China’s New Documentary Movement: Alternate Realities and Changing State-Society Relations in Contemporary China

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Collaborative Masters of Arts Program in Asia-Pacific Studies

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2010

Abstract

Independent documentary films in contemporary China articulate a vision of Chinese politics and society that deviates from official state discourse. This thesis explores how China’s New Documentary Movement (NDM) – a spontaneous, independent phenomenon in Chinese cinema – serves as an important arena to study state and society struggles in the aftermath of the post-Mao reforms.

This study first explores the politicalization of Chinese national cinema to demonstrate how the degree of control exerted over filmmaking and the documentary genre functions as a useful indicator of Chinese state-society relations. Focusing on the contentious issue of land disputes and rural rightful resistance in two documentaries – Feng Yan’s Bing Ai as well as Zhang Ke and Dong Yu’s Where is the Way – it contrasts the lived reality of displaced peasants to the official rhetoric disseminated in the state media. Also discussed is the state’s response to the NDM and its implications for greater societal autonomy in contemporary China.
Acknowledgments

This thesis is the product of my passion for Chinese cinema and politics. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Professor Lynette Ong for supervising and guiding my research, and for providing me with invaluable feedback during the writing process of this thesis. I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Bart Testa for his kindness and encouragement. I truly enjoyed and benefitted from all the conversations we have had. My special thanks to Professor Bai Ruoyun and to Professor Hy Van Luong as well for all their support and patience.

With regards to data collection, I wish to acknowledge my appreciation to colleagues and friends at the University of Toronto’s Cheng Yu East Asian Library and Innis Library. Thanks also to Zhang Ke and the helpful staff at CIDFA whose passion for independent documentary-making in China remains an inspiration.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Following Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “reform and opening” (gaige kaifang), state-society relations in China have undergone tremendous change. Under Mao Zedong the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had monopoly over the political, economic and ideological resources of the nation. As such it was able to control the public sphere and even succeeded in regulating, if not completely or successfully, the ways people spoke, thought and behaved. However economic autonomy and the deregulation of individual life had the effect of granting greater autonomy to society while cultivating a diversity of interest among different social actors in contemporary China. This is reflected in the establishment of various mass associations such as environment and animal protection groups, HIV/AIDS support groups and labour rights groups in contemporary China.

The post-Mao reforms have thus prompted a re-evaluation of the dynamics of Chinese state-society relations. Elizabeth Perry has contended that we are now seeing a new generation of scholarship in the study of Chinese politics that rejects previous state-society interpretations influenced by Cold War politics and the Cultural Revolution. Drawing from European models of state-society relations, this new generation of scholarship has sought to come to terms with the post-Mao reforms and the uprisings of 1989. Interpreting the causes, character and consequences of political change as a product of the interactions between the state apparatus and society at large, questions of state-building, civil society, public sphere as well as the relationship between marketization and democratization have emerged as the focal point of this new generation of scholars. More importantly there is the recognition that rather than foisting

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these European concepts onto Chinese realities, the application of the state-society paradigm should be reconceptualised to fit the Chinese context.\(^2\) Eschewing earlier models of state-society relations that assumed the zero-sum distribution of power between state and society, this new approach emphasizes a bottom-up approach and seeks to recover the voices of common Chinese people in contemporary China. It asserts that state-society struggles are not merely about the control of the top leadership positions of the state; nor do they always take place among large-scale social forces operating on a grand level. Instead struggles for domination take place in multiple arenas whereby parts of the state are related not only to one another but each is a single social force interacting with other social forces in the arena. These social forces encompass informal and formal organizations, as well as social movements – including those held together by common, motivating sets of ideas.

This thus calls into question our understanding of “state” and “society”. What does it mean to speak of the Chinese state and of Chinese society? The CCP is often referred to as a unitary actor capable of strategic choice and coordinated behaviour but the reality is that a wide spectrum of political values and policy orientations ranging from reformers to moderates to hardliners exist within it. Furthermore decentralization has given rise to a divide between the central government and its local representatives as illustrated in the Centre’s difficulty in disciplining officials in breach of its policies. Additionally, viewing Chinese society as an undifferentiated and homogenous actor runs the risk of eliding the intra-societal distinctions based on ethnic (i.e. Han vs. Tibetan) and regional (i.e. inland vs. coastal) loyalties, kinship networks and class differences for example. Chinese society is therefore not a uniform entity; rather it interacts with various social forces co-existing within it.

Power and authority are therefore relational and are negotiated through a continuous process of claims and responses. In these spaces in society where social forces (including

institutions of the state) engage one another, both state and society as a whole find themselves in a continuous condition of flux. In an environment of conflict, the state finds itself hemmed in and transformed by internal forces clamouring for change even as society itself is being moulded by the opportunities and obstacles presented by the state. Hence state and social forces co-exist symbiotically, mutually influencing each other in a continuing process of transformation.³

Following in this approach, this thesis extends the study of state and society struggles into the cultural arena. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the regime has dominated cultural production in order to facilitate the dissemination of its belief system onto the nation. Under the influence of Lenin and Mao, Chinese national cinema and in particular, the documentary genre became subject to the demands of the revolution. The post-Mao reforms have however made it harder for the regime to control film production. This paper focuses specifically on an independent, unsanctioned phenomenon in Chinese national cinema – China’s New Documentary Movement (新纪录运动; hereafter known as NDM). It argues that the NDM plays a crucial role in negotiating for a greater degree of freedom of expression in post-Mao China. Working independently from the CCP-controlled studio system, the NDM dedicates itself to the exploration of ‘truth’ even in areas the central leadership would rather keep secret. By doing so, it presents an alternate discourse to the state-sanctioned perspective and thus performs some of the most essential functions of political opposition in political systems where legal opposition does not exist.⁴


1.1 Background

The Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress in December 1978 marked the official beginning of China’s post-Mao reforms when the new leadership, led by Deng gave its blessing to the initial stages of decollectivization of agriculture and the expanded scope of the market. In the early years of reform Deng exhorted the nation to “let some people get rich first”, arguing that by permitting some people and regions to become wealthy first, “common prosperity” could be attained at a faster pace. Heeding Deng’s adage, China’s citizens were willing to sacrifice their individual gain for the sake of the nation. As the coastal areas benefitted from state investment and privileged access to international capital and markets, millions of Chinese residing in the interior and rural areas flocked to cities to offer themselves as low-cost industrial workers, construction workers and factory workers even as socialist welfare and social security systems were being dismantled in the name of ‘reform’.

Although China’s transition from a planned economy to a (socialist) market economy has led to an overall rise in income levels and standards of living, it should be emphasized that this economic growth has been uneven. Three decades after Deng’s reforms, China has moved from “the ranks of the world’s most egalitarian societies to one of the most unequal in its distribution of income, wealth and opportunity.” According to a Chinese press report, in 2001, 80 percent of China’s wealth was in the hands of less than 20 percent of the population. As the ‘externalities’ of the reform agenda – environmental degradation, corruption, widening income inequality – become more pronounced, the Chinese leadership finds itself confronted by an

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8 Perry and Selden, “Introduction”, 1
increasingly vocal public willing to express their discontent over perceptions of relative deprivation within the country.\(^9\)

Taking advantage of the legal reforms and more hospitable environment for individuals to protect and assert their rights in the post-Mao era, China’s dispossessed and disempowered have seized upon the enumeration of legal rights and promulgation of public policies to demand for greater accountability from the government who they hold responsible for state administrative failures, abuse of power by lower-level officials, economic hardships and other shortcomings such as unemployment and financial scams. In recent years, the number of collective protests by ordinary people – i.e. workers, peasants, urban residents – has risen dramatically. In 1993, the Ministry of Public Security reported 8 700 incidents of collective protests.\(^10\) By 2004, official government statistics reported no fewer than 74 000 incidents of mass protests. This figure would rise to 87 000 in 2005;\(^11\) this rapid rise in mass protests reflect the growing ire and impatience of ordinary Chinese citizens hoping for a more equitable society.

Thus despite the survival of the CCP and the single-party system in the post-Mao era, the socioeconomic transformations associated with the reforms have left a profound impact on Chinese economics, politics, society and culture as China finds itself caught between its socialist past and capitalist present. Though Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought continues to officially underline the legitimacy of the ruling CCP today, the reality is that the socioeconomic reforms have eclipsed China’s official communist ideology. Instead the legitimacy of the CCP relies on a master narrative of socioeconomic progress.\(^12\) Hence, the propagation of acts of

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\(^10\) Pei, “Rights and Resistance”, 23-29


\(^12\) McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 204
popular contention vis-à-vis socioeconomic grievances has generated much anxiety among China’s central leadership. There is the fear that these incidents of resistance will vividly and publicly demonstrate the vulnerability of the regime’s political authority and provide dissidents with greater opportunities to reach out to groups who feel they have been neglected and forgotten in postsocialist China. In this environment of conflict, the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department has established norms to control the dissemination of information that can be published and discussed in the public arena. Adopting the stance that the media’s role is to create a stable climate of public opinion and protect political stability, media outlets are encouraged to “focus on positive propaganda.” Consequently the state media is barred from discussing sensitive issues such as the widening income inequality gap, inflation and social discontent that may cause instability in China.

Despite the party-state’s efforts to render these sensitive socio-political issues invisible to the public, their efforts have only led to limited success. Deng’s open-door policy had paved the way for major innovations in cultural expression and his 1992 “southern tour” symbolically reaffirmed the course of China’s reforms in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen turmoil. Therefore for the first time in the history of the PRC, the media and cultural industry were placed on the frontlines of economic restructuring and were subjected to the imperatives of market competition. These developments have led to what Peter Gries and Stanley Rosen refer to as a “deformalization” in the language of Chinese politics. This refers to the dramatic increase in the number and variety of voices participating in political discourse today. Whilst propagandists under Mao were able to control political discourse by restricting open discussion of elite politics, economic reform has resulted in the proliferation of the media at the local level.

13 Pei, “Rights and Resistance”, 42-43
14 Anne-Marie Brady, Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 95-97
15 The term “cultural industry” refers to the production of standardized culture goods through film, radio and magazines. The term was first coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Today the use of the term has expanded to include all other forms of popular culture such as TV and video games.
16 McGrath, Postsocialist Modernity, 2-5
as illustrated in the rising distribution of unofficial publications. Meanwhile decentralization has made it harder for the Party to control the dissemination of unsanctioned political discourse. The Information Communications Technology (ICT) revolution has also empowered ordinary Chinese citizens enabling them to engage in online activism today. Arguably, public opinion has begun to play a role in regulating Chinese society and politics today. Just as the fear of losing “face” constrains behaviour leading to sincerity in social relations, concern for maintaining “face” has a similar disciplining impact on politics especially as political elites find themselves increasingly “in the people’s gaze” (zhongmu kuikui).

The multiplicity of voices participating in political discourse in the post-Mao era thus appears to pave the way for the emergence of a Habermasian public sphere – a realm which guarantees ordinary citizens the freedom of assembly and association as well as the freedom to freely express and publish their opinions in an unrestricted manner. The NDM is one among the many voices participating in political discourse today. The economic restructuring of the film industry as well as the ICT revolution has radically transformed the face of Chinese national cinema. Unable to compete in the market-driven environment, the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio found itself in a downward spiral. In 1993, the studio failed to secure more than a few orders for several dozen shorts and two feature-length documentaries. As opportunities in the shrinking film industry became scarcer, the state-run studio was forced to “let go” of many young filmmakers as it was unable to secure sufficient financial resources to employ them. Consequently many of them seized the opportunity to rebel against the discourse of traditional ideology with independent, free and individual modes of expression. Breaking

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17 According to Yang Guobin, online activism refers to contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet and other new communications technology. He argues that China’s online activism reveals how Chinese netizens creatively negotiate political power and is thus part of a “long revolution” to make Chinese society more open. For more on China’s Internet culture and online activism, see Yang Guobin’s *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

18 Gries and Rosen, “Introduction”, 8-9

away from the “incessant moralizing and torrents of lecture” that had characterized much of Maoist era films, they turned their lens to document the socioeconomic changes taking place in China, using the newly available technologies to cultivate linkages with the overseas market to release their films. In particular these filmmakers chose to focus on China’s underclass and marginalized – the people whose grievances the central government tries to keep hidden in order to maintain socio-political stability.

