FLOATING AS THE KEYWORD: CHINESE INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY FILMS IN POST-SOCIALIST CHINA

by

SIOSAN UN

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Department of East Asian Studies
University of Toronto

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Siosan Un

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies
Department of East Asian Studies
University of Toronto
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Abstract

Independent documentary films have made floating population—such as the migrants and people who flow from place to place—a prominent screen scene against China’s social and cultural landscapes since the 1990s. This study investigates how a “floating generation” of Chinese filmmakers has been formed and represented as an imagined community in China’s post-socialist context through Chinese independent documentaries.

An attempt to excavate and examine the problems behind the instable but also flexible status of Chinese independent filmmaking within the state censorship, my study focuses on the implications of the keyword “floating” as they unfold along the development of Chinese independent documentary films. In a case study of Jia Zhangke’s three documentaries, In Public, Dong and Useless, my study analyzes the relationship between independent documentaries and China’s campaign of “constructing a harmonious society”.

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Introduction

It is almost impossible to talk about contemporary Chinese visual culture in post-1989 era without mentioning the emergence of independent filmmaking and its wide reach through various media. In the past years, independent filmmaking in China struck scholars as a marginal mode of film production that does not necessarily share the institutional and political interests of the state and its ideology. While scholars are cautious not to label independent filmmaking as the alternative to the state controlled film production, they do admit in various ways the ambiguous yet new possibilities independent filmmaking seems to have brought forth.

My study explores a specific sector of China’s independent filmmaking, the independent documentary films. Since the 1990s, independent documentary film has played an important role in China’s media culture. It is both the product and the critic of the post-socialist reality of China. My particular focus is on the connection between the migrant population which I call “floating population” and the emergence of a generation of bohemian artists and filmmakers in China’s post-socialist moment. I seek to show that the independent documentary filmmaking sheds light on the formulation and self-understanding of a new imagined community.

The core of this imagined community is the concept about, as well as the motif of, floating. Floating population (liudong renkou) is a socially constructed category, which is comprised of a large number of internal migrants who left the rural hinterlands to seek employment and business opportunities in China’s urban centers. It is also a “by-product of economic reform and China’s entry into the orbit of global capitalism”. The development of Chinese independent documentary, too, is closely related to China’s “socialist market economy”, particularly to the social-cultural changes generated by the flow of surplus population and the movement of artists

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1 Li Zhang, Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China’s Floating Population (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.
over the past two decades. Chinese independent documentary filmmakers pay more attention to the story of peasant migrants now than in the early 1990s, and often consider capturing China’s rapid transformation as the purpose of making documentaries. Besides recording the instable lives of peasant migrants, independent documentary filmmakers also tend to demonstrate the “floating generation” (piao yi dai)—a popular term which contemporary Chinese migrant intellectuals and travelling artists use as their self-identification, since they often consider themselves a part of this imagined community.

Many studies have discussed the relationship of Chinese floating population and media mostly on print media form such as newspaper and magazine, since it is a widespread medium and an affordable product that reflects the attitude of the state and the urban customers toward the migrants, as well as provides a way for migrants to express themselves to certain degree by writing articles to the magazines. However, the visualization of floating population has gradually reached other mediums or art forms, particularly documentary and film industry in recent years, which also deserves our concern in this visual-oriented era.

Focusing on the interaction between floating population and Chinese independent documentary, I benefit from the previous studies of the institutional development of Chinese independent documentary, and the discussion of the concept of public sphere suggested by several scholars. In the field of film studies, Chu Yingchi’s recent book Chinese Documentaries: From Dogma to Polyphony (2007) provides a comprehensive overview of the development and the various types of Chinese documentaries from 1949 to 2006. She argues that there is a gradual process of democratization in the media, in which documentaries play a significant role under both the planned and the market economy. More importantly, she suggests that the rapidly expanding participation of television audiences in documentary programs across Chinese society, including sectors of the peasantry, appears to be preparing the ground for the possibility of a

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Habermasian “public media sphere”—a promising avenue to discuss the expression of public opinion on a mass scale in China today. ³ Other notable scholars, such as Chris Berry, focused more exclusively on independent documentary films in 1990s. In his influential thesis “Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism”, Chris Berry suggests that the cultural meaning of Chinese independent documentary films is to approach and to face reality. He also indicates that the significance of the new documentary in China can only be understood in China’s post-socialist context, particularly after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. ⁴ Other important scholars such as Michael Berry, provides many first-hand information in an interview “Jia Zhangke: Capturing a Transforming Reality” (2002). His recent published book Jia Zhangke’s “Hometown Trilogy”: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures (2009) demonstrates as a valuable attempt to explore, through in-depth analysis of Jia’s three feature films, the central themes in Jia’s oeuvre: destruction and change, stagnation and movement, the individual versus society, and the ceaseless search for home. Based on the previous researches, my attempt is to supplement the current study of floating population and visual culture from the cinematic aspect. The meaning of “floating” in this study is a metaphor referring not only to a problem of population but also to a state of being and an experience of instability in post-socialist China.

To be more specific, the term floating has two meanings in this research. First, the concept of floating expresses a sense of *instable* feeling toward the fast changes in China’s urbanization and globalization process. Many independent filmmakers’ preference for instable themes about floating population such as peasant workers and travelling artists, as well as topics about changes, such as the urbanization in Three Gorges area and the replacement of hand-made manufacture industry by mass production. Although social instability has been a motif shared by many independent documentary films in many countries, beyond the formal similarities, both the appeal and the significance of these modes in post-socialist China are quite different from that in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the US, where independent documentary can have more freedom to


approach sensitive social issues and can act as a more aggressive tool to advocate social reform. Social instability, such as the massive number of migrants and the lack of a fair social welfare system, is often the symptom of crisis or even a starting point of revolution. Both Chinese authorities and Chinese independent documentary filmmakers seriously concern about the increasing social unrest. Consequently, the exploration of instability in Chinese independent documentary film is also an exploration of crisis that is usually hidden from the official discourse.

The concept of floating also signifies the flexible role of Chinese documentary filmmaking, in terms of its vague position in mainland China’s media system in the post-socialist era. Chris Berry points out that the term “post-socialism” has been used colloquially to mean simply “after the end of socialism” for the countries that have appeared after the break-up of the Soviet Union (Chris Berry (a) 115). But in China’s case, however, post-socialism has allowed the forms and structures of the socialism to persist long after faith in the grand narrative that authorizes it has been lost within China’s unique “socialist market economy”. In another words, “Chinese post-socialism” is more like a dilemma of a declining faith in liberal capitalist democracy and the absence of any actually existing alternative.

To supplement Chris Berry’s definition of China’s post-socialism, I would like to add that the impacts of floating population, urbanization, and marketization have made the situation of Chinese independent documentaries since the 1990s more complicated. The number of floating population and the fast pace of urbanization had been increasing dramatically in the 1990s, and their consequences such as building demolition and people’s travelling inevitably became social landscapes that could be seen almost everywhere in China. This is particularly obvious after 1993, when the Media Reform was promoted by Chinese author and resulted in a creation of a relatively open market and institutional system for documentary filmmaking to showcase these floating landscapes. Cooperation among state-owned media, independent filmmakers and private company (or NGOs) is also an important factor of the blossoming of Chinese independent filmmaking since the mid-1990s.
What makes floating the keyword in post-socialist China after the mid-1990s? What does floating and independence mean to the filmmakers’ self-experiences and how do they affect the filmmakers’ understanding towards the fast-changing China? What does the marketization of public media mean to independent filmmaking and state censorship? More importantly, does the experience of instability in any way confront the official ideology of “constructing a harmonious society”? These are the questions I hope to discuss below.

This study is divided into three parts. The first part examines the social instability in post-socialist China and the development of Chinese independent documentary films since the 1990s. At the same time, I will also demonstrate the different spirits (i.e. getting real and recording) of independent documentaries before and after the mid-1990s. The second part analyzes the flexible strategies of independent documentary filmmakers to survive in state media system after the Chinese government’s Media Reform in 1993. I argue that the changes of the way of production, censorship and broadcasting of independent documentary filmmaking after the Media Reform have helped shaping a new understanding of independence and a new imagined community in China. The third part is a case study of three documentary films of Jia Zhangke with the focus on his way in handling social issues, such as floating generation, as well as his interpretation of China’s rapid urbanization and marketization. Jia’s career as an independent feature film and documentary maker reflects a trajectory of ambiguity and uncertainty in Chinese independent filmmaking. In fact, the ambiguity inherent in a search for cultural belongings and visual representation of instability drives the director to question the meaning of independent documentary films. From Public Sphere published in 2001 to Dong in 2006 and Useless in 2007, Jia and his works move from the representation of the floating population to a search for self-identity as a travelling and independent artist who is a member of the floating generation.

At the end of this study, I conclude that floating is a keyword to understand the relationship between Chinese independent documentary filmmaking and the Chinese authority. On the one hand, the independent filmmakers’ visualization of the floating generation and the fast-changing social landscapes in Chinese independent films questions the state’s propaganda of harmonious society. On the other hand, the seizing of the control of the burgeoning public media sphere will
be the key challenge to both Chinese authority and independent filmmakers, and will ultimately change the very concept of independence in documentary filmmaking in post-socialist China.

Although the meaning of independence in Chinese documentaries is still questionable, overall, documentary film here is used as a broad category of visual expressions that is based on the attempt, in one fashion or another, to "record" reality. Although "documentary film" originally referred to movies shot on film stock, it has subsequently expanded to include video and digital productions that can be either direct-to-video or made for a television series. Documentary, as it applies here, works to identify "a filmmaking practice, a cinematic tradition, and mode of audience reception" that is continually evolving and is without clear boundaries.\(^5\) It refers to what people do with media devices, content, form, and production strategies in order to address the creative, ethical, and conceptual problems and choices that arise as they make documentaries.

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\(^5\) Bill Nichols, 'Foreword', in *Documenting The Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, eds. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997)
Chapter 1
Instability: Floating and The Status of Independent Documentary Filmmaking

Many sociologists, such as Cindy Fan, Tamara Jacka, and E Judd, have argued that “China on the move” is probably the most common and visible scene in China’s society nowadays because of the massive internal migration of the floating population. Comparing to “moving,” the keyword floating as it is used in official and popular discourse can better reflect the complexity of instability and mobility of post-socialist China, thus provides a better understanding of the cultural and social position of the Chinese independent documentary. Chinese independent documentaries since the late 1989 have been characterized as paying attention to the fast-changing social-cultural landscapes, such as marginal or ordinary people and their instable lives. The independent documentary film is significant not only because its production and broadcasting is relatively outside the state system, but also due to the emergence of individual styles. These individual styles offer a realistic, bottom-up rather than top-down description of Chinese society, which can be understood as a distinct difference to the state propaganda that China as a steady developing, more and more harmonious society.

1.1 Floating and Post-socialist China

Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) conducted the “Reform and Opening-up Policy” in 1979, China today is undergoing a series of dramatic transformations in almost all realms of social, cultural, economic and political aspects. Later in 1992, the CCP declared at the Fourteenth Party Congress that its mission was to henceforth develop a “Chinese way”—officially termed the “socialist market economy”—to set up a market economy in the context of socialism. One of the most visible and significant manifestations of this process has been a huge increase of floating population in migration from the largely agricultural countryside and remote rural interior to the relatively industrialized urban areas, particularly the towns, cities, and Special Economic Zones of the coastal provinces since mid-1980s. This kind of internal

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migration was a direct outcome of the economic reforms that encouraged employees to try their luck in the market rather than stay in the state-run companies.

