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'My' self on camera: first person DV documentary filmmaking in twentyfirst century China

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'MY' SELF ON CAMERA:
FIRST PERSON DV DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IN TWENTY-
FIRST CENTURY CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This project explores first person DV documentary filmmaking practice in China in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Building on existing studies of first person filmmaking in the West, which predominantly analyse filmic self-representation on the textual level, this study addresses two themes: the film text as an aesthetic and cultural object that constructs a self; and the filmmaking as a practice and a form of social participation, through which individual filmmakers as agents actively construct representations of their own selves and their subjectivities.

Focusing on the work of nine filmmakers, including Yang Lina, Shu Haolun, Hu Xinyu, Wu Haohao, and Ai Weiwei, I argue that these films illustrate the makers' individual selves as multi-layered and conflicted, situated in complex familial and social relationships, and in the changing relations between individuals and the state. In addition, this practice can be seen as a form of provocative social participation in the era of 'depoliticised politics', that stimulates important individual critical thinking and helps to form a new kind of political subjectivity, to reconstruct political value and reactivate the political space in China. These films and the filmmaking practice not only reflect some aspects of the changing concept of individual self in contemporary China, but can be seen as a generative and constructive process, that further contribute to the changing constitution of the individual subject in China.

Through close textual analysis of this body of first person films and this filmmaking practice, I demonstrate features of the complex changing relations between the public (*gonggong*) and the private (*siren*) space, between the collective (*jiti*) and the personal (*geren*), and between the individual (*geti*) and the party-state (*dangguo*) in post-socialist China. The project aims to contribute to current debates in the international field of first person filmmaking, and to studies of contemporary China.

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The thesis uses the *pinyin* system to romanise Chinese characters. Chinese-language names and phrases first appear in pinyin, followed by the English translation then the Chinese characters in brackets. When it is to emphasise the English translation, it appears in pinyin followed by Chinese characters in brackets, then the English translation. Chinese-language film titles all appear in their English translations. In the filmography, a list of these film titles is shown in the format of English titles- Chinese titles - name of filmmaker - year of production. Names of Chinese authors, filmmakers and individuals appear according to the Chinese convention, i.e.family name followed by the first name.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this dissertation carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Westminster. The work is fully original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree. The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

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'My' Self on Camera
First person DV documentary filmmaking in twenty-first century China

Introduction

I.   Background of the Research

My interest in the first person video diary started in 2008. In Autumn 2008, I was given a chance to work as a part-time researcher on a BBC documentary production 'China's Capitalist Revolution'. The film was constructed through interviews with western politicians, scholars, Chinese exiles, and historical archives on China shot by western media. In addition to being a cultural production as a TV programme, this film explored the complexity and difficulty of 'cultural translation'. As the central task of classic social anthropology,[1] cultural translation has become more widely relevant in the current context of globalisation. Documentary film, with its strong visual impact in presenting 'reality', has been used as an important mediator in the discourse of representing the cultures of 'others'.

Fascinated by how a Western film crew represents the country I originally come from, I began to make a first person ethnographic film about the crew and my experience working on this production. I documented my negotiation, as an ethnographer and researcher, with the crew in their editing suite and offices. I also made intensive video diaries recording my personal confessions and responses to this film.

During this filmmaking, I encountered the central question in reflexive ethnography of how to position myself and understand my own subjectivity. I constantly asked myself "Who am I? How have I come to be what I am now?" As the only Chinese person on the crew, my self-identity became a major issue. For the first time I was exposed to a large amount of contradictory archive materials on the history of modern China. Such materials disclosed historical narratives that were new to me. I had discussions with the director, the editor and the assistant producer on issues on which we in China have been

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[1] Lienhardt, "Modes of Thought", 95-107; Beattie, *Other Cultures*.

given different views. I saw my 'self' as split into different parts: the self that had been constructed in China had become more complicated since I came to the UK.

Who am I? Or what is 'myself'? A Chinese person by ethnicity? But what does it mean to be a Chinese person in the contemporary world, especially as I constantly shift between two geo-cultural entities? How has the culture in the era of Deng's economic reform constructed my self-identity? How could I position myself facing two 'cultures'? I produced *Memory of Home* (2009), a ten-minute first person video exploring the inner truth of myself, or my psychological difficulty in positioning myself when facing China's massive urbanisation and my current position in the West. I increasingly found it difficult to present the question of how the 'Western' side of myself sees the 'Chinese' side of myself and vice versa, one of my original aims.

I felt it was very difficult and problematic to separate and define what are the 'Western' and 'Chinese' sides. In the post-modern era, the 'Western' self is no longer easily accepted as a voice of controlling consciousness. In the same sense, an essential Chinese culture hardly exists. In addition to early imported culture such as Buddhism in ancient China, modern China has been influenced by - and merged with - 'imported' cultures since at least the late 19th century. Looking at myself, my personal trajectory illustrates the multi-layered culture of contemporary China.

Born in the 1980s in central China, which claims to be the heart of ancient Chinese culture, I moved to Shenzhen at the age of nine. As the first Special Economic Zone, Shenzhen epitomises the transition of China's socio-economic structure in the post-Mao era. It is the 'city of experiment' of the socialist market economy, openly embracing 'Western' capitalist culture and Chinese migrant culture. Locating Shenzhen in the larger context of China, the culture of Shenzhen mirrors the overall picture of a modern China in the throes of dramatic transformation and urbanisation.

The realisation of the problematic nature of my own social, cultural and politically-situated identity urged me to explore how the self is represented in first person documentary films in general. I started to explore 'Western' first person films, to understand how Western filmmakers present themselves within Western society. As a

domain within international cinema, the first person non-fiction film has been increasingly practised by western filmmakers and artists since the late 1960s in North America and Europe. The films I watched included Jonas Mekas' video diaries, *News From Home* (dir. Chantal Akerman, 1977), Ross McElwee's autobiographical films, *Treyf* (dir. Alisa Lebow, 1998), *Reassemblage* (dir. Trinh-T. Minh-Ha, 1982), *Tongues Untied* (dir. Marlon Rigg, 1989) and others. These filmmakers document their own social engagement. Their films reflect a multi-layered, fragmented, 'Western' self. Then I started to explore Chinese first person filmmaking. I aimed to find out how the sense of self is represented in the first person films made locally in the contemporary Chinese context. I believe that through studying these first person self-representations, I will have an insightful view on what it means to be a 'Chinese' in today's world. Hence the focus of this research.

II.   Research focus

This Ph.D. thesis explores the first person digital video (hereafter called DV) documentary filmmaking practice in China, which emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The first person documentary film, known as 'autoethnography'or 'autobiographical film', has been practised in countries like America, some European countries, Japan and so on since the 1960s. As a domain in film studies, it has raised much scholarly attention over the last three decades, such as the writings by Michael Renov, Catherine Russell, Laura Rascaroli, Alisa Lebow etc. However, as I observe, this filmmaking approach has only been practised in China by a small number of filmmakers and DV amateurs over the last ten years. When I first started the research, it was still being largely ignored within the independent filmmaking community. Only in the last three years have more independent filmmakers and critics started to notice this new form of video practice. In current academic study of Chinese independent cinema, this is a realm that has been little explored.

The existing studies of first person filmmaking in the West predominantly approach the filmic self-representation on the textual level and its socio-political implications. There has been little exploration of how the socially and culturally grounded notion of self in the West has informed aesthetic and ethical choices in the making of first person films.

Scholars in Chinese film studies tend to take independent films as departing from the mainstream cinemas, or the cinema of previous generations, and focus on how independent unofficial films function as personal historiography that challenges mainstream political ideologies. In my study, I regard the first person documentary practice in contemporary China as both a critical comment on contemporary socio-political conditions and a challenge to current new documentaries which primarily focus on representing others. I focus on first person filmmaking on the level of the individual. The study primarily asks: how is the self represented through the filmmaker's own camera and what does self-expression in the contemporary Chinese context really mean? How does the first person filmmaker position his or her self in their complex relations with others, the society and the state, in the process of filmmaking?

I argue that the first person documentary practice in China has gone beyond what Michael Renov proposes as the four distinctive functions of documentary, those of preservation, persuasion, analysis, and expressivity.[2] The focus should be put on the action of filmmaking itself. I argue that first person filmmaking practice can be seen as a kind of provocative act. These filmmakers not only actively deconstruct their selves for self-understanding, but also further probe the current problematic social relations in which they are situated. Wang Hui argues that China is currently in an era of "depoliticised politics", a time that is lacking in "political debates, political struggle, and social activism around specific political values and their attendant benefits".[3] I argue, along with some other scholars, that, there are increasing political struggles and activist movements, not just limited in the virtual space in China. The first person documentary practice, that emerged in the beginning of twentieth century China, hence can be seen as a new form of political subjectivity, an important individual expression of critical thinking and social participation that helps to reconstruct political values and reactivate the political space in China.

The post-socialist decollectivisation process which unties individuals from previous social and ideological institutions has allowed some individuals with more autonomy. Equipped with the digital camera, the individual selves analysed here explicitly exhibit

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[2] Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 21.

[3] Wang, "Depoliticized politics," 690-1.

their subjectivity and raise their personal voice by turning the camera inward on themselves. However, these films illustrate that these filmmaker selves are not entirely 'disembedded' from traditional and socialist social relations. In fact, they are presented as multi-layered and conflicted, situated in complex and diverse social relationships among family members, between individuals as individuals within society, and between individuals and the state. Overall, these films and the filmmaking practice can be seen as important sites and powerful generative and constructive forces, through which the self, constituted within multiple spaces and practices, is constantly being (re) constructed. Engaging with a broader discursive environment, film contributes significantly to the changing constitution of the individual subject in China.

III.   Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters, each of which investigates certain aspects of the topic.

In Chapter One, I position my research in the field of film studies and review related academic studies, including current studies of first person filmmaking practice, and the independent new documentary filmmaking in contemporary China. My questions are:

- What do current studies of first person filmmaking practice investigate?
- What are their main achievements and what has been ignored?
- How is first person filmmaking positioned in the history of Chinese independent cinema?

I note that existing Western studies focus on first person non-fiction films made in the Anglo-European social cultural context.[4] They examine the historical and theoretical context of the post-1960s 'West' from which Western first person filmmaking emerged. Placing varying emphasis on different aspects, current scholars name this practice using different terms, such as 'filmic autobiography',[5] 'autoethnography',[6] 'first person

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[4] Renov and Suderberg, *Resolutions*; Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*; Renov, "First-person Films," 39-50; Russell, "Autoethnography," 275-314; Lebow, *First Person Jewish*; Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*.

[5] Renov, "First-person Films," 39-50.

[6] Russell, "Autoethnography," 275-314.

documentary',[7] or 'personal cinema'.[8] Although these studies have provided great inspiration to my study, they predominantly examine the social-political implications of this practice in the 'West' and how the individual self is represented on the textual level. However, they have performed little exploration into how the Western socially and culturally grounded notion of self has informed aesthetic and ethical choices in the making of first person films.

In addition, I review the key notions that have been discussed in the field of Chinese independent film, including 'post-socialism', 'New Documentary Movement', 'independent' and 'personal'. Existing studies focus on how independent, 'unofficial' films function as personal historiography, and how these films are a counterweight to mainstream cinemas, which are controlled by the government and heavily influenced by commercial factors in the new socialist market economy.[9] However, few studies have explored how such independent films, especially the first person films studied in this thesis, explore the filmmaker self on the level of the individual. Through reviewing current studies in this chapter, I not only develop a complex understanding of current studies in the field of first person filmmaking and Chinese independent cinema, but also reaffirm my focus on studying first person filmmaking practice as an action, an ongoing social-political participation.

In Chapter Two, I explain the methodology of this research into the first person documentary films in contemporary China. I make textual analysis, combined with analysis of the filmmaking practice, through conducting semi-structured interviews with the chosen filmmakers. After explaining how my focus on the filmmaker self originated, I describe the process I have gone through in collecting and selecting the films in my first fieldwork in Beijing, and how I analyse the films and the filmmakers. In analysing the films, I argue that author theory is not entirely relevant to analysis of first person films, as they are films made by a single author and about that 'author'. Therefore, I

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[7] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*.

[8] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*.

[9] Lu, "*Jilu Zhongguo, Dangdai Zhongguo Xin Jilu Yundong*"; Zhang, "Rebel without a cause?"; Berry, "Independently Chinese", 109-22; Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private'"; Wang Yiman, "The Amateur's Lightning Rod," 16-26; Wang Qi, "*Writing Against Oblivion*"; Berry, Lu and Rofel, *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*.

explore how the choice of setting, camerawork, lighting, and sound create a representation of the self on camera, and how they form a particular personal style and perspective as part of the self. To analyse the filmmakers, I conduct semi-structured interviews with the filmmakers in my second fieldwork, which allows me to explore in great depth the backgrounds of the filmmakers, their personal trajectories, and their production and screening experience from a subjective point of view. I am aware of the drawbacks of interviews, and point out that the interviews only play a complementary role and need to be further examined alongside the analysis of the films.

In Chapter Three, I explore the key notion underpinning the study of first person filmmaking in China – the individual self/individual subject, both the maker and the presented in this filmmaking practice. This exploration is essential to situate the articulations of the individual self that emerge in the films and the filmmakers' analysed in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The chapter is structured on the basis of the major themes concerning the constitution of the individual self, developed from the first person documentary films and filmmaking practice analysed in this thesis. I asked:

- What aspects of self are demonstrated in these first person films? How are these different features of the construction of self cultivated in contemporary Chinese society, from historical and cultural-philosophical perspectives?

- What are the social and technological factors facilitating people turning the camera on themselves?

I conceive the individual self in post-Mao China as multi-layered and encompassing a multi-temporal character, inherited from the discursive history of changing notions of the individual, especially since the late Qing period. As illustrated in these films and demonstrated in this first person filmmaking practice, the individual has to deal with different and sometimes contradictory forces and socio-political relations. Five key themes on the construction of the individual self I have identified as it emerges in these films. These are 1) the collective sense of self; 2) paternal authority and gendered expectations; 3) filial duties and expectations of familial obligations; 4) the changing relationships between individuals and the state; 5) the social interactions between

individuals as individuals in their own right. Of these five, the first three themes explore the construction of the individual self by and through family relationships, obligations and expectations. These family relations, especially the paternal authority and filial duties, further mirror the state authority and the submission of individual subjects to the state. The last theme of how individuals interact with each other outside the familial space extends the familial relations which historically dominate the interpersonal social relations.

These five themes are discussed within the context of the discursive history of the construction of the individual self since the late nineteenth century, when early modern intellectuals openly attack Confucian family ethics. Throughout the course of twentieth century, the construction of the individual self has been articulated through huge ideological shifts. The exploration of these five key themes is not only to understand the self in these films, but also to understand the intention of this filmmaking practice, and to see how this practice has further constructed the self, by transgressively pushing the boundary of current familial and social ethics.

In Chapter Four and Chapter Five, I focus on the first person filmmaking that explores the self in a semi-private and semi-collective space, the family-home (*jia*,家). I argue that the changing dynamics of familial relations, illustrated in these films, also reflect the changes of the much wider social relations in the social political pace. In Chapter Four, I focus on three films made in 2000 and 2001: *Nightingale, Not the Only Voice* (dir. Tang Danhong, 120mins, 2000); *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple* (dir.Wang Fen, 45mins, 2000); and *Home Video* (dir. Yang Lina, 64mins, 2001). In Chapter Five, I analyse three films made in the late 2000s: *Nostalgia* (dir. Shu Haolun, 70mins, 2006), *Family Tree* (dir. Yang Pingdao, 278mins, 2008), and *Family Phobia* (dir. Hu Xinyu, 180min, 2009). It is interesting to note that the first three films are all made by amateur female filmmakers, while the latter three are all made by male filmmakers.

I ask:

- In what ways are these films different from what Michael Renov regards as 'domestic ethnography'[10] made in an Anglo-European context?
- How does this practice of filming the familial relate to earlier personal writing and independent filmmaking practice?
- How are the films made in the early 2000s different from the films made in the late 2000s?
- What are the social conditions that contribute to the emergence of this filmmaking practice in the early 2000s and the late 2000s?
- What are the social and personal implications of these films in China?
- How is the self represented in their familial space and relations through the filmmaker's own camera?
- In the process of filmmaking, how does the first person filmmaker as a social agent position his or her self culturally, socially, and ethically, in relation to the self, their family members and the society?

I note that while the current studies of 'domestic ethnography' in the West emphasise the documentation of familial others as complementary to the construction of the self, the familial self-representations in a Chinese context emphasise the self as highly relational and situated within the familial relations. Hence, unlike Renov, I use the term '*familial self*' to describe these films. Instead of focusing on the '*self*', I pay attention to the '*familial*' as the central site, where the first person filmmakers display their individual selves in the context of familial relations and familial space. These films are different from previous new independent documentaries in China which primarily focused on marginalised public spaces. I observe that while the female first person films primarily investigate and question the filmmakers' problematic family relations and their accumulated history, the three male first person films are more like ethnographic documentations of the structural and spatial changes of their family, disrupted by fast-path urbanisation.

In Chapter Four, through analysing the interviews with these filmmakers and reading their background, I observe that the institutional reform of 'decollectivisation' has untied the three individuals from the socialist work institutions and allowed them to do

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[10] Renov, "First-person Films," 39-50.

what they desire to do, which is not their original profession. Their films can be seen as having developed out of the context of the growing number of women's 'individualised writings' in the late 1990s. Adopting a strong authorial first person voice, they all turn the camera on their family from the point of view of their role as the daughter. Challenging the traditional 'father (the old) - son (the children)' relationship, they have gone beyond the stereotyped obedient passive image of the daughter. In fact, they examine their problematic familial relationships through a dual role as both a daughter and an 'outsider', an independent individual.

I argue that though these three women explicitly question their parents through proactive investigations with a camera, they in fact try to communicate with their parents, and show care for them. In this sense, their practice can be seen as what Evans identifies "a communicative practice"[11], as well as a re-negotiation of filial duties. Nevertheless, their films illustrate that 'the family', a traditional institution that has historically defined the individual in an ethical relational society, still influences the construction of the individual self as multi-layered and conflicted in contemporary China. Though the three filmmakers present themselves with strong individual authority, their authorial voices do not just speak for themselves. They present themselves as being situated within complex familial relations, and as thinking highly of the family as a collective group that has given them a sense of identity.

In Chapter Five, I first probe the social and technological contexts that have encouraged more first person filmmaking, amongst an increasing number of DV documentary practices. The advance of digital technology and the participatory media web 2.0 have played a compelling role in encouraging self expression and social-political participation, such as making DV documentaries. While the three women filmmakers can be seen as the pioneers of DV filmmaking in China, more people have participated in DV filmmaking during the 2000s, and some have also focused on their selves and their familial space. The three films analysed in this chapter take their family as the central site, to document its transformation. Taking a dual position, their vision is no longer the pure insider's 'look' at their familial life, but is also the inward 'gaze' of a relatively autonomous individual with other social roles. Their self-reflexive

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[11] Evans, "The Gender of Communication", 986.

examination is not just for a personal purpose, but is also a significant social-political act, to understand how individuals' family homes have changed in a fast-changing social and economic environment. Like the female filmmakers, the three male filmmakers do not present themselves as the central focus. Their films demonstrate that family as a traditional institution has constrained the individual selves to develop their own lives in particular ways. However, individuals still seek protection, security and a kind of identity from their families. Furthermore, their films also reveal that the family has to some extent become the site where the tension between the individuals and the state plays out.

In Chapter Six, I study a group of first person films that represent the individual self outside the familial space, in public spaces. These films are also growing out of the increasing amount of DV documentary practice. I mainly focus on five films made by three filmmakers: *Kun 1: Action* (dir. Wu Haohao, 2008), *Criticizing China* (dir. Wu Haohao, 2008), *Martian Syndrome* (dir. Xue Jianqiang, 2010), *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* (dir. Xue Jianqiang, 2010), and *Laomatihua (*a.k.a. *Disturbing the Peace*, dir. Ai Weiwei, 2009). My questions are:

- What are the 'public spaces' where the individual selves film themselves?
- What are the social conditions that cultivate this practice of representing the self in public spaces?
- How are these films different from - and similar to - those made in other social and cultural contexts, such as in Japan and America?
- How are they different from the familial self-representations?
- In the process of filmmaking, what kinds of social relations does the first person filmmaker create, in relation to the self, to other individuals and the state?
- How are they represented through the filmmaker's own camera in the public spaces?
- What are their social-political implications in China?

Drawing on Chris Berry's conceptualisation of 'public spaces', multiple sites where different power configurations and relations play out, I term these films as representations of a '*public self'*. I understand the individual self as an important agency that is negotiating with different internal and external forces and relations in the

'public spaces'. When the party-state retreated from public life, it also withdrew the previous socialist welfare system, leaving individuals with more autonomy but little institutional protection.[12] In these three filmmakers' practice, their selves are not just passively shaped by the forces and relations in existing public spaces, but are challenging the socially defined conventional interpersonal relations, through actively filmmaking. Their filmmaking has some similarity with Japanese filmmaker Kazuo Hara's 'action documentary'. It is not only intended to further understand oneself in the social public spaces, but also actively presents this self as a power, trying to reactivate the political space in China's 'depoliticised era'.[13]

These five films illustrate the rebellious and rights-conscious 'public selves', and their changing social relations. As these films depict, the traditional social and moral norms still play an important role in defining how individuals interact with each other and with the state. However, they also demonstrate that some young 'public selves' are left out in their own spaces, longing for communication. Some of them are actively participating in social events, challenging the established social relations. Nevertheless, I also observe that while regarding themselves as heroes or saviours in their communities, some of their practices also tend to be very problematic.

All together, these six chapters build up my understanding of the first person documentary practice in the first decades of twenty-first-century China. The first three chapters provide the background for understanding how my research developed, how this filmmaking practice fits in with the tradition of documentary film and Chinese cinema, and how it reflects the changing notion of the individual self in China. The other three chapters analyse these films thematically in great detail. They demonstrate that this filmmaking practice as a form of individual social/political participation adds a small but vigorous contribution to China's ongoing modernisation project, and that these films as individuals' own representations illustrate multi-layered and conflicted selves in familial and public spaces that are undergoing dramatic transition.

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[12] Yan, *The Individualisation of Chinese Society*, 288.

[13] Wang, "Depoliticized Politics", 695.

Chapter One

Literature Review and Study Focus

I.   Introduction

This chapter contains two parts. In the first part, I will provide a review of current studies related to my research on first person DV documentary making in post-socialist China during the first decade of the twenty-first century. I will first review existing studies of Anglo-European first person non-fiction films. Scholars in this field use different terms to describe this practice, such as 'filmic autobiography',[14] 'autoethnography',[15] 'first person documentary',[16] and 'personal cinema'.[17] After analysing the differences between these terms, I choose to use 'first person documentary' to describe the films made in a contemporary Chinese context. While these studies have provided significant inspiration for my own study, they have some limitations. Predominantly examining the filmmaker's self-representation on the textual level, they have done little exploration into how the filmmakers' understanding of their own selves in a Western social and cultural context has informed their aesthetic and ethical choices in the making of first person films. Then, I will review key notions that have been discussed in the Chinese field, including 'post-socialism', 'underground'/'independent', 'personal/individual filmmaking' associated with amateurism, and ethical dilemmas. These studies explore the economic-political and cultural conditions of so-called independent practice, and the aesthetics and ethics of these films. However, the majority of these studies tend to focus on how independent unofficial films function as personal historiography, and how these films counterbalance political constraints and mainstream cinemas.

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[14] Renov, "First-person Films," 39-50.

[15] Russell, "Autoethnography," 275-314.

[16] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*.

[17] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*.

In the second part, I will explain the focus of this thesis. As part of amateur individual DV filmmaking, first person DV documentary filmmaking is a domain that still remains largely unstudied. I regard this practice as both a comment on contemporary social-political conditions and a critique of current Chinese new documentaries that tend to focus on representing the 'others', as Jaffee points out.[18] Exploring how first person filmmaking focuses inwardly on the maker's self, my research questions address two themes: 1) the film text as an aesthetic and cultural object that constructs a self; and 2) filmmaking as a practice through which filmmakers as individual agencies construct representations of their own selves and their subjectivities.

I argue that the camera-mediated self representations illustrate multi-layered and conflicted individual selves in a contemporary Chinese context. This filmmaking practice can be seen as an act, a mode of social participation and a new form of political subjectivity that intervenes in what Wang Hui regards as today's depoliticised era in China. The 'politics' in the term 'depoliticised', is "a sphere borne of an active subjectivity".[19] These film texts and the practice of filmmaking together are powerful generative and constructive forces that construct the self. While reflecting some aspects of the changing concept of individual self in contemporary China, they further contribute to the changing constitution of the individual subject in China.

II.   Review of current English language studies on first person filmmaking

First person non-fiction film and video has become a domain of its own in international cinema. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, filmmakers and artists in the 'West',[20] mainly in North America and Western Europe, have increasingly documented their own social engagement, reflecting their multi-layered fragmented self identities in terms of

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[18] Jaffee, "*Every Man a Star,*" 102.

[19] Wang, "Depoliticized politics," 690.

[20] I recognise the words 'West' and 'Western' as being problematic. In this thesis I henceforth use the term to refer to North American and West European societies.

socio-cultural practice, ethnicity and sexuality that are constantly in flux. Such an emerging domain of cultural practice has produced a small number of studies from the tradition of Anglo-European film studies in the past twenty years.[21] Existing scholars name this practice with different umbrella terms, such as 'filmic autobiography', 'autoethnography', 'first person documentary', and 'personal cinema', which cover different subgenres, and different forms of first person narrative non-fiction films that have emerged in the Anglo-American and European social context. In this section, I will examine the key contributions of current studies. They have influenced how I understand the notion of 'self' in the contemporary Chinese context, and also offer some tools for me to use to analyse Chinese first person films. In addition, I will also probe the limitations of current studies, upon which my own studies aim to expand.

1.   The context of post-1960s Western first person filmmaking

Firstly, these scholars examine the historical and theoretical context of the post-1960s 'West' from which Western first person filmmaking emerges. This includes the cultural atmosphere and the advance of video technology, as well as the philosophical and epistemological changes in Western anthropological and cultural studies. These have inspired me to look into the specific social context in contemporary China, from which Chinese first person filmmaking practice has emerged.

Scholars argue that first person filmmaking, which first emerged in the realm of avant-garde and video arts in the late 1960s and 1970s, comes from the tradition of autobiography and the art author films. Michael Renov observes that the cultural atmosphere in the 'West' during the late 1960s and 1970s was dominated by "the displacement of the politics of social movement by the politics of identity…The women's movement changed all that and helped to usher in an era in which a range of 'personal' issues – race, sexuality, and ethnicity – became consciously politicised… In all cases, subjectivity, a grounding in the personal and the experiential, fueled the

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[21] Renov and Suderberg, *Resolutions*; Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*; Renov, "First-person Films," 39-50; Russell, "Autoethnography," 275-314; Lebow, *First Person Jewish*; Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*.

engine of political action."[22] Focusing on the autobiographical feature, Renov argues: "Film has the power to stop and even reverse time's inexorable passage, providing a powerful tool for the obsessive investigation of the past, autobiography's stock-in-trade."[23] Rascaroli emphasises the authorial subjective feature of first person films, which is located in the tradition of the art film, "developed in Europe especially in the 1960s, at a time when the filmmaker 'became' an auteur, took up a central position in both textual and extra-textual discourse and reconnected to the experiences of the historic avant-gardes, and, learning from the novelties introduced by Italian neorealism, attempted to produce a personal, private, idiosyncratic vision of the world."[24]

Technological advances, especially the development of video and more recently the digital video camera, have played a vital role in providing a new production and distribution mode. Catherine Russell points out the important role that the technology of representation plays in the identification process of the self, arguing that "autoethnography in film and video is always mediated by technology, and so unlike its written forms, identity will be an effect not only of history and culture but also of the history and culture of technologies of representation" .[25] In the 1970s, the art critic Rosalind Krauss pointed out the narcissistic nature of video. She argued that this first generation video apparatus is a medium that "is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time, producing instant feedback… The body of the self is centered between two machines, the camera and the monitor, that re-project the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror."[26] Renov believes that: "Video can be seen as a format historically joined to the private and the domestic, a medium capable of supplying inexpensive sync sound images, a vehicle of autobiography in which the reflex gaze of the electronic eye can engender an extended, even obsessive, discourse of the self."[27] Russell observes that video diaries tend to have a slightly different temporal effect from

[22] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*,176-7.

[23] Ibid., 43.

[24] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 108.

[25] Russell, "Autoethnography," 281.

[26] Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 52.

[27] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 203.

filmic autobiography which exploits the temporal lag between filming and editing.[28] In fact, as I will explore further in the next section, technological advance is also a major cause of the emergence of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking in the late 1990s.

In addition, scholars have also been aware of the changes in epistemological preconceptions of the relationship between 'the self and others', and the critiques of the centrality of subjectivity. The epistemological critique of post-modernism and post-structuralism on classic social anthropology placed a strong emphasis on the new reflexive ethnography.[29] Ethnographers started to conceive of subjectivity and their own position differently, which usually involved self-inscription. Based on this, Russell expands Mary Louise Pratt's term "autoethnography" to the field of filmmaking. For Russell, "(a)utobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a 'staging of subjectivity' – a representation of the self as a performance."[30]

Originally, Mary Louise Pratt's definition was developed from the post-colonial perspective, focusing on self-representation by 'others' who have been represented by the Western 'self'. Russell on the other hand sees that the subject in autoethnography can also be the Western 'self'. However, Russell's focus on the Western self does not depart from the centrality of the subject. She makes no critique of Western self-inscription, except in pointing out that "the utopian impulse of autoethnography relies on a certain mobility of the filmmaker and remains in many ways couched in modernist, imperialist, and romantic discourse".[31] Unlike Russell, Renov criticises the lack of self-justification of white male professional documentarists in the Direct Cinema, who "had assumed the mantle of filmic representation with the ease and self-assurance of a

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[28] Russell, "Autoethnography," 280.

[29] Tyler, "A. Post-Modern Ethnography."

[30] Russell, "Autoethnography," 276.

[31] Ibid., 280.

birthright".[32] He sees that "the new autobiography, far from offering an unselfconscious transcription of the artist's life, posits a subject never exclusive of its other-in-history... transforming the ways we think about and represent ourselves for ourselves and for others".[33]

Exploring the complexity of the construction of the self as subject in the post-modern context has also been one of the focal sites in current literatures of film studies. In fact, it has also received intensive debates by political theorists, cultural theorist, and philosophers. In a post-modern and post-structuralist perspective, subjectivity is understood as a constructive process, while identity is seen as floating, reflexive, and transitional, filled from those outside us, rather a complete product.

Political theorists and sociologist such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim regard the individual self in the 'second modernity'[34] as non-linear, fluid, reflexive.[35] The cultural theorist Stuart Hall famously claims that "[r]ather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of identification, and see it as an ongoing process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a lack of wholeness which is 'filled' from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by others."[36] This understanding of identity as an continuous process has huge influence on the discussions on the construction of subjectivity in studies of first person films.

Michael Renov regards the construction of subjectivity in what he calls 'the new autobiography' or filmic autobiography as "a site of instability--flux, drift, perpetual revision--- rather than coherence".[37] In her study on first person Jewish documentary, Alisa Lebow argues that the self "is a constructed, culturally inscribed, fragmentary, and

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[32] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 181.

[33] Ibid, 111.

[34] Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010, p.xiv. [no 2010 reference in bibliography]

[35] Beck, 2000 [no 2010 reference in bibliography]; Lash, 2000 [no reference in bibliography]; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

[36] Hall, quoted by Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 10.

[37] Renov, "the Subject in History," 10.

incomplete narrative that is neither the sole invention of an ideologically autonomous author, nor the collectively overdetermined product of a monolithic culture, but rather is some admixture of these two impossible positions, made even more impossible by the fact that the cultural context is highly heterogeneous and always at some measure of remove".[38] Laura Rascaroli points out the influence from what Jean-Francois Lyotard regards as the end of metanarratives: "The mistrust in master narratives leads to the phenomenon of the diminishing of authority found in postmodern discourse."[39] Rascaroli also raises the question of the possibility of representing subjectivity in the cinema by comparing filmic and literary autobiography. She argues that it is the very question of identity that really matters, as the pronoun 'I' even in the literary form remains problematic, as "[i]n postmodern times, the (Western) self has become decentred, split, liquid, protean, displaced, multiple, schizophrenic, as well as socially constructed."[40]

In her well-known and influential book *Gender Trouble*, the post-structuralist Philosopher and feminist theorist Judith Bulter develops the concept of performativity, which has occupied central stage in the debates on gender identities. Understanding identity as a social process, she regards gender identity as enacted, culturally constructed, through repetitions of socially and ideologically rooted acts.[41] In other worlds, gender identity is a constructive process, which is expressed through what one does, remains open for (re-)interpretations, rather than a solid status defined by what one is according to hegemonic social conventions.

Bulter's notion which understands identity as performative also has strong impact the studies on the self construction in reflexive, autobiographic and first person documentaries. Inspired by Bulter and some others, Alsia Lebow emphasises on the process of negotiating the cultural and social conventions in the first person filmmaking, which further generates the self. "In the process of self-representation, the autobiographer inevitably encounters a profusion of cultural tropes that must be

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[38] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, xvi.

[39] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 4.

[40] Ibid., 10.

[41] Bulter, *Gender Trouble*.

negotiated. It has been suggested that this is all the more true for him, considering its tendency to 'typify' characters. Autobiography, then, has the unenviable task of confronting, confounding, and even confirming the assumptions, impressions, and (mis) conceptions about the author's or filmmaker's identificatory positionings. We might even say following Foucault and Butler, that it is in the process of negotiating and articulating these perceptions that the autobiography generates the self, which may then be (mis)apprehended as having existed prior to these mediation. In other words, it is only through this process of naming and imag(in)ing that the subject is constituted, and this naming always emerges out of a history of names that have been called. This naming-class is of course the process through which knowledge is attained and power is gained and claimed.".[42]

The discussions on the decentralised, liquid and multiple 'self' in the Western post-modern context and the complexity of construction of subjectivity in autobiographic and first person films are of great significance to my own study on the self in the contemporary Chinese context. From the post-colonial perspective, the 'Western self' is no longer easily accepted as a voice of authority, facing other cultures. From the post-structuralist perspective, the 'self' in Western social contexts is understood as fragmented, multi-layered and always in flux. In this sense, the essential 'Chinese self' hardly exists, given that modern China has been influenced by - and merged with – 'imported' cultures since at least the late nineteenth century. Throughout the twentieth century, the changing political and economic structures has further complicated the self as heavily layered and conflicted. Inspired by Lebow's discussion on the generative force in first person filmmaking practice, I regards the first person filmmaking practice as an action or social practice that further contributes to the construction of the self. In other words, the practice of representing subjectivity itself can be seen as part of the process of constructing the self.

2.   Key development of current studies

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[42] Lebow, *First Person Jewish,* pxvii.

Current scholars each have their specific focus in studying first person filmmaking. Russell's study is a general overview on what she calls 'autoethnography'. She observes four levels of self-inscription that construct a fragmented self-identity. These are: the self as speaker, the first person voice-over; the self as seer, the 'origin of gaze'; the self as the seen, the 'body image', and the self as the avant-garde collagist or editor.[43] She also identifies some techniques of self-inscription, such as by creating new voices or new subjectivities; by self-performing; through testimonial, confessional discourse; or through memory and travel that create temporal and spatial distance which split different moments of the self.[44] Her observation of different levels and techniques of self-inscription is very valuable for first person film text analysis. I will use Russell's four levels of self-inscription as an analytical tool to explore the Chinese first person films. However, her study tends to be over-generalised and lacking in specificity. Firstly, her statements cover films ranging from those by Western, mostly American, independent filmmakers, home-video amateurs, to 'third world' filmmakers, without offering any further specific historical and social context. In addition, she does not further explore how different techniques of self-inscription have developed in the 'Western' film tradition, and how they create different sub-genres under the umbrella of 'autoethnography'.

As a key writer in this field, Renov focuses on what he calls 'autobiographic documentaries' or 'filmic autobiography' in post-1960s American society. He observes that filmic autobiography has many forms, including the essay film, the electronic essay, the diary film, the video confession, the epistolary mode, domestic ethnography, the personal web page, and the blog.[45] In his analysis, Renov emphasises the 'essayistic' and confessional feature of such films. He is one of the first scholars to borrow the literary term 'essay' to describe this domain, such as 'the electronic essay' or 'essayistic impulse'.[46] He takes Barthes's interpretation of the essay as reflective text and argues

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[43] Russell, "Autoethnography," 277-8.

[44] Ibid., 178-80.

[45] Renov, "First-person Films," 44.

[46] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*,104.

that such 'essayistic' self-interrogation shares some characteristics of autobiography, hence the name 'new autobiography'.[47]

In addition, Renov dedicates a large amount of writing to what he calls 'video confession'.[48] He sees it as grounded in Western history, as "Western epistemology presumes a subject who must submit to the truth, one whose substance and identity are constructed in relation to an authoritative Other."[49] For Renov, video has played a significant role in transforming Western confessional culture, by changing the power relations in the traditional confession that Foucault identified. The video camera's immediacy of feedback, and the possibility of operating it by oneself, enable the subject to "achieve a depth and a nakedness of expression that is difficult to duplicate with a crew or even camera operator present".[50] In fact, this satisfied Foucault's formulation of confession as "a discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement", in which the 'speaking subject' is understood as necessarily and simultaneously being the 'enunciating subject'.[51] Hence, Renov identifies the function of first person video confessions as self-examination and emotional recovery. "Video confessions produced and exchanged in non-hegemonic contexts can be powerful tools for self-understanding as well as for two-way communication, for the forging of human bonds and for emotional recovery…the media facilitate understanding across the gaps of human difference rather than simply capitalising on those differences in a rush to spectacle."[52]

Renov also studies intensively what he regards as 'domestic ethnography' - the construction of the 'other' self, the familial other, as a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice which also functions as a vehicle of self-examination.[53] Overall, Renov focuses on the 'essayistic' and confessional features of first person films

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[47] Ibid., 105-6.

[48] Renov and Suderberg, "*Resolutions*"; Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*.

[49] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 193.

[50] Ibid., 203.

[51] Renov and Suderberg, "*Resolutions*", 85.

[52] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 215.

[53] Ibid., 218.

that are primarily grounded in 'Western' historical contexts. I will examine how these features can be understood in the Chinese context. His notion of 'domestic ethnography' in the Western context will be examined in my study on the films that explore the familial self in Chapter Four and Five.

Alisa Lebow's study *First Person Jewish* is more culturally and historically specific. She studies independent Jewish first person films among Jewish diasporic communities. Lebow points two distinguishing features of first person documentary, 'subjectivity' and 'relationality'. I have discussed the complex construction of subjectivity in the previous section. In terms of relationality, Lebow claims that first person expression always belongs to "the first person plural", which is in her case the collective identity of Jewishness. "Autobiographical film implicates others in its quest to represent a self, implicitly constructing a subject always already in-relation - that is, in the first person plural. As psychoanalysis teaches, and as others such as Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler have argued, the self is always a relational matter, never conceivable in isolation. First person film merely literalizes and makes apparent the fact that self-narration - not to mention autobiograpohy - is never the sole property of the speaking self. It properly belongs to larger collectivities without which the maker would be unrecognizable to herself, and effectively would have no story to tell."[54]

 Lebow's discussion on 'relationality' inspired me to think to what extent this is also the case in the cultural imbrications of first person documentaries in contemporary China. While Renov emphasises how these films function for emotional recovery and self-understanding for the filmmaker, Lebow focuses on the wider political implications of these films. She argues that "every autobiography engages the embodied knowledge, memory, history, and identity of much larger entities than the self".[55] This position of emphasising the political significance of personal filmmaking is also shared by many scholars researching Chinese independent cinema, which I will discuss in the next section.

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[54] Lebow, *First person Jewish*, xii.

[55] ibid., xv.

In addition, following on from Renov's notion of 'domestic ethnography', Lebow dedicates a chapter "Reframing the Jewish Family" to a discussion of family autobiographies. She suggests that "family serves not only as the context but actually as the pretext for many autobiographical explorations, filmic and otherwise, to the extent that most domestic ethnographies appear as much biographies of family members as autobiographies".[56] Lebow argues that "the image that these reflections suggest is none other than the Lacanian mirror phase, where the child's perspective frames the looking but double image is seen: that of the child and that of the entity holding the child up to the mirror – the (m)other or a mechanical 'prop'…(T)he autonomy and mastery that the child sees reflected back is an illusion, a fantasy, much like the autonomy of the autobiographical subject in these films."[57] Based on this, she examines the child's view, the adult filmmaker as child, and different attitudes to career and marriage held by different generations in the family. Lebow points out the difficulties in defining what makes a Jew and that an essentialist definition of Jewishness would be very problematic.[58] In the same way, it is very problematic to define an essential 'Chineseness' in the contemporary globalised world.

Rascaroli's sub-categorisation of 'personal cinema' is complementary to Renov's classification of different modalities of 'filmic autobiographies'. First of all, Rascaroli regards all of these non-fiction first person films in a wider sense as documentaries, which have recently tended to be more subjective and uncertain in the post-grand narratives era.[59] She groups the diary film, the notebook film and the self-portrait film into the category 'personal cinema', and puts the essay film in a separate category, based on "different textual commitments, and the spectatorial pact they set up". She proposes that in the essay film, the textual commitments and the spectatorial pact are: "I, the author, am reflecting on a problem, and share my thoughts with you, the spectator." In a diary film: "I am recording events that I have witnessed and impressions and emotions I have experienced." For the notebook: "I am taking notes of ideas, events, existents for future use." Finally for the self-portrait: "I am making a

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56 Ibid., 39.

57 Ibid., 38.

58 Ibid., xxi.

59 Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 3.

representation of myself."[60] "The essay, is always subjective, but is not necessarily autobiographical."[61] This is different from Renov's understanding, as he sees the 'essayistic' self-interrogation as sharing some characteristics of autobiography.[62] In examining different sub-categories, Rascaroli tracks the literary or artistic origins of essay, diary, self-portrait, and notebook, and discusses how their filmic versions developed from the original versions.[63] Rascaroli has inspired me to understand the tradition from which Chinese first person films are developed, which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

3.   Critique of current studies

Overall, the existing studies have made significant contributions to the domain of first person non-fiction filmmaking, which has not been widely studied. However, there are some differences among the umbrella terms, used by these scholars. Russell's term 'autoethnography' developed from the tradition of ethnographic filmmaking that historically focuses on the 'others'. 'Autoethnography' means that the 'others' focus on themselves, or the former 'Western selves' turn the camera inward on their own selves. Russell's term still implies an orientalist division of 'self' and the 'others'. Renov's term 'filmic autobiography' places more emphasis on the 'essayistic' and confessional feature of such films. He emphasises how 'filmic autobiography' functions as self-examination and emotional recovery. Using the term 'first person documentary', Lebow believes that first person expression always belongs to "the first person plural", the collective significance of first person expression. Rascaroli, on the other hand, splits 'essay films' from 'personal cinema'. For her, 'essay film' is not necessarily about the self but a personal self expression on any issue, while 'personal cinema', including diary films, self-portrait films and notebook films, explicitly document something about the first person self.

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[60] Ibid., 15.

[61] Ibid., 16.

[62] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 105.

[63] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*.

From the view of 'autoethnography', the films I analyse here could be seen as those done by the Chinese who film themselves, which emphasises autoethnography's orientialist division of 'self' and the 'others'. However, I will not take this position. The films I analyse here are not of single forms - of essay film, video confession or diary film. They cannot be simply split into Rascaroli's division of essay film and personal cinema, as they all reveal something *about* the first person self; meanwhile, they also explore the first person opinion on issues that are not necessarily all about their selves. They mix different forms together, some are more essayistic, confessional, others are more critical. But among Rascaroli's categories of essay, diary, self-portrait and notebook films, these films are closer to the diary films, in which the writing subject 'I' "blatantly and persistently speaks in the first person", and "includes – along with the record of facts and events – her own impressions, ideas, sensations".[64] They tell stories through their own personal feelings and present their own opinions. I group these films under the umbrella term 'first person DV diary documentary'. While agreeing with what Lebow claims is the collective significance of first person expression, I emphasise their explicit expression through a first person narrative. The self is not only the maker but also the main character in the event they participate in and/or investigate.

Furthermore, the existing studies have some drawbacks. They tend to be over-theorised and explore little of the first person self as the filmmaker. For example, Rascaroli focuses on the theoretical roots of personal cinema, paying special attention to the early film theories of French cinematic impressionism, Cesare Zavattini's ideas of a cinema in the first person, and Pier Paolo Pasolini's theorisation of a cinema of poetry. However, filmmakers as practitioners are not necessarily inspired by these theories. In fact, their personal trajectories and experiences may play a dominant role in influencing their filmmaking practices and how they present themselves. In addition, current studies pay less attention to the historical context of the past two decades in which the participatory media and interactive platforms have seriously influenced traditional filming practices, especially among amateur filmmakers. I believe my studies on first person filmmaking in China will be complementary to the current studies. I aim to explore how Chinese first person filmmaking practice is situated in contemporary Chinese independent cinema and grounded in Chinese historically-rooted notions of 'self'.

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[64] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 116.

III. Chinese independent cinema and amateur films

In this study, I regard Chinese first person documentary filmmaking as being situated in
the field of Chinese independent cinema, as well as the broader discursive and aesthetic
fields of practice in which the self is also a privileged subject. In this section, I mainly
focus on the current debates in the field of Chinese independent cinema, an area which
has received growing scholarly attention in recent decades. I will first review the key
notions and issues in the current academic debates, including: notions of 'post-
socialism', 'underground' and 'independent' cinema; the concept of 'geren dianying',
which can be interpreted as 'personal filmmaking' and 'individual filmmaking', with
linkages to 'amateurism' in the contemporary Chinese context; and the dilemma of self-
positioning and ethical issues. I will then discuss how first person documentary
filmmaking relates to these notions and issues, and how I address this topic with my
own specific focus.

1. Post-socialism

The notion of 'post-socialism' has been discussed very frequently in Chinese studies
and Chinese film studies. It was first coined by Arif Dirlik before June 4th 1989, to
describe the political system and social period since Deng's reform. "At a time when
many believed Deng's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' was a face-saving
euphemism for capitalism, Dirlik responded with this term to acknowledge the changes
Deng had brought about but also to note that Deng's China was not capitalist yet."[65]

Following Dirlik, Paul Pickowicz proposes post-socialism as a periodising label to
characterise China since the late 1970s, and a regime of political economy called
socialist market economy, or the so-called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.[66]
Inspired by Fredric Jameson's theory of post-modernism, Pickowicz sees 'post-

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[65] Berry, *Postsocialist cinema in post-Mao China*, 13.

[66] Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism," 58.

socialism' as "the ideological counterpart of postmodernism",[67] a parallel framework illuminating Chinese culture since the 1980s, which "contained the vestiges of late imperial culture, the remnants of the modern or bourgeois culture of the Republican era, the residue of traditional socialist culture, and elements of both modernism and postmodernism".[68]

Chris Berry invokes its original roots in the 'post-modern', "considering whether postsocialism is a specific form of postmodernism".[69] Later in discussing new documentary in China, Berry specifies this notion as 'Chinese post-socialism' for two reasons. Firstly, he believes that Chinese new documentary "can only be understood in this locally specific context".[70] Secondly, he points out that post-socialism is a condition shared across many different countries and experienced in locally specific ways. However, in China it does not mean the same as in other former socialist countries which have experienced a total break from the Soviet Union and socialism. Post-socialism in China "has more parallels with Lyotard's post-modernism, where the forms and structures of the modern persist long after faith in the grand narrative that authorises it has been lost".[71]

Despite different understandings of the relationship between post-socialism and post-modernism, scholars such as Paul Pickowicz, Chris Berry and Zhang Yingjin all understand post-socialism as a new social and cultural condition. Berry analyses cinema in 1980s China.[72] Pickowicz studies cinemas of different generations of filmmakers under conditions of post-socialism.[73] In Zhang Yingjin's understanding, Pickowicz's exploration of post-socialism demonstrates a "new structure of feelings", which "could be articulated in a wide spectrum of cinematic works".[74] This "new structure of

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[67] Ibid., 80.

[68] Quoted by Zhang, "Rebel without a Cause?", 50.

[69] Berry, *Postsocialist cinema in post-Mao China*, 13.

[70] Berry, "Getting Real: Chinese Documentaries, Chinese Postsocialism," 116.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Berry, *Postsocialist cinema in post-Mao China*.

[73] Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism."