1.2 Statement of Intent and Purpose

This thesis aims to explore Chinese state-society relations in the post-Mao era through the prism of the NDM. It will argue the NDM represents an active and important arena to study state-society relations because it has the ability to create public space through mutually transformative interactions with various forces within the state. Thus it is important to note that the state is neither a monolithic entity nor are state-society relations a zero-sum distribution of power. By offering alternate perspectives of Chinese politics and society, the NDM invites an implicit contrast to the official discourse disseminated in the mainstream media even as it actively negotiates the boundaries of public discourse within China. It also puts pressure on the state to deliver on promises made and to be more attentive to public opinion by exploring the discrepancy between state rhetoric and reality.

In recent years, Chinese documentaries have been celebrated in the international film festival circuit for “offering access to a China never seen before”. Its success has captured the attention of a growing number of scholars both outside of and even within China where these

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20 Xudong Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Documentary Box, No. 26 (October 2005), 9, 4 <Stable URL: http://www.yidff.jp/docbox/26/box26-3-e.html> (accessed 28 June 2010)

politically sensitive films have a limited audience in comparison to the overseas market.²² Lu Xinyu’s *Documenting China: The Contemporary Documentary Movement in China* (2003) provides a comprehensive overview of this new development in Chinese cinema. She recounts the context in which the NDM arose and argues that the significance of this movement is best understood as a rebellious force directed against the state media in the aftermath of the changes in society in the late 1980s.²³ Other scholars commenting on independent Chinese documentary have emphasized its capacity to produce virtual public space.²⁴ In *Chinese Documentaries: From Dogma to Polyphony* (2007) Chu Yingchi compares documentaries made in the Mao era to its contemporary counterpart. She suggests that the diversity of voices in Chinese documentary today indicates the tentative beginnings of a public sphere and the gradual progression toward a more genuine freedom of expression in China.²⁵ In *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (2006) Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang put together an edited collection of essays reflecting on underground and independent filmmaking. Several chapters are devoted to the critical analysis of the development, motivations and future of independent documentary-making and the authors are in general agreement that the role of this movement is to offer a critique of the official depiction of Chinese politics and society by producing a non-mainstream view that claims to be ‘truthful’.²⁶

²² Maggie Lee, “Behind the Scenes: Documentaries in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong”, *Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Documentary Box*, No. 23 (May 2004), 2 <Stable URL: http://www.yidff.jp/docbox/23/box23-2-2-e.html> (accessed 28 June 2010)


This thesis seeks to supplement the current literature on the NDM by focusing on its implications for Chinese state-society relations as it renegotiates the boundaries of public discourse by addressing social issues deemed sensitive to the state. It will incorporate the use of NDM films as social documents in this study. The social document approach directs our attention toward a specific aspect of the historical world whose presence allows us to gaze onto the world “by means of a text, a window, and an argument”. Thus in studying it, one has an opportunity to observe the social conditions that shaped the film. By doing so, this paper seeks to demonstrate how this cinematic movement can act as a bargaining chip, aiding social forces in the struggle for a more genuine freedom of expression, thereby displaying how state-society relations are in a constant state of flux in contemporary China.

1.3 Scope and Methodology

The NDM addresses a myriad of issues facing China’s marginalized and it would be beyond the scope of this paper to examine them all. Instead, this paper will concentrate on two documentaries – *Bing Ai* (2007) and *Where is the Way* (2005). Both films focus on acts of rightful resistance in rural China provoked by the perceived injustice stemming from the displacement of villagers in favour of large developmental projects. This study acknowledges that these films represent a small sample of NDM films. Nevertheless the production, exhibition and distribution process of *Bing Ai* and *Where is the Way* is similar to other NDM films. As such it provides a window through which the state’s response to the NDM as well as its renegotiation of the boundaries of public discourse can be examined.

The following research questions provide the framework for the study of state-society relations in post-Mao China vis-à-vis the NDM: 1) What does Chinese national cinema reveal about the condition of state-society relations? 2) To what extent can the NDM be considered

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autonomous and independent from state control? 3) How effective has the NDM been in pushing the boundaries of public discourse in contemporary China?

This study includes a comprehensive review of literature concerning the importance of documentary, a historical overview of the politicalization of Chinese national cinema and the context in which the NDM arose. An analysis of the chosen filmic texts will be used to as an indicator to determine the impact of the NDM on state-society relations through the framework of the issue of rural resistance in China.

1.4 Organization

This thesis is organized in seven chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the literature published regarding documentary theory and explains how and why the documentary genre plays an integral role in the search for ‘truth’ especially in a country where a free and independent media does not exist. It will also acknowledge and address the limitations of using documentaries as a social document. Chapter 3 provides an overview of China’s film industry in the Maoist era (1949-1976) and the post-Maoist era (1976-present) with a focus on the development of the documentary genre to provide a deeper understanding behind the politicalization of Chinese national cinema.

Chapter 4 examines the context of the rise of the NDM as well as its motivations and characteristics to demonstrate its revolutionary aspects, focusing on its attempt to break free from the rigid, hegemonic voice that is evident in the mainstream media. Chapter 5 analyses *Bing Ai* and *Where is the Way*, beginning with a brief overview of the themes addressed in the film – land displacement and rural rightful resistance. It then proceeds to analyse the films, examining how their exploration of social reality play a crucial role in giving a voice to China’s marginalized people. Chapter 6 evaluates the implications of the NDM and examines the state reaction to this movement in order to understand how the NDM has negotiated for a greater
degree of freedom of expression. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the discussion and provides conclusions to the issue of state-society relations in contemporary China.
Chapter 2
Why Documentary?

The purpose of this chapter is to familiarize the reader with the genre of documentary. This is especially pertinent because in comparison to its fictional counterpart, documentary cinema has traditionally played a more prominent role in Chinese politics and society. Unlike in most countries, documentary has been the leading film genre in China since 1949. This can be attributed to Lenin’s influence. He contended that “of all the arts, for us film is the most important”. Lenin viewed film as the most powerful tool for mass education and held the documentary genre in especially high esteem, arguing that it presents “a forceful form of visualized political argument”. Consequently documentary emerged as a mainstay in the government’s project of national building and national education since the CCP won victory in 1949.

2.1 Defining Documentary

In Bill Nichols’ definitive book on the documentary genre – *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* – he argues that there is no strict definition for the documentary genre. Rather, he asserts that:

“Documentary as a concept or practice occupies no fixed territory. It mobilizes no finite inventory of techniques, addresses no set number of issues, and adopts no completely known taxonomy of forms, styles, or modes. The term documentary must itself be

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28 Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 28
30 Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 28-29
constructed in much the same manner as the world we know and share. Documentary film practice is the site of contestation and change”.31

Despite the documentary genre’s lack of a clear definition, this paper will attempt to provide one by addressing the specific qualities that make it a unique genre.

Documentary takes up the tradition of photograph’s truth claim – the camera cannot lie.32 The philosopher Charles Pierce argued that the photograph is made under circumstances in which it is “physically forced to correspond point by point to nature”.33 Hence, the camera reproduces an image of the real world, creating an impression of authenticity other art forms cannot replicate. This feature of the camera was seized upon by Dziga Vertov, the Soviet documentarist who won Lenin’s support for championing the use of the camera as a “cinema-eye”. Vertov contended that the use of the camera as a cinema-eye is “more perfect than the human eye for exploring the chaos of visual phenomena filling the universe”.34 Thus by the virtue of camera’s ability to serve as “a [visual] record of the way a society typically represents and so understands itself and others”, it can to a certain extent claim to be able to function as a mirror of socio-political and cultural change.35 Hence for the purpose of this thesis and in the context of this paper, documentary will be viewed as a means to access to the real, historical world.

31 Nichols, Representing Reality, 12
32 Keith Beattie, Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 13
33 Charles Pierce, quoted in Nichols, Representing Reality, 149
34 Barnouw, Documentary, 58
35 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 2
2.2 Types of Documentary

According to Nichols, there are four documentary modes that offer a distinct approach to the representation of reality. These modes serve as a guideline by which documentaries are structured. They consist of the expository mode, the observational mode (also known as direct cinema), the interactive mode and the reflexive mode. Of all the modes, the first two will be emphasized in this study because they are the most pertinent to the discussion at hand as will be explained later in this chapter. In practice however, these modes tend to be combined and altered within individual films.

Documentaries in the expository mode address the viewer directly and are characterized by a “voice-of-God” commentary. Expository texts take shape around pre-scripted commentary directed towards teaching and guiding the viewer. Images used in the film serve either as an illustration or counterpoint. Causation tends to be direct and linear; thus viewers generally hold the expectation that a commonsensical world will unfold in terms of the establishment of a logical, cause/effect linkage between the sequences shown onscreen. Documentaries made during the Mao era fall into this category. Taking the form of the pre-scripted illustrated lecture, they were known as zhuantiqian (专题片) and were heavily influenced by the Soviet style of “political stereotyping”. Its structure consisted of a running commentary in crisp, authoritative tones designed to interpret events for the viewer so there could be no question as to the meaning or significance of the events shown onscreen. Comparing Maoist documentaries to its Western counterpart, Ren Yuan of the Beijing Broadcasting Institute (BBI) described them as mere “political and moral generalities” which were “monotonous in content, drab in language and fixed in form”.

36 Nichols, Representing Reality, 32-37
37 Reynaud, “Dancing with Myself, Drifting with My Camera”, 4
38 Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 3
Observational films (or direct cinema) stress the non-intervention of the filmmaker who aims to be as unobtrusive as possible. This mode of documentary-making arose in the West in the 1950s when new, light camera equipment able to record both image and sound emerged. In turn, this made possible an intimacy of observation new to documentary. However it was only after 1979 that direct cinema gained the attention of NDM filmmakers who were attracted to the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world provided by the on-scene presence of the camera. In fact, the observational mode continues to remain the *modus operandi* of the NDM today. In its purest form, voice-over commentary, non-diegetic music, intertitles, re-enactments and interviews are avoided. Observational films tend to centre on the exhaustive depiction of the everyday to produce the effect that what we see onscreen is a record of reality as it unfolds. Rather than using commentary and images to make observations about the world it projects, observational films seek to show, explore and provoke. It may imply propositions about the world but is ultimately content to let viewers draw their own conclusion. Both films chosen for discussion in this paper lean toward this observational mode as they seek to capture the reality of the historical world in events available to the camera with minimal intervention on the filmmakers’ part.

The interactive mode is similar to the observational mode insofar that the camera is on the scene to record events as it unfold. However unlike observational films, the documentarist operating in this mode is not content to only be a cinematic, recording eye. Instead he/she adopts an active role in the film process and social actors are drawn into direct encounter with the filmmaker. Interaction between the documentarist and social actors often revolve around the interview but in this mode, interviews generally serve as evidence for an argument. Finally, the reflexive mode gives emphasis to the encounter between the filmmaker and viewer as opposed to the encounter between the filmmaker and subject. As such these texts are highly self-
conscious about its form, style, strategy, structure, conventions, expectations and effects. They address the question of how we talk about the historical world and is poststructuralist in its critique of the assumptions viewers possess regarding documentaries.

2.3 The Role of Documentary and its Limitations

Having established the definition of documentary and the different modes that comprise it, this paper will now proceed to argue for its importance especially in the Chinese context.

Truth claims based on argument and evidence ultimately lie at the heart of documentary because they are a non-fictional representation of the historical world. These truth claims reflect an unspoken contractual agreement between documentarists and film audiences that the representation shown onscreen is based on an actual socio-historical world. As a result, documentaries are viewed with reference to a different set of expectations and conventions as opposed to fiction films. Operating on the viewer’s consciousness, the fundamental role of documentary is to probe, to provoke discussion among the audience and to raise awareness vis-à-vis an aspect of the lived world.

The power of documentary resides in its ability to provoke audience reaction. In particular, documentaries that examine the complexities of everyday life can provide an antidote to mainstream thinking and are thus viewed as subversive texts with the potential to “destroy the equilibrium of accepted thought”. For this reason documentaries are often susceptible to censorship. Within China, the regime has not hesitated to ban documentaries deemed offensive.