The large scale migration and the massive increase in floating population is a recent phenomenon. From the late 1950s to the early 1980s, the floating population was small in size due to the strict management of the planned economy, coupled with rigid administration of the permanent household residence system. There were only 6.57 million floating population in China in the early 1980s, according to estimation based on the data of the 3rd Census in 1982, which accounted for only 0.66 percent of China’s national population. Since the mid-1980s, China saw a rapid growth of her floating population after the State Council released in 1984 a document entitled a “Notice on the Issue of Farmers’ Entry and Settlement in Towns”, which loosened, to some extent, the control of farmers to enter urban areas and the mobility of the total population. The momentum of growth of the floating population has become irresistible; the amount of floating population has been sharply increasing since the mid-1990s. The floating population had increased from 70 million in 1993 to 147 million in 20057, exceeding 10 percent of the national population and accounting for 30 percent of all rural labors. And the total number of migrants is expected to be increased gradually in the next decade.

Both the state and the surplus peasants see the economic benefits of the migration. This temporary mobility was permitted by authorities because it simultaneously absorbed a large amount of surplus rural labor, improved the economies of rural areas, and satisfied urban requirements for service and other workers8. The most significant aspect of the temporary migration, however, was that it was viewed by both the state and the peasants as a possible initial step toward the development of small, rural-oriented urban centers that could bring employment

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8 See, for example, Davin Delia, Internal Migration in Contemporary China (London: Macmillan Press Ltd 1999)
and urban amenities to rural areas. Surplus rural laborers were able to take the opportunity and migrate primarily for employment or educational purposes. Leaving their place of official registration for days, months, or even years, agricultural workers mostly found jobs in construction, housekeeping or restaurants. Several other reasons such as personal fulfillment or being free from the control of parents, also contribute to China’s massive internal migration.9

While the migration has been an important source of urban and economic development, it has generated unexpected impact on the social system. The CCP has been seeking ways to control the massive amount of floating population through the household registration system (hukou system). In an effort to control this internal migration, neighborhood committees and work units (danwei) were required to comply with municipal regulations issued in January 1986. These regulations stipulated that communities and work units keep records on visitors, that those staying in Beijing for up to three days must be registered, and that those planning to stay longer must obtain temporary residence permits from local police stations. However, as scholar Wang Hui points out, the government failed to create any new regulations or appropriate measures for the protection of labor in this time of rapid historical change.10

In fact, the ambiguity of the term Chinese “socialist market economy” itself provides many flexibility for the CCP to balance the contradiction between socialism and Neo-liberalism discourses in the post-1989 context. While literally remain loyal to the socialist legacies of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the government is actually busy disengaging from society and the everyday life it inherited from Mao’s China. After two decades of trying to re-link the Chinese economy to the world system, the ruling technocratic elite seems to agree that “the socialist moral-ideological framework of the past will have to be dismantled to make room for the neoliberal theology of the free market, efficiency, competitiveness, etc., and to rationalize the

9 For detailed analysis, see Tamara Jacka, Rural Women 118-164.
10 Wang Hui, China’s New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition, ed. Thedore Huters (Cambrige, MA: Harvard University, 2007), 68-70
state form in the new global economy”. The general consensus is that the current Chinese economy is neither clear-cut socialist nor clear-cut capitalist; instead, it consists of mixed modes and shared spaces of production that pertain to overlapping social, political, and administrative structures. As Xudong Zhang argues, in economic sense, “two Chinas” seem to coexist: a China already integrated with the world market, and a China still unable or unwilling to enter the playground of finance capital, global competition, and neoliberal social policies (10).

Consequently, the central tension in Chinese society today is not so much the discrepancy between a Communist government and a market environment—since the two have already effected a corporate-style merger—but rather an intensifying conflict between this state’s rational self-interest (prosperity and stability) and the Chinese people’s desire (get rich and be free to express and mobilize), which put them in direct confrontation not only in Chinese independent documentary films but also the society at large. The discourse “let some of the people get rich first” (xian rang yi bu fen ren fu qi lai) which rendered in Deng regime can no longer satisfy the society, particularly for rural migrant workers who are eager to participate in the uprising market economy. Facing the fact that millions of Chinese are mobilizing inside the country, however, the overlapping of preexisted social divisions with the new hierarchy and the inequality established by the CCP during the past two decades have greatly reduced the popular support for economic and household reforms. As a result, the instability in social-political area has also rendered the current Chinese social and political environment “sensitive, unstable, and potentially explosive” (Xudong Zhang 12).

Most of these migrants are so-called unofficial, temporary, non-hukou migrants, floaters, “blind drifters” (mang liu), or be summarized in the official term— “floating population” (liudong renkou) as a whole. Floaters, especially peasant workers, are often considered as the

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12 What distinguishes the floating population from official and permanent migrants (qianyi renkou) is that the floaters do not have the local household registration (i.e. local hukou).
equivalent of the dangerous classes and illegal groups that should be closely watched or sent back to wherever they come from.\textsuperscript{13} Since urban people rarely know these floaters, and floaters are always lack of channel to express themselves through mass media, it is easy to make up stories about them that quickly turn into rumor and stereotype. Media often describes them either as money-oriented devils or innocent victims (of the foreign capital or themselves to be blamed).\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, the massive amount of floating population is often considered as a hidden danger to the state stability. The social influences caused by the floating population are so wide and deep to almost every Chinese. As a result, any personal story related to the floating population can be read as a national allegory to certain extent. The floating population in post-1989 not only consists of peasants workers but also includes educated intellectuals and artists. They move from smaller towns and rural areas to bigger cities to build their own circle of friends and community. The social attitudes towards the floating lives of artists and professionals are a relatively different story. Although this kind of floaters is not conceived as Baudelaire style’s “flâneur”\textsuperscript{15} — a detached observer in understanding, participating in and portraying the urban phenomena and modernity—they are somehow be/self romanticized as floating generation (\textit{piao yi dai}) or “Chinese Bohemia”\textsuperscript{16}, who are always pioneers and promoters in China’s floating discourse and struggle to live in the cities. The first few independent filmmakers appeared right among these Bohemians. The first independent documentary film, \textit{Liulang Beijing or Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers} (1990) directed by Wu Wenguang, was actually a record and a self-portrait of the migrating artists themselves. Echoing with the floating experience with peasant migrants, the practice of Chinese independent documentaries have enlarged the term “floating generation” not only to educated, new middle class Chinese who are affordable to migrate internally but to people who share the same way of living.

\textsuperscript{13} For detailed analysis, see John Friedmann, \textit{China’s Urban Transition} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005)

\textsuperscript{14} For detailed analysis, see Tamara Jacka, \textit{Rural Women}, 31-86.


\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Chen Guanzhong, Liao Weitang and Yanjun, \textit{Boximiya zhongguo} (Bohemia China) (Hong Kong : Oxford University Press, 2003)
Independent documentary filmmakers are a part of the floating generation in terms of experience. Young, jobless, low-living conditions, stranger in the city, facing the unknown and the uncertainty, risking violating the legal or municipal rules—all these are shared experiences among the independent filmmakers, potential artists and the migrant laborers. The independent filmmakers are also a distinct group among the floating population. The migrant laborers achieve their goal in economic enrichment and social self-betterment. The independent documentary filmmakers, however, often have to give up their position or economic stability. Drifting around seems to be their volunteered choices. The migrant laborers take the opportunity to work at the cities. The independent filmmakers and artists create their own opportunity, thus articulate the meaning of their floating with a certain level of self-consciousness.

Now the question is: what does “floating” mean to the Chinese independent filmmakers and how does it affect their understanding towards their floating objects? I will discuss it later in the second part of this study.

1.2 “Getting Real of the Public Secrets” in the Late 1980s to the Mid-1990s

Chinese documentary film has been a mainstay in both film production and the government’s project of national education starting from the early-twentieth century. Strict requirements such as pre-written script, controlled content, and voice-over are noticeable characteristics of many state-produced documentaries. As Chris Berry has pointed out, this went through a tremendous change in the 1990s along with the emergence of Chinese independent documentary. He argues that the Chinese independent documentary and feature filmmakers in the 1990s both operated under the imperative to “get real” (Chris Berry (a) 115). For him, “getting real” means the tendency of showing the truth behind the camera by using “on-the-spot realism” (jishizhuyi) and unscripted spontaneity on the one hand, while it also refers to the desire of facing the post-socialist reality on the other. In another words, in China’s post-socialism context, particularly after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, “getting real” means the need to develop “a new understanding of the limits of the emergent public sphere and the possibilities of social
transformation”, as well as to rethink “the negative example of the former Soviet Union’s fragmentation and decline following the transition to democracy and capitalism in the 1990s” (Ibid). Chinese independent documentaries, as a result, represent a transformation of Chinese documentary from the state propaganda to a medium for people to rethink the problem of Chinese society lied between post-socialism and capitalism. Unlike Chinese official documentaries which are mostly featured with background music or voice-over, Chinese independent documentaries not only “go down among the people” but they also give the ordinary people a direct voice, which enable the documentaries “to speak directly to other ordinary people and resonates with the economic agency that the development of a market sector gives them” (122).

Wu Wenguang’s *Bumming in Beijing* is widely recognized as a pioneering success in independent documentary filmmaking in China. The documentary’s shooting began in mid-1988 and ended in late 1990. After Wu left his *danwei* or work unit—Kunming television station, he came to Beijing looking for a creative space and opportunity as a floater as many young educated people in the late 1980s. As a floater who is interested in art, Wu soon met many self-choice bohemians who shared similar interests and instable living experiences. And he gradually generated a desire to save a record of their stories. *Bumming in Beijing* focuses on four alienated artists living in Beijing, like Wu himself, outside the state-run working system and without a Beijing *hukou*. After all the depressing living experience, all but one of the artists in the documentary film decided to search for more stable lives in the foreign countries by marrying foreigners. In another words, for them, the most turbulent lives exist not in elsewhere, but in the fast-changing China, their homeland. Time, space and movement are fragmentized due to the disjoined scenes among these artists. A sense of grouping and communication of these artists

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17 They were mostly called blindly mobile intelligentsia or artists (*wen hua mang liu*) — a new social phenomenon among young people as part of the floating population trend started in the late 1980s.

18 Due to its sensitive production period (the eve of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident), and its spontaneous style in depicting the fresh subject, the film attracted considerable attention first in Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1991, it then achieved international success through the participation of different documentary film festivals throughout the 1990s. This film is widely considered as the landmark of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking because it is produced out of the state-own studio and was distributed among small groups of artists and international film festival rather than in state-own media.
does not appear in any physical gathering, but through the instable living experiences and the related inspiration they share.

*Bumming in Beijing* provides a new understanding of reality in Chinese documentary that makes it so innovative. Starting from Wu Wenguang, the “on-the-spot realism” and unscripted spontaneity has been a main aesthetic approach in many Chinese independent documentaries in the 1990s and 2000s. This was also one of the most immediately striking features of *Bumming in Beijing*, and many independent documentaries have followed this new style. In practice, the spontaneous and unscripted style is a fundamental and defining characteristic distinguishing independent documentaries from the skillfully planned special topic documentaries (*zhuanti pian*). It is frequently accentuated by handheld camera work, instable picture structure, technical lapses and flaws characteristic of uncontrolled walk-in objects and situations. The most obvious example in *Bumming in Beijing* would be the nervous breakdown of the artists which can never be seen in official, scripted documentaries.