[74] Zhang, "Rebel without a cause?", 51.

feelings", according to Zhang, is the one that "remained repressed in the Mao years but has found vocal articulation in the post-Mao era, with alienation and disillusion as its two thematic *foci*".[75] Overall, Zhang envisions post-socialism as "a varied cultural landscape in post-Mao China against which filmmakers of different generations,[76] aesthetic aspirations, and ideological persuasions struggle to readjust or redefine their different strategic positions in different social, political and economic situations".[77] Among the productions by different generations of filmmakers with distinctive aesthetic styles and strategies, responding to their readjusted positions, the so-called 'underground' or 'independent' cinema has attracted most scholarly attention.

2.   'Dixia'(underground) or 'duli' (independent) cinema

The question of how to define the films produced in China since the early 1990s without state or other 'official' finance or production infrastructure has provoked many debates in current studies. '*Dixia*'(地下) -'underground', and '*duli*' (独立) - 'independent' are the two terms that have been used frequently to describe the socio-political conditions of both feature and documentary films of that ilk.

Paul Pickowicz argues that it is 'underground' rather than 'independent' that is part of the identity of filmmakers who work outside the state system.[78] In his understanding, 'independent', especially referring to American independent cinema, is a financial status, rather than a political position. "'Underground film' seems better than 'independent film', a concept in the American art lexicon that suggests a small art-house movie privately financed by someone like Robert Redford. 'Independent' in the American setting means independent from 'Hollywood'. This American distinction between 'independent' and 'Hollywood' has little to do with the role of the state, since almost all American filmmaking takes place in the private sector."[79] Pickowicz reminds

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[75] Ibid.

[76] In socialist China, Chinese filmmakers were categorised by the decade when they were born, which also related to the kind of style of their films.

[77] Zhang, "Rebel without a cause?", 52.

[78] Pickowicz, "Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China," 2.

[79] Ibid., 3.

us that "in the Chinese case the concept means independence from the Chinese state rather than independence from the sort of powerful private conglomerates that have dominated Hollywood".[80] Therefore, Pickowicz believes that the term 'underground' is better to describe the unofficially produced films and the filmmakers' intention to resist state political control.[81]

Pickowicz concludes two features of the 'underground cinema': its illegal status and its politically illicit gestures. "As the state was not inclined to enforce the law in a rigorous way, but the activity of almost all early underground filmmakers was illegal nonetheless."[82] They use private funding, but not in the sense of profit-driven economic entrepreneurs, but more like "artistic, cultural, and political enterpreneurs".[83] "The filmmakers want greater freedom of expression, including freedom from oppressive and restrictive political and bureaucratic controls, more than they want vast sums of money."[84] By comparing Chinese alternative film production to American independent cinema, Pickowicz's analyses have some valid points, especially on its relation to the state. However, the politically illegal status of such films may have been the case during the 1990s, but since China's entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), we have seen significant changes to the dynamics of power in the field of Chinese film production. Non-state private production is no longer regarded as illegal.

The state-owned film industry established in the 1950s has been experiencing a process of marketisation and globalisation since the market reforms in the early 1990s, through deregulation and elimination of entrance barriers to private investment, both domestic and foreign. In 1993, the state's monopoly on film distribution was ended. In 1997 the state totally cancelled the protection for state-invested film production and encouraged private, foreign and collective local sectors to cooperate with state-owned studios. Since the end of 2004, domestic private capital has been allowed to be invested in cinema

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 4.

[84] Ibid.

exhibition and also film production and distribution.[85] Foreign sector investors are also allowed to form joint ventures, with a minor share of ownership no more than 49%, and the co-produced films can therefore be freely distributed in China without being affected by the quota system. However, political censorship still influences filmmaking, especially films intended for domestic distribution.

Zhang Yingjin prefers to use the term 'independent', rather than 'underground' to describe such alternative modes of production and circulation of these films.[86] He observes that for political reasons, most young directors refuse the term 'underground'.[87] Zhang argues "if not entirely independent of state institutions (for nominal affiliation was required in some cases), at least *independent of official ideology*. Their 'independent' status, accordingly, is defined not in relation to the private sources of their funding (increasingly from overseas, which means they are not truly financially independent) but with reference to their lack of approval by the government."[88]

Zhang describes the ambiguous relationship between these filmmakers and the state institutions. However, what Zhang means by being '*independent of official ideology*' as an alternative political position is not entirely different from Pickowicz's arguments of 'underground' status as a political opposition. Nevertheless, Zhang's later point that relaxation of regulation in the market economy has enabled such independent productions in the first place adds credibility to his choice of 'independent'. He states that "'independent' filmmakers turned their financial disadvantages into ideological advantages and negotiated their ways through the cracks and fissures opened up by the market economy. Relaxed state regulations enabled them to become independent in the first place, notably by being able to rent film equipment and facilities and deal directly - albeit unofficially - with overseas distribution agents."[89]

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[85] Private companies with minimum registered assets of 1 million RMB are allowed to engage in film production and distribution (Sun, *Chinese Cinema in 2005*).

[86] Zhang, "My Camera Doesn't Lie?".

[87] Ibid., 26.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Zhang, "Rebel without a cause?", 54.

Chris Berry offers a much more sophisticated analysis of what it means to be an independent filmmaker in China today. He starts by questioning the terms 'independent' and 'underground' themselves, arguing that both the American concept of corporate independence and the Soviet model of 'underground' as a dissent culture are conceptually inadequate, as "they are grounded in an understanding of independence as freedom from power rather than something produced through power".[90] Berry cites Kleinhans' discussion on the nature of 'independence', which is in relation to a dominant system. Examining this from a Foucauldian perspective, Berry argues that independent Chinese filmmaking is not just free from something, but also enabled and shaped by the changing power dynamics. He points out the *three-legged system* from which Chinese 'independent' filmmakers have emerged and within which they are now situated: the party-state apparatus, the marketised economy, and foreign media and art organisations.[91] Overall, Berry argues that:

"Independent filmmaking in China never was a dissent culture and it is becoming less and less similar to one as marketisation and globalisation proceed apace. Furthermore, the range of opportunities and options for independent filmmakers is increasing. But, within an understanding of power as productive, this doesn't mean that they are increasingly free from power. Rather, (the) opportunities are themselves produced and conditioned by relations of power. The more active they become and the more opportunities they explore, the more complex are the negotiations and relationships they have to develop with others in the matrix of power in order to remain independently Chinese."[92]

In his later writing, Berry points out the difference between independent feature filmmakers and independent documentary makers, which is "the result of their different places in the administrative structures of the state and the different regulations and laws applying to them".[93] Berry observes that: "In July 1996 the government passed a new

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[90] Berry, "Independently Chinese," 109.

[91] Berry, "Independently Chinese," 109.

[92] Ibid., 119-120.

[93] Berry, "Getting Real: Chinese Documentaries, Chinese Postsocialism," 128.

film law that explicitly made illegal any film production other than that done within the state-owned studio system. This means that although would-be independent feature filmmakers might not think of themselves as underground or subversive, they have been defined as such by the government."[94] But there are no regulatory or legal interventions against the makers of independent documentary films. [95]

Following Zhang and Berry, I would also label such non-state, unofficially-funded film production and distribution as 'independent cinema'. I also agree with Berry's analysis of the complex power dynamics in which independent productions are situated. Recently, more focus has been placed on the power relations in the field of independent filmmaking, and the film culture articulated by the growing number of independent film festivals and screening events which have emerged in the past decade.[96] The importance of independent film culture in cultivating the emergence of more young filmmakers and the production of more independent films is significant. In addition, I am aware that 'independent' as a label referring to a political and financial gesture also indicates a set of alternative aesthetics and strategies, which is usually associated with 'geren'(个人), which literally means 'personal' or 'individual' as opposite to 'official'.

3.　'Geren dianying' (personal or individual filmmaking), and amateurism

The concept of 'geren' is often used to describe the aesthetic style of Chinese independent cinema. It has usually been discussed in the context of 'geren dianying'(personal/ individual filmmaking, 个人电影), which can be translated into 'personal filmmaking' or 'individual filmmaking'. Zhang Yingjin regards geren dianying as describing films made by the 'xinsheng dai' (newborn generation, 新一代), referring to the so-called 'Six Generation' and the new independent documentary

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[94] Ibid., 129.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Such as Robinson, "Film Festivals and the Field of Independent Chinese Documentary Production", and Ma, "Regarding the Grassroots Chinese Independent Film Festivals".

films.[97] Some scholars, such as Sheldon H. Lu[98] and Wang Qi[99] also include experimental videos and digital media works.

Wang Qi's Ph.D. thesis focuses on '*geren yingxiang*' (individual image, 个人影像)，which literally means 'personal shadows and images'), which can be translated into 'personal film and video,' or 'personal filmmaking'.[100] In Wang's analysis, "the word '*geren*', composed of two characters, *ge* (individual, single) and *ren* (person, human being), has connotations of individual, individualistic, private, personal, self, and nonofficial in the independent filmmaking".

Wang Qi specially focuses on the 'personal/individual filmmaking' of one particular generation of filmmakers born between 1960 and 1970.[101] She names these filmmakers, including fiction, documentary and avant-garde filmmakers as the 'Forsaken Generation', a generation that is 'marginalised', forsaken by history.[102] In Wang's reading, '*geren*' – the personal — "provides a subjectively grounded *vision* and an irreducibly individualistic *position* in reviewing and approaching history and reality, thus helping reinsert the Forsaken Generation historical subject in a remembered or re-imagined time and space where he can exercise his own interpretation in order to redeem the individual and private experience that was lost, suppressed, and forgotten in official historiography… What is more, its goal is to go beyond the personal into the field of generational and collective vision."[103] Wang Qi sees 'personal' as a political *position* and an aesthetic *strategy* in narrative and visual style to approach history differently. She provides a detailed analysis of how these personal films demonstrate an unofficial personal historiography of recent Chinese history.

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[97] Zhang, "My Camera Doesn't Lie?", 26.

[98] Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*.

[99] Wang, *Writing Against Oblivion*.

[100] Wang, *Writing Against Oblivion*, 64.

[101] Extensible to include late 1950s and up until the early 1970s.

[102] Wang, *Writing Against Oblivion*, 43-4.

[103] Ibid., 71-2.

Unlike Wang Qi, Pickowicz criticises the obsession with 'exploring the self' and 'the rapid evolving notions of self identity' in the 'independent films' or what he regards as 'underground films'.[104] For Pickowicz, such films are self-indulgent, shallow, self-centred, and lacking in context with China's own history.[105] Understanding that self-exploration is not new in modern Chinese cultural production, and was an important part in the New Culture and May Fourth era, Pickowicz probes the possible reasons for the current preoccupation with self-exploration. He believes that in contemporary China, this is a phenomenon of what Ci Jiwei regards as the transition from utopianism to hedonism, and a result of self-censorship and the dynamics of globalisation and commercialisation.[106] While Pickowicz's judgement is too moral centred, he also analyses the political and practical reasons for the rise of personal films. On the one hand, filmmakers believe that the exhibition of the self and "the hidden truths and reality" is what foreign audiences expect to see.[107] On the other hand, he argues that since the state has given up on "the Maoist and Confucian desire to order family and private life", the filmmakers therefore limit the problems of their protagonists inside "the incredibly narrow confines of closed, private, residential spaces", so as to maintain the possibility of making film independently.[108] The retreat of the state from public social life does enable individuals to explore more the concept of personal space and the notion of self.[109]

While in fiction filmmaking, the personal representation is usually seen as the mirror of the filmmaker's self, in independent documentary filmmaking, Wang Qi argues that "'personal' is often connected with a necessarily specific, embodied and reflexive perspective".[110] In fact, this personal individual vision is usually associated with *jishi zhuyi* (纪实主义), which Berry translates as 'on-the-spot-realism',[111] an aesthetic style

[104] Pickowicz, "Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China," 14.

[105] Ibid., 17.

[106] Ibid., 14-19.

[107] Ibid., 14.

[108] Ibid., 15.

[109] In Chapter Three, I talk in more detail about how the anthropologist Yan Yunxiang discusses the social implications for the individual self, after the state's retreat from public social life.

[110] Wang, *Writing Against Oblivion*, 71-2.

[111] Berry, "Getting Real: Chinese Documentaries, Chinese Postsocialism."

that is drawn from cinema verité and direct cinema, and has been influenced by the works of Wiseman and Japanese filmmaker Ogawa Shinsuke. Before the New Documentary Movement, the mainstream documentary programmes produced by state-owned television tended to use voice-over commentaries to speak for the authority or a certain ideology. Zhang Yingjin analyses how the documentary methods of cinema verité have enabled Chinese independent filmmakers to get closer to reality or truth. In addition, this style is ideologically associated with the individual, rather the institutional, which fits the new documentary filmmakers' agenda.[112] The aesthetic style of on-the-spot-realism has been a tremendous influence on Chinese documentary filmmakers both in and outside the state system. In the second stage of the New Documentary Movement, 'personal' also indicates the focus on the personal space in individual documentary filmmaking, compared to early new documentaries that primarily focus on the public space.[113] Lu Xinyu[114] points out that while the early independent filmmakers primarily made documentaries to resist authority, the DV filmmakers in the second stage since the late 1990s put more focus on the personal aspects of their subjects and on exploring the individual experience of living in China's transitional period, following two decades of economic reform.

To a great extent, personal and individual filmmaking is also associated with amateurism. In fact, as Valerie Jaffee argues, when the concept of amateur filmmaking was first advocated by Jia Zhangke, it was "primarily an attitude, not a lifestyle condition – an attitude composed of self-deprecation and disinterest in convention".[115] Jaffee points out that Jia "is not exactly talking about actual amateurs – untrained individuals for whom filmmaking is an activity outside of their main profession – but is instead extolling a certain mode of self-presentation among directors who are, by all conceivable standards, professionals".[116]

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[112] Zhang, "Styles, Subjects, and Special Points of View," 123-4.

[113] Lu, "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement."; Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private'."

[114] Lu, "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement," 34.

[115] Jaffee, *Every Man a Star,"* 82.

[116] Ibid., 81.

However, in documentary filmmaking, it has been frequently used to describe a technological condition, refering to DV filmmaking since the year 1996. Though a Beijing-based film critic Wang Xiaolu[117] states the amateur hi8 camera was in fact used earlier in the 1990s, by filmmakers like Zhao Liang, Ji Dan, Hu Jie and Feng Yan, and some video artists, the hi8 camera was only circulated among a small group of early amateur filmmakers who mostly have an artistic background. The video camera as a consumer product did not widely reach the Chinese population until the late 1990s. This was after the digital video camera was introduced into the Chinese market in 1996. The majority of current studies believe that it is in these technological and economic circumstances that the individual amateur DV filmmaking started a new wave of film culture.

DV cameras, as a low-cost consumer product available on the retail market, have enabled the proliferation of amateur documentary film productions. Coming from other backgrounds, such as writer, painter, poet, teacher, office clerk, villager, hair salon lady,[118] and intellectual, individuals mostly work in a "one-person filmmaking" method,[119] taking a camera to observe the reality from their own individual personal viewpoint, and interacting with contemporary social issues.

The pioneer of independent new documentary in China, Wu Wenguang considers DV individual filmmaking as a different way of thinking. He sees the consumer level DV camera as '*xiao jiqi*' (small machine, 小机器), compared to '*da jiqi*' (big machine, 大机器), the broadcasting beta video camera.[120] While Wu believes that'*da jiqi*' has enabled the 'professional' kind of documentary filmmaking in the earlier stage of the New Documentary Movement,[121] he regards filming with '*xiao jiqi*' as writing with a pen, allowing individuals to work much more flexibly and reflexively on their own, "to break through the barrier between the filmmaker and their subjects, creating a

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[117] Wang, "Zhuti Jianxian".

[118] This is a particular occupation in contemporary China, referring to young women working in hair salons, washing hair and doing massage for customers, often involving prostitution.

[119] Berry and Rofel, "Alternative Archive: China's Independent Documentary Culture," 8.

[120] Author's interview, 2010.

[121] Ibid.

communal experience rather than a hierarchical one".[122] His own works, *Jiang Hu* (1999) and *Fuck Cinema* (2005), were made using DV cameras.

From this perspective, DV has largely emancipated and empowered individuals, making them closer to their subjects and their own subjectivities. Jaffee argues that the amateurism that Jia advocates demonstrates a spirit of democracy. "Access to cinema is conceived of as a *human right* – that is, a privilege that should be universal."[123] This way of seeing the democratic nature of DV cameras has been shared by other scholars studying digital media. Despite some anxiety amongst academics about the manipulability of images, given the epistemological distrust and suspicion of documentary in relation to reality, the positive response to digital media is how the increasing *access* to digital cameras and web 2.0 has transformed the active audience available to active producers.

Bjørn Sørenssen[124] points out the implicit meanings of Alexandre Astruc's 1948 vision: "1. New technology provides new means of expression. As a result of this the film medium develops from being exclusive and privileged to a common and publicly available form of expression. 2. This, in turn, opens space for a more democratic use of the medium..." In his understanding of Astruc's vision, Sørenssen[125] argues that the expanded access to digital production and distribution channels to some extent enhances the democratic potential of the visual-audio media, which is traditionally dominated by producers with access to capital. In this view, the increasing public access to digital production and distribution shifted the power of representation from the hands of experienced professionals and intellectuals, to the hands of mass amateur individuals.

4.   Self-positioning and ethical dilemmas

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[122] Berry and Rofel, "Alternative Archive: China's Independent Documentary Culture," 9.

[123] Jaffee, "*Every Man a Star,*" 82-3.

[124] Sørenssen, "Digital video and Alexandre Astruc's caméra-stylo," 49.

[125] Ibid., 47.

However, such a human right is sometimes abused, showing the ethical dilemma of documentary filmmaking. The early New Documentaries and recent DV amateur documentaries have been predominately made by Han ethnic men, to document 'others' – ordinary, especially marginalised, "impoverished people speaking in exotic dialects and living at the mercy of socio-economic forces".[126] Jaffee sees this attempt to "lodge the aura of art in the Other, and to redefine the self in so doing" as the heart of this discourse about amateurism.[127]

Constructing the aura in the 'other' is by no means only happening in Chinese independent documentary. In fact, the authenticity of documentary as presenting the truth and the ethics of the practice have always been a recurring topic within documentary practice and the wider field of anthropology. Among these, one of the major changes is the 1960s crisis of anthropological representation, which has had extensive impact on documentary practice, including informing the broader epistemological critique of post-structuralism and post-modernism on the question of power. Trinh T. Minh-ha provocatively states that "there is no such thing as documentary".[128] By saying so, Minh-ha means that "on the one hand, truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power. On the other, truth lies in between all regimes of truth."[129] She not only criticises the Griesonian concept of documentary as being to inform and persuade people, but also cinema verité. For Minh-ha, though the cinema verité approach admits the filmmaker's authority in constructing a particular truth, it still maintains "the age-old opposition between the creative intelligent supplier and the mediocre unenlightened consumer".[130]

As for the Chinese individual amateur documentary filmmakers, when they try to question the authority of the 'West' and Chinese officialdom, they are in fact re-inscribing a new mode of authority and subjectivity. In Trinh T. Minh-ha's words, they

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[126] Jaffee, "*Every Man a Star,*" 102.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Minh-ha, "The totalizing quest of Meaning," 90.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid., 97.

tend "to replace one source of unacknowledged authority by another, but not to challenge the very constitution of authority".[131]

Wang Yiman uses the term 'camera cruelty' to describe amateur documentary filmmakers' "deliberate violation of the codes of decorum, or the documentary ethic, that helps to maintain the subjects' dignity".[132] She states that "the anxiety about excessive details reconfirms the indexical power of the 'guilty' DV image. It appears voyeuristic, exhibitionistic, even potentially damaging, precisely because it is deemed immediate and indexical. In other words, DV documentaries' potential epistemological and aesthetic violence is ultimately connected to its truth-value."[133]

Scholars like Zhang Yingjin and Matthew Johnson point out the dilemma of self-positioning that independent documentary filmmakers face in representing marginalised others. Wu Wenguang was among the first to reflect on the role of the filmmaker as self. Both Zhang and Johnson have studied Wu Wenguang's anxiety over the function of documentary filmmaking and the dilemma of self-positioning during and after Wu's making of *Jiang Hu* (1999). Zhang states that "while working on *Jiang Hu*, Wu lived with performers in a song-and-dance troupe traveling among rural towns and small cities, and arrived at this vision of *self-positionality*."[134] Quoted by Zhang,[135] Wu states that "you scrutinized yourself and discovered that you no longer belonged to any group, not to the stage nor to the audience – you belong to yourself." Therefore, positionality has authorised Wu to call for a return to the self. Zhang observes that "his new position is not an official position (government), not an intellectual's position (enlightenment), not an underground position (marginality), nor even an oppositional position (rebellion), but simply an individual's position".[136]

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[131] Ibid. *When the Moon Waxes Red,* 42.

[132] Wang, "Reproducing the Self," 20.

[133] Ibid., 22.

[134] Zhang, "My Camera Doesn't Lie?", 33.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

Wu's other film *Fuck Cinema* (2005), made after *Jiang Hu*, serves as a critique of the ethical irresponsibity of independent filmmakers. Taking himself as an example, Wu honestly exposes the intervention of the filmmaker in the subject's personal life. The film was shot in 1999-2000 and has been edited three times. In my interview with Wu, he explained the process he has gone through to make the final version of the film. This process demonstrates the positions he has shifted between as a filmmaker over those years. In the first version which he names '*I love cinema*' (2001), Wu cut out all of the shots of his intervention and only constructed the character through an observational eye. This is seen from an intellectual's position looking from 'above'. But the final one, '*Fuck Cinema*', honestly presents himself in the film and how he has influenced the main character. Wu reflexively criticises himself as an exploiter, using the images of the poor marginalised others to accumulate fame for himself as an internationally well-known filmmaker. Wu's self-reflection and critique have explicitly raised the ethical issues in documentary filmmaking that have been discussed elsewhere.

However, the ethical dilemma is still seen as one of the main problems, as more people participate in independent DV individual filmmaking. Markus Nornes comments on the lack of ethical responsibility in his report on Chinese independent film festivals in Songzhang and Kunming. "Truth to [be] told, it is unclear that any of the subjects in the competition films realise they are being seen on the international film-festival circuit."[137] While it is also problematic to set unified criteria for the ethics of documentary practice, the unbalanced relationships between the filmmaker and the subject have nevertheless raised attention as to how the individual perceives the self in relation to others, and one's responsibility in a modern society. Wu Wenguang's experience seems to have not yet been recognised by other individual filmmakers. The ethical issue is made more problematic by the fact, observed by Johnson, that the majority of DV users, who are mostly college students, think DV-based documentary and feature filmmaking may be a "route to potential fame and fortune".[138] How to position the self as the filmmaker and a responsible individual, between the aims of raising awareness of social issues and getting symbolic recognition, is still the problem facing many independent amateur filmmakers.

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[137] Nornes, "Bulldozers, Bibles, and Very Sharp Knives," 52.

[138] Johnson, "A Scene Beyond Our Line of Sight," 70.

Overall, the discussions of key notions of 'post-socialism', 'underground'/ 'independent', 'personal /individual filmmaking/amateurism', and issues of self-positioning and ethical responsibility are of great significance in understanding contemporary Chinese independent cinema. However, there are also some limitations. Valerie Jaffee mentions that "most observers of Chinese underground cinema have taken as their main point of departure the opposition between that movement and other institutional or artistic fields – the works of the fifth generation, state-run studio films, market-oriented mainstream cinema, and so on". Instead, she focuses on "the conflicts and contrasts evident within the movement".[139] While Jaffee focuses on the elevation of 'amateurism', as "underground cinema's rebuke to itself rather than to the censorship system or mercenary markets to which critics more often contrast the movement",[140] in this thesis I focus on first person filmmaking. First person filmmaking has followed the tradition of Chinese independent cinema in focusing on the personal and self-exploration. It has gone beyond that by turning the camera inward to film the maker him or herself. It is undeniable that some filmmakers have the intention of using this approach to make a difference and get recognition and fame. This approach, however, functions as a reprimand to the amateur filmmaking that tends to "lodge the aura of art in the Other".[141] The self as the filmmaker is also the main character in the film. In addition, the filmmakers do not minimise their own impact on the subject and the reality; in fact, they are either documenting the filmmaking process as part of the reality, or provoke something to happen in reality and document that reality. The ethics it involves become much more complex as presenting the self also relates to self-exposure.

IV.   The focus of my study and my argument

In fact, as part of amateur individual DV filmmaking, first person DV diary documentary filmmaking since the new millennium is a domain that still remains

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[139] Jaffee, "*Every Man a Star,*" 78-9.

[140] Ibid., 83.

[141] Jaffee, "*Every Man a Star,*" 102.

unexplored in the current scholarship. Undoubtedly, this practice plays an important role in challenging the master narrative of history on the grand social-political level: my focus is, however, on how this practice explores the individual self. I regard the *individual self* as a key notion underpinning the discussion of this study. I will analyse, on the one hand, how the *individual self* is represented through the filmmaker's own camera and what self-expression in the contemporary Chinese context really means; and, on the other hand, during the process of filmmaking as a form of social participation, how the first person filmmaker understands and further constructs his or her self as an individual, in relation to others, the society and the state.

The first person films analysed in this thesis explicitly present the individual self as the maker in the act of filmmaking. These filmmaker selves are not just understood as art agents in the field of filmmaking, but also as individual selves, public citizens, social civic agents, who use the DV camera as a tool and platform for self-expression and social-political participation. These filmmakers, Tang Danhong, Yang Lina, Hu Xinyu, Li Ning, Wu Haohao, Xue Jianqiang, Ai Weiwei, and others, take an approach of interactive, reflexive and performative first person filmmaking that explores the self in social participation and complex familial and social relations. Taking a camera, they directly interact with and engage in problematic family relations or public socio-political events, or deliberately provoke a problem. Though they still share some earlier on-the-spot realism documentary techniques, they have gone beyond that. As Wu Haohao states straightforwardly to the camera in his film *Kun 1: Action*: "*Avoid presenting the reality, avoid politics. Avoid the ideal, avoid the self, and avoid action. China, Chinese, Chinese films are especially abnormal, nauseous, secular and degenerate...Take immediate action when facing dilemmas in reality. Film should only record those actions.*" This dogma concludes the central concern of these first person filmmakers who not only aim to record the social reality but to participate in it and directly make some change.

Therefore, this documentary practice has gone beyond what Michael Renov[142] concludes are its four distinctive functions, those of preservation, persuasion, analysis, and expressivity. It is no longer the film as the text that matters, or how authentic the truth

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[142] Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 21.

is. The *action* of making the film, the process of engaging with and enraging people is more meaningful. I argue that, in addition to subjectivity and reflexivity, as the key characteristics of first person autobiographic documentary,[143] *action* is another crucial aspect of these first person films where the self is an active individual and social-political agent.

In fact, the filmmaking process as an activity has been highlighted by some scholars and practitioners. Trinh T. Minh-ha focuses on the 'mediating activity' between mediator and medium, arguing that "meaning can be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilised and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather, empties it, or decentralises it".[144] While Minh-ha focuses on the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject, the Japanese practitioner Tetsuo Kogawa examines the relationship between the recorded image and the audience, since the emergence of video technology in the 1970s. He argues that "video is no longer a tool to represent, recollect the origin; it is a transmitter to terminate the origin completely. And the truth of the image consists not in the represented image itself - real or unreal - but in the relationship of access that obtains between the audience and the image source or environment. Therefore the audience as such has to become an activist of access."[145] In Kogawa's view, the position of audience has been changed from passive receiver to 'activist of access'.

In this study, I focus on how the first person filmmakers take a DV camera to conduct an action with social-political meaning. In analysing autobiographical photos and writings, some scholars hold similar views in seeing these as a form of action. In his study of the individual portraits taken in front of Tiananmen in an autobiographical context, Yomi Braester views photography not so much as a final product, but focuses on the performative aspect of photography.[146] He not only focuses on the process of taking a photo, but also "extends it to moments both before and after the subject poses

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[143] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*; Lebow, *First Person Jewish*; Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*.

[144] Minh-ha, "The totalizing quest of Meaning," 100.

[145] Kogawa, "Video: The Access Medium," 59.

[146] Braester, "Photography at Tiananmen," 636.

for the camera, and takes it as highly interactive".[147] For him, "the act of taking a picture stages a multi-layered relationship among photographer and subject, their immediate surroundings, and the larger social environment in which the photo is shot and viewed".[148] Similarly, Wang Lingzhen sees women's autobiographical writing in the 1980s and 1990s as a practice, an action. "Rather than perceiving autobiographical writing as a simple record of a life and self, I view it as an act, a negotiation of selves and identities in history."[149] In this understanding, she tries to "bring in a social and cultural dimension that is mediated through the author's specific experience; and to examine the constructing and deconstructing effects of writing that are culturally, socially, and personally informed rather than immune to or transcendent of historical contexts".[150]

I regard Chinese first person filmmaking also as an act, a social-political participation. According to Wang Hui, one of the most influential neo-left-wing historians and scholars, China is in an era of depoliticised politics in the last four decades, especially after the 1989 social movements. Wang argues that "the political party, through the process of exercising political power, became the subject of state order, it functioned no longer as a kind of stimulant for ideas and practice, but increasingly changed into a conventional form of state power, so that by a certain point it had become an apparatus of depoliticised power or a bureaucratic machine".[151] The 'politics' in Wang's concept of depoliticisation, "do not refer to those ever-present power struggles in national or international life and politics, but indicate, rather, political debates, political struggle, and social activism around specific political values and their attendant benefits".[152] For Wang, the 'politics' in the term 'depoliticised', is "a sphere borne of an active subjectivity".[153] In this context, some scholars and intellectuals, including Wang himself, have urged for the search for new forms of political subjectivity.

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[147] Ibid., 638.

[148] Ibid., 636.

[149] Wang, *Personal Matters*, 12.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Wang, "Depoliticized politics," 690.

[152] Ibid., 690-1.

[153] Ibid., 691.

Wang Hui's notion of depoliticised politics has provided me with a complex understanding of the nature of contemporary Chinese society. However, my observation of this group of first person films and filmmaking practice suggests that new political ideas and practices do exist, which have been actively stimulating new forms of political subjectivity. The first person documentary filmmaking in fact, can be seen as an important form of social participation, that helps to reconstruct political values and reactivate the political space in China. In short, my claim is that these films and the filmmaking practice not only reflect some aspects of the changing concept of individual self in contemporary China, but more importantly, they are generative and constructive agents that further contribute to the changing constitution of the individual subject in China.

V.   Conclusion and contribution to knowledge

In conclusion, my interdisciplinary study is situated in the fields of international first person film studies and Chinese independent film studies, and also is intertwined with the exploration of the notion of the individual self in the contemporary Chinese context. It aims to expand the existing studies of international first person non-fiction filmmaking, which have so far centred on the practice in an American and Anglo-European social context and are grounded in the Western notion of 'self'. It also aims to advance current research on independent Chinese cinema, by exploring first person amateur DV documentary filmmaking practice as a critique of the current amateur documentaries that "lodge the aura of art in the Other".[154] Finally, in analysing how the individual self is represented in the first person documentary films and filmmaking practice, the thesis also intends to explore the meaning of the individual in contemporary China.

Overall, the thesis aims to contribute to knowledge in four key respects: firstly, it documents a body of independent first person films made in China between 2000 and

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[154] Jaffee, "*Every Man a Star,*" 102.

2009,[155] alongside interviews with the filmmakers. Secondly, it explores some features of the complex relations between the *gonggong* (public, 公共) and the *siren* (private, 私人) space, between the *jiti* (collective, 集体) and the *geren* (personal, 个人) in China since economic reform in the 1980s. Furthermore, it examines the notion of individual self as illustrated through this practice in a contemporary Chinese context and how it differs from the discussion of 'self' in current Western studies of first person films. By doing so, it contributes to this literature new material on the 'self' in Chinese first person filmmaking. Lastly, it offers analysis of this filmmaking practice as individual social-political participation, which further contributes to the construction of individual self in China's ongoing modernisation project, and how these films illustrate multi-layered and conflicted selves in the familial and public spaces that are undergoing dramatic transition. Through this, I hope the research will offer greater understanding of what it means to be 'Chinese' in today's world. I will discuss in the conclusion of the thesis how far my research confirms this. Lastly, I will show how these Chinese examples can contribute to the debates in the international field of first person filmmaking.

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[155] Except two were made in 2010 by Xue Jianqiang.

Chapter Two

Methodology

I.   Introduction

The methodology of this study is textual analysis, combined with analysis of the filmmaking practice, using the method of semi-structured interview. In the research process, theoretical study and my own experience have played an important role in influencing my choice of methods and analytical strategy. In return, my analyses have led me into deeper theoretical research, which further influenced my analyses.

In the beginning, my own practice of making video diaries recording my experience of working on a BBC programme inspired me to watch first person films in the 'West' and review the current scholarship on these films. Through this, I built up my knowledge of Anglo-European based first person filmmaking practice. Then I started to look reflexively at myself, and made a first person video *Memory of Home* (2009). While making this video, I paid special attention to the self as the maker. I was very conscious of the vital role of my own personal aesthetic and ethical choices in influencing the construction of my self-representation. In addition, I am highly aware of the significance of how this filmmaking practice reflects inwards on to myself as a maker. It is not only a process through which I express myself, but also a process of experiencing and understanding more.

Then I thought to look at my own culture and ask whether there are first person films in contemporary China. I started to search for Chinese first person films, aiming to explore how Chinese filmmakers present themselves and what they have achieved through filmmaking practice. While watching and analysing these films, I developed more questions and decided to conduct interviews with filmmakers.

II.   Collecting film materials

I did my first fieldwork in China in December 2009. The main purpose of the trip was to identify, collect and watch the first person films made in China since 2000. It is interesting to note that all these films that I found are independently produced with money from the filmmakers' own savings. Most of them are only shown on the domestic, independent film festival circuits. Because of the degree of privacy revealed in the films, filmmakers are not usually willing to send the films to people they do not know well, such as myself, a Chinese researcher based in the UK.

Before going into the field, I researched into where current independent filmmaking communities are located in China, and the key people in the field. As a filmmaker myself, I have some personal contacts who introduced me to more people and independent organisations. I found that a few independent film festivals and filmmakers' studios in Beijing host rich archives of independent films, such as Li Xianting Film Fund at Songzhuang district in the southeast suburbs of Beijing, Chinese Independent Film Archive at Iberia Centre for Contemporary Art in 798 art district Beijing, Indie Workshop near Beijing Film Academy, and Caochangdi Workstation (CCW) at Caochangdi. The geographical places where these archival centres are located are the active zones where independent filmmakers gather regularly. The former two are key places for independent film screenings and festival organising offices, while the latter two are independent 'production houses', led by two influential filmmakers: Zhang Xianmin the head of Indie Workshop, and Wu Wenguang, the leader of the CCW. These four places have different agendas and hence produce different categories of films.

Because of Wu Wenguang's personal interest in more personalised films, or what he regards as 'individualised documentary' (*geren yingxiang*), CCW hosts a rich archive of contemporary Chinese independent documentaries, and gathers mostly what I regard as first person narrative documentaries. These include films made in the first wave of DV filmmaking at the turn of millennium: *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple* (dir. Wang Fen, 2000); *Nightingale, Not the Only Voice* (dir. Tang Danhong, 2000); and all the personal documentaries made by an amateur filmmaker Hu Xinyu, such as *The Men* (dir. Hu Xinyu, 2003), *My Sister* (dir. Hu Xinyu, 2006) and *Family Close-up* (dir. Hu

Xinyu, 2009), which was an earlier version of *Family Phobia*. The archive also includes films made more recently, such as *My Family Tree* (dir. Yang Pingdao, 2008); *Nostalgia* (dir. Shu Haolun, 2006), *Kun 1: Action* and *Criticizing China* (dir. Wu Haohao, 2008), and *My Name is Fenfen* (dir. Guo Lifen, 2008). In addition, there is also *My Village*, a documentary series made by four villager amateurs in 2006, 2007, and 2008, led by Wu Wenguang.

When I arrived in Beijing, I spent a week visiting Caochangdi Workstation and watched most of these films alone in a video-watching room. While I was watching the films, the question I asked myself was how these filmmakers presented themselves on camera and on what aspect of 'self' they focused. I kept viewing notes and diaries, documenting the important scenes, my thoughts on the films at the time, and the first viewing experience. As I managed to obtain copies of some of these films, I watched them again after I came back from my field trip, and wrote my analysis of each film in more detail.

III.   Analysing films

When analysing personal perspectives, author theory has usually been taken as an approach to understanding the vision of the director as an 'auteur'. The idea of seeing the director as a writer was first developed by the French film critic Alexander Astruc, in his term 'camera-pen', emphasising "the creation of a film was like the writing of a novel or a poem: it was not only a creative art, but a deeply personal one".[156] The film critic André Bazin published an article 'De la politique des auteurs' in French magazine *Cahiers du cinema* in 1957; the phrase 'la politique des auteurs' was later translated by American film critic Andrew Sarris into English as '*author theory*'. Over the last half a century, author theory, or auteurism has attracted tremendous attention, but also controversial debates in film studies.

As an approach, author theory is usually seen to have two intentions. Firstly, it recognises the director as a film's 'principal creative source', and believes that "film

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[156] Sikov, *Film Studies: an Introduction*, 119.

ought to bear the personal stylistic signature of its director", or the 'auteurprints'[157] of its creator.[158] Secondly, this approach was used to understand Hollywood directors working in the highly standardised and controlled industrial environment,[159] as "genuine, even exemplary auteurs".[160] As Chris Darke points out: "Auteurism's most profound and influential critical tactic is not the mere attribution of individuated creative agency in what is a collaborative medium, but rather the exaltation of Hollywood directors, hitherto seen as mere cogs in a vulgar commercial machine, as auteurs."[161]

These two main points that author theory aims to demonstrate have also raised many criticisms. Firstly, "Auteurism was attacked for belying the collaborative conditions of cinema's mode of production", as "auteurs no longer produced films intentionally, rather films produced auteurs unintentionally".[162] Secondly, "communication and signification become a closed circuit with authors jam packing films full of meaning and spectators subsequently unpacking that meaning at its ultimate destination". In addition, there is also the problem of 'the commerce of auteurism',[163] as "auteurism has become a commercial strategy for organising audience reception, as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims".[164]

As I discussed in the literature review chapter, the Chinese first person DV diary documentary filmmaking can be seen as having developed from Chinese individual one-person amateur filmmaking. There is no question about whether they have an 'auteurprint', as they are films made by a single author and about the 'author' self in a

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[157] Routt, "L'Evidence".

[158] Watson, "Approaches to Cinematic Authorship," 98.

[159] Darke, "Film Critism," 401.

[160] Watson, "Approaches to Cinematic Authorship," 98.

[161] Darke, "Film Critism," 401.

[162] Watson, "Approaches to Cinematic Authorship," 100.

[163] Corrigan, quoted by Watson, "Approaches to Cinematic Authorship," 101.

[164] Ibid.

diary format. As Rascaroli states "in diaries, authorship is always in focus".[165] In addition, I believe the self in contemporary Chinese context to be multi-layered, hybrid and conflicted, as I mentioned in my literature review. This self is not only the main character represented on camera, but is also the maker of its own representation in its own film. The style and perspective that the maker gives to the film as his or her 'signature' is in itself part of the identity and representation of the self.

So when analysing the films, I focus on how the choice of setting, camerawork, lighting, and sound construct the self on camera and create a particular style and perspective that indirectly contribute to the construction of the self.

1.   Setting in the familial or the public space

In terms of the choice of setting, I observed that more than half of these films focus on the familial space of the filmmakers, such as films made by Tang Danhong, Wang Fen, Hu Xinyu, and Shu Haolun. The others, such as the younger generation filmmakers Wu Haohao and Xue Jianqing, present the self often directly confronting other individuals in public spaces. These films raise ethical tensions between public and private, personal and collective. I roughly grouped these films into two categories, one focusing on the self in the familial space, the other focusing on the self in public spaces. When analysing the familial self, or what Renov regards as 'domestic ethnography', I take as a reference point Lebow's argument that the documentation of the familial others is complementary to the construction of the self, to explore if this is also the case in Chinese first person films. When analysing the public self, I explore in what kinds of public spaces the filmmakers stand, and compare these films with Japanese filmmaker Kazuo Hara's films.

2.   Different layers of the self

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[165] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 116.

Catherine Russell's four levels of self-inscription that construct a fragmented self offer me an analytical tool. As I outlined in the previous chapter, when Russell analyses what she regards as auto-ethnographic non-fiction films, she states that the self is inscribed in the film through four layers. These are: the self as *speaker*, the first-person voice-over; the self as *seer*, the 'origin of gaze'; the self as the *seen*, the 'body image', and the self as the avant-garde collagist or the editor.[166] These different layers also split the self as the maker and the subject. However, these two identities of the self are not clearly separated in the film. It is easy to identify the *speaker*, the *seer* and the *editor* as the maker self, while the *seen* constructs the subject self. However, the *speaker* and the *seer* is also the subject, who speaks and sees for the self. Similar to Russell's notion of the *seer*, Alisa Lebow emphasises the 'look *in* the film', which is not the aesthetics of the look *of* the film, but is the way it looks at its subject, "the active engagement of its visual subjects".[167] This is seen through the eyes of the first person self as filmmaker and as subject. The look articulates the emotion of the self, which further constructs the identity of the self.

When the self is presented on camera, the self is seen by a camera eye, which I argue is through a view of a third person, the audience, or it is through the eye of another self, who observes its own self. At these moments, different layers of the self are sometimes contradictory to each other. Through studying this disjuncture, especially the disjuncture between what they say and how they act on camera, between the content and the style, I understand these individual filmmakers in more depth.

3. Documenting 'now'

Furthermore, time and space are important elements that separate the self in different historical stages. In analysing how the sense of time, history, and memory are presented in Akerman's film *D'Est*, Lebow takes Benjamin's notion of 'the Now of recognisability'.[168] She understands that "the present moment, history in the making,

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[166] Russell, "Autoethnography," 277-278.

[167] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, 12.

[168] Quoted by Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, 255.

comes into the realm of 'the Now' only as it relates to a prior era, the 'Then' of a powerful imaginary field".[169] While Akerman's film expresses the collective first person identity as Jewish Diaspora, searching for roots through a journey across time and space, I notice that Chinese first person films made in the first decade of the twenty-first century document a 'now', or a recent past, without that much time and spatial distance.

It is the 'now' rather than the memory of a past that haunts that dominates the Chinese first person films. The selves are out there, *xianchang* (on the spot,现场, literally meaning 'now/current and space/place'), recording the 'now' as it is happening. They are actively participating in events or daily lives, such as in their own families; or proactively raising an issue and investigating it. They are either trying to solve a problem, or interacting with others and documenting their personal experience. In a sense, these first person filmmakers are experiencing a process with a DV camera, and their films document this process, the 'now'.

In fact, focusing on the 'now' is a feature of diary and video diary. "Diary obeys at least two rules: it must say 'I' and it must say 'now'."[170] In her book *Personal Camera*, Rascaroli states:

"Composed at a short distance from the events (immediately following them – or else after a few hours or, at most, a few days), diaries produce an effect of immediacy… Such immediacy distinguishes the temporality of the diary from that of other autobiographical writing: while the autobiographer, in an attempt to dominate time, imposes a teleological design on contingency and inscribes a profound meaning onto disconnected events (a meaning that often resembles a narrative of predestination), the diarist adapts and surrenders to the unpredictable and variable rhythm imposed by the everyday."[171]

By comparing diary with autobiography, Rascaroli emphasises the contemporaneity of the diary and its focus on the everyday experience. In this sense, Chinese first person

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[169] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, 13.

[170] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 119.

[171] Ibid., 119-120.

documentaries can be seen as video diaries, as their cameras document the daily events as they are happening. Even when they are investigating a private familial issue or a political public event, they are expressing their investigation in the current stage of 'now'.

4. Film diary as a practice

While focusing on the 'now' on the spot, these films also document the 'now' of making films, the process of their filmmaking action. This has made these first person DV diary films, to some extent, into what David E. James regards as '*film diary*', which is distinct from 'diary film'. For James, 'film diary' is 'the act of filming', "the practice of filming regularly, of producing footage of one's life".[172] He emphasises collecting daily materials as an ongoing practice. However, he disregards the editing and post-production stages as part of the practice. In developing James's notion of 'film diary', Laura Rascaroli argues that editing and post-production are important stages that "make a diary out of a set of audiovisual 'notes'".[173] She argues that "the filmic diary is twice in the present: it offers both the 'now' of the recorded images, and the 'now' of the reflection and commentary on them".[174] James's and Rascaroli's analyses of the 'film diary' as a practice have provided me with a new perspective with which to approach Chinese first person documentary as an ongoing processing action. However, their analyses are limited to the aesthetic level and to how authorship is inscribed in this practice. They do not put the specific action in any historical and political context, nor do they explore its social meanings. In fact, James regards film diary only as "a private event, where consumption, especially consumption by others, is illicit".[175]

On the other hand, I ask:
- What is their intention in turning the camera inwards and filming their own lives and their interaction with others as 'film diary'?
- Why do they choose to use this filmmaking approach?

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[172] James, quoted by Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 128.

[173] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 130.

[174] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*,129.

[175] James, "Film Diary/Diary Film," 147.

- Have they faced any social ethical dilemmas?
- What have they achieved throughout the filmmaking process?

To explore these questions, I started to focus on the filmmaking process of these films. I read existing secondary materials, such as interviews with these filmmakers by other scholars and critics, published writings on these films, as well as screening and production notes. These secondary materials have given me more understanding on their production process and screening experiences. However, these materials are not specifically designed to explore my questions, but instead have their own agendas. Since all these films have finished production, it is impossible to go back to do an ethnographic observation of the production process. I decided to conduct interviews with filmmakers, inviting them to reflect on their production and screening experiences. This is to get a deeper understanding of the motivation and process of their first person filmmaking. My hypothesis is that through first person filmmaking practice, the filmmaker selves are consciously and unconsciously taking part in an ongoing process of deconstructing and reconstructing their own selves. To some extent, this practice throws light on - and mirrors - the larger process of the construction of hybrid modern identities in contemporary China.

IV. Interviewing

To conduct the interviews, I undertook my second field trip in the summer of 2010. During the preparation for the trip, I chose to do qualitative interviewing, 'a conversation with a purpose',[176] which is an efficient and valid way of gathering descriptions of life experiences from a subjective perspective.[177] I decided to use a semi-structured interview format, rather than the structured interview that is usually used in qualitative survey research. "Semi-structured interviews are designed to have a number of interviewer questions prepared in advance but such prepared questions are designed to be sufficiently open that the subsequent questions of the interviewer cannot

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[176] Kahn and Cannell, *The dynamics of interviewing*, 149.

[177] Kvale, "The qualitative research interview"; Maxwell, *Qualitative research design.*

be planned in advance but must be improvised in a careful and theorised way."[178] This method allows complex questions and issues to be explored in-depth in a flexible manner, but still within the topics that I focus on and for which I am fully prepared. The interview questions combine a number of cultural and topical issues. Cultural questions "focus on the norms, values, understandings, and taken-for-granted rules of behaviour of a group", whereas topical interviews seek descriptions of the processes of selected events and look for detailed factual information.[179] Organisational categories were created before the interviews, which function as 'bins' sorting the data for further analysis.[180]

Six categories of interview questions were devised. These centred on:
1. The filmmakers' backgrounds: what did they do before and when did they start making DV films?
2. About production:
    a. Their intention of choosing this method of filming themselves;
    b. Whether they have seen similar films before;
    c. The length of production;
    d. The budget.
3. About screening:
    a. How they think of their film;
    b. How others think of their films;
    c. What they want their audience to see.

In addition to these there were more open general questions:
4. What kinds of films they like and dislike.
5. How they think of other Chinese first person films.
6. What they have got out of making their films.

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[178] Wengraf, *Qualitative research interviewing*, 5.

[179] Rubin and Rubin, *Qualitative interviewing: the art of hearing data*, 28.

[180] Maxwell, *Qualitative research design*, 97.

I contacted filmmakers either by directly approaching them through emails and phone calls, or by being introduced by friends and other filmmakers. I informed them of the purpose and theme of my study and asked for their participation in it through interviews. Although the topic of their filmmaking is not a particularly ethically sensitive area, the interviews are still very personal, relating to the individual experiences and opinions of these filmmakers on socio-economic-political constraints. Building trust with participants was very important, especially with those who did not personally know me before the interviews. I clearly informed them of the purpose of the interview, telling them that the interview was part of my Ph.D. research project. Most filmmakers showed interest and agreed to participate voluntarily; therefore we set up a mutually agreeable time for interviewing. For personal or geographic reasons, I did not interview Tang Danhong, who is now living in Israel with her Israeli husband, and Ai Weiwei, whom I managed to approach later in London.

Before I went back to China to interview the filmmakers, I did a pilot interview with a young Chinese filmmaker through a Skype call. It helped me to practise my interview technique, to test the efficiency of interview questions, and to explore new perspectives. It also provided valuable information to stimulate analytical categories.