44 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 44-48, 57-63, 116
45 Beattie, *Documentary Screens*, 11
46 Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, 11
47 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 69
to political sensitivities. Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon’s *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (1995) offer a good example of how changing perceptions of political acceptability can affect the reception of a film. When it was released, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* was praised by critics for its impartiality and for demystifying the romantic image of students as campaigners for democratic reform during the June 4 incident. The film is contentious because it suggests that extremists within the government and rebel faction wanted the massacre to happen. It implies that had the student leadership been more moderate and rational, the tragedy could have avoided. Initially the Chinese authorities were half-hearted in their attempts to ban the film because it did not directly attack the CCP and thus was thought to be less damaging to the Party than expected. Following Deng’s death in 1997 however, a global effort to suppress the film surfaced due to fears that it could have an adverse effect on the nation’s image especially in light of Hong Kong’s imminent handover to China.\textsuperscript{48}

The banning of Peter Watkins’s anti-war classic, *The War Game* (1965) in Britain reveals how censorship is not just confined to “repressive regimes”. It also serves as a good example of how censors try to “anticipate all meanings that audiences might receive from a film once it is exhibited”. Contending that the film had the potential to destroy the peace and security of the nation, British censors justified their actions by claiming that in predicting the collapse of social order in the aftermath of a nuclear offensive, *The War Game* “challenged conventional views of British society as cohesive and consensual”. The documentary was finally screened twenty years later after a heated debate as to whether the censors had the right to stifle debate on nuclear policy and to shield the public from the horrifying consequences of such warfare. These examples illustrate how governments, regardless of its political orientation try to contain oppositional thought and expression in recognition of the potential impact of documentary’s critique of dominant ideologies in society. Nonetheless, because documentary confronts its subject matter openly and dares to adopt a position that runs counter to established

mythologies\textsuperscript{49} it functions as the “Other” and allows alternative and marginalized histories to be registered at close range.\textsuperscript{50}

Nevertheless critics of documentary assert that the genre is not objective enough and often castigate independent documentarists for this reason. This study acknowledges these criticisms; whilst it is true that documentarists play on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time and space – thereby creating a cinematic gaze that reflects the operator’s preoccupations, subjectivity and values\textsuperscript{51} – it is vital to note that in a country like China where the media is neither independent nor free, these works emerge as a necessary and valuable source of information containing aspects of reality unavailable elsewhere.\textsuperscript{52} As such, this thesis views films as being more than the sum of its production. It follows Lola Young’s claim that a cinematic text “should be analyzed as part of a complex web of interrelated experiences, ideas, fantasies and subconscious expressions of desire, anxiety and fear that need to be located in their historical, political and social contexts.”\textsuperscript{53} Hence it is through this prism that the works of the NDM will be utilized as a source of information as it seeks to privilege the voice of China’s marginalized.

\textsuperscript{49} Barnouw, \textit{Documentary}, 345-346
\textsuperscript{51} Nichols, \textit{Representing Reality}, 77-79
\textsuperscript{52} Barnouw, \textit{Documentary}, 297
\textsuperscript{53} Lola Young quoted in Donald, \textit{Public Secrets, Public Spaces}, 142
Chapter 3
The Politics of the Film Industry in China

In order to comprehend and study the role of a national cinema, it is imperative to take into account the history of the country of origin. Introduced into China in the late 1890s by foreign showmen who would rent teahouses and theatres to exhibit short films amid variety shows, cinema has come a long way in China. It has survived wars, state intervention and manipulation to establish itself as a significant force in the international film arena.

3.1 Cinema during the Mao Era: 1949-1978

During the Mao era, the state was in full control of the film industry. In fact as early as in 1932, the CCP had established its first film organization in recognition of the popular potential of film as a political tool. Mao Zedong’s 1942 Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art also consolidated the political and theoretical foundations of Chinese cinema which would be zealously implemented after 1949. At Yan’an, Mao asserted that there can be no separation between art and politics; art must therefore obey the demands of the revolution. He proposed the idea of geming wenyi (revolutionary art) whose purpose was to serve the workers, peasants, soldiers, urban bourgeoisie and intellectuals. In particular, films were to be

54 Regis Bergeron quoted in Yingjin Zhang, Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary China (Michigan: Centre for Chinese Studies, 2002), 53
56 Paul Clark, Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949 (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 9
58 With respect to the last two groups, Mao meant that the urban bourgeoisie and intellectuals should cater to the workers, peasants and soldiers and with time, share in their views.
accessible to the first three groups; thus Mao exhorted filmmakers to share in the lives of workers, peasants and soldiers in order to ensure effective political education of the masses.

One of the first tasks of the triumphant CCP in the aftermath of the civil war was to establish a national system for the production, censorship, distribution and projection of films.\textsuperscript{59} The urgency with which this task was carried out is attributed to the Party leaders’ acknowledgment of the value of the filmic media as a powerful means of persuasion to propagate their belief system onto a nation\textsuperscript{60} and to create a new national mass culture.\textsuperscript{61} Guided by Mao’s thoughts on revolutionary art, Communist filmmakers adopted the documentary genre as a model to emulate because it required only the most rudimentary of cinematic techniques. Its appeal was reflected in the popularity of Communist-produced news and documentaries, prompting filmmakers to develop a scriptwriting principle which sought to base narratives in fiction films on events and people in documentaries.\textsuperscript{62}

By February 1953, the nationalization of the Chinese film industry was complete and the state was in full control of the production, censorship, exhibition and distribution of the “most important art”.\textsuperscript{63} In the same year, the Central News Documentary Film Studio was established and the First Conference on News Documentary Filmmaking was organized. The Conference declared that the aim of documentary filmmaking was to “educate the masses about Socialism” and that films “should portray models in Socialist construction”. Zhou Yang, then Deputy

\textsuperscript{59} Clark, \textit{Chinese Cinema}, 34

\textsuperscript{60} Part of cinema’s appeal was its ability to reach a wide audience even if they were illiterate. A large proportion of Chinese society then consisted of uneducated peasants and workers thus the battle to win the hearts and minds of the illiterate masses was crucial for victory. See Clark, \textit{Chinese Cinema} for more.

\textsuperscript{61} Shelia Cornelius and Ian Haydn Smith, \textit{New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations} (Great Britain: Wallflower Press, 2002), 16

\textsuperscript{62} Chu, \textit{Chinese Documentaries}, 56-57

\textsuperscript{63} Clark, \textit{Chinese Cinema}, 38
Minister of the Central Propaganda Department and Ministry of Culture underscored the uniqueness of the documentary genre by stressing its cinematic representation of actuality. He also re-emphasized the need for news and documentary films to be used by the CCP to present national achievements in order to encourage participation in the socialist reconstruction of the country. CCP reiteration of the need for film to serve politics thus sent a clear signal to filmmakers that cinema was no longer a simple matter of business or art; rather it had evolved into a serious political operation to be controlled by the state.

Therefore the politicalization of Chinese national cinema had its roots early in the Mao era. By subjecting all aspects of cinema to state control, the CCP effectively created a condition of panopticism within Chinese society, using cinema as a means to discipline its populace. Accordingly, the nationalization of cinema meant every filmmaker became a state employee with the state as the “guardian of knowledge and the supervisor of sensibility”. There was also a concerted effort on the part of the state to increase the number of film audiences through the expansion of distribution activities (i.e. mobile projection units, fixed cinemas) to ensure thorough dissemination of the new socialist mass culture. This politicalization of cinema was manifested in the wedding of film to revolutionary politics and was most apparent in the upheavals associated with the film industry as the CCP oscillated between loosening and tightening control over the industry. Shortly after the nationalization of cinema, Mao launched

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64 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 53-60
66 See Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of a Prison, Part 3 for more on panopticism.
67 Donald, Public Secrets, Public Spaces, 22
69 Clark, Chinese Cinema, 61-21. According to Clark, more than 47 million film attendances were recorded and this number grew to almost 600 million by 1956. In 1958 more than 2.8 billion tickets were distributed. He acknowledges that these figures may be incomplete or unreliable but they do indicate substantial growth.
70 Zhang, Chinese National Cinema, 190
the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956-1957), encouraging candid criticism of the regime. Many filmmakers responded enthusiastically to the campaign and openly critiqued the CCP’s dogmatism, sectarianism and intervention. 71 Within the documentary arena, filmmakers contested Lenin’s notion of documentary – a “visual illustration of political ideologies” – as the only legitimate definition of Chinese documentary. During this period, several documentaries were produced that broke free of the CCP’s dogmatic formula. 72 Annual feature production also increased as a result of this openness and new film genres (i.e. satirical comedy) and themes (i.e. affectionate portrayal of intellectuals, heterosexual love) were explored in film. Nevertheless this Hundred Flowers thaw was short-lived; in mid-1957 the CCP leadership, alarmed by the criticism directed towards them ordered an Anti-Rightist purge of the film industry. Progress made during the Hundred Flowers campaign was thus destroyed. 73

In rapid succession, the Great Leap Forward (GLF) was launched in 1958. Under the slogan of “more, faster, better, more economical”, film – an obvious tool to encourage mass mobilization – was emphasized. Documentarists were tasked with creating “cinematic illustrations of political ideologies” for mass education to assist Mao in achieving his declared goal of delivering a Communist lifestyle that would rival that of Britain and America. Hence, studios mass produced documentaries showing the people tirelessly working toward Mao’s goal even though the reality was that large parts of the nation were gripped by famine and starvation. 74 The GLF enthusiasm eventually waned with the realization of its disastrous effect on the nation and the subsequent general relaxation of Chinese political life was mirrored in the film industry. Not only was there a wider range of film subjects explored in Chinese cinema but there was the recognition that films should not only educate but also entertain. 75 Nonetheless in

71 Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, 70-73
72 Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 60
73 Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 206-207
74 Chu, *Chinese Documentaries*, 61
75 Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, 80-81, 86
a nation where politics takes precedence over all of society, cinema would find itself at the centre of attention as control over the filmic medium intensified.

The battle for control over cinema reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In February 1966, Mao called for a socialist revolution in the cultural realm following Jiang Qing’s speech at the Forum on Army Literature and Art Work, foreshadowing the decade of turbulence that would follow. Jiang – head of the ‘Gang of Four’ – and her supporters attacked the cultural leaders they hoped to supersede by arguing that a seventeen-year “dictatorship of a black line in literature and art” had poisoned the revolution. From 1966-1970, Jiang shut down all feature film production to search for a new film aesthetic that could better serve the interests of the proletariat (she eventually settled upon the revolutionary model performance film which would dominate film production till Mao’s death and the arrest of the Gang in 1976). Despite these upheavals, the documentary genre retained a special position insofar that its production never ceased. Jiang had declared that documentary film had to follow the principles of “facts serve politics” and “truthfulness serve politics”. Under her leadership, the documentary genre was fiercely guarded by the CCP and constituted the mainstream cinema. No alternative, different or critical perspectives and voices could be found in films produced during this period. Documentary film as a genre thus became inseparable from politics as the progression in its content and style came to reflect the Party’s political agenda and serves as a testimony to the importance attached to it.

3.2 Cinema in Contemporary China: 1979-present

The end of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent opening up of China saw the state retreat from the film industry and cinema was able to flourish once more. However the legacy of

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76 Zhang, Chinese National Cinema, 217. These films were a blend of modernized Peking opera, somewhat traditional ballet and revolutionary military subjects. See Film Art: An Introduction, 6th edition, David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), pp. 551-552 for more.