In this representation, the instable living condition of bohemian artists does not provide a sense of freedom and happiness outside the state system, but Wu, as an independent documentary filmmaker who worked flexibly outside the government-funded and regulated mass media, created a vivid visual record of these undocumented floating individuals. Although *Bumming in Beijing* is widely considered as the first Chinese independent documentary made totally outside the state-run media system, Wu enjoyed the flexibility of making independent documentary through working for state-run studio. In Beijing he had various project contracts with the China Central Television (CCTV), a time during which he was given access to camera

and recording facilities that allowed him to make independent documentary which focuses on topics that the state television will never be interested in.20

Recording artists and educated young people as the representative of city floaters are very common in many Chinese independent documentaries in the early 1990s. Independent documentaries such as SWYC Group’s Wo biyele or I Graduated (1992) and Jiang Yue’s Bi an or The Paradise (1995), the directors are mostly floaters in Beijing like Wu and continue their dual activity as independent documentarians and contracted artists for CCTV. In terms of the aesthetic approach, Jiang and the SWYC Group deal with similar issues by using similar techniques such as “on-the-spot realism” and unscripted spontaneity. The Paradise, for example, records the young dramas performers gradually losing their enthusiasm and dreams due to their unstable and hopeless lives and all of them left Beijing with disappointments at the end. Besides giving voice to the interviewees to express themselves, this documentary does not simply record a staged play, but rather performs in an innovative mise-en-scène that includes fragments from the original play, scenes from the actors' training and rehearsals, as well as interviews and scenes from the actors' lives offstage. A substantial portion of the play is recorded; dialogues and actions are shown from a multiplicity of angles that Jiang most likely selected from the seven different performances (since he shot the documentary alone with one camera) and combined through an extensive and creative editing job. The result is the eighth performance of the play—a version that was never performed as we see it, but only exists as an art video which records the mental struggles of floaters in their real lives in the post-socialist China.

I would like to suggest that Bumming Beijing and other Chinese independent documentary films used individual style to bring forth a “public secret,” in the sense Michael Taussig

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20 In Wu’s saying: “At that time, I do not know what I was making was documentary film, we only called it film……It was neither a feature nor TV news reels’ ‘good people’s story’, but a film that is about ‘real person and true things’. See Wu Wenguang, “Daixu : Jilu de yu bei jilude” (Preface: the recorder and the recorded), in Wang Weici, Jilu yu tansuo: ya datu jilupian gongzuohe de shijidihua (Record and explore: conversation with Mainland Chinese documentary filmmakers) (Taipei: Yuanliuchubshe, 2000), 13
discussing mimesis and alterity. I argue that the establishment of this “public secret” is not merely to share a hidden truth but to form a community of potential action. Public secret refers to the areas of shared experience that are lodged in the imaginary of a group or society, but which is not openly referred to, described, or acknowledged. It is symbolically invisible but it makes a group of people recognize this secret with share experiences. The key to understand Taussig’s concept of public secret lies among the output of the imaginary and sociological fact, ritual, mimesis, and the pragmatics of physical survival. The potential realization that people are separated from their own truth generated a special sense of floating – alienated from their own true beings. This sense of separation from their own truth serves as a starting point for the formation of a community of the alienated. This will later enable the filmmakers to engage into different social political situations.

In the early 1990s, both the independent documentary and the Sixth Generation feature film directors tend to use the instable lives of floaters as an essential motif to approach the public secret of the Tiananmen Incident. In terms of structure, for example, many early independent documentaries such as Bumming in Beijing, I Graduated!, Xuan lian or Red Beads (1993), directed by He Jianjun and Dongchun de rizi or The Days (1993), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai, foreground the structural absence of Tiananmen Incident via the depiction of the hopeless feeling among educated young people in the early 1990s. Guangchang or The Square (1994), co-directed by the Sixth Generation director Zhang Yuan and documentarian Duan Jinchuan, is a cinéma vérité portrait of the ordinary daily activities and power plays that occur in the Tiananmen Square. The film addresses the taboo silently by demonstrating the seemingly peaceful scene in a once bloody stage. Sprang from the motifs of truth-yearning youth, the independent documentarians extend their concerns to the forgotten lives of the ethnical minority or marginal people (such as artists, homosexual-theme). As these figures are brought to the imagined community of the alienated, they helped connect the Chinese independent filmmaking with the rest of the Chinese floating population.

For detailed analysis, see Taussig Michael, Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)
1.3 “Recording the Floating Social-Cultural Landscapes” from the mid-1990s

Later in the mid-1990s, the public secret shared by many documentary makers has been changed from the Tiananmen Incident to the social instability behind the state campaign of “constructing a harmonious society”. In another word, the public secret is no more a political taboo that cannot be mentioned, but a sense of lost of the cultural identity that is too widespread and complicated to be fully recorded.

The discourses of floating population in state-control mass media silence the articulation of widening gaps among the classes in the post-1989 context. The once prevailing classes discourse—working class, peasants, petty bourgeoisie, and national exploitative bourgeoisie—according to Mao Zedong, become a public taboo after the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. And the same time, busy celebrating the born of new middle class and the state project in shaping the ideal China via special topic documentaries\(^\text{22}\), the media did not pay much attention to the issue of floating population until the late-1990s. On the one hand, China’s uprising power in the world is accompanied with the nostalgia of traditional Chinese culture and countryside in the market\(^\text{23}\). The narration in mass media was mostly embodied in an antithetic expression such as “city versus rural”, “civilization versus ignorance” and tended to depict the rural migrant women workers as braver and victor who overcame urban prejudgments and turned this rigid social contradiction into a classless harmony. On the other hand, in state produced TV series such as *Huangshanlaide gunian* (Girl from Huangshan, 1984) and *Dagongmei* (Women migrant workers, 1991), the rigid internal social contradictions such as the widening gap between social

\(^{22}\) For detailed analysis, see Chu, *Chinese Documentaries* 96-116.

classes, inequity between rural and urban development, are replaced by a national allegory of “Chinese versus foreign capitalism.”

While social stability has become the prior concern of China’s Hu-Wen leadership, as exemplified by the state’s project of “constructing a harmonious society” (hexie shehui)—a socio-economic vision that is said to be the ultimate result of Chinese leader Hu Jintao's signature ideology of the Scientific Development Concept since 2005—massive visual products, such as banners, posters, special topic documentaries, newsreels, TV series started to emerge. At the same time, along with the accessibility of equipment and the participation of amateur independent filmmakers, the topics of independent documentary nowadays are more diversified in the mid-1990s than the late-1980s.

Independent documentaries focus on the instable lives of the floating population blossom after the mid-1990s to the present, with notable examples such as Zhang Zhituo’s Xinjiang Xinjiang (2008) and Ai Xiaoming’s Kaiwang jiaxiang de lieche or The Train to My Hometown (2008), which deal with massive amount of floating population in specify period. Xin Jiang Xin Jiang records the movement of western China’s migrant—over one million temporary migrant workers flocking to Xinjiang province to pick up cotton every August. With refined image and a group of figures, this documentary depicts the living condition of the migrant workers. The Train to My Hometown, however, presents the scene of thousands of migrant workers in Guangdong who were eager to go home before the Spring Festival via trains which were stopped due to the ice-snow disaster in 2008. Rather than depicting one or two floating individuals, all these documentaries focus on the physical movement of massive floating migrants with similar wishes (such as going to work or going home) and as a result provide a sense of grouping when they were facing the difficulties caused by the unsuitable arrangement by the state authority.

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24 See, Dai, Jinhua, Yin xing shu xie : 90 nian dai Zhongguo wen hua yan jiu (Invisible writing: studies of Chinese culture in the 1990s) (Nanjing : Jiangsu ren min chu ban she : Jing xiao Jiangsu Sheng Xin hua shu dian, 1999), 22
Wu Wenguang has a sense of recording the gathering of floaters started in *Bumming Beijing* and throughout the 1990s, but he enlarges the scope of his definition of floaters. In *Sihai weijia* or *At Home in the World* (1995), he interviews the same characters in their new homes around the world while most of them do not end their floating lives after migrating to the overseas. In *1966 Wo de hongweibing shidai* or *My Time in the Red Guards* (1993), Wu records another way of floating in the past by visualizing the turbulent days through interviewing former Red Guards who chose to travel around the state mostly by their own decision or by the force of the trend of that era. Similar to Lu Wangping’s video about traveling rural opera troupe, *Wang Laobai de gushi* (The story of Wang Laobai, 1996) and Jia Zhangke’s feature films *Platform* (2000), Wu’s DV documentary *Jianghu* or *Jiang hu: Life on the Road* (1999) deals with the same issue, in which the filmmaker follows an rural entertainment troupe around the country to find ways that will appeal to the market. Other independent documentaries such as Tang Danhong’s *Yeying bushi weiyi de gehou* (Nightingale, not the only voice, 2000), Wang Yiqun’s *Buanding de shenghuo* or *An Unstable Life* (2003), Weidong’s *Jietou tanfan* (Street peddler, 2003) and Huang Weikai’s *Floating* (Piao, 2005), showcase desperate scenes of travelling artists trying hard to survive in prosperous cities.

The feeling of floating often comes along with China’s rapid urbanization, and the desire to record the floating landscapes which will soon fade away are also reflections of the Chinese independent documentary filmmakers’ uncertainty toward the meaning of harmonious society. The tension that Chu has observed lies between documentaries produced by state-run television stations on the one hand and those produced by semi-independent and independent filmmakers on the other, in terms of the difference in the cinematic representation of urbanization (197). Whereas the former highlights successful reforms and rapid growth by ways of modernization, the latter tend to explore the social changes brought by the new technologies and market economy. For instance, a CCTV documentary series *Gaige kafang 20 nian* (Twenty years of opening and reform, 1999) presents stunning views of Chinese capital cities shot from a helicopter which emphasizes the modern layout of new cities and vast construction sites, with interviews in praise of progress. Many independent documentaries, however, demonstrate the rapid urbanization as a process of making people’s life unstable and insecure. Han Lei’s *Doudong de 20 fengzhong* or *Trembling for Twenty Minutes* (2002), U-thèque’s *San yuan li*
Jia Zhangke’s *Public Sphere* capture the mobility of city life. Wang Bing’s *Tie xi qu* or *West of the Tracks* (2003) details the slow decline of Shenyang’s industrial Tiexi district, an area that was once a vibrant example of China's socialist economy. Similarly, Li Yifan and Yan Yu’s DV documentary *Yanmei or Before the Flood* (2005) and Jia Zhangke’s *Dong* (2006), record in details the process of the first trial flooding in the Three Gorges Dam as waters submerge a city. All these documentaries express a feeling of powerless and directionless when the camera records the fact that the developing harmonious society is sometimes based on the damage of ordinary people and the environment.

The sense of floating in Chinese independent documentary is not only demonstrated in a physical movement but also in a mental instability and uncertainty. The dilemma of many floaters to choose a self-identity between countryside and city is frequently emphasized in many Chinese independent documentary films since the mid-1990s, when the number of rural migrants increased dramatically. Countryside is no more considered home as we can see in independent documentaries such as one of Duan Jinchuan’s trilogy of Tibetan works— *Bakuonanjie shiliuhao* (No.16 Barkhor Street south, 1996), a stunning observational documentary about a neighborhood committee in the heart of Lhasa. Although these second or new generations of peasant workers do work unrelated to farming, their residence cards still read farming under profession due to the *hukou* system. Their growing dilemma is that while they see no future for themselves as farmers in the countryside, they can hardly be considered as one of the legal urban citizens and establish a sense of belongings to the city. Li Hong’s *Huidao fenghuangqiao or Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997), in which the director follows a group of young women workers from the village of Phoenix Bridge in Anhui province to Beijing. As Gina Marchetti indicates, rather than turning struggle into spectacle, *Out of Phoenix Bridge* struggles to visualize the exist of instable, invisible and undocumented women migrants. And the film expresses the women migrants’ confusion about their self-belonging between home and city. In Zhou Hao and Li


Lianghong’s DV documentary *Houjie* (Houjie township, 2002), the directors record a group of migrant workers who suffer in Guangdong but are unwilling to give up this kind of unstable live no matter what, and for them money seems to be the only reliable thing in the world. Documentary films such as Xujun’s *Shanghai Farmer* (2008) depicts the love value among Chinese young migrant workers who eager for long-term love but at the same time cannot afford any real relationship due to the high mobility and insecure living style as urban floaters. Using interviews and intimate footage, these documentaries elicit remarkably candid and complicated testimony from their subjects as they frankly discuss their insecure work, pressures from instable status in the city, and love experiences with men/women in their floating lives. All of these are different to the state-produced documentaries which emphasize happiness and avoid sentimental testimony about the bitterness in the (post)socialist China.

