comes as no surprise that some filmmakers cross discomforting boundaries. This is, after all, the point. One of the most exciting aspects of contemporary Chinese documentary is the fact that it operates in an authoritarian national space where state power is exerted across a set of spectra of geography, class, occupation, and subject matter. On this complex ideological terrain, these filmmakers and their exhibitors confront line after line laid down by the state, readily stepping right over and forging ahead to capture their personal vision on video.

Most of these taboos are constructs imposed by the government and most of them deserve challenge by the filmmakers—someone has to do it. Admirable though this is, other lines they cross relate to notions such as privacy, informed consent, and other issues that are more ethical than political. This chapter attempts to delineate some of these problems through historical comparison and a set of revealing examples. It conducts what Bill Nichols called “axiographics” in *Representing Reality*. This involves an inquiry into the ethical stances filmmakers take when they enter the historical world, camera in hand, to render real people (or animals) in moving image media. Nichols argues they also inscribe their ethics

into the representation itself, in every camera angle, cut, or sound recording. He writes,

How do the visual representations of the camera place the filmmaker in relation to the historical world? The presence (and absence) of the filmmaker in the image, in off-screen space, in the acoustic folds of voice-on and voice-off, in titles and graphics, constitute an ethics, and a politics, of considerable importance to the viewer. Axiographics extends those classic tropes of ethical debate—the nature of consent; proprietary rights to the recorded images; the right to know vs. the right to privacy; the responsibilities of the filmmaker to his or her subject as well as audience, or employer; codes of conduct and the complexities of legal recourse—to include the ethical implications conveyed by the representations of time and space itself. (Nichols 1992, 77)

Nichols poses this as a challenge to spectators as much as to filmmakers themselves. When the lights dim on a movie theater, the audience comes into relation with the time and space of other sentient beings, both human and animal. The filmmaker has taken a stance in that historical space, a positionality that is rendered graphically and sonically in the anterior space of the movie theater. Nichols argues that as spectators, we must ask ourselves how a given filmmaker has “acquitted” him- or herself in the face of the historical world and consider what ethics or politics adheres to this moving image representation. This is because we in turn adhere to the filmmaker’s look on the historical world.

This chapter examines the axiographics of Chinese documentary, paying special attention to the films made in the style of direct cinema—which is to say, the majority of them. Its approach is analytical, historical, and comparative. The comparisons are mainly between China and Japan, which has been both a site of discovery and a sounding board for documentary praxis on the continent. It begins in the mountains of Yamagata, with Asia’s first documentary film festival. It was here that the first Chinese documentarists encountered two titans of the documentary: Frederick Wiseman and Ogawa Shinsuke. I wish to think through the implications of the situational differences between Japan and China and their consequences for creative praxis, particularly when it comes to ethical concerns. What happens when an independent documentary film culture appears out of thin air, with little sense of history (with no common sense, as it were)? What happens when it then conceptualizes documentary primarily as a (creative?) process in opposition to an oppressive mainstream—yet disregards questions of distribution and reception? There are some vexing ethical conundrums linked to these conditions. We can tease them out through another comparison, this between the double-edged impact these two foreign filmmakers have had on the Chinese independent

film scene. This approach will prepare us to explore the axiographics of the present-day scene through three compelling films. We will find that these renegade filmmakers too often reproduce the intrusive politics they are so intent on fighting.

But first to Japan.

Japan/China—Ogawa/Wiseman

Ask a Chinese filmmaker about the documentarists they admire and the answer is inevitably Wiseman and Ogawa. All this started in Japan in 1991. Ogawa Shin-suke hit their radar when Wu Wenguang brought his first film to the 1991 Fukuoka Asian Film Festival (in August) and the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (in October). This was the first outing for the Fukuoka festival, and Yamagata, the lone documentary film festival in Asia, was issuing only its second edition. The first was in 1989, when there were no Chinese documentary filmmakers working outside of official media (they did invite fiction filmmaker Tian Zhuangzhuang, but he was prevented from attending in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident). Between the two festivals, Wu and feature film director Peng Xiaolian were invited to Ogawa Productions on three or four occasions. After each screening, Ogawa would sit down with them to chat. Wu was enchanted by Ogawa's famous charisma and his enthusiasm for Chinese documentary's future. Ogawa was a consummate cheerleader, and Wu left charged up and with luggage filled with VHS tapes of several Ogawa films.

We can pinpoint Wiseman's entrance onto the Chinese documentary scene even more precisely. Wu returned to the next Yamagata festival in 1993 with Duan Jinchuan and Hao Zhiqiang in tow. Unfortunately, Ogawa had passed away after the previous festival; however, his influence continued to be felt by all subsequent festival participants. But Wiseman was there to present *Zoo* (1993). Here is the moment of contact as described by intellectual historian Akiyama Tamako, who served as the Chinese interpreter attached to the three directors. She accompanied them to the screening of *Zoo* and describes what happened after the film:

No sooner had the lights gone up than someone behind me suddenly began shaking my shoulder. "Oi! Tamako! Did you see that!?" Wu, speaking faster than ever, raised his voice in excitement. Slightly taken aback, I mustered my best Chinese and said, "Um, well, it was a strange film. It's a zoo, with nothing out of the ordinary. Yet both the people and the animals feel like they are part of a single system . . ." This drew a winking smile from Wu. "Oh, you were watching closely, weren't you? I wondered if you were sleeping," he said with an air of satisfaction, and then stood up. When we left the confusion of

spectators in the theater, it was dark out. Rejoining each other on the street outside the theater, the three Chinese directors were itching to talk about the film they had just seen. The evening air of Yamagata had started to feel chilly, but their faces were flushed and slightly sweaty. Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, and Hao Zhiqiang stepped on each other's sentences in excitement, striding through the evening darkness like a herd of buffalo—me chasing behind them, trying to keep up. After that screening, Chinese documentary filmmakers came to line up Frederick Wiseman next to Ogawa Shinsuke when they spoke of the directors they particularly admired. (Nornes 2014, 256–257)

Wu went home after the 1993 film festival with yet another armload of videotapes, which included the works of both Wiseman and Ogawa. He held intimate screenings in his Beijing apartment for friends, many of whom were equally startled by both filmmakers' work. They started making their own films, and most of this work took the form of direct cinema. For whatever reason, only a few took Ogawa to heart.