77 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 62, 67
the Mao era remained strong as the CCP continued to retain control of the industry even in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Hence, whilst the profound political and economic changes of post-Mao China did lead to significant new cultural developments as early as the late 1970s, the circumstances of cultural production throughout the 1980s remained shielded from the effects of the market.\(^78\) For instance the cinematic aesthetic accomplishments of the Fifth Generation\(^79\) which dazzled the West were actually produced within the existing socialist studio system. The Fifth Generation films that won international acclaim – i.e. Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (1987) – were made with huge state subsidies and filmmakers remained salaried employees of the state throughout the 1980s.\(^80\) Furthermore, it also remained mandatory for films to be submitted to the state-controlled Film Bureau for approval before distribution despite the relaxation of control over film production.\(^81\)

The period of 1989-1992 was however marked a major turning point in the history of Chinese cultural production. The June 4 violence in Tiananmen Square and the brutal suppression of student demonstrations indicated the Party-state’s willingness to take a hardline stance against perceived threats towards the regime. This incident marked the end of popular and intellectual euphoria about modernity, subjectivity and progress in China.\(^82\) In the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident, strict censorship was imposed on Chinese cinema. Consequently documentary projects which sought to break away from the style and narrative of Mao era were

\(^{78}\) McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 2-3

\(^{79}\) The Fifth Generation refers to the group of Chinese filmmakers who burst into international cinema in the 1980s. The films of the Fifth Generation in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution marked a clear break from the Maoist cinematic aesthetic. Characterized by their ambiguity which invites analytical reading that demands independent thought from its audience, these films are very much a response to the devastating impact the Cultural Revolution had on the nation. Examples of Fifth Generation films include Zhang Junzhao’s *One and Eight* (1983), Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Horse Thief* (1986) and Chen Kaige’s *King of the Children* (1987). See Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and its Films* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005) for more on the Fifth Generation.

\(^{80}\) McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 131

\(^{81}\) Cornelius and Ian Haydn Smith, *New Chinese Cinema*, 48

\(^{82}\) Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 270
shelved. It was not until Deng’s symbolic reaffirmation of the course of reforms in 1992 that cultural production could thrive once more. The emergence of “socialist market economy” as the official label for the organization of social resources, and the extension of market reforms to the cultural industry coincided with the introduction of new technologies (i.e. the Internet) into China. Filmmakers seized the opportunity presented by these changes to carve out some space for artistic autonomy despite the regime’s control of the mainstream channels of production, distribution and exhibition. It is thus within this narrow space created by the changes in the studio system and the introduction of the market economy that the independent NDM arose and continues to co-exist with China’s mainstream film industry.

83 Reynaud, “Dancing with Myself, Drifting with My Camera”, 5
84 McGrath, Postsocialist Modernity, 3-5
Chapter 4
The Rise of the New Documentary Movement (NDM)

“Every epoch, every period of social development, every class, group or layer has its own difficulties and obstacles on the way to artistic truth and, it goes without saying, its own favourable circumstances.”

Aleksandr Voronsky, 1928

4.1 What is the New Documentary Movement?

The NDM refers to the spontaneous emergence of independent documentary-making activities in the early 1990s. Until then, independent film production did not exist in the PRC. Within the context of this paper, the term “independent” should be understood as a relational term. “Independent” documentaries are thus called because they are made outside of the dominant CCP-controlled state system which claims to represent the interest of the masses. Subsequently any filmmaker who challenges state control of filmmaking (be it in the realm of production, exhibition or distribution) are viewed as pariahs operating outside of the state-sanctioned system and their works viewed as de facto illegal.

Today, the NDM has become synonymous with an objective portrayal of the lives of China’s ordinary folk from a bottom-up perspective. Frequently adopting the direct cinema mode as a reaction to the Party-state’s dominant “voice-of-God” commentary, the NDM focuses on ordinary people left behind in the wake of China’s reforms – i.e. the handicapped, peasants, migrant workers, orphans, AIDS sufferers and the poor. By using the camera as a tool to show reality as documented, the NDM aims to articulate an alternate version of ‘reality’ to

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86 吕, 纪录中国, 14

87 The first independently produced film in China is Zhang Yuan’s *Mama* (1990). The film focuses on a librarian struggling to raise her mentally handicapped son in modern day Beijing. While it is a fiction film, *Mama* includes actual interviews with parents of autistic children and thus has documentary leanings in it as well. See McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 131 for more.

the official viewpoint on Chinese politics and society and to widen the realm of political discourse in China.\textsuperscript{89}

4.2 The Birth of a Movement

The NDM is considered spontaneous because it began with individuals working independently to produce, direct and release documentaries outside of the authorized state system. Deeply affected by the 1989 Tiananmen incident and the impact of globalization following China’s transition to a socialist market economy, these filmmakers are often not motivated by economics and refuse to submit their scripts to film bureaucrats as required by law.\textsuperscript{90} First, as students themselves at the end of the 1980s, many were traumatized by the ruthless crackdown on student demonstrators. Unlike the Cultural Revolution which was publicly criticized as a national disaster, open discussion of the June 4 incident remains taboo.\textsuperscript{91} Thus these filmmakers began to employ a “concrete, open and individualistic ‘reality’ to dissolve a unified, absolutist, rigidly hollow universe of political dogma”\textsuperscript{92} as a form of rebellion against the state media and what they portrayed. Understandably, independence is very important to them because it symbolizes a breakaway from the dominant state structure and ideology that shapes mainland Chinese life.\textsuperscript{93} Second, independent filmmakers found themselves disappointed by globalization’s impact on China. Though they acknowledge the new world order that has enabled the independent production of film, they also question the value

\textsuperscript{89} 吕，纪录中国, 295-296


\textsuperscript{92} Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 4

system – capitalism – that now underlines Chinese society. Initially hopeful that globalization would bring about positive changes in society, they became disillusioned with the blind worship of money and the widening rift that ensued instead. Caught between the political control of a Communist regime and the financial pressure of globalization, these independents rarely romanticize harsh reality in their works.  

It is interesting to note that the many of the pioneers of the NDM – i.e. Wu Wenguang, Shi Jian, Zhang Yuan – had received some training in documentary-making through the state-run China Central Television (CCTV) in the late 1980s. Recruited to work on a number of large-scale documentary productions as part of the run-up to celebrations commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the PRC, the NDM’s future leaders attended “special internal study sessions” organized by CCTV. These special study sessions consisted of private screenings of Western-produced films about China; films such as Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Cina* and *Heart of the Dragon* (a twelve-part documentary collaboration between Britain, Hong Kong and China) were screened and they left a tremendous impact on filmmakers, raising their collective consciousness as they became aware that individual societal actors going about their daily lives were an invaluable resource and a vivid testimony to the changes taking place in China.  

For a short period of time, these filmmakers were granted relative creative freedom to experiment in documentary-making. The June 4 incident however made them aware that the subversive nature of their work meant that mainstream channels of communication would always remain closed to them. Subsequently many either dropped off from the TV stations that employed them – for instance, both Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan left CCTV to pursue independent work – or decided to moonlight as independent filmmakers. These filmmakers would sell their documentaries to the international network of film festivals and art venues –

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95 Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 2
where they would gain worldwide attention. In 1991 the BBI held an academic symposium on documentary film, bringing filmmakers dedicated to a new documentary aesthetic as well as the new documentaries shelved in the aftermath of the 1989 turmoil together for the first time in China. The documentaries screened stimulated spirited debates and there were even private talks of an unwritten “New Documentary Manifesto” but it was not till 1992 that these individuals banded together to assert the rebirth of documentary through a “new documentary movement”.

The advent of the relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use digital video (DV) technology, is closely intertwined with the evolutionary trajectory of the NDM. As Wang Yiman points out, the emergence of DV in China in 1998 signalled the inclusion of more amateurs within domestic filmmaking circles and “encouraged collective attention to the detailed modes of life experienced by marginalized social groups”. Thus it teases out “neglected but important social issues, rather than reductively incorporating them into an a priori masterpiece”. DV therefore implies a political stance as it empowers filmmakers to “debunk institutionalized filmmaking”. Through a combination of local and international exposure, DV also gained attention as evidence of Chinese independent documentary cinema’s progression toward “new frontiers of the marginalized and repressed” because it granted filmmakers virtually unimpeded access to remote areas previously difficult to film in.

Examples of independent documentaries made by filmmakers moonlighting outside of their “day jobs” at CCTV include Li Hong’s *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997). It tells the story of four young female rural-urban migrants seeking a better life away from the countryside. Another example includes Chen Weijun’s *To Live is Better than to Die* (2002). A harrowing documentary about a family infected by HIV after being convinced to sell their blood, it was made while he was still working at the Wuhan TV station. See Reynaud, “Dancing with Myself, Drifting with My Camera”, 4 for more.

Among the films screened were Wu Wenguang’s *Bumming in Beijing*, Shi Jian and Chen Jue’s *Tiananmen Square*. See Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 2-3 for more.

This was also the first time the term “新纪录片运动” (a “new documentary movement”) was used. See 吕, 纪录中国, 334

Wang, “The Amateur’s Lightning Rod”, 23
More importantly, the introduction of DV into China played a crucial role in accelerating the growth and institutionalization of independent documentary cinema. It enabled independent documentarists to circumvent state regulations issued in 1996 to “limit cultural autonomy and regulate the cultural market”. For this reason, the NDM is often referred to as the “DV generation”. The close links between the spread of the movement and DV technology is reflected in the increasing proportion of documentaries made in the DV format. Whilst the vast majority of independent Chinese documentaries live and die among the people and only a tiny minority make it to the global market via international festivals, their presence nevertheless indicates the existence of an emerging public sphere in post-Mao China. Through its expression of independent thought, these documentaries seek to provoke audience reaction and to engage the state in dialogue by exploring sensitive issues usually hidden in state discourse. In a country without a free and independent media, this is a bold and revolutionary move on the part of the NDM.

In sum, the context in which the NDM arose is very specific to the socioeconomic changes that followed in the wake of Deng’s reforms. To date, the CCP continues to wield control over filmmaking and demands for art to remain loyal to the state. It has established a “regime of truth” to determine the types of discourse accepted and made to function as true. This has created a cultural environment where “if art belonged to the masses, whose interests were represented by the Party, art [can] no longer be regarded as the special province of

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100 Johnson, “A Scene Beyond Our Line of Sight”, 62, 68
101 Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 14
102 Since 2000, the number of documentaries produced in the DV format has increased significantly. This development has not gone unnoticed by the state. In fact most TV stations currently have a programme dedicated to DV films. The Beijing Film Academy has also organized non-government DV exhibitions and important film festivals such as the Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival has also begun to include many independent DV documentaries in its programming. See Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 183-184 for more.
103 Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 15
104 吕, 纪录中国, 14
105 Michel Foucault, quoted in Donald, Public Secrets, Public Spaces, 22
Although a truly independent and autonomous film culture has yet to materialize in China, the NDM has nonetheless emerged out of the turbulence of the late 1980s with a preoccupation with objectivity, interest in the lives of ordinary people and the hope of providing an indirect albeit conclusive criticism of official social perspectives. It rejects the mainstream channels in favour of independent production, distribution and exhibition of documentaries. The observational style adopted by the NDM symbolizes a rebellion against the pre-scripted expository mode that characterized Mao era documentaries and its preferred subject-matter reflects the movement’s disparagement of the discrepancy between state rhetoric and actual experiences these filmmakers perceive as lying at the heart of everyday life. Determined to give a voice to China’s invisible, the NDM has transformed the documentary genre from “dogma to polyphony” and in the process of doing so, acts as an active site for the renegotiation of state-society relations in contemporary China.

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106 Haraszti, The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism, 15, 82
108 Johnson, “A Scene Beyond Our Line of Sight”, 55
109 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 217
Chapter 5
The Camera as Cinema-Eye: Rural Land Displacement and the NDM

“Only those who make a living from the land can understand the value of land.”
Fei Xiaotong, *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, 1947

The purpose of this chapter is to examine contemporary Chinese state-society relations through the prism of two NDM films – *Bing Ai* and *Where is the Way*. It will demonstrate how independent documentarists construct alternative perspectives to the official state discourse by contrasting state articulated policy to reality. Because both films tackle the topic of rural rightful resistance in relation to land displacement and resettlement resulting from large-scale developmental projects – the Three Gorges Project (TGP) in the former and highway construction in the latter – this chapter will begin with a brief overview of rights consciousness and land appropriation in post-Mao China. It will then proceed to analyze both films to demonstrate how their depiction of alternate realities help contribute to the development of a public sphere and evolution towards a greater freedom of expression, thereby recasting state-society relations in China.