The feeling of the lost of human relationship and cultural tradition due to the marketization is also prevailing among Chinese independent documentaries, especially when marketization has become a main force of people’s migration. Filmed in five different regions of China, Du Haibin’s *Umbrella* (2007) provides a telling look at the vast changes of social status that have taken place in Chinese society. Others such as Jia Zhangke’s *Useless* (2007) depicts the feeling of losing intimate human relationship and cultural tradition—things that make people feel connected in their floating lives due to the cruel process of marketization.

Overall, the spirit of recording in documentary-making is also demonstrated in the new trend of letting the ordinary people to film the contemporary lives in China, where community is inevitably changed by the massive amount of floaters. The documentary *Glacier* (2002), directed by Guo Jing and Tibetan poet Zhaxi Nima, is the result of a ‘Participatory Video Education Project’ funded by the Ford Foundation. Part of the project was to provide Tibetan villagers with digital cameras to record their traditions and changes occurring in their community, as a medium to heighten villagers and school children’s awareness of their cultural and community in China’s rapid internal migration, urbanization and marketization. Another similar project, “The China Village Documentary Project” was launched in Beijing in September 2005, which opens a visual channel from the villages by putting video and still cameras in the hands of villagers across the
nation. Headed by Wu Wenguang, the project is part of the public communication activities of the EU—China Training Programme on Village Governance to raise a sense of community where most of the young villagers leave and go to cities as migrant workers and leave the village with emptiness.  

In sum of Chapter 1, the Chinese independent documentary films in the late 1980s and 1990s mark a sharp deviation from the mainstream documentary mode and special topic documentaries, and further lead to the blossom of independent documentary filmmaking since the mid 1990s to the present. Although recording the (relatively real) history has been a main characteristic and nature of documentary starting from the beginning and is prevailing in many countries, the difference between the spirit of getting real and recording is coming out of the different social-political background in post-socialist China. The significance of the spirit of recording China in independent documentary after the mid-1990s will be further discussed in two parts in the next chapter.

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27 The project consists of two parts: villagers’ documentary films (10 selected villagers) and villagers’ documentary photos (100 selected villagers). The ten successful candidates were chosen from villagers from across the nation who answered a call for proposals and each of them was awarded a video camera, a tripod and ten blank video tapes. The 100 villager photographers were chosen both from among applicants and through snowball sampling in 18 different provinces. The number of the photos returned to the project totals 6,000. By April 2006, the ten villagers’ documentary films and *Seen and Heard* (a documentary of the project itself) have toured four American universities (New York University, Yale, Columbia and Notre Dame) and have been shown in Beijing on various occasions such as documentary workshop, international conference on village governance which is supported by Chinese government officials, Chinese and overseas researchers on local governance, as well as general public screenings.

28 Although the spirit of “recording” the fast changing China in many independent documentary films after the mid-1990s address the downside of the state progress, it can also be seen in their sensitivity to document special, spontaneous social events compared to the early independent documentary films. The most recent and noticeable example is the record of “May 12th Sichuan earthquake” happened in 2008. With fast production process, numerous independent documentaries have been produced, such as Du Haibin’s *1428* (2009), Zhang Wenqing’s *Jiayuan or We Are The Family* (2008), Fan Ling’s *Zaiquriji* (Dairy in the earthquake, 2009), Wu Xianglie’s *Sheng ming zai zhen han zhong yan xu* or *Living Beyond Disaster* (2008), Zhou Houheng’s *Dongqu chunlai* or *From Winter to Spring* (2009). *1428* records the victims’ way of survivals after the Sichuan Earthquake happened in 2008. Behind the highly-mediated official visits, the vagabond and family are detailing grievances about the ill-handling of rebuilding schemes and relief funds. Depressing scenes and interviewer’s complaint about the CCP do not have a chance to be seen on official television, but *1428* has post a challenge to the state reported “truth” and “love” by showing these landscapes in the Venice International Film Festival in 2009, and have raised international concerns about China’s human rights. Most of them have crucial social influence with the cooperation with NGO via hosting related film festival to remember the victims and helping to maintain the social cohesion; at the same time, it questions the responsibility of the disaster and the reconstruction works of the government, which demonstrate a much bigger desire in social participation than independent documentaries in the early 1990s.
Chapter 2
Flexibility: Blossoming of Independent Documentary Filmmaking in State Media Censorship

By pointing out the spirit of recording in Chinese independent documentaries since the mid-1990s, I suggest that the significance of Chinese independent documentary films can be understood in two aspects: Firstly, the appearance of recording (China) rather than getting real (of public secrets) has created a more flexible status for Chinese independent documentaries to survive in the state censorship. Secondly, by recording and screening the instable living experiences of the floating population and the fast-changing social-cultural landscapes, the motif of floating in Chinese independent documentaries is strengthening the media discourse of floating generation in the burgeoning public media sphere. All of these will ultimately influence the project of “constructing the harmonious society” promoted by the CCP, as well as the future development of Chinese independent documentary films.

Being widely considered as the first Chinese documentary to move away from the illustrated lecture format and toward spontaneous filming style that was made outside the state-run media censorship, Wu Wenguang’s Bumming in Beijing gave birth to a new film genre in the PRC. Chinese independent documentary films, like many Six Generation feature films, have gone through a process of “from underground to independent”\(^{29}\), and gradually adopted a more flexible strategy to deal with the limitation and difficulty caused by the state control of production, censorship, and broadcasting; particularly when they deal with social issues brought by floating population, urbanization and marketization.

2.1. Independent Documentary Filmmaking and Media Reform

In comparison to their film colleagues, Chinese independent documentary makers enjoy a relative free and legal condition. I specify the term “flexibility” here in three aspects: production, censorship and broadcasting.

\(^{29}\) See Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds. From Underground To Independent: Alternative Film Culture In Contemporary China (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006)
Firstly, in terms of production, independent documentary filmmakers after the mid-1990s enjoy more flexibility due to the accessibility of easy control equipments, and the increasing opportunities for local and international cooperation than the late-1980s. Before the arrival of the digital era, Chinese independent filmmakers mostly produced their documentaries through *guanxi* (personal relationship)—secretly borrowed state-own equipments from friends or by taking jobs for commercial advertisements or state television station to redeem the rental fee. The reasons of the dilemma of independence filmmaking were, as Wu Wenguang points out in his case, “making documentaries” was an “individual motivations” rather than “conforming to the dictates of television or distribution networks,” but the filming and production techniques he was using were the usual one that required money to rent the big, professional camera equipment. However, the accessibility of new filming technology—the relatively affordable, user-friendly, fast spreading use of digital video (DV) after the mid-1990s—has leaded to the blossom of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking as a casual and individual activity, and encouraged a new variety of ways of looking into China’s society. As scholar Yiman Wang points out, DV makes possible amateur filmmaking, which mainly operates outside the incumbent industry and official system and “has encouraged collective attention to the detailed modes of life experienced by marginalized social groups.” The purpose is “to make visible frequently occluded social arenas, thereby teasing out neglected but important social issues, rather than reductively incorporating them into an a priori master narrative.”(Yiman Wang 23). In other words, amateur DV documentary-making implies a new way to debunk institutionalized filmmaking (ibid). As for the funding support for production, the flexible cooperations among independent documentary film, state-own television and transborder investments are increasing, particularly after the China’s Media Reform in 1993 and China’s enter the WTO in 2001.

30 See, for example, Wu Wenguang, “DV: Individual Filmmaking” 136
31 The most recent innovation has been the advent of mobile phone video technology since 2005, marked in China by Chen Liaoyu, a student at the Beijing Film Academy who uploaded his mobile phone films, such as *Pingguo* or *Apple* (2005) on to his webpage.
33 Along with the emergence of independent documentaries in the early 1990s, official documentaries are also seeking changes in their ways of production and the establishment of self-sufficient enterprises able to compete with
CCTV’s *Dongfang shikong* (Oriental horizon) and Shanghai TV’s *Jilu pian bianji shi* (Editorial room for documentary film) were two pioneer documentary television programs started in 1993. The two programs adopted a producer responsibility system, permitting program producers to recruit their own crew and outsource projects to freelance filmmakers\(^3^4\), which gives spaces for independent documentaries to be seen by the public.\(^3^5\) Furthermore, the increasing transborder investments and cooperation also help enhancing the flexible status of Chinese independent documentaries. Many private companies or transborder NGO (such as CNEX) started to become interested in issues such as floating population and urbanization\(^3^6\), as they consider independent documentary a relatively low investment but effective way to conduct social practices or express their social concern. In fact, many state-run televisions have shown increasing interests about documentaries related to floating population since it is a hot social issue and also a topic full of personal stories. With the assistance of foreign professionals, funding and even channels for broadcasting, the Chinese independent documentary filmmaking enjoys a much more flexible

Hollywood and other Western media industries in the domestic market. The markatization impact, including the policy towards commercialization, the growth of advertising industry, and the steadily expanding participating of consumers, has forced the government to conduct Media Reform in 1993. The Media Reform includes the abolishment of central-control in film distribution by the News Documentary Film Studio, as well as the permission to all films studios to seek their own distribution mechanisms based on the market competition. See Chu, *Chinese Documentaries* 95-97

\(^3^4\) According to media scholar Wu Bingxin, in 2004 the CCTV made only one third of their screened programs themselves, provincial stations made one out of six, and city stations are one out of nine of their program. See Wu Bingxin, *Xinxing guizhu: Zhongguo dianshi* (New middle class: Chinese television) (Jinan: Shandong Art Project, 2004), 67

\(^3^5\) *Dongfang shikong* contracted a number of independent documentary filmmakers for its production such as Jiang Yue, Duan Jinchuan, Li Hong and Shi Jian; while *Jilu pian bianji shi* is regarded as “China’s first documentary program independently run by filmmakers themselves”. See Shuliu He, *Zhongguo dianshi jilu pian shi lun* (History of television documentary in China) (Beijing: China Media University Press, 2005). Although the programs were constrained in many aspects such as the control of sensitive topics and length, there are increasing opportunities for independent documentaries to cooperate with the state media much earlier than the Sixth Generation independent feature filmmakers.