When we consider these two filmmakers, the fact that they are mentioned in the same breath as the foundation for Chinese documentary seems rather perplexing. Ogawa predicated his cinema on a deep identification with his subjects, which were almost always groups of people. The films were the product of years of study and, more importantly, *intimacy* with their subjects. Furthermore, he favored a collective production mode and never once worked alone. He even lived with his crew, who lived with their subjects. Their cinema was conceptualized as one collective representing another . . . for yet another (the audience). Significantly, when queried about their “film movement,” the Ogawa Productions filmmakers assumed they were being asked about *distribution* and not the point of production. For example, when he left the PR company Iwanami, the first thing Ogawa did was build a collective called the Independent Screening Organization (*Jishu Joei Soshiki no Kai*, or Jieiso for short). They created a network of sites across Japan that could step around the mainstream film circuit, which locked out independent producers. This organization eventually turned into Ogawa Productions in 1968. Ogawa saw production, distribution, and exhibition as inextricably linked. At a fundamental level, these links were *conceptual*: this was about creating a new human who was a social being, and they theorized a mimetic relationship on the part of the spectator vis-à-vis the historical actors on-screen. Also, the links were *practical*: 16mm production was remarkably expensive and required a steady flow of donations and ticket sales from the reception context to ensure the continuity of the collective and, by extension, the social movements they took part in.¹

Wiseman, in contrast, may work with crews but they are anonymous and he presents himself as the lone filmmaker and subject of his praxis. He took on this appearance from the beginning of his career, when the other high-profile direct

cinema outfit was Drew Associates. Subsequently, most of the other major figures working in this style were in partnerships: Albert and David Maysles, D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, or Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. Wiseman also pays close attention to the issue of distribution. He is well known as a crafty businessman and keeps the strictest of holds on the distribution of his work. For example, before the age of DVDs he sold exhibition rights to the education market only for the short term, later recharging at a new rate adjusted for inflation (in both the economic and cultural capital senses). Now exhibition rates are linked to expensive library sales. While he does enjoy wide theatrical distribution for his films, it is likely that theatrical and festival screenings essentially function as PR for television sales around the world. Wiseman has been the most obstinate proponent of the direct cinema style. He never appears in the films, and there are few gestures in the films to his presence. He spends enough time with his subjects for them to disregard his presence, but takes leave of them upon the completion of the film.

While most Chinese documentarists follow Wiseman in lock-step, Ogawa did make his mark on a handful of filmmakers, at least when it comes to developing and maintaining intimate relationships to the subject and devoting oneself to long-term study. Prominent examples are Feng Yan (*Bing'AI* 2007), Zhao Liang (*Petition* 2009), Cong Feng (*Dr. Ma's Country Clinic* 2008), Mao Chenyu (*I Have What? Chinese Peasants War: The Rhetoric to Justice* 2013), and Gu Tao (*Yuguo and His Mother* 2011).² However, starting with the film Duan Jinchuan and Zhang Yuan made immediately after Yamagata—*The Square* (1993)—it is Wiseman who informed the documentary practice that was swiftly spreading across China. The overwhelming majority of films are in direct cinema style, eschewing voice-over narration, intertitles, and obtrusive editing. They avoid argumentation and work hard to reproduce the time and space of history, rendering the very present filmmaker rhetorically absent. They conceive of their work as personal and individual, and their technical tools enable them to work alone. Finally, they promote and distribute their films themselves.

On this last point, there are differences from Wiseman that have profound consequences, precisely because the situation on the ground today is remarkably similar to the one that Japanese filmmakers like Ogawa and Tsuchimoto Noriaki confronted in the early 1960s. Unlike Wiseman, the Chinese filmmakers do not enjoy well-developed circulation systems for their films. There are no distribution companies, and television is not an option. It is mostly unclear where films can be shown publicly, aside from a handful of domestic festivals and a ragtag collection of galleries, bars, and cafes. And unlike Ogawa, none of the filmmakers seized the opportunity of this vacuum to build a distribution network from the ground up. This leaves the Chinese directors on their own.

What happens in a situation where a documentary film culture appears so suddenly in the vacuum created by propagandistic nonfiction media, and then conceptualizes documentary primarily as an individual, creative process in opposition to an oppressive mass media—disregarding the question of distribution and reception? This is the question to which I will turn in the remainder of this chapter.

The Visible Hidden Camera

That there is a connection between the lack of a distribution system and documentary practice is evidenced by the remarkable length of so many films. We may treat this in a symptomatic fashion, as an index of their larger production context. It is possible in the first place because there are no distributors or exhibitors breathing down their backs, demanding short running times for the sake of profit. Indeed, the filmmakers are proud that they calculate the proper running times of their films with profit extracted from the equation. At the same time, it indicates that they are also making those calculations without consideration of the audience. This is about their vision and what the film supposedly requires—and by “film” they mean production, a creative practice cut off from reception. That is to say, they operate with a conception of documentary utterly different than that of Ogawa Shinsuke.

In the rest of the world, lengthy documentaries are almost always conceived for televisual distribution. Ken Burns and Wiseman are exemplary in this regard. When these filmmakers began distributing their films on television, the running times swiftly expanded to multi-night affairs. Other long-form documentaries tend to be about impossibly huge topics (e.g., *The Sorrow and the Pity* 1969, *Shoah* 1985). Ogawa’s films also became longer and longer over the course of his career, even though he never had access to television; however, it is significant that this happened only when the student movement came to an end and his independent distribution system disintegrated. This case only proves my point: in the absence of pressure from the distribution/reception context, running times tend to soar.

Outside of these examples, filmmakers generally avoid long running times because distributors will not touch the work, spectators fall asleep, and cultural conventions inform their sense of “proper” running times. As a consequence, every filmmaker struggles with the pain of cutting hard-won scenes to achieve the most powerful shape and length for their work. However, Chinese documentary filmmakers do not struggle over this; they keep everything. I am a fan of long-form documentary, but I can think of few Chinese films that deserve run-

ning times over 120 minutes. The length of Chinese documentaries is mainly a sign of a lack of rigor (Wiseman's photography is pedestrian, but his editing is masterful) and a narcissistic concentration on the production to the exclusion of reception.

More importantly, ignoring the reception context enables the Chinese filmmakers adopting the direct cinema approach to think outside of ethical responsibilities as they walk into the historical world with camera in hand. They devote their energies to reproducing the time and space of the profilmic scene with remarkably little regard for the people they encounter. This is probably one attraction of the direct cinema approach, because it hardly demands filmmakers to think too hard about what they are doing. Everything can be for the sake of the film. (In contrast, the filmmakers following Ogawa's example follow their subjects over the long term, developing respectful—and thus “contractual”—relationships that demand thinking from the other's position, and thus tapping into other kinds of power.)³

We can tease out the implications of all this by considering the poster for the 2010 Songzhuang Film Festival, which was designed by film director Wang Wo. It symbolizes the situation in Chinese documentary, and not in entirely conscious ways. The poster features a weathered pole ornamented with a collection of surveillance cameras pointing this way and that. A traditional tiled roof ornaments the background. The poster has an attractive red-orange palette, and Wang has given a worn look to the image with virtual defects and scratches. The sheer number of cameras on this single pole is striking and initially grabs one's attention; however, the eye eventually strays from this dominant feature to the bottom corner and notices a very famous forehead edging its way into the photograph. It is Mao, and this is Tiananmen Square. The overt meaning of the poster is clear. Above and beyond the comment on state surveillance, the filmmakers represented at Songzhuang are renegades. Their cameras are aboveboard and about capturing reality as it is, not exerting power over behavior to mold the world into a preconceived vision or ideology.

This poster made me wonder about the camera in the hands of independent filmmakers. In an ideal sense, their camera is identical to Wiseman's: these are films about institutions where life is caught “unawares,” as if what happens there would have taken place whether or not the camera was present. The conventional trope we use to describe this direct cinema approach is the “fly on the wall.” The filmmaker remains so discreet and out-of-the-way that his or her subjects stop noticing the camera and act “naturally.” This stance would allow the filmmakers to capture the *reality* of China, which has never been recorded on moving-image media before. The aim is to capture the behavior of subjects as though a camera were not present; the only gaze these



Figure 1.1. Poster for the Songzhuang film festival: they surveil the state, hiding their cameras in the black margins. (courtesy of Wang Wo)

subjects deal with is that of the state, and if anything is the main theme of the independent documentary it is precisely that. And this is, indeed, the effect of these films. It explains why so many scholars of China have gravitated to the documentary, and also why their work tends to be focused resolutely on text over context.