5.1 Rural Land Displacement and Resettlement: The Focus of Rightful Resistance in China’s Rural Society

A survey of an estimated 2000 people conducted by the State Planning Commission in 2001 revealed that the rural populace are more likely to resort to collective protest and other direct (or even violent) means of defiance than urban residents. As such the majority of occurrences of social unrest are conducted by rural citizens. Additionally, a study conducted by the Institute of Rural Development at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)

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110 Pei, “Rights and Resistance”, 29
between 2003 and 2004 discovered that most of the cases of rural disturbances had their roots in land disputes. According to Yu Jianrong, head of the CASS research team, most of these land disputes occur either as a result of illegal or forceful land appropriation by the local government or from inadequate compensation for land.\footnote{Ling Zhao, “Significant Shift in the Focus of Peasants’ Rights Activism: An Interview with Rural Development Researcher Yu Jianrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences”, trans. Manfred Elfstrom, \textit{China Left Review}, No. 1 (Spring 2008), \url{http://chinaleftreview.org/index.php?id=7} (accessed 28 July 2010)} As Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang have shown, there is evidence to show that the rural populace is increasingly turning to “rightful resistance” to protest against the expropriation of their land. Defined as a form of popular contention that “entails the innovative use of laws, policies and other officially promoted values to defy political and economic elites”, rightful resistance is a kind of partially sanctioned protest that uses influential allies to apply pressure on power holders who have either failed to live up to a professed ideal or to implement some beneficial measures.\footnote{Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, \textit{Rightful Resistance in Rural China} (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2}

Peter Ho has argued that the trampling of villagers’ land rights can be attributed to China’s vague land ownership structure. In order to understand why this is so, there is a need to delve briefly into China’s history of land policy. It was with the promise of “land to the tiller” that Mao built his rural support base which played a key role in enabling the CCP to declare victory over the Kuomintang (KMT). After coming into power, the CCP established the Higher Agricultural Production Cooperatives in 1956, effectively ending abolishing private land ownership in China. From then land was either in the hands of the state or the collective. In 1962 following the disastrous GLF the central leadership issued the Sixty Articles, decentralizing land ownership from the commune to the production team. For more than two decades, the Sixty Articles would be the basic document defining the land ownership structure of rural collectives. The introduction of the Household Responsibility System and dismantling of communes however prompted a reassessment of the rural collectives’ ownership structure. According to Ho, in general, “the township/town (xiang/zhen) replaced the commune, the
administrative village (xingzhengcun) replaced the brigade, and the natural village (zirancun) or the villagers’ group (cunmin xiaozu) replaced the team.”\textsuperscript{113}

Even though this rural land ownership structure has been clarified in Party regulations, collective ownership remains vague due to three legacies of the collectivist past that could potentially lead to land disputes. First the absence of the rule of law coupled with the incoherent legal framework during the collectivist era (1956-1978) meant that land was often requisitioned from the team and brigade without following any formal procedures or provision of proper compensation. Moreover the weak and inconsistent legal framework then meant that villagers had no recourse to justice even if they perceived the land appropriation to be illegal. During the collectivist era the word of higher-level cadres was law; once their approval was secured, economic projects – i.e. water reservoirs, silk farms – would proceed. As a result it was difficult for the team to safeguard its interest in the land it worked on and depended on for its livelihood despite the ownership structure stipulated by the government.

Second, China continues to lack a nationwide land cadastre. To date, the Supreme Court as well as the Ministry of Land Resources considers the 1950 Land Reform and the 1962 Four Fixes Movement the basis for land title assessment. During Land Reform villagers had been issued with land titles but this was not done systematically. In addition the socio-political upheavals that characterized much of the Mao era subsequently led to the loss and destruction of an unknown number of land deeds. The 1962 Four Fixes Movement sought to rectify this by granting permanent ownership of labour, land, animals and tools to the production team. In principle, the team’s land was to be surveyed and registered but this never occurred. Attempts by the Ministry of Land Resources to strengthen the principle of “state-owned unless proven collective” has therefore created a potentially explosive situation because it is hard for villagers to prove that they have the right to be on the land they live and farm on.

The third reason for China’s vague rural land ownership structure is related to the state’s failure to recognize customary claims over the control and ownership of land. In the Chinese context, customary rights often developed at the grassroots level either alongside or in the absence of state law. This has resulted in a sense of customary entitlement that villagers expect the authorities to respect. Nevertheless like in other developing nations, Chinese villagers have a hard time getting customary land rights – which are largely unwritten – recognized by the state. Motion has defined customary law as “unwritten law established by long usage” but this begets the question – how long is long? 114

These sources of conflict over the ownership and control of land have been exacerbated by China’s rapid urbanization. According to the Constitution of the PRC “land in rural and suburban areas is owned by collectives”. 115 Yet as economic development progresses and as towns and cities continuously expand, the demand for land for industrial and commercial purposes has significantly increased. Consequently much of collective land has been subsumed within the city limits without formal change of land ownership titles to meet this rising demand. In turn cadres seeking to gain from their terms of service often approve real estate projects on collective land and this opens up large opportunities for corruption to take place. It is not uncommon to hear of villagers being forcefully evicted from their land or losing their compensation money to corrupt cadres seeking to benefit from China’s (real estate) development. 116 Considering that a large percentage of rural labour still rely on farming, the loss of land has serious implications for their livelihood. 117

114 Ho, Institutions in Transition, 61, 45-50
116 Ho, Institutions in Transition, 32-33
The rise in land disputes to become “the most serious problem in peasants’ rights” has been accompanied by the rise in rightful resistance in rural China. Like other forms of popular contention, rightful resistance involves a “collective, public challenge, based on common purposes and group solidarity”. It reflects the growing rights consciousness and a more contractual approach to political life within China. In China, the divide that arose between the central government and its local representatives in the aftermath of Deng’s decentralization has provided an opening for rightful resistance to take place. This divide is manifested in Beijing’s affirmation of its commitment to control policy infringements and criticism of cadres who neglect central policies and infringe on villagers’ lawful rights. The central government has also established institutions to rein in local officials who fail to implement policies satisfactorily. As O’Brien and Li report, the CCP leadership has long allowed citizens to “report improprieties through letters and visits offices”. Their research has also shown that many Chinese villagers trust the Centre while viewing lower levels with suspicion. Accordingly rightful resisters usually direct their frustration at the local government. In turn top Party leaders tolerate these acts of dissent because it provides them with “intelligence about policy violations and helps them break through the ‘protective umbrellas’ (baohu san) that local leaders use to fend off oversight”.119

These demonstrations can put considerable pressure on rural cadres making it hard for them to justify suppressing resisters as if they were “run-of-the-mill protesters”. Nonetheless local officials still try their best to repress such protests to avoid censure from Beijing. To communicate their grievances to sympathetic high-ranking officials, rightful resisters seek allies to help them champion their cause. The support of the media is eagerly sought because it can theoretically help generate publicity but the reality is that their assistance is at best limited. Constrained by norms established by the Central Propaganda Department detailing what can and cannot be said in the public arena, the state media is generally unlikely to intervene and report these demonstrations unless villagers do something drastic to draw the attention of provincial or national leaders. Furthermore there are also instances where investigative journalists are

118 Yu Jianrong, quoted in Zhao, “Significant Shift in Focus of Peasants’ Rights Activism”

119 O’Brien and Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China, 3-4, 28-29, 32
detained or beaten up for championing popular contention, revealing the extent local leaders will go to prevent their misdeeds from being reported to the higher authorities.\textsuperscript{120}

Still rightful resistance can effect powerful change on Chinese state-society relations. It is important to note that contention may not produce major effects directly or immediately; but through ongoing interactions in a public sphere, it can create micro-level shifts in political identities, cultivating hardened activists and influencing the way Chinese villagers think about the duties and responsibilities of the powerful. It may even inspire power holders to consider policy innovations and institutional reforms. Moreover in the course of making use of existing channels of participation to make their case, rightful resisters may simultaneously broaden them and aid in placing new issues on the agenda in a suggestive and forceful way. This is especially relevant when protests threaten social stability, thereby encouraging Beijing to pay attention to the voices of the disenfranchised rural populace.\textsuperscript{121} For these reasons, NDM coverage of rural resistance is very relevant and important in contemporary China. Not only does it construct an alternate vision to official discourse disseminated in the state media, it also negotiates the boundaries of political discourse by daring to explore subjects the state would rather keep hidden. In the process of doing so, it also serves as an ally to these demonstrators and contributes to the creation of socio-political pressure for change as it exposes the discrepancy between what the Centre says and what actually happens in reality.

5.2 Truth in Film?

Both films examined below deviate from the official Party-line to express an individual point of view regarding rural displacement, land disputes and rightful resistance. It is important to reiterate that these films comprise only a small sample of the overall NDM canon of films.


\textsuperscript{121} O’Brien and Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China, 112-116, 123
Nonetheless the production, distribution and exhibition process can be considered representative of the NDM. Thus both Bing Ai and Where is the Way offer insight to the ways in which NDM films constitute an important arena to study state-society relations in China. In exploring these politically sensitive topics, the films’ directors reconstruct an alternate perspective of reality and thus contribute to the cacophony of voices participating in socio-political discourse in contemporary China. This lies in stark contrast to the dogmatic voice of documentary cinema in the Mao era and indicates the tentative emergence of a public sphere in a country where political dissent is rare.

5.2.1 Bing Ai

In Bing Ai, director Feng Yan’s multiple award-winning 114 minute film, she presents an intimate portrait of the life, loves and struggles of an ordinary Chinese peasant woman. Zhang Bing Ai, the protagonist of the film lives with her sickly husband, Xiong Yunjian and their two children in Guilin village located in Zigui County, Hubei Province where they grow oranges along the banks of the Yangtze. Bing Ai offers insight to the discord between the Centre and its local representatives insofar that it reveals the disparity between Beijing’s policy intent and actual implementation at local levels. The family’s livelihood is threatened when they are ordered by the central government to relocate to make way for the TGP. However Bing Ai contests the local government’s execution of central policies and not only refuses to leave but also rejects the paltry compensation offered. Thus begins her decade-long struggle to protect her right to live on her land even as the water level rises around it.

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Some of the awards Bing Ai has garnered include the Ogawashinsuke Prize at the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival (2007), the Humanitarian Award for Outstanding Documentary at the Hong Kong International Film Festival (2008) and the Grand Prize at the Punto de Vista Documentary Film Festival (2008).
Feng dedicated ten years filming *Bing Ai* with the goal of documenting the TGP from the perspective of displaced villagers.\(^{123}\) The product is a rare glimpse of the reality behind this enormous hydroelectric project. The news media had been directed by the state to focus on the dam’s positive aspects;\(^ {124}\) thus, the TGP has been heralded as a symbol of China’s progress and promoted as a way to accelerate the nation’s growth. However dam construction comes at a high price. All in all 1.24 million individuals have been displaced from the Chongqing and Hubei region\(^ {125}\) – one of China’s 18 continually poverty stricken regions – resulting in the largest development-induced displacement and resettlement. Historically, development-induced displacement in China has resulted in the impoverishment of peasants due to inadequate compensation and farmland destruction.\(^ {126}\) To better cope with the TGP’s scale of displacement, the state has thus drawn upon lessons from past dam resettlement practices and incorporated the policy of developmental resettlement into the *Changjiang Three Gorges Project Resettlement Regulations*, promising to “restore or even exceed [migrants’] former living standards”.\(^ {127}\) Compared to past resettlement schemes, progress has obviously been made but problems still exist. These issues are however often overlooked due to state directives that TGP resettlement affairs be “favourably and cautiously reported”.\(^ {128}\) The official view claims that through an “arduous task” those relocated will be guaranteed a “happy and peaceful life, free of


\(^{126}\) Yan Tan, *Resettlement in the Three Gorges Project* (Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 87, 29

\(^{127}\) Deputy Premier Zou Jianhua quoted in Tan, *Resettlement in the Three Gorges Project* , 78-79

\(^{128}\) Tan, *Resettlement in the Three Gorges Project*, 113
However as will be shown later in this chapter, this is untrue. Foreign journalists seeking to cover the resettlement of villagers also find themselves closely watched by local officials determined to ensure that “negative things about the relocation” are not leaked. This demonstrates the regime’s determination to keep problems associated with the resettlement process hidden from the public eye. Hence Bing Ai emerges as a valuable source of information vis-à-vis the reality behind peasant attitudes regarding their relocation as it functions as an outlet for public frustration because it encourages the state to pay greater attention to public opinion. Thus, it emerges as an important arena to examine changing state-society relations in China.