\(^3^6\) For example, CNEX, the short name for “Chinese Next,” a non-profit organization that aims to promote Chinese documentaries by funding 100 documentary films in ten years on different annual themes related contemporary social issues (such as money, dream and home etc.). Funded out of Taiwanese intellectuals, with its main offices and working team in Beijing, and with legal registration in Hong Kong, CNEX demonstrates many flexible strategies toward state media censorship. Overall, CNEX has been creating opportunities for transborder cooperation among professionals from these three areas and achieved worldwide success by participating in international film festival, hosting film festival in these three areas, and cooperating with other local or international NGO to promote their documentaries.
status and freedom to handle the topic of social instability than the early 1990s when most of the sources were dominated by the state.\textsuperscript{37}

Secondly, in terms of the censorship regulation, independent documentary filmmaking enjoys more flexibility than the film industry. The film industry's high profit and ideological importance assured that it was the subject of both commercial investment and state control. Within the state-run film system, various proactive and reactive local and national censorship regulations have been in place at different times, insisting on script approval prior to production as well as approval of completed films prior to release. Throughout the 1990s, the government has actively intervened to close any loopholes enabling filmmakers to avoid scrutiny—loopholes such as investment from overseas, editing overseas, sending films to film festivals prior to submitting them for approval for release, and so forth. Finally, in July 1996 the government passed a new film law that explicitly made illegal any film production other than that done within the state-owned studio system. Within the state-run television system, however, the situation of documentary production is significantly different. The regulation focuses on what television stations air, not on what they have produced, since it is relatively hard to control what the filmed object will say in the interviews and it is difficult to require a script before they film. Although many new documentaries have not been aired, so far there have seldom regulatory or legal interventions against the makers of these independent documentaries.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} Chris Berry has offered a very detailed analysis of the “transborder Chinese cinema”. Taking CNEX as an example, Chris Berry argues: “This zone of intense connection between China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong is the one of the manifestations of Chinese transnational cinema today. The so-called barriers to free trade have been lowered in the neo-liberal and post-Fordist environment. However, the result in the cinema has not been a free and even flow of Chinese cinema culture and trade around a now supposedly ‘smooth’ globe. Nor has it been a simple and straightforward reassertion of cultural Chineseness. Rather, a more complex situation has arisen. On the one hand, a variety of factors including perceived cultural proximity are propelling connections and cooperation amongst Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwan filmmakers. As CNEX exemplifies, this even extends to the supposedly very local mode of documentary. On the other hand, the border continues to be very much present, as different filmmaking and business practices, habits and assumptions encounter each other in this zone of Chinese cultural connection.” See Chris berry, “The CNEX Project and Transborder Chinese Documentary Cinema”(paper presented at the Hong Kong Documentary Film: the Regional Context and Theoretical Perspectives Conference, May 25 – 27, 2009)

\textsuperscript{38} One notable state intervention happened in the 1994. Encouraged by the international successful experiences of Wu Wenguang, independent documentary filmmakers started frequently participated in overseas film festivals and established connection with international NGOs. Their independent move challenged the state censorship and finally leaded to the first official announced “black list”— including the seven directors of Blue Kite, Beijing Bastards, Bumming in Beijing, I Graduated, Ning Dai’s Ting Ji (Shooting finished, 1994), The Days, and Red Beads—by the Chinese Ministry of Broadcasting, Film, and Television in 1994 (a year after the Media Reform in 1993). For further details, see Dai Jinhua, Yin xing shu xie, 92.
Thirdly, in terms of broadcasting, the gradually opening markets and screening channels provide independent documentaries more opportunities to connect with the public and even extend the independent documentaries from underground to reach audience around the world. The confrontation of neoliberal discourse and “socialist market economy” in the 1990s not only resulted in a request of personal freedom in documentary and film making, but also echoed with the thirst for a free market for distribution and selling. The flexibility between Chinese independent documentaries and the official media demonstrates in the concept of, in Dai Jinhua’s term, “shared sphere” where there is no clear division of “official versus unofficial” in the Chinese post-socialist context. On the one hand, in the post-cold war China, independent documentaries won their fame and response in Western world in related to their political meaning. On the other hand, independent documentaries, with their artistic improvement, have gradually got into the loosening state media. Representatives works such as Ju Anqi’s *Beijing de feng hen da* (There’s a strong wind in Beijing, 1999), Yang Tianyi’s *Laotou* (Old Men, 2000), Du Haibin’s *Tie lu yan xian* (Along the railway, 2001) have gone into public sight via different channels (including state control media such as CCTV). Eager to improve the appearance of its propaganda and to survive under the market pressure, state-own televisions conduct more cooperation with independent documentary filmmakers, such as popular CCTV documentary series *Wo de min gong xiong di* (My migrant worker brothers, 2008) and *Jie mei* (Sisters, 2004), directed by independent documentary filmmaker Li Jinghong. These documentaries offer a more humanized insight and concerns to the difficult living of migrant workers, but still fail to generate any critical thinking of the origins of the social instability. Later in the 2000s, different kinds of Chinese official institutions participated in organizing film festival and international conference of independent documentary films also. All of these increasing screening

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39. Dai Jinhua, *Yin xing shu xie*, 230
40. Currently most television stations have a program dedicated to independent DV films. From the late 1990s, there have been specialized DV program screened by Phoenix, the CCTV, the CETV and provincial stations.
41. Such as the influential Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival, The Chinese Independent film Festival, Chinese Documentary Film Festival, Beijing Independent Film Festival and Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival.
opportunities to showcase the floating scenes help raising people’s concerns about the social instability.

Besides its special connection with the state media system, Chinese independent documentary has also entered the public sight with the cooperation with private company and NGOs. Various weekend exhibitions and private or public salons start to prosper. Many of these events are organized by non-government organizations associated with universities, newspapers, website, and popular magazines. Art NGOs, such as CNEX and Li Xianting’s Film Fund; art gallery such as Iberia Center for Contemporary Art (ICCA) and Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA); bookstore or cafes such as One way Street and Box Café; documentary channel such as Channel Zero and Documentary Channel, also accelerate the development of independent documentary filmmaking, as well as enlarge the connection scope and social effect of its critical discourses.

Among all the channels, internet will probably be the most promising and powerful medium for independent documentary films to connect with the public in the future. Many scholars, such as McCormick and Liu, believe that “the introduction of new technologies has transformed the Chinese public sphere in ways that make a more open and reasonable debate more likely.”

42 Such as Zhang Yuan’s Fang kuang ying yu or Crazy English (1999), is supported by an English education company; Jia Zhangke’s Useless and semi-documentary 24 City (2008) are supported by different Chinese companies.

43 Here are a few examples. In August 2003, the biggest independent DV exhibition took place in Zhuijiang, billed as ‘Independence Day: Screen Exhibition’; in 2004 ‘Contemporary Chinese Independent Screen Exhibition’ (Chongqing); and in 2005, the ‘Multicultural Visual Festival’ in Yunnan featured many independent documentaries. Beijing Independent Film Festival has already held for three years since 2006. The most representative one is “The First Independent Film Exhibition” at BFA in 2001 that organized by Beijing Shijian She and Southern Weekend, featuring more than 50 independent documentaries to the public.

44 A trend of watching independent documentary in the cinema is gradually emerging in Shanghai in recent years. Moreover, (pirated) DVD market also provides new opportunities for Chinese independent films to distribute.

Since the early 1990s, internet use in the PRC has grown at a tremendous pace. There are increasing on-line platforms in China for purchasing, screening and discussing Chinese independent documentary films, such as Fanhallfilms, 107Cine and Liangyou. And it is not hard to expect that the CCP will increase the control of cyberspace information, physical data pipelines, and network revenue. As a result, the censorship on the internet will post significant challenges to Chinese independent documentaries in the next few decades.

By showing the flexible status and the market pressure of Chinese independent documentaries since the 1990s, it is necessary to rethink the meaning of “independence” of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking. Marketization and globalization, as Chris Berry suggests, have both complicated the picture of the dominant system for Chinese filmmakers, creating a “triumvirate of larger forces for them to negotiate: the state, corporations, and foreign sources of funding and exhibition opportunities.” Chuck Kleinhans’s understanding of American independent film—indeed has to be understood as a relation to the dominant system rather than taken as indicating a practice that is totally free-standing and autonomous—is becoming more relevant to understanding the Chinese context. In China’s case, the dominant system is the state system as we can see in the early careers of established Chinese independents.

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46 The 24th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China published by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on July 16 2009 shows that by June 30th, 2009, China had remained as the world’s largest online population (320 million) compared to by 210 million in 2007, although internet penetration is still fairly low (22.6%) even if it exceeds the world’s average by almost one percent. With the popularization rate of the internet raised stability after long-term fast growth, CNNIC’s Report shows that the proportion of Chinese internet users accessing the internet for entertainment, information and networking purposes was high. See, China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), “The 24th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China”, http://www.cnnic.net.cn/

47 Some of the official banned independent documentaries can be purchased or downloaded on these websites.


such as Duan Jinchuan and Li Hong. However, none of them participated in any anarchistic social movement or announced that their works are a call for a larger social rebellion.

Furthermore, for example, when internet became a possible way for Chinese independent documentary to function more independently as they do not have to rely on state dominant television channel, the CCP does not under-estimate the power of internet as well.\(^{51}\) The state censorship of internet media such as the ban of Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Wikipedia and the enforcement of the “Green Dam Internet filter”\(^{52}\) also affects the development of a true “public media sphere”, particularly when these internet recourses deal with similar social issues as what Chinese independent documentaries do.

When Kleinhans comments that this relational approach to independence is contrary to the usual understanding of it as “autonomous” and “free-standing”, he implies that in defining oneself against something, one is also simultaneously caught up with it and shaped by it, even if only in a resistant sense. Chris Berry argues that, in terms of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking, the word “independence” is also “in dependence” (Chris Berry (b) 110). Extending this insight, a Foucauldian approach to power as productive enables us to see how contemporary practices of independent Chinese filmmaking are not achieved solely in a negative mode—freedom from something else—but also in a positive mode as enables and shaped by the changing power dynamics operating in the PRC (Ibid.).

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\(^{51}\) For example, relief news after the earthquake on May 12th, 2008, in Sichuan Province, people.com, xinhuanet.com, chinanews.com and cctv.com had released about 123,000 pieces of news on the earthquake relief (including pictures, texts, audios and videos) by May 23, 2008, and played a leading role in news releasing; sina.com, sohu.com, NetEase and Tencent jointly released 133,000 pieces of news. The above eight websites received 11.6 billion hits on news with up to 10.63 million follow-up replies. The Internet played an important role in news releasing about earthquake relief, helping people find their missing kin, delivering aids and soliciting donations. The development of China’s Internet media has come to a new stage. See China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), “The Timeline of the Internet 2008”, http://www.cnnic.net.cn/

\(^{52}\) The government said web filtering software was necessary to prevent children from viewing pornography and other harmful content, but is believed to be political censorship software as well.
In sum, the so-called binary of “floating versus stable”, “fact versus fake”, “marginal versus mainstream”, “people versus official”, and “control versus rebel” is much more complicated in China’s post-socialist context, particularly with the emergence of the fast-growing public media sphere. I will detail the discussion with the concept of imagined community in the following part.

2.2. Floating Generation and Public Media Sphere

I have demonstrated the instable status of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking and its flexible strategies towards difficulties and opportunities in production, state media censorship, and broadcasting through various public media such as internet, DVD, cinema and film festivals. I argue that Chinese independent documentaries are intensifying the new concept of imagined community (i.e. floating generation) on the one hand; while the seizing of the control of the instable, burgeoning public media spheres also complicated the relationship between Chinese independent documentaries and the CCP in dealing with the issues of floating generation and harmonious society discourse.