In July and August 2010, I visited eight filmmakers and film critics in Beijing and Shanghai, where most of these filmmakers are currently based. I kept fieldwork-style notes and diaries, in addition to sound recordings of face-to-face interviews. These materials reflected on the process of data collection and my feelings on interaction with interviewees. They aided the development of my initial ideas about the analytical categories, and became a reflexive foundation for future interviews. Interviews mainly took place in filmmakers' homes, studios, open spaces, or local cafés. One interview was conducted through a phone call with the filmmaker Yang Pingdao, as he was in his remote home town which was not convenient for me to visit. The interviews usually lasted one to two hours. Usually after each interview, I immediately listened to the sound recording and wrote a draft transcription. On the one hand, this was to check if there was any question or area that had not been covered. If so, I could quickly arrange another talk while I was in the field. On the other hand, this was for my own reflection and to allow me to develop more suitable questions for future interviews.

The tradition of signing a consent agreement before interviewing does not exist in Chinese culture, the presence of any contract or agreement being more likely to arouse the participant's suspicion than allay their fears. For this reason, I did not provide them with such a document. Nevertheless, I reassured them of their anonymity and right to withdraw at any stage of the interview. As for the sound recording, I asked for their permission to record before each interview, informing them that the sole purpose for doing so was for convenience of recall, as it would be impossible to take notes on everything they said and reassuring them of the confidentiality of the conversation. The interviews were all done in Mandarin Chinese, the native language of the participants, through which they could express themselves best.

I am aware of the drawbacks of the method of interview. The advantage of qualitative interviewing, which brings out in-depth description of one's life world from one's own viewpoint is also a limitation.Memories of past experiences and feelings are highly subjective, reconstructed and influenced by a few factors, such as the interview environment, i.e. in what circumstances the interview is conducted and to whom the interviewee is speaking. Therefore, I consciously kept reminding myself that the interview materials are not the main component of researching the self as the maker, but only play a complementary role to film text analysis and secondary materials.

In addition to interviewing these filmmakers and some critics, the purpose of this trip was also to collect more first person films which I had not seen on my first trip, and to collect production notes and screening notes. During this trip, I watched more first person films, including *Home Video* (dir. Yang Lina, 2001), *Martian Syndrome* (dir. Xue Jianqiang, 2010), *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* (dir. Xue Jianqiang, 2010), *Tape* (dir. Li Ning, 2010), *Treatment* (dir. Wu Wenguang, 2010), *Self Portrait: Three Women* (dir. Zhang Mengqi, 2010), and so on. I also visited local independent filmmaker communities, such as in Songzhuang, around Beijing Film Academy and CNEX[181]. This was to understand the local independent film culture and the power relationships in the field, so as to get more understanding of the filmmakers and their films.

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[181] CNEX, the short form of "Chinese Next" and "See Next", is a non-profit foundation which produces and promotes documentaries of the Chinese people.

During this trip, I also collected more secondary materials. For example, there are rich archival materials on the first person villager documentaries, gathered by the programme leader Wu Wenguang. This includes his email communications with the villagers since 2005, written diaries, discussions, production notes, and responses to the films in screenings. Wu is also writing a book through his first person viewpoint chronologically examining the progression of the programme.

V.   Selection of films

After this trip, I sorted the films into three groups. The first group is films made at the turn of the millennium (in 2000 and 2001), at the beginning of the DV filmmaking wave. I found three first person films made at this time, by three female amateur filmmakers Tang Danhong, Yang Lina, and Wang Fen. These three films all investigate the filmmakers' familial issues through the daughter's point of view. The second group is films made in the mid and late 2000s, when more people joined the wave of the so-called DV independent documentary filmmaking. While most of those DV filmmakers focus on others, some, like the three female filmmakers, take a first person narrative and explore their own familial space. These include three male filmmakers Hu Xinyu, Shu Haolun, and Yang Pingdao.

The third group is also films made in the late 2000s. However, unlike the other two groups of films that focus on the familial self, these films explore the self in public spaces, or in their own space. The young filmmaker Wu Haohao's films stand out distinctively. In most of his films, he explicitly presents himself as a highly authorial figure criticising others. I have also included films by another young amateur filmmaker Xue Jianqiang, who has been influenced by Wu Haohao's approach, as well as the documentary film practice by contemporary artist Ai Weiwei.

As Xue Jianqiang and Ai Weiwei were not in the original selection before my second fieldwork, I used other ways to have a conversation with them. For Xue, I held an informal telephone interview with him, and read other interviews with him done by

others. For Ai, I attended the exhibition of Ai Weiwei and his public conversation at Tate Modern London in October 2010. I also managed to have a short conversation with him on how he thinks about the medium of documentary.

In my original plan, I also selected another group of films for study. These are films made by the 'subaltern selves', including the series of villager amateur films *My Village* (2006, 2007, 2008), and *My Name is Fenfen* (2008), made by a migrant worker girl Guo Lifen. However, during the analyses of these films, I found that in the first three groups of films, the individual filmmaker selves stand in the position of an individual citizen, fighting for individual rights and protections, and their films reflect how this self is situated in the individualising Chinese society. Though the first group of films is made by female filmmakers, the filmmakers do not emphasise their social identity as women. They explore their problematic familial relations as a family member questioning problematic parental or parent-child relationships. On the other hand, the films made by subaltern selves explore the filmmakers' social identity as subaltern individuals. These films cannot just be conceptualised through the notion of the individual self, and need much more complicated analysis. In addition, the villager documentary series consists of rich video and written materials that deserve more study than only a thesis chapter. Therefore, I decided to remove this group from this Ph.D. thesis, and hope to study it later in much more detail.

Furthermore, since my focus is on films made from 2000 to 2009, the first ten years of the twenty-first century, I do not include many recent first person documentaries made after 2009, by Wu Wenguang, Li Ning, Zhang Mengqi, some others. While I do not talk about their films in the main chapters, I will discuss some of them in the conclusion of the thesis. It is important to note that I made an exception for Xue Jianqiang by including his two films *Martian Syndrome* and *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* both made in 2010. This is because Xue shares some of Wu Haohao's ideas of 'action documentary'. By including him, I can compare different filmmaking techniques of the so-called 'action documentary' and examine what the filmmaker has achieved.

VI.   Conclusion

In this research on the first person DV documentary in contemporary China, I take the method of textual analysis, and semi-structured interview to analysis the filmmaking practice from the perspective of the filmmakers. The interviews with the filmmakers provided rich material for me to understand the backgrounds of the filmmakers, their personal trajectories, and how far they have been influenced by other personal or first person films.[182] In addition, I asked about their intentions in filming themselves, and what they actually get from the filmmaking. By comparing their intentions and what they achieved, I understand better the function of first person filmmaking practice for the filmmaker selves. These nine first person filmmakers all more or less emphasised their filmmaking as an experience in the interviews. Though to some of them, making a first person narrative film is also a way to enter the independent film world in China and make a difference from previous filmmakers, they all take filmmaking as more than just a *film* practice. To some extent, their filmmaking practice has become a form of social practice, through which they are producing their experience, and gaining more social understanding. Nevertheless, such interview materials can only play a complementary role and need to be further examined alongside theoretical research and film analysis. In Chapters Four to Six, I will discuss in more detail my analyses of these films and the interview materials.

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[182] Wu Haohao and Xue Jianqiang have seen Japanese filmmaker Kazuo Hara's films. Shu Haolun has seen Michael Moore's films. The others have not seen any foreign or domestic documentaries that take a first person narrative or similar approaches. They think they have not been influenced by others.

Chapter Three
The Individual Self in China

I.   Introduction

The notion of '*first person*' relates to concepts of 'self', 'individual', 'person', 'subject' and 'private'. These have all been interpreted differently throughout the course of Chinese history. In this study the notion of '*first person*' has a strong connotation with the *self* as an *individual subject*. '*First person*' filmmaking practice means the filmmaker points the camera inward, to film his or her individual self, and explore relationships between the self and other individuals, society and the state.

In this chapter I will discuss five key themes that I identify which are related to the constitution of the individual self developed from Chinese first person documentaries studied in this thesis. Of these five, three themes explore the construction of the individual self by and through family relationships, obligations and expectations. These family relations, especially the paternal authority and filial duties, further mirror the state authority and the submission of individual subjects to the state.

In fact, the themes concerning family relationship inherit a history of struggle over the moral and political meaning of the individual person that date back to the late Qing and Republican period, when reformers and revolutionaries attacked the Confucian family system for the constraints it imposed on the individual person. Though the conceptualisation of the self and person have been one of the key debates in ancient Chinese thought, it was not until the Republican period that modern notions of individual self, rights and autonomy were introduced to China, which further complicated the constitution of individual subjects. Therefore, in this chapter I will mainly discuss these five themes within the context of changing connotations of the individual since the turn of twentieth century.

The first theme that emerged in these films is the collective and relational sense of self, which is inherited from Confucian family ethics. Current scholarly debates reveal that, though Confucian family relations have been challenged since the late nineteenth century, the collective sense of self has not been destroyed and has been further emphasised in Mao's China through socialist collectivism. In post-Mao China, the decollectivisation process has largely untied individuals from previous collective institutions; however it has not been a thorough process. Scholars like Yan Yunxiang observe that the decline of earlier socialist collective institutions also means the withdrawal of social protection and welfare from many individuals. As illustrated in the first person films that explore the familial self, individuals tend to turn back to their families for a sense of belonging and collectiveness.

The second theme that frequently emerges in these first person documentaries is that of parental authority, or more precisely of paternal authority, and the gendered nature of ethical expectations. Existing studies reveal a well-established pattern of resisting paternal authority and the ethics of female obedience since the late nineteenth century. In the early Republican period, new women emerged, openly challenging traditional constraints set on women. In Mao's China the social status of women had largely risen and women gained more power in the domestic space. However, gender hierarchy still existed and women were primarily seen as related to the domestic space. Scholars argue that women's familial obligations and obedience have been re-emphasised. Although there has been a renewed proliferation of women's semi-autobiographical writing, such personal expression continues to reinforce the connection between the female, the private and the domestic. The three female filmmakers' first person films studied in Chapter Four also explore their personal familial relations.

The third theme concerns filial duties, which is especially evident among the first person films that explore the familial self. Filiality has been regarded as the central virtue of traditional Chinese ethics, which is also in response to the dominant parental authority. Scholars observe that though paternal authority has been attacked throughout the history of twentieth-century China, the logic of obedience has been kept as the central morality and has been emphasised for different political purposes. The films studied in this thesis demonstrate the tensions between individual desire and family/

obligation, as well as a re-negotiation of filial duties of different generations.

While the first three themes all explore the construction of the individual self through family relations, such as the collective sense of self, gendered expectations and kinship filial obligations, the following two themes are concerned with the relationship between the individual and the state, and between individuals as individuals in their own right. In pre-modern China, the society was deemed as 'familistic', where family ethics played an important role in defining the individual's position in social relations. This family centered morality has been attacked since the late Qing and early Republican period. Intellectuals have called for the construction of modern social ethics for the project of modern state building.

The fourth theme, especially developed from the first person films exploring the public self, concerns a changing relationship between the individual and the state. Though scholars have argued that modern Western notions of individual rights and autonomy have been introduced to China since the late Qing period, the understanding of such notions still mirrored a traditional state-centred intellectual framework, which emphasised the conformity of the individual to the state, rather than individuals' rights against the state. However, as these films demonstrate, individuals start to assert their rights, facing the decline of social protection. In addition, the individualising society also sees the emergence of what Yan Yunxiang regards as "new sociality", that is, how individuals relate to each other in interpersonal interactions outside the domestic space. Hence the fifth theme is the changing relationship between individuals as individuals, which is shown through all the first person films studied in this thesis. First person filmmaking practice can be seen as what Evans regards "a communicative practice", in which the camera as a mediator leads the interaction as well as documents the interactive process.

In the following sections, I will discuss in detail these five key features, which I identify from the first person films and this filmmaking practice, in the context of the changing constitution of the individual self throughout twentieth-century China.

II. The collective and relational sense of self

These first person films, especially the first two groups that explore the self in familial relations and the domestic space, construct the self as highly relational in collective groups. This collective sense of self can be seen as inherited from traditional Confucian family ethics that emphasise relationality and collectiveness. Liang Shuming, an influential Chinese intellectual, states that traditional Chinese culture is centred on ethical relations. This means that traditional Chinese society is organised by Confucian family ethical relations through which the self is positioned as a relational social being.[183] De Bary points out that the fundamental aim of Confucianism is "to be a man among men", in other words, "man defines his 'self' in relation to others and to the way which unites them."[184] According to this perspective, in traditional Chinese culture, the self is defined as encompassing a strong sense of collectiveness situated in a web of a larger whole.

Related literature demonstrates that Confucian family relations have been challenged since the late nineteenth century. However, current scholarly debates show that even when modern Western notions of self had been introduced to China at the turn of the twentieth century, the collective sense of self has not been destroyed. In Mao's China, the collectiveness of self had been further emphasised under the tenets of socialism collectivism. Though the decollectivisation process in post-Mao China has legitimately untied individuals from previous collective institutions, it has not been a thorough process. As these films illustrate, new social problems emerged due to the lack of social protection, which made the individual self turn back to their families for a sense of belonging and collectiveness.

During the late Qing and Republican period, while modern western notions of the individual had been introduced to China, there was a general rejection of traditional Confucianism led by reformers and revolutionaries. The main intellectual debate at the

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[183] Liang, "Zhongguo Wenhua Yaoyi," 79-95.

[184] De Bary, *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, 149.

time was that the individual self should gain independence from all kinds of social relations and organisations, i.e. family, belief systems and ruler-subject relationships, and should be directly subjected to the modern nation-state.

However, though traditional Confucian ethics had been attacked, the western concept of the individual did not totally replace the traditional Confucian understanding of self as relational. In fact, the introduction of this new concept of the individual was not simply a translation of western equivalences. As Lydia Liu states, it was rather through a 'translingual practice'[185], that is a dynamic process of construction, drawing on influences from both ancient Chinese thought and imported Western philosophy.[186]

Scholars notice that, in this 'translingual practice', early modern intellectuals did not focus on a singular form of the individual, but emphasised the plural form of a collective group of individuals. Svarverud observes that the intellectual framework at the time was profoundly mirrored on the state-focused intellectual tradition which "defined individuals in terms of inescapable social categories that define their duties towards collectives and society at large."[187]

In his Ph.D thesis, Yin states that the word 'individual' was in fact first translated into Chinese as a modern legal and collective political concept in the Chinese translation of Wheaton's *Wanguo gongfa* (Elements of International Law, 万国公法) (1864).[188] Instead of being translated into '*geren*' (个人, one person), as used later by May Fourth intellectuals, the word 'individual' was translated into '*min ren*' (民人), in which the word *ren* (a person, 人) was put after *min* (the people, 民), underlining the collective political notion.[189]

Though reformists and revolutionists such as Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, and Sun Yanshan at

[185] Liu, "Narratives of Modern Selfhood"; Liu, *Translingual Practice* (1995).

[186] Liu, "Narratives of Modern Selfhood"; Liu, *Translingual Practice* (1995); Yang, *Zhuanxiang Ziwo*; Zarrow, "Citizenship and Human Rights in Early Twentieth-century Chinese Thought."

[187] Svarverud, "Individual Self-Discipline and Collective Freedom," 195.

[188] Yin, *The Politics of Art*.

[189] Ibid.

the time had their own interpretations of the modern Western notion of individualism, they all tended to focus on the plural form of the individuals as a collective notion, such as *guo min* (state man, 国民), a new vocabulary created by Liang Qichao. Describing 'citizenry',[190] *guo min* "represented a logical evolution of a term which had previously simply referred to the 'people of the kingdom' or 'the people'".[191] In other words, the individual subject was still being emphasised as part of the collective.

After the Communist Party came into power, a radical transformation of social structure took place. However, scholars generally believe that although Maoism denies Confucian values, the collective sense of self was not entirely abolished. In fact traditional collective institutions organised by the family system, and quasi-family organisations, were replaced by new forms of socialist collective institutions. On the one hand, the family system faced destruction through the new marriage law and encouraging children to report on their parents; on the other, the Communist Party utilised various mechanisms in the ideological realm and also brought in fundamental changes to the organisation of production, distribution, law and general social life, to create new forms of collective identity.[192]

In rural areas, *shengchan dui* (production teams, 生产队) were introduced as the most important units in the lives of peasants. These organised the productive activities of the peasants and also the distribution of their products within the team.[193] Similarly in urban areas, during the 1950s, there was a rapid industrialisation and expansion of the state bureaucracy, which formed *danwei* (the work unit, 单位), usually meaning the state-run factories and state agencies. For urban individuals, *danwei* not only represented privilege compared to the rural population, but also meant extreme immobility.[194] In addition, the party also introduced the *hujibu* (household registration book, 户籍簿) in

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[190] Ibid., 219.

[191] Ibid.

[192] Pye, "The State and the Individual"; Inkeles, Broaded, Cao, "Causes and Consequences of Individual Modernity in China"; Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*.

[193] Inkeles, Broaded, Cao, "Causes and Consequences of Individual Modernity in China"; Pye, "The State and the Individual," 8-9.

[194] Inkeles, Broaded, Cao, "Causes and Consequences of Individual Modernity in China," 33-35.

both urban and rural areas. This new form of collective relations created the collective identity of the "new socialist men and women"[195] as fellow comrades who shared the same task of building a new socialist state.[196]

Since the late 1970s, a series of top-down policies, such as the open policy, and structural changes have resulted in what Yan Yunxiang regards as a 'decollectivisation' process, or '*songbang*', untying the individual from previous socialist institutions of the work units and production teams.[197] In addition, marketisation has provided more resources, materials and choices for individuals to develop their own lives. All this has accelerated individual autonomy to make decisions and to develop their own paths of lives. For these filmmakers, increasing social mobility and autonomy have enabled them to make films according to their own wills, and to take a reflexive look into themselves in changing familial or public spaces.

However, the 'decollectivisation' in contemporary China is not a thorough process. The collective family and quasi-family relations still construct an individual's identity to a great extent, highlighting the relationality of autonomy occupied by the individual subject. Scholars like Kipnis argue that in managing relationships between individuals and between individuals and social organisations in everyday life, social relations still play an important role in individuals' everyday life.[198] In addition, some traditional and socialist collective institutions have not entirely disappeared from social life. The *hukou* (household, 户口) system still exists, holding family as the basic unit of society, and continually creating unequal rural/urban social identities.

Some social problems emerged in this ongoing decollectivisation process. While the state retreated from public life, it also withdrew certain forms of social welfare from a group of individuals, such as medical care and subsidised housing. However, new sets of social institutions, to provide resources and securities, were not developed. This tension has resulted in inequality, lack of social protection and over-commercialised

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[195] Munro, quoted in Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 81.

[196] Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 81.

[197] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*.

[198] Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi*.

public spaces. As shown in the films on the familial self, that I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five, the individuals tend to turn to their family for a sense of connectedness and collectiveness. Though these filmmakers express themselves through a strong authorial voice, they still emphasise their roles as parts of the larger collective, and are concerned with how the changing social and economic context has influenced their family as a collective. In Chapter Four the focus on the collective familial is expressed through the strong concern with broken family relations, while in Chapter Five it is explored through the changing structure and space of '*laojia*' – old home.

III.   Parental and paternal authority and gender hierarchy

The parental, or more precisely paternal authority, with the accompanying gendered aspect of ethical expectations is also a key theme that repeatedly emerges in these first person documentaries. This is shown both in the films that explore the family and the films that present the self in public spaces, in which the elder, especially the senior male characters, also possess a strong paternal authority. Situated in a deep-rooted patriarchal order, these filmmakers consciously try to break it. It is interesting to know that some male filmmakers do try to establish their own authority in this attempt, rather than destabilising the power equation altogether.

The traditional Confucian three cardinal guides, (*sangang* 三纲): the ruler guides the subjects; the father guides the son; and the husband guides the wife, have been highlighted as central ethical norms since the Han period (second century BC). This is the period when Confucianism had grown into "authoritative architects of the state cult and had succeeded in endowing their ethics with a semi-official standing within the just emerging mandarinate".[199] While the three cardinal guides indicate three fundamental ethical relations in traditional Chinese society, there are in fact five basic ethical relations, which are the relations between parent and child; between husband and wife; between old and young; between ruler and subject; and between friends. The latter two relations fall outside the kinship realm, according to Feng Youlan, one of the most prominent modern Chinese scholars and philosophers. These two relations can also be

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[199] Trauzettel, "Historical Aspects of the Individual-Society Relationship in China," 27.

conceived as familial relations between father and son, and between the elder and younger brother.[200] In this sense, Chinese society as a 'familistic' society,[201] emphasises the central position of the ruler, the father and the husband in social relations.

The dominance of paternal authority is also explicitly shown in Hu Xinyu's *Family Phobia* (2010), in which Hu's father 'interferes' in every family issue and holds himself as the authority of the family. In addition, in the other two films which explore the public self, Xue Jianqiang's *I beat the Tiger when I was young* (2010), and Wu Haohao's *Critising China* (2008), the young male filmmakers challenge the 'senior' quasi-father figures in grassroots public spaces.

Paternal power is expressed strongly in three women's films whose investigations of their family relationships nevertheless challenge the authority of the father in different ways. In fact, a gendered feature of Chinese ethical relations is male domination. Responding to it is the principle of "Three Obediences" that governs women. As Wolf points out, "[A]s an unmarried girl a woman must obey her father and her brothers, as a married woman she must obey her husband; as a widow she must obey her adult sons. During the three stages of a woman's life, defined by male ideology, she was the property of different groups of men who were responsible for her care but who could, as with any property, dispose of her as they saw fit."[202] All three women's films, to some extent, illustrate how "Three Obediencs" still constrains the female figures in the family and how they confront traditional gendered expectations.

In fact, current literature reveals a well-established pattern of repelling paternal authority and the ethics of female obedience that underwent tumultuous changes since the late nineteenth century. The so-called 'new women', who emerged in the early Republican period, openly challenged the traditional constraints set on women. In Mao's China, though legislations had been established to raise the social status of women, and though women gained more rights and equality inside the family, gender hierarchy continued to exist and women were still largely seen as related to the

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[200] Feng, *Zhongguo Zhexue Shi*.

[201] Parsons, Quoted by King, *The Individual and Group in Confucianism*, 58.

[202] Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 2.

domestic space. Since the late 1970s, women's familial obligations and obedience have been re-emphasised. The renewed proliferation of popular women's semi-autobiographical writing does express more women's personal voices; however it reinforces the connection between the female, the private and the domestic. In fact, three first person films made by three female filmmakers, all explore their domestic familial relations as a way to actively communicate with their parents.

During the late Qing and early twentieth century, a cultural attack was launched among intellectuals questioning the Confucian family norms of authority and obedience.[203] It was also during the May Fourth period that modern-educated 'new women' elites emerged, who actively protested against discriminatory gender attitudes and practices in an attempt to change the perception of women in traditional society. The 'new women' figures included journalists, novelists, playwrights, poets, and critics, such as Ding Ling, Bing Xin, Xiao Hong, Qiu Jin, and Zhang Ailing. Deploying new forms of literature, such as fantasy, autobiography and comedy, they addressed new cultural feminism. According to Wang Zheng, who provides significant insights into the lives of radical new women prior to 1949, "New cultural feminism altered the lives and indelibly imprinted the consciousness of the generation of new women who came of age at the time".[204]

The women's movement not only had influence in urban China, but also had impact among peasants and the working class. Wolf observes that "as the women's movement matured in the 1920s, greater efforts were made to appeal to women in the villages and factories, mainly by focusing on issues relevant to their needs, such as wife beating, divorce for cause, footbinding, and literacy".[205] During this time, the Communist Party also focused on empowering female identity, especially among peasant women; however, it was to serve the construction of a new sociality identity, rather than challenging male domination. Wolf argues that "Mao's oft-quoted statement – that women, like men, were subject to the three oppressive systems of political authority, clan authority, and religious authority, but also had one more, the domination by men –

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[203] King, *The Individual and Group in Confucianism*, 60.

[204] Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment.*

[205] Ibid.,14.

was *not* to be the keynote of the Chinese Communist Party's approach to peasant women." [206] Even though the Communist Party's promotion on women liberation was not a thorough process and was for the need of national salvation, this relatively liberated view on women, however, has been challenged by the Nationalist Government when it came into power in 1927. In the early 1930s, the Nationalist Government started the New Life Movement, which set a series of moral principles derived from traditional Confucian virtues.[207] Emphasisng "orderliness, cleanliness, frugality, simplicity, promptness, precision, harmoniousness, and dignity"[208], this conservative view rejected Western individualism and promoted traditional Confucian ethics. It also against the images of 'new women' and saw the new women challenge the political uniformity and social stability.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, legislation was enacted to repel gender inequality. The new Marriage Law was established in 1950, stating that "men and women enjoyed 'equal rights,' 'equal status in the home,' and 'equal rights in the possession and management of family property."[209] The law promoted free-choice marriage and ensured sexual equality. As Wolf states, "[t]he features of the new law that received the greatest attention, both favorable and unfavorable, were the rights of women to demand divorces and the rights of young people to choose their own marriage partners without parental interference."[210] At the same time women were also encouraged to move outside the familial sphere, to enter the productive workforce and were integrated into social production. Official state organisations, such as the Women's Federation or '*Fulian*'(妇联), were funded. These legal changes have to some extent had a positive impact on increasing women's position, especially in the domestic space.

However, as many scholars have argued, the image of the new strong woman is to support the socialist collective ideology, whereas in reality it was far from reaching the aim of gender equality. In her influential anthropological study examining the extent to

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[206] Ibid., 15.

[207] Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundation of the New Life Movement", 965-966.

[208] Ibid. 955-56.

[209] Quoted in Evans, "The Subject of Gender," 11.

[210] Wolf, *Revolution Postponed,* 15.

which women had been emancipated in Mao's China, Margery Wolf argues that the communist party failed to bring Chinese women equality with men legally, politically, socially and economically. Therefore, the gendered features of the expectations in patriarchal society still largely remain.

Though women could enter the production force in Mao's China, they were still seen as being connected to the domestic space. During the first Five Year programme, "Five Goods" was promoted by the state: "[s]ince the economy was not yet ready to provide full-time employment for women, they should (1) unite with the neighborhood families for mutual aid, (2) do housework well, (3) educate children well, (4) encourage family production, study, and work, and (4) study well themselves."[211] During the Great Leap, the emancipation of women was on the basis that it would not challenge the economic growth. "Of all the policies adopted in the Great Leap the attempt to change the role and status of Chinese women probably resulted in the most widespread, consistent, and far-reaching opposition. It was both qualitatively and quantitatively different from other problems for its involved questioning of basic traditional cultural values and institutions, and half the population was involved in its scope…. it is clear that at this stage the Chinese had decided that the advancement of women must not be at the expense of economic growth and technical change; i.e., the opportunity for female employment and participation must be within the context of increasing production and expansion of social services."[212]

The Cultural Revolution is seen by some scholars as having raised women's status. As Wolf states "The Cultural Revolution was the first major campaign that focused with any depth on women's needs since the ill-fated Marriage Law Campaign of the 1950s".[213] However, Evans argues, it has gone to another extreme in the total denial of feminine features. "Its defeminization of women's appearance, its gender-neutral encouragement to all young people to examine their political values by breaking with urban culture to go to the countryside, and its insistence on the possibility of developing a revolutionary outlook through working for the collective – all such representations

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[211]Andor quoted by Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 23.

[212] Quoted in Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 23.

[213] Wolf, *Revolution Postponed,* 25.

signified the replacement of explicit advice by a discourse of 'no advice'."[214] Despite this gender hierarchies continue to exist. Wolf states that after the Cultural Revolution, there were still women who told her that "it was 'nature' for men to rule outside the home and women to rule within."[215] She observes that many women "seemed to think their newfound voice within the house, limited though it might be, was the victory they had been preparing for."[216] This indicates that the battle for gender equality has gained some ground in the domestic space through lawful and economic forces. However, it still remains largely unchallenged on the larger social sphere.

Wolf analyses the reasons why gender equality was not achieved during Mao's China. "Although sexual equality as a principle has not been vacated, it has been set aside at each economic downturn or show of rural resistance without recognition that such casual treatment will in time devalue a principle until it is but a hollow slogan. I do not think this was a conscious effort on the part of CCP to keep women subordinated, but rather a consistent failing on the part of an all-male leadership to perceive their own sexist assumptions".[217]

In the early post-Mao era, however, the popular discourse on women still emphasised women's familial obligations. Wang Lingzhen observes, "the state started relaxing its control over gender and class relationships and, as a result, conventional prejudice against women regained its popularity. At the same time, Chinese women's personal lives were still largely defined in relation to social obligations and public moral standards".[218] Evans states that, "Gender inequality appears to be a structural feature of the market economy, and in conditions in which gender issues do not rank high on the state's agenda, the allocation of resources exacerbating such differentials continues to disadvantage women. Thus, while opportunities for mobility and occupation abound for the elite sector of well-educated and largely urban-situated women...the logic of the unregulated market consolidates the entrenchment of gender discriminatory practices in

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[214] Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China*, 8.

[215] Ibid.

[216] ibid.

[217] Wolf, *Revolution postponed,* 26.

[218] Wang, *"Reproducing the Self,"* 175.

the wider economy, society and culture."[219]

However, in this social context of the reiteration of gender discrimination, female personal writings re-emerged in the 1980s pinioned by writers such as Yu Luojin, after the first emergence of modern women's writing during the May Fourth period. Such literary discourse can be seen as a resistance to the public attitude towards women. These writers "seek cover behind various legitimate and socially sanctioned principles, such as Marxist theory on love and marriage, truth telling, and equality between men and women",[220] and try to carve out a space for gendered personal voices, repelling conventional gender expectations.

During the late 1990s and the early twentieth century, these writings grew rapidly and further diversified. "The new orientation towards the privatization of domestic services was accompanied by a marked relaxation of controls on artistic and narrative representation about private life. 'Affairs of the heart' – love, marriage, divorce and sex – became common topics of the burgeoning popular media and print culture. A new discourse of private affect and desire exploded into everyday life, replacing the stern self-sacrificing ethos of the Maoist subject with a new vision of personal happiness cemented by emotional self-fulfilment in interpersonal and family relationships".[221] Facing the ever-growing market forces of consumer culture, such discourses of women's personal voice have become largely visible; they have also become highly profitable as cultural commodities to satisfy the consumer's voyeuristic and narcissistic needs.[222]

Nevertheless, the re-proliferation of the gendered personal voice reinforced the connection between the female and the domestic. Evans argues that, "'soft and gentle' images of a supportive femininity topped the rankings for desirable wives. Treating love and sex as key constituents of happy and stable marriages rapidly became crucial criteria of China's new claims to being a 'modern society'. While these images were

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[219] Evans, "The Gender of Communication," 998-999.

[220] Wang, "Reproducing the Self," 175.

[221] Evans, "The Gender of Communication," 989.

[222] Wang, "Reproducing the Self," 176.

sometimes disturbed by others of the 'strong woman' (nüqiangren 女强人) and the ambitious entrepreneur, the dominant popular message affirmed women's naturalized emotional attributes of gentleness, sympathy and care."[223]

In her anthropological study on experiences of the mother–daughter relationships of urban women born in the 1950s and the 1980s, Evans observes that "As families and kin groups, communities and neighbourhoods are physically, spatially and socially broken up, and as gender differences in employment and income increase, discursive encouragement to mothers to become the all-round confidantes, educators and moral guides of their children through "communicating" with them affirms women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere."[224] The younger generation women as daughters, born in the 1980s and growing up the post-Mao China, emphasise more *goutong* with their parents - a term that encapsulates "a range of desires, longings and ideals of relatedness with parents, particularly with mothers".[225] Evans argues that such expectations of mother-daughter communication, on the one hand, "affirm a new ethics of the individual subject in the changing character of the urban family", while on the other, they "reinforce the gendered attributes and responsibilities associated with them."[226]

The three films made by female filmmakers explore their personal familial relations. Though these three women take the initiative to investigate their own personal family relations, which challenge the obedient role of daughter, they do not aim to be 'strong women'. Instead, their filmmaking practice can be seen as a way of active *goutong*, longing for connectedness with their parents. This changing role of daughter as a more active communicator also indicates a change in filiality, which is another theme demonstrated in these films, in responding to parental authority.

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[223] Evans, "*The Gender of Communication,*" 998-999.

[224] Ibid., 983.

[225] Ibid., 981.

[226] Ibid., 983.

IV. Expectations of filiality, tensions between individual desire and family obligations.

Filiality, a moral practice in responding to parental authority, is also shown in the first person films that explore the familial selves. As the core virtue of Confucian ethics defining intergenerational relationships, this morality requests the children to be obedient and supportive of their parents and ancestors. It also influences parental attitudes and expectations of the children, and has a larger impact on social-political structures as a way of maintaining social sustainability.[227] Liu even argues that, "the individual and social dimensions are inevitably subordinated to and substantially negated by the filial precisely within the Confucian framework", making Confucianism consanguinitism.[228]

Current studies reveal that though paternal authority and expectations of obedience have been attacked since the early Republican period, filiality has not been widely repelled but was still seen as a key virtue of Chinese culture. The early modern intellectuals argue that kinship obligations were not to be erased but to be expanded as "a civic virtue and public morality".[229] In Mao's era, a new kind of universalistic ethics and communist comradeship was established which expended with familial filial duties. As Stockman observes, "in the early years of Communist rule in China there was only a universal, public realm of comradeship."[230] However, as Evans states, "although attempts were made to shift the focus of filial piety away from the parent–child relationship to the socialist-citizen/Party-state one", the central morality in this period followed the same "logic of submission and obedience", as Yan points out.[231] Therefore, she concludes that, "while socialist ideology and its institutional mechanisms made a significant intervention in redefining the ethics of family obligations, these did not shift parental expectations of child obedience".[232]In other words, though the dominant

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[227] Huang, The struggle between Confucianism and legalism in Chinese society and productivity.

[228] Liu, Filiality versus Sociality and Individuality, 234.

[229] Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 79.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Evans, "the Gender and Communication," 989.

[232] Ibid.

universalistic norms and comradeship blurred the division between public and private moral practice, the logic of obedience was still the central morality. The respect to the elder in familial relations has been transmitted to support the party-state.

In the post-Mao era, scholars argue that filiality has been re-emphasised strategically by the state as a way of maintaining social sustainability while China is undergoing a dramatic economic development. Since the late 1970s, China has been going through what Yan Yunxiang regards as a "decollectivisation process", in which the state has enacted a series of top-down policies such as the open policy and structural changes, untying individuals from previous social institutions. [233] In this journey, however, the state also withdraws the social protection and welfare previously given to individuals. As Yan observes, "the individualisation process in China does give the individual more mobility, choice and freedom, but it does so with little institutional protection and support from the state".[234]

In this context of the lack of social security and protection, filiality becomes the "primary source of social security for the elderly".[235] It is even legitimately stressed that adult children should provide economic support for their elderly parents.[236] As Vanessa Fong points out, "The cultural model of filial duty remained one of the most salient aspects of China's Confucian legacy. Chinese leaders continued to promote this cultural model because it allowed the state to devote its resources to promoting economic growth instead of social security on the assumption that most citizens would rely on their children for nursing care, economic support, and the payment of medical expenses in their old age."[237]

 Parental expectations of filial duties also make the parents invest significantly in their

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[233] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*; Pye, "The State and the Individual" .

[234] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, 288.

[235] Fong, *Only Hope*, 127.

[236] This is "in article 49 of China's 1982 Constitution, article 15 of the 1980 Marriage Law, article 35 of the 1992 Women's Protection Law, and article 183 of the 1979 Criminal Law". Fong, *Only Hope*, 129.

[237] Fong, *Only Hope*, 128.

children's education, making enormous self sacrifices.[238] This is shown in Hu's film *Family Phobia* (2010) in which the first and second generation family members sacrifice their individual desires and suffer themselves to support the younger generation's study.

It is a challenge to filiality if the child does not show obedience to his/her parents; however, as Yan points out, filiality does not request parents to pay attention to children's opinions, emotions or happiness.[239] In fact, "parents felt uneasy at how much power children had over them, and devastated when children were not as filial or successful as they should have been".[240] Nevertheless, this threat from disobedient children has become more obvious as the decollectivation process has also encouraged the emergence of the self-centred young generation - individuals who are exposed to more opportunities and have the possibilities to make their own choices and develop their individual lives. Hence, it results in a re-negotiation of filial duties of different generations to balance individual desire and family obligations.

Lisa Rofel observes that the self-centred ethic is more obvious among the younger generation,[241] who are often regarded as *'wo yi dai'* (我一代) – the 'I generation'[242] or the 'me generation',[243] referring to the younger generation born in the 1970s and after. These young individuals have grown up in the market economy, experienced material affluence, and have been influenced by an overwhelming neo-liberal ideology, as compared to older generations who experienced socialist collectivism in their youth.

Facing increasingly individual choices, traditional family obligations are to some extent in conflict with the individuals' personal desires. The younger generations have started to negotiate with the elderly within the family, to reach an intergenerational agreement on filial responsibility and expectations. The three female filmmakers' proactive and

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[238] Ibid, 127.

[239] Quoted by Evans, "The Gender of Communication," 988.

[240] Fong, *Only Hope,* 127.

[241] Rofel, *Desiring China*.

[242] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, 280.

[243] Elegent, "China's Me Generation".

provocative investigations of their familial and parental relationships seem to have challenged parental authority and the conventional expectations of filial duties. However, I argue that their practice can also be seen as a re-negotiation of filial duty in the context of contemporary Chinese society and culture.

Evans' study on the changing experiences of the mother-daughter relationships of urban women suggests that "desires for recognition of the independent emotional self through communicative practice are replacing "traditional" expectations of the younger generation's obedience to parental authority". She argues that "this shift also has its part to play in explaining daughters' attempts to renegotiate their sense of filial responsibility to their natal parents alongside, rather than in contradiction to, their own desires for self-fulfillment."[244] In this sense, the three films made by female filmmakers, on the one hand reflects the features of "increasing self-interest of the individual"; on the other hand, the practice of questioning or investigating their parents or the parent-child relationship further generates what Evans regards as "a new ethics of mutual recognition and exchange between parents and children".[245]

Similarly, films by the male filmmakers also illustrate this re-negotiation of filial expectations. However, unlike the three women filmmakers who challenge their parents through direct face-to-face confrontation, the male filmmakers, like Hu Xinyu and Yang Pingdao, avoid following their parents' expectations. In Hu's *Family Phobia* (2010) and Yang's *My Family Tree* (2008), the elder generation ask the filmmakers to get married and give birth to the new generation, so as to continue the family clan. However, both Hu and Yang do not follow this responsibility in their films. Rather than explicitly refusing this request, they remain silent in the films.

V.   Submission to the state authority, and emergence of individual rights

The fourth theme that emerges in these films, especially those that explore the public selves, is the changing relationship between the individual and the state, and the

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[244] Evans, "The Gender of Communication," 986.

[245] Ibid.

increasing sense of individual rights. Current studies share the view that in the history of struggle over the moral and political meaning of the self throughout the twentieth century, individual subjects have been encouraged to challenge Confucian constraints; however, it is still the conformity of the individual towards the state that has been emphasised in different historical stages, rather than the individual's rights against that of the state. Mulhahn notes that the concept of individual rights, that shielded the individual from excesses of state power, never existed in Chinese history.[246] However, in contemporary China individuals are increasingly asserting their rights in relation to the state, especially through online activism and recent political volunteering/ participation. This marks a major difference in the individual-state relationship, compared to previous eras. The first person films that explore the public self, which I will discuss in Chapter Six, illustrate some features of the individuals' concern for individual rights.

Fei Xiaotong, one of the best-known social scientists to have emerged from China in the twentieth century, argues that the rise of individual rights has not been encouraged in, what he regards as, the Chinese pattern of social relations *chaxugeju* (differential mode of association, 差序格局). It is the order, in the forms of *li* (ritual, 礼), that is the "publicly recognised behavioural norms", rather than *fa* (law, 法), that is in force.[247]

 "The concept of public was the ambiguous *tianxia* (all under heaven, 天下), whereas the state was seen as the emperor's family…The state and the public are but additional circles that spread out like the waves from the splash of each person's social influence. Therefore, people must cultivate themselves before they can extend outward. Accordingly, self-restraint has become the most important virtue in social life. The Chinese thus are unable to assert themselves against society to ensure that society does not infringe on their individual rights. In fact, the Chinese notion of a differential mode of association does not allow for individual rights to be an issue at all."[248]

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[246] Ibid., 145.

[247] Fei, *From the Soil*, 70.

[248] ibid.,

During the late Qing and May Fourth period, along with the introduction of the modern Western concept of the individual, modern ideas of citizenship, individual autonomy and individual rights became key terms openly discussed by early modern intellectuals. However, scholars point out that the interpretation of these words still mirrored the traditional relationship between the individual and the state - that the construction of the individual identity involved a dual task of both self-cultivation and obligation towards the state.[249] Peter Zarrow states: "Chinese intellectuals in the late Qing availed themselves of the symbolic and conceptual resources both of Confucianism and of Western history and thought. From Confucianism came such ideas as moral autonomy and from modern Western ideas the notion of individuals as rights-bearers. We cannot assume that *quan* (rights, 权) in its various guises and compounds was used in the same sense as "rights" carried earlier in the West or possessed today."[250]

As an important reformist intellectual at the time, Liang Qichao has been intensively studied. Liang's ideas of *zizhi* and morality in *Xinminshuo* emphasised the restriction on individuals through self-discipline and moral achievement, for the construction of a modern nation state, but he focused less on the individual's rights. Svarverud argues that though Liang's term of *zizhi* can be translated as 'autonomy', it is different from the Kantian notion of autonomy;[251] instead, it should be best translated into 'self-discipline', sharing some similarities with the traditional Confucian value of self-cultivation - a kind of self-legislation that man places upon himself.[252] In addition, scholars note that Liang's concept of morality is in fact based on a dichotomy between '*gongde*' (public morality, 公德) and '*side*'(private morality, 私德). While 'public morality' refers to "one's ability to strengthen group cohesion", 'private morality' refers to "the means of creating individuals of use to the group".[253] Therefore, he emphasises

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[249] Zarrow, "Citizenship and Human Rights in Early Twentieth-century Chinese Thought."

[250] Zarrow, "Citizenship and Human Rights in Early Twentieth-century Chinese Thought," 210.

[251] Svarverud states that "autonomy in the Kantian sense points to man's innate disposition and freedom of moral self-legislation based on his pure reason, only limited by the purposiveness of nature directing human morality." (Svarverud, "Individual Self-Discipline and Collective Freedom," 207)

[252] Svarverud, "Individual Self-Discipline and Collective Freedom," 207.

[253] Zarrow, "Citizenship and Human Rights in Early Twentieth-century Chinese Thought," 219.

self-discipline and moral achievement of the individual for the national project of modern state building, rather than focusing on the individual's rights.

During the May Fourth period Gao Yihan, an intellectual, created the terms of *xiaoji* (smaller self, 小己), and *daji* (larger self, 大己). Lydia Liu argues that Gao's terminology maintains a hierarchical order between the individual and the state rather than establishing an antithetical distinction.[254] Svarverud also states that "to Gao Yinhan, true freedom of the self may only be obtained through self-restraint, echoing Liang's arguments from *Xinminshuo*, when the individual is able to sacrifice his smaller self and strive for the larger self".[255] Following on from Gao's division of 'lesser self' and 'greater self', the contemporary Chinese scholar Xu Jilin concludes that individualism, as developed during the May Fourth period, was a combination of '*xiao wo*' (small I, 小我) and '*da wo*' (big I, 大我).[256] In Xu's interpretation, the ultimate goal of '*xiao wo*', a self equipped with a sense of reason and social obligation, is to serve the '*da wo*', embedded in the sense of public interest and the nation.

After the Communist Party came into power a radical transformation of social structures took place. However, the socialist ideology requests the submission of all individuals as socialist workers to build the new socialist state. "Every citizen was to be a fellow comrade, engaged in the common task of building a new social order, sharing the same 'will' or 'ambition' to combine their efforts in the common cause."[257]

Scholars argue that it is not until the post-Mao era that the concept of individual rights emerges. It emerges in the context of decollectivisation, as the state largely withdrew institutional protection and welfare measures that were available to rural and urban workers in the Mao era. The decline of socialist institutions and marketisation has resulted in social inequality and uneven distribution of wealth. Although the socialist workplace has not been entirely abolished, it mainly provides social security and

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[254] Liu, "Narratives of Modern Selfhood," 179-80.

[255] Svarverud, "Individual Self-Discipline and Collective Freedom," 217.

[256] Xu, "Dawo de Xiaochu."

[257] Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 81.

resources for individuals who are mainly urban middle-level income earners.[258] For the majority of the rural population and laid-off workers, the structural changes mean the loss of state protection in employment, medical care and housing benefit. Hu's *Family Phobia* illustrates how the cut in socialist social benefits affects the lives of Hu's family members, especially his aged parents, who are former socialist workers.

In the context of the lack of social security and protection, individuals through different means start to link the self with a set of rights and raise their voices to ask for legal protection;[259] hence the rise of rights-assertion. The most developed of these is the rise of consumer rights consciousness through consumer protection movements since the 1980s,[260] which led to the establishment of the Consumer Protection Law in 1993.[261] Since the late 1990s there has been increasing activist movement in cyberspace, which reflects the rise of a new citizenship asking for equal opportunities, the protection of human rights and the recognition of marginalised social identities.[262] Yang Guobin regards this as 'online activism', which is a direct reflection of the new citizen activism and "a response to the grievances, injustices, and anxieties caused by the structural transformation of Chinese society".[263]

In recent years, the sense of new citizenship and human rights has grown and there is a rise in volunteering in social participation and political activism. In fact, Chinese first person filmmaking can be seen as a social-political participation. In Chapter Six I will explore how two young filmmakers, Wu Haohao and Xue Jianqiang, use filmmaking as a way to provoke critical political debates in public spaces. I will also analyse the political activist participation led by the contemporary artist Ai Weiwei, which is documented in his film *Laomatihua* (a.k.a. *Disturbing the Peace*, 2009). Shu Haolun's film *Nostalgia* (2006), discussed in Chapter Five, can also be seen as an individual

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[258] Thelle, *Better to Rely on Ourselves*.

[259] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, 280.

[260] Hooper, "The Consumer Citizen in Contemporary China".

[261] Palmer, "The Emergence of Consumer Rights," 57.

[262] Damm and Thomas, *Chinese Cyberspaces*; Lagerkvist, *The Internet in China*; Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*.

[263] Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 7.

critique of how state-enforced demolition affects the individual interests of Shu's family and the neighbourhood.

However, the number of people who are aware of their rights is still very small. Thelle observes that before the early 2000s many people were still either not well informed about the nature of their rights, having a profound distrust of institutions, or lacked the means to enforce their rights.[264] Yan notes that most people still do not regard their individual rights as ones they were born with but, instead, as ones they have earned themselves: "The individual has emerged as a key unit in both discourse and action in everyday life, but consciousness of individual rights is based on a Chinese understanding of rights as earned privileges through individual efforts."[265] This might be because the state still carries out firm stewardship of people.

What is more, the people's understanding of individual rights in the current era has been largely constructed by historical cultural traditions. Wu Haohao's *Criticizing China* (2008) illustrates how people conceive individual rights based on their past experiences. In addition, when individuals implement their rights, or ask for legal protection, they sometimes disrespect others, even infringe on others' rights. This is shown in Xue Jianqiang's *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* (2010). This, therefore, leads to the last key theme that emerges in all these films - the changing relationship between individuals as individuals in their own right.

VI.   The changing relationship between individuals as individuals

In their filmmaking practice, and as illustrated in the films, all the individual filmmakers, to varying extents, face the problem of how to interact with other individuals. This is not only for those who interact with individuals in public spaces, as analysed in Chapter Six, but also for filmmakers who film their own family members in Chapters Four and Five. When a filmmaker points the camera at the most intimate family members, and at the represented self, and then screens the camera-mediated

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[264] Thelle, *Better to Rely on Ourselves*.

[265] Yan, Introduction to *iChina*, 9.

personal images to a public audience, the self as an individual bears the responsibility and the public ethic of how to communicate with both the filmed subjects, including his or her self, and the audience.

How to interact with individuals as individuals has indeed become a trait of a rapidly individualising society, as well as its new challenge, according to Yan Yunxiang.[266] He regards such social interactions among strangers, who are outside familial relations or other social groups, as new types of sociality.[267] "Along with the increase of mobility in social scale and geographic scope, more individuals found themselves interacting in public life with other individuals who were either unrelated or total strangers, whereby collective identity and group membership became secondary to individual identity and capacity."[268]

The positive impact of the new types of sociality is that unrelated individuals have now developed new groups based on similar personal interests and forms of public participation on and off the internet. Along with this is the development of *minjian* public spaces, a kind of non-governmental organized grassroots public space, which will be further discussed in Chapter Six. Wu Haohao's *Critisizing China* (2008) illustrates one such space - the spontaneously emerged discussion corner in a public park where local residents participate. His own filmmaking is also a way of interacting with these local individuals. In addition, it also encourages the rise of individual volunteerism, such as political participation in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 and the 'public citizen investigation' project led by Ai Weiwei. In fact, Ai's *Laomatihua* (2009) documents an unplanned political activist participation when Ai and a group of volunteers traveled to Sichuan to testify in the defense of an independent political investigator, Tan Zuoren.