The viewer is first introduced to Bing Ai in 1996 – the year the relocation of Guilin village’s residents first began. The camera is a relentless eye, recording their move as they dismantle their houses brick by brick, carrying their possessions to the river bank where a boat waits to bring them to their new home. Through the camera’s lens, Feng captures their reluctance to move. The camera’s gaze lingers on the tear-stained, anxious faces of the villagers. Bing Ai however refuses to sign the agreement to move to a government-designated place despite the threats of the local cadres to take away her hukou if she persists to resist. Her reasons for refusing to move are purely pragmatic – she is entirely dependent on her land for her family’s survival and the compensation offered is insufficient to even restore the family’s living standards if they move. Thus she is reluctant to abandon her land which is the source of her livelihood and according to her, “the most precious thing” because it “can give you everything”. Hence she appeals to the village cadres to let her relocate to a plot of land close by and requests that they report her case to the higher authorities.


Six years later, Feng revisits Bing Ai and Guilin village’s remaining residents. Bing Ai’s desire to live close to her land has not abated and she has requested to build on a plot within the boundaries of the Guilin No. 2 Brigade (which she and her husband belong to) but is rebuffed. Local cadres insist that she move to Lancaoping which belong to the No. 3 Brigade, declaring “living conditions are much better elsewhere”. A particularly telling moment in the film however tells a different story. A June 2002 meeting between the remaining villagers and government officials reveals the anger of the villagers who feel they “[are not] getting anything out of the migration policy. The policy of access to water, roads, electricity and land, [they have not gotten] any of it”. The state failure to at least restore their living standards is poignantly reflected in the villagers’ complaint that they now “have to carry water in a container from right over the mountain” whereas “in the past [they] never had to do that”.

Bing Ai presents a challenge to local authorities because she continues to refuse compensation and to relocate to the land assigned. Instead she persists in asking for a permit to build at a site close to her farmland arguing that if she were in a position of influence (i.e. village head, village party-secretary), her request would be granted. Bing Ai and her husband’s knowledge of their land rights are reflected in their discussions about their preferred relocation spot. As previously mentioned, the plot of land Bing Ai has her eyes on falls within the boundaries of the Guilin No. 2 Brigade which they belong to. According to Chapter 2, Article 10 of the Changjiang Three Gorges Project Resettlement Regulations:

“Those relocated should be resettled in their original villages, townships, cities and counties. If they cannot be resettled in their original villages, townships, cities and counties, they should be resettled in their original province. If they cannot be resettled in their original province, they should be resettled elsewhere in accordance with economic principles.”

131 In the documentary, Bing Ai points out how unfair it was that certain individuals with guanxi were able to obtain huge compensation for their houses whilst everyone else received a paltry amount in comparison.
The rationale behind this is to enable relocates to live as close to their original homes as possible so it is easier for them to adjust to their changed circumstances. The *Changjiang Three Gorges Project Resettlement Regulations* serves as the legal basis for the Three Gorges resettlement;\textsuperscript{132} as such Bing Ai and her husband’s request for their preferred resettlement spot falls within the purview of the law. When Bing Ai reports to Xiong that a local official had signed a contract with a villager from another brigade, he angrily responds that the actions of the local official is in violation of the law because as a member of the No. 2 Brigade, he has the right to move there. Stating that he is “not going to break the law”, he declares that he is only willing to relocate to a plot of land he is legally allowed to be on. Well aware of their rights, the couple is unafraid to question the local officials’ decision to move them to the No. 3 Brigade’s land. When their request is once again denied, Bing Ai is filmed consulting the *Zigui County Three Gorges Dam Migration Relocation Plan* and uses the rhetoric of the regime’s policies to negotiate with local officials about land rights above the flood line. Contending that the rules in the migrant handbook “must be followed”, Bing Ai seeks to hold local officials responsible for “supporting and assisting migrant relocation” as stated in Article 5 of the handbook. Moreover she argues that the actions of local officials regarding her relocation are not in line with state policies because the designated land is too far from her farmland thus violating the decree in the migrant handbook which asserts that houses built by migrants “must help production”.

When Bing Ai and her husband finally concede to look at the land assigned, they are unimpressed – the land is on a slope, lacks running water, electricity, road access and is far from the river. An official orders Feng to stop filming but she covertly continues and captures the local cadre threatening Bing Ai that “when the time comes, [she will] relocate, like it or not”. Coerced, Bing Ai puts in an application to build on Lancaoping to the satisfaction of the local cadres who leave her with the parting shot, “the government won’t abandon you”. With that, the couple is refused the right to build on ‘their’ land – Guilin No. 2 Brigade – and the state promise to at least restore their former standard of living is unfulfilled. The film ends with an intertitle

informing the viewer that Bing Ai never moved to Lancaoping even after her house was submerged in February 2003. Instead she built a shed on her fields and lived there for a year before using her compensation money (4800 yuan) to build another shed by the road where she continues to live.

*Bing Ai* therefore illustrates the disparity in state-articulated policy and reality. Compared to other resettlement schemes and past levels of compensation, senior government and project officials have insisted that resettlement compensation for affected migrants is high enough to ensure the adequate resettlement of everyone.\(^\text{133}\) Some local officials have even gone so far as to showcase prospering resettlers as “success stories”. However the reality is that these families were designated as “model resettlers” by local officials; hence they were able to receive preferential treatment during the relocation process. Displayed to senior inspectors and to persuade other families to leave, each “model” household cost about four times the average amount available for the relocation of a household. Since the central government insists that the total sum for resettlement is fixed, there is doubt as to whether there is sufficient compensation to ensure adequate resettlement of all relocatees. *Bing Ai* explores the actuality of the official discourse and documents villagers meticulously demolishing their homes brick by brick because the truth is that the final compensation amount received is largely insufficient for rebuilding after the move. According to an investigation by Chinese sociologist Wu Ming, corruption at the lower levels during the TGP was so widespread that every farmer interviewed knew of cases of officials embezzling resettlement funds meant for them. However strict controls over the reporting of problems relating to TGP resettlement meant that corruption issues were largely kept hidden from the general public in favour of “positive propaganda”.\(^\text{134}\)

\(^{\text{133}}\) Yang, “Three Gorges”

The film also exposes the callousness of local officials who appear more interested in lining their pockets and intimidating the villagers than faithfully carrying out central government policies or listening to villagers’ concerns regarding resettlement. Rural peasants possess extensive knowledge of the land around them and while they may appreciate the state strategy of resettling migrants on uphill sites (especially if they are unwilling to take the government-organized distant resettlement option), they are also aware that conditions in elevated areas are inherently more difficult for farming and living.\(^{135}\) Nonetheless the local cadres caught on film seem unconcerned that the poorer quality of replacement plots will have a negative impact on villagers’ income level. The covertly recorded scene by Feng serves as a powerful testimony to the apathy of local officials who were willing to abuse their power to get their way. The camera therefore captures the way villagers are excluded in the key decision-making process of resettlement. It also reveals the tension that arises between villagers and government officials due to the lack of understanding of the desires and needs of those affected by the TGP.

Bing Ai’s struggle with the government also reveals the development of rights consciousness in the countryside and willingness of peasants to contest what they perceive as injustice. In relation to the TGP, there have been several instances of rightful resistance over issues of resettlement and compensation. The Gaoyang protest is among one of them. In 1997, Gaoyang’s villagers organized a petition movement against corruption and embezzlement by local officials, criticising them for failing to redistribute adequate financial resettlement. The villagers had also discovered that the land designated to them that would allow them to stay in the same township were scattered plots of poor quality soil along sloping ground. Declaring the land unusable and claiming that officials had embezzled up of three million yuan of land reclamation fund, villagers brought their case all the way to the capital, succeeding in getting a commission to investigate the case. Moreover in 2003 the liberal, Hong Kong based South China Morning Post reported on “long standing complaints that resettlement plans are ill conceived, funds inadequate and that monies allocated for this purpose have been embezzled by

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\(^{135}\) Yang, “Three Gorges”
corrupt officials continue to be ignored.” This particular article also noted that frustrated residents are “increasingly resorting to public protests, sometimes resulting in clashes with police or local officials”.

As relocatees become increasingly vocal of the perceived injustice done towards them, the central CCP leadership has worked to clamp down on potential sources of grievances by meting out punishment to high-level offenders and addressing smaller outbreaks. For instance the Centre has indicted more than 100 officials on charges of corruption. At the same time, in order to maintain support for the project and socio-political stability, the Centre had issued a number of orders prohibiting the mass media from disseminating any news of scandals involving state functionaries, including corruption cases, without prior approval. Instead it broadcasts documentaries such as CCTV’s On the Other Side of the Dam which foregrounds the process of TGP evacuation and compensation to bolster support for the regime and the project. On the Other Side of the Dam offers a top-down perspective of local government, emphasizing the execution of central government directives by the local administration. Although the film includes complaints and expression of dissent, the CCTV camera is mainly directed at those who appear content with their resettlement and compensation. This carefully orchestrated CCTV documentary thus presents the evacuation process as a reasonably controlled operation and adopts the observational style to lend it an air of objectivity. In contrast, Bing Ai depicts the relocation process from a bottom-up position and is witness to the difficulties faced by the relocatees. Feng’s courage to pursue such a politically sensitive topic strictly monitored by the CCP thus establishes Bing Ai as an important ally for those affected by the TGP. Not only does it compel the viewer to reflect on the flip side of modernization and the price China’s dispossessed and disempowered pay, it also recasts state-society relations by giving a voice to those marginalized and neglected.

136 Beattie, “Dam Building, Dissent and Development”, 150-154
138 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 205
5.2.3 Where is the Way

In 2005, 117 families of Lian Feng village, located in Wei Yuan county of Gansu Province were ordered to leave their homes to make way for the county government’s road expansion plan. The authorities planned to widen the road running through the village, demolish the houses next to it, replace them with a row of uniform two-storey houses and connect the new road to the highway to accommodate China’s rapid urbanization. The affected villagers however, believed that the actions of the local officials were illegal and refused to comply. Led by two village elders – Xi Zhiren and Gong Jinfu – they decided to confront the local officials using legal channels available to them to protect their rights. Zhang Ke and Dong Yu’s short 44 minute observational documentary Where is the Way chronicles the course of their resistance and serves as a testimony to the legal process as experienced by the villagers.

Where is the Way was produced as part of the EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance’s Visual Documentary Project on China’s Village-Level Democracy. Introduced in 2005, the project is headed by Wu Wenguang and Jian Yi. The aim of the documentary project is to bring together young filmmakers and villagers to see the changing realities from the perspective of the young generation and people whose lives are dependent on the villages. This project represents an unprecedented step forward in creating a “burgeoning, multi-voiced public media sphere” that strives to challenge the existing boundaries of public debate in China. Where is the Way opens with jerky, handheld camera footage recorded by the villagers in April 2005 documenting a scuffle between them and the local officials. Following the news of the impending demolition of their homes, the villagers requested to meet with the local township officials. They had hoped to have a look at the official documents handed down from the higher

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139 Zhang Ke and Shen Shiping, “EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance Proposal”, 3
141 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 211
authorities verifying that the land appropriation and implementation of the road construction plan was in accordance with the stipulations of the law. However the local officials not only refused to entertain their request but also insisted that the villagers had agreed to move voluntarily. This angered the villagers and sparked a clash between both parties which cumulated with the village head’s attack on Xi Zhiren who had to be hospitalized for several days after. The camera captures the village head looking on with disdain at Xi Zhiren lying motionless on the ground, surrounded by fellow villagers as he walks away from the scene. The camera’s role as a witness to the rough treatment meted out to villagers seeking to protect their rights thus serves as a powerful reminder of the basic function of film and why it is so critical to continue to record this period in Chinese history.  

Yet this attack did not deter the villagers who not only went to Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu to appeal to the courts but also, as a testimony to the growing rights consciousness in rural China, sent a representative to the Beijing State Council to petition the government. As the film unfolds, it becomes apparent that the villagers are not completely opposed to the land appropriation. In a conversation with a village leader, Xi Zhiren argues that the villagers are not trying to hold back the development of the village. Rather, their struggle is tied to the demand for social justice as the disparity between government policy as articulated and the reality vis-à-vis rural land rights materializes.  