Benedict Anderson, in his influential work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, argues that a modern nation-state arises as a result of the imagining mechanisms of print culture, such as the novel and the newspaper. Although Anderson’s insight on the mystery of modern nationalism has won general acclaim, his privileging of print culture in the creation of the modern nation state needs to be reexamined. In particular, Anderson overlooks the role of visual media culture in the shaping and imagining of a modern nation-state. Various critics have argued that electronic media such as television, film, broadcasting and the interactive internet have played a crucial role in the imagining and construction of national identity in an age of post-Fordism, globalization and even post-socialism.53

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The reference to Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” is that CCP always has a high consciousness toward the power of visual media. As I have mentioned above, the issue of what can and what cannot be made available for public viewing is consistently illustrated by documentary cinema during the Mao period: the firm belief influenced by the Soviet Union that cinema as a public space in which specific educational and ideological values are to be instilled in the film viewer, while policy makers could be safely trusted with documented facts. While the state-produced documentary and special topic documentaries concentrated on shaping the “national imagination”— typically composed of ethnographic documentary such as ethnic minorities, and a few Chinese documentary series organized around a grand theme, such as the Great Wall, the Yellow River, Silk Road, Grand Canal or the Economic Reform. After the CCP’s campaign of “constructing a harmonious society” announced in 2005, the official documentaries stress more on the economic achievements, such as the Beijing Olympic Games, Three Gorges Dam and other urbanization projects.

The Chinese independent documentary film since the early 1990s, on the contrary, pays attention to the poor, the marginal and ordinary people and their often trivial lives, particularly to floating population by showcasing more critics to the hidden social problems. There is a shift towards independent and semi-independent films, with the emergence of individual styles, a realistic, bottom-up rather than top-down description of Chinese society, which can be understood as the opposite to special topic documentary and its grand themes. Chu argues that the uprising independent, semi-independent and the transformation of official documentary, has lead the Chinese documentary from a phase of monological, dogmatic style to a polyphonic diversity in terms of subject matter, presentational mode, and speaking position in today’s media market (212). Moreover, the diversification in subject matter and the multiple channels to broadcast mean that the independent documentary is no longer a limited resource to well-educated audience. As a result, the imagined community here refers to a group of Chinese who are not grouped by the blood or traditional culture, but people who share the floating experiences in China or being influenced by the floating generation discourse in mass media.
Many scholars have suggested a possible emergence of public media sphere in terms of the reform of media system and the emergence of independent documentaries or documentaries related to social problems. The occasional demonstration of social dark or expression of views different from official policy constitutes a tendency towards democratization to certain extent. However, a real democratization in “public media sphere” requires the evolution of public opinion out of private opinion by way of rational debate open to the general public and free from domination. This is the route Jürgen Habermas’s argument on the bourgeois public sphere takes from its beginnings in Kant. Chu argues that public media sphere is a space that “has opened up between political ideology and commercial interest”, as well as “a space that is being negotiated by the media in a special way” (212). As a result, Chinese documentary and its related media changes is actually “a televisual rehearsal of democracy by means other than the obviously political” (Ibid). In this general sense, then, the notion of “public media sphere” seems to me useful for a description of different spheres (such as internet, DVD, Film festivals) where the power of the state, Chinese citizen and independent documentary filmmakers are mutually interacting and affecting each other.

It would be too hasty to suggest that independent documentary filmmaking and its related social network have shaped a “public media sphere” that is already influential enough to generate a democratic civil society without concerted, field-works’ statistics at this moment. However, based on the analysis I have mentioned so far, I would argue that the floating, instable but also flexible relationship between Chinese independent documentary and the state authority has undoubtedly begun to cause a shift of the meaning of “independence” in post-socialist China. Moreover, by strengthening the sense of floating generation, Chinese independent documentary has posted a great challenge to state promoted vision of “imaging community”—a harmonious society that consists of 56 ethnic groups under the leading of CCP.

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Chapter 3
Deconstructing the Harmonious Society: a Case Study of Jia Zhangke’s Documentary Films

As I have tried to demonstrate in the first two parts of this study, the concept of floating indicates China’s instable social landscapes and the flexible strategy of Chinese independent documentaries. The analysis of Jia Zhangke’s films here hopefully serves as a further demonstration of the concept of floating.

As one of the most influential independent feature and documentary filmmakers in contemporary China, Jia Zhangke was born in an ordinary family in Shanxi province in 1970. After graduated from BFA in 1996, he started working as an independent filmmaker. From a little town to Beijing without Beijing hukou, Jia Zhangke always feels like an outsider and a floater, a feeling shared by many Sixth Generation and independent documentary filmmakers. Jia once said in an interview about his feature film Unknown Pleasure (2002): "I think in the process of urbanization, especially after the success of Beijing's bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, a number of outsiders, myself included, all rushed into the big cities. I came to Beijing from Fenyang, a little town in Shanxi province, in 1993. We call ourselves the ‘floating generation’. Unknown Pleasure tells the problems, stress, confusion, distress and hope of the youngsters, the generation of floaters in the process of accelerated economic changes." Later in another feature film The World (2004), he even puts the advertisement line as “We are all members of the floating generation. We float in the world” on the poster. In fact, Jia has a tendency to intertwine this feeling into all his works. The World, in particular, with its portrayal of gaudy theme park filled with recreations of foreign landmarks is often noted for its critique of the alienation of the floating generation in a globalization era. For him, the term “floating generation” not only refers to the filmed objects, but also points to the instable condition of many Sixth Generation filmmakers and himself within the state censorship.

56 See Jia Zhangke, Jia xiang: 1996-2008 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008)
Jia’s crossover cinematic attempt illustrating a new and flexible strategy between independent feature films and independent documentaries is probably the best example of the flexibility of Chinese independent documentary. The innovation of Jia Zhangke is to combine documentary and feature filmmaking, in terms of the production concept, structure and marketing. Most of his documentaries have become an inspiration and sub-product to his feature films. His documentary films are sold together in the related feature film DVD package. Therefore his documentaries have reached a larger amount of audience through the DVD market. In terms of aesthetic style, Jia echoes the recording spirit with many Chinese independent documentaries after the mid-1990s and becomes a new hallmark of Chinese “on-the-spot realism”. On the one hand, the realistic approach is his personal aesthetic preference affected by the French director Robert Bresson’s sympathetic but unsentimental view on its victims, and by Italian director Vittorio De Sica’s neorealist style. On the other hand, for him, recording the fast changing social landscape is also a reclaim of realism from the official propagandas, as well as a rejection to the Fifth generation’s increasing tendency to move away from the reality of modern China and into the realm of historical legend, such as the orientalized “old China” in the Fifth Generation’s film in the 1990s, and the export-friendly and lushly-colored “wuxia China” in martial art films.

Self-defined as a member of the floating generation, Jia’s wide-spread works help visualizing this imagined community with his realistic approach to record their floating lives and uncertain dreams in the cities. Jia’s works shared similar motif (i.e. ordinary people float in fast-changing,

58 For example, Zhang Yuan, a notable filmmaker of the Six Generation, has shown a strong interest in documentary since his first feature Mama (1990), a film about a mother of a disabled child, which includes documentary sequences of interviews with real-life mothers of disabled children. Being official banned in 1994 due to his feature film Beijing Bastard, Zhang participates in documentary filmmaking, such as documentary films Ding zi hu (1998), Crazy English (1999), Shi waxinge zhongguoxing (Arnold Schwarzenegger in China, 2000), and Shouyang (Adoption, 2001), in cooperation with private company and NGOs.


60 Such as Chen Kaige’s Ba wang bie ji (Farewell my concubine, 1993) and Zhang Yimou’s Da hong deng long gao gao hua (Raise the red lantern 1991)
urbanizating and marketizing China, with other Sixth Generation independent filmmakers or documentary filmmakers. However, the concept of floating is relatively complicated in Jia’s works. Although the characters or filmed objects are always in an unstable situation such as being a migrant worker, they are never free to mobilize or to stay due to the state policy or the rapid urbanization and marketization. They are either as part of the floating population in Beijing (The World), Guangdong (Useless), Three Gorges (Dong, Still life), or laid-off state-owned company workers (24 City), or performers moving in China (Platform), or as hopeless youth or ordinary people drafting in the streets of the small towns without directions (Xiao Wu, Public Sphere, Unknown Pleasures). In another words, floating is not a personal, free living style but a consequence of state violence. For example, people in his feature film The World enjoy a fake mobility as they can travel around the world (a theme park) without the concern of money, hukou and passport. 24 City depicts changes of a state-owned military factory where the workers are separated with the outside world and cannot control their destination and future.

In Public is submitted as a short film to the 2001 Korean Jeonju International Film Festival, presenting the public visibility of the floating life. This is also the first time when a more mobilized medium, i.e. digital video, is used to capture mobile scene in several public places in Datong. In Public, as Kevin Lee describes, seems fitfully situated between Platform and Unknown Pleasures, “utilizing the patient long takes of the former to lend a calm melancholy to the same post-industrial wasteland digitally rendered in the latter”. I argue that it is in this post-industrial and actually post-socialist setting that floating become a visual language, a filming style of following the flow or showing the flow: the flow of time, the flow of people, the flow of actions and unarranged life itself. To elaborate this point, let me discuss this film in more details below.

61 The other two directors who produced entries that year were Taiwanesefilmmaker Tsai Ming-liang and British director John Akomfrah.

Without any liner plot or continued time and space (even Datong is unrecognizable), the film instead is content to capture seemingly mundane moments happened in public space: a man waits in a train station for his family, and the train arrives; or an older man has difficulty doing up the zip on his jacket, but manages to do it. A woman waits for a man and leave together; people in the bus are curiously looking into the camera, while the camera focuses on a boy who suffers from his toothache. People are eating in a “mobile” restaurant transformed from a bus; people dancing, playing billiard, and waiting for long-distanced bus in a multi-functional station, while the camera focuses on a disable man in a wheelchair who looks like a retired soldier. They are all strangers without names or story to the viewer and the public. They are mostly silent, or the spontaneous discussion is only visually recorded. While the film, being as intent on examining places as it is on examining people, can be described as a location scouting video for *Unknown Pleasures*, the human moments that occur onscreen retain a startling mystery.

The sense of floating in *In Public* is not only about floating people but time and space. As Chris Berry points out, Jia Zhangke’s works and Wu Wenguang’s documentaries seem to dwelling on time passing in a seemingly uncontrolled manner (Chris Berry (a) 123). Referring to Deleuze’s idea on the “movement-image”, in which frame follows frame casually according to the necessities of action, and the “time-image”, which free time from causality; Chris Berry argues that some of the Chinese independent documentaries and Sixth Generation features also break away from the logic of the “movement-image” toward a distended form in which shots continue beyond any movement logic either in the literal sense or in the sense of narrative development (Ibid). The movement in *In Public* has actually become a sense of pure circulation of speed. However, the speed is very slow and sometimes stagnated; at some point the movement itself seems to lose meaning. Unlike other films emphasizing on the fast pace of city via fast motion and long-shoot of the flow of commuters, Jia uses close-up and long take to capture their relatively static motion and their facial reaction toward the existing of the camera to transmit the uncertainty in the aura of these places (e.g. bus, station). In a moment of history where change is

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so speeded up that everything is transforming and disappearing, people in *In Public* look incredibly lonely and directionless. Trains and bus are passing by, people drop in and drop off, no signs or name or direction are given by either the public space itself or the people inhibited in the scenes. Everything is seemingly flowing so slowly and so without direction or routine in comparison to the state planned of fast urbanization and marketization. People in the scene, even they are pacing up and down in the station or dancing in the disco, look so static as if they are left behind by the pace of the era.

The feeling of floating in *In Public* is much stronger when space is immeasurable and indefinable, which leads to a further indefinable meaning of human activities in different (or shared) spaces. Starting from the night in a station, the camera then moves to a bus stop in dusk, where we see the sunlight was going and the sky turned dark. All of a sudden the camera gets into a crowded bus during a sunny daytime for a long while until the bus reached a stop. With an offscreen sound of the opening of a bus door, the scene switches into a bus-transformed, mobile restaurant in the night. Time and space changed, but the motion was continued when the owner of the restaurant closed the bus door. Finally, the concept of time was blurred in the last scene, in which a multi-function long-distance bus station seemingly divided into two times and two spaces, simultaneously—a bus ticket selling hall with billiard table in the daytime on the one side of the curtain; and a dark night-like disco with couples doing western social dancing with Chinese music and dizzy disco lights, on the other side. Through the in and out movement of the camera, the assembling of spaces became possible—a map that shows the ambiguity of territories of private and public, interior and exterior, entertainment and public service, a very illegal but also very common scene in the urbanizing China.