However, there is another way to read this poster from Songzhuang's film festival. The black frame and the photograph it contains express two ends of a spectrum within Chinese moving-image culture. When I look at that poster, I see the vague contours of the Songzhuang documentarists themselves—their cameras—built into its structure. Their camera is the frame, that black edge that (very visibly) attempts to hide from view yet organizes the structure and meaning of the image. The surveillance camera must be seen, or its omnipresence must be assumed, in order to have the desired effect: the exertion of power over and control of behavior, and the internal installation of the state's gaze. In contrast, the camcorders of independent documentary hide in the pitch black of that poster's frame. Out in the real world, those camcorders may be visible, but the point is for the filmmakers to behave as though they are invisible. Unless one is looking to the margin and thinking about the black border, the contrivances of the filmmakers, their framing, goes unnoticed.

Ideally, these filmmakers would be hidden . . . and, in fact, they are. Theirs is the "visible hidden camera." This is not "fly on the wall" cinema, but rather the cinema of the hidden camera. And that hidden camera is, ironically enough, visible to all. It explains the extraordinarily "natural" scenes these filmmakers manage to capture. Yet acknowledging the camera's paradoxical *visible invisibility* draws our attention to the relations of power that this cinema generally disavows, and a set of discomfiting ethical issues emerges for both filmmakers and viewers.

We can most easily draw out the implications of the visible hidden camera by investigating how it pivots around (real) human bodies. It is in his discussion of the body where Nichols' axiographics provides powerful footing for thinking about the Chinese documentary and the treatment of its subjects. Nichols introduces two powerful terms as the basis for axiographics: magnitude and vivification. Documentaries are always at pains to point beyond themselves to the historical world where, as Fredric Jameson suggests, there is hurt. One cannot reduce nonfiction film to mere textuality because it is always about the world we live in. And no matter how "direct" an approach filmmakers take, there will always be an ample measure of excess—a magnitude of historical excess that the film can only hope to gesture to. A fundamental question for filmmakers is how to use the tools of cinema to achieve a representation of the historical world that is adequate to the magnitude we sense living in it.

"The issue of magnitude," writes Nichols, "involves a tension between the representation and the represented as experienced by the viewer" (Nichols 1992, 232). Without this tension, we are no longer dealing with documentary but rather a fictive world of fantasies. Vivification refers to the ways that filmmakers evoke the emotional, experiential, and visceral within that gap between representation and the historical world. Through vivification, they "render *felt* what representations

only allude to” (Nichols 1992, 234). Some filmmakers make overt use of cinematic techniques to accomplish this. Interesting, if overt, examples might include the work of Errol Morris or Stan Brakhage. However, direct cinema filmmakers downplay form to call our attention to the object plane, the historical world itself.

Chinese direct cinema adherents would seem to benefit from China itself. It is such a vast place—geographically, culturally, linguistically. The Chinese documentaries display an incredible variety of landscapes, many of which are epic in scale. Visual and aural difference is inherently spectacular, from the clothes people wear and the food they eat to the subtitled dialects they communicate in. One palpably senses the magnitude of China in these films’ direct and simple imagery, seemingly rendering the imperative of vivification moot.

While the enormity of China itself may make it easy for China’s documentary filmmakers to give their simple, direct cinema films the weight of history, this could not be enough. Otherwise, the documentaries would amount to little more than travelogues. The other, crucial, added ingredient is violence. Many of these films center on the brutality of the state, scenes of abject poverty, personal viciousness, or the cruelty of indifference. Occasionally, there is also the violence of our intrusion into the personal zones of history. We can get a handle on this by focusing on how these filmmakers treat the human body—how we experience the historical, human body. Nichols writes,

Documentary film insists on the presence of the body. It exerts a relentless demand of *habeas corpus*. Like the legal system, documentary discourse insists on the principle that we must be presented with the body. Witness and testimony, deposition and refutation, accusation and denial—all depend on direct encounter and physical presence. The cinema in general cannot leave the incarnation of characters or social actors to the viewer’s imagination. An indexical bond prevails between the photographic image of the human body and the more abstract concept of historical or narrative agency . . . a photographic likeness offers evidence of a life as it was lived and experienced in the flesh, within the constraints of the historical, physical body itself. And yet that likeness in and of itself is insufficient evidence. It is but a frozen moment, an artifact, that requires the animating force of time, narrative and history to gain experiential meaning. An *awareness* of the tension between representation and that which is represented, of magnitudes beyond representation, is the foundation for praxis informed by a text.

(Nichols 1992, 233)

It is our recognition of the mortality of the human body—our cognizance of those organs grinding away inside us—that is the ultimate stuff of magnitude. When we watch a documentary we assume the referent is as fragile as us. What filmmakers “do” is to enmesh the bodies of their subjects in the paradoxes, conflicts, and contradictions of an historical moment. “The body is the battle site of contending values and their ends,” asserts Nichols, and the formations of that battle are embodied in the sum of technical and formal choices the filmmakers have made in the course of production (Nichols 1992, 238). The choices are written into the fabric of the film. It is our responsibility as viewers to consider how the filmmakers conduct themselves, particularly considering how these particular documentarists deploy a camera that is visible, yet somehow hidden, from the historical actors before them.

How does the visible hidden camera work? First, it is predicated on the non-existence of a distribution system for independent documentary. One curious scene from Du Haibin’s *I428* (2009) reveals the nature of the profilmic scene of the Chinese documentary. A woman approaches the filmmakers and asks, “Are you filming for the government or yourself?” Without missing a beat the filmmaker answers, “For ourselves.” Du Haibin may have been speaking for the entire community of Chinese documentary filmmakers; as I will argue, too many will do anything for the sake of their films. The image world of China is either official or it is thoroughly private. It is either broadcast television or home video. Those are the only options Du’s interrogator can imagine; Du is neither, but he does not enlighten her regarding his more public intentions. Without distribution through companies or television, only a select and very small community among the billion are aware that an independent documentary exists. This means that unless a filmmaker reveals his or her intentions, the subjects have no idea their lives are headed toward international distribution and the accumulation of capital—cultural and sometimes monetary. After all, the filmmakers are rarely working in crews, and camcorders are now ubiquitous consumer products embedded in the fabric of daily life. They look no different than anyone else shooting home movies. Since the filmmakers generally aren’t given tutorials on the history of documentary, and they hardly look like TV crews, the subjects of these films are oblivious to what is going on. The camcorders may be visible, but these secret motives render the cameras invisible.

This is as close to capturing “life unawares” as is imaginable, and surely one of the reasons the films are so powerful. It is roughly analogous to the shooting conditions of the ethnographic film before consumer video penetrated the village and experiments in self-representation, most famously the various projects with the Amazonian Kayapo, called attention to the ethics and politics of ethnographic

capture and exhibition. The Chinese documentary offers a similar scene, and by pushing the “camera” from the blackness of that frame into the light we can see an array of prickly ethical implications that rarely get aired. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to explore some of these issues through three quite revealing films: *Wheat Harvest* (2008), *Toxicosis* (2010), and *Martian Syndrome* (*Huoxing yao zonghezheng* 2009). These films each pivot around the treatment of bodies in space and thus lend themselves to an investigation of the axiographics of Chinese documentary.