However, the negative aspect of new kinds of sociality is the decline of social trust in an increasingly mobilised and open society.[269] Peng describes six types of distrust: distrust

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[266] Ibid.

[267] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, 284.

[268] Ibid.

[269] Ibid.

of the market due to faulty goods and bad services; distrust of services providers and strangers; distrust of friends and even relatives; distrust of law enforcement officers; distrust of the law and legal institutions; and distrust of basic moral values.[270] This lack of social trust is illustrated in several films analysed here, such as Xue Jianqiang's *Martian Syndrome* (2010), Wu Haohao's *Criticizing China* (2008) and Ai Weiwei's *Laomatihua* (2009).

In addition, as demonstrated in these films, the mixed and multi-layered value systems make personal communication more difficult. Evans identifies the desire for *goutong*, or "emotional communication" as an important phenomenon in China's individualising process.[271] She points out that "[a]longside the unprecedented material and social independence that characterizes young people's lives, satisfaction of individual emotional needs is widely seen as a condition of sustainability of intimate personal relationships."[272] Evans goes on to argue that "[t]his is much more than an effect of changing socio-economic and cultural forces making people more assertive in articulating their emotional needs, for in the flow of the material, cultural and moral influences shaping contemporary society, individual desires for emotional communication are reconstituting the meaning of the subject, self and responsibility in China."[273]

First person filmmaking practice, in this sense, can be seen as "a communicative practice",[274] out of an eagerness for emotional communication. In the six films that explore the familial self, which I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five, the filmmakers have a strong desire for connectedness with their families having undergone a structural transformation under urbanisation. This emotional need does not just exist in intimate personal relationships. The films exploring the public self, that I will discuss in Chapter Six, also demonstrate the individuals' longing for emotional security from an individualising society. Both Xue Jianqiang's *Martian Syndrome* (2010) and Wu

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[270] Quoted by Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, 286.

[271] Evans, "the Gender of Communication," 995.

[272] Ibid.,982.

[273] Ibid.

[274] Ibid.,986.

Haohao's *Kun 1: Action* (2008) illustrate the lack of emotional care and guidance for value building. These two young filmmakers express a strong desire for a more politicised community where they can find emotional and material security, and one that will help them to build the value system.

Nevertheless, these films demonstrate that hierarchical relations and gendered expectations still largely exist in interpersonal relations. For example, in *I Beat the Tiger when I was Young*, when the filmmaker Xue tries to challenge the senior or the old, the language he uses is still in a violent dictatorial and non-negotiable logic that aims to entirely demolish the old.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, I understand the individual self in post-socialist China as multi-layered and encompassing a multi-temporal character, inherited from the discursive history of changing notions of the individual, especially since the late Qing period. The individual in contemporary China has to deal with different and sometimes contradictory forces, and socio-political relations, and has to position the self within this web of forces.

In this chapter I have explored five key themes of the construction of the individual self, as evident in these films, to situate the articulations of the individual self that emerge in the films discussed in the following three chapters. These are the collective sense of self; the paternal authority and gendered expectations; filial duties; the changing relationships between individuals and the state; as well as between individuals as individuals in their own right. Among them, the first three themes explore how the self is constructed through family relationships, obligations and expectations. These family relations, especially paternal authority and filial duties, further mirror state authority, and the submission of individual subjects to the state, which is the fourth theme. The last theme, of how individuals interact with each other outside the familial space, extends the familial relations which have historically dominated interpersonal social relations.

I put these five themes within the context of the changing conceptualisation of the

individual self since the late nineteenth century, when reformers and revolutionaries started to attack the Confucian family system for the constraints it imposed on the individual person. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, the construction of the individual self has gone through a discursive process and has been articulated through huge ideological shifts since the early Republican period. The exploration of these five key themes helps to build up the social and historical context within which to understand why and how the individual self in China starts to make first person documentary films, and how the practice in China is both different from - and similar to - the American and Anglo-European first person filmmaking practice. In the following three chapters, through the exploration of three groups of films, I will analyse how these themes are demonstrated in these first person films and how this filmmaking practice further constructs the self, which has challenged conventional familial and social relations.

Chapter Four

The Familial Self in the Early 2000s

I.   Introduction

In this and the following chapter, I will focus on the first person DV diary documentaries that explore the self in the private space of the family-home (*jia*,家). Six films will be examined which can be put into two thematic groups: family ethical relations, and the family space. The se two groups can be compared in two further ways: that they were made in two different but overlapping historical periods and social contexts, and their filmmakers are different in gender. In this chapter, I focus on films made in 2000 and 2001: *Nightingale, Not the Only Voice* (dir. Tang Danhong, 120mins, 2000); *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple* (dir. Wang Fen, 45mins, 2000); and *Home Video* (dir. Yang Lina, 64mins, 2001). Interestingly, these three films are all made by female amateur filmmakers. In the next chapter, I will analyse three films made in the second half of the 2000s: *Nostalgia* (dir. Shu Haolun, 70mins, 2006), *Family Tree* (dir. Yang Pingdao, 278mins, 2008), and *Family Phobia* (dir. Hu Xinyu, 180min, 2009). These three films are made by three male filmmakers. As I observe, gender difference is inscribed in, and contributes to, the construction of the individual self, as illustrated in these films.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Michael Renov regards the first person self representations in the familial space as 'domestic ethnography', "a mode of autobiographical practice that couples self-interrogation with ethnography's concern for the documentation of the lives of others, in particular, family members who serve as a mirror or foil for the self".[275] Exploring this further, Lebow studies the Jewish first person representations of the self in the family, which she regards as 'family

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[275] Renov, "First-person Films," 44.

autobiographies'.[276] She takes the first person film of family as constitutive of the self. Both Renov and Lebow emphasise the documentation of the familial others as to serve the construction of the self, the central focus of the representation.

However, as I discussed in the last chapter, the constitution of the individual self in modern China has gone through a discursive process since the late nineteenth century. The first theme concerns the collective sense of self, specially illustrated in these films on the exploration of familial self discussed in these two chapters. The Confucian family ethical relations which have played a dominant role in ancient China define traditional Chinese society as ethical-relation based, hence the relational self in traditional Chinese culture.[277] Throughout twentieth-century China, the notion of the individual has been changing during the detraditionalisation process since the early republican period, the socialist collectivism in Mao's China, and especially since the decollectivisation ('*songbang*') process in the post-socialist era. As I discussed in the last chapter, although the individuals in the process of decollectivisation have been untied from the previous socialist institutions of the work units,[278] the traditional and socialist encompassing social categories, such as family, have not been entirely abolished. In fact, as these films illustrate, familial ethical relations still construct the individual self as a relational one to a great extent.

In the films discussed in these two chapters, such as Yang Lina's *Home Video*, and Hu Xinyu's *Family Phobia*, the filmmaker self does not just speak for his or her own rights. They film themselves as part of the larger collective, and explore how changing family relations and spaces influence family members' lives, including themselves, and how these further transform the familial relations. Hence, rather than using the term 'domestic ethnography' to describe how the self is situated in family space, I use the term '*familial self*'. Instead of focusing on the '*self*', I pay attention to the '*familial*' as representing the central site, where the first person filmmakers deconstruct their individual selves as part of familial relations that are in transition.

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[276] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, 44.

[277] Liang, "Zhongguo Wenhua Yaoyi."

[278] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*; Yan, Introduction to *iChina*.

In fact, before the emergence of new documentary film, 'family-home'(*jia,*家) has been regarded as a focal site in Chinese 'melodramatic realism', the dominant mode and a powerful force in twentieth-century Chinese cinema.[279] In the realistic cinematic discourse, the 'family-home' is often linked to the different imageries of 'nation' (*guojia,*国家), through a number of melodramatic conventions, "such as elaborate mise-en-scene (which functions as national allegory) and happy endings (which project different visions of China's future)".[280]

Despite its central role in fiction cinema representations, 'family-home' as a private space has been little represented in non-fiction film in twentieth-century China. The assumptions which see documentary film as a representation of social realities to provoke social-political changes have for a long time made the grand social-political domain their primary focus. Though independent documentary practice emerged in the early 1990s in China as a critique of the official documentary mode, the focus has also been put on public social issues. Robinson even regards the Chinese independent documentaries made in the first phase of the 1990s[281] as 'public documentaries'.[282] The Chinese documentary film scholar Lu Xinyu states that these early documentaries tend to focus on the geographically and socially marginalised public space, and the lives of the underclass.[283]

Despite little exploration of the private and the familial in non-fiction cinematic form, the first person autobiographical narrative writings re-proliferated in the post-Mao era. The most prominent is the women's "individualised writing" (*gerenhua xiezuo*, 个人化写),[284] or "body writing" (*shenti xiezuo*, 身体写作), which is seen as a "return to the innermost, deepest, and most intimate parts of life for exploration and reflection".[285]

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[279] Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 80.

[280] Ibid.

[281] Usually refers to before 1997.

[282] Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private'," 182.

[283] Lu, "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement," 35.

[284] Wedell-Wedellsborg, "Between Self and Community," 174.

[285] Ibid., 175.

The discourse of self-expression in literature and art has existed since ancient periods, among which autobiographical writing experienced its golden age in the late Ming.[286] In addition, modern autobiographical writings first emerged during the May Fourth and New Culture Movement in the 1910s and 1920s. Among them, the personal essays, autobiographic fictions have been practiced by new women writers who deployed new forms of literature to challenge the patriarchal authority. While during the socialist period such personal writings were discouraged, they have re-emerged in post-socialist China. However, there was also the re-emergence of prejudice against women. In this context, the personal writings by women in the 1980s, especially the writings of Yu Luojin, have attracted much criticism for their overt and 'unconventional' exposure of personal emotions and desires, and have been denounced as 'privacy literature' (*yinsi wenxue*, 隐私文学). Public opinion towards personal writing has changed during the 1990s, in what Wang regards as an age of "privacy fever".[287] (Semi-)autobiographical writing has re-proliferated and been packaged as seductive popular cultural commodities in the ever-growing market force and consumption culture.

As an important scholar researching on the post-Mao women's 'individualised writing', Wang Lingzhen regards these titillating texts as artefacts of the writers' own narcissism and the general narcissistic culture of a rapidly globalising market society.[288] "The desire to consume one's past, the need to reimagine and re-create, and the narcissistic drive for looking at oneself through writing, as I have argued, have been made visible in the frame of modern hedonistic consumerism."[289]

This perspective analyses well the social economic context of the growth of individual writing by the women writers. It is also in the context of growing literary self-expression on the personal that the earliest Chinese first person filmmakers emerged in the beginning of the 2000s. Interestingly, the first few filmmakers who picked up the mini DV camera for self-expression and familial investigation are all women who take the role of a daughter. They are not trained professional filmmakers but are amateur DV

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[286] Wu, *The Confucian's Progress*; Huang, *Literati and Self-re/presentation*.

[287] Wang, *Personal Matters*, 175.

[288] Ibid.

[289] Wang, "Reproducing the Self," 182.

makers. To some extent, such female first person films share some features of the autobiographical women's 'individualised writing', as they also focus on the familial aspects of the maker/writer selves. In this sense, their practice can be deemed as 'DV individualised writing'.

While women's individualised writings are mostly packaged as cultural commodities, the first person DV documentaries made by the women amateur filmmakers were neither sold on the market, nor have they been widely shown to audiences in public spaces. Expressed through personal non-commoditised and non-official narratives of individual experiences, such films can be seen as a strong counterpoint to the official representation of family during the social transition, and complementary narratives to their highly commoditised literary counterparts.

In addition, while the studies on the literary personal writing focus less on how this practice has impact on the individual writers' selves, I argue that such first person films can function as therapy for self-understanding and self-recovery for the filmmakers, as identified by Renov[290] and Lebow.[291] Lebow regards Jewish family autobiographic films as 'filmic repair', arguing that "these family autobiographies, each in its way, go beyond the problem of displacement and loss, attempting to filmically mend a breach within the family created by time, historical events, lack of communication, generation gaps, different beliefs, or the vicissitudes of memory. The medium becomes a device for this repair, bringing fathers and mothers together again in harmony…"[292] Similarly, these Chinese filmmakers who explore their familial relations and structures also have the intention to understand, or to help 'repair' the broken family relations. Though this is not always successful or sufficient in -rebuilding the relationship in reality, by bringing the broken family members together in the same frame, it reflects a kind of wish fulfillment. In this process, these filmmakers have worked towards self-understanding for the filmmaker selves.

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[290] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 215.

[291] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, 85.

[292] ibid.

Admitting the implications of first person familial self-representations, as alternative archive and self-therapy, I also focus on how this filmmaking practice demonstrates some features of the individual self in contemporary China. The changing dynamics of familial relations, illustrated in these films, also reflect the changes of the much wider social relations in the social political space, outside the domestic/familial space. The three women's filmmaking practice demonstrates a strong self awareness of themselves as independent women eager for self expresson. Though performing the role of daughter, they do not simply or always follow the traditional norms of "Three Obediences" that women should follow. In fact, they are consciously and unconsciously challenging the obedient image of daughter, producing a new understanding of a 'parent-daughter' relationship. In her highly influential book *Bodies That Matter*, Judith emphasises the role of repetition in performativity, or performance as perverse citation. For her, "Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance."[293]

For the three female filmmakers, even if their iterative performance do not consciously try to break the conventional norms, they do not just perform the socially defined role of daughter either. By exploring their problematic familial relations, they not only challenge the parental authority, but also re-negotiating the filial duties expected of a daughter. In fact, the three female filmmakers' practice of questioning or investigating their parents, or the parent-child relationship, can be seen as what Evans identifies as "a communicative practice",[294] longing for connectedness with their parents. On the one hand, it reflects the features of "increasing self-interest of the individual", or the "I"

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[293] Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 95.

[294] Evans, "The Gender of Communication", 986.

Generation; on the other hand, it further generates what Evans regards as "a new ethics of mutual recognition and exchange between parents and children".[295]

In the following sections, I will first probe the social conditions of this first person filmmaking practice in the early 2000s. The institutional reform of 'decollectivisation' has untied the individuals from the socialist work units and provided individuals with more autonomy to pursue their own lives. It is in this context that the three women reflexively look inwards at their own selves and start making films; this was not their original profession. Produced in a relatively 'independent' environment by relatively autonomous individuals, these three films have been inscribed with the strong authorial first person voice of the filmmaker selves. This reflects the emergence of identity politics in contemporary China, that the self is more self-concerned, and more confident to directly address their own will.

I will then analyse how these women filmmakers present themselves in the films, based on Catherine Russell's four levels of self-inscription, including the self as the seer, the seen, the speaker and the editor. I observe three features of these female familial self-representations. Firstly, these three films are all imprinted with a strong authorial voice as the filmmaker and the daughter in the family. Secondly, their practice has gone beyond the stereotyped passive image of daughter, and challenged the traditional 'father (the old) - son (the children)' relationship . They explore their familial relationships not just as a daughter, but also as an 'outsider', an independent individual. They document their relationships with their parents during the process of their first person filmic investigations.

However, though the three filmmakers present themselves with strong individual authority and challenge traditional familial relations, their authorial voices do not just speak for themselves but more for the family as a larger group, in which their individual selves are situated. In other words, they are more concerned with the familial relations as a collective whole, which is the first theme that emerged in these films, as I identified in the last chapter. In addition, I will analyse what aspects of their problematic familial relations they explore in the investigations, and also the moral critiques the filmmakers

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[295] ibid

faced after public screenings. Rather than saying they do not show respect to their parents, I argue that they are indeed trying to re-negotiate familial duties with their parents, not through passive obedience, but through contributing their own understanding and perspectives to the family. Though the making and screening of these three films demonstrate that it is still very difficult to gain recognition from the family and from society, the three female filmmakers' practice can be seen as a form of social participation that probes existing constitutions of the individual self, especially gendered expectations, and further constructs their sense of self as an independent subject.

II.   Individuals with increasing autonomy

The three daughters' introspective filmmaking is an impulsive, ground-breaking act. In my understanding, the increasing autonomy acquired by individuals in post-socialist China can be seen as an important social condition for their filmmaking practice.

As discussed in the last chapter, in post-socialist China, the individual has gained relatively more mobility and autonomy from social institutions and encompassing social categories and traditions, which enable them to develop their own lives. Similar to the 'disembeddedness',[296] or the 'detraditionalisation'[297] process in the Western European individualisation process, Yan Yunxiang argues that the Chinese state has initiated the 'decollectivisation', or '*songbang*', process, through untying individuals from the previous socialist institutions of work units and production teams.[298] Yan even argues that the 1990s was the most liberal period in China, in terms of the phenomenal growth of the private sector, the retreat of the party-state from its previous control over social life, the replacement of the dominance of the Communist ideology by neo-liberalism, and the restructuring of life chances and mobility channels that set hundreds of millions of Chinese people on the move.[299]

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[296] Bauman, *The Individualised Society,* 146.

[297] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

[298] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*; Yan, Introduction to *iChina*.

[299] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, xvi.

The three women filmmakers, Tang Danhong, Yang Lina, and Wang Fen, are three individuals among many others who have gained more mobility and autonomy during this decollectivisation process in the market reform. Born in the 1960s, Tang experienced her youth during the 1980s, when the public debates about modernity and the search for roots dominated the cultural scene. Influenced by the cultural debates and literary discourse at the time, Tang developed a strong interest in writing and has published many poems in underground literary magazines that circulated in the literary community.[300] Her works have been regarded as highly personal and self-reflexive. In terms of her career, Tang worked for a short period in a university library, a state-owned work unit in the late 1980s, then Tang left that job and started to work in a private local gallery in Sichuan.[301] In 1994, Tang started to run a bookshop as *geti hu* (self-employed, 个体户),, then she worked in a private documentary production company.[302]

Born in 1972, Yang Lina was trained as a dancer and worked at the People's Liberation Army Theatre during the 1990s when she was in her twenties.[303] In my interview with her, Yang revealed that she gradually could not stand working as a propaganda tool any more. Though at the time she was not very familiar with the term 'ideology', she increasingly felt uncomfortable about being constrained by the political codes, and eager to express her true self.[304] In the late 1990s, she left the military work unit and went to Beijing to start a new life. The market economy and the new social context allowed her to work as a freelance. From 1996 to 1999, she made her first amateur documentary *Laotou*, observing the daily life of a group of old men in a local Beijing residential area for two years.[305] This film has won her prizes at international film festivals. Since then, she has received much attention from the domestic media. She was regarded as the first amateur filmmaker to use a mini-DV camera to record the lives of

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[300] "Zuonv Tang Danhong".

[301] "Tang Danhong: Zhongshi Ziwo (Tang Danhong: Loyal to the Self)."

[302] "Nvshiran Tang Danhong Jiemi Guanbi Kafuka Shudian yinqing (The Female Poet Tang Danhong Reveals the Hidden Secrets of the Close-down of Kafuka Bookshop)"

[303] "Daoyan Fangtan: Yang Lina (Director's interview: Yang Lina)."

[304] Author's interview, 2010.

[305] "Daoyan Fangtan: Yang Lina(Director's interview: Yang Lina)."

ordinary people at close quarters. Her second film, *Home Video*, made in the year 2001, is Yang's personal investigation into her parents' divorce and family conflicts.

Wang Fen is the youngest of the three filmmakers. She was born in 1978 when China was just starting its economic reforms. Leaving home at nine years old, she was trained in an acting school.[306] In contrast to Tang and Yang, Wang has never worked in a state-owned work unit. This is partly because of her profession as an actor, and partly because when she grew up in the late 1990s, the state did not compulsorily allocate jobs for young people, and therefore individuals had to rely on themselves to find a job. In my interview with Wang, she reveals that she started to work with crews as an actress in her late teens; however, she changed her mind and wanted to be a director. Then she borrowed a video camera and went back to her home town in Jiangxi province, to interview her parents on their problematic marriage.[307]

On the whole, the three amateur women filmmakers started filmmaking in a relatively free environment after China had experienced almost ten years of a market economy. As individuals with more autonomy, they did not rely on state work units, and have to some extent been influenced by the neo-liberal ideas disseminated in the individualising society.

In addition to the general changing social context, these three women filmmakers have their personal reasons to film inwards as personal investigations. Through my own interviews with them, and through researching secondary materials, I discovered that before the filmmaking the three female filmmakers had all to some extent hoped to gain more self understanding, and to solve their familial problems.[308] Wang Fen reveals that she wanted to understand herself, so she chose to reflexively think about her parent's problematic marriage and how it has influenced her character.[309] As the youngest daughter in the family, Wang does not act the same as her sisters and brother who do not

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[306] Author's interview, 2010.

[307] ibid.

[308] Wang and Yang also intended to gain experience of filmmaking, or to make the film as a passport into the film world. I will discuss this further in the conclusion.

[309] Author's interview, 2010.

dare to ask their parents, and think it is not right to film it; instead, she strongly feels that the issue of her parents' unhappy marriage has greatly shaped her character and she should take responsibility for her own life and find out more.[310] "At the time I was twenty-one years old, I was already an adult. I wanted to know my origins, where my emotions and my weakness have come from...There are some things I did not understand and really want to know."[311] Hence, she decided to make the film. Leaving home at a young age, Yang Lina also wanted to understand her problematic family better.[312] Similarly, Tang Danhong hoped to 'clean up' herself. As she explicitly states in her first person voice-over in the film, making the film is for her to understand herself, as a process of self 'dissection'. She also hopes the confrontation with her parents in front of the camera can help her solve her own problems.[313]

I.   A strong authorial voice

Produced in a relatively independent environment by relatively autonomous individuals, these three films are inscribed with a strong authorial voice of the filmmaker selves. The three women filmmakers lead the investigation either through directly presenting themselves on camera, or through an insistent voice constantly asking questions from behind the camera. The first person authority imprinted on the films reflects the emergence of identity politics, Both Yang Lina and Wang Fen can be put in the category of the so-called 'I Generation' (*wo yi dai*), which refers to individuals who were born after the 1970s and are more concerned with self-realisation and self happiness than previous generations. These two filmmakers explicitly express their concern with their personal lives in their films, aiming to find out why their unhappy parental marriage has constructed their own selves. In comparison, Tang Danhong does not belong to the same cohort as Yang and Wang. However, Tang's early experience as a poet who was tightly involved in avant-garde writing during the 1980s has contributed to her expressive, reflexive, poetic, and essayistic character. In addition, as female

[310] ibid.

[311] ibid.

[312] ibid.

[313] ibid.

filmmakers, their strong authorial voice also challenges the morality of the "Three Obediences" that constrains women, especially the ethic of paternal authority, given their role as daughters in their families.

In the following parts I will analyse how a strong authorial voice is inscribed in these three films based on Catherine Russell's four levels of self-inscription,[314] that is the self as the *speake*r, the first-person voice-over; as *seer*, the 'origin of gaze' that creates the 'look *in* the film';[315] as the *seen*, the 'body image', the subject in the film, and the self as the *editor*, who constructs a certain aesthetic style.

Home Video

In *Home Video*, Yang Lina deeply inscribes herself as the *seer*, the 'origin of gaze', and the *speaker*, aiming to dig out what has caused the broken relationship between her divorced parents, and between her father and her brother. She is also the editor, and arranges her interviews in a particular way to show how she understands it. The title 'Home Video' indicates an amateurish 'look'. Though Yang does not appear on camera, it is clear that this family investigation would not be possible if Yang did not have the courage to do so. Throughout the film, her point-of-view shots, her voice that keep asking questions from behind the camera, and the way she edits the material together constantly remind us of Yang's existence as the first person filmmaker.

In the five-minute opening sequence, Yang establishes herself as the author and an important character in the film. As a key family member, and the investigator, Yang uses subjective point-of-view shots from her perspective. She equates her own eyes with the lens of the camera in her hand, facing directly the three family members, and digging out the unspoken and untouchable secrets. Such cinematographic technique does not follow the conventional fly-on-the-wall observational documentary technique that has influenced the early Chinese new documentaries. The choice of point-of-view shots from Yang's perspective establishes the subjective and personal tone of the film, and enforces the authority of the first person filmmaker Yang. In addition to the subjective

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[314] Russell, "Autoethnography," 277-8.

[315] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, 11.

first person 'look' in the film, Yang's insistent off-screen voice directly expresses her intention and her emotion, and guides the narrative.

FIGURE 4.1   FIGURE 4.2
The opening shot of Yang's mother lying on the bed, followed by a shot of the father on the bed in *Home Video* (2001)
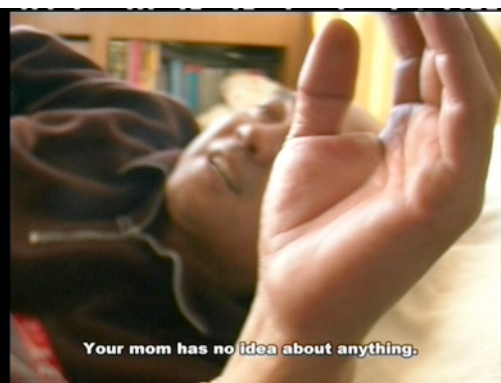
FIGURE 4.3   FIGURE 4.4
It cuts back to the mother commenting on the father.   Yang follows the father around in his room.

FIGURE 4.5   FIGURE 4.6
The father still refuses to disclose his perspective.   Yang asks the mother to persuade the father.

The film opens with a medium shot of a woman (later known to be Yang's mother) in the right edge of the frame. She lies on the bed only wearing underwear, facing towards the left of the frame, where Yang stands off screen (fig. 4.1). Yang's voice comes from the left-hand side, talking to her: "*I want to make an investigation into the divorce of my*

parents. If you think it is boring or too intrusive, I will stop."[316] The mother says: "*It is a good topic. To look into the story about the divorce of one's parents is fashionable these days.*" While Yang asks: "*Do you support me?*" The mother replies lightly: "*Yeah.*" Yang laughs very excitedly, then the mother goes on saying that: "*It is an interesting topic. A movie like this will have a huge impact but it will make us all look very bad, Yang Lina.*" Yang continues screaming with laughter.

While the mother turns away from the camera, the film cuts to a man (Yang's father) lying on a bed in another bedroom space. The handheld camera looks her father directly in the face. He says to the camera that "*Your mum has no idea about anything. She's just happy that she's going to be an actress, right?*" (fig. 4.2.) Yang edits this shot of her father immediately after the shot of the mother, as if the father comments on the mother immediately. Yang laughs with the father, while replying that: "*No way. How can you think of her that way?*" It cuts back to the mother, still lying on the bed in the middle of the frame, looking up at the camera, which is facing down. The mother says: "*Tell him to think about it carefully.*" (fig. 4.3.) Yang giggles like last time. Then it cuts back to the father walking into his bedroom. The camera follows him from behind while Yang's off-screen voice speaks: "*If you don't agree, I'll keep following you around.*" (fig. 4.4.) The father turns around and sits on the bed. Yang tenderly asks: "*Tell me why you don't want to tell me what you think. Do I really have to plan a trick on you?*" "*Well, you are planning your strategy now.*" (fig. 4.5.) Yang giggles again saying: "*I'm not.*" Then it cuts back to the mother who still looks up at the camera lying on the bed. Yang asks her to persuade the father if he does not participate (fig. 4.6).

Then Yang asks the mother if her brother Xiaofan would participate. While mentioning Yang's brother, Xiaofan's voice appears with a medium close-up of Xiaofan sitting in a dark living room facing the camera: "*I cannot support this.*" Yang insists on asking: "*Why?*" The brother says immediately: "*I was really thinking about it last night and I decided not to support your project… If we all just speak from our own points of view, it will turn into a family war.*"

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[316] In *Home Video*, all the conversations in English are from the subtitle in the film.

Yang edits the materials in a way that compares the attitudes among the three family members. It cuts back to the father, trying to cover up the lens and asking Yang to stop filming. "*Put it down. Then we will talk seriously.*" (fig. 4.7.) While the camera is put down, it cuts back to the brother, who says "*Turn it off. Then I will talk to you.*" (fig. 4.8.) Both the father and the brother refused to be filmed in the beginning. Only the mother is happy to participate, saying: "*I will give you a true story*". (fig. 4.9.) The brother says "*This is not just an average event from our past…You are hurting people… Stop talking, turn that thing off. [It's] not just hurting myself.*" (fig. 4.10.) Cutting back to the father, who says "*It's best not to do anything that you will regret.*" (fig. 4.11.) Yang says: "*…No, I will be very fair.*" Then, back to the brother "*I think you are a little shameless.*" (fig. 4.12.) Yang answers: "*Yes, yes, you are right. I'm beginning to feel very shameless…*" The brother says: "*We have so little privacy and you want to dig it out, and leave them with nothing. Turn it off.*"
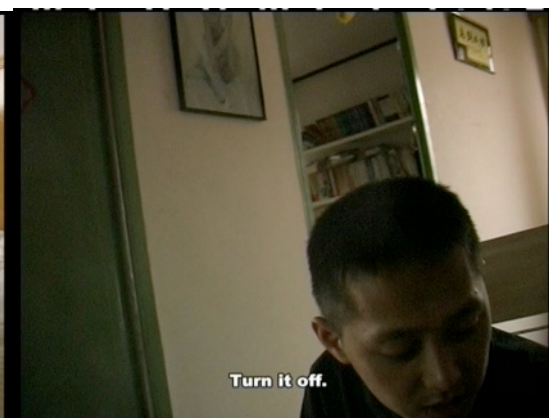
FIGURE 4.7   FIGURE 4.8
Both the father and the brother refused to be filmed in the beginnning of *Home Video* (2001).

FIGURE 4.9   FIGURE 4.10
The mother's attitude is quite different.   The brother reveals it is an serious matter.

FIGURE 4.11
The father warns her not to do something she will regret.

FIGURE 4.12
The brother criticises her for revealing the family scandal.

It is interesting to note the mother as a woman does not care if the family secret is disclosed to the public. This is the same as Yang's attitude, who insists on filming, to know what has happened while she was away and why her parents got divorced. On the contrary, the father and the brother, though against each other, who were not willing to be filmed in the beginning. While the brother thinks remembering the 'broken past' will hurt them again, the father's rejection may come from self-censorship, feeling it is shaming to talk about it again, especially as he is the person who is responsible for the domestic violence. Yang's and her mother's attitude of not being afraid of being filmed suggests their gesture as rebellious women who are not afraid of disclosing family scandals caused by the father's domestic violence.

Yang leads the investigation in that she not only interviews each person, but also shows it to the family and records how they react to each other's perspective. After the interviews, Yang invites the mother and the brother to watch the film together and records their responses to the film. It is the first time we see the mother and the brother together, and for the two to see the father's perspective. She also asks if they two agree to show the film to the father. Though the mother disapproves of doing so, Yang still shows the film to the father. Yang's action, though apparently not obeying her mother, can be understood as her own way of showing filiality to her parents, or her contribution to the family collective, as she hopes the film can bridge the long-term misunderstandings among the three.

They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple

In *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple,* Wang's first person influence can be felt strongly through her self-inscription as the *seer* and the *editor*. Like Yang, Wang edits the material and constructs her parents' confessions according to her own personal interpretation. In the opening sequence of the film, she uses some experimental elements, asking her parents to play themselves. We see close-ups of two pairs of hands cutting out phrases like 'marriage', 'love', 'family' from magazines. While one throws them into a bin, the other comes to pick them up. Then the camera zooms out, we see a couple standing side by side, who we know later are Wang's parents. In this sequence, Wang introduces us to the relationship of her parents through the performance directed by Wang. Then Wang interviews her parents separately. The main part of the film juxtaposes the mother's and the father's points of view, how they think of each other. It also inserts some observational scenes of the parents' daily life.

Though Wang does not use voice-over, she chooses very sentimental off-screen music over some observational scenes, such as her father enjoying a massage by a hair salon lady, and her parents walking together, hardly talking. The romantic nature of the music is in high contrast with the uncommunicative relationship of her parents in reality. The music can be seen as Wang's first person voice, expressing her unrealistic desires for her parents' marriage and the family in which she grew up. The film is Wang's personal documentation of her parents' feeling towards each other.

Nightingale, Not the Only Voice

Tang Danhong's authorial voice is much more layered in the film than Yang's and Wang's selves in their films. She presents herself not only as the *seer* (though in some parts she has a cameraman filming for her), the *speaker*, the *editor*, but also as the *seen*, 'the body image'. It is this directly physical representation of herself on camera that makes her highly reflexive authorial voice conflicted and unstable.

In fact, Tang's *Nightingale, Not the Only Voice* is not only about Tang's story. Instead, it consists of stories of three people: a male performance artist, Yin Xiaofeng; a female painter artist, Cui Ying; and the last and the key character, the filmmaker, poet, Tang Danhong – herself. She captures how individuals suddenly acquiring more mobility and autonomy than previous generations see their lives in the neo-liberal period.

Three people's stories are interwoven with each other, linked together through Tang's first person narration. As Tang's voice-over reveals, she starts to film herself because the other two characters have strongly inspired her: "I often do not dare to go out without wearing makeup, but the self behind the makeup has given me power to film Yin and Cui, now the same power has made me turn the camera inwards to film myself. I feel Xiaofeng and Cui Ying are parts of me, so I am in fact recording the fragments of myself".[317] This establishes that the representation of Cui and Yin in the film works as reflections of Tang's own self, and urges her to present herself as the '*seen*'.

Her self as the *seen* is split into two: the one with her friends drinking and laughing together, and the other in her own private space, by herself, with her psychologist or with her parents. In her private space, she even presents her naked body, as a gesture of frankness and of making a confession. In fact, this is the first time she presents herself on camera. In this scene, she is seen in long shot, sitting on the bed, undressing herself, then going naked to the bath. The body here acts a material form that indicates openness.

In addition, she intensively uses voice-over, not just speaking about her past history, but also commenting on herself as presented in the film. The next shot cuts to Tang lying in the bath quietly. The camera films from above and her voice-over appears: "*It is almost like a porn movie. I was in fact very sad at the time, but when I saw it during the editing, I cannot see I was sad at all, because I was bumbling. I was like an alien. What happened to me? The camera pointing at me is like a weapon with a sharp eye, I feel ashamed, embarrassed, and try to hide my true feelings and be calm…*" In this shot, the self is not just split between the *seer* and the *seen*, but also temporally between a filmed past, and a spoken 'now'. This distance between the self being filmed and the self in the

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[317] Author's translation.

editing gives her space to speak in a highly reflexive and self-critical way. The 'performance' of the self as the *seen,* and the voice-over expressing her feelings at being examined, have prepared her to open her inner psychological self in front of the camera.

The self as the '*seen*' is mostly shown in Tang's personal confessions to her psychologist about her traumatic childhood when her father often beat her up. This confessional scene is filmed by another filmmaker, who is Tang's close friend.[318] The handheld camera presents Tang in extreme close-up and through very subjective shots. It seems as if it is another self of Tang, examining herself closely. The camera traces Tang's face and body up and down, observing Tang's facial expressions while Tang talks to the psychologist. Then the camera pans to the psychologist, who is sitting opposite to Tang, listening to Tang's confession. The camera does not stay long on the psychologist and pans back to Tang. The camera closely observes Tang in a strikingly aggressive manner. The unstable, highly subjective, close-up shots magnify Tang's unsettled and flustered feelings, making this her own space, which is fully occupied by Tang's inner 'self' that has not been shown on any other occasion. The closeness between the camera and Tang leaves no room for breath.

In short, in these three first person familial self-representations, the women filmmakers all inscribe themselves as a strong authorial voice, leading the investigation, even when facing family rejection. Yang and Wang do not present themselves on camera. They are inscribed as the *seer* and *editor*, constructing the memories from different family members according to their own personal interpretations. Tang Danhong, on the other hand, inscribes herself not just as the 'seer', the 'editor', but also as the '*seen*', and the voice-over. The self split between the filmed past, and the spoken 'now' gives her temporal distance to reflexively examine herself in the past, and in the 'filmed' past. Despite different methods of self inscription, the three women's searching for self all start from their position as the daughter in the family. However, they do not present themselves as a stereotyped passive and voiceless daughter that is the role 'given'[319] to

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[318] Wu, Mei. "*Yibu Jilupian he Yiwei Yishujia de Shenjingzheng Shi* (a Documentary and the Neurological Disease History of an Artist).*"*

[319] The traditional human identity has transformed from a role of 'given' into a role of 'task' (Bauman, *The Individualised Society*, 144).

them in the traditional family ethics. On the contrary, they actively challenge the Confucian 'parent – child' relationship which requests them to obey the father (parents). Their filmmaking can be seen as a way of active *goutong*, communication with their parents, longing for connectedness with the family. While raising their voices as independent individuals, they also show responsibility to their families and try to help the family members to understand family conflicts.

III. Beyond the traditional image of daughter

As discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, the traditional Confucian ethical relations construct the female figure as powerless and voiceless. The female plays the role of the daughter and the wife, subject to the father, the husband and the eldest son respectively, which is indicated in the "Three Obediences".[320]

In her invaluable study of women and sexuality in China, Harriet Evans observes that "[b]efore the radical changes that spread though China's cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a patrilineal system of inheritance and power governed matters concerning marriage and sexual conduct."[321] Since the late nineteenth century, resistance to paternal authority and the ethics of female obedience has gone through different changes. During the May Fourth period in early twentieth-century China, a group of modern, educated intellectual 'new women' emerged actively challenging traditional perceptions of women.[322] However, this image of modern 'new women' has been repressed by the ideology of Nationalist Government during the 'New Life Movement' in the 1930s, that tried to recover the traditional Confucius morality on women. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, a more empowering definition of female identity was constructed. Gender inequality, in traditional

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[320] Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 2. Margery Wolf states that a woman throughout her life has to obey different men at different stages of her life. At first, before marriage, she should obey her fathers and brothers, then her husband, then after her husband dies, her adult sons.

[321] Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China*, 4-5.

[322] *New women including journalists, novelists, playwrights, poets, and critics, such as Ding Ling, Bing Xin, Xiao Hong, Qiu Jin, and Zhang Ailing. Their works were regarded as new, not only in terms of narrative content but also the narrative forms, i.e. fantasy, autobiography, comedy, and strategies they deployed, the readership they sought to address, and the publication venues of which they availed themselves.*

patriarchal society, was violently countered through a series of pieces of legislation, such as the new Marriage Law and the establishment of Women's Federation, or '*Fulian*'(妇联) to ensure gender equality. Through these efforts, the status of women was raised significantly, as compared to their role in traditional Chinese society, especially in the domestic space.[323] However, as many scholars have argued, the female figure in socialist realist cinema has usually been used to signify the victims of traditional Chinese feudal society, to be liberated by the Communist Party and become proletarian workers. The new strong woman's identity is used to support the socialist collective ideology, and to construct a unified socialist national identity. Some critics argue that "women's emancipation in China failed not only because a new patriarchal order attempted to replace an old one by using women's representational power, but also because Chinese women, for lack of gender awareness, could not sufficiently resist their reductive roles as representations of masculinist ideology".[324]

The popular discourse on women re-emphasised women's familial obligations in post-socialist China since the late 1970s and "the logic of the unregulated market consolidates the entrenchment of gender discriminatory practices in the wider economy, society and culture."[325] In this social context, women's personal writings, such as those by Yu Luojin, re-emerged in the 1980s, and enjoyed further popularity during the late 1990s and early 2000s, including those by young generation writers Wei Hui[326], Mian Mian[327], and Mu Zimei[328]. These women individualised semi-autobiographical writing have, to a great extent, carved out a space for women's personal voices. Although during the 1980s such writings still received much criticism, they have gained much popularity at the turn of new century and have been packaged as cultural commodities. The consumption of women's individualised writings has made the women's personal

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[323] Dooling, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China*.

[324] Lu, *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society*, 18.

[325] Evans, The Gender of Communication, 998-999.

[326] Wei Hui is the pen name of the writer Zhou Weihui. Her personal writings include the semi-autobiographic novel *Shanghai Baby* and *Marrying Buddha*.

[327] Mian Mian is the pen name of the writer Wang Xin. She is known for her novel *Candy*.

[328] Mu Zimei is the pen name of a female journalist and blogger whose blog frankly describes her sexual encounters with various men.

voice subject to market forces, reinforcing the connection between the female and the personal, the private and the domestic.

The three female first person filmmakers analysed in this section are neither passive voiceless daughters, nor powerful asexual socialist workers. They are also different from the individualised women writers, whose writings have been packaged as cultural commodities to be consumed. In fact, these three women's first person films have not been shown often to an audience.

In all three films, the daughters' first person questioning of their parents challenges the traditional 'father (the old) - son (the children)' relationship. Yang Lina and Wang Fen question their parents' marriage and divorce. Tang Danhong questions her father's malevolent behaviour towards her. Although by doing so they have gone against the traditional moral virtues of obedience, the three daughters cannot just passively accept broken family relations and the disharmonious family environment that has, to a great degree, constructed their own selves. They are eager to communicate with their parents. As young individual women, who have somehow started their own career path or still pursue the dream, the fast changing social environment makes them constantly reflect on themselves. The desire to know more about their own selves makes them look back to their family, and reconnect to their parental history. Through the process of filmmaking they have been actively investigating, or even intervening in, their familial relationships.

I argue that their first person investigatory filmmaking practice in their own families can be regarded as a kind of 'communicative practice', a term identified by Evans to describe the changing pattern of 'mother-daughter' communication, as daughters of the younger generation long for emotional relatedness with their parents.[329] In this way, their rebellious filmmaking practices are likely to further generate a new set of ethics of communication between parents and children. During this practice, the three women start to see their parents not just from the viewpoint of a daughter, but more from the viewpoint of an 'outsider', an independent individual who shows responsibility towards their family.

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[329] Evans, "The Gender of Communication," 981.

Home Video

In *Home Video*, Yang constructs herself as a new independent self conscious woman
through three different strategies. Firstly, matching the level of Yang's physical eyes, the
camera angle creates a special subjective look at the subjects, a look that has gone
beyond that of a daughter or a sister. Yang does not choose to talk to them in a formal
interview setting, neither does she follow the traditional manner of a daughter. Instead,
Yang does the interview in a very informal way, interrogating the parents like an arbiter.
Yang's intimate relationship with them enables her camera to enter the private familial
space of the subjects. When talking to the mother or the father, Yang's camera
sometimes looks down from above on the mother or the father who lies on the bed.

In addition, Yang uses this subjective amateurish camera eye to lead the narrative. She
not only insists on filming the investigation, but also decides to show the mother's and
the brother's views to the father, the authorial figure of the family. I argue that through
investigating the family secret, which turns out to be serious domestic violence, the film
ultimately challenges the father, not only through her gesture of interviewing him,
letting him tell the story from his memory, but also through using the subjective
memories of the mother and the brother, to disturb his own judgement (fig. 4.13).
However, in the last conversation with Yang, the father still does not accept the brother,
nor does he forgive him. In the ending sequence, after the father asks her: "*What do you
think?",* the film fades out into dark, only with Yang's voice speaking: "*I don't know. I
let the audience make the judgement.*" As a filmmaker, Yang presents the father's
explanation for the audiences to make their own judgements. The ultimate role of Yang
in this film is a filmmaker.

FIGURE 4.13. Yang talks to her father after showing him the video.

Lastly and most importantly, her firm and insistent voice that keeps coming behind the camera makes clear her position as an independent filmmaker. In fact, her voice is the first one we hear in the film, stating persistently that "*I want to make an investigation of the divorce of my parents.*" It states clearly, it is 'I' holding the camera who is making this film, and investigating my parents' divorce. When the father says "*you will regret it*", Yang firmly replies, "*No, I will be very fair.*" At this moment, she does not take herself just as a daughter, but as a judge, who has the ability to make her own judgment on her parents' issue. Though when she is told that her mother was beaten up by her father in a striking manner, we can hear her crying from behind the camera. She still tries to be calm when later she talks to the father, hoping to get his point of view on this domestic violence. When the younger brother says "*I think you are a little shameless*", Yang does not feel guilty, instead, she admits it and playfully says "*Yes, yes, you are right. I'm beginning to feel very shameless…*" Even though challenged by the two male figures, Yang does not give up her filming. She not only insists on filming but also reflexively shows her filmmaking journey, asking the subjects to participate and eventually getting to know the family secret through her camera.

It cannot be denied that Yang also has the intention of using her family scandal to catch the attention of the audience. In fact, her action of filming is from a position of a filmmaker, who hopes to craft a film out of her materials. "I've been listening to my

mother talking about the issue several times, and think maybe I can make a film out of it, and investigate how others think of the issue."[330] The private familial issue was revealed to her in familial spaces. She laughs with them, and when the father and brother do not agree, she persistently asks, and naughtily tricks them. However, recorded on her camera, this issue is no longer just a personal one. By showing the edited film to a wider audience, Yang's identity has also gone beyond that of a family member. When the film was shown in Leipzig and Beijing, some audiences criticised Yang, thinking that it is not right to disclose family trauma to the public through the camera. In my interview with Yang, she reveals that at the time she was under great social pressure, as it was not easy to face the criticisms from the audience and her family. Even though she believes this is not just a personal matter, but reflects the much grander social structural changes and instability in China's transitional period, the huge pressure that Yang faced when she first screened the films in the early 2000s, made her question her own motivations in making such a transgressive film.[331] Her conscious self denial suggests that the self is highly socially constructed. The gendered expectations of obedience and expectations of filiality, as well as family obligations, still play a crucial role in the constitution of self in contemporary China.

They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple

For Wang Fen, making the film *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple* arose out of her sense of responsibility towards her parents. She believes that the film raises much wider awareness of a marriage problem that is not just a personal issue, but reflects much larger social reality. Having lived outside the home town from a young age, Wang wants to find out the answer to a question that has confused her since she was very young: "Why are my parents not happy together?" She regards the making of this film as the starting point of her adulthood. "Before that, it is usually the parents who take care of the children, but through the making of the film, I start to care about them and worry about them."[332] In this sense, the making of the film can also be seen as Wang showing

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[330] Author's interview, 2010.

[331] ibid.

[332] ibid.

filiality to her parents through her own way of actively displaying emotional care for the parents, rather than simply being an obedient and quiet daughter.

Like Yang, Wang also exclusively inscribes herself as the '*seer*'. However, unlike Yang who uses all subjective point-of-view shots, using the handheld camera as equating to her own eyes, Wang creates a less personal and more objective 'look' and constructs the interview setting in a more formal and traditional way. Wang put the camera on a tripod to achieve a stable view. The father and the mother each sit in the middle of the frame in medium close-up, and look directly into the camera, rather than looking at Wang's eyes behind or at the side of the camera. Being a first time filmmaker, Wang's idea of documentary comes from what she can see from conventional TV documentary.[333] Hence she also constructs the interview setting in a similar way. The close relationship between the parents and the daughter makes the parents speak to the camera without any worry.

In addition, Wang's off-screen voice speaks in a very calm and less emotional way, as if the couple has no personal relationship with her. Wang's voice appears a few times from behind the camera, asking questions and exploring the details. But her off-screen voice does not express her emotion as strongly as Yang's voice. She neither argues with her parents loudly nor laughs or cries with them like Yang.

However, I argue that it is this less personal 'look' and neutral tone of questioning that reinforce her position as a filmmaker, one who tries to stand outside her own familial relationship, examining it as an independent individual. She creates this chance for her parents to confess, to speak out about their pain, as a way of showing her care and love for them.

Nightingale, Not the Only Voice

In *Nightingale, Not the Only Voice*, Tang's self as the filmmaker and the daughter - the filmed subject is more integrated, as the problematic relationship she questions is her

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[333] ibid.

own uncommunicative relationship with her father. In fact, what Tang challenges is beyond the father as the familial authorial figure. By making the film, Tang is making a critique of how different political ideologies have impacted on constructing human relations and how the class struggles and dominant universalistic ethics during the Cultural Revolution have further problemised family relations.

In the film, she takes the courage to ask very sensitive questions of her father: "Why did you often beat me when I was a child?" Her highly provocative questioning brings the uneasy and disharmonious relationship to the foreground. Tang's indomitable questioning discloses a traumatic but collective memory of China's recent history that has impacted on a large population – the ten-year "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966 – 1976). This general political and moral atmosphere of Tang's youth is the 'pre-text' of Tang's problematic relationship with her father.

In the scene where she has a face-to-face confrontation with her parents, she also presents herself on camera, letting a third person film this scene. In this way, she not only challenges her father through asking sensitive questions, but also reflexively presenting her self. It starts with an establishing shot presents three people's position, which illustrates the hierarchal relationships in her family, as a way to criticise it: Tang sits on a chair in the right edge of the frame, like a child who has made some mistakes, facing left to her parents who sit side by side on the sofa in the right side of the frame. This reflects what she revealed earlier in the confession: "This family seems to be only made up of these two [her parents]."