According to Article 8 of China’s Revised Land Administrative Law (hereafter referred to as Land Law):  

“Land in the urban areas of cities shall belong to the state. Land in rural and suburban areas shall belong to rural collectives, except that is owned by the state in accordance

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142 Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 16
143 Zhang and Shen, “EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance Proposal”, 3
with the law. Housing sites, plots of land and hilly land for personal use shall also be owned by rural collectives”.\textsuperscript{144}

As previously mentioned, the dismantling of communes in the early 1980s forced the CCP to redefine rural land ownership. During the Mao era, the production team which had been the basic holder of land ownership and accounting has now been replaced by the natural village (zirancun) – a traditional concept that refers to the villagers’ sense of what is local and long-standing – and the villagers’ group (cunmin xiaozu).\textsuperscript{145} Subsequently, Article 11 states that:

“Land owned by peasant collectives to be lawfully used for non-agricultural construction shall be registered and recorded by people's governments at the county level, which shall, upon verification, issue certificates to confirm the right to the use of the land for such construction.”

Growing commercialization and the expansion in urbanization following Deng’s reforms has resulted in the steep rise in the value of land. In turn this has often led to the forceful eviction of villagers by corrupt local cadres as seen in the case of Lian Feng village. Additionally, the local government’s refusal to have a dialogue with the affected villagers and the village head’s attack on Xi Zhiren clearly violates the decree that the relevant local people’s government “listen to the opinions of the rural collective economic organizations and inhabitants whose land is requisitioned”.\textsuperscript{146} Nevertheless both Xi Zhiren and Gong Jinfu are aware that the township government cannot make unilateral decisions vis-à-vis land appropriation as evidenced in the film. There are several scenes in Where is the Way showing both men deep in conversation, discussing how best to counter the illegal demolition of their homes by using laws and officially sanctioned policies to make their case. Xi Zhiren and Gong

\textsuperscript{144} The Land Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000), 5
\textsuperscript{145} Ho, Institutions in Transition, 44-45
\textsuperscript{146} The Land Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China, Article 48, 27-28
Jinfu prove to be well-informed about their rights and highly organized in their legal battle against the local government. In one scene, both men have gathered together four days before the provincial court announces its decision vis-à-vis their appeal. Surrounded by fellow villagers, Xi Zhiren and Gong Jinfu are seen plotting their next step and preparing to build a new case against the local government if their appeal is turned down.

In November 2005, the villagers learnt that their appeal had been turned down by the provincial court. The court ruled that the villagers had agreed to move voluntarily; it also determined that compensation standard for the affected villagers would be set at 3 yuan per square metre for the site and 40 yuan per square metre for any built-up structure on the requisitioned land. Considering that the average monthly per capita income of the villagers is an estimated 500-600 yuan,\(^\text{147}\) the amount offered would be insufficient for displaced villagers to rebuild their homes. Discontented with the court’s decision, Xi Zhiren and Gong Jinfu thus decided to petition the court once more. Citing laws and regulations to challenge the state, both men are filmed making rounds in the village to alert fellow villagers of their right to contest the court’s decree.\(^\text{148}\) The directors express their implicit criticism of the state’s lack of support for the poor by deliberately highlighting the villagers’ poverty. As Xi Zhiren and Gong Jinfu go about their task, rallying fellow villagers to their cause, the camera captures the dark interiors of the villagers’ homes, the lack of heating during winter time, the derelict condition of their houses and the unpaved roads that run through the village.

*Where is the Way* ends with both men once again purposefully making their way to the provincial capital to petition the court. Undeterred by their previous failure and the threat of retribution by local cadres, the film is a visual testimony to the endurance and resourcefulness of

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\(^{147}\) Zhang and Shen, “EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance Proposal”, 2

\(^{148}\) Publicizing policies, demanding dialogue and face-to-face defiance are variants of direct action. See O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, 69-76 for more. Also in *Where is the Way*, villagers are seen engaging in these variants of direct action in their demand for social justice.
the villagers. At the same time, *Where is the Way* exposes the inconsistencies in the state articulated rhetoric and reality. In the process of doing so, it also serves as an ally to China’s marginalized by publicizing their grievances when the official mainstream media refuses or is unable to do so. Though the film remains silent on the result of their final petition, in an email message received from Zhang Ke, he reveals that the efforts of Xi Zhiren and Gong Jinfu did pay off. The long stalemate between the villagers and government finally ended when the latter agreed to a fairer standard of compensation to the villagers. This reaffirms the villagers’ point that they are not merely unruly and rowdy protesters but are fighting against the injustice that they feel has been done to them. In fact, with the completion of the road construction project, the village has begun to flourish because it is now more easily accessible.149

Interspersed with long takes of rural daily life, *Where is the Way* is therefore a moving testimony to the tenacity of the villagers determined to protect their rights. By documenting the process of their rightful resistance against the state, the directors of the film provide crucial evidence of the local cadres’ abuse of power and apathy towards the villagers. Like *Bing Ai*, *Where is the Way* challenges the “positive propaganda” circulated in the official state media and seeks to reconstruct reality from an alternate standpoint. Hence it defies the guidelines and regulations issued by the state to not “discuss problems that cannot be easily solved.”150 It also offers an indirect critique of the government for not doing more to provide sufficient support for China’s disempowered and dispossessed. This implicit criticism of the state is significant because divergence from the approved state viewpoint would not have been tolerated during the Mao era. However in the post-reform era, the potent combination of a rebellious cinematic movement and the proliferation of mass social unrest have bestowed Chinese society with greater autonomy, attesting to the renegotiation of the boundaries of public discourse in China. The NDM therefore establishes itself as an important arena to examine changing state-society relations in contemporary China by exploring aspects of politics and society usually hidden from official discourse.

149 Zhang Ke, email interview by author (8 June 2010)

150 Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, 97
Chapter 6
Evaluating Contemporary State-Society Relations through the NDM

Both *Bing Ai* and *Where is the Way* are representative of the NDM insofar that they are independently produced, distributed and exhibited. Moreover they share the NDM’s dedication to exploring China’s marginal people (i.e. migrant rural workers in the city, homosexuals, the rural poor, etc.) and social realities (i.e. corruption, poverty, the dark side of urbanization and the economic boom). These subjects however constitute some of the most politically sensitive matter in contemporary Chinese society. Such subject matter is sensitive not because it cannot be addressed but rather, its coverage requires an unwavering alignment with the state-sanctioned perspective. With regards to the issue of rural rightful resistance and land disputes, the default position of the government is to prevent independent investigation into such cases. The official media has been instructed to uphold the CCP goal of emphasizing “stability above all”;\textsuperscript{151} as such there is concern that a multiplicity of voices competing with the official state discourse may threaten to undermine the Party-state’s carefully crafted image of social stability, as well as the regime of truth enunciated in the state-sanctioned media.

The regime is well aware of the potency of the media and its ability to shape knowledge and influence values. Considering that the evolution of the documentary genre is closely intertwined with the changes in China’s political landscape, the state’s response to the NDM functions as a useful indicator of contemporary state-society relations. In this chapter, this thesis will first examine the domestic reception of *Bing Ai* and *Where is the Way* because it serves as a useful mirror to gauge the Party-state’s response to the NDM. It will then proceed to explore the

\textsuperscript{151} Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, 77
larger implications of this cinematic phenomenon on contemporary Chinese state-society relations.

6.1 Implications of the NDM & State Response

Like all NDM films, the *de facto* illegal status of *Bing Ai* and *Where is the Way* means they have to rely on unofficial channels of distribution and exhibition for screening purposes. Nevertheless despite the CCP’s suppression of the distribution and exhibition of these films, both *Bing Ai* and *Where is the Way* have helped to draw attention to much neglected socio-political issues. This is reflected in amount of publicity it received within China even though its articulation of an alternate viewpoint represents a breakaway from the dogmatic, didactic and authoritative voice that characterizes mainstream media.

After receiving critical acclaim in the international film circuit, *Bing Ai* was chosen as part of the 2008 Reel China Documentary Biennial (hereafter known as Reel China) programme despite being blacklisted and banned from public screening. Praised for its sensitive and objective portrayal of TGP resettlement, *Bing Ai* was awarded the prestigious Grand Award at an awards ceremony held at the Shanghai Museum of Modern Art. As one of the most influential independent film festivals and biggest archival centres specializing in contemporary Chinese documentaries, Reel China is a well-established festival with links to more than twenty worldwide universities and cultural institutes. Similarly, *Where is the Way* enjoyed a relatively high profile when it was released in China in 2006 because it was part of the pioneering batch of films to be independently produced as part of the ongoing EU-China

152 See Jury’s Comments at Reel China for more reviews of *Bing Ai*. <Stable URL: http://www.reelchina.net/english.htm> (accessed 5 August 2010)


154 Examples include Yale University, Columbia University, New York University, Stanford University, University of Washington, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), New York Public Library, New York Asian Cultural Center, Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Boston, the Frontline Club in London, and Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe (ZKM) in Germany. See http://www.reelchina.net.
Training Programme on Village Governance Young Filmmakers’ Documentary Project between the European Union (EU) and the Chinese government. In fact, the mainstream media began publicizing this project as early as in September 2005 when Wu Wenguang and Jian Yi announced a call for documentary proposals in the newspapers and on the Internet. Upon its completion, Where is the Way was screened on two separate occasions at Wu Wenguang’s Cao Chang Di Workstation – an independent art space in Beijing which allows for the consumption of unsanctioned cultural products – and enjoyed a month long run respectively. Currently Where is the Way is stored in the Cao Chang Di Workstation’s documentary archive where it is available for screening at no cost to the public.

The domestic reception of both Bing Ai and Where is the Way is striking because it reveals their ambiguous position in contemporary China. On one hand, the regime suppresses independent films by declaring its production, distribution and exhibition as illegitimate. On the other hand, the manner in which Bing Ai and Where is the Way were received suggests that independently produced films may be slowly gaining acceptance in mainstream discourse. Nonetheless the state has not hesitated to take a hardline stance to repress independent screenings or to rein in independent filmmaking when it deems necessary. For instance, in 1996 the Chinese government passed the Regulations on the Administration on Movies to rein in independent filmmaking as part of its campaign against “spiritual pollution”. When it became apparent that independent documentary scene was gaining in strength in spite of attempts to contain it, the State Council promulgated new guidelines in 2002 reaffirming that films which “endanger the unity of the nation” or “disturb the public order or destroy public stability” are prohibited from being made.

155 Johnson, “A Scene Beyond Our Line of Sight”, 55, 61-62

Since the NDM burst onto the Chinese filmic scene, numerous independent filmmakers have been blacklisted for engaging in activities deemed subversive to the state. Examples include Zhang Yuan’s *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) which deals with the topic of homosexuality and alienated youth in China, Ai Xiaoming’s *Our Children* (2009) which focuses on the experiences of parents whose children were killed when their schools collapsed during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and Zhao Liang’s twelve-year project *Petition* (2009) which records the stories of a group of petitioners seeking justice in Beijing. The authorities have also intervened to cancel the exhibition of NDM films. In September 2001, the Beijing Film Academy (BFA) organized an independent film festival which consisted of experimental films, feature films and documentary films. The festival was however prematurely cancelled after its organizers were reprimanded by the government and forced to submit self-criticisms after.

This control of the media appears to be working in favour of the CCP; there is good reason to believe that protest forms vis-à-vis the inconsistency between state rhetoric and reality spread slower in China than in more open polities where the media deem dramatic, innovative tactics newsworthy.

As such, these films can at best have a limited impact in the domestic market because their filmmakers are forced to look for alternative distribution and exhibition networks. Moreover, because the state controls the means of repression and knowing when and in most cases where independent documentaries are being made and screened it possesses the will and capacity to snuff out any non-state sanctioned project if it so desires. If this is so, why did the Party-state not stop the Reel China screening of *Bing Ai*? Also, in the case of *Where is the Way*,


158 Lin, “Documentary in Mainland China”, 15

159 O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, 77


161 The 1998 crackdown on the Chinese Democracy Party, the 1999 suppression of the Falungong and more recently, the harsh stance taken by the central government in Tibet and Xinjiang reveals how the CCP is able to respond to any perceived threat to the state if it wishes.
why did the regime agree to a joint project with the EU to allow independent films to be produced yet prevent it from being screened in conventional ways and in meaningful venues? Does the state’s response to Bing Ai and Where is the Way imply a tentative acceptance of independent documentaries and in turn suggest the emergence of a public sphere? A closer examination of the discourse surrounding the NDM suggests that positive inroads are being made in the struggle for greater freedom of expression within China. Considering that the evolution of the documentary genre is closely intertwined with the changes in China’s political landscape, the state’s response to the NDM functions as a useful indicator of contemporary state-society relations.