The transformation of spaces finally leads to a question of the meaning of “public sphere”, which I argue as an inseparable part to understand Jia’s interpretation of the concept of floating. The public space in Jia’s *In Public* does not specifically refer to Habermas’s concept of “public sphere”, but it captures the floating meanings and overlapping functions of public and private spheres in post-socialist China. Habermas points out three so-called “institutional criteria” as preconditions for the emergence of the new public sphere, such as Britain’s coffee houses,
France’s salons and Germany’s Tischgesellschaften where "they all organized discussion among people that tended to be ongoing; hence they had a number of institutional criteria in common" (36). However, Jia seems to prefer to shoot “public sphere” rather than private places. Scenes such as streets full of noise and people, bus stops or train stations, restaurants, theme park, dormitory, disco, KTV room, out-door stages are common in all of his feature and documentary films, particularly in the case of *In Public*.

More importantly, for Jia, the world of the floating generation is a world of *jiang hu*. The theme of *jiang hu* is a sense that exists in most of Jia’s feature and documentaries, so as in other independent documentaries. For example, Jia’s second feature, *Platform*, deals with the similar topic such as Wu Wenguang’s documentary *Jiang Hu*. In Jia’s film notes *Jia xiang: 1996-2008*, he uses the term *jiang hu* (literally means rivers and lakes) several times to describe his understanding of contemporary Chinese society. *Jianghu* is an alternative imagined world in many modern Chinese films and literature referring to a non-bourgeois public formed with its own rules and agents beyond and between the state and society. *Jianghu zhongren* (or *pao jianghu*), literally “river and lake runners,” refers to complicated, instable group of performers, such as people who told fortunes, performed magic and acrobatic stunts, or sold Chinese medicine all around the country in order to survive in the ancient China; while it indicates more about migrants and gangsters in the present. Although the meaning of *jiang hu* is changing from time to time, it always has an indirect connection with migrant lower-class people who has no fixed status in the cities. It is often used as a term referring to a society that is full of instability, dangers, floating strangers, and short term human relationship. In *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870-1930* (2003), Di Wang suggests that small anonymous peddlers and lower-class shopkeepers as well as migrant laborers and wondering artisans – formed the public space of street culture in Chengdu. In *In Public*, people meet and pass-by in different meeting points such as bus stop, mobile restaurant, and dance hall. This sense of *jiang hu*, I would argue, is probably the key to understand all of Jia’s works, such as the instability in *Dong* and *Useless*. 
Jia’s concentration on floating individual in the floating social-cultural landscape is inseparable with his aesthetic preference of realism. The “on-the-spot realism” in the early Chinese independent documentaries, including the appeal of cinéma vérité and other spontaneous documentary techniques can be understood as to reclaim the authority of realism from the increasingly devalued special topic documentaries and the influence of report literature (baogao wenxue) as I have mentioned above. More importantly, the floating social landscapes of China, along with Jia’s documentary and realistic style, echoes with other Chinese independent documentary filmmakers as a reclaim of realism from the empty illusion of the state’s propaganda of “harmonious society”.

The tendency of Jia to record the floating generation and China’s floating landscapes is related to his understanding of the nature of documentary—to record rather than to get real. Starting from Jia’s first feature film Xiao Wu, he is well-known for his consisting focus on the realism by the use of dialect, non-professional actors, real scene, on-time record, and long shot in most of his feature films. At the same time, Jia also pays attention to spontaneous things happened around him when he is filming. Jia’s understanding of realism is relatively different when he is making a documentary. He once mentions in his book: “The so-called ‘reality’ produced by the on-the-spot realistic technique is very likely to cover the reality under the real-life order……For me, all the ways of the ‘on-the-spot realism’ is to depict the spiritual real world of my personal experience. We can never approach reality per se, and the meaning of film is not to reach the level of reality either.”64 With this sense of recording the personal experience and collective memory of a generation in mind, the unscripted spontaneous technique in Jia’s documentary is strongly emphasized in In Public and Dong, while Useless is relatively structured in time orders rather than the logic of movement.

Jia himself is an advocator to the trend of recording China. In Public is an observational documentary, which has no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects

64 See Jia Zhangke, Jia xiang 99-100
(except the on-the-spot background music which is a song glorying the Great China), no subtitles, no historical reenactments, and no interviews. Different from the case that scene and information of the plot are all overseen and overheard entirely in feature films, the visual experience in documentary is more like letting the viewer to witness the actual time, space and event that are going to happen; the participation of viewer and the conjunction of spaces (documentary space and display space) are also strengthened by the return-look from the people in the scene. As a result, “the filmmaker’s retirement to the position of observer calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.” 65 In another word, the purpose of recording the landscapes of China is not only to display, but also to call for the audience’s participation to fill the gaps of the multiple meanings in these landscapes.

Sound is a very important part of composing the sense of floating in Jia’s feature and documentaries. Jia’s feature film is famous for its observation sensitivity and calmness, as well as the films’ recurrent and reflexive use of pop signs (such as pop songs, pop movies clips) to ensure that they are more easy to arouse resonance or public memory shared by the floating generation, such as the use of pop song Unknown Pleasure in his feature film Unknown Pleasure. In fact, popular culture can be understood as a shared memory by the public in the public media sphere. In In Public, without any sub-title or clear record of discussion, the most memorable sign in the film is the flexible use of public space and the loud background music in the dance hall. The tension in Jia’s feature is often shaped by confrontation of the popular culture and the political culture. In other words, a harmonious society in Jia’s understanding is not a China that is under any strict regulations or leaded by particular leadership, but a society that allows its citizen to have flexibility and freedom to establish a way of living and to use the public spheres according to their needs.

The recording of destruction and change are the central themes which display in the rethinking of urbanization and marketization. Another topic that attracts massive concern of the

Chinese independent documentary filmmakers is the rapid urbanization since the mid-1990s. On the one hand, the problem of too-rapid urbanization was exacerbated by the agricultural responsibility system which forced a reallocation of labor and increased the number of peasant migrant workers in the cities. On the other hand, the state urban planning (such as The Three Gorges Dam Project) also forces many people to leave their origins and is eliminating part of the national memories (such as the destroy of old towns, cultural heritage or the large state-own companies).

Along with the fast pace of urbanization, the demolition has become the very theme of much contemporary Chinese visual art. It points not only to the physical demolition of the old cityscape, but more profoundly “to the symbolic and psychological destruction of the social fabric of families and neighborhoods.” As a companion piece to his feature Still Life, Jia’s documentary Dong was conceived first, following the famous artist Liu Xiaodong in his search for new subjects for his paintings in the Three Gorges area before China’s controversial dam project flooded the region. The backdrop of the painting is the human body of peasant workers who have been demolishing nearby towns for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. The immense civil work project will ultimately result in the world’s largest hydroelectric power station, as many official newsreels, documentaries, and special topic documentaries have demonstrated. Rather than concentrating on the well-known painter or the process of painting, Jia turns his focus to the no-name floating workers and their left-behind family.

In official discourse, “to construct a harmonious society” means conduct large public construction that would be helpful for the country’s economical development. Taking the slogan “Development is the absolute principle” (fa zhan cai shi ying dao li) promoted by Deng Xiaoping in 1992 as the guideline for two decades, CCP has been busy constructing big environmental project such as the Three Gorges Dam, Qinghai-Tibet Railway, and other rural

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development. However, what interests Jia and other independent documentary filmmakers is the human and cultural cost in China’s transformation. In *Dong*, this cost includes the destruction by flooding of millennia-old settlements and sites, potentially grave environmental pollution, numerous cheap and insecure workers labors, and above all the relocation of over a million-and-a-half people. With the frequently featuring long-take of the deconstructed Three Gorges and the close-up of peasant workers’ bodies, what seems to be important is not Liu’s idea of art that consists the largest part of *Dong*, but the director’s concern about individual lives in instability in the name of constructing a harmonious society for all the Chinese.

*Dong* echoes with the spirit of *Still Life*, in which things and people are always in a fading or floating situation. The destruction made a two-thousand-year-old city destroy in two years, and this long memory has just been erased, leaving a sense of void and emptiness. In contrast to Jia’s long and stable camera style, scenes in *Dong* are always on the move. Instead of story-telling, plot and scenes are occasional and instable; the character is always traveling via ferry, boat or bus in search of aspiration. In the second part of the *Dong*, one of the peasant workers was dead in the deconstructing workplace without reason (probably another “public secret” shared by contemporary Chinese—peasant workers’ work is dangerous and without the protection of law). Rather than ending the story with cliché such as “sever the mass” (*wei ren min fu wu*), Jia and his filming crew followed Liu to the worker’s left-behind family in rural area. Using a shoot of a car being submerged by the flood as a metaphor, along with local people’s accustomed attitude toward death, Jia implies that human life becomes fragile and trivial in the rapid urbanization process. The construction of a “harmonious society” needs the commoditization of peasant’s human labor; however, it does not result in wealth and stability for the peasants, but leads to enormous physical and psychological traumas that are largely unseen in the mass media.

Posting critical question to the state by recording the changing landscapes and the pain suffered by migrant workers and their family as many other independent documentaries, *Dong* emphasizes that people are still finding hope in desperation, and carry on their daily lives—which is evidence of a strong life force in instability. In *Dong*, migrant workers as constructor of urban and de-constructer of old city, the energy of their body are being emphasized, cohere with
single shots of peasant workers mediation look in watching the torn down building and ever-changing environment that made by them. The friendship between migrant workers is emphasized in the instable working and living places. Besides, by giving close-up to the silence face of peasant worker’s family and their smiles toward the present bought from the city by Liu, Jia captures the real essence of harmonious society is to support each other in front of difficulties.

Besides capturing the floating scenes in China’s urbanization, to rethink the logic of marketization and its consequence of alienation in social relationship is also a big issue for Jia and other independent documentary filmmakers. Jia’s another documentary, Useless, is a meditation on social relationship, marketization and manufacturing industry. After the 1990s, marketization and consumerism have taken the center place of Chinese culture. Pop culture has replaced the elitism. In Jia’s words, one of the purposes of making Dong and Useless is to “rebuild the connection between intellectuals and the public.”

Eagar to record the fast pace of urbanization, a sense of speed and the contradiction between stagnation and movement are emphasized in In Public and Dong with the capture of the social landscape and the fast floating people in the street and Three Gorges. Consisted of three parts in three different cities, Useless starts at a Guangdong garment factory showing workers busy cutting cloth, taking their short lunch break and getting medical checkups. The main character in Useless is Ma Ke, who is the founder of a commercial designer label Exception and has started a new brand Wuyong (literally, "Useless") based on hand-woven fabrics and earthy colors. Along with a large proportion of interview with this avant-garde fashion designer, this documentary does not limit to demonstrate the artist’s art concept as Bumming in Beijing does, but links Ma Ke’s personal critics of marketization with similar social issues to construct a bigger picture of contemporary China. After the collection has successfully launched at the 2007 Paris Fashion

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67 Independent documentaries such as Zhou Hao and Ji Ianghong’s Houjie and Huang Wenhai’s Xuanhua de chentu or Floating Dust (2003), depict the migrant workers and lower middle class existence in the urban, where money is everything and neighborhood relationships are trivial and commoditized.