In this conversation, the establishing shot intercuts with close-ups of Tang and her parents. It relies on continuity editing which creates an axis of action. Tang starts to ask: "*Around 1975, when I forgot to cook for the family, you beat me so badly and asked me to leave. The other occasion, you were so angry that you gave me a knife and asked me to kill you. How can you beat me like that?*"[334] It cuts back to the long shot, showing that the father looks very serious and pained, but does not seem to feel guilty. The mother sitting next to the father says: "*The mode of education at the time was not right – to beat meant to love. Because your father was treated so badly during the Cultural*

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[334] Author's translation.

Revolution, and was labelled as 'right-wing', 'anti-revolution'...he felt very depressed, so he had a very high expectation of his child."[335] The father is still quiet, saying nothing.

Both Tang and her parents speak in their local Sichuan dialect, which is different from Tang's voice-over and confessions, which are in Mandarin Chinese. The local dialect sounds less formal, more familial, familiar, as that is the dialect she was born with. Tang does not speak very aggressively, but in a quiet, calm and low voice. By contrast, her parents' voices sound more harsh.

The mother continues: "*It is all because of that revolution.*"

The father: "*At the time, my single action, and my family's action, would have influenced me... Now I don't want to say anything. I have forgotten many things... I was under huge pressure that even your mother could not totally understand.*"

The mother: "*There was only loyalty at the time, no family ethics [jiating lunli] at all.*"

The father: "*It was all because of the social environment then. I hoped my children could be better than me. You cannot say this without mentioning the history. That's all I want to say.*"

The mother continues speaking for the father.

Tang: "*I want to listen to what father says. You have been explaining for him your whole life.*"

The father: "*If people said you have made serious mistakes and have to isolate you, you know, this means asking you to die.*"

Tang: "*So in fact it was not you who beat me, it was the powers asking you to die that beat me.*"

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[335] Author's translation.

(Author's translation)

At this moment, it reaches the culmination of Tang's confrontation with her parents. During the Cultural Revolution, class struggle based on the class division of 'the repressed, the repressor, and the liberator', and a new morality of universalism based on comradeship, have replaced the traditional ethics of three cardinal guides and five constant virtues. Individuals were all subjected to the socialist state and the party. In these norms, the young no longer needed to respect and show filial obedience to the old, and the wife could rebel against the husband, if the old and the husband belonged to the 'public enemies', the 'bad' class, i.e. the descendants of feudal repressors or capitalists.[336] As Tang's mother reveals in the film: *"there was only loyalty at the time, no family ethics at all."*

In this context, the father was the victim of class struggle who was heavily criticised and isolated by the society dominated by the 'proletarian class'. However, he still exercised his patriarchal power at home as the father and husband. The criticism and violent treatment he received, outside the domestic space, has heavily repressed him and brought him both physical and psychological suffering. The private familial space, hence, became the only outlet for him to release himself. However, he expressed himself through domestic violence on his daughter.

While Tang questions her father, she is in the process of deconstructing the existing family order which has constructed her current self. Interestingly, what she questions is not so much the traditional Chinese family order between father and children, which is 'father guides son'. In fact, she is questioning why her father did not follow those family virtues and show affection to his child. "*Why did you beat me?*" Tang keeps asking. For Tang, her father does not have a benevolent image. Towards the end of this conversation, Tang realises that it is not her father who beat her, as she says to the father *"it was the power asking you to die that beat me."* The film ultimately blames revolutionary socialist ideology during the Cultural Revolution, which has not just

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[336] There are many autobiographical books that tell real life stories through a first person narrative of how personal lives were affected by the Cultural Revolution and how family ties and friendships were sundered by class struggle. Examples include *Born Red* by a former 'Red Guard' Gao Yan*, Son of the Revolution* by Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro*, Wild Swans* by Jung Chang*,* and *Spider Eaters* by Rae Yang.

repelled traditional family relations but has gone so far that it has damaged their humanity.

Overall, the three women filmmakers challenge the traditional obedient image of a daughter. They neither present themselves are emotionless asexual socialist workers, nor "strong women" that media has tried to portray. With care for their parents, they insist to know more about their parental or parent-daughter relations. Within the films, they each construct themselves as a new independent woman through different techniques. Yang and Wang investigate problematic familial or parental relations that are not directly related to themselves. This gives them an 'outsider' position, to investigate the problematic families that have however constructed their own selves. Yang uses handheld subjective point-of-view shots to look at her parents, and to lead the narrative. She also constantly argues with them. Wang creates a formal 'objective' look and speaks calmly to her parents, trying to mention her position as an 'outsider'. Tang, on the other hand, investigates an issue that directly relates to her own self, and directly challenges her father as the authority figure. By doing so, Tang criticises political ideology during the Cultural Revolution for disrupting basic respect among individuals.

II.   The relational self - not breaking away from traditional relations

The last and most distinctive feature of three women's familial self-representations is their primary focus on the familial relations, rather than just on their own selves. I argue that this is the major difference from the Western 'domestic ethnography', in which, as Renov and Lebow argue, the representation of the familial others serves as a reflection and extension of the self. Despite the strong authorial voice as an independent individual who has challenged the traditional parent-children relationship by investigating and questioning their parents, the three women's first person films do not just focus on their own selves in the family. This is especially the case in Yang's *Home Video* and Wang's *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple*. What these two films concern most is family as a collective whole. Their authorial voices do not just speak for themselves, but for the sake of the family as a larger group, in which their individual selves are situated.

As I discussed in the last chapter, though the individual has gained more autonomy and mobility in contemporary China, the traditional and socialist collective institutions have not been entirely abolished but still shape the individual self to a great extent. The autonomy that the individual has acquired is still relational. In other words, the individual self in the contemporary Chinese context does not search for ultimate autonomy and freedom as promoted in modern Western enlightenment individualism. As shown in *Home Video* and *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple*, what the individual filmmaker selves care most about is their families as a larger collective, in which they find their own positions.

They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple

In *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple,* Wang's camera focuses on examining the relationship between the husband and the wife, the most fundamental relationship in a traditional family. The mother/wife and the father/husband are presented as the main characters. The majority of the film consists of two interviews with them separately, as two single confessions from their own perspectives. The two interviews are cross-cut, and organized in the context of what they think of each other and their relationship, like a dialogue between the two.

It is interesting to note that the locations where the two interviews take place are very different. The conversations with the mother is filmed in a public space. It is first filmed in an open space near the railway in their hometown. The mother/wife takes a small stool with her, sits down in the middle of the frame and starts to talk to Wang who is behind the camera. After a short while, the mother worries that she might meet acquaintances, so decides to move to a place where fewer people pass by. The camera follows the mother to a vegetable garden, where she sits down on her stool and starts to talk again. While the mother speaks in an open space, the father, however, chooses to disclose himself in a closed interior space, which is the guesthouse of the railway station where he works. As the authority figure in a traditional Chinese family, the father closes the curtain and starts to reveal to the daughter his inner feelings.

The couple's individual choice of locations, where the two couples disclose themselves, implies their different attitudes towards their positions. The mother chooses a public space rather than the domestic setting that women usually relate to. This indicates that she is not afraid of exposing her pain outside the family. It might also be for the practical reason - that the mother does not have another private space to go to except the home where she is subjected to the husband. Lack of a space of her own indicates her lack of autonomy. The father, on the other hand, has the power to find another private space through the network offered through his work. Consciously keeping it private, by carefully closing the curtain, the father still keeps it as a personal issue. One can also say that for the mother, her marriage and family is all she has, whereas for the father, the marriage and family is only the private aspect of his life, as he also has his work.

The film transgressively presents the couple's personal dissatisfaction towards each other on camera. The father/husband starts to reveal to the daughter his love lives before the marriage, including his affairs with other women. Then the film cuts to the mother/ wife, saying that "*I never really trusted him*." The film cuts back to the father/husband complaining about his wife. As the conversation flows, we realise that the traditional ethical relationship between husband and wife is seriously broken in Wang's family. The 'three cardinal guides' request the husband to guide the wife, and show affection and protection toward the wife, while the 'Three Obediences" request the wife obey the husband. Even when socialist ideology replaced traditional family ethics in the period from the 1950s until the late 1970s, the new morality of socialist 'commandership' required an equal relationship between men and women, and mutual respect. But through confessing to the camera of their daughter, Wang's parents have destroyed the stereotyped image of a good couple.

The image of the mother/wife constructed through the first person daughter's camera is of a hard, somewhat emotionless woman, challenging the traditional model of the quiet, speechless and obedient wife. The mother/wife directly speaks about her feelings of dissatisfaction and her hatred towards the husband. As discussed above, socialist ideology has largely raised the social status of women, making women equal socialist workers integrated into social production. Legal and social institutions were founded to

protect gender equality. This social context has cultivated the habitus of Wang's mother as a hard, less feminine and emotionally closed woman.

It was also in the New Socialist China that Wang's mother married Wang's father. In fact, the film reveals that Wang's parents' marriage has been influenced by China's changing social-political climate at the time. In the new socialist China, the father cannot marry other women because of class differences. In one scene, Wang goes to the toilet and asks her dad to say whatever he wants to the camera while she is not there. The father feels a bit uncomfortable at first, then starts to confess to the camera: "On the issue of marriage, I have been tortured my whole life. Why? Because I cannot be with the one I love. The society did not allow it. But the one I don't like at all becomes my real wife, then I do not experience a single happy day ever since…" In the father's view, his mistaken marriage is partially because of the communist class struggle and grouping people by their class labels, rather than by personal affection.

In the last sequence, however, Wang puts some cheerful scenes where her parents are together like a happy couple. They act very differently from what they say in their individual confessions. The film ends with the couple standing side by side, waving goodbye to the camera. The 'happy together' ending may be read in several ways. Is it a performance directed by Wang, who imposes her own romantic wish on to her parents? Is it because her parents want to present a happy image when they are together facing the camera, not knowing what each other has said? Or is it actually part of their daily life, as they both reveal that they do not want to divorce, because they want to give their children a unified family. In all these interpretations, the family members, either Wang or her parents still show much care for the family as a whole, hoping to maintain a collective family.

Home Video

In *Home Video*, what the daughter, the first person filmmaker Yang aims to explore is why her parents are getting divorced, and what has happened while she was away that has caused the broken family. Yang organises the conversations between Yang and other

family members as responses to each other. Yang's interviews with her mother, father and younger brother are consecutive and cross-cut, making it like a face-to-face conversation of the three, with the central focus being the family. While one person recalls an event, the other two immediately respond in the following shots (figs. 4.14, 4.15, 4.16).

FIGURES 4.14, 4.15, 4.16: The three interviews are cross cut in *Home Video* (2001).

As their conversation reveals, the violent family history is that the mother had an affair which is witnessed by the brother who later told the father. The father consequently beat the mother, and they got divorced. The brother also witnessed the domestic violence therefore has a complex set of feelings towards the parents. The film reveals that both the relationships between the couple, and between the father and the son, are seriously broken. The former, which has created the violent history, has recovered through the years. However, this issue has led to serious misunderstanding and distrust between the father and the son.
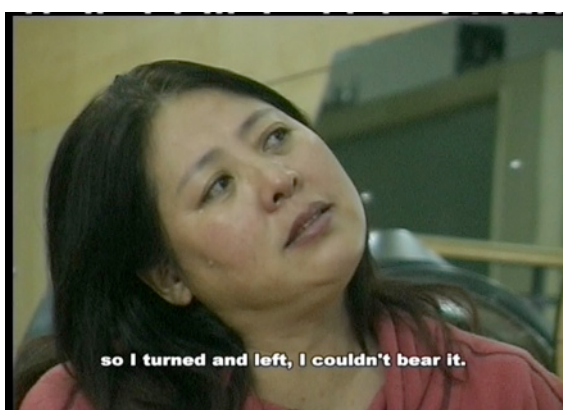
FIGURE 4.17
The mother cries while watching the video.

FIGURE 4.18
Yang talks to the brother and the mother after showing the video.

In the film, Yang is not the only one who cares about the family as a whole; her mother also worries about the overall relationship among them. After interviewing the three family members, Yang invites the mother and the brother to come and see the conversations she has recorded. In close-up shots, the mother is watching the video with tears, and the brother looks very serious (fig. 4.17). It was the first time that the two had heard the father's perspective. After the screening, Yang discusses with the mother and the brother, whether the video should be shown to the father (fig. 4.18). The mother insists that Yang should not show it to the father, as it would ruin the relationship among the family members that has just been built up again in recent years. The mother is especially afraid that the younger brother would lose his inheritance from the father. Though divorced, the mother still cares for the continuity of the family. However, in the end, Yang still shows it to the father. In the last shot, Yang asks what the father thinks, while the father asks her back: "*what do you think*?" Watching this film, Yomi Braester argues that this moment indicates that the ultimate protagonist of the film is Yang.[337] However, as I argue here, what Yang cares most about is still the family as a collective, which is also the central focus in the film. Yang believes that this filmmaking activity has indeed created a chance for the family members to re-examine their relationship, and for a deeper level of communication that they have not had for a long time.[338]

IV.   Conclusion: Still a silence voice after the filmmaking

Overall, the three amateur filmmakers turn the camera inward to film their familial self, in the context of state-forced decollectivisation, and growing autonomy acquired by individuals. Playing the role of daughter in the family and an individual situated in the wider society, the three women filmmakers document their first person exploration of their problematic family relations, from a perspective that has gone beyond the traditional voice of the daughter, and challenged the social expectations of women. The relational dynamics explored in the films concerning the familial relations also reflect the much larger relational dynamics in the larger political space.

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[337] Braester, "Photography at Tiananmen," 211.

[338] Author's interview, 2010.

To some extent, they share the same courage with the May Fourth new women and post-Mao individual women writers. Their filmmaking demonstrates a strong self-consciousness as independent women desiring to express themselves. Yet, they have somehow gone beyond that. Unlike the writing practice which is limited within a space of one's own, these three women have moved a step further. They use a DV camera as a pen, to interact with their family members and directly challenge their problematic relations, as well as their expectations of women. In this sense, their filmmaking practice can be seen as a mode of communicative practice. Through disrupting the current lack of communication, they aim at reconnecting with their parents and creating a chance for family members to speak out about their pain.

In addition, their first person investigation and expression draws attention to a re-examination of the family which has become a heavily layered and complex entity in China's transition period. Their films illustrate the fact that family, as a traditional institution that has historically defined the individual self in an ethical relational society, still plays an important role in constructing the individual self. These three filmmakers present themselves in the complex familial relations, and think highly of the family as a collective group which provides them with a sense of identity.

As for themselves, they also see their filmmaking practice as an important personal experience, through which they have gained more understanding of their own selves. Tang Danhong values this filmmaking process significantly as an important learning experience in her life.[339] Wang Fen states that, though even if she had not made the film, she would have understood the problem later, the filmmaking has accelerated the process, especially at a time when she had just started a relationship herself. She even regards this investigation as a guide for her to understand marriage.[340] Yang Lina reveals that the criticism she received from her brother and father, as well we from the audience has made her reflect on her own ethical relations with her family and the audience.[341]

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[339] "Yibu Jilupian he Yiwei Yishujia de Shenjingzheng Shi(a Documentary and the Neurological Disease History of an Artist)."

[340] ibid.

[341] ibid.

However, unlike the May Fourth new women and the post-Mao individual women writers who have built up a collective power and social awareness, the three female filmmakers have not yet formed a collective group. These three women live in different geographical areas in China. Tang was born and lived in the southwest province of Sichuan before she moved to Israel with her Israeli husband. Yang was born in northeast China and moved to the capital Beijing by herself in the mid 1990s. Wang was born in the southeast province of Jiangxi and has been living away from home since she was nine years old, firstly for studying, then making a living in Beijing. They did not know each other at the time, and have had little contact after making the films.

In addition, their films are not well known in wider society outside the film community, and have received strong criticism in the last ten years, both abroad and domestically. It is also for this reason that the three women have not widely shown their films to audiences in public spaces.

Yang Lina's *Home Video* has only been shown three times in ten years' time, once at the Leipzig Film Festival in Germany, and twice inside China. Yang mentioned that even when it was shown in Leipzig, some members of the audiences criticised her on the basis that it is outrageous to record and show one's family privacy. Similarly, Wang Fen also recalled that her film was first shown at Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF) in Japan, then it was shown twice in Beijing. After that some domestic journalists seriously criticised her as abominable, for her action of disclosing her family scandal.[342] Unlike Yang's and Wang's films which received public criticism in the media, Tang's film was only shown twice to her close friends or to artists and filmmakers in the field. It was first shown to some of her acquaintances at 'Bai Ye' (White Night), a locally well-known art and intellectual salon in the south-western city of Chengdu in Sichuan province, where Tang was based. Then in 2003, the film was shown at the first 'Yunfest' – a visual anthropology film festival in China. After that, Tang has talked little about the film in public and just kept it for her self-understanding.

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[342] ibid.

It is important to note that Yang Lina and Wang Fen also had other intentions. As both wanted to make films, or had just made amateur films to date, they hoped to make a 'film as a film' through filming their family. As Yang's mother responses to Yang's idea of filmming the family: "*It is a good topic. To look into the story about the divorce of one's parents is fashionable these days*." This somehow also reflects Yang's intention in the beginning. However, it is also this intention that has made them very self conflicted for a long time, as many audiences have criticised them for lack of moral responsibility, for exposing their personal family issues to gain personal recognition. The criticism they receive even made them question themselves.

After making these films, the three women filmmakers have not made any similar films to explore their personal lives again. Tang married an Israeli and moved to Israel in 2006. Wang made some experimental films and was funded to make a commercial fiction film released in China in 2008. Only Yang Lina still keeps making documentaries. However, because of the social pressure and expectation placed on a documentary filmmaker, Yang Lina's later films only focus on 'the others' and with grand social responsibility in mind. She treats documentary filmmaking as a profession and has done some commissioned works for foreign broadcasters. This is different from how she treated documentary in the early years, as a special vehicle for self-expression and social participation.

The three women's transgressive filmmaking practice not only challenged their parents and family members, but also provoked their audience. The critical response and hostility they have received towards their films indicate that their filmmaking has seriously threatened the audience and disrupted their conventional expectations of women, as 'passive' obedient daughters. In other words, it reflects to what extent society can accept personal familial issues being discussed in public, and how people conceive the public and the private in contemporary China.

On the other hand, their self-censorship, after getting hostile responses, also indicates the complex construction of the self and the difficulty in challenging socially deep-rooted gendered expectations. In the early 1980s, when the woman writer Yu Luojin's autobiographical writing was first published, it also faced much criticism and later was

banned for its explicit description of private and sexual lives from a woman's point of view. Although, since the 1990s, more women's semi-autobiographical writings have emerged, they are packaged as cultural products available on the market and have satisfied 'modern hedonistic consumerism'.[343] The visual representation of one's familial self and family members draws attention to ethical questions much more strongly than the written works, because of their direct projection of the family members' images on camera. While an individualising society has offered them more autonomy to pursue their selves outside traditional familial space, society seems not to have accepted women openly challenging parental power as a way to re-negotiate the communicative pattern between parents and children. It also indicates that society has not yet opened up public spaces for individuals to openly examine their selves in the context of unstable, uncommunicative and broken familial relations that were, to a great extent, caused by transforming social structures.

Apart from these three women, there are a few other women in China making similar films that explore their domestic space and familial relations. Liu Jiayin, a young female filmmaker who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy, has made two films about her familial life *Oxhide I* (110 minutes, 2005), and *Oxhide II* (133 minutes, 2009). However, these two films are semi-documentary/semi-fiction as although she has her own family members play themselves in their own domestic space, the films are scripted. Zhang Mengqi, a young dancer-filmmaker made a first person documentary, *Self Portrait: Three Women* (70 minutes, 2010), exploring different values of love and marriage of three females in her family - her grandmother, her mother and herself.

Some other female first person films, however, have moved beyond their familial space. In the decollectivisation and marketisation process, a huge number of young women, like their male counterparts, also rush to urban coastal cities, from rural areas, for work. A couple of first person documentaries are in fact made by these young women who document their lives as migrant workers in urban cities.

Guo Lifen, who is working as a maid in Guangzhou, made a documentary called *My Name is Fenfen* (2008). In this film she takes the camera as a listener, confessing to it

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343 Wang, "Reproducing the Self," 182.

her personal confusions and emotional conflicts as a migrant subaltern class worker. She also takes the camera to record her life with other young female peer workers. Nevertheless, familial conflicts are inevitably part of her transitional life, from a peasant girl to a urban migrant worker. When Guo takes the camera back to her home village, during the Chinese New Year, she puts the camera in a corner of her familial living room and documents a huge quarrel between her father and her, at a time when they least expected it. The film therefore documents her challenges to paternal authority in the family.

When the film was shown at Chaochangdi Cross Film Festival in 2009, it received many positive responses and praise from the audience who are mostly students, intellectuals and filmmakers. This is quite different from the response received by the three female filmmakers in the early 2000s. However, for these well-educated members of the audience, what has made them value this film is not Guo as a young woman challenging the father figure in the family, but Guo as a less educated migrant worker who can also make films and present her personal emotional world that represents a lower class life - a life little known to them. Similarly, a hair salon lady in Shenzhen, Zhang Hua, has made documentaries about the lives of herself and other salon ladies. Her films also received positive comments from the media. These comments emphasise her identity/position as a salon lady filmmaker.

In addition, a peasant woman amateur filmmaker, Shao Yuzheng, one of the villager filmmakers in Wu Wenguang's 'Villager Documentary Project', has participated in the first person filmmaking practice since 2005. The 'Villager Documentary Project' is a series of first person documentaries made by selected villagers from different regions of China. It was originally an EU-China Village Governance Project in which ten villagers were chosen to film their own villages with a portable DV camera in 2005. Since then four village filmmakers[344] have continued making documentaries on a yearly basis, under the mentorship of Wu Wenguang. Their films are named as "My village 2006/2007/2008/2009". Shao Yuzheng is the only female filmmaker among the four who continues to document her village life.

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[344] Wang Wei, Shao Yuzhen, Jia Zhidan, and Zhang Huancai.

Unlike other female filmmakers, who predominantly focus on familial conflicts or their personal emotional world, Shao Yunzhen is more like an independent journalist who keeps a record of daily events in her village, not just those that relate to her own family. Her camera has even confronted official media. As a few of Shao's DV documentaries have been gradually shown on local TV stations, her filmmaking practice has attracted journalists from mainstream media to interview her.

Interestingly, since she started making films with a DV camera herself, she has got a new idea of what a camera can do, and the scenes she records with her own camera can be very different from conventional representations of peasants on News or TV documentaries.[345] When state journalists try to interview her in a rehearsed setting, practicing interview questions with her, and ask her to play in some enacted scene, she is not afraid of confronting them. With her small camera in her hand, she documents how she questions the state journalists for their highly constructed, and unrealistic, ideal image of Chinese peasants. By doing so, she has not only challenged the stereotypical image of the peasant class, but also the image of a peasant woman who is usually linked to the domestic space as an obedient and quiet wife, with little knowledge and interaction with the public and wider society.

Apart from films made by subaltern female filmmakers, a UK-based Chinese female filmmaker, Guo Xiaolu has made a documentary, *We Went to Wonderland* (76mins, 2008). Though the film is narrated in the first person, the daughter's narrative focuses on her parents' cross-cultural experience when they come to visit Britain. In other words, the film has moved beyond the domestic familial setting, to observe the cultural interaction of Mao's generation with the West.

To sum up, these first person films made by female filmmakers of a subaltern class, or with a cross-cultural background, have moved beyond the focus on familial ethics. These films demonstrate that women have moved beyond the domestic space that they are seen to be connected with. Their gendered identity has been further complicated in a society that is going through dramatic urbanisation, marketisation and globalisation. Nevertheless the family, which has been traditionally seen as a fundamental unit in

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[345] Author's interview with Wu Wenguang.

Chinese society, still plays a significant role in constructing the individual self. A few years after the three women, Yang Lina, Wang Fen and Tang Danhong, made their first person films exploring problematic family relations, some male filmmakers also turned the camera inward to examine their transforming family structure in the late 2000s. In the next chapter I will focus on three first person films on the familial self, made by three male filmmakers, Shu Haolong, Yang Pingdao and Hu Xinyu. Like the three women's films, their documentations of familial changes also reflect changes in the much wider public space.

Chapter Five

The Self in the Changing Family Space in the Late 2000s

I.   Introduction: the social context of the increasing number of first person films

This chapter focuses on three first personal familial self-representations that were made in the second half of the 2000s. This includes *Nostalgia* (dir. Shu Haolun, 70mins, 2006), *My Family Tree* (dir. Yang Pingdao, 278mins, 2008), and *Family Phobia* (dir. Hu Xinyu, 180min, 2009). Unlike the three female filmmakers' films, which investigate the problematic family history through first person questioning, the three male first person films are more like ethnographic documentations, recording the transformation of their family as it is happening through a first person perspective. Coincidentally, they all focus on structural changes within the family, especially as represented through the familial space disrupted by fast-path urbanisation.

Before looking at these films in detail, some social, economic and technological background will be examined in this introductory section. Urbanisation in post-socialist China has had a strong impact on family structure, and dramatically influenced individuals' lives, especially after the millennium. These three films illustrate the internal familial structural changes, such as the nuclearisation of the family (see below), forced demolition of the family home, and the increasing tensions between individuals and the state which have emerged in this process. As discussed in Chapter Three, scholars such as Yan Yunxiang[346] argue that the state-forced decollectivisation has largely encouraged the social mobility of the rural population, resulting in a large amount of migration from rural areas to the south-east coastal cities for employment. As

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[346] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*; Yan, Introduction to *iChina*.

individuals from the countryside have been 'liberated' from the traditional familial collectivism and the former socialist collective mode of production, this also means the nuclearisation of traditional big families.[347] According to Yan, this is the gradual replacement of the traditional extended family by the smaller and more intimate unit of a couple with unmarried children.[348] In *My Family Tree*, Yang Pingdao specially illustrates fading tradition and the rise of nuclearised small families in his family clan. In addition, demolition and reconstruction have taken place in many places across the country, especially in urban areas. This has caused the relocation of the family-home for many urban citizens who previously enjoyed many social welfare benefits, including housing, in Mao's era. Shu Haolun's *Nostalgia* is a first person critique of this state-forced demolition and relocation in his home city of Shanghai. Furthermore, for those who still live in traditional or socialist housing, the structural change is implicitly shown through the family conflicts between different generations, who have different life experiences and different reactions to the fast social transformation. Hu Xinyu's *Family Phobia* presents the generational conflicts that constantly take place in his parents' small flat in an inland city.

Despite the striking structural changes within the family, these three films demonstrate that the individual selves are not totally breaking away from familial relations. Instead, the individual selves have turned back to their old home for social security and to help construct their own identity. However, their films illustrate the increasing tension between individuals and the state. This is different from previous social periods. As discussed in Chapter Three, in ancient China and the socialist period, even during the radical Late Qing and early modern May Fourth era, the individual self has to develop the self in order to serve the state as a big family collective, as conceived in the dominant ideologies. However in contemporary China, the family, that has traditionally constructed an individual's sense of self, has been greatly interrupted by state-forced urbanisation. Even worse, the state has provided little social welfare to assist individuals to develop their own lives.[349]

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[347] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, xxiv.

[348] Ibid.

[349] Yan, Introduction to *iChina*.

The individuals situated in such complex relations have found various new ways to express their personal concerns. During the 1990s, though individuals had gained more autonomy and social mobility, such freedom could be seen as being suddenly given to or forced upon them. In this process, there were also signs of strong reluctance and resistance to the social economic transformation that was caused by the economic reforms. But there was limited public space for individuals to express their frustrations and personal experiences, except in the women's individualised writings that were commoditised as popular cultural products for mass consumption, as I mentioned in the last chapter. Cultural, media and arts institutions were affiliated with the government. The mainstream representations of personal experience had to fall in line with the dominant ideology of maintaining social stability, rather than causing social upheaval, after the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. Though some underground art works and film productions have emerged to express some individual's feelings, such works have still been very limited in the art world and not widely received by the majority of individuals.

However, during the 2000s, the advance of digital technology and participatory media in the age of web 2.0 has played a compelling role in encouraging self-expression and socio-political participation in an unprecedented way. A large number of individuals, ranging from elites and celebrities to ordinary people, document their lives with digital cameras and participate in blogging, online forums, video sharing etc., to express their selves and raise personal voices in public cyberspace.[350] Haiqing Yu proposes the concept of media citizenship to describe "how urban populace uses new media and communication technologies…to transform and dislocate the networks of communicative practices and hence refigure subjectivities".[351] Blogs and more recently Chinese 'twitter', *Weibo* (微博), which literally means 'mini blog',[352] is one of the most direct channels for self expression. In addition, though *You Tube* and other western-originated video-sharing sites are blocked in mainland China, the Chinese local

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[350] Though there is still censorship on certain political issues on the virtual public space. As I will further explore in the next chapter, there has been increasing self-expression and public debates in cyberspace, which has forged the online activist movement, and reflects the rise of new citizenship (Damm and Thomas, Chinese Cyberspaces; Yu, "From Active Audience to Media Citizenship"; Lagerkvist, The Internet in China; Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*).

[351] Yu, "From Active Audience to Media Citizenship," 304.

[352] <www.weibo.com> accessed on Mar. 2, 2011.

video-sharing websites, such as *tudou.com, youku.com, ku6.com, 56.com,*[353] have become a powerful platform for sharing video information and self-made amateur videos, or home videos. In fact, the slogan of tudou.com, 'Everyone is the director of life',[354] explicitly promotes the idea of individual determination of one's own life. Furthermore, new TV programmes, such as the popular reality TV singing talent show *Supergirl* (chaoji nüsheng, 超级女生)[355] and other similar shows - including 'China's Got Talent'[356] - have created a platform for individuals to perform their talent and express themselves. Through examining *Supergirl*, Michael Keane suggests Chinese citizenship is changing. "In this popularity contest adjudicated by viewers, the individual self emerged — at least for some international media and Chinese pundits — as an emblem of China's integration within the global economy. The right to express uniqueness, to perform, and to engage in pastiche triumphed over regimented conformity."[357]

Among the different ways of self-expression, making documentary films with a DV camera has been practised by a large number of individuals. While the three women filmmakers discussed in the last chapter could be regarded as the pioneers of DV filmmaking in China, the number of people participating in the DV filming practice has increased significantly during the 2000s. The deregulation and elimination of entrance barriers in film production have allowed individuals to produce independent films by themselves. DV has granted individuals more flexibility and choices to choose their own subjects and visions.

The emergence of independent film festivals has further accelerated independent amateur DV filmmaking. The Yunnan Multi Culture Biannual Visual Festival (Yunfest) was founded in 2003, establishing itself as one of the key places for independent and

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[353] Among the films discussed in this thesis, Ai Weiwei's film *Laomatihua* can be these video sharing sites. But not the others.

[354] www.tudou.com, accessed in Mar. 2, 2011.

[355] This TV show was produced by Hunan Satellite TV in Hunan province, southern China, and broadcast nationally from 2004 and 2006. However, it was banned in 2006 as it was criticised by official ideological officers as too vulgar and poisoning young people's minds.

[356] The Chinese version of 'Britain's Got Talent'.

[357] Keane, "Chinese citizenship and globalization," 43.

amateur documentary screenings and filmmakers' gathering. Following Yunfest, the Chinese Independent Film Festival was founded in Nanjing in 2005, and the China Documentary Film Festival was established in 2007. In addition, independent screenings in various settings, such as universities, bars and film clubs have become visible in different cities. These viewing places have injected public space with "critical public discourses",[358] which has further encouraged independent filmmaking.

In addition to the development of independent *minjian* (non-governmental) amateur film communities, there are also DV film competitions organised by the official institutions. In some state-owned provincial or local TV stations, DV amateur films have even become a source of new materials.[359] The attention to DV content paid for by state-owned TV stations has made DV less of a sensitive medium, but more one with features of mainstream and mass participation.

While DV provides people with a means for self-expression, the independent film festivals and mainstream TV programmes have offered them opportunities to screen their films and communicate with a larger audience. It is in this social, economic, cultural and technological context that more amateur filmmakers have emerged from many diverse backgrounds. Some can be considered as semi-amateur, as they have not necessarily studied film professionally, but have some related experience in media, arts or TV productions.[360] The others come from very different fields.

Among the three filmmakers discussed in this chapter, Shu Haolun and Yang Pingdao are amateur-turned-professional filmmakers. In my interview, Shu Haolun describes himself as a banker-turned-filmmaker. He studied automation instrumentation at university, and was working in an investment bank before he went to the USA to study film in 1998. Then he made a documentary with a DV camera, and *Nostalgia* is his second documentary.[361] Yang Pingdao states that he majored in Business English and was working in the management team in a factory in Guangdong before he pursued

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[358] Nakajima, "Watching Documentary," 134.

[359] Leng, "DV Jilupian de Xinshang yu Chuangzuo."

[360] Lu, "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement," 34.

[361] Author's interview, 2010.

further study in theatre and directing in Beijing in 2006.[362] Hu Xinyu, on the other hand, has no background in film at all. He tells me that while he was working as a music teacher in a provincial college, he was introduced to the field of filmmaking as an actor in Jia Zhangke's film *Unknown Pleasures* (2002). Working with a small crew and filmed on video, he realised that filmmaking does not require high level qualifications; therefore he bought a DV camera and started making amateur films.[363]

It is interesting to know that many of these amateur independent filmmakers have positions in state-owned sectors, which is also the case with these three filmmakers. Both Shu Haolun and Yang Pingdao left their previous jobs to study filmmaking. After making their first publicly recognised films, *Nostalgia* and *My Family Tree*, respectively, they have then either pursued a job in the state-owned sector or been involved in mainstream commercial projects. Shu works as a lecturer at Shanghai University after graduating from a film school in the USA. In this case, he has time to make films and experiment with more ideas in the university environment. Yang has done some freelance work for state-owned TV stations or private production companies, while at the same time trying to make his own films. As for Hu, though he has kept making films since he started in 2001, he has never quit his teaching job in a state-owned college. To some extent, this indicates that individuals still tend to work within the state-owned sector to secure a stable income, even though they have acquired more freedom to pursue a life according to their own will. DV filmmaking has offered them a channel to manifest what they are not allowed to express in the mainstream governmental or commercial institutions. This position of working both in and outside the mainstream system also makes their selves more complicated.

I argue that the increasing number of amateur or semi-amateur DV filmmakers do not just consider themselves as individuals representing their personal viewpoint, but also as public citizens with strong social responsibility, rather than socialist workers in the previous Mao era. Focusing on marginalised people and social spaces, they are eager to show critical views on the society and form an opinion from their own individual perspectives. Unlike the early independent filmmakers who primarily made new

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[362] Ibid.

[363] Ibid.

documentaries to resist authority,[364] many non-professional filmmakers put more focus on the personal aspects of people's lives. DV has been regarded as an intimate and personal tool for documentation, "a format historically joined to the private and the domestic".[365] The individual amateur and semi-amateur DV filmmakers enter the private space of their subjects with a small DV camera, exploring the very individual experiences of living in China's transitional period. For example, holding a Ph.D. in economics from a Japanese University, female filmmaker Feng Yan has documented for almost ten years the life of a housewife Bing Ai, whose family has been affected by the Three Gorges Project. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in some cases, while individual filmmakers try to make their own statement through filming others, they often overlook the ethical aspects of the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject. I will further discuss the ethics of individual filmmaking in the next chapter, the Public Self.

While the majority of individual filmmakers focus on the lives of others, a small number of filmmakers, following the three women in the early 2000s, also turn the camera inwards to film themselves. These include the three filmmakers discussed in this chapter, Hu Xinyu, Shu Haolun, and Yang Pingdao, whose films focus on the self in the changing familial space. And three filmmakers analysed in the next chapter: Wu Haohao, Xue Jianqiang, and Ai Weiwei, whose films explore their self in public spaces. In addition, the villager filmmakers, and filmmakers like Wu Wenguang, Li Ning, and Zhang Mengqi also use the small DV camera to explore their own selves in great intimacy. However, as I mentioned in the methodology chapter (Chapter Two), the films made by amateur villager filmmakers cannot just be conceptualised through the notion of individual self – a focal point of this thesis. In fact, their films significantly explore the makers' social identity as subaltern individuals. With a rich supply of videos and written archival materials, the amateur villager films deserve more complicated studies and cannot be explored just in one chapter. Therefore, I decided to take this group of films out of this thesis and explore it later. In addition, the first person films made by Wu Wenguang, Li Ning, and Zhang Mengqi were finished after 2010, whereas this thesis is primarily focused on films made from 2000 to 2009.

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[364] Lu, "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement," 34.

[365] Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 203.

An important feature of Chinese first person films made in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as I mentioned in the methodology chapter, is their documentation of 'now', or a recent past, without much time and spatial distance. The selves are on the spot, *xianchang,* recording the 'now' as it is happening. It is also this feature that dominates the Chinese first person films video diaries, documenting the 'now' and the 'now' of the filmmaking process. This is especially evident in these three first person films on the familial self.

Compared with the early Western first person family documentaries, such as Jonas Mekas's *Lost Lost Lost* (178 min, 1976), which is constructed from amateur 16mm footage collected over a long historical period in the past, these films do not look *back* at history, but are intentionally looking at the reality "as it is happening now". These three filmmakers do not just aim to rediscover a past, to excavate a different historical narrative, or to "reviv(e) and resuscitat(e) that which has been lost",[366] as the three women did in *Nightingale, Not the Only Voice*; *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple* or *Home Video*. Instead, they are purposely recording a personal version of their family in the stage of 'now', keeping evidence of the personal lives of individuals who are forced to be silent by the official version of 'now'. Even after the completion of their films, they still keep on recording the changes of their familial lives and their community.[367] By doing so, they are purposely standing in the position of ongoing documentation of their family histories.

Consciously observing the changing position of their families, these documenters take a dual role as both a family insider and outsider. On the one hand, they are involved in the family relations and conflicts. On the other hand, they are consciously standing back as an 'outsider', an individual filmmaker who is purposely filming, editing and screening the films, expressing themselves in a voice that they are not allowed to in the mainstream social and political environment in which they live. This dual position gives them an opportunity to constantly examine in intimate detail the inner changes of their family-home and how their selves fit within the familial space. By doing so, they are

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[366] Ishizuka and Zimmermann, *Mining the Home Movie*, 132.

[367] Author's interview with Shu, Yang and Hu, 2010.

also participate in a 'communicative practice' with their family like the three female filmmakers. In addition, the dual identity also enables them to stand back and look at the relationships of the family with the wider social sphere, and the state. In fact, they document with a strong sense of social responsibility, in an attempt to understand how individuals' lives have changed in a crucial traditional collective institution, the family-home, in a fast-transforming modern society. It is in this sense that their filmmaking practice is a significant social practice.

Their films illustrate the individual self as multi-layered and conflicted, in a similar way to the female filmmakers. Also like the female filmmakers, the three male filmmakers also explore the collective and relational sense of self, as well as the parental authority. They do not present their selves in the centre of the family, but as a relational character of a collective family. Hu Xinyu's long term observation in *Family Phobia* shows that traditional family relations, that highlight the power and authority of the father and the old, have constrained the individual from developing his or her own will to some extent. However, given the growing tension between the individual and the changing social conditions, the family is still the place where individuals can find security and identity. For Yang Pingdao, the making of *My Family Tree* is a personal journey of going back. Yang's first person subjective view shows that it is not the family conflicts but the physical distances between family members that indicate the structural change of the family. The family ancestor's house, *zuwu*, in the small village representing the family collective roots is inevitably declining as the younger generations are migrating to the industrial town and cities, and forming their own nuclearised homes. However, the big family clan still works as an 'imagined society' that emotionally links all the family members together. For Shu Haolun, making the film was an impulsive decision. Afraid of losing the old house where he was born and spent his childhood and adolescence, Shu revisits the old community, nostalgic about a vanishing communal life style which has constructed his sense of self. In this sense, all these filmmakers' first person filmmaking practice is not just for family communication, but also a significant social practice, as they have provided valuable materials in understanding the changing sense of self among individuals who face the transition of familial space in the context of rapid urbanisation.

I. The family space in transition

In this section, I examine how the three filmmakers present the changes in their original familial space, 'laojia' (old home, 老家). The notion of 'laojia' indicates a strong sense of roots and collectiveness that links all family members together as a collective whole. The existence of 'laojia' signifies the continuity of a family clan. I observe that the three filmmakers' laojia is presented through the first person camera eyes, as being disrupted and reshaped by the fast-path urbanisation that has accelerated since the new millennium, which indicates the decline of laojia.

Family Phobia does not present the physical changes of his familial space. In fact, the family space he observes has not been changed through the years. It is the external spatial changes and the changes of individuals' values that make the unchangeable familial space seem inappropriate. The title Family Phobia immediately suggests the first person filmmaker, Hu Xinyu's, extreme fear of the family. The familial space Hu intensively filmed is the sixty square-metre flat of his eighty-year-old parents, located in an old-fashioned state-subsidised apartment building area. This kind of residential area is usually called jiashu yuan (family dependents courtyard, 家属院), where the staff members of state-owned work units used to live before the modern apartments of commercial real estate took over the cityscape. The hallway and stairways in the former socialist apartment buildings are presented as being very dark and dirty, with cheap advertisements messily pasted on the walls, a mark of the decline of socialist collectivism.

On the one hand, as I discussed in Chapter Three, the state-forced decollectivisation has largely encouraged the social mobility of individuals, and liberated them from some previous social institutions, such as state-subsidised work units, which have been gradually transformed into more commercialised companies. accomanied this is the gradual privatisation of China's housing market in the 1990s.[368] Through the cityscape the film shows the demolition of the old and the construction of new commercial and residential space. On the other hand, the socialist state-subsidised apartment buildings

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[368] Fong, *Only Hope*, 128.

are not totally destroyed. Hu's parents have been living in this small flat for a long time and have not changed during the seven years of Hu's filming. Hu observes the generational conflicts of his family in this space that is closely identified with the former socialist period and the transition from a planned to a market economy.

FIGURE 5.1. The view through the window of Hu's parents' flat in *Family Phobia* (2009).

FIGURE 5.2. The family are watching TV together in the living room in *Family Phobia* (2009).

During the Chinese New Year period when Hu films most intensively, the small flat is full of family members of three generations, twelve people in total. There is not much

space of one's own. As the second and third generation family members are growing up in the changing society, they have different views on individual and family and nation as collectives. Hence, the change of Hu's familial space is reflected through the tension among different generations, which I will further explore in the next section. It is the old socialist familial space that is no longer appropriate for the family members, who are themselves changing in the transforming society.

Nostalgia is a first person memoir by Shu Haolun of a vanishing lifestyle of his childhood in a '*shikumen*' (literarily means 'stone gate', 石库门) style residential area called '*Dazhongli*' (大中里). '*Shikumen*' buildings specially refer to the carved-stone pillars and archways that adorn these houses, a kind of tenement building constructed in the colonial era from the 1920s to the 1940s in Shanghai. Like many other local '*shikumen*' places, '*Dazhongli*' was facing demolition under Shanghai's new urban plan when the film was made in 2006. Homes of many generations of local residents would be redeveloped into modern bars and a shopping district, and skyscrapers like the famous Shanghai *xintiandi* (new heaven earth, 新天地), a commercial district consumed by tourists as well as the newly-emerged rich and middle-class Shanghainese. The film was shot during Shu's holiday back in China, while he was studying filmmaking in the USA. Being afraid that the old home would have disappeared next time he came back, he immediately picked up a camera and revisited the place.

In the film, Shu's first person voice-over reveals that he and his parents have moved out of this community since he went to university in the 1990s. For him, the filmmaking is a return and being reconnected to the old familial space and his community. He revisits his grandmother who still lives there and introduces to the audience the history of how his grandparents first moved to here in the 1930s from a nearby village. For most families in this community, it is the old generation like Shu's grandmother who still live here. Although the second and the third generation have moved out, the old house still represents the familial centre that binds the whole family together.

In my interview with Shu, he states that "Since the film was made, the area has been demolished. Families in this community have been forced to move out, and have been relocated to several marginal places in suburban Shanghai …The urbanisation has a

huge impact on family. In Chinese tradition, no matter in the cities or the rural area, there is a concept of '*laojia*', usually the place where the grandparents live. *Dazhongli* was the '*laojia*' to many families. The demolition of this area has in fact destroyed the '*laojia*' concept for the local residents."[369]

In Shu's opinion, despite new families having been created, the demolition of the old familial spaces indicates a break of a traditional sense of self that has been constructed through the notion of *laojia*. In addition, for the local residents, the demolition of old houses not only means the loss of a family centre and an old life ecology with which they have been familiar, but also means the loss of benefits and the convenience of living in the city centre of Shanghai. After the demolition, many households have been relocated to the suburbs of the city, which also means the loss of privileges that local Shanghai residents used to have.

Yang Pingdao's first person film *My Family Tree* is also a return visit to the old familial space that he left at a young age, to study and then to work. While Shu records the vanishing lifestyle in the transforming cosmopolitan Shanghai, Yang presents us with how his big family in a small village in Guangzhou province in southeast China is going through the nuclearisation process, in the national wave of rural-to-urban migration. The family has now spread out in different cities and towns in and outside China. From the end of 2007 to the spring of 2008, Yang visits more than twenty family members of four generations living in different places.

As the phrase 'Family Tree' in the title suggests, it covers a *jia zu* (family clan, 家族) as a much bigger collective whole, with a history of where it comes from, its tradition and its transformation. The film, 4 hours and 38 minutes long, tells the history and current situation of the family in seven parts, linked together through Yang's personal journey. This includes: 1. The old family house; 2. My grandpa and grandma; 3. My uncles and aunts; 4. Far away from hometown; 5. Go back for the spring festival; 6. My father's 'last-home'; 7. My brother gets married. The filming process for Yang is a journey of going back to 'his people', from the 'outside' where he has experienced several years' education and has just started a career, as a migrant young individual.

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[369] Author's interview, 2010.

The three filmmakers document the transformation of their familial space on the stage of 'now'. Hu Xinyu presents how the change of individual family members' values has made the unchangeable familial space inappropriate. Shu Haolun records the last moment before the demolition of his old family house and community in urban Shanghai. Yang Pingdao pays a revisit to his old home in a small village and captures some snapshots during the ongoing nuclearisation process of his big family.

II.   The self in between the insider and the outsider

As documenters of their own family space, the three filmmakers take a dual position, as both an insider within their complex family relations, and as an individual filmmaker with his own social position. Hence, I argue that the three filmmakers' visions of their own families are no longer the pure insider's 'look', but the inward 'gaze' of a relatively autonomous individual who plays other social roles in the society. Playing the dual role, these three filmmakers use different techniques to inscribe their selves as the *seer*, the *seen*, and the *speaker*.

In *Family Phobia*, Hu presents himself primarily as the '*seer*', the origin of the gaze, but also as the '*seen*'. Most of the time, the camera 'eye' and the 'I' quietly observe the family through the approach of cinema verité. This third person perspective makes Hu an 'outsider' with respect to the family, consciously documenting the triviality of familial lives, but within an extreme proximity. Sometimes the camera eye stays in a corner and observes what happens through long shot, sometimes it moves around with the characters through point-of-view shots. In some sequences, Hu's extremely close view of his own family puts the viewer in a position of peeping into his family privacy. After the opening sequence with the sound of a morning radio programme, the film starts with a long shot in the bedroom, facing the bed. Hu's father is standing by the bed in the middle of the frame, trying to wake up his grandson, who is still sleeping when it is already eight o'clock (fig. 5.3). This is followed by a sequence of shots observing Hu's old parents' daily lives in the small flat, such as a long shot showing the father sitting on a stool while the mother is cutting his hair (fig. 5.4), and close-ups of the

mother administering eye-drops to the father who is lying on the bed. In the first half of the film, before Hu's brother returns home from the USA, most shots are filmed in the interior familial space, or the residential area where the flat is located.

FIGURE 5.3. The grandfather is waking up the grandson Chaochao in the first shot of the film of *Family Phobia* (2009).

FIGURE 5.4. Hu's mother is cutting hair for his father in their small flat in *Family Phobia* (2009).

However, it is precisely his identity as an 'insider', the youngest son in the family, that gives him the proximity to film some very intimate and emotional moments of his family's life without any hint of rejection or intentional performance. His family members do not really care about being filmed, though they do not really know why Hu films. In a sequence when Hu follows the father across the street, the father shouts at him: "Watch cars! What's the use in recording this!" The family members take playing with DV as Hu's hobby, even a 'useless' hobby that cannot get him more money or a

wife,[370] the only two things the family cares most about for Hu. It is also in those moments that Hu exposes himself as the filmmaker.