As the field of independent documentary continues to expand and attract filmmakers from all corners of China, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the state to keep the lid on issues it wishes to keep hidden from the public. Moreover the NDM has been gaining greater attention within China in recent years. As Bing Ai and Where is the Way demonstrate, the NDM has succeeded in widening its domestic viewership despite its de facto illegal status and dependence on unofficial channels of distribution for exhibition. This lies in stark contrast to its earlier years when it could only depend on the international network of film festivals and art venues to promote and exhibit its films. Within China, there are several independent film festivals that regularly take place on Chinese soil. In addition to Reel China, other noteworthy film festivals include the China Independent Film Festival (CIFF), China Documentary Film Festival and the Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival. Because the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) continues to claim jurisdiction over any film festival, the official status of these events are ambiguous at best. Yet these festivals are well-established, prestigious affairs which not only draw international coverage but also provide a rare

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162 The Film Bureau was reorganized in 1998 as part of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). SARFT is directly managed by the Central Propaganda Department which has a leadership role over the whole of the media and cultural sector in China. See Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, 15-18 for more.
opportunity for independent Chinese filmmakers to get together.\textsuperscript{163} Besides independent film festivals and art spaces, the number of options available for avid viewers of independent documentaries has also increased. This is illustrated in the proliferation of private film clubs offering screenings of independent films. Seio Nakajima’s study of film clubs in Beijing reveals the emergence of an alternative film culture which serves as an important public space for the consumption of these films.\textsuperscript{164}

In addition, China’s Internet revolution also offers filmmakers a dynamic platform to launch, promote, screen, purchase and discuss documentaries. Interested viewers have the option to download and view “illegal” titles through websites which include Wu Wenguang’s Cao Chang Di Workstation, CIDFA and dGenerate Films.\textsuperscript{165} More significantly, independent filmmaking and the NDM have emerged as a source of lively debate and discussion in the mainstream Chinese media as well as in art-related and scholarly publications in recent years. Much attention has been paid to the political implications of independent filmmaking and the discourse is often reacculturated to fit into the context of Chinese cultural production. Nevertheless, Chinese film scholars and academics are unable to reach a definitive consensus concerning the significance of this cinematic movement. On one hand, there are scholars such as Dai Jinhua who emphasize the movement’s “enlightenment value” and praise it for promoting independent thinking and individual autonomy – both of which have been suppressed in the PRC due to historical and political reasons. On the other hand film critics such as Zhang Fu take


\textsuperscript{165} These websites have established themselves as the premier source of information regarding independently produced documentaries in China. Some of the officially banned films can even be screened or bought on these websites. For instance CIDFA (www.cidfa.com) is a valuable source of independent Chinese documentaries because it offers free online access to these films even in China; Cao Chang Di (www.ccdworkstation.com) provides up-to-date information regarding the latest happenings in the realm of independent documentary making in China and dGenerate Films (www.dgeneratefilms.com) is dedicated to the promotion of independent Chinese films.
the view that whilst the independent movement is technologically innovative and potentially subversive, it needs to prove itself by going “beyond shock value and become well-rounded.” Despite these disagreements, the appearance of several exploratory volumes and college textbooks devoted to this subject suggest a growing acceptance of independent filmmaking by the official establishment. In many ways, the growing interest in this phenomenon is itself a testimony to its historical significance.166

Thus it appears that regime has chosen to respond to independent documentary’s divergence from the official state discourse with simultaneous repression and wary acceptance. At this conjuncture, it must be reiterated that the state is in no way a monolithic entity; rather it consists of liberals and conservatives with opposing views on cultural production. It is vital to note that the flourishing of the NDM is ironically a direct result of new government policies that permit the relaxation of government control over the media. Ultimately the regime’s unofficial sanctioning of the NDM – as reflected in its entry into mainstream discourse – would not be possible without the support of reformers and cultural liberals within the CCP.167 They argue that the independent documentary scene serves as a “useful pressure release mechanism” and that it is in the state’s political interest to permit these filmmakers to “blow off steam” in the unofficial sector. Hence they are willing to turn a blind eye to the overseas demand of these films, believing they “make[s] China look good”. Moreover the cultural liberals are largely unwilling to take drastic measures to silence NDM filmmakers who are protected by the international visibility of their work. These reformers contend that the independents will refrain from outright criticism of the Party and point out that the independent film scene provides young filmmakers with something to do in view of the dearth of opportunities in the state filmmaking sector following market reforms in the state studio system. They argue that the independent film world could serve as a training ground for ambitious filmmakers to hone their skills before recruitment into the state system.


167 Chu, Chinese Documentaries., 3, 212
Seen from this perspective, the state clearly “allows” independent documentaries to be made and exhibited. Yet the central leadership also refuses to spell out in detail what subject-matter is acceptable or unacceptable. Nonetheless on the part of the filmmakers, it is well understood that there exists a tacitly respected set of political topics that should be avoided. These include direct criticism of the Party-state, the issue of the status of Tibet, the Tiananmen incident and free elections. Still the ambiguity and vague boundary markers have created an environment in Chinese cinema where “everything is political and nothing is political at once and the same time.” In other words, politics is “everywhere and yet it subverts itself at any moment”.

Liberal elites argue that independent filmmakers will accept the foundational rules laid down by the state. In return for their compliance, they get to explore subjects largely neglected in the mainstream media. By and large, the NDM does accept the boundaries set out by the state. The notable increase in scholarly discussions of the NDM as well as the surfacing of independent documentaries without much official objection can be attributed to a symposium jointly organized by the China Filmmakers’ Association, the China Film Corporation and the Beijing Film Studio in 1999. One of the key issues the symposium addressed was how should the state respond to the emergence of independent films. Zhao Shi, an official from the Mass Media Bureau of the central government sent a clear signal that the state wished to co-opt the independent movement and this prompted some participants to declare that a “mutual understanding” had been reached between government officials and independents. Also, the presence of prominent NDM directors – i.e. Li Hong, Jia Zhengke – at a follow-up symposium in 2002 suggest that the independent documentary scene is making inroads into the official

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168 Pickowicz, “Social & Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China”, 6-8
169 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 216
170 Chen Xiaoming, quoted in Zhang, Screening China, 332
171 In discussion with Zhang Ke regarding obstacles encountered when filming without a permit, he comments that China in general offers a fairly relaxed environment for independent filmmakers as long as sensitive issues such as the Tiananmen incident and Tibet are left alone. He personally has never encountered any problems while shooting and is proud to announce that he is a CCP member.
establishment. Today, there is a significant number of NDM directors moving with ease between the independent film world and the state sector. These documentarists spend their free time producing “illegal” films despite being either an employee of the state or a CCP member. Examples include Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhengke, Cui Zi’en and Zhang Ke.

From this point of view, independents are essentially being placed in a “velvet prison” where they are expected to engage in self-censorship. In this velvet prison, the state is content to open up a space for criticism so long as independent documentarists pledge allegiance (passive or active) to the authority of the regime. However as Paul Pickowicz argues, instead of holding on rigidly to this velvet prison model and viewing cultural production in contemporary China as being firmly in the hands of the Party-state, it is vital to note that the individual standpoints articulated by the NDM – regardless of whether self-censorship occurs – symbolizes a radical transformation from representation based on an ideological conception of ‘truth’ to a depiction of ‘truth’ based on perceptual actuality. To view state-society relations in such binary zero-sum terms would be to dismiss too quickly the “wide range of criticism that emanates from the velvet prison”. Furthermore, the state believes that it controls cultural production but today, thousands upon thousands of Chinese filmmakers are documenting their lives and surroundings in a way defended as more individualistic and truthful as opposed to the official text put out by the state.

172 Chen and Xiao, “Chinese Underground Films”, 146-147
173 In an email interview with Zhang Ke, he was proud to announce that he is a CCP member and a university film professor. This appears to be a common phenomenon among NDM directors. Cui Zi’en for example is also a faculty member of the Beijing Film Academy and as such is a state employee.
174 See Haraszti, The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism for more
175 Chu, Chinese Documentaries, 217
177 Reynaud, “Dancing with Myself, Drifting with My Camera”, 13-15
The deepening of the reform era has therefore made it much harder for the state to police cultural production. In addition there are filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchan who underscore the importance of preserving autonomy vis-à-vis official forms of representation if social realities are to be objectively and accurately portrayed.\footnote{Johnson, “A Scene Beyond Our Line of Sight”, 63-64} Seizing the opportunity provided by the state to test the limits of public discourse, these filmmakers persist in their negotiation with the regime to expand the boundaries of public space. At times they may be rebuked and forced to step back in line at times (manifested in the blacklisting of documentaries) but continue with the hope of obtaining success at a later date. Compared to the dogmatic representational style that dominated documentary production in the Mao era, the diversity of subject-matter in Chinese documentaries today and the mainstream debate surrounding the significance of the NDM represents a shift towards a greater degree in the freedom of expression and confirms the NDM as an active arena to examine state-society relations in contemporary China.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine state-society relations in contemporary China through the prism of the NDM. In adopting a bottom-up approach to state-society relations and acknowledging the multiple arenas in which the state and various social forces engage in mutually transformative interactions, it has demonstrated how the exploration of the NDM sheds light on the condition of Chinese state-society relations. The politicalization of the Chinese national cinema and the documentary genre has created an environment whereby the degree of control exercised over the film industry has come to reflect the political climate of the PRC. This can be attributed to the legacy of China’s Maoist past. Utilized by the CCP as a cinematic illustration of governmental policies and achievements, documentary was forced to conform to the regime of truth as dictated by the ruling elite. Following Deng’s policy of “reform and opening”, the CCP’s monopoly on the articulation of ‘truth’ has been challenged by multiple individual voices seeking to present a range of alternative vistas, each claiming to be more ‘truthful’ than the official discourse. The analysis of Bing Ai and Where is the Way demonstrates how the NDM’s exploration of sensitive topics can contribute to the socio-political pressure for change especially when it aligns itself with the voices of the nation’s dispossessed and disempowered.

The two-prong approach of repression and acceptance adopted by the state in response to the NDM reveals its ambiguous position because of the regime’s attempt to co-opt it especially as it begins to enter China’s mainstream discourse. Independent documentarists value their status because it gives them credibility as they seek to provide an objective, realistic view of Chinese politics and society. Yet many of them operate within a set of boundary markers which is akin to placing them in a velvet prison. While it is easy to dismiss these filmmakers as unsanctioned state employees, it is nevertheless, vital to note that these documentaries were produced under politically ambiguous and difficult circumstances. Hence it is important to view
this development with nuanced eyes. Ultimately, through its reconstruction of reality the NDM is slowly chipping away at the foundations of state socialism.\textsuperscript{179} State and social forces are thus engaged in a complex dance of ongoing negotiations for a more genuine freedom of expression and the possibility of a Habermasian public sphere.

Considering the growing number of independent documentaries exploring sensitive socio-political issues, as well as its grudging acceptance by the official establishment, it appears that the NDM is here to stay. Given the positive inroads made by independent filmmakers in recent years, it is hard to deny that a significant and critical discourse vis-à-vis documentary-making will continue to develop. Whether these filmmakers will be able to express their point of view freely and without constrain remains to be seen. The Party-state’s response to the NDM so far however suggests that with regards to the issue of cultural liberalization, the regime plans to adopt the approach of “crossing the river by feeling the stones”. Nevertheless with the support of liberal allies within the government and as film audiences become increasingly sophisticated over time, it is likely that the boundaries of political discourse remain in a continuous state of flux, proving that state-society relations do not remain frozen despite the survival of the one-Party state in contemporary China.

\textsuperscript{179} Pickowicz, “Velvet Prisons and the Political Economy of Chinese Filmmaking”, 217
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