68 See Jia Zhangke, Jia xiang, 241
Week, the film returns to China for a final half-hour set in Jia's native Shanxi province, showing a couple small sewing businesses trying hard to survive under the pressure of mass manufacturer.

The documentary observes the social instability caused by marketization via the recording of Ma Ke’s critique of mass manufacture and by witnessing her making of hand-woven fabrics and nature-engaged clothes, as well as by interviews of the small-town tailors who constitute a dying breed. Like Dong and Jia’s other features, Useless depicts people becoming over-whelmed by the forces of history, and fighting to form small-scale human relationships. Useless is concerned with stable, emotional, interactive human relationship in the process of exchange and consumption; while at the same time, observes the exploitation of factory workers, the retail trailers who are facing the threat of capitalism, and the wealthy Parisian fashion-show devotees. This three-part structure allows Jia to explore the processes of marketization, to compare, in typically subtle fashion, the differences between various modes of labor and social relationship embed, and to elaborate on his central theme, the impact of social and economic upheaval on the lives of individuals in the post-socialist China.

In Useless, life is floating and instable not only in terms of the geographic changing and feeling as outsiders, but also caused by the violence of marketization and the changing of occupation. Just as many history and memory are going to be destroyed by new construction and submerged by the flood, Ma Ke considers human emotion and relationships are being erased by modern and machine-oriented assembly line. Rather than simply putting the narration into a “national contradiction” (Chinese traditional culture being erased by foreign capitalists) as many state documentaries do, Jia critically turns the camera to the new middle class in the Louis Vuitton flagship store in Guangzhou, and records their discussion about the latest trends of different foreign luxurious products. In his cinematic narration, what seems to contribute to the instability of individual lives is not only the violence of an opened market, but the changing concept of the Chinese toward commodity and social relationship due to the marketization and consumptionism. The film shows the fashion industry’s workers populating the vast factories, often competing with the efficiency and precision of machines, and their health is also sacrificed without any state protection. And we meet small-scale artisans uneasily waiting for the new
economy’s laws to sweep away their craft and force them to look elsewhere for survival, such as being a coalmine or a migrant worker. However, the one who can afford to resist the negative influence of the mass production, fast circulation and materialism, is the one who are financially and socially secured, just like Ma Ke and Lui. The once stable lives of individuals in rural area finally turn into a floating condition without other choices, along with China’s enormous transformation.

Besides his tendency to record the transforming landscapes which gives the audience a sense of floating, Jia’s filming career also indicates the more and more flexible status of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking in local and transborder cooperation. Two of his feature films are invested by Japanese famous director Takeshi Kitano, while 24 City is supported by the state-own military factory and invested by an estate developer (which has a new building project also called “24 City”). His documentary film In Public is sponsored by the Korean Jeonju Film Festival as an international filmmaking project, while Useless is collaborated with the design brand Wu Yong.

Moreover, Jia’s instable but also flexible status in the state censorship system fully demonstrates the power of the enlarging “public media sphere”, as well as the dubious concept of independence in post-socialist China. Since Xiao Wu, all of Jia’s major productions such as Platform, Unknown Pleasures, and documentary In Public, shared the similar fate of most independent filmmakers of the Sixth Generation—being banned in Mainland China for seven years. However, his films were widely distributed through China’s pirated DVD markets and internet, along with his extraordinary success in significant international film festivals. Since his feature The World, Jia began to work with official approval from the Chinese government. His documentaries such as Useless and Dong have achieved both commercial and artistic success, as well as approval from the state. His shift from underground to state-approved at that time was
not in isolation, however, but was part of a broader movement by many underground film directors turning legitimate.69

International film festival has always been a local tension between independent filmmakers and the state censorship, as well as an international tension between CCP and foreign countries in the post-socialist context, which render the status of independent documentary instable. But Jia is a special case. Jia keeps emphasizing that the term “independent” is referring to the filmmaking process that is outside the state-run studios, but it does not mean to rebel or anti anything at all.70 After his winning in Venice International Film Festival in 2006, China’s government has more intention to have an international well-known director in integrating the state propaganda into film without trace. 24 City focuses on state-run factory and received the government and business support. In July 2009, all mainland Chinese films, including Jia’s short film Cry me a river (2008) and Emily Tang’s A Perfect Life (2008) withdrew from the Melbourne International Film Festival in protest to a documentary Ten Conditions of Love (2009) about Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer shown in the Festival. Although Jia’s move may not be a direct outcome of the pressure from the CCP, but Jia definitely takes into consideration this compromise as a strategy to retain a relatively independent but also legal status in state censorship and the Chinese film market.

The enormous changes under the name of “Development is the fundamental principle” and “Maintaining stability is overwhelming everything” (wen ding ya dao yi qie) promoted by the CCP as we can see in Jia’s documentaries, will ultimately bring to the question of what a


70 “Interview with Jia Zhangke” (Entretien réalisé à Paris, Jan 2003), collected in the DVD of Jia’s Platform, 2003
“harmonious society” means to the CCP and the Chinese people. For the CCP, the building of a “socialist harmonious society” (hexie shehui) serves as the ultimate goal for the ruling CCP along with xiaokang society, which aims for a "basically well-off" middle-class oriented society. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping used the terms xiaokang society in 1979 as the eventual goal of Chinese modernization. The concept of a xiaokang society is the first time in which the CCP has used a classical Chinese concept to legitimize its vision for the future of China. Its recent use has been associated with Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao as a goal for mainland China to reach by the year 2020.

The vision of a xiaokang society is one in which most people are moderately well off and middle class, and in which economic prosperity is sufficient to move most of the population in Mainland China into comfortable means, but in which economic advancement is not the sole focus of society. The revival of the concept of a xiaokang society was in comparison to the discourse of “let some people get rich first” by Deng Xiaoping. It is in part a criticism of social trends in mainland China in the 1990s under Jiang Zemin, when the state policy was felt to be focus too much on the newly rich and not enough on mainland China's rural poor by many Chinese people. Furthermore, there has been a fear in some circles that Chinese society has become too materialistic placing material wealth above all other social needs. In contrast to previous concepts such as the spiritual civilization and the campaigns against bourgeois liberalization in the 1980s, the concept of the xiaokang society does not involve heroic self-sacrifice and does not place the material and the spiritual in opposition. The vision of a xiaokang society sees the need for economic growth to provide prosperity, but it sees the need for this prosperity to be broadly distributed under the leadership (and censorship) of the CCP.

For the Chinese people, what has been explicitly incorporated into the concept of a xiaokang society is the idea that economic growth needs to be balanced with the somehow conflicting goals of social equality and environmental protection. The wish for fostering a "basically well-
“off” middle-class (just as those young ladies in the LV flagship in Jia’s *Useless*) is often based on sacrifices of migrant workers’ or small scale businessmen who cannot compete with foreign capital, as well as the rapid urbanization which makes numerous people lose their home.

In sum, the feeling of lost and directionless caused by the floating lives, urbanization and marketization in Jia’s documentary films, as well as in other independent documentary films, is the reflection of ceaseless searching for home and for true stability and harmony that puts people’s benefit on the priority in the fast-changing China. In other words, the harmony so far exists only in the flexible, humanized relationship among the floating generation as they have a sense that they are a community sharing the pain and despair. This community has the potential to face the truth, the crisis in humanity and value systems, by trying to define the meaning of floating beyond the marketization and overcome the related difficulties on the one hand, and on the other hand, refuse to confirm blindly with the stability and steadiness the system tends to force into the society and culture. Jia’s works, as well as many Chinese independent documentaries, have been focusing on a generation and a China which are always on the float, and the filmmakers themselves have endured the instable status in the state media system when they are eager to record this social fact. Their independent act might be questionable, but their effort to search for a spiritual home is providing a sense of gathering and care to millions of floaters in China.
Conclusion

This study suggests that the term floating serves as a keyword in understanding Chinese independent documentary films particularly after the mid-1990s in the following three ways: First, in social aspect, floating indicates the complicated social status of many independent documentary filmmakers in Chinese post-socialist context, as long as echoes the new life-style of the massive amount of floating population, particularly among intellectuals. Second, institutionally, floating also points to the flexibility in terms of documentary production and broadcasting in state censorship. Thirdly, “floating” serves as a motif and filming style in many independent documentary films, its relation to truth searching (getting real) and recording the changes will inevitably manifest the fast-changing social-cultural landscapes and question the concept of “harmonious society” of the post-socialist China.

It is not what has been shown in the films that make floating and Chinese independent documentaries so important in post-socialist China. It is also what the film has generated and will continue to generate in the corresponding social reality that is worth noting. The formation of a loose community of floating generation has the potential to negotiate with the double-sided post-socialist condition, i.e., the state’s necessity for migrating laborers and floating population to feed urbanization and marketization on the one hand; and on the other hand, the state’s need to enforce stability and steadiness to keep social and political order. The state’s instable and precarious attempts to balance between the two trends can be hazardous to the floating population and migrant laborers. The visualizing of floating social-cultural landscapes and the lives of floating generation in Chinese independent documentaries has increased social concerns in the public and the CCP, which posts a great challenge toward CCP’s media control and will hopefully ultimately become a source where public opinions gather and express.

Currently, Chinese independent filmmakers have already negotiated with the post-socialist economic and political policies by make floating a cultural term, a sensibility, an experience of the time. It both reveals the inhumane aspect of urbanization and marketization (such as missing the roots and home), and reserves the room of vulnerary flexibility which could mean room of
forming a non-confirmative standing point of the critic. Even independent documentary filmmaking is always in a floating condition within the state censorship or production system, what can be sure is that it has already floating from a marginal position to the public sight. Although the audience of Chinese independent documentary films is still relatively limited to social elite, but the public concerns toward the problem of floating population, urbanization, marketization is increasing due to the approach with multiple visual media and channels such as internet, public events, film festival and academic discussion. In this generous sense, then, the notion of a public media spheres seems to me useful for a description of a sphere where the power of the state, Chinese citizen and independent documentary filmmakers are mutual interacting and affecting each other. Although a true sense of public media sphere which allows people to freely and fairly communicate in China still has a long way to be well-developed, the critical discourses and social concerns generated by Chinese independent documentary film will be one of the many push factors.

Last but not least, while marketization has enriched the meaning of the floating statue of Chinese independent documentaries from instability to flexibility in or outside state media censorship, it also posts new challenges to these films by slowly changing the meaning of “independence”. While the instability of the post-socialist Chinese society is hastening the breakdown of the development toward a civil society, whether the action of state-independent filmmakers-foreign capital cooperation will benefit the authority’s democratic image in the long run or intensify the social instability is still hard to expect, since the uncertainty of the Chinese independent documentaries’ economic position corresponded the uncertainty of their political function. As my study has show, there are several areas in which independent documentary filmmaking and state media overlap. It is expected that the result of the competing forces of marketization and to seizing the power in public media sphere will shape new ways in more media reform actions in state-run media, as well as changing the very concept of “independence” of Chinese independent documentaries in post-socialist China.
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A Perfect Life (2008), dir. Emily Tang
Ba wang bie ji (Farewell my concubine) (1993), dir. Chen Kaige
Bakuonanjie shiliuhao (No.16 Barkhor Street south) (1996), dir. Duan Jinchuan
Beijing de feng hen da (There’s a strong wind in Beijing) (1999), dir. Ju Anqi
Beijing zazhong or Beijing Bastards (1993), dir. Zhang Yuan
Bi an or The Paradise (1995), dir. Jiang Yue
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Cry me a river (2008), dir. Jia Zhangke
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Doudong de 20 fengzhong or Trembling for Twenty Minutes) (2002), dir. Han Lei
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Jie mei (Sisters) (2004), dir. Li Jinhong
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