However, before that, it is worth noting we are mainly dealing with the filmmakers that have stepped into the legacy of Wiseman here. The filmmakers that admire Ogawa work aboveboard. They develop long-term relationships with their subjects, who are collaborators and not merely objects of the camera’s gaze. For example, the people that appear in films like Zhao Liang’s *Petition* (2009), Feng Yan’s *Bing’Ai* (2007), or Xu Xin’s *Karamay* (2010) clearly understand what these films are about. They are collaborations and this, along with the virtues of long-term relationship building, is an important source of their power. Indeed, Ogawa and his collaborators used a hidden camera in one early film and then renounced the practice. The film was called *Forest of Oppression* (*Assatsu no mori* 1967), and the scene involved a member telling a leader that he wanted to quit. It was a delicate situation, so the filmmakers shot the scene from outside the room with a telephoto lens. Cameraman Otsu Koshiro explains what happened after that.

Later on when the rushes were done the staff were all holding their heads saying, “We shouldn’t have done it like this . . .” I think Ogawa and Tsuchimoto both stopped using “hidden camera” techniques after that. That was some pretty bitter medicine, to be honest. There was a debate over whether or not to use the shot, but in the end we did use it. It was a strange shot. Let’s say we had a camera here with us as we’re talking, with a cameraman to do the shooting. If there is no mutual trust—not necessarily a contract, but an agreement with the person being photographed that there will be a camera present—we probably shouldn’t be filming. The problem is whether or not that question was considered, and in this case it wasn’t. We weren’t serious enough about building a relationship between the camera and the subject. (Nornes 2007, 81)

Borrowing Otsu’s term, we could say that the direct cinema directors of China are not serious enough. Furthermore, anyone appearing before an Ogawa Productions camera knew precisely how the film was going to be shown, whether they were farmers, students, or riot police. It is clear this is not the case for the majority of the people appearing in Chinese documentaries—the subjects of these films shot with perfectly visible hidden cameras.

Consider *Toxicosis*, a competently made record of the traffic at the Manhai Border Post on the China-Burma border funded by the Busan International Film Festival's Asian Network of Documentary (AND) Fund. The post is the primary setting of the film; it essentially serves as a customs and immigration station with interrogation rooms and a jail. Director Wang Baochun was originally a television producer, although the film is in the direct cinema style and contains content that could probably not be broadcast in China. Presumably because of his connections to official television, Wang is granted extraordinary access to the police. They seem to allow the filmmaker to shoot freely in the jail and interrogation chambers. Although the police here surely deal with all sorts of crime, Wang is interested in drug trafficking and concentrates primarily on three women who have been arrested. One is an older mother of nine who was caught carrying and is interrogated at length. Her scenes are intercut with two young women who were smuggling heroin and are awaiting trial in a holding cell. Wang shoots their conversations through a barred window.

The indisputable climax of the film arrives when two new female suspects are led into the station for questioning. The scene starts like any other in the film and then takes a nasty turn. Suspicious that one of the women is carrying heroin in her body, the police insert a camera in her vagina to investigate. Seeing strange shapes that shouldn't be there, they subject her to a full body cavity search—which the filmmaker shows in its entirety.

Two policewomen force the woman onto the floor and pin her down. The position puts the suspect's head at the feet of the cameraman. One policewoman holds the woman on the ground as the other pulls up her dress, reaches inside her vagina, and starts pulling out bag after bag of heroin. The scene is shocking and slightly chaotic, and after tossing ten bags next to her head the police demand to know how many she inserted. The woman tilts her head to count the pile as if to stop the attack, but they push her face back to prevent her from looking. Not satisfied with her answer, they reach in and pull out more bags.

At first glance, this might remind one of Zhao Liang's *Crime and Punishment* (*Zui yu fa* 2007). This kind of torture and rape would seem to be such a normalized interaction between police and citizenry that the officials don't think twice about letting someone film it. How else to explain the photography of such brutality? Indeed, the parading of criminals being punished is something of a genre in news programming on Chinese television. Since we come to these films with some sense of individual rights vis-à-vis the state, we are aghast at the treatment of suspects and prisoners. This is certainly the position from which Zhao shot *Crime and Punishment*, a position that becomes crystal clear at the end of the film when he awkwardly inserts Christian imagery as a symbol of hope that is incapable of being coopted by the state. Likewise, his audience at the Songzhuang festival

shouted at the screen in uncontrollable anger. However, the axiographics of Wang's *Toxicosis* are, thanks to his use of the visible hidden camera, exceedingly vague.

Nichols' description of axiographics argues that a filmmaker's ethics are inscribed in the representation of time and space on-screen. The body cavity search hints at Wang's positioning in relation to the historical world—in relation to these historical beings he photographs. In the course of the search, as the woman screams and cries for help, the director makes two revealing edits. Apparently dissatisfied with his *mise-en-scène*, the director cuts to circle the woman's body forty-five degrees. After a moment, this view is evidently inadequate, and the director cuts once again to move another forty-five degrees to the woman's feet. (In all probability, this was one long shot orbiting the woman's body, with the camera moves expunged by the edits. Perhaps that was "too much"?) Now he is finally able to shoot straight up the woman's spread legs as the officer penetrates and fishes around her vagina. Finally, when the rape is over, he offers what might be a site for mimetic identification for the spectator: the officer that did the dirty work bends over and vomits violently on the floor. Suddenly (finally?) self-conscious at being filmed, she flees the building and bends over a barrel in the courtyard to vomit more—Wang's visible hidden camera running after her the entire way.

One imagines a couple lines of defense for the inclusion of this scene. First, it did, after all, *happen*. The whole point of direct cinema is to show life as it is, as if the camera were never present in the first place. This is an important part of life for both suspects and guards on the border. It happened to take place while the filmmaker was present, so he shot it. Secondly, one could assert it is an event that *should not* be elided, considering the violence of the act (and perhaps even the official's nonchalant willingness to allow its filming—by a male director no less). As I mentioned previously, the screening of *Crime and Punishment* actually incited angry shouting at every blow of the police when shown in Songzhuang, and it is easy to imagine a similar reaction to this film. Spectators might greet the scene with anger; however, the axiographics of the scene undermine a claim on the director's part that he had an ethical responsibility to shoot and include this violent act. That is because of all the ways he could have rendered the incident—aurally, through voice-over narration, with a carefully written intertitle, or even retreating to a long shot, or simply looking the other way—he chose to get a "better view." The camera's 180-degree pivot around the woman's body gives the film a revolting ambivalence; it remains ambivalent precisely because of the absence of context in the direct cinema style. Of the viewing positions available—independent exposé of state violence or official televisual spectacle of criminals being punished—either seems possible.

Although an excessive example, *Toxicosis* provides us with two basic lessons. First, it invites us to ask direct cinema filmmakers about their relationships to their

subjects, because they so often seem incapable of affiliating with others in compromised situations. Secondly, it reveals the way axiographics typically revolve around representations of the body. *Toxicosis* is an extreme example of the tendency of Chinese direct cinema films to concentrate on discomfiting situations of personal exposure of one sort or another; but there are countless films showing people living amidst abject poverty. Many center on lives spinning spectacularly out of control because of alcoholism and mental illness. Before engaging more ethical considerations, it is important to first recognize how cinematic treatments of the corporeal *function* in direct cinema, for the impressive reality effect of this style is deeply connected to how human bodies are rendered in the time and space of the documentary.