Hu combines techniques of direct cinema with participant observation, inscribing himself as the *seen*, but also using his off-screen voice. Hu's camera is not a pure 'outsider's' look which pretends he is not there. In fact, he himself gets involved in the family conversations and arguments. We can hear his voice coming from behind the camera talking with the family members, for example, when the brother talks to him about employment, and when the mother talks to him about his own marriage. In addition, he also presents himself directly on camera as a *seen*. As I mentioned in the methodology chapter, when the self is seen through a camera eye, it can be seen as from the view of a third person, the audience, but also as the view from the other self, the public self of the filmmaker, who is quietly observing his or her own 'familial' self. In some scenes, when Hu's family is having dinner together, Hu puts the camera on a tripod in a corner of the family space, presenting himself together with other family members having dinner around a round table. This demonstrates that he is also part of the familial collective. But throughout the film, Hu does not reveal much of the other side of his self as an individual with a social role.

In *My Family Tree*, Yang presents himself as split between being a member of a big family, and a migrant individual who is trying to make a living in China's neo-liberal period. Yang is no longer a pure insider of his village, but is split between the urban and the rural. Having left home at a young age, Yang regards himself as a '*nong erdai*' (second generation peasant, 农二代). This refers to the young Chinese who were born in a peasant family in rural China and migrated to urban cities, as the state has lost control over the rural population in the last two decades. However, though these young generation individuals live in the city, their '*hukou*' (the resident registration, 户口) is still bound with their hometown. Hence, they cannot be legally regarded as urban citizens, but only '*zanzhu renkou*' (temporary residents, 暂住人口). As for Yang, he was born in the small village in Guangzhou province and moved to the nearest town for primary school education. Later he went to the city nearby for secondary schooling. Then he went to university in the capital of the province and also worked there for a few

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[370] ibid.

years. Later he went to Beijing, the capital of the country, to studying filmmaking.

The film was made during Yang's final year as a film student in Beijing. Having experienced youth in the fast-changing society and seeing individuals from different parts of the country who are trying to survive in the neo-liberal market, Yang constantly reflects on his own experience as a '*nong erdai*'. In my interview with him, Yang reveals that his intention is to use his extended family as an example to mirror China's urbanisation at large. "In my life so far, I have been constantly moving, from the rural toward the urban. Living independently outside home, I have been thinking about many issues related to the rural and its urbanisation. And I also constantly think about what my big family has been going through. Some family members have migrated to Hong Kong, some even go to the States. At the time it was 2007 and 2008 and the government was paying increasing attention to the rural area. I want to make a critique on it through my own family."[371] Therefore, Yang records his family, not just to understand the relationship between himself and his family, but also the relationship between his family and the nationwide urbanisation.

In the film, Yang's dual position is constructed through his constantly shifting in between public space and private familial space. His self as a young migrant individual is established in the very beginning of the film. The opening sequence begins with four long shots of Beijing train station in the late evening, describing a public space full of city traffic and restless migrant people. The music starts. Then it cuts to a point-of-view shot of Yang walking up an escalator, with people passing by on both sides. Yang's camera captures these people with emotionless faces, carrying luggage and busy going back home, or to their next destinations (fig. 5.5). The subtitle written over the image speaks as Yang's first person narration: "*My brother just has a daughter born in the mid-night, but neither my mother, brother, nor myself is at home. And the father was died eight years ago* [sic]."[372] While the view of the public space is full of strange individuals travelling around, the subtitle speaks of the personal familial issues from Yang's first person view. This is similar to Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (85 minutes, 1976), in which voice of Akerman reading her mother's personal letters to him

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[371] ibid.

[372] The English translation is from subtitles of the film.

is running over the images of public spaces in 1970s New York. The two elements, moving image and the subtitles in *My Family Tree,* split Yang into two selves. While one self is connected to the transforming Chinese urban landscape that is increasingly occupied by migrants, the other is connected to the home, where Yang comes from, and is going to.

FIGURE 5.5. The point-of-view shot of Yang walking among other individual strangers in *My Family Tree* (2008)).

Then it cuts to Yang's point-of-view shot through the window of the train: the moving landscape, the mountains and rivers, the industrial towns and remote villages. The train takes Yang back to his village where his family '*zu wu*' (the ancestor's house, 祖屋) is located. Following the opening sequence, a panning shot from top to bottom presents piles of ancestors' monuments on a table (fig. 5.6). The title '*jia pu*' (my family tree, 家谱) appears. The monuments fade into old family photos, in which rows of family members standing together facing the camera (fig. 5.7). In the photo, Yang is a young boy standing among them.

FIGURE 5.6   FIGURE 5.7

FIG 5.6 - 5.7 The ancestors' monuments(fig 5.6) is followed by a family photo (fig. 5.7).

Then on a black screen is written: part I - the ancestor's house. A voice of an old man appears, talking about the family history in the local Hakka dialect. The black screen fades into a couple of long shots of a newly constructed highway, reaching the small village. While the voice still goes on, it cuts to a medium shot in which we see the face of the old man, who is sitting in the living room of an old house near a TV, talking to the camera (fig. 5.8). In a thirteen-minute conversation, Yang's grandfather gives an oral history of how their ancestor arrived here 300 years ago to develop this place and establish this village as their family. The stories of different generations are vividly revealed, up until the grandfather's generation. Yang puts the camera at the level of his chest, so the old man can look at his eyes, rather than directly at the camera. Sitting behind the camera, Yang, as a younger generation member of the family, is receiving the knowledge of the family ancestors from the old, so the story of the family clan can be passed on. This shot establishes the film as a personal journey of Yang going back to his roots.

FIGURE 5.8. Yang's grandfather is revealing the family history in *My Family Tree* (2008).

In addition to his grandfather, Yang also talks to several other family members living in this or nearby villages. This makes up the first three parts of the film. His camera enters their familial space, observing their common daily lives happening on the stage of 'now'. The old houses in the village all seem very dark and in a state of decline.

Outside these familial interior spaces, the village in Yang's eyes is almost empty. While the traditional houses still occupy the scenery, there are not many people in the village. Yang only captures a few villagers passing by and greeting Yang in their local dialect. This casual conversation between Yang and the villagers indicates his position as part of them (fig. 5.9). Though he is observing the village consciously, as someone who returns from the outside, for the villagers he is still someone of the village. While the familial space and the village landscape seems unfamiliar to him, he is still linked to this place through familial relations.

FIGURE 5.9. People in the village pass by and talk to Yang in *My Family Tree* (2008).

After visiting his home village, Yang leaves again to visit his family members who have moved to other places. Taking buses, trains and boats, Yang is travelling to different places in China, from neighbouring towns, to nearby cities Shaoguan, Jiangmen, and Guangzhou, even to Hong Kong, and Chongqing in southwest China. The public spaces observed through Yang's camera are full of moving migrants. The sound of traffic, construction and pop music make the public spaces restless, dehumanised,, where endless economic development is taking place.

In the beginning of this section, the screen goes dark again, the sound of traffic appears and the subtitle writes part four "Far away from home". Then it fades into a long shot filmed through the front window of a bus, showing a highway in the early morning. Yang is on the road again, traveling and drifting around the wide social public spaces, as a migrant individual, the one we knew in the beginning. The bus passes through different places. In a small town, it stops as a group of migrant workers wearing uniforms try to get on. Shot through the window, we cannot hear those people talking. The road trip gradually fades into an establishing shot of a huge bridge over a river. The camera zooms out and slowly pans around, showing a busy city at a river. The subtitle says it is the city Yang Chun. Then it cuts to an interior shot of a family eating together. This is where Yang's mother lives.

After twenty minutes' observation of familial lives in this place, Yang leaves again.

Taking a train, Yang follows a family relative to Chongqing. Yang's handheld camera captures the close-ups of migrant porters/labour workers waiting for customers, moving cruises on the Yangtze River, Chinese flags on the sail, and bridges. The off-screen music is a popular song. Then it cuts to a middle-aged man, an entertainer, who is singing loudly with a microphone in a public space at night. This is followed by point-of-view shots as Yang walks through the crowd outside the train station of Chongqing. After an interview shot with this family relative, the camera cuts back again to another train station, Shaoguan. A couple of shots observe migrant workers sitting on the floor by themselves, or with a group, waiting for their trips with emotionless faces (figs. 5.10, 5.11). The lack of human voices indicates the lack of communication by individuals in these public spaces.
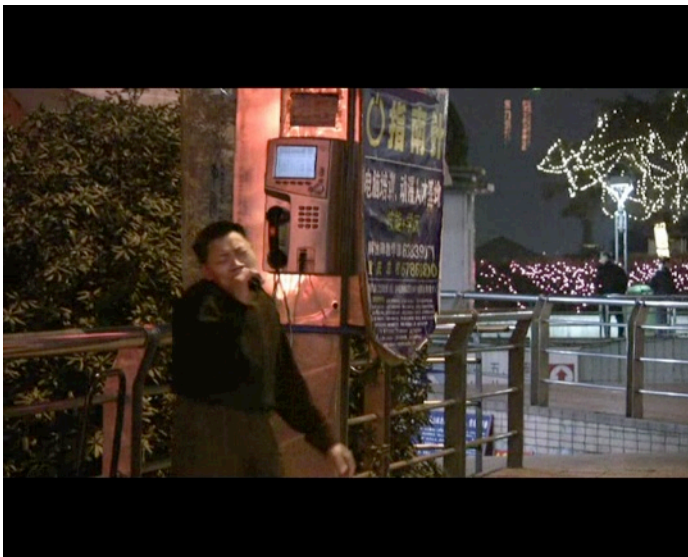
FIGURES 5.10, 5.11. The migrant individuals captured by Yang's personal camera in *My Family Tree* (2008).

These public spaces are presented in high contrast with Yang's familial spaces that provide security and care for individuals. Yang's journey shows how small families are spreading out in the vast expanding urban net, as separated growing cells, developing individuals' own families. In the neo-liberal era, family seems to be the only place where individuals can find security and social care.

In *Nostalgia,* Shu Haolun's dual self is inscribed as many layered, constructed through two cameras. One camera is held by a third person professional cameraman, following Shu around. Through this camera, Shu's self is presented as the *seen*, who engages closely with the local residents, or directly talks to the camera as a presenter. The other camera is held by Shu himself, presenting him as the *seer*, a first person participant-observer of his own people in the community. Shot from Shu's first person subjective view, we see Shu's grandmother and neighbours directly talking to the camera, in fact to Shu, making Shu a relational individual inside the community. Shu's identity as someone who grew up there makes the local residents less sensitive to his camera, as he is part of 'them'.

In addition, there are three voices of Shu. The first voice is his first person narration recorded in post-production, presenting him as a rights-conscious individual with strong social responsibility. This voice-over reflexively narrates his childhood memories, comments on the issues which occurred during his filmmaking, and expresses his critical view on "the pervasive worship of modernization and profit-seeking".[373] The second voice presents him as being in between the local and the outside worlds. This is when he directly talks to the camera as a *seen* – a presenter, filmed by a third person camera. At this moment, he is highly aware of the audience, introducing the audience to his childhood places and stories. At these moments, the self is no longer a pure insider, but a middleman, connecting the local to the outside world. The third voice is when Shu talks behind the camera to his own community in Shanghai dialect. This voice makes him an insider who still has family relatives and old neighbours living there.

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[373] Berry and Rofel, "Alternative Archive," 140.

The film begins with Shu's voice over a dark screen, with English subtitles written in the middle of the frame, stating that "*My grandmother called me one day saying that our old house in Dazhongli would be demolished soon*".[374] While Shu speaks, the camera pans over a local newspaper showing the news, then it fades into a long shot overlooking this *shikumen* area - a large block of old houses. Hu continues to speak "*Although demolishment* [sic] *in my city Shanghai is very common, I cannot feel common anymore at that moment, because our old house is in Dazhongli. It hits home, our old house.*" (fig. 5.12). Then the camera tilts up very slowly, revealing that the old community has now been surrounded by the tall modern skyscrapers. He continues speaking "*Now what I could do is that I take my camera to Dazhongli, which hasn't became* [sic] *skyscraper yet. I want to 'write' my nostalgia through lens.*" (fig. 5.13.) Then the title '*xiangchou*' (Nostalgia, 乡愁) appears.

FIGURE 5.12. Shu's old house in Da Zhongli 'Shikumen' style residential area in *Nostalgia* (2006).

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[374] The English translation of the dialogues in *Nostalgia* is from subtitles.

FIGURE 5.13. The old houses are shown surrounded by skyscrapers in *Nostalgia* (2006).

This opening sequence establishes the film with a critical view, and a very personal tone, through Shu's first person experience. Shu starts with a position as an individual coming from the outside, revisiting his old family house and the neighbouring community. Shu's initiative to make this film is because the demolition will hit his home. The government project to turn this residential area in central Shanghai into a modern commercial area, with huge economic profits, however hits Shu's individual interests, in fact his family's interests.

Then it cuts to a medium shot of an old lady (later known to be Shu's grandmother) holding a piece of paper. Shu's voice speaking Shanghai dialect comes from behind the camera, asking the old lady where the paper comes from. Then it cuts to a long shot taken from the third-person camera, presenting Shu's and the old lady's positions. As we see, Shu is standing at the end of the room, holding a camera facing the old lady, and saying that '*I finish (adjusting white balance)'*. Then it cuts to another long shot, in which Shu is talking to his grandmother at the table (fig. 5.14). The voice-over appears again, stating how and when his grandparents first arrived in Shanghai and settled down in this old house in the 1930s. Then it cuts to Shu's subjective handheld shot of his grandmother sitting in front of the camera, speaking in Shanghai dialect. It cuts back to a medium shot which shows Shu interviewing the grandmother, with a camera in his hand. While the conversation goes on, it cuts to old family albums of the grandparents in the 1930s, and then intercuts with Shu's point-of-view shot of the grandmother. Shu's

subjective camera eye observes his grandmother's daily life, such as preparing food, eating and playing mahjong with the neighbours. Throughout the film, the two camera views, the one held by a third person and the one held by Shu, are intercut. Shu sometimes speaks to people in the community as an insider, and sometimes speaks to the third person camera as a mediator/presenter. In addition, Shu's first person voice-over tells of his old memories and comments on the current lack of economic development.

FIGURE 5.14. Shu is interviewing his grandmother in *Nostalgia* (2006).

The three filmmakers sit in between the identities of both the insider and the outsider of their own families. Both Hu Xinyu and Yang Pingdao most of the time present themselves as a 'seer', a conscious observer of their own families. But Yang starts from a position of coming from the outside, going back, while Hu starts from the inside of the family space, like a 'fly' observing his family at extremely close range. In addition, Yang uses subtitles to 'speak' his inner feelings as a first person voice, while Hu only speaks a few times from behind the camera or when he is on camera a couple of times. On the other hand, Shu Haolun presents himself as many layered, as the seer, the seen, and the speaker, which are associated with his different identities as the outsider, the insider and the mediator.

III.　Self, Family and the State

Through observing how the three filmmakers illustrate the transition of their familial space through a dual self, as both the insider and the outsider of their families, I notice that they do not just focus on their own selves. Like the three female filmmakers, they focus on the changing relationships between the family and the individual self, and between the family and the state. In this section, I look in close detail at how the three films present the interchanges of their family relations, and how the relationship between the family, as a traditional collective institution, and the modern state has changed in the ongoing urbanisation. I will especially focus on *Family Phobia*, as the film examines both interfamilial relations and the relationship between the family and the state in great detail.

Family Phobia

In *Family Phobia,* Hu observes the family conflicts among individuals of three generations who hold different values, as well as his family members' complaints about current society, and the state. This reflects that on the one hand, though the individualising society is giving individuals more autonomy to develop their selves, the traditional familial ethical relations that highlight the old and the male however still seem to constrain the younger individuals. On the other hand, while the state has retreated from social public life, it has also withdrawn protection for the individuals; therefore, individuals still turn to the family for security and connections, and keep up some traditional family practices to maintain their roots.

1. Generational conflicts

Hu films most during the New Year period, when most family members come back to the small flat from their own homes or from work. The physicality of the small two-room flat in the state-built courtyard complex has largely enhanced the relational aspect of individuals. In terms of the interior space, the dining area is in the middle connecting to the main door, and there are a living room, two bedrooms, the bathroom and the kitchen. In some scenes, the camera eye in a corner captures the family members surrounding the 'grandparents' and watching the New Year Gala on the TV in the living

room, or films them having dinner together at a round table. However, there is not much space of one's own. The camera moves around in the small familial space, showing that everyone is tightly connected to each other, sharing the same space while doing different things. This also causes family tensions, especially among three different generations who hold different views. In addition, in the small family space, even Hu's first person camera eye seems inappropriate, too close to the subjects, putting the viewer in a position of peeping into the privacy of his family.

The tensions between the three generations illustrated in *Family Phobia* are not a rare case. In fact, it reflects an important feature of individual relationships in contemporary China as I discussed in Chapter Three, which is a generational gap caused by the co-existence of different moralities. In other words, it is the existence of a mixture of different generations with distinctive social ethical values, caused by varying and sometimes contradictory social-political structures that emerged at different points throughout twentieth-century China. It has indeed made inter-individual communication difficult.

In this film, the eldest generation, grandparents, are Hu's parents. The second generation family members are Hu and his brother and sisters, born between the late 1950s and early 1970s. The youngest generation is Hu's nephew and niece, who were born in the late 1980s and 1990s. The conflicts centre on daily family lives, from '*yi shi zhu xing*' (clothing, food, accomodation, and transport, 衣食住行), education, career, and marriage, through to international relations. These concerns internally reflect different perceptions of an individual's autonomy and family and nation as collectives, and externally reflect the change of social structures and ideologies.

It is interesting to note, as the eldest generation, the retired grandfather, Hu's father is seen as the authority of the family, who intervenes in nearly every family issue. He firmly holds the family together as a collective whole, insisting that one should study and modernise oneself in order to make a contribution to the nation. His voice is the first one heard in the film. This is when he stands by the bed asking the grandson Chaochao to wake up and recite English. In fact, this voice is also the one heard most throughout the film. In contrast, we hardly hear the youngest generation speaking,

though many conflicts are raised by their 'improper' behaviour. This youngest generation lives in a time when China's economy has started to grow and has experienced a much richer material life. The general ideology has changed from the socialist collectivism to the so-called hedonism of a market economy.[375]

<u>The grandfather and the grandson</u>

One of the most important relationships observed by Hu's first person camera is the tension between the grandfather and the grandson. In the first half of the film, Chaochao and grandfather are the main characters. The daily life of the old couple is centred around Chaochao's study. In Hu's first person camera eye, the elder generation is seen to pay great attention to education, as in many other Chinese families. Traditionally, studying well and going to a good university is to *guangzong yaozu* (for the pride of the family, 光宗耀祖). Near the beginning of the film, the film cuts to a close-up shot of a note written by the grandfather, which reads: "*A well-educated person nowadays should know 'how to talk', 'how to walk' and 'how to write'. By talk, we mean that he can speak one or two foreign languages fluently. By walk, we mean that he can drive well. By write, we mean that he knows how to use a computer – Script from TV soap opera – Pretty Girls.*"[376] This illustrates well the grandfather's attention to modern education, which is also how he educates his children and grandchildren. However, Hu's personal eye also illustrates how the old use hierarchal power to force the young to follow their instructions. By this method, family members are not respected as independent individuals, but for their position in the family in relation to others, and for what they can bring to the family.

After the first sequence, the camera cuts to a shot looking outside at the residential yard through the window. The subtitle writes that it is 2002. Then it cuts to a panning shot revealing the grandfather and the grandson walking side by side in the residential yard towards the gate. As the two walk forward, the camera follows them from behind, recording their conversations. The grandson asks the grandfather to buy a computer book for him, but the grandfather says it is too early for him to specialise in computing

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[375] Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*.

[376] This English translation is from subtitles of the film.

and he should go to a good university first. Then it cuts to the interior where the grandson is reciting English to his private tutor. Following that is a long shot in the bedroom, where the grandson recites English to the grandfather at the desk. This series of shots demonstrates that the grandfather is supervising the grandson's study all the time. Then it cuts to a close-up of the grandson on the left edge of the frame, facing toward the right edge where the computer screen is (fig. 5.15). The subtitle reads "*Chaochao, my nephew, the son of my eldest sister*". This is the first time when Chaochao is by himself without any adults 'taking care' of him, and he is presented as highly obsessed by the computer.

FIGURE 5.15. Hu's nephew Chaochao is playing computer games in *Family Phobia* (2009).

FIGURE 5.16. The grandfather shouts at Chaochao, asking him to stop playing the computer in *Family Phobia* (2009).

Throughout the film, the computer, which offers entertainment and information, raises constant problems. It represents something more individual than the traditional medium of TV, which is usually watched by the family gathered together, indicating a reunion. In the older generation's view, the computer is not a good thing, as children could get addicted. In several scenes, the aged father/grandfather shouts at Chaochao, asking him not play on the computer, but to do his homework. In one scene, the grandfather stands with his back to the camera and faces the bedroom, where Chaochao sits in a corner at the computer desk (fig. 5.16). The grandfather shouts at him: stop playing the computer games. As Chaochao does not answer, the father walks into the bedroom, shouting: "*How much longer will you play? I'm asking you*". The camera traces him as he walks toward Chaochao, "*I will cut off the power!*" While Chaochao still says "One moment", the grandfather is so angry that he pushes the power switch off, and walks away. Then it cuts to the grandmother sitting in the kitchen preparing food and complaining "*He's about to sit for the high school exams and he just sits there playing.*"

Hu is not just observing this as an outsider without intervention. On the contrary, the camera, as an extension of his own eyes, searches for his nephew and tries to find him when he is not studying. The camera even enters the toilet, 'discovering' that Chaochao is hiding there reading other books. He also looks through the window on top of the door, and finds out that Chaochao locks the door and watches TV secretly in the living room. In these two shots, Hu speaks from behind the camera, commenting on Chaochao, while Chaochao feels embarrassed and tries to avoid the camera.

In fact, throughout the film, Chaochao seems very reluctant to work and does not talk much in front of the camera either. Lying on the bed, lazily reciting English, or sitting comfortably on the sofa, watching TV, Chaochao never studies of his own volition. He seems to be the least independent one in the family, always chased by the adults and forced to do something that he does not really want to.

The father and the son

As the authority figure of the family, the father also has conflicts with the second

generation, such as with Hu's elder brother, Hu's sisters and Hu himself. The conflicts usually take place at the round dining table, when the family are eating together. It is also the time when the adult family members have serious conversations. The table conversations are usually presented in long shots through the camera in the corner. At these moments, Hu does not sit behind the camera. He also presents himself as a '*seen*', sitting with them and joining in the discussion. The family continues their conversation as if the camera is not there.

In one conversation, the father queries the career choice of Hu's elder brother. After Hu's brother comes back from USA, the family is having a dinner together. Hu puts the camera in a corner showing that Hu's father and brother and Hu himself sit at the round dining table. The father is in the middle of the frame, while the two brothers sit on either side facing the father and with their backs to the camera (fig. 5.17). The off-screen ambient sound is *xinwen lianbo* (新闻联播), the national news broadcast on CCTV ONE[377] watched by families usually at dinnertime. The father says to Hu's brother that one should never flatter the boss to get a promotion. The brother does not agree, saying that "*You should not go against the flow.*" The father insists on his opinion and gets impatient. Then the brother says he needs to do it (sending some gift or even money to get promotion) for his career, as long as it is legal. He also asks Hu Xinyu whether he is right. At this moment, we know that it is Hu himself who sits at the table. In fact, it is the first time Hu presents himself on camera. But Hu does not talk much, making other family members the focus, rather than himself. The father comments that this is a very selfish attitude as one should think more about making a contribution to the state. Hu's brother replies that the goal is to contribute to the state, but if one is in a better and higher position, one can contribute more.

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[377] China Central Television, Channel One.

FIGURE 5.17. The father and the sons are having dinner together in *Family Phobia* (2009).

The father was born in the pre-socialist state and has lived through the anti-Japan war and the civil war. He also experienced the establishment of the socialist state and was influenced by the socialist collective ideology. His life experience as a 'new socialist man'[378] makes him think more of the nation and the collective than of the individual. Deleuze describes the individual in the former East Germany as 'dividual' in which "individuality is not effaced but completed by collectivity".[379] In China, this is also the experience of the father's generation. In contrast, the brother belongs to the generation which is deliberately 'forgetting' the collective experience. They had their childhood during the Cultural Revolution and had their youth in the 1980s reading 'scar literature', which was used in the post-Mao era, to "*interpellate* intellectuals into an imagined vision of economic reform designed to lead China into its deserved place as a nondependent, powerful nation in the world of nations".[380] Hence, it is easy to understand that the brother is looking for economic wealth. His generation has lived through China's transition from a planned economy into a market economy, and has experienced China's repositioning in the world as a growing economic giant.

However, it is interesting to note that when talking about the collective, the word used by both the first and second generations is '*guojia*' (the nation/state, 国家), rather than

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[378] Inkeles, Broaded and Cao, "Causes and Consequences of Individual Modernity in China".

[379] Quoted by Panse, "Collective Subjectivity", 80.

[380] Rofel, *Desiring China*, 49.

"*shehui*' (society, 社会). It indicates that the first and the second generations, who have experienced Mao's China, are more familiar with the relationship between the individual and the state, but not the relationship between the individual and the society, or among individuals as equal beings.

Another dining-table conversation, illustrating the clash of values between the first and the second generation, is the debate over the issues of Tibet and Taiwan, between the father and the third sister. This is also shown through the camera eye observing from a corner, almost the same camera position as the last one (fig. 5.18). In this scene, Hu's third sister says loudly that Tibet should be an independent state. While the father seems very angry and insists that Tibet is historically part of China, the sister holds her opinion even more strongly, stating in front of her father that her parent has been totally brainwashed by the Communist Party. Having lived outside this familial space and formed her own family with an American husband in the States, Hu's third sister does not follow the traditional codes of behaviour of a daughter and openly challenges the father. This conflict leads to a larger fight between the father and the daughter so that the father even refuses to recognise Hu's sister.

FIGURE 5.18. Hu's sister is discussing the Tibetan issue with the father in *Family Phobia* (2009).

Hu himself also gets involved in this conflict. It is the first time he explicitly expresses himself in the film. Towards the end of the film, a long shot shows that Hu and his sister are sitting side by side on the sofa in the living room, the voice of the father coming

from outside the frame, shouting at the sister. The fight is still going on. Hu says to his sister that "I have chosen not to fight with them for several years, just to be quiet". As the father still constantly shouts at them, Hu cannot stay quiet any more, he suddenly stands up and shouts at the father outside the frame: "*You are the Mao Zedong in this family!*" (fig. 5.19.) This is the moment that Hu first speaks out his own viewpoint as an individual in the film. The father, however, responds that "Today I carried 35 kg of stuff and you were just filming me!" This is the father's voice criticising Hu and Hu's filming. At this moment, standing in the centre of the frame, Hu also becomes the centre of the film. Not only him as a family member, but also his self as an individual. The argument between the father and Hu also draws attention to the ethical question of what to film, and how much should be filmed.

FIGURE 5.19. Hu stands up and shout at his father outside the frame in *Family Phobia* (2009).

The 'private issue' of the first person Hu

In addition, it is important to note that while the father/grandfather is concerned about the 'public' aspect of family issues, such as the education of the eldest grandson and the career of the eldest son, the mother/grandmother is more concerned with the personal issues of her children, especially Hu's marriage. Marriage stands for the continuity of family through giving birth. Berry and Farquhar have analysed how marriage and children stand for the continuity of a family in Ang Lee's first hit *Wedding Banquet,* in

which what the aged parents worry most about is also the marriage of their son.[381] In this film, Hu's situation of being nearly forty years old but still without a proper girlfriend to marry is constantly pointed out by his mother, who seems very worried.

It is at these moments concerning Hu's marriage that he becomes the centre of the family. Nevertheless, like the grandson Chaochao, Hu is shown not as an independent person with his own choices and individuality. He becomes the centre only because his marriage is not a purely personal issue, but an issue for the family as a whole. In the traditional view, as a son, he is supposed to carry the responsibility to produce the next generation, and so to continue the family clan as a collective whole.

In a couple of scenes, Hu's mother speaks to Hu behind the camera about her worry about him being single. Once, the mother speaks to him in front of the camera, "*This year you must solve your personal problem of marriage, otherwise mama is under too much pressure*". In another scene, the mother stands directly facing the camera, telling Hu her ideal image of a good wife for him. Then Hu intentionally enters the frame. In this scene, Hu deliberately presents himself on camera as a speechless child being educated by his parent. Near the end of the film, Hu's 'personal issue' is raised again. Two sisters mention that Hu's personal issue really worries the old parents and Hu should think seriously about it. Only the third sister with American values supports him to find his own love, rather than to get married for marriage's sake. Throughout the film, Hu does not reveal his personal opinion on his own 'personal issue', in fact on most family issues in general, except for a couple of events. His quietness suggests his unimportance in the family as an individual in his own right, though ironically, his marriage is important to the family as a collective whole. In other words, he is only important to the family for his role as part of the family, as one who carries familial responsibility.

2. The tension between the individual and the state

In addition to documenting the daily conflicts among the three generations, who have

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[381] Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 175-80.

grown up in different social eras, Hu also captures the tensions between family members and the changing state. 'Flying' around in the familial space, Hu's camera eye picks up some moments when his family members are complaining about the lack of social protection, and the benefits that used to be given to them by Mao's government. As Yan Yunxiang mentions, the state in Mao's era used to provide social welfare to the workers, including medical and health care.[382] However, as revealed by Hu's parents to his personal camera, it is no longer the case. When his parents are alone, the eighty-year-old couple's conversations are centred around the rising price of domestic appliances and medication. Having lived through Mao's era, the father compares the current era to the previous era, and shows his feelings of disappointment towards the current social condition.

In one scene, Hu's handheld camera in a corner of the bedroom is documenting the father who is in the middle of the frame, talking to the mother off-screen about medicine. Realising that Hu is standing behind him, the father turns around facing the camera and starts to talk to Hu: "*Now what Chinese people care most about is money, it is same with the doctors. Earning money rather than saving life is their premier goal.*" In another scene, Hu observes the father in extreme close-up, on the phone talking to Hu's third sister in America. The moment he mentions health care, he suddenly breaks down, speaking to Hu's third sister on the phone in tears that when he was ill in 1994, he realised that if one couldn't afford to pay for the hospital, the hospital would not provide any treatment: "*I was there spitting blood and they just ignored me! They only treat you when you have paid. What sort of country is this! It only serves rich people.*" In these two moments, Hu does not speak from behind the camera. He just stands there, observing the emotional moments and insecure feelings of his aged parents. His quietness also suggests his lack of power to provide his old parents with a better life.

Housing is another issue that reflects the changing relationship between the state and the individual. In one sequence, Hu follows the father to visit the second sister. The sister also lives in an old apartment for socialist workers. Walking into the apartment building, the camera passes by a dark corridor on the ground floor, where cheap advertisement posters are messily stuck on the dirty walls. Hu consciously asks the father from behind

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[382] Yan, Introduction to *iChina.*

the camera: "*What a shabby and dirty building! Who built it?*" (fig. 5.20). The father, climbing up the stairs, says to him that "*They (the Housing Administration) build it for grassroots, but themselves never lived here. They have better houses elsewhere…Being an official now is like doing business. They first buy a position, and then others give them money.*" What the father reveals reflects the changing relationship between the individual and the civil worker, and the state. While in the socialist past, the government provided apartment buildings for its socialist workers, now the buildings have been used as commodities to rent to the individuals who could not afford to buy the modern apartments developed by the real estate developers.
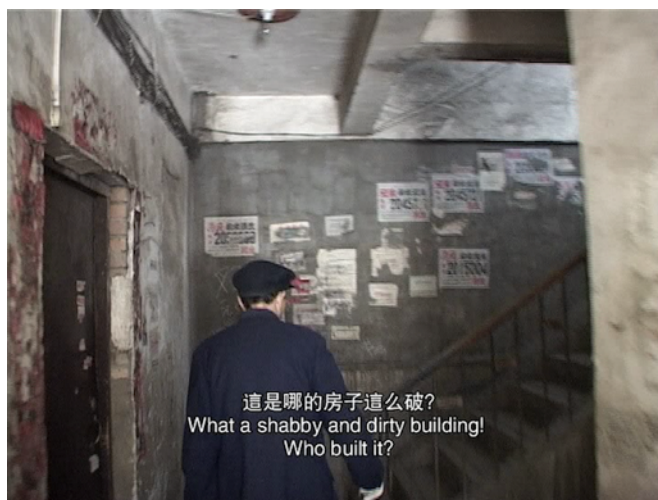
FIGURE 20. Hu follows the father walking into an old-fashioned flat in *Family Phobia* (2009).

Towards the end of the film, Hu's niece accompanies her grandparents (Hu's parents) to visit a spacious modern apartment that they intend to buy. It seems that in the national transition, the old familial space of the small socialist flat is no longer enough for the individuals to develop their own life. The film does not reveal whether the family has moved to the new flat, but the long shot of the grandparents and the granddaughter walking hand-in-hand back toward the camera, indicates the family continues as a collective. Though the relations of individuals in the family become conflicting and problematic, the family as a collective institution is still the place where individuals find security.

While Hu's family inevitably faces the impact of declining social welfare, Hu also consciously documents the public open space. Hu captures the ever-growing

commercialised spaces and the migrant individuals. On New Year's Eve, Hu's camera looks outside through the window, wandering around. Zooming in, he captures the migrant merchants still doing business in the street (fig. 5.21). His voice comes from behind the camera asking "*Why are they still there?*" When Hu's elder brother comes back home, Hu follows him to revisit the old residential areas and public places they used to pass by every day in their childhood. However, many of these places have been knocked down. In a long shot, Hu's brother stands in the streets, looking around but finding nothing familiar.
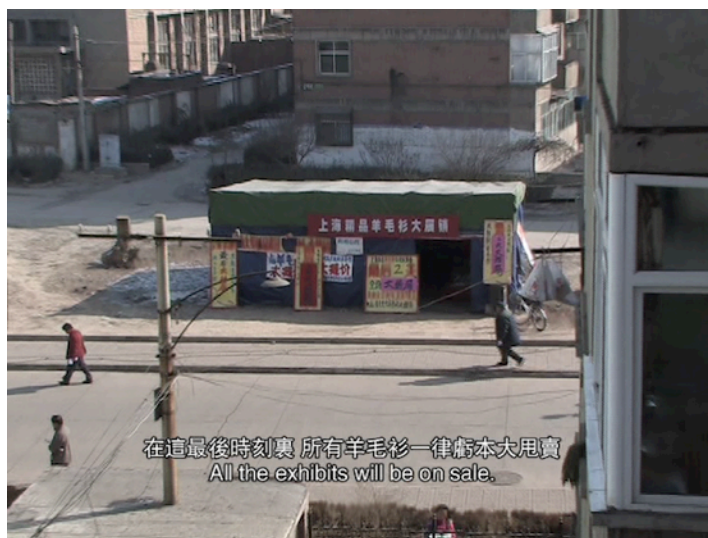
FIGURE 5.21. The small merchant's mobile house in the street in *Family Phobia* (2009).

By consciously observing his familial space, Hu documents the generational conflicts between the first generation and the second, and both these with the third generation, which are caused by the problematic familial relations that have become twisted with the conflicting political ideologies. It reveals how traditional family relations have largely constrained attempts by individuals in contemporary China to develop their own individualities. However, Hu's documentation also reveals the changing relations between the individual and the state. Though the state has left the individuals with more freedom, it does not provide enough social care to the individuals to develop their own lives. Therefore, even though family relations have become conflicting and problematic, the family as a collective institution is still the place where individuals find their selves and security.

My Family Tree

Yang Pingdao takes the camera as an extension of his own eyes, and travels in between familial and public spaces. *My Family Tree* demonstrates that, as many of Yang's family members have left the ancestor's house in the small village and moved to the industrialised towns and cities, the old house is losing its traditional influence as the physical centre of the family's activities. However, the small nuclearised families formed by family members are not entirely separated from each other. Individuals still play their familial roles as a relational self in a family collective community. Yang's role as a son in the family also carries the responsibility to give rise to the new generation.

1. The fading traditions

In *My Family Tree,* many of Yang's family members have moved out of the small village where his family originally started. Though family conflicts are also inevitably part of his family's lives, Yang does not take that as a central focus. In this film, it is not the conflicts, but the distance among family members that indicates that the family is in structural transition. As the grandfather's oral history reveals in the beginning, Yang's family ancestors moved to this small village in Guanggong province, in southeast China, more than three hundred years ago. From there, Yang's family started. For generations, Yang's extended family has been living there as an agricultural family, living through farming, and all family members lived close together, following the tradition. During the socialist period, the *hukou* house registration system forced the rural population to stay in the countryside.

However, since the economic reform in the late 1970s and 1980s, the state has lost control over the rural population, which has caused a wave of migration. As the story reveals in the film, Yang's family is also experiencing a rural to urban migration. Many family members, since his father's generation, have moved out to towns and cities, to search for work. As mentioned in the last section, the first person filmmaker Yang Pingdao himself has also left the small village at a young age. This has seriously changed the previous family structure. As Yang's first person camera eye reveals, there

are only old people, young children and women left in the village. Several family members mention that their children have gone to the cities for work. Yang also states on the subtitles that his father died some years ago and his mother has remarried again in Hong Kong. Yang shows that many family traditions are fading away in this transition. It is especially shown through the decline of *zhuwu,* the family ancestor's house, where his grandparents live.

Yang's *zhuwu*, the ancestral house, is presented as the core of his family, which symbolises the family as a collective whole. In the first three parts of the film, there are several conversations between Yang and the older family members, such as his grandparents and older relatives. The central theme of their conversations is the decline of their ancestral house. The older people are concerned that if their old house becomes too dilapidated and collapses one day, then the tradition will get lost. In the older generation's view, the good condition of the ancestral house means the prosperity and the continuity of the family as a collective whole. They regard it as the origin of a family; one should always remember it and come back to it.

The domestic space of Yang's ancestral house is dark and quiet, with a few pieces of old furniture. While interviewing his grandfather, Yang intercuts some shots of the family's old house in its current condition. He uses mostly panning shots, like his own eyes observing the interior and exterior details of the house, such as big long cracks on the dampish walls, the long stick holding up the thatched roof, the incense burners, the farming tools, the ruins of collapsed walls. Traditional firewood is still in use for cooking. On the four walls of the space, only some towels and cooking utensils are hanging. The TV next to the grandfather is the only connection to the outside world. While the grandfather is telling the family history, the TV is on, showing news, TV commercials and TV dramas, reminding the audience of the time of 'now', and bringing into this space a sense of contemporaneity.

After talking to his grandfather, Yang visits some other old relatives. In one scene, Yang talks to his grandfather's brother in a dark room. In the middle of the frame is a shabby bed covered by an old mosquito net. An old man is lying on the bed, disabled and in bad health. The old man asks Yang sitting behind the camera in a very low voice if his old

house will collapse, as it always leaks when it rains. "It needs to be repaired", mutters the old man. In another scene, as the camera pans around the village, observing the muddy small village road and houses, it captures an old lady holding a big umbrella. Yang's camera focuses on her, standing in the middle of the frame (fig. 5.22). She tells Yang, slowly and quietly in the local dialect, that her old house leaks when it rains. In part two, Yang talks to his grandmother, who is lying on the bed covered with a mosquito net. In the almost ten-minute conversation, the grandmother natters lightly and quietly, recalling every family member. She says that one should come back to the old house when one is dying.

FIGURE 5.22. An old lady in the village in *My Family Tree* (2008).

Before Yang leaves the village, a long shot shows that the old houses stand quietly in the rain in the distance. The subtitles come up again, like Yang's voice talking to himself, "M*y grandfather told me that a lot of people come back to build their old house when they've earned enough money in the city. He told me to rebuild the old house when I have enough money. He said, even if nobody goes back to live there, it's still our native place, it shouldn't be so ragged.*" As a modernised young man who has received higher education in the capital of the country, Yang says he does not totally believe the traditional family customs, but he still pays respect to them, as they are part of his roots.[383]

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[383] Author's interview, 2010.

For rural residents, urbanisation and the state losing control over the rural-urban division mean more social mobility and freedom. However, the fast-pace urbanisation inevitably means the decline of the traditional status of family as the centre of one's life. As revealed in *My Family Tree*, Yang's old family house is losing its traditional influence, as the members have moved out to start their new lives and form their own small families, in the ongoing process of national rural to urban migration.

2. Family as an imagined community

Though Yang's film shows that his 'old home' is declining, it still plays a crucial role in constructing Yang's sense of self as, what Hansen and Pang called, a 'second generation peasant'. This refers to the phenomenon that "younger people born and socialized in rural families in China account for their own roles as individuals who relate to the family as a collective".[384] Hansen and Pang observe that 'the high mobility, unpredictable employment and emphasis on individual choice among young migrant workers have not done away with the family as a unit of life meanings",[385] a unit which is regarded by Yan, as an 'imagined community'.[386]

As an individual who has been living in an urban area, Yang neither breaks away from his familial self as a rural person, nor does he try to rebel against tradition. In the beginning, while Yang walks in the public space of a train station, the subtitles tell, through a first person narrative, the family news from far away back home. As I discussed in the last section, the public spaces depicted through Yang's camera are cool, but restless. Travelling in such a space full of moving migrant strangers, it is the family that gives him a sense of belonging. Throughout the film, family is presented through Yang's first person view, as an 'imagined community' that links all the family members together, though they are physically separated in different places. Yang and his first person camera can be seen as an invisible line, threading the small nuclearised families together as a big community. Though the extended family is not physically present as a

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[384] Quoted by Yan, Introduction to *iChina*, 20.

[385] Ibid.

[386] Yan, Introduction to *iChina*, 20.

strong prosperous community any more, it still emotionally links the family members together.

The continuity of the family to keep the 'imagined community' alive is one of the most important messages delivered through this film. Like Hu Xinyi, as a son, Yang is also burdened with the task of giving birth to the new generation, so to continue the familial clan. During Yang's journey of visiting small nuclearised families, several family members ask Yang whether he has a girlfriend. In the ten-minute conversation with Yang's grandma, the old lady tells Yang what kind of girl he should take as wife. "*You don't want to get married, then I might not be able to see the grandchild, but if only I can see you having a wife, I will be happy… Please note, an ordinary looking girl would be good…*" When Yang visits his mother, who is taking care of his brother's child in the city of Yangchun near the village, the mother also worries a lot about Yang's marriage, and asks him just to find a normal girl. They do not require outstanding characteristics of the woman, nor do they care if Yang can find his true love, as long as she can help the Yang family give birth and keep the family harmonious.

In the film, though Yang himself does not get married, he chooses to start the film with the birth of a new family member, his brother's son. The film ends with Yang doing traditional worship to his father, followed by the marriage of his brother (his brother has a baby first then gets married). This signifies the rearrangement of the family, as one member dies and a new member comes, as the family tree continues growing.

In my interview with him, Yang reveals that though he has been living outside the family home on his own for a while, not many family members seem to care about Yang's achievements as an individual in the outside world. As he states: "Usually I bring back money to the elderly when I come to visit. They normally just ask me how much I can earn. They do not really care what I am doing, but only if I can make a living and bring wealth to the family."[387] This emphasises how the old family members care mostly about whether or not Yang brings goodness and prosperity to the family.

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[387] Author's interview, 2010.

Nostalgia

1.   A self in a collective community

As illustrated in *Family Phobia* and *My Family Tree*, the family structures of the filmmakers are going through a gradual transition as a result of urbanisation on a national scale. In *Nostalgia*, the state-forced demolition has a very prominent and radical impact on the family structure, as Shu's old family house was facing being physically knocked down, because of the new urban plan. What is more, this also indicates the loss of a communal life style, as facilitated by the '*shikumen*' style of residence, a life style that is largely missing in current neo-liberal society. In this sense, Shu's nostalgia is not just for the physical form of the old house itself, but also the communal life-style and community relations.

Two cameras used in the film describe Shu not only as an insider within his family, but also a part of the collective community of *Dazhongli*. In the beginning, Shu's conversation with his grandmother reveals that Shu, as the grandson of the family, was born in this old house and experienced his childhood and adolescence in this open community. While talking to his grandmother, a childhood photo of Shu and his brother standing in the local public hallway is dissolved into a shot of the hallway in the present. Through Shu's first person camera eye, we see neighbouring families living close to each other, sharing some communal spaces and participating in group activities. A montage of the life in *shikumen* shows the neighbours preparing food, hanging their laundry in the public hallway, and playing mahjong together (figs. 5.23, 5.24).

FIGURE 5.23. An old man living in the neighbourhood is watering the plants in *Nostalgia* (2006).

FIGURE 5.24. Shu's grandmother is playing mahjong with the neighbours in *Nostalgia* (2006).

Like the other two filmmakers, Shu's first person self is never introduced as an isolated individual, but is always in relation to others - family members, friends and neighbours. Intercut with Shu's point-of-view shots is the third person camera capturing Shu wandering around in the open hallways of the '*shikumen'*, with acquaintances passing by and greeting him. Shu also tells to the camera stories of his family members and neighbours. It is interesting to note that the characters in the film are not introduced by their names, but through their positions in the neighbourhood. That is how people remember each other. When Shu chats with neighbours about the past, they casually mention Shu's familial stories, as if everyone's life in Dazhongli is intertwined with each other. In one scene, the third person camera captures Shu walking into a house of a

neighbouring family, greeting an old lady sitting at the window, eating lunch. Then it cuts to Shu's first person view of the old lady closely facing the camera. While Shu's voice in the film is chatting with the old lady in the Shanghai dialect, his voice-over gradually emerges louder and louder, introducing the audience to this old lady: "*this is our neighbour grandma of Yu's family, who is such a good cook that I often came to eat here when I was small, following the smell of food*". In return, this old lady tells to Shu's camera her memory of Shu's father and aunts when they were very young (fig. 5.25).

FIGURE 5.25. Shu's old neighbour the lady grandma Yu in *Nostalgia* (2006).

Through these conversations about their common memories and experiences, the film presents the audience with a circle, a network of relations. The first person 'I' does not just stand for the singular 'I', in fact, Shu's familial self is also part of the community. He is a representative of this circle, who tells the story of 'us', the collective of selves living in this area. Lebow claims that first person expression always belongs to 'the first person plural', as "every autobiography engages the embodied knowledge, memory, history, and identity of much larger entities than the self".[388] In this film, Shu's individual self is aligned with the larger collective identity, 'the first person plural' of the neighbourhood, constructed through the '*shikumen*' architectural space and sharing many common life experiences and memories.

2.   Nostalgia for the socialist past

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[388] Lebow, *First Person Jewish*, xv.

Representing the first person plural of the local community, Shu shows a strong nostalgia towards the lifestyle under socialist collectivism. To reach the past, some black-and-white enacted scenes are constructed. He gets a small boy to play his life as a child and a young teenager to play his adolescence. In one scene, the small Shu goes to school with his neighbours, passing the local breakfast shop. Then Shu introduces this breakfast shop, a shop that commonly existed in Shanghai in the 1970s and 1980s. He also uses some historical archival footage, showing how people used to queue up in the morning, buying breakfast for their family with '*liang piao*' (grain ration coupons, 粮票), a special food currency distributed in Mao's era.

That is a period when the sense of 'we' rather than 'I' was felt more strongly, when more focus was placed on the communal collective interest rather than personal interest. In an interview, Shu states that "People who have lived through the 1980s in China have all experienced the collective and communal lifestyle. Therefore, people often have the dream to change the world, feeling that everyone has the obligation to help others, to change the reality."[389] In one sequence, Shu walked to the old neigbourhood committee house. He tells the third person camera in the street that this used to be the local residential office which maintained public order of the neighbourhood, and organised community activities in Mao's time. Shu also reveals that in the 1980s, when TV sets were still very expensive and not every family could afford to buy one, people in the neighbourhood used to gather here and watch TV together in the public hallway. In fact, this is an experience shared by many Chinese in both urban and rural areas in the 1980s, when China had just begun its economic reform.