It may be useful to bring English-language reality television in as a foil. This is because there are special moments in reality television where the palpable artifice of the situations that the “actors” have been inserted in falls away and something overwhelmingly real infuses the show. These are usually scenes featuring turbulent emotions, people in the throes of one passion or another. Laura Grindstaff has likened these moments to the “money shot” of hard-core pornography. For her, the money shot of reality television is where

joy, sorrow, rage, or remorse [are] expressed in visible, bodily terms. It is the moment when tears well up in a woman’s eyes and her voice catches in sadness and pain as she describes having lost her child to a preventable disease; when a man tells his girlfriend that he’s been sleeping with another woman and her jaw drops in rage and disbelief. . . . These moments have become the hallmark of the genre, central to its claim to authenticity as well as to its negative reputation. According to producers, the more emotional and volatile the guests and audience members, the more real (and the more “ordinary”) they are. . . . Like the orgasmic cum shot of pornographic films, the money shot of talk shows makes visible the precise moment of letting go, of losing control, of surrendering to the body and its “animal” emotions. It is the loss of the “civilized” self that occurs when the body transcends social and cultural control.

(Grindstaff 2002, 19–20)

There are countless moments like this in the independent Chinese documentary. One entire subgenre where bodies often lose emotional control is the rubble film, where people protest land expropriation to make way for national modernization. Some films have money shots that remain the durable images of the films. After watching Gu Tao’s *Aoluguya* . . . *Aoluguya* (2007), the very title evokes the memory of the main character wasted on liquor and completely incapable of controlling her body. Or there is the final, insane dance of the mentally handicapped



Figure 1.2. Karamay. Money shot: Xu Xin strings together parent after parent, sitting on similar couches telling similarly heartbreaking stories about losing their children in a school fire.

man in *Survival Song* (Yu Guangyi, 2008), his seizure-like movement seemingly purging the pressures of the world. It is precisely at these moments where the authenticity of the sober direct cinema style is guaranteed.

Furthermore, it's not always a money shot. Direct cinema also has its meat shot, which is not so much an analogue of the hard-core trope as a variation. For example, director He Yuan literally shoots *Apuda* (2011) with a surveillance camera. Unlike other direct cinema directors, he seems to be something of a formalist. Much of the film is shot in a small one-room home in the Burma and Tibet borderlands. *Apuda* is a dirt-poor farmer and his father lies on his deathbed; *Apuda's* bed sits on the other side of the room. The 145-minute film patiently follows the father's inexorable slide toward death. Most of the film is shot from one of two corners of the tiny room, using unwavering forty-five-degree angles on each bed. The director clearly set up the camera, hit record, and left the home. This surveillance camera style has its own strong reality effect, but there is also the moment when the father struggles mightily to sit up in bed. His robes fall open and out pops his penis.

This wasn't the first meat shot in Chinese documentary. The most famous is probably Wang Bing's 2013 *Till Madness Do Us Part* (*Feng ai*), one of the most ethically dubious films of the independent Chinese documentary. Before this, his *West of the Tracks* (*Tiexi qu* 2003) had already featured full frontal male nudity, including shower scenes. In *Till Madness Do Us Part*, Wang constantly shows inmates of a mental hospital wandering around naked and urinating in bathrooms,



Figure 1.3. *West of the Tracks*. Meat shot from Wang Bing, who shoots swinging dicks discreetly at genitals level.

cells, and hallways. One scene in particular powerfully reveals Wang's axiographic position. An old man crouches over a plastic bowl relieving himself, his penis in full view. When he realizes Wang is photographing him, he uncomfortably shuffles around the bowl in order to obtain some modicum of privacy—effectively turning his back on the camera, without spilling a drop of urine. Wang cruelly disregards this awkward but perfectly legible gesture of humiliation and defiance, continuing to shoot the man and ultimately including the scene in the final film.

The meat shot is unusual in documentary. The few examples I can think of all come from queer work, ethnographic documentary, or films shot in the heyday of the 1960s counterculture. The key difference with the Chinese examples is that they are all shot with the visible hidden camera. The people in these Chinese documentaries surely have no idea that the camera in the room will circulate their personal lives around the world and compete in competitions for cash prizes and fame. One wonders if they would have thrown a hand in the camera or a towel over their crotch if they had known that their genitalia would be projected and enlarged for public consumption from Japanese film festivals to the

classrooms of Harvard University. In any case, like the money shots exhibiting intense bodily responses that punctuate the Chinese documentary, these meat shots are strong markers of authenticity. To borrow Linda Williams' words, "This aspect of the genre is characterized by a cinema vérité devotion to the revelation-confession of real bodies caught in the act of sexual pleasure—in, for example, the 'meat shot.' Here . . . is irrefutable, visible evidence of penetration, really taking place, with no possible faking" (Williams 1993, 241). Our Chinese documentarists punctuate their penetration of Chinese reality with their own meat and money shots, and incidentally with a decidedly masculine bravado as well.

Axiographics invites us to see these deployments of the human body as more than the mark of the authentic. Indeed, while pornography and documentary have a variety of curious points of contact, Nichols points out how the use of narrative and actors renders the opposition of fiction and documentary a difference between erotics and ethics, "a difference that continues to mark out the movement of the ideological through the aesthetic" (Nichols 1992, 76). Let us now explore this issue through two more complex examples that raise questions about filming-filmed relations and the cinematic deployment of real human bodies.

The first of these two films is Xu Tong's *Wheat Harvest*. It was celebrated as one of the first, or perhaps *the* first, Chinese film to deal with prostitution without merely condemning it. Xu follows a young woman, named Miaomiao, between her workplace in Beijing and her rural home. She prostitutes herself to help support family and her ill father. Xu began his project as a novel and he used video as a form of visual note-taking. He received the consent of Miaomiao for this research (it's never clear if he's a "participant observer," as it were). However, after a while his novel morphed into a documentary film project, something he neglected to tell Miaomiao and the men and women around her. They merely thought it was Xu's habit to carry around a video camcorder and shoot constantly. It appeared woven into his daily life.

He premiered *Wheat Harvest* at the 3rd Beijing Independent Film Forum and then shortly thereafter at Yunfest in Kunming. At the Yunfest Q and A, he mentioned that Miaomiao had no idea he was making a film. This was probably the worst place to make such a revelation, as the participants of this particular festival include many activists from NGOs who are dedicating their lives to social issues like prostitution, sexual slavery, AIDS, and the like. He was roundly attacked, and then the dialogue became so heated that the festival scheduled a separate discussion. It lasted several hours. Xu was—and remains—unrepentant, much to the furious frustration of his critics. The controversy follows him wherever he goes, although it has rarely if ever prevented a festival from showing the film.

Miaomiao eventually stumbled on the controversy in an online forum. Not surprisingly, she was rather surprised to discover that Xu had made a film about her life without telling her, and also that it was being shown around the world. She raised objections and proffered a set of conditions for the film's continued screening:

1. Delete all the negative information about her on the Internet, where possible.
2. No more domestic screenings of the film, although foreign screenings would be acceptable.
3. Cover the identities of everyone in the film but her.
4. And she wanted to see the film.

Xu accepted all but one of the conditions. For some inexplicable reason, he refused to accept the last condition. He doesn't have a terribly good explanation for why. I finally asked him directly, and he parried questions with vague assertions that they have a good and long-term relationship, and that the relationship is not predicated on showing her the film. She stopped asking about it; he says she was primarily concerned about the publicity about her life.⁴

Wheat Harvest is quite a good film. At the same time, Xu Tong's deployment of the visible hidden camera remains troubling, and he would likely argue that the film wouldn't have been possible in the first place had he not made it surreptitiously. Needless to say, this was at the expense of Miaomiao's privacy; and, notably, the terms of their relationship were also somewhat vague in the end (i.e., it is difficult to ascertain whether this was, as I have mentioned before, participant observation). In comparison, what makes an equally controversial film like *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) quite admirable is precisely that Dennis O'Rourke started shooting Aoi with her explicit cooperation and exposed his motivations and the terms of their relationship within the film itself.⁵ In other words, O'Rourke's camera was anything but hidden; he does shoot one scene with a hidden camera, but it is reserved for drunken Europeans and their misogynist reviews concerning the women of Patpong.

The next film, Xue Jianqiang's *Martian Syndrome*, discovers a novel way of hiding the fully visible camera—simply lie about its ability to “see.” Xue is one of those young directors for whom the camera is an extra appendage. It is always with him, and he is always shooting. *Martian Syndrome* documents a single evening shared by four young men. They are from rural areas, budding artists attracted to the cutting-edge art scenes of 798 and Songzhuang. They also seem to be gay, or at least experimenting with their sexuality. However, they remain bitterly on the outside edges of the art world they desperately want to enter. The film literally takes place on either side of the front door of one artist. He cowers inside, afraid

of a new arrival that enjoyed his body and food earlier in the week. The new man is starving and homeless and keeps knocking on the front door, leaving the artist feeling harassed. The man is a bundle of contradictions, highly aware that he doesn't fit in; he calls himself a "Martian," which provides Xue his title. The artist refuses to answer his front door and keeps his lights off. Another friend calms the man down, stroking his arm and chest. After eighty-three minutes of traumatized hemming and hawing inside, the Martian is finally rejected and retreats into the night.

The filmmaker tags along all evening, shooting the conversations on either side of the door with the infrared setting of his camcorder. This gives it an otherworldly feeling, leeching the color from the image. It has the grainy gray palette of Pixelvision. And thanks to the infrared, everyone's eyes transform into glowing orbs. One film festival called it a "bravura night poem," but this would be like calling the tortured grammar of Google Translate poetry. The film consists of only five shots.⁶ The first is a short, introductory image of a woman, possibly drunk, stumbling through the streets at night. The next four shots, each between fifteen and twenty-five minutes in length, capture the conversations inside and outside the apartment in real time. Whatever chunks of time are excised in the editing are short. There are brief flashbacks that interrupt the continuous flow of time of the five shots; each insert is rendered in negative and recalls a snatch of conversation from earlier in the film—some bit of hypocrisy, contradiction, or outright lie. Outside of this, it is the simple record of an evening of interaction, a tedious adolescent drama and not much more.

Through the evening, Xue carries his camera loosely. For the most part he points the camera in the general direction of people, but not with much "accuracy" because, after all, he is trying to hide the fact that he is shooting them. In the first shot after the introduction, the Martian points at the camera after a moment and asks, "Hey man, can you shoot?" (Meaning, can you shoot in the darkness?). Xue lies, "No, I can only record sound." The conversation continues—three young men shooting the breeze in the dark. Five minutes into the second shot they go inside after the Martian takes leave; when the apartment owner finally calms down he notices that Xue is shooting video. "Who is that? Is he with you? Can he see?" he asks. His companion replies, "Yes, it's an advanced camera." The owner says, "Oh, this will be classic." With this acknowledgment of the camera, the film would seem to shift modes as it moves from outside to inside the apartment. Outside, Xue's lie rendered his camcorder into a visible hidden camera and was firmly recording in the direct cinema mode. Once inside, when the photography is properly acknowledged, the film apparently shifts to something akin to the interactive, interventional style of *cinéma vérité*.

The work would seem to maintain this mode when Xue returns outside in the next shot, now a half-hour into the film. The Martian is back, and a third man



Figure 1.4. *Martian Syndrome*. Rendering the camera invisible: the director responds with a lie—“No, I can only record sound.”

has arrived to ask Xue about editing his film. The third man knows enough about cameras to realize Xue is shooting their conversation. He demands repeatedly that the camera be turned off, pushing his hand into the camera lens. Xue dodges, ignores him, and continues shooting. When he leaves, Xue turns to the Martian and says, “Now it’s your turn.” Xue berates the Martian for harassing the artist inside the apartment. The Martian is only half-listening. He now realizes that Xue has been photographing their entire conversation, tells Xue to stop, and repeatedly demands the tape. The crux of the film, such as it is, finally arrives: *the director drops his camera onto the ground and beats the Martian into submission.*

Camcorder abandoned on the sidewalk, the horizon canted at an impossible angle, we *hear* but do not see the fight. Now the camera records sound but cannot see. The image is strikingly similar to the famous scene from *The Battle of Chile* (*La batalla de Chile* 1979), where the camera falls to the ground when the cinematographer is fatally shot and records his own death. Significantly, the power dynamic is completely reversed. Here, the cameraman is the agent of violence. When the Martian flees, Xue picks up the camera and returns inside to the accolades of his companions: “Was the camera on or off? On? That’ll be a famous banned film!”

Actually, the film has enjoyed some success, as evidenced by a 2011 London screening and an award in 2010 at Songzhuang (as discussed in chapter 2 by J. P. Sniadecki). The acclaim at Songzhuang was not universal. Xue faced tough questions about the ethics of beating his subject in the post-film Q and A. He was unable to articulate a response. In fact, his explanation was so incoherent that some audience members left convinced that the entire film was a brilliant staging of that evening's events in the mock documentary tradition. Others felt this was giving Xue a bit too much credit, that it looked more like an "accidental" documentary—his camera was on and merely pointing in the general direction of the action, with only five or six edits needed to keep the running length reasonable. At the nearby festival lounge the conversations brought Xue in and he dispelled any notion that it was a skillfully executed, fictional set piece. Xue happened to have his camera running while something interesting happened and, aside from a few snide flashbacks, he made an attention-grabbing film despite himself. In other words, while Xue's approach would seem to be interventional at first glance, it is actually an observational, direct cinema documentary about his own life and self. We usually associate autobiography with the essayistic rather than direct cinema, but it is possible here because the director described the position from which he filmed—his position, his self—as "empty."

Perhaps this is why he so desperately tries to fill that empty self, at least with his next film, *When I Was Young I Also Beat a Tiger* (2010). This is essentially a self-shot record of Xue confronting veteran filmmakers like Wu Wenguang, condemning them as old hat to their faces, and claiming the mantle of a new and improved generation of documentary filmmakers. He was shooting this film at the same time as a visit to CCD Workstation's May Festival by Hara Kazuo, which I organized with Wu Wenguang. Hara gave long talks there and at Songzhuang. Xue was present, and apparently left deeply impressed by what Hara called his "action documentary." He identified with Hara's interventional approach, which he thought he was doing as well.