Showing nostalgia for the socialist past, the film also inserts some old TV programmes of the 1980s. One is a children's choir singing, 'We are so happy'. Although the song is socialist propaganda, it shows something that has largely disappeared in the current society – the collective notion of 'we' 'us', 'our'. Another enacted scene is a school memory (fig. 5.26). After a scene in the classroom where pupils are reading a Chinese text on Lei Feng, a socialist hero who submitted himself to the collective, the school bell rings. It then cuts to a long shot of the school yard, where a school staff member is

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[389] Xu, *Shanghai is not like this*, accessed online on 3 April 2011, through [http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2008-06-13/110215738621.shtml]

sweeping the floor, while the loud speaker is saying "*Our education policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually and physically, to become a worker with socialist consciousness and culture*". This slogan reflects an ideal individual identity that was pursued by people under Mao's socialist China. Then the film cuts to how the schoolyard looks nowadays. However, he finds out that the primary school has disappeared and the high school has now turned into the office of a real-estate developer. While the memories of the past are still vivid in Shu's mind, the places that have constructed his life experiences are nevertheless disappearing in front of his eyes, as his voice-over says "this area would soon turn into a picturesque postcard, visited by the foreign tourists".
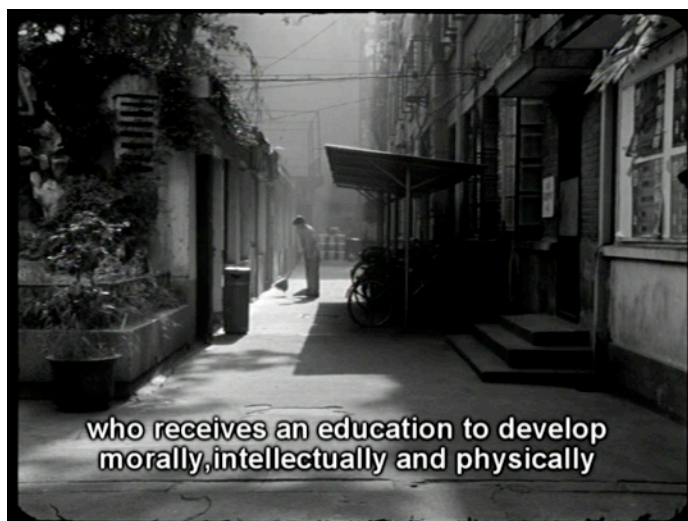
FIGURE 5.26. An enacted scene of Shu's primary school yard as in his memory in *Nostalgia* (2006).

3.   A self with critical voice

It is at that moment that Shu's voice-over becomes more critical. Having experienced a childhood with a socialist education, and witnessed increasing commercialisation in the market economy, Shu cannot stay quiet anymore. His voice-over directly reveals his disappointment in today's society, which only worships materialism. The experience of Shu's family and community is caused by the irresistible state and market forces in transforming an individual's life. Similar to Hu's family experience, this also reflects what has been discussed by Yan Yunxiang,[390] the lack of social protection for

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[390] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*.

individuals in contemporary China. And in the case of Shu's family, this is not just a loss of social welfare, but a loss of their old familial space.

I argue that Shu's first person filmmaking is more than nostalgia toward home and a vanishing life style, which has constructed his own self. In fact, it is an important political participation of a public citizen who openly makes a personal critique of the changing ideology and the worship of modernisation. Born in the 1970s, Shu can be seen as part of the so-called 'I generation' who are more concerned with their individual happiness and individual rights.[391] The experience of studying in America has also influenced his understanding of human rights. In the film, Shu's voice-over criticises the highly commercialised public space and neo-liberal culture in the beginning of twenty-first-century China. Towards the end, he inserts clips of a Shanghai promotional video made by the blockbuster filmmaker Zhang Yimou to bid for World Expo 2010. This depicts a modern, fashionable Shanghai as a flourishing metropolitan city in East Asia. In an interview afterwards, Shu explains that "Zhang Yimou spent eight million RMB (approximately £800,000) to make this commercial but I think it is very stupid. It shows people waving their arms in front of the Oriental Pearl – from the worship of leader in the past to the worship of capital, money in contemporary China…"[392] While showing clips of this promotional video in the film, his voice-over is speaking over the image, criticising that the state of affairs. "*Do people truly worship these skyscrapers? I doubt it. Do the times really drive everyone to chase so-called fashion, pursue the so-called modern, and love the neon lights at night? I don't believe it*." Facing mainstream commercialisation and consumerism, Shu does not stay silent any more. Instead, he raises his voice and directly expresses his criticism of the current worship of capitalism. As the state-forced urbanisation and demolition has seriously damaged the interests of individual citizens, Shu starts to fight for his own interests and rights – the right to keep their own living space, the family-home.

The tension between the brutal demolition enacted by governmental and commercial power, and the existence of individuals' familial space has been expressed by many

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[391] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, 280.

[392] Shu, interviewed by Xu (author's translation), *Shanghai is not like this*, accessed online on 3 April 2011, through [http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2008-06-13/110215738621.shtml].

other individuals through different means. Some have also taken a camera and expressed their personal voice through independent films. For example, the local Beijinger Zhang Jinli uses a DV camera to film his resistance to a demolition. Zhang does not just stand as a familial self, his public side as a rights-conscious individual stands out eminently, to fight for the interests of himself and his family. The substantial first person materials he filmed are used in the documentary *Mei Shi Jie* (dir. Cao Fei/ Ou Ning, 2007, 85 minutes). I will discuss in more detail the public self in first person films in the next chapter.

The three films, all together, observe in great detail how the self is situated in the complex relations inside the familial space, and between the family and the state. Hu Xinyu primarily observes the generational conflicts among different family members, especially between the authority figure (the father/grandfather) and the younger generations. This indicates that some family relations have prevented individuals from expressing their individual desires. Despite the internal familial conflicts, Hu also observes that the changing nature of the state has affected the lives of his family members. Yang Pingdao, on the other hand, does not focus on the familial conflicts. Instead, observing how family traditions face decline as members have moved out to the urban areas, Yang notices that family has regained its importance as a significant imagined community, from which the individuals find security and a sense of belonging. Shu Haolun enhances the importance of family to individuals in contemporary China. He invokes the nostalgia for a family lifestyle constructed by the *Shikumen* communal residential places, as well as the period of socialist collectivism. In addition, while the other two filmmakers implicitly point to the state-enforced urbanisation and decollectivisation process, Shu explicitly criticises the inhuman demolition and wide-spread materialism.

IV.   Conclusion

These three filmmakers are among the small group of DV filmmakers who turn the camera inward to film their familial selves. Unlike the three female filmmakers who investigate historically-formed problematic familial relations, these three filmmakers

examine what is happening to their family 'now', in the nationwide urbanisation. They are not just a pure insider, but are consciously looking back at their families as an individual with a social role. This dual role enables them to examine their multi-layered selves and the conflicted relationships among the individuals, the family and the state. These films show that, on the one hand, the traditional institution of the family has constrained the individuals to develop their selves in particular ways, and, on the other hand, individuals still seek protection and security from their families. In addition, by filming inwards into their own familial space, these three first person filmmakers demonstrate a strong sense of individual citizenship, making a critique of the state-forced urbanisation that has affected their familial structure.

In addition, their filmmaking as a social practice is based on the fact that they are consciously filming their own families as filmmakers, negotiating the ethical issues of how much to present oneself in the private familial space to the public. As filmmakers, they are reflectively looking at their family and looking back at their selves in the familial space. They are also actively screening their films to the audience. In the beginning of the 2000s, the three female filmmakers chose to keep the films largely to themselves partly because of the serious ethical accusations from the audiences who saw them. However, in the late 2000s, the three male's familial self-representations did not face much rejection. This is partially because the three female filmmakers' films explore sensitive ethical relations, while the three male filmmakers explore the familial space. It is also because the public attitude towards the representation of self has also been changing.

The filmmaker Hu Xinyu has experienced the changing public attitude towards first person documentaries on one's own self. In fact, *Family Phobia* is not Hu's first documentary. He has made two other personal documentaries before which share a similar style. His first completed DV documentary *The Man* (2003) observes the very intimate emotional and even sexual lives of himself and two friends. Hu reveals that *The Man* has received much criticism, especially by female audience members, for its provocative language and sexist behaviour toward women.[393] His second film, *My Sister* (2006), observes the life of his third sister living in the USA. His observational camera

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[393] Author's interview, 2010.

eye seems to be a stranger breaking into the private space of his sister's American house. There are many shots 'zooming in', peeping in on Hu's sister while she is outside with her neighbours, when she is making phone calls, and also her private time with her husband. When I talk to other filmmakers and some audiences about Hu's early films, some criticise his overt exposure of private personal lives, which can make the audience very uncomfortable.[394]

Throughout this decade, the influential documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang has been keenly promoting reflexive personal documentaries. While others seriously criticise Hu, Wu encourages Hu to keep his focus on the personal aspects of his own life.[395] In recent years, more screenings of private personal documentaries have been shown to audiences in more independent spaces. In return, the audiences, mostly inside independent filmmakers' communities, have started to accept more diversity. In addition, the increasing self-expression through mainstream and independent channels, such as personal blogs, video sharing sites, and TV shows, have also made the audience more used to the exposure of intimate private lives and personal expression. In this context, his new film *Family Phobia* does not face the same criticism.[396] Even with that though, Hu does not show the film much inside mainland China, just a few times such as at Chongqing Film and Video Festival 2010 and Yunfest 2011. However, Hu's concern is not so much about the ethical issue, but about political sensitivity, as the family debates on Taiwan and Tibetan issues may bring trouble to his family.[397]

The other two films, *Nostalgia* and *My Family Tree,* have both received positive responses to different degrees. *Nostalgia* has been shown several times in domestic and international film festivals.[398] Though the filmmaker, Shu, explicitly expresses his first person critique of the governmental project of demolition and the mainstream worship of capital, the film has not been banned by the officials. On the contrary, it has been

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[394] This is during my research field trips in China in 2009 and 2010. The filmmakers do not want to reveal their names.

[395] Author's interview, 2010.

[396] Ibid.

[397] ibid.

[398] ibid.

well received not only by foreign media, but also by state-sponsored domestic media.[399] However, the domestic media mainly focus on how the film captures the details of local people's lives in indigenous '*shikumen*' architectural buildings. They usually do not mention Shu's first person criticism expressed in the film. For example, a local Shanghai TV channel (*dongfang weishi* 东方卫视, or Dragon TV) praises the film for its detailed description of local Shanghai lives in '*shikumen*'.[400]

By comparison, *My Family Tree*, made more recently in 2008, has only been shown in the domestic independent film festivals, such as Yunfest 2009, and China Documentary Film Festival Songzhuang, Beijing. In my interview with Yang, he told me that the film had entered the competition at Yunfest in 2009. Four judges from mainland China gave very high marks to this film. The fifth judge, from Taiwan, said such personal films about one's family are very common in Taiwan, and though the film horizontally documents the current lives of a large number of family members in different places, it does not have a vertical observation across a long time period.[401] Nevertheless, the film received the 'Special Jury Prize' at Yunfest. The film has been well received overall in the local film communities. However, because of its length (more than three hours) it has not been shown much to wider audiences.[402]

Overall, the practice of displaying one's personal familial lives for public viewing has been pushing the ethical boundaries. The public response to these films also reflects the changing public perceptions of the public and the private, compared to the situation in the early 2000s. Taking Hu Xinyu's film as an example, Zhang Yaxuan, an independent Beijing-based film critic believes that the unlimited exposure of personal issues reflects the unbalanced Chinese society at the moment. "Every society needs to leave an exit point for individual personal expression. But in China, this exit point has been so small for a long time. The public space has been so strong that it represses the growth of personal space. So for a long time personal emotion cannot be openly expressed… Therefore, when there is an opportunity of expressing oneself through DV camera,

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[399] "Huizhibuqu de Xiangchou (The Lingering Nostalgia)."

[400] Video accessed on Feb. 5, 2010. http://www.ndnews.cn/spnd/bkzx/shwx/200904/91984.html.

[401] Author's interview, 2010.

[402] Ibid.

things are disclosed without a limit. One cannot say it is not good, as no one can give a simple ethical judgement."[403] I agree with Zhang on the point of the unbalanced status and development of public space and private space in China. The uncontrolled personal expression of the self in familial private space can be seen as a response to an unbalanced society, which has gone beyond a simple ethical issue. In the next chapter, exploring the self in the public space, I will discuss in more detail the aspect of individual privacy and presenting the self in public spaces.

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[403] Ibid.

Chapter Six

Producing the 'Public Self': First Person Action Documentaries

I.   Introduction

In this chapter I focus on the work of three filmmakers - Xue Jianqiang, Wu Haohao and Ai Weiwei – who all represent the individual self outside the familial space, in public spaces. While the majority of independent filmmakers are interested in other individuals' personal experiences of living in contemporary Chinese society, (notably Zhao Liang, Xu Tong, and Zhou Hao), the filmmakers I study here have gone so far that they take their own selves as the central subjects for exploration. Like the majority of independent filmmakers in contemporary China, none of these are primarily trained filmmakers:[404] Xue Jianqiang is a self-trained amateur; Ai Weiwei, although he first graduated from Beijing Film Academy before studying art in New York, is better known as an artist; and while Wu Haohao graduated with a degree related to filmmaking, his one-person and first person approach is also very 'amateurish' in comparison with the more industry-oriented professional filmmakers. Interestingly, most of the filmmakers working on the self in public spaces are men.[405] The five films I study in this chapter are *Kun 1: Action* (dir. Wu Haohao 2008), *Criticizing China* (dir. Wu Haohao 2008), *Martian Syndrome* (dir. Xue Jianqiang, 2010), *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* (dir. Xue Jianqiang, 2010), and *Laomatihua (*a.k.a. *Disturbing the peace*, dir. Ai Weiwei

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[404] Including some I do not study here but will mention in my conclusion: the dancer/ performance artist Li Ning, and a group of villagers who participate in the villager documentary project.

[405] A couple of women filmmakers explore their selves outside the familial space. One is a middle-aged villager amateur filmmaker Shao Yuzhen, who explores her daily life in a village in the suburbs of Beijing, and her confrontation with the journalists working in state-owned TV stations who come to interview her as a villager filmmaker. Another is Zhu Yi, a student at Nan Jing University at the time who made her first student film 'Scrap', which was a university project. In that film, Zhu investigates a public issue, the public policies to control small street merchants. Taking a small DV camera, Zhu records the different perspectives of merchants and policemen, as well as the process she experiences when she is trying hard to interview the local policemen.

2009). These are among the first films of their kind to have circulated through screenings on the domestic independent film festival circuits, or through dissemination on DVD. When these films were screened in public, they immediately provoked intense debates among cultural critics and the independent filmmaking community .

While grouping these films thematically around the representation of the self in public spaces, I do not simply refer to the 'public sphere' or 'civil society', being aware of the danger of accepting these terms as a standard against which to measure the Chinese context. In recent decades, the model of the public sphere and civil society - and their conceptualisation in the Chinese context - have received enormous scholarly attention. Referring to He Baogang's summary of five main competing academic models,[406] Chris Berry concludes that three main positions exist simultaneously in current scholarship: "Some believe that China is moving in the direction of these various models, others disagree, and a third group argue that China is too different for the application of these foreign ideas."[407] However, Berry argues that "subscribing to such an idealized and ideological model as the public sphere blinds us to the complexity and range of publics and public spaces in general—in the Western just as much as in the Chinese context. Furthermore, it also binds us into an Orientalist posture where China's efforts to 'catch up' confirm the West—where it is assumed there is such a thing as the 'public sphere'— as a model for all to follow. The public sphere model's equation of freedom with the removal of state power is too simple."[408] Taking none of these positions, Berry draws from Foucault's idea of productive power and theorises an operable new term, 'public space', to describe the Chinese case. For Berry, the term 'public spaces' "are not only multiple and varied but also positively produced and shaped externally and internally by configurations of power".[409] Berry believes that this approach "avoids any assumption that its appearance must indicate Westernization".[410]

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[406] "…Namely the Gramscian model (Thomas Gold, Barret McCormick, Timothy Cheek and Sarah Pfizner), the Kantian model (Madsen, 1993), the Habermasian model (David Strand, William Rowe and Craig Calhoun), the Communitarian model (Chamberlain, 1993) and the Rousseauvian model (Lawrence Sullivan, 1990)." He Baogang, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China*, 5.

[407] Berry, "New Documentary in China," 104-105.

[408] Ibid., 97.

[409] Ibid.

[410] Ibid.

In this chapter, my understanding of 'public spaces' is grounded in Chris Berry's theorisation. Based on Berry's concept, 'public spaces' are multiple sites where different power configurations and relations play out. In 'public spaces', individual self is an important power, an agency that is negotiating with different internal and external forces and is situated in varying social relations. Hence, I term this self as *'public self'* and these films as representations of the *'public self'*. By viewing the public self-representations, I notice that the traditional moral norms influenced by family ethical relations play an important role in defining how individuals interact with each other, especially on the relationship between the old and the young.

I demonstrated in Chapter Three that much current scholarship believes that individuals experience themselves - and forge an awareness of self - through social moral norms that explicitly refer to the family.[411] Fei Xiaotong invents the notion of *chaxugeju*, 'differential mode of association',[412] to describe how each individual in Chinese society has a different web of social relationships, and each network appears differently depending on which person is the focus of the web.[413] Although traditional moral ethics have been attacked several times in the course of China's modernisation process, such moral ethics still play an important role in interpersonal relations. After the Communist Party came into power, a radical transformation took place to reshape the consciousness of individual, or to create what Inkeles, Broaded and Cao regard as the 'new socialist men and women'.[414] However, some scholars note that in reality Confucian morality still determined interpersonal relations in some circumstances.[415]

In terms of the relationship between individuals and the state, many scholars argue that it is the conformity of the individual towards the state as a larger family that has been emphasised, rather than individual rights in relation to the state. During the Late Qing and May Fourth period, although there was a general rejection of Confucian ethics, the

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[411] Such as writings by Trauzettel, "Historical Aspects of the Individual-society Relationship in China."; Feng, *Zhongguo Zhexue Shi.*

[412] Fei, *From the Soil*, 62.

[413] Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 73.

[414] Inkeles, Broaded and Cao, "Causes and Consequences of Individual Modernity in China."

[415] Gold, "Youth and the State"; Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society.*

intellectual framework in this period profoundly mirrored the state-focused intellectual tradition.[416] During Mao's socialist era, the social structure was based on the complete submission of the self to the state. The general view is that although Maoism denies traditional Confucian values, it still put individuals in collective groups, hence giving little autonomy for the individual. In addition, although 'the socialist new men' were empowered to fight against the traditional constraints, the new socialist state asked for a new kind of submission for the construction of a communist state.

This socialist ideology, however, has become unsustainable in the post-socialist era.[417] In contemporary China, one of the leading features of the individual 'self' is the changing relationship between the individual and the state. Compared to previous social stages, there is increasing concern for individual rights. While the state has largely withdrawn from public life, the individual has gained relatively more autonomy to develop their own life and build their own biography,[418] which has encouraged increasing concern for one's subjectivity. In addition, since the late 1990s, there has been increasing "online activism",[419] which refers to the activist movement in cyberspace asking for equal opportunities, the protection of human rights and the recognition of marginalised social identities.[420] This "online activism" is "a response to the grievances, injustices, and anxieties caused by the structural transformation of Chinese society".[421] In recent years, the sense of new citizenship and human rights has been growing. There has been a rise of volunteering in forms of social participation and political activism beyond the virtual space. I argue that first person filmmaking in public spaces is a kind of social participation.

The 'public self' in this practice is both the filmmaker - the '*seer*'/ '*editor*' - and the represented subject - the '*seen*', situated within complex changing social relations. In the first section, I will analyse the public self as the filmmaker, while in the second

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[416] Svarverud, "Individual Self-Discipline and Collective Freedom," 195.

[417] Lin and Galikowski, *The Search for Modernity*, 155-6.

[418] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*; Yan, Introduction to *iChina*.

[419] Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 7.

[420] Damm and Thomas, 2006; Lagerkvist, 2006; Yang, 2009.

[421] Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 7.

section, I will explore how the self is represented in film in public spaces. I argue that, as the filmmaker, the 'public self' is not just passively shaped by the forces and relations in existing public spaces but also highly influenced by the familial ethical norms. As Yan states, when the party-state retreated from public life, it also withdrew the previous socialist welfare system, leaving individuals with more autonomy but little institutional protection.[422] This is also the case for the three filmmakers here. The three 'public self' filmmakers actively present their selves as a power, trying to politicalise the space in which they are situated. In this sense, their filmmaking practice as a form of social-political participation responds to China's current debates on the construction of public citizenship and social ethics. It can be seen as 'action documentary' practice, a term coined by Japanese filmmaker Kazuo Hara. In the larger picture, this filmmaking practice to some extent helps to reconstruct political values and to reactivate the political space in China's 'depoliticised era'.[423] Through active social participation, the self is further changing social relations in public spaces, and challenging and redefining public ethics in contemporary China. To the filmmaker selves, their 'action documentary' filmmaking is also a practice exploring how to act as an individual in public spaces in contemporary China.

As the represented subject in the films, the 'public self' as the 'seen' is situated in various changing relations. These films illustrate the rebellious and rights-conscious selves and their changing relationship with other individuals and with the state. On the one hand, with increasing freedom, young individual filmmakers are found in the spaces of their own making. This is especially the case in Xue Jianqiang's *Martian Syndrome* and Wu Haohao's *Kun1: Action*. These two filmmakers turn their personal camera inwards to film their individual spaces and the absence of community in the individualising cityscape. They express a strong desire for a more politicised community where they can engage with society, and where they can find social and emotional care that they especially need during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. On the other hand, despite the absence of community life, the individual self filmmakers, as described in *Criticizing China*, *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young*, and *Laomatihua*, are proactively participating themselves in *minjian* public spaces. *Minjian*

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[422] Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, 288.

[423] Wang, "Depoliticized Politics."

(民间) literally means 'among the people', and represents a non-governmental organized grassroots public space. The filmmakers Wu Haohao, Xue Jianqiang and Ai Weiwei are actively challenging the established social relations among individuals and between individuals and the state. Though these films also present the filmmakers' problematic individual selves in interpersonal interactions, these films provide valuable materials in analysing the changing sense of self in public spaces.

II. The 'public self' as filmmaker: action documentary practice

In this section, I examine the public self as filmmaker. These three individual filmmakers boldly and explicitly address their own political subjectivity, a strong desire to break the conventional institutional and ideological forces that have constrained them as individuals. I argue that their first person filmmaking practice, which explores the self in public spaces, shares many similarities with Kazuo Hara's concept of 'action documentary'.

Both Wu Haohao (born 1986) and Xue Jianqiang (born 1984) belong to the so-called 'post-80 generation', a cohort born in the 1980s and which grew up during the economic reforms. These two young filmmakers reveal that they do not have a close relationship with their family, the dominant traditional institution in China, and were also very rebellious towards educational institutions.[424] Xue skipped classes at school, and finally left school at the age of 15 years old. He then started to work in different places as a young migrant labour worker, waiter, hairdresser's assistant, and so on.[425] Wu was sent to a remote village for high school by his parents during his late teens, then he went to university in a southwest city, Chongqing. Though Wu eventually finished university, he attended few classes, spent most of the time on his own and lived outside campus.[426] Ai Weiwei (born 1958), as an established artist, has had a distinguished life history compared to others in his generation. He spent his youth as an artist in New York where he was influenced by the liberal spirit there. As the most politically

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[424] Author's interviews, 2010.

[425] Ibid.

[426] ibid.

outspoken contemporary Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei also acts as a curator, a constant blogger, and a political activist. His art works have attracted enormous attention in the West, but have been little shown inside China. Domestically, he is well known for his political activism, fighting for human rights and social justice, especially since the 'Citizen Investigation project' he initiated to investigate the construction of school buildings affected by the Sichuan earthquake. In addition, he has also been consciously documenting political activists' activities with a DV camera.

For Wu and Xue, their filmmaking practice functions more as a communication tool and for self-understanding. For Ai, it is to use the 'self' as a medium through which to effect social change. With a personal camera as a weapon, these three 'public self' filmmakers, as agents, are negotiating with different changing forces, and trying to disrupt the established social structure and relations within public spaces. In the second part of this section, I will examine in detail how they 'print' their actions on the films through the use of different cinematic techniques. While Wu Haohao presents his action at both the filming and the editing stages, Xue presents his action exclusively in the 'now' of filming. The action in Ai's film, on the other hand, is the practice of a collective group.

1.   Action documentary filmmaking

The films of these three filmmakers have gone beyond the observational mode that has dominated Chinese new documentary film since it emerged in the early 1990s. Wu Haohao even states straightforwardly to the camera in *Kun 1: Action*: "Take immediate action when facing dilemmas in reality. Film should only record those actions." The other two filmmakers, Xue Jianqiang and Ai Weiwei, both share this idea in different ways. I argue that, while their filmmaking practices share some similarities with Jean Rouch's participatory 'cinema verité', (notably their direct participation in an event), and Michael Moore's reflective, performative first person filmmaking, (in their explicit presentation of the self on the spot),[427] their first person filmmaking practice shows most similarities with Japanese filmmaker Kazuo Hara's 'action documentary' films, which "have strong narratives, dramatic encounters, and characters who struggle against

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[427] In fact, all three filmmakers mentioned that they have watched Michael Moore's films before.

adversity".[428] This is because these three filmmakers are not only in conversation with their subjects, but also provoke or question their subjects, in order to get their responses.

Hara's documentary method is highly aggressive, forcibly generating action through the camera, to see the 'embarrassing things' that people want to hide, and intentionally breaking down the institutionalised ideologies that cause people to feel embarrassment.[429] By doing so, he expresses a strong eagerness for social change in the social environment in which he is situated. As Hara states, "In the sixties and seventies, there was a feeling that if the individual did not cause change, nothing would change. At the time, I wanted to make a movie, and I was wondering how I could make a statement for change".[430] In addition, his filmmaking practice also comes out of an eagerness to find his self. Hara states that "[T]here is something unknown with in me that leads me to unfamiliar places, and perhaps I'm afraid of that. But I do have a very strong desire to find out what that is, and when I make a documentary film, I'm not doing it for social justice, or to organise the masses, or to expound some theme, or anything except to discover that question mark within me. Therefore, although I use my camera to shoot my subjects, I'm also carrying the camera toward the inside of myself, and going further and deeper within."[431]

Without being aware of Hara's term 'action documentary', Wu Haohao also labels his filming practice as '*xingdong dianying'*, which literally means 'action filmmaking'. While the titles of many of Wu Haohao's films start with the verb 'criticising' and connect this with a noun, such as *Criticising China*, *Criticising University*, others explicitly have the word 'action' in the title, such as the series of *Kun x: Action*. He takes the name 'Kun', the girl he first fell in love with in adolescence, to represent a belief, a passion, or a kind of spirit, which is similar to communism. Wu reveals that during his university years, he was reading Marxism and communism, as he needed a belief system to pull him out of his confusion and make him act.[432] For Wu, 'action'

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428 Ruoff, "Filming at the Margins," 116.

429 Hara, *Camera Obtrusa*, 7.

430 Quoted by Nornes, "Private Reality,' 147.

431 Quoted by Nornes, "Bulldozers, Bibles, and Very Sharp Knives," xiv.

432 Author's interview, 2010.

means an activity to directly confront current social constraints and conventions through interacting with his subjects. His approach is to proactively engage with others, in order to get direct interaction and communication with people. As he explains: "I do not have the money or resources to travel around to make films like some other filmmakers. Even my camera was borrowed from others. I know some interesting people through friends or on the Internet. I introduce myself to them as a filmmaker, who would like to film them...In some way, the camera is a medium for me to get to know about other people and interact with them."[433]

In addition, Wu's action is also a special way for him to reflexively look at his own self. Like Hara, Wu does not only concentrate on the revolutionary nature of his personal camera in exploring public social life, but he also thinks of his actions as a way to get a deeper understanding of his own self. This so-called action documentary filmmaking has become an important part of Wu's life journey, especially when he was in transition from adolescence to adulthood. Wu reveals that during his university period he read many western political philosophers and watched much world cinema, from which he has developed his own ideas of filmmaking as action.[434] Wu states that "In China everyone seems to have a similar life: going to school, then going to university, then finding a job and living their whole life like that. What I do may seem a bit adventurous.Sometimes I choose to attack people first and then see their reaction. I want to give them a chance to think about things differently. I am eager to communicate with people. When I am communicating with others, I am also giving myself a chance to know more."[435] In his films, his personal camera also explicitly exhibits his own self and even appears naked in his own private space.

Inspired by Wu Haohao, Xue Jianqiang also labels his filmmaking practice as 'action filmmaking'.[436] He thinks of his practice as a communication tool. With no institutional training in filmmaking, the amateur filmmaker Xue approaches the camera playfully

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[433] Ibid.

[434] ibid.

[435] ibid.

[436] In my interviews, Wu Haohao thinks Xue takes this idea from him. Xue agrees that Wu influenced him, but his filmmaking is somehow different from that of Wu's.

and sees documentary as no longer holding an aura of mystery that constructs the truth.[437] Xue states that "the older generation is too serious about documentary. They worship documentary for its privileged relationship with reality. But for me, everyone can make a documentary, as everyone can access the camera. It is just a daily practice."[438] He sees his filmmaking as a haphazard activity in real life. Neither staged nor prepared, his documentary practice is an unplanned interaction with people in his daily life, and the camera is there to record his interactions. As shown in his films discussed in this chapter, his interactions and haphazard activities are mostly within the independent film community and underground art scene, where most of his daily activities take place. Xue also insists that documentary film should function for self understanding, as he constantly mentions in his film *I beat the Tiger When I was Young*.

While the three women's first person films in the early 2000s share some similarity with the 'women's individualised writing', these two young filmmakers' filmmaking practice can be seen as the filmic version of the post-80s generation writing in the 2000s, represented by a young Chinese writer Han Han. Han Han is one of the most outspoken young writers who grew up in post-socialist China. In the early 2000s, he quit high school, openly criticising Chinese education, and became a popular novelist. More recently, he has become a well-known cultural celebrity, an opinion leader for his open critiques of social issues both in and outside virtual space. His blog became the most visited blog in China in 2010.[439] Speaking for social justice and for the rights of public citizens that normal scholars do not dare to speak about, he has received enormous public response.[440]

Wu and Xue share many similarities with Han Han, like their rejection of the dominant education system and their courage to openly criticise absurd social issues and conventions. Like Han Han's public critical discourse, Wu's and Xue's first person action documentary practice explicitly demonstrates their political subjectivities. However, unlike Han Han, who first gained fame through his fictional writings and

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[437] Author's interview, 2010.

[438] Ibid.

[439] "Hanhan de Guang (The Light of Hanhan)."

[440] To know more about Han Han please access http://www.hanhandigest.com and http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/han-han/ .

criticism on public social issues, Wu and Xue start with their own personal lives and the small circle around them. While Han Han has become extremely well-known both in and outside mainland China, Wu's and Xue's films are only shown in the independent documentary network and do not receive the same popularity as Han Han. While Han Han can be seen as a role model for the younger generation, Wu and Xue's practice indicates the rise of individual political subjectivity among a much wider section of young Chinese society. They take first person action filmmaking as a way to interact with the changing society, raising their personal voice and hoping to understand and develop themselves.

On the other hand, for the well-known contemporary Chinese artist and political activist Ai Weiwei, documentary practice is part of the action of truth searching. His films are seen by some others as 'action documentaries',[441] which means his filmmaking is part of his political activism. He dedicates himself to the action of investigating legal and political issues, and the activity of filmmaking is part of his political participation to challenge the dominant institutions. Like Hara, Ai aims to use his action to make a change.

Ai Weiwei regards the self in itself as a medium that is only produced through the action of self expression, communicating with the world and sharing one's self- expression with a wider population. He states that: "Before I believed in the classic understanding of documentary, which is how I as a filmmaker see a particular reality. But now, I think myself is a medium. The "I" is only produced when the "I" is expressing his or her self. The so-called "I" is in this process, being deconstructed and reproduced. If there is no such process of self expression, there is no self."[442] In other words, Ai regards the self as the centre of the action of documentary filmmaking, who is only produced in the process of expression and action.

Ai's political activist documentary practice is not just limited to the level of making films, but has expanded to film circulation. Unlike other independent Chinese films, which are only circulated among the independent film festivals or small screening clubs, Ai Weiwei puts his documentaries on various websites. He also produces a large

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[441] Author's interview with Wu Wenguang, 2010.

[442] "Ai Weiwei".

number of DVDs and distributes them for free. This large-volume free distribution is also part of his action documentary practice as a form of social participation. Up to October 2010, there have been 100,000 copies of his films given out to people, in addition to the free access through the Internet.[443] He tries every method to circulate the documentation of his political participation, to inform a larger population how the current political system has restricted human rights and to accelerate the public quest for political reform.

2.   Printing the actions on the films

The three filmmakers take different approaches to presenting their action on camera. None of the films is arranged in a complete linear narrative and all have little cinematic craft. Wu Haohao's films present his actions at two stages, both during the filming and during the editing. Unlike Wu Haohao, Xue Jianqiang presents his unplanned random encounters almost exclusively in the 'now' of filming. He does not present the action of editing, a process of reflexive thinking on the response he received from the others. Ai Weiwei's film, on the other hand, is a first person practice of a collective group of public citizens, which consists of three levels of actions.

WU HAOHAO – Action in two stages

Wu Haohao's *Kun 1: Action* and *Criticizing China* present himself both in the action of interacting with people, and the action of editing and reflexive thinking. In the first stage, he conducts film diaries, documenting his daily activities. *Kun 1: Action* gathers the footage he has kept over the course of four years during his time at university, while *Criticizing China* was filmed in only two days, documenting Wu's intervention and participation in public debates in a local park. Wu reveals that he has been observing the local public debates for a couple of weeks. He then decides to film them, thinking this is a very good phenomenon that reflects the increasing public speech in China.[444] In addition, Wu not only presents pieces of his daily life recorded with a personal camera,

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[443] Ai's public dialogue with Dr. Katie Hill at Tate Modern, 2010.

[444] Author's interview, 2010.

but also presents the 'now' of the editing, which is the second stage of action, when he reflexively looks back at himself during the filming process. Temporally, Wu's self is split into two, doing two actions. One is in the 'now' of filming, the other is in the 'now' of editing. In fact, both films start with the 'now' of editing, when he presents himself on camera directly talking to the audience, or uses first person narration.

Kun 1: Action starts with the action of editing, as Wu's voice-over emerges from the background music, stating the address of his location: Song Zhuang district, a suburb of Beijing. Five different shots describe this place: the village street, a house yard and a room. People familiar with independent film and art would know that Song Zhuang is an artists' cluster. Then the camera enters the room, a long shot showing that Wu is sitting in front of a computer. It is followed by a medium close-up of Wu staring at the computer, while his voice-over continues: "*action: editing the movie.*" (fig. 6.1). Then the title appears on the black screen: "Kun 1: Action."

FIGURE 6.1. Wu Haohao sits in front of the computer editing the film in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).[445]

Then the film goes back to the 'now' of filming, collecting fragments of his life in his university days. A few shots reveal Wu in three different years, half or fully naked, sleeping, taking a shower, sitting in front of the computer, or walking. His voice-over

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[445] In the subtitle, the Chinese word '*dongzuo*'(动作) is translated into 'action', while in other places in the film, he also translate the Chinese word '*xingdong*'(行动) into 'action'. The word '*dongzuo*' emphasises more the action or movement in a particular moment, while '*xingdong*' refers more to a process of performing an action. In the term 'action documentary' I use in this chapter, 'action' refers to the latter '*xingdong*'(行动).

narrates over these images, criticising himself and the environment he is living in. The first person narration is formed in the editing stage, which is also the stage when he forms the idea of 'action documentary'. Wu reveals that at the time of filming, he did not really know what this was for, neither did he have a clear idea of how to construct a film.[446] These materials are his experiments, and also the evidence of how he gradually forms his worldview.

Then Wu takes the method of cinema verité, proactively approaching people with different life experiences and of different age groups. He interviews seven people, a single young man in his late twenties, a young man and his girlfriend, two young university girls, a middle-aged woman, and a rock singer. In some of these interviews, Wu also reflexively shows himself, sometimes letting a third person film him in conversation with the subjects, sometimes recording himself in a mirror.

FIGURE 6.2. A man (who might be the cameraman) pretends to hold a camera and observes 'us' who look through the real camera in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

In one scene, a handheld camera captures Wu chatting to a young man while they are eating at an outdoor restaurant. Wu is talking to the man about his idea of filmmaking, and how he would like to spend a day in the man's home to observe his life with his girlfriend. After the conversation, it cuts to a close-up of another man (who might be the cameraman), pretending that he is holding a camera, observing 'us' who look through the real camera (fig. 6.2). While the man moves, the camera moves with him, always

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[446] Author's interview, 2010.

putting him in the middle of the frame. This man can be seen as a mirror of Wu's other self, as an observer of his own self in communication with others.

After approaching different people, Wu starts another kind of action, directly expressing his political ideas through performance (figs. 6.3 – 6.6). In one scene, Wu and his friends make a performance in Hongyan park, a communist monumental park in Chongqing city, southwest China. The camera pans from the left to the right, showing Wu with longer hair wearing a shirt. He shouts '*Long live, the people! Long live, the people!*' Then the camera quickly pans right, showing a man standing in front of the camera in a medium close-up. The man makes a bow to the camera. The camera tilts down, showing a gun on the floor, then it tilts up, showing the man putting on a KMT uniform and picking the gun up from the floor. Pointing at the camera, the man shoots, then the camera immediately pans back to the left, as if the bullet travels through the camera, shooting Wu, who is standing at the wall. Wu pretends to be shot, and falls down on the floor. At this moment, we know that Wu is acting as the communist, being shot by a KMT soldier during the Chinese civil war. The KMT soldier comes to him, putting some red ink on Wu's shirt, as if it is blood. Then he lies at the side of Wu and the two start to talk about the future of these two soldiers. This scene is filmed in only one shot. By doing the performance and recording it in the film, Wu and his friend are trying to imagine what the 'political' should be, and looking back at the political struggles that have contributed to the construction of China's socialist state. Then the camera pans away to the right, showing that people passing by are looking at them. Following that, the music of the international song appears in the background, while some archival materials from some classic feature films of social realist cinema are inserted, showing that the communist soldiers are fighting against the Japanese invasion to protect the homeland.

FIGURE 6.3   FIGURE 6.4

FIGURE 6.5   FIGURE 6.6

FIGURE 6.3-6.6 Wu Haohao plays a communist soldier while his friend plays a KMT soldier in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

Then it cuts back to Wu standing in front of the camera in a close-up, his voice-over addresses his own understanding of communism and China's socialist history. He then declares that he is establishing a New Communist Party group. As a young Chinese man in his early twenties in twenty-first-century China, it is not very common for such a person to raise political issues and have a clear political position. To demonstrate the foundation of his own new communist party group, Wu's camera follows his friend who walks around painting their new logo in Chongqing's Cultural Revolution cemeteries. This is also a long shot, and is shown in fast forward. Though this action is like an unserious joke initiated by some youngsters, it demonstrates that a small number of Chinese youth today are eager to express their individual political gestures, though still not yet in a mature enough way.

The last scene is a long shot in which Tian'an men is in the middle of the frame far away, and a Chinese national flag is in front of the Tian'an men (figs. 6.7-6.9). People on the Tian'an men Square walk around. Far away we see Wu at the bottom of the Chinese national flag running towards the camera. Wu arrives in front of the camera, presenting his face in extreme close-up, and giving a loud shout at the camera. Then he stands still in front of the camera, presenting his face in a close-up again, as he did earlier in the film. However, this time he is no longer in his own private space. He and his camera have moved to a public space, and a place that has links with various politically significant events in China's recent modern history.

FIGURES 6.7, 6.8, 6.9. On Tian'an men Square, Wu runs towards the camera and gives a big shout, then he stands still, staring at the camera in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

Criticizing China also starts with the 'now' of editing. It opens with an extreme close-up of Wu's face, as he stares at the camera with strong anger and emotion. His first person narration is sharply and concisely making a statement - the aim of this practice: "*I need to intervene into people's lives any day. In fact, I am nervous of going into the crowd, to communicate, to fight with people, and record it. This personality of mine is cultivated in the environment that I've grown up, and those lousy Chinese people in this environment. But I am eager to do so, I need to rescue, and express my love. This is my struggle.*" (fig. 6.10). This indicates his main aim is to provoke people, to join their discussion and to disrupt an established social order and ideologies that cultivate people's mindset.

FIGURE 6.10. Wu stares at the camera in the beginning of *Criticizing China* (2008).

Then the film goes back to the action of filming. It starts with the preparations for his action. Wu uses the camera as his own eyes, presenting the man he is talking to in an

extreme close-up. Through the conversation, we know that this is Wu's cameraman, as Wu says from behind the camera: "*When you shoot, I want the camera this close to the person… I want a feeling that you have entered their field of vision. Not the older way of doing it, hiding someplace and shooting in a distance…I will talk to them and you can shoot me as well…Don't switch off the camera, keep it on*." (fig. 6.11). This conversation reveals the style Wu wants in his film, and the agenda behind his action.

FIGURE 6.11. Wu's camera shows the cameraman in close-up in this frame in *Criticizing China* (2008).

Then the camera is given to the cameraman, recording Wu in action in the 'now' - interacting with people in the park. It also records Wu's reflective talk inwards to the camera, asking the cameraman what to film. The handheld camera follows Wu's back, as he is walking towards people in the park. His voice-over expresses his worry and excitement: "*I have been waiting for this day for so long*". When he walks into the crowd, the camera captures people's reaction to him and his camera, as people start to spread out. At this moment, he and the camera behind him are like a grenade thrown into the public, to enrage people and provoke their reaction. The camera documents how Wu delivers his idea of filmmaking and democracy to these people, and how these people gradually understand his idea. Intercut with the 'now' of filming is the close-up of Wu's face filmed in the 'now' of editing. This close-up shot of Wu staring at the camera cuts back several times, narrating the story and examining his action in the 'now' of filming.

XUE JIANQIANG – documenting haphazard activities in daily experience

Xue presents his action almost exclusively in the 'now' of filming, unlike Wu Haohao, who presents his action in both the filming and editing stages. Xue's films are non-planned first person diaries that document his daily encounters and experiences. In his films, Xue is always on the move, holding a small amateur DV camera in his hand, recording his interaction with others at extremely close range. Xue uses long takes that document whole events or conversations without cuts. The images he records are usually very shaky, and are not well composed. In both of his films analysed here, he presents some random life sequences at the beginning and at the end of the films, without much link to his main action in the films. This roughness of the images and the randomness of the opening and the ending sequences not only give his films a strong amateurish feel, but also indicate that he is in the 'middle' of his activities, while filming is just to record this. As the filmmaker Guo Xizhi comments on him in *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young*, Xue uses the camera almost like a microphone, rather than as a moving image recorder.

In *Martian Syndrome*, Xue's personal camera records a one-night encounter with a homeless young man with neurasthenia who calls himself 'Martian', when Xue visits his artist friend living in Cao Changdi, a suburban artist's colony in Beijing. The film, 83 minutes long, consists of only 5 long takes.

Xue himself does not physically appear on camera. His camera is extremely close to the characters, making their talk seem like hysterical and self-contradictory confessions. In the middle of the film, Xue puts down the camera to beat up Martian. The camera does not stop filming and records this moment, as we can hear the sound. Unlike Wu, Xue does not use any reflexive first person narration. Instead, Xue inserts some 'playbacks' of this encounter in reversed colour, to contrast people's behaviours and languages. These 'playbacks' can be seen as some reflections of Xue in the stage of editing, when he examines this encounter. But without making judgement himself, Xue just presents these contradictions for the audience to make their own judgement. After the one-night event, the film cuts to a shot that Xue filmed a week after this. This is the only shot that takes place during the daytime in the film. In this shot, two people are talking about a film in a screening event in the foreground, then the camera zooms in, focusing on

'Martian' sitting in the background. This is the moment Xue rediscovers 'Martian', but again in a self-maintained, independent art and film community. The openness of the ending and the roughness of the image indicate what is being recorded in this film is part of his daily experience, as a young migrant individual trying to become a filmmaker in the capital Beijing.

Like *Martian Syndrome*, *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* only presents Xue in the action of filming. The film records Xue's attacks on various filmmakers at different independent film festivals, including Wu Wenguang, Guo Xizhi, and Xu Tong at casual gatherings and while dining. In fact the title *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* is an old Chinese saying which indicates the action of a younger generation to criticise and to deny the older generation, in order to establish their own authority.

The film begins with Xue directly addressing his intention to criticise the elder independent filmmakers. The handheld camera reveals that it is the award ceremony at Beijing Independent Documentary Film Festival and we can hear Xue talking to others from behind the camera. When the presenter on the stage announces Xue's name, Xue hands the camera to someone next to him, and walks on to the stage to receive the 'Best New Filmmaker' award. The shot continues and zooms in, showing that Xue stands on the stage and states to the audience that his next film will criticise documentary filmmakers. In the following part of the film, Xue takes the action of provocatively approaching the elder established filmmakers, to set up a debate and address his own understanding of the purpose of documentary filmmaking. Most of the time, he talks while he is filming, almost using the camera as a microphone. The image is very rough, with limited light and sometimes out of focus.

Xue's film not only reveals the whole process of his 'attack', but also how others respond to him, when they speak to Xue's camera. This is coherent within his agenda that documentary should function for self-healing and self-criticism. During the time that Xue has been making films, there have been increasingly frequent debates within the independent filmmakers' community about how filmmakers should position

themselves in relation to their subjects and the audience.[447] Xue reveals that he has been thinking about the function of documentary and he does not agree with the current observational style that dominates the majority of Chinese independent new documentaries.[448] As a newcomer to the independent documentary film world, Xue stands for the position that filmmaking is ultimately for self understanding.

AI WEIWEI – the action of a collective of public selves on three levels

Ai Weiwei's *Laomatihua* (English title 'Disturbing the Peace') documents an incident that Ai and a group of 'public citizen investigation' volunteers encountered when they traveled to Sichuan to testify in the defence ofan independent political investigator, Tan Zuoren. Tan Zuoren had been investigating the relationship between the quality of school buildings and local officer corruption, and had been prosecuted for subversion of the state power by the government.

Strictly speaking, this is not a documentary of a singular first person narrative of Ai Weiwei himself. In fact, it is a first person practice of a collective group, including Ai Weiwei and the 'citizen investigation' volunteers. Though Ai Weiwei is the main character and the advocate of this practice, the film is neither filmed nor edited by him. This is different from the films by Wu Haohao and Xue Jianqiang, who complete their films by themselves from the filming to the editing.

As a collective action, the film represents action on three levels. The first level is the action of Ai and his group going to Chengdu to testify in Tan's defence, which later turns into the action of appealing the local authority. The second level is the action of filming by the cameraman Zhao Zhao most of the time. The third level is the action of editing, disseminating and distributing the other two levels of action.

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[447] There have been some heated debates on fanhall.com (现象网, *xianxiang wang*), the independent filmmakers' online forum founded by the film programmer and film festival director Zhu Rikun. However, the website was permanently closed in March 2011, which might be because of its explicit rebellion and opposition to the official media policy and ideology. In addition, such debates have also been discussed through email exchanges in the Chaochangdi email group, which is by invitation only.

[448] Author's interview, 2010.

The first level of action is led by Ai Weiwei, who is also the main character because of the illegal treatment he received by the police. In fact, the film opens with the leader Ai Weiwei sitting in front of the camera in a medium close-up, explaining to the camera, the audience, the reason he went to Chengdu, which is to investigate the death of students in the Sichuan earthquake of May 12, 2008.

Then it cuts to the beginning of their journey. A few shots show that the group is on the train going to Sichuan. It is a joyful start, as everyone is confident and shows strong belief in what they are doing. Arriving in Chengdu, the camera follows the group as they check-in to a hotel and go for dinner. Ai is easily identified as the leader, as he is always surrounded by others and the camera focuses on him most of the time. When they come back to the hotel, Ai finds an unknown car outside the hotel and he comes to talk to the people in the car, aware that his group have been 'watched' by national security agents. That night, a dozen policemen force their way into the hotel and break into Ai and his volunteers' rooms. Ai is hit by the police and one of the volunteers is arrested. The police hold them in the hotel for 11 hours, until Tan's trial is finished.

While most of the film is recorded by the cameraman, two moments are Ai Weiwei's own first person recording. The first one is the moment when the police knock fiercely on the door of Ai's room at 3 am. While Ai refuses to open the door, they break in and hit Ai on the head. Having been dealing with the police for a long time, Ai is very conscious of keeping a record using every means possible. At this moment, Ai switches on the sound recorder. In the darkness, we hear the confrontation between Ai and the local police. The second one is a picture taken by Ai's mobile-phone, shown at the end of the film. After the police beat him in his room, Ai is accompanied by the police into a lift. In the picture, Ai stands in the middle, surrounded by the policemen. He raises his left hand holding a mobile phone above his head, and his eyes are looking at the phone. The flash of the phone-camera sparkles, documenting this moment as the evidence of the illegal arrest by the state authorities (fig. 6.12). These two moments are kept as evidence of the incident, which marks the turning point of their journey.

FIGURE 6.12. Ai takes a picture of himself surrounded by policemen by a mobile phone in *Laomatihua* (2009).

After the incident, the group appeals to the local rule of law for an explanation for their using illegal procedures to arrest citizens. In this action of appealing, not only Ai Weiwei, but also the others, such as the lawyer Hu, and volunteer Liu, also equally help to construct a rights-conscious collective of public selves. The lawyer Hu is the first one on camera when Ai's group meets after the incident and Tan's trial. He takes the action of addressing their view to foreign journalists and explains the context. Then the group goes to different ruling institutions of the local city, such as the police station, the procurator and the court, to ask for an official explanation.