However, this is a gross misreading of Hara's "action documentary," which involves a complex interplay of ethics and politics and serves as an excellent counterpoint to the direct cinema filmmakers of China. After all, Hara conceived his approach in reaction to Ogawa and the collective approach he stood for. Furthermore, many of his films may be in direct cinema style, but they are deeply informed by the axiographic praxis of filmmakers like Ogawa and Tsuchimoto Noriaki. Hara worked as an assertive, individual filmmaker moving through—and thus influencing—the historical world; however, he was an individual filmmaker carefully working through webs of relationships. His innovation was to make "private film," but he conceived of the private as a place thoroughly supplemented by and inseparable from the social. This is to say, it naturally had a politics about it.

For example, one can contrast the meat shots of Chinese documentary or Xu Tong's surreptitious capture of Miaomiao's body with Hara's *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974* (*Kyokushiteki erosu koitua 1974*). The nudity in Hara's film was part of the fabric of the times and entirely consensual. The women he shot were actually collaborators on the film. Moreover, the difference between Xu Tong and Hara is most obvious in the climactic scene of *Extreme Private Eros*, when Hara's lover (and producer) and his ex-wife both give birth at home, on the kitchen floor. They explain that this method of giving life was an expression of their independence as women. Having Hara shoot it was a way of amplifying this expression. In contrast, Xu Tong surreptitiously uses Miaomiao's body for his own ends.

We could also compare Xue Jianqiang's *Martian Syndrome* to Hara's *Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* (*Yuki yukite shingun 1987*). The latter film was very much about the director's relationship to Okazaki and his patent insanity, a WWII veteran who beats his interviewees into revealing their shared history of wartime atrocity. Thus, this film also revolves around the mortal bodies before the camera. These are old men, and the beatings are quite real; one of Okazaki's victims (who participated in the horrific massacre and violence during the war) was recovering from surgery and required a visit to the hospital after the film crew's visit. Indeed, unlike Xue's bravura attack, Okazaki called the ambulance and accompanied the old man to the hospital. Where to draw the line was Hara's constant question, a political one considering the societal consequences of erasing war memory. The power of Hara's film comes precisely from this intersection of ethics and politics that is rendered with great sophistication in cinematic space and time. This is something Hara spoke eloquently about in the Q and A's Xue heard in Beijing. Hara would agree with Bill Nichols' assertion that any interventional style involves an "ethic of responsibility." He would also agree with Nichols that one can also imagine an "ethic of irresponsibility," a camera gaze that "actively sides with the agency of death, legitimates itself through the same code that legitimates the taking of life in the first place" (Nichols 1992, 85). Notably, Taiwanese documentary is quite self-conscious about these issues. Kuei-fen Chiu writes,

The filming act is represented as a controversial activity that generates unexpected and unwanted impacts on human relationships during the filming process. In this kind of documentary, we often find an oscillation between the desire to use the camera and the urge to put it down. The question that continues to weigh upon the filmmaker's mind is no longer "How can I use my camera to represent them?" but "Should I put down the camera?" (Chiu 2012, 148)

Filmmakers on the mainland might find this no more than naval gazing. They will film anyone doing anything. It may be unfair to claim that this means the

Chinese disciples of Wiseman “actively” align themselves with the side of dominance and control in the hierarchies they confront with their cameras. The Song-zhuang poster, bristling with surveillance cameras before the forehead of Mao, obviously asserts the opposite. In scenes of official corruption, state violence, and other abuses of power, they are not simply catching life unawares; they are catching criminals in the act. In this sense, that battery of surveillance cameras directly symbolizes their camcorders—surveilling “Mao” and all the things done in his name.

Indeed, the attraction to Wiseman’s cinema is not only its “objective” feel (in contrast to state television), but also the way it offers an easy route to identify with the powerless side of the hierarchies of Chinese society. Perhaps the problem is that it is too easy a route. In *Ideology and the Image*, Nichols called Wiseman’s cinema “tactless” for the way it eschews “etiquette and taboo,” even if it relentlessly draws our attention to areas of society that normally get pushed out of view (Nichols 1981, 140). Chinese documentary filmmakers have inherited this ethical ambivalence; however, with no checks from the distribution or exhibition contexts, and a daring cinema driven by an anything-for-the-sake-of-the-film narcissism, that ambivalence ends up amplified and edging toward a troubling ethics of irresponsibility in too many works.

Where does that leave *us*? Yiman Wang has also noted the questionable practices of Chinese directors in a fascinating essay published in *Film Quarterly*. The essay takes virtually the opposite stance I have suggested here. After analyzing several films, she writes,

The amateur documentarians’ recurring emphasis on the “cruelty” of documentation suggests their awareness of a conventional documentary ethic *and* their decision to go against it in order to deliver what they see as the truth. In these terms, the question one should ask is not simply what is the bottom line of DV documentary making, or how far it can go without becoming too intrusive and exhibitionistic; *but rather whether it is necessary* [my emphasis] and possible to justify the “guilty” ethics of deliberately cutting into the private realm of everyday reality and exposing it with unbearable clarity.

(Wang 2005, 22)

Wang does ask some tough questions of the filmmakers she examines. Whether they are cognizant of the ethical conundrums of documentary practice (I remain unsure what she means by a “conventional ethics”) is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, this quote demonstrates Wang’s alignment with their values. Intrusiveness and exhibitionism are at the heart of it all. And this is because the ultimate goal of the independent documentary is, for both filmmaker and viewer, to be

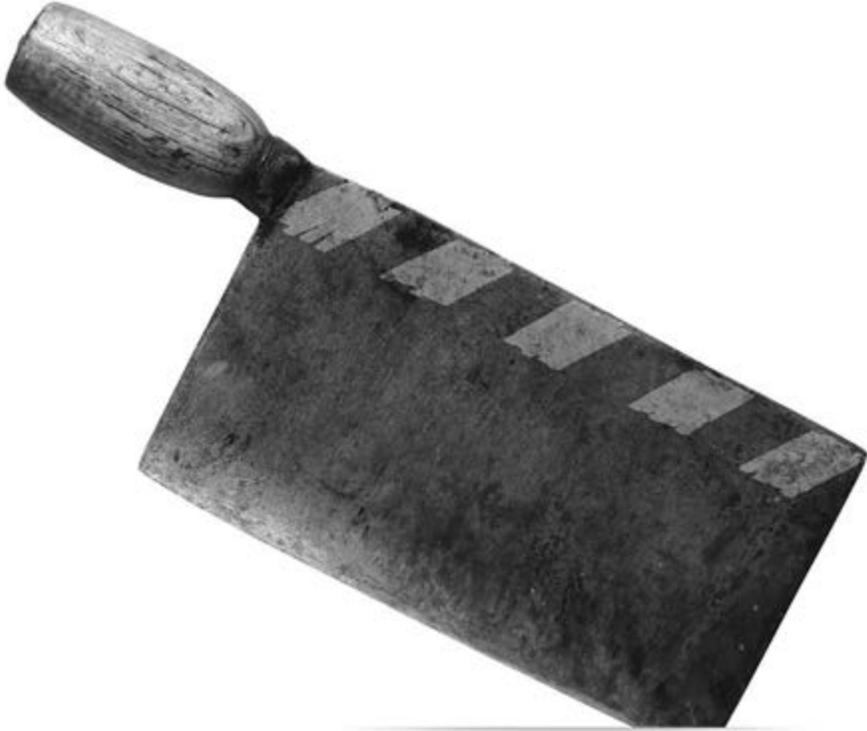
“seared” or “wounded” by the cruelty before the camera (or inflicted by the camera). As for the films’ subjects, they are curiously left in brackets. They are mainly necessary for “teasing out neglected but important social issues” (Wang 2005, 23).

By way of contrast, Nichols challenges we spectators of the Chinese documentary to ask how filmmakers acquit themselves in relationship to the historical world as they commit it to video, give it form through editing, and then re-present it in theaters, cafes, universities, and art museums. What ethics or politics come to play in this process? What ethics adhering to a work might actually undermine its politics? Should a film like *Martian Syndrome* be awarded a prestigious prize? Should *Wheat Harvest* still be shown in China? In other words, I am suggesting there is an ethics of exhibition to consider as well, something the programmers at Song-zhuang appear to be especially self-conscious about. The poster for this year’s festival features a cinema clapboard in the form of a meat cleaver.

Unfortunately, it was a festival that never took place. In the summer of 2011, there was a government crackdown reaction to the Arab Spring and in anticipation of the change of leadership. Ai Weiwei had been arrested in April and his whereabouts were unknown. This strategic arrest chilled the film, art, and architecture scenes. Around the same time, the sudden disappearance of the websites for Li Xianting Film Fund and Yunfest portended trouble. Yunfest endured, despite some official interference and a financial crisis. CCD Workstation’s May Festival went without a hitch, although early visits by police made them wonder if they’d get to the finish line. The year before, Iberia let its film archivist and programmer go, supposedly because independent film brought no added value or accumulation of wealth to the gallery; finally, in the summer of 2011, the owner of the high-profile gallery Ullens announced he was selling everything, pulling out of 798 and moving to India.

In the summer of 2011, things were worst at the epicenter of the independent documentary film scene, the Li Xianting Film Fund and its film festivals. After the vice-mayor of Beijing visited Li to demand all the festival selections for inspection, the organizers decided to pull back and cancel the event rather than submit to inevitable censorship. In the past, they had met such interference with bull-headed resistance; they would simply move to a secondary space and show the films anyway. This year, according to Li, the pressure was different. He felt that to proceed with the festival would mean going head-to-head with the most powerful adversaries they had dealt with thus far, and that it could very well mean losing everything. Better to take one or two steps back and then proceed with caution for a while. He invited people to watch films on TV or computer monitors, which a few people did in the first couple days. However, they were followed in the streets, and Mark Peranson, the Canadian juror and programmer from the Locarno International Film Festival, was even questioned at his hotel. The director

中國紀錄片交流周
Documentary
Film Festival
China



The 8th DOChina-Documentary Film Festival China
第8屆中國紀錄片交流周

日期：2011年5月1日~7 Date:1st ~7th May 2011
場地：現象藝術中心 Venue：Fanhall Center for Arts
開幕時間 5月1日下午2點 Opening Time：14:00 1st May
所有的放映免費 All screenings are free



歡迎使用網站獲取最新信息 Welcome to website: www.lisiting.org
電話Phone: (86 10) 80856827 ext 901

Figure 1.5. Poster of the 8th Documentary Film Festival in China. (design: Wang Wo)

of the institute, Zhu Rikun, resigned from his position and announced that he would return to his hometown to become a farmer (that didn't last long).

Amidst this chilly atmosphere, there was a significant bright spot. Indie Workshop, the outfit run by Beijing Film Academy professor Zhang Xianming, established the Indie Screening Alliance of Art Space. They will curate packages of films and circulate them through a formal network of screening sites around the country. Their first package of twenty-three films, *To Live—in China*, was assembled in the spring of 2011. The package did not include the most daring films, but this is hardly surprising under the circumstances. It initially circulated through ten venues. Happily, more sites were added as time went on. In other words, the Chinese documentary film movement, such as it is, was finally building the reception context into its ethics of exhibition. It was finally tackling what Ogawa in Japan took as his starting point when he left Iwanami and established Jieiso. However, in subsequent years government pressure has only intensified, culminating in the total suppression of both Yunfest and Songzhuang's Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2014. This basically leaves personal DVD hand-offs and the Internet as the only means of distribution and exhibition for the independent documentary. In this situation, it is hard to imagine the filmmakers looking to someone like Hara Kazuo and combining the best of Wiseman and Ogawa.

Notes

This chapter was written with the support of the State Innovative Institute for the Studies of Journalism & Communication and Media Society at Fudan University and the University of Michigan's Center for Chinese Studies and Confucius Institute.

1. I describe and analyze these conceptual and practical aspects, at length, in Nornes 2007.

2. These filmmakers follow Ogawa's example of long-term interaction with their subjects, but in terms of style they opt for the Ogawa of the mid-career Sanrizuka Series and not the more formally innovative films of the Magino Village Story.

3. One can palpably understand this dynamic by considering the experience of watching Gu Tao's work, which invites one to think from the perspective of the ethnic minority family that is pushed off their ancestral hunting lands to live in awful tract housing. Watching their abject poverty, profound misery, and embarrassing drinking binges in *Aoluguya . . . Aoluguya* (2007) and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* (2013), one wonders about the role of the director. The films feel objectifying and almost unbearably exploitative. By way of contrast, it is difficult to feel this way with Gu's 2011 follow-up, *Yuguo and His Mother*. We now see the same family in many of the same situations, but he follows them for years and their relationship is obviously close. The style of the films is similar, but there is a pronounced shift from a Wiseman

to an Ogawa mode. Still, it is unclear if the stumble-drunk mother has the slightest idea her life is winning awards on the international film festival circuit (the second film won the Ogawa Shinsuke Award at the 2011 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival).

4. The following website has information about the controversy: <http://www.mvage.com/space.php?uid=4&do=thread&id=208>.

5. I was involved in the programming of this film for the competition at Yamagata International Film Festival in 1991, where it caused a controversy equal to that of *Wheat Harvest* (although mainly among foreign viewers). The festival stood by its choice in terms similar to Linda Williams' defense of the film in "The Ethics of Documentary Intervention: Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok*" (Williams 1997).

6. This is an analysis of the original version shown at the Beijing Independent Documentary Film Festival; the version J. P. Sniadecki writes about elsewhere in this volume seems to have a coda added after the fact.

Bibliography

- Chiu, Kuei-fen. 2012. "Should I Put Down the Camera?"—Ethics in Contemporary Taiwanese Documentary Films." In *Documenting Taiwan on Film: Issues and Methods in New Documentaries*, edited by Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Tze-la Deborah Sang, 138–154. New York: Routledge.
- Grindstaff, Laura. 2002. *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nichols, Bill. 1981. *Ideology and the Image: Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1992. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nornes, Abé Mark. 2007. *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2014. "Yamagata—Asia—Europe: The International Film Festival Short Circuit." In *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*, edited by Daisuke Miyao, 245–262. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wang, Yiman. 2005. "The Amateur's Lightning Rod: DV Documentary in Postsocialist China." *Film Quarterly* 58 (4): 16–26.
- Williams, Linda. 1993. "Pornographies On/Scene, or Diff'rent Strokes for Diff'rent Folks." In *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, edited by Lynn Segal and Mary McIntosh, 233–265. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- . 1997. "The Ethics of Documentary Intervention: Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok*." In *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, edited by Chris Berry, Laleen Jayamanne, and Annette Hamilton. 79–90. Sydney: Power Institute Press.