The second level of action is taken by the cameraman. It is important to notice the changing role of the cameraman before and after the incident. Before the incident, the cameraman Zhao Zhao follows the group around, making a record of their journey, without the intention of crafting the footage for a documentary.[449] He does not care whether it is too dark or too noisy to film. The handheld image is very rough, sometime even out of focus. There are some long takes, and jump cuts. Zhao does not intentionally capture anything dramatic. After the incident, the cameraman Zhao Zhao is more conscious of his camera's power. His camera has gone beyond the role of a 'witness', but has become an important weapon to subvert the state authority. I will explore Zhao Zhao's action in more detail in the next part when I discuss how individuals confront state power.

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[449] "Sun TV's interview with Ai Weiwei."

The editing process is the third level of action by Ai's studio. While at the filming stage, the group and the camera are not very conscious of the audience, at the editing stage, the editor and Ai have a strong awareness of the audience. In fact, the initiative of putting the footage together into a film is to show to a wider population what has happened to stop them testifying with their evidence in defence of Tan. Ai first circulated the sound recording and the self-portrait photograph online through social network websites, then Ai thought of constructing the footage into a film.[450] The film is credited as "an Ai Weiwei Studio production". Ai does not put himself as a director, and gives credit to the cameraman, editor, music and etc. It seems that Ai Weiwei does not really care whether this documentary can be 'a piece of work' that gains him recognition as a filmmaker. His aim is to disseminate their action of fighting for legal justice. In this sense, the film itself is only a 'carrier' of the action.

Lastly, it is interesting to know that the Chinese title of the film, *Laomatihua*, is in fact named after a famous local Sichuan dish of boiled pig's feet, which they ate the night before the police attack. When Ai was asked why he chose to use this name for the title of the film, he explained that what has been recorded in the film is very resistant and dramatic, but he does not want to give a politically sensitive title to the film. Instead, choosing a title that seems irrelevant to the incident can attract more normal audiences to click the link, watch the film, and laugh about it with bitterness.[451] In this sense, taking such a title is to avoid political sensitivity so that the film could immediately be widely disseminated in virtual public space without attracting undue attention. In addition, Ai reveals that the title is very humorous, which also demonstrates their gesture and attitude to what has happened to them – aside from the sorrow and disbelief, there are also their wry smiles.[452] Compared with the Chinese title, the English title "Disturbing the Peace", which was originally used to describe a criminal action of upsetting the normal order in a public space, is more direct and to the point.

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[450] The film was first put online in early September 2009.

[451] "Sun TV's interview with Ai Weiwei."

[452] Ibid.

Overall, while the practice of the three filmmakers (including Ai's film group) can all be seen as provocative social practice, as they are actively pushing the boundaries of established social relations, they each have slightly different focus, using different approaches. Wu Haohao's practice functions more for self-understanding and self-development. To achieve it, he uses more self-reflexive methods, by presenting his action and thinking in both the filming and editing stage. Sharing some of his agenda with Wu, Xue Jianqiang thinks filmmaking should be a practice of self-criticism and self-healing. In addition to presenting himself at the filming stage, Xue also self-reflexively presents how others respond to and criticise him. In this case, the film functions as a mirror through which the self can reflexively look inward for self-understanding.

Unlike Wu and Xue's films, *Laomatihua*, though credited as a film by Ai Weiwei's studio is not strictly a first person film of a single individual self, as many audiences may perceive. This is because though Ai himself speaks to the camera in the opening sequence, giving the reason for making this film, and contributes some first person materials such as the sound recording, the film is not filmed or edited by him, but by other individuals working in his studio. However, I argue that the film is made by a collective of 'public selves' led by Ai and demonstrate the desire for individual rights and self-protection of the first person plural. As I analysed above, in addition to Ai, other individuals in the group, such as the lawyer and the cameraman also participate actively in the legal appeal and contribute to the filmmaking in different ways.

III. The 'public self' as the seen: seeking a change within complex relations

In this section, I focus on the 'public self' as the *seen.* Through analysing their films on the textual level, I will explore how the self is situated in varying social relations in multiple public spaces in a society in transition. I notice that of the five films, two of them (*Kun 1: Action* and *Martian Syndrome*) express a strong desire by individual selves for a more politicised community where they can find social and emotional care. The filmmakers of these two films, Wu and Xue turn their personal camera inwards to

film their individual spaces and the absence of community in the individualising cityscape. The other three films, Wu's *Criticizing China*, Xue's *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young*, and Ai Weiwei's *Laomatihua* illustrate some features of how individuals interact with each other in *minjian* public spaces - non-governmental grassroots public spaces. These films demonstrate that the traditional moral norms influenced by the family ethical relations are still playing an important role in defining the interpersonal interaction even in *minjian* public space, especially on the relationship between the old and the young. In addition, these films also demonstrate the changing relationship between individuals and the state.

1.   The 'public self' in one's own space

In *Kun 1: Action* and *Martian Syndrome*, the filmmakers Wu and Xue turn their personal camera inwards to film their individual spaces and the absence of community in the individualising cityscape. In these two films, the main characters, born in the late 1980s, feel extremely lost in China's neo-liberal period when they grew up. It reflects the fact that while younger generation individuals have been given more freedom and autonomy than the elder generation to develop their own lives, they have lost the social protection, as well as the psychological sense of security and belonging, that the elder generation used to have through being part of '*danwei*' system in the old Mao's China. While the first part of *Kun 1: Action* solely focuses on Wu's own isolated self, Xue's *Martian Syndrome* depicts the problems and difficulties in communication of several young individuals, including Xue himself, who live in migrant artist ghettos in the suburbs of metropolitan Beijing. Both films illustrate the lack of community life, and express a strong desire by individual selves for a more politicised community where they can find emotional and material security.

Kun 1: Action – filmic body writing and different layers of self

In the first half of *Kun 1: Action*, Wu presents his physical body and his isolated personal space in an almost indulgent manner. I argue that Wu is undertaking a filmic

diary of 'body writing', a term originally used to describe the women's individualised writing that takes one's own body as "the innermost, deepest and most intimate parts of life for exploration and reflection".[453] In fact Wu Haohao's filmic 'male body writing' shares some similarities with the women's body writing, as he also focuses on "sexuality and psychological conflicts".[454] Wu's focus on sexuality is explicitly shown through his obsession with his own body. Being so close to his self physically, he presents his body in a highly narcissistic and self-indulgent manner. The nude dominates the scenery of the first half of the film and sets up a solitary feeling that dominates the overall tone of the film. In addition, Wu's male body filmic diary writing is not just a 'private event' that is limited to himself.[455] Exhibited through his personal camera, which acts as a mediator, Wu's personal space has become a public site where the self has become a 'public self' performing to the audience in the mediated public space, or what Berry regards as the electronic elsewhere.[456] The different layers of the self in the mode of looking, being looked at and relooking are in conversation with each other, and communicating with the audience.

After the title sequence, the first shot is Wu's emotionless face in the dark. The subtitle says that it is his first year at university. Then it cuts to Wu lying on the bed half naked, smoking in the darkness, while another young man sits at the side. This is him in the second year. In the third shot, Wu lies on the bed completely naked. It cuts to another angle shot from the end of his bed. Wu then sits up looking at the camera. This is him in the third year. In these three shots, Wu gradually exposes his body more explicitly in his university dormitory.

In the following sequences, Wu's personal camera reveals this space in more detail: a simple standard four-people university dorm in a typical university '*sushe lou'*, which literally means dormitory building. A shot shows Wu's naked upper body as he stands on the small balcony (fig. 6.13). The camera pans to the left, revealing that what

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[453] Wedell-Wedellsborg, "Between Self and Community," 175.

[454] Ibid., 173.

[455] David E. James regards film diary merely as "a private event, where consumption, especially consumption by others, is illicit" (James, "Film Diary/Diary Film," 147).

[456] Berry, "New Documentary in China".

surrounds this building are the same concrete building blocks intensively erected, filling up the cityscape and breaking the grey sky in pieces. Small balconies and windows are like little drawers inserted into the buildings. Wu imprisons himself in one of these 'drawers'. As his voice-over states, the city is like 'a morbid congregational zone'.

FIGURE 6.13. Wu stands in the small balcony of his university dormitory looking outside in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

In several scenes, Wu explicitly 'looks' at his own body, through the view-finder of the DV camera, which acts as a mirror, or at the recorded image shown on his computer screen. In the 1970s, the art critic Rosalind Krauss pointed out the narcissistic nature of video, as the body of the self is centred between the camera and the monitor, which "re-project the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror".[457] With the small digital video camera, the self is looking at his self on camera almost like looking at a mirror, as the viewfinder is within the camera, next to the lens. In Wu's film, the concentration on his own body forges an isolation that enhances the solitude. In *Kun 1: Action*, the distances between different layers of his self are created through temporal distance. While the 'I' in the filming is watching the self narcissistically through its own lens , the 'I' in the editing stage keeps commenting on the self, looking back at itself in the past.

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[457] Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 52.

你也明白了你自己与这个世界
You understand the world and yourself

FIGURE 6.14. Wu stares at the camera, or the reflection of himself through the lens in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

In one scene, Wu stares at the camera in close-up, as though he is looking at himself in the view-finder. The voice-over comments that '*through examining the world, I know my self better*' (fig. 6.14). At these moments, three selves are in conversation; the self in the stage of editing, the self presented on camera, and the self who is filming (or just the one who presses the record button). Through looking, being looked at, and relooking, he is trying to deconstruct himself and understand himself and his relationship with his surroundings.

In addition, the computer which connects to virtual space is another conduit that opens him up to the outside world. The virtual space that offers no temporal spatial limitation is in high contrast with the physical reality in which he chooses to be. This is the space through which he can communicate with others, and look at and examine himself through editing. The first person voice-over constantly reminds us of the existence of another time, the 'now' of editing, while it is presented in a digital space on a computer. In one sequence, Wu sits in front of the computer, presenting his upper body on camera. Then it cuts to the same image shown on the computer screen, which indicates that we are now seeing the stage of editing. His body occupies his private room, his computer screen and his camera (figs. 6.15, 6.16).

FIGURE 6.15   FIGURE 6.16

FIGURE 6.15-6.16 The close-up shot of Wu sitting in front of the camera is followed by the
same shot shown through the editing 'window' on his computer in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

In analysing the individualised women's writings, Wedell-Wedellsborg mentioned that
"[W]e may also interpret the seclusion of the protagonist as a longing for a different
kind of community from that available to her, and her subsequent breakdown as that of
a self without embedding it in some sort of collective…What is left is the imagined
community to which the text repeatedly - implicitly as well as explicitly - refers: that of
writing".[458] Similarly, Wu's seclusion can also be seen as a longing for a more
'politicised' community in which he can reach out and have direct interaction with
others. Unlike what Wedell-Wedellsborg regards as the 'imagined community' through
the practice of writing in one's own space, filmmaking as a practice to approach others,
interacting with other individuals, has gone beyond the 'imagined community' of one's
own. After showing Wu's indulgent obsession of looking at himself through the camera
lens and the computer screen, he and his personal camera have moved beyond his small
personal space, to have interaction with others.

His desire for action is, to some extent, a reaction to his limitations – a desire to break
through the boundaries. A long take shows that Wu is walking in a long corridor, back
and forth, while his voice-over continues "*only actions are able to break through those
boundaries. Now our lives have been so decadent. An acting force and its counterforce
interact with each other perfectly*". This is an important transitional scene in the film
and also the one that explicitly demonstrates his agenda of action filmmaking.

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[458] Wedell-Wedellsborg, "Between Self and Community," 176-177.

Following this, Wu presents his action of approaching different characters and talking to them to explore their lives and concerns. Taking as the role of a psychiatrist, Wu lets them make confessions to his camera, speaking out about their emotion, pain and confusion about love, life and sex. Wu's camera acts as a window through which the subjects disclose themselves. For example, in a ten-minute long sequence, a university girl confesses her love story to Wu's camera in an extreme close-up shot (fig. 6.17).

FIGURE 6.17. A university girl is presented in extreme close-up, disclosing her confusion about love to Wu's camera in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

Collecting individual confessions mostly in the subjects' own individual spaces, the film reflects a desire for communication and a sense of community of a larger group of individuals. In addition, Wu's filmic body writing is not just limited to filming his own body, but also expands to others' bodies and sexual interactions between him and others. After presenting a close-up of a young woman, Bingbing's, face (fig. 6.18), the camera gradually zooms out, presenting the full face of a pretty young woman (fig. 6.19). Wu's voice-over states, "Women, I need them. I want to make love with women, so I film them." After introducing Binging, Wu states in the voice-over that he has entered Bingbing's body. Presenting Bingbing's face as a beautiful flawless specimen, and women as beautiful objects that he is desperate for, Wu explicitly presents his instinctive sexual desire. The directness of his sexual expression indicates his position of taking women as objects to gaze at and to obtain.
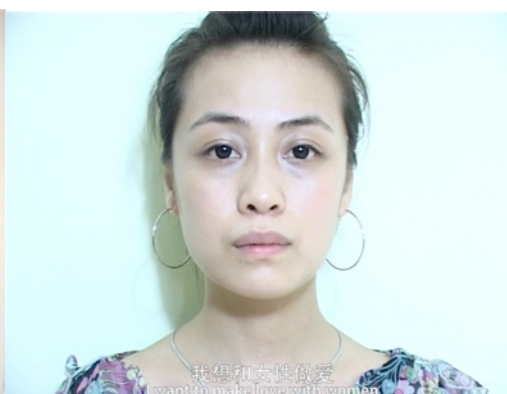
FIGURE 6.18   FIGURE 6.19

FIGURE 6.18-6.19 Wu's camera gazes at the young girl Bingbing as if observing a beautiful specimen in *Kun 1: Action* (2008).

Martian Syndrome – the absence of community and problems of communication among vulnerable young selves

The desire for communication and the state of solitude expressed in Wu Haohao's *Kun 1: Action* is also manifested in Xue's *Martian Syndrome.* Shot on a dark night, it is difficult to see what the physical space looks like. Xue's insider's first person camera depicts this space as full of insecurity, coldness, and deception. In addition, the lack of trust is explicitly illustrated through Xue's own problematic behaviour; as we can hear he openly lies to his subject and beats him up.

Throughout the film, Xue holds the camera as an extension of his own eyes. Because of the lack of light, Xue uses the night mode and puts the camera extremely close to the characters' face. This night mode creates the greenish look that makes people's faces look very pale and emotionless, and their eyes lack focus. This visual style enhances what is depicted in the film, the problem of communication. Xue's camera coldly and aggressively captures these individuals in their most unprotected, fragile and vulnerable moments in their own loneliness. Though not presenting himself on camera, Xue constantly speaks from behind the camera, asking questions, chatting with the subjects; he even records the sound of himself beating up one of the subjects.

After the title sequence, the film begins with a long take, tracing a young girl wandering in the empty open night street, slowly moving forward. The young girl directs Xue's camera forward into the darkness. Switching to the night mode, Xue's camera is looking for the way to his friend, Xiaodong's, place along a long dark corridor. The first voice that comes to him is from a stranger, asking Xue whether he is a painter or filmmaker, while another man (later known to be Xue's friend who comes with him) reveals that Xue does not know anything but is only an amateur. Moving forwards, another person comes to talk to them, asking in a low but aggressive voice "*Has Xiaodong come back? I'm Wang Xi.*"(fig. 6.20). Xue's friend asks "Wang Xi? Who?" Then he starts to talk to Wang Xi, while Xue's camera traces Wang's face in a close-up shot.

FIGURE 6.20. Wang Xi's pale, anxious face in *Martian Syndrome* (2010).

From the conversations, we know that Wang Xi was born in 1986 and comes from a regional area in the middle of China. He has been in Beijing for several months with a dream to become an artist, but finds it difficult to make a living. As he reveals, he does not have a place to live, nor has he any food or money. He has been waiting here for a few hours hoping to talk to Xiaodong and get some food. Wang regards himself as 'Martian', coming from a totally different world. In this vast metropolitan city where new sets of interpersonal relations are forming, 'Martian' finds it difficult to communicate with others. As he says: "*People do not express their feelings directly, pretending to speak in a civilised language that is in fact very cold.*"

While the conversations between 'Martian', Xue's friend, and Xue just build up the audience's emotional engagement with Martian, Xue's camera enters Xiaodong's room outside which 'Martian' has been waiting. The handheld image is out of focus. In the darkness the image finally comes into focus, and we see a half naked man. This is Xiaodong. Seeing Xue's friend arrive, Xiaodong hugs him from behind, and starts to cry like a small baby (figs. 6.21 and 6.22). The masculinity that is usually associated with men as shown in mainstream TV & film has totally disappeared. Xiaodong is presented as weak and vulnerable. Xue's friend tries to console him and accompanies him to the bedroom where they sit on the bed in the dark. Xiaodong is continuously crying while hysterically muttering about how the way 'Martian' was knocking at the door so aggressively has made him scared and hopeless. Speaking very fast and keeping on repeating himself, Xiaodong says that he is driven to neurasthenia by 'Martian'.

FIGURES 6.21 - 6.22: Xiaodong hugs his friend from behind, while his friend tries to comfort him. Then he starts to cry: "It scares me" in *Martian Syndrome* (2010).

The aimless chatting among Xiaodong, Xue's friend and Xue from behind the camera lasts for more than twenty minutes. Throughout the film, it is never revealed explicitly whether Xiaodong is homosexual, but in several places, the characters openly talk about homosexuality in an aggressive way. Xiaodong mentions that he does not mind 'playing' with 'Martian' for a night as long as he does not bother him again (fig. 6.23). To confirm this, Xue cuts back to an earlier shot and marks it in revised colour, showing that Wang Xi says Xiaodong wanted to have sex with him the night before (fig. 6.24). The film does not reveal whether Xiaodong's neurasthenia is because of his hidden sexual identity that is not openly accepted in this society. Apparently in contradiction with his homosexual identity is the fact that he has a wife, as he says that he has been saving money with his wife, hoping to buy their own place to live.

FIGURE 6.23. Xiaodong sits in the dark saying to his friend that he can have sex with Wang.

FIGURE 6.24. In an earlier shot which the filmmaker Xue marks '57 minutes ago', Wang Xi says that Xiaodong wanted to have sex with him last night but he refused.

The film is a first person film, not only because Xue holds the camera and encounters the incident as a witness, but also in that he also gets involved in the relations himself. In the middle of the conversation with Xiaodong inside the room, Xue goes out talking to 'Martian', as 'Martian' asks him for the tape that has his images. However, Xue lies to him that he did not film him and threatens 'Martian' to go away otherwise he will call the police. While 'Martian' refuses to go, Xue puts the camera down on the floor and fights with 'Martian' in the dark, long corridor. We can hear the sound of Xue beating 'Martian' up. Then Xue picks up the camera again and walks inside the room. When Xue's friend comments on Xue's action, Xue jokes that this is the new concept – action

documentary, a new style in which the director should engage with the event he's filming (fig. 6.25). The character Xiaodong is emotionless, asking whether Xue can still film as it is too dark. As one of the main characters in the film, it seems that Xiaodong does not really know what Xue has filmed and what it is for. Though in the later film, *Beat the Tiger*, Xue openly criticises the elder documentary filmmakers' problematic strategies, Xue himself seems also to fall into the dilemma of using his subjects for his own filmmaking purposes. In this sequence, Xue becomes the central character in the film, whose action is not just to film this one night encounter, but also to directly engage with the subjects – other young individuals like himself trying to survive in metropolitan Beijing.

FIGURE 6.25. Xue's voice comes from behind the camera, saying to his friend and Xiaodong that his method of participating in the filmed event is based on a new concept.

The final sequence is a long shot in which 'Martian' and Xiaodong have a long talk through the window. Wu's camera faces the back of Xiaodong, leaving the two to talk, with no intervention except when 'Martian' asks for the tape again. In Xue's camera, both Xiaodong and 'Martian' are desperately searching for emotional care and communication, however, they both hysterically express themselves, finding it difficult to communicate.

In short, both *Kun 1: Action* and *Martian Syndrome* illustrate individuals isolated in their own space outside the familial places, desiring communication and understanding.

Wu Haohao reveals that "we are so poor, but not in terms of materials - though we are not rich either. We are poor because we desperately need communication, and emotional care".[459] The retreat of the state from public life since the economic transition to the neo-liberal model has left young individuals to develop their own biographies and careers. While having more freedom to make choices about their own lives, they have also lost the lifesaver that has been available for previous generations, such as *danwei*, the work unit, a lifelong work place in the cities that also offers social benefits, like housing and medical care. Born in rural or regional areas, Wu Haohao and Xue Jianqiang have gone to cities to develop their own lives. In the highly marketised and commercialised social space, individuals find no one to rely on, but only their own selves.

2.   The 'public self' in the emerging minjian public space

The other three films, Wu's *Criticizing China*, Xue's *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young,* and Ai Weiwei's *Laomatihua* illustrate the 'public self' in new 'socialities', a term coined by Yan Yunxiang to describe the social interactions among individuals as individuals in their public lives. These films all indicate the rise of *minjian* public space. Such a public space spontaneously emerges through grassroots independent social-political participation, such as the local public debate corner in *Criticizing China,* the independent filmmaking community in *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young,* and the voluntary political activist organisation in *Laomatihua*.

It is important to note that these three filmmakers do not just document the *minjian* public space through their own personal vision, but also further provoke existing social relations in the *minjian* public spaces. By close inspection of these three films, I notice that even in *minjian* public space, the traditional moral norms that have been influenced by family ethical relations play an important role in defining how individuals interact with each other, especially in the relationship between the old and the young. In addition, these films also demonstrate the changing relationship between individuals and the state. Wu's *Criticizing China* illustrates the fact that many people still think

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[459] Author's interview, 2010.

individual rights are very limited, through their reaction towards the camera. However, along with the increasing activist movement on the Internet and among a small number of activist groups in social life, there has been the rise of a new form of citizenship which requests equal opportunities and individual rights. Ai Weiwei's *Laomatihua* and Wu's *Criticizing China* illustrate the sense of new citizenship among a group of individuals.

Criticizing China - contestable *minjian* public space and limited understanding of individual rights

In *Criticizing China*, the *minjian* space captured through Wu's camera is a common leisure park near residential areas that typically exist in China's urban scenery. Such a public space brings people from the local residential area together to relax and to do exercise. In this film, the physicality of the space itself as a common park contributes to the formation of a local community. It re-enhances the notion of collectiveness, which is declining as work union and state-subsidised residential areas (as depicted in Hu Xinyu's *Family Phobia*) are gradually transformed into private companies and private real estate. The park becomes a site where local residents spontaneously gather together for political debates. As many old people talk to Wu in the film, they have been keeping coming here every day for a few years. Everyone knows each other's political position and taste. However, they do not intend to form a group with a political agenda, but just to show their personal concern about the nation.

The title of the film *Criticizing China* can be understood from different perspectives. It can refer to the activity of local people criticising Chinese politics, as Wu documents in the film. In addition, it can refer to Wu's gesture of criticising these local people who do not dare to face the camera. Lastly, from the audience's point of view, 'criticising China' also means to criticise the problematic social ethics practiced by individuals, exemplified by the interaction of Wu with the local people.

Wu Haohao's initial idea is to record a group of retired old people gathering in a local park for public debates. Entering this community, Wu does not introduce himself

through traditional relations, in which he is positioned as the youngster and has to listen and respect the elders' speech. Instead, Wu presents himself as an equal independent individual with social responsibilities, by bringing a cameraman with him to film the elders' public debates.

As documented by the camera, as soon as Wu enters this space, his filmmaking practice raises a new discussion on the role of the camera and the power of the individual. Their different attitudes reflect how people conceive the relationships between individuals with others and with the state. To a great extent, the film reveals that this *minjian* public space still exists under the umbrella of the official public space controlled by the authority. The camera is regarded as the eyes from 'above'. When Wu walks into the crowd in the park with a camera following him, many people suddenly become very conscious of the camera. They express a strong suspicion, assuming that the camera is from a controlling power, and try to avoid it.

FIGURE 6.26

FIGURE 6.27

FIGURE 6.28

FIGURE 6.29

FIGURE 6.30   FIGURE 6.31

FIGURE 6.32   FIGURE 6.33

FIGURES 6.26 to 6.33. When Wu and his camera held by the cameraman enter the crowd, people start to be very suspicious of his camera. All from one long take from *Criticizing China* (2008).

Most people still regard a camera as a form of state power, rather than the power of the individual to raise their voice. Wu stands in the middle of the crowd, trying to explain his agenda (figs. 6.26 – 6.33). The camera follows their discussion in a long take, illustrating people's insecure feelings toward the camera, which in extension represents an invisible power that surrounds them. When the camera films a middle-aged man in a white shirt who criticises Chinese politics, a man in brown walks to the white-shirted man and asks him to walk away from the camera. The camera watches from behind them, while Wu walks towards them and says: "*Don't be afraid really, we are just shooting a documentary*." The man in brown asks: "*What do you do?*" Wu answers: "*We make documentary, independent documentary*." Another man asks: "*Where will you show it?*" Wu answers: "*we want to reflect real people's lives*." The man in brown says: "*How can you reflect real people's lives?*" Wu answers: "*We will try our best.*" Facing backward to the camera, the man in white says: "*They are from the state TV station*". Wu responds: "*We are not from the TV station, we are different from them. We are independent.*" For the local people, they do not know what the camera can do, and whom the camera represents. Police, journalists, or foreign media? They try to avoid the camera carefully and have a strong fear that the camera may represent the state.

After showing people's response to the camera, Wu compares people's attitude to the camera with how people responded to the camera in Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *China* (1972). Inserting some clips from *China*, Wu's voice-over comments: "Look at these Chinese, they look alike. Times have changed, but their

facial expressions haven't change." At this moment, the filmmaker Wu is at the stage of editing, reflexively looking back, and comments on how people respond to his action of filming. As Wu expresses in his voice-over, this reflects how individuals understand themselves in China. He explicitly criticises the fact that people are still afraid of expressing themselves on camera.

Interestingly, some people reject Wu not because he might come from the 'above', the government, but because he is a youngster, an individual, who does not have the right to do so. Some think they do not have the right to film them as the filmmakers have invaded their privacy. When the camera comes close to a man, the man asks them: "*Who do you represent?*" Wu, standing beside him, says that: "*We are independent, representing ourselves.*" "*Yourselves? Then you shouldn't film. If you are from state media, then you can interview us, but if you just do it for yourself, then you do not have the right. You intervene in our privacy.*"

In another shot, a man wearing sunglasses says loudly that "*I really hate this kind of behaviour…Go away! We are all senior and you are even younger than my children. Who do you think you are! You are so disgusting, dressing like a woman.*"(fig. 6.34). People start to walk away. Then it cuts to a woman talking to Wu with anger: "*You don't have permission to film them, so you are wrong. Child. If you shoot me again I will break your camera. You children! You need to respect, as an individual you need to respect them (the old)...See all of them are older than your father. They are all senior workers. You are weird.*" Wu tries to communicate with them, stating loudly that "*The media in China need transparency*". However, the man in sunglasses still shouts at them "*You shameless people. You should go! Child, you should go off to earn money and not be doing this…You (long hair) like women, are you men or women?*"

FIGURE 6.34. The man in sunglasses refuses to be filmed in *Criticizing China* (2008).

Without knowing their intentions, people around start to ask them to leave, or say they can stay there without filming them. The governmental power is so huge that individuals find it difficult to trust each other. However, these people in the film reject Wu's shooting by positioning Wu as the junior, the youngster, in relation to them, the senior, the elder. They also explicitly attack the masculinity of Wu and the cameraman, as they both have long hair tied in a ponytail. It reveals that the traditional social relations between the old and the young still constrain many elder generation people as to how to interact with other individuals, especially the younger. In addition, they have a very traditional idea of how men should look, as the freedom for men to have long hair is not ethically and aesthetically accepted. The way they refuse to be filmed is through insulting Wu and his cameraman in autocratic cursing and aggressive language. While the filmmakers make claims for their own individual rights, they are in fact invading others. Behind the excuse of invading privacy is still people's fear of what the camera represents.

Others think that they are too young to effect any change. An old man comes to him, asking whether he has a journalist's permission card. Wu answers: "*We are not journalists. We represent ourselves.*" The old man asks again "*If you film these discussions, both for and against the official line, will you show it on TV?*" Wu answers: "*No, we cannot.*" Then the old man says: "*This would not have any effect.*" In another shot, a man says "*you are still very young. How much can you reflect the reality?*" Another one says, "*You do not need to reflect our reality. Even if you do, you cannot change anything…You are still children…Children don't understand the society.*" This

reveals that people still do not believe that individuals have the ability to make any change.

However, the serious criticism does not stop Wu from filming. He participates himself in the discussion, confidently delivering his agenda. Wu's idea of democracy seems to be influenced by so-called American values. Facing rejection, he loudly states that *"When the American people see the camera, they all speak bravely in front of the camera, express themselves and address their problems. But look at us, seeing the camera like have seen a fire gun."* Later in the film, he also says that *"The American President once said, 'You always complain that the nation hasn't provided you with anything. But as individuals, what have you people brought to the nation?' I have a digital video recorder now, so that's what I do."* What Wu refers to is John F. Kennedy's speech at his inauguration in 20 January 1961: "And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." While some reply that *"Our nation does not have the same soil as America"*, Wu replies *"Our Chinese always think we individuals are very small."* Wu continues, *"What I care about is democracy in China. I need my camera to intervene in public events…If everyone thinks like you, then nothing can be changed."* For these elder generation individuals, this low individual trust is perhaps originated in the Cultural Revolution, when every individual could report on each other as anti-revolutionaries to the authorities. There were only 'friends' and 'enemies' even among familial relations.[460]

During the 'now' of filming, Wu leads the whole event actively, as a hero, or a 'saviour' of the people he talks to. Wu says to the elders that he wants to do something different; as he mentions, most young people of his age do not care about this. He wants to use his action to change people's attitudes towards the camera, and encourage public speech. Wu's 'public self' demonstrates a strong awareness of citizenship. As a younger generation individual, Wu interacts with people older than him as equal individuals, and openly manifests his understanding of the camera, democracy and individual relations. By doing so, he has stimulated people to think how to interact with each other as individuals in public space. Gradually some people start to accept him and talk to him. His brave intervention into this space occupied by the elders has made them accept him.

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[460] Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 83.

As is shown in the second half of the film, people gradually become more relaxed with his camera and start their public discussion again.

I Beat the Tiger When I was Young – challenging the old and the problematic public self

In *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young*, the *minjian* space that Xue has chosen is the independent filmmaking community, that has been established on the basis of a shared interest in social participation through independent filmmaking practice. There is no solid or concrete physical space for the film community as in *Criticizing China*. This *minjian* space is constructed by independent film festival and screening venues around different places in China. Marginality and mobility are the main characters of this space in physical form, which mirrors its shared agenda of independent practice that focuses on the socially and geographically marginal places. As an insider, Xue turns the camera inward to explore his own community. Travelling around different film festivals for screenings, Xue talks to filmmakers during their informal gatherings, prompting the elder independent filmmakers to reflect on the function of independent documentary film.

I Beat the Tiger When I was Young reveals that in the independent filmmaking community where filmmakers aim at independent self expression, the traditional social relationship between the old and the young still exists to some extent. However, openly challenging the elder filmmakers, Xue does not receive the elder's criticism, as Wu encounters in *Criticizing China*. Instead, this public space allows him to speak about his ideas and elder filmmakers share their thoughts with him. However, his challenge is expressed in an aggressive autocratic manner that is historically inherited, making himself a problematic character for the audience to relate to.

At first glance, *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* is about the function of documentary, as the first person filmmaker Xue Jianqiang discusses with different filmmakers in the film. In fact, as I observe, underpinning the discussion of documentary is how Xue's action of filmmaking and his language challenge the traditional social moral norms among individuals outside the familial space. Language in this film plays an important

role. While the narrative is led by Xue's action of 'attacking' elder filmmakers, his action is predominantly vocal criticism of others. The generational conflicts and communication problems provoked by Xue's attack closely relate to different language frames used by different generations.

After the title sequence, the film begins with a long shot of the award ceremony at Beijing Independent Film Festival. It is filmed by Xue himself among the audience. When Xue is announced as the winner of 'Young Promising Filmmaker', Xue passes the camera to a person next to him and goes on the stage to receive the award. Standing on the stage, Xue however, states very aggressively: "*My next film will criticise you – documentary filmmakers. You take yourself as a flaw in your film...While you ask the society to open up, your subjects to open up, you hide your selves behind the camera. You cut off all the footage that shows you. This is dictatorship. This is violence.*" This is the first time Xue presents himself on camera and he establishes himself as a highly provocative figure, epitomising individuals of the younger generation who desire self-recognition and dialogue as equals. While in *Criticizing China* Wu Haohao does not deliberately raise a problem, in *Beat the Tiger*, Xue is deliberately raising a conflict through his provocative language.

Following Xue's provocative speech is a black-and-white long take of Xue walking into Wu Wenguang's studio at Cao Changdi, an artists' colony in the northeast suburbs of Beijing. Walking through the yard, Xue captures the environment of Wu's studio, surrounded by big walls and doors, and some people sitting in the yard. Xue enters the room seeing Wu walking towards him. Xue asks from behind the camera: "*Could I talk to you? Do you have time?*" Wu does not even look at him, and continues walking toward the outside while saying that "*I do not have time*". Xue follows him, asks again: "*How about later*?" Wu continues doing his thing and does not reply. Xue keeps asking: "*How about when you finish your work?...Can you give me a reply?*" Wu walks way, saying "*No time!*" Xue insists "*Can I make an appointment with you?*" Wu walks away from the camera, impatiently saying that "*No time. I have things to do*". Xue turns around, leaving Wu's studio, while saying to himself, "*Such a busy man.*"

Shortly afterwards, Xue accompanies another director to Wu Wenguang's studio. This time, in the presence of other people, Wu does not refuse Xue, but jokes that Xue might want to curse him and put it online. While the camera points directly at Wu's face, Xue speaks behind that camera "*I want to know how you think of me?... Have you seen my film?*" While making fun of Xue's appearance, Wu says "*Not yet*". Xue replies, "*You are degenerate now as you don't watch new filmmakers' films…I watched your films so I want to have a talk with you. However, you said you didn't have time…Right? I want to learn from the elders, but the elders do not want to learn from the younger ones anymore… This is what I think personally.*" Wu tries to explain and justify himself. Then Xue says, "*Can I express my feelings about your films?*" Wu still says he has no time and needs to go. While Xue insists that he only wants to say it briefly, Wu finally allows Xue to speak. Xue states firmly that "*You do not have talent in documentary filmmaking anymore and should not make films anymore. But your villager documentary project is very good…I want to learn from you, so I watched all of your films…*" Xue's words surprise Wu, who is unprepared for this criticism. However, Wu pretends to be very calm and says nothing.

FIGURE 6.35. In the first encounter, Wu walks away, saying "*No time'* in *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young* (2010).

FIGURE 6.36. In the second encounter, Xue criticises Wu to his face: *"I think you do not have talent in documentary filmmaking anymore."*

In the first encounter between Xue and Wu, Xue's polite request for a dialogue has been impolitely refused by Wu (fig. 6.35). It is also because Xue does not even ask Wu for permission to film him. In their second encounter, Xue begins with a serious question as to how the established filmmaker Wu thinks of him. Having received in return a joke and a cold reply, Xue asks permission to express his opinion to the elder. Finally given a chance to speak, Xue does not do what a youngster should do, show humbleness and modesty. Instead, he expresses his real thoughts directly on camera, which for Wu is unacceptable (fig. 6.36).

In my interview with Wu a few months after Xue's visit, Wu states "The younger generation wants power (*quanli*, 权利) so much. They (both Wu Haohao and Xue Jianqiang) have been repressed for too long and they want their own authority, however, the way they do it is to beat all others… How does he ever have the authority to say that 'you should not make films anymore'? He does not have the authority to say so!"[461]

From Xue's perspective, Wu's impoliteness and arrogant attitude to the younger filmmakers and his hierarchical position have prevented the younger people from having equal opportunities to express themselves. Hence, equipped with the power of the camera, Xue directly challenges Wu, which many young people in the field do not dare to do. From Wu Wenguang's point of view, as he says in my interview, Xue's

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[461] Author's interview, 2010.

directness and aggression seriously challenge the conventional social moral norm *Xu* (序, the order) between the old and the young. In addition, Xue does not have the quality of a modern independent individual, as Xue does not show respect to others. In Wu's view, both Xue's aggressive camera that faces Wu, and Xue's direct comments on Wu's film indicate Xue's misuse of the power given by the presence of the camera.

Then it cuts to the Chengdu screening tour of independent films. On this occasion, Xue talks to several filmmakers during a casual gathering in between screenings. In one sequence, when the filmmakers sit around in an open yard, Xue comes to talk to them, and expresses his idea that filmmakers should reflect themselves. He puts the camera facing Ji Dan, an established woman filmmaker, and comments that Ji Dan's film is just beautiful but she does not reflect herself enough.

Ji Dan, however, does not feel challenged at all. Instead she replies calmly that people have different characters. Not every film should be the same. Another filmmaker Guo Xizhi sitting nearby makes reference to how new literature in the 1980s criticised the old forms of writing to indicate that "*We also used to beat the tiger when we were young.*" He mentions that "*It is not because something is new that it is always good... One style should not totally replace another. In those days everyone followed the 'on-the-spot' realism, now everyone follows the private personal documentary... One should think what one really wants and everyone has their own character.*"

Ji Dan points out the language differences. She states that "*For a long time we Chinese did not have confidence in our language... Since we were young we learnt about how to talk correctly and nicely. But this is not a language of our own. So a filmmaker friend of mine always says that I am making a speech...It's very sad that I cannot even remove it from myself. It becomes part of me... I am very afraid of writing. Whatever I write, it might be a word from any magazine or from any reading. Your generation do not have this problem. You are the sun. So you can criticise anyone and no one would hate you.*"(fig. 6.37). Ji Dan goes on to say that "*I don't think getting old is a good thing. At least I don't think so myself. We should be equal, so you do not need to discriminate against the elders...We are the mirror of your future.*" Ji Dan's words crucially point out how language has constructed people's minds. She is self-critical about how her

generation's language has been constructed by a doctrinaire education. In fact, when she describes Xue, "*You are the sun*", 'the sun' she uses is explicitly Mao's phrase to depict the young generation.

FIGURE 6.37. Ji Dan talking about the language differences, saying that "In the beginning I did not admit. Then I realise it is actually true."

In the same sense, Xue's autocratic language can also be seen as socially constructed. Xue uses his camera as a power to 'attack' the elders and to deliver his own 'theory' of documentary. However, the way he speaks is still in a violent dictatorial manner that aims to entirely demolish the old without any space for negotiation. Towards the end of the film, Xue goes to the stage after his film is shown at the Chongqing screening tour. Standing on the stage for a question and answer session with the audience, he restates his agenda that documentary should explore and 'anatomise' the self. "*The best function of documentary is to discover the weakness of the self, and reflect self, rather than entertaining.*" While disseminating his own understanding of documentary, he is, however, speaking like an arbiter, telling others what the best function of documentary should be. This logic of language is also shown in the other of Xue's films *Martian Syndrome*. In that film, the characters 'Martian', Xiaodong and even Xue himself speak in a violent and self-contradictory way, telling others what to do and denying what they have said violently. I argue that this kind of dictatorial language or formula is historically inherited and influenced by the traditional patriarchal structures, in which one authority, such as the father of the family, or the empire of the state, has the

authority to make rules asking all others to follow.[462] This kind of patriarchal structure was transformed into new forms in Mao's socialist era. Formulae, as important "cultural and linguistic artifacts",[463] play a crucial role in constructing and constraining how individuals think and express themselves, such as the revolutionary and destructive language spoken during the Cultural Revolution.

Laomatihua (a.k.a. Disturbing the Peace) – challenging state power and the collective public selves

In Ai Weiwei's *Laomatihua*, the *minjian* public space does not have a stable physical form either. It is a *minjian* organisation, a '*gongmin diaocha*' - 'citizen investigation' project initiated by Ai Weiwei, with a political agenda, to investigate the relationship between the death of children and the low quality of school building construction during the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008. *Laomatihua* depicts how this collective *minjian* group of individual selves interacts with state power. Traditionally the relations between the ruler and the ruled outside the family can also be transformed into the familial relations of father and son.[464] As described in Chapter Three, many scholars argue that throughout different historical periods, the dominant philosophy and ideologies have emphasised the conformity of the individual towards the larger whole, rather than the individual's rights in relation to the state.[465] In recent decades, there has been increasing activist movement on the Internet, which is regarded as "online activism".[466] The voluntary 'public citizen' project led by Ai Weiwei illustrates how political activism is not just limited to virtual space. The making of *Laomatihua* is part of this public citizens' project. The film, as the documentation of their political appeal, illustrates how this collective of public selves, including Ai Weiwei, the cameraman

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[462] Fei, *From the Soil*; Feng, *Zhongguo Zhexue Shi*; Liang "Zhongguo Wenhua Yaoyi"; Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*.

[463] Yuan, Kuiper and Shu, "Language and Revolution," 61.

[464] Feng, *Zhongguo Zhexue Shi*.

[465] Feng, *Zhongguo Zhexue Shi*; Liang "Zhongguo Wenhua Yaoyi"; Svarverud "Individual Self-Discipline and Collective Freedom" ; Zarrow, "Citizenship and Human Rights"; Liu "Translingual Practice"; Xu, "Dawo de Xiaochu".

[466] Yang, *Zhuanxiang Ziwo*.

Zhao Zhao, the lawyer and the volunteer investigators, fight for individual rights and for the transparency and openness of lawful procedure.

The individuals present themselves as highly rights conscious. When they face illegal treatment by the rule of law, they direct confront the power of authority. How they speak in the film demonstrates their 'non co-operation' gesture to the government. Rather than passively obeying what authority asks them to do, they speak as independent individuals protecting their own rights.

The night before Ai and his volunteers go to testify in the court, the authorities send the local police to prevent them from leaving the hotel. When Ai faces the unreasonable police attack at 3am, Ai consciously turns on his sound recorder and documents what happens at this moment as evidence. In this sequence, after the group go back to their individual rooms, the screen suddenly turns dark. At the upper left corner, is written: 3am, 12 August, 2009. Ai's determined voice asks firmly: "*Who?*" A voice says: "*Police!*" Ai asks: "*What police?*" No one answers. Ai asks again, then the voice says "*Police from the local police-station.*" Ai insists: "*Why are local cops knocking at my door at this hour?*" "*Inspection!*" "*Inspect what?*" "*Inspect ID!*" Ai does not yield: "*Who allows you to check ID at this time?...*" Ai refuses to open the door, insisting that "*How do you prove you are the police?*" Ai keeps asking this question and calls the number '110' to report this persecution. However, the police answer him by breaking into his room and beating him.

In the darkness, the sound recorder documents this moment of violence, beating and fighting. Facing illegal treatment by the so-called police, Ai does not show any compromise. He keeps asking three times in the dark: "*Is this how police behave?*" Having been involved in several human rights political activist movements in China, Ai is very conscious of individual rights. However, the 'police' deny that they have beaten him and keep saying "*Who has beaten you?*"

After this incident, a mobile phone camera secretly records in shaky images that several policemen surround Ai, asking Ai not to leave the hotel (fig. 6.38). Ai's voice firmly asks "*Who allows you to do so? Law! Which provision provides him with the right to*

restrict a citizen like this? Which law?... Shouldn't you respect a citizen's rights?..."
This sequence is recorded by someone in the group, demonstrating individual awareness of self protection and keeping evidence.

FIGURE 6.38. A sequence recorded on mobile phone by someone in the group in *Laomatihua* (2009).

In addition to Ai, the independent lawyer Hu, who works on Tan's case, also demonstrates an unco-operative attitude. After the group is released, they go to meet Hu in a restaurant, where the camera records Hu saying to media reporters that "*We want to say that Mr. Tan and Ai have done what the government has not done. They tried to do what the government has used every means to cover-up. As a result, for our nation, the trauma of rethinking our system in the wake of this disaster has been extremely valuable… yesterday, about 6 am, we were informed none of our witnesses would be allowed in court.*" He also comments on Ai's experience, that "*The police did not even prove their identity as police when they broke the door and beat Ai...To openly report the result of investigations regarding the construction quality of school buildings was Premier Wen Jiabao's promise to the entire nation, and to the world...We have the right to know what's happening around us. We have the right to know how our government operates...This kind of trial is extremely disappointing.*" As a lawyer, Hu openly criticises the government. Klaus Muhlhahn states that though the legal position of the individual has experienced a considerable change throughout the twentieth century, the Chinese government sees individuals as a potential threat and fundamental security

problem, hence limiting the legal status of individual rights.[467] Muhlhahn concludes that there is an absence of the notion of inalienable rights in China.[468] This explains the governmental behaviour. But Ai and Hu's actions and statements challenge this government and ask for more individual rights.

Another important character in the film, the cameraman Zhao Zhao, also demonstrates his persistence to fight for individual rights through his forceful filming. In the group's second trip to Chengdu the husband of an arrested volunteer, Liu, also arrives. The cameraman, Zhao Zhao, interviews him with a journalistic voice, asking who he is and why he has come here. This conversation not only provides us with information but also shows that more people are getting involved in fighting for their individual rights.

Most of the time using long takes and a handheld camera, the images are very rough. However, this roughness and the imperfect framing indicate that filming is not allowed. In one scene, when the group visits a local police station, Zhao Zhao holds the camera on his hand while they are walking in, pretending that the camera is not switched on. When they talk to the police, the camera is facing up from a lower angle, capturing the arguments between the police and the group. At the most fierce point of the dispute when it is difficult to film, Zhao even puts the camera face on the floor, not even filming at all. The camera at this time functions as a secret sound recorder, capturing the evidence of the inappropriate behaviour and procedures of the police. Then when Ai uses his mobile phone to take a picture of the police, the police also hold up a small DV camera and start to film the protestors. At this moment, Zhao openly turns his camera on the police and shows that several policemen hold a camera in their hands. The two groups are in an irreconcilable confrontation, not only through voice, but also through the camera, as they are recording each other (fig. 6.39).

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[467] Muhlhahn, "Friendly Pressure," 228.

[468] Ibid.

FIGURE 6.39. A police officer in a local police station also films them with a small DV camera.

When they are finally allowed to go inside to see the staff member who is in charge of this incident, the camera is put directly facing the police, asking for an answer. Several police staff members come to see them one after another, but none of them wants to solve the problem. While Ai's group insist on doing it lawfully, the police avoid directly answering their questions. Directly facing these policemen, the camera captures their improper behaviour. One senior member speaks to these Beijing visitors in the local Sichuan dialect, rather than the nationally-used Mandarin, presenting himself very unprofessionally (fig. 6.40).

FIGURE 6.40. Toward the end of *Laomatihua* (2009), the senior police member talks to Ai's group in the local Sichuan dialect, and goes around and about rather than answering their questions directly

The last scene is when Ai's group comes out of the police station building. Ai uses his camera to take a picture of the building. Immediately a guard comes to him, asks him to switch off his camera and forces him to leave. Ai insists that he is in a public space and should have freedom to film. The video camera is still on, recording this absurd moment when the policemen force the individual to leave the area and turn off the camera. This is evidence that the police are indeed trying to protect the authority of the state, rather than citizens' individual rights. However, because the camera is still on, the policemen do not dare to do anything more violent. When Ai insists on seeing their police IDs, they can do nothing but present the IDs to Ai, as they are afraid that the camera would also capture their inappropriate behaviour (fig. 6.41). In the final sequence, the picture of everyone involved in this incident is presented one after another, with their names written below their pictures. Through this, the film seems to say that everyone has a name and should be respected.

FIGURE 6.41. When the police ask Ai not to film, Ai insists on seeing their police identity cards in the ending sequence of *Laomatihua* (2009).

Overall, these three films all together illustrate features of how individuals interact with each other in *minjian* public spaces. In all three films, the camera plays a significant role as a weapon, challenging people's perception of the camera, the hierarchical relationships between the old and the young, and state authority. Wu's *Criticizing China* illustrates that in a grassroots *minjian* public space, though people can express their political ideas openly, they are still very sensitive about the camera, which in their view may represent a hidden power. Wu's filmmaking aims to challenge how individuals understand the role of the camera and individual rights. In *Beat the Tiger*, Xue attacks the elder filmmakers through his aggressive camera work and his autocratic language.

The latter, however, in doing so constructs himself as an ethically problematic individual. In *Laomatihua*, a group of collective public selves have risen to the level of challenging the power of the party-state.

As I discussed in the last section, this last film is not a singular first person film but is made by and represents a collective 'first person plural'. On the one hand, Ai and other group members persistenth uphold their rights when appealing to the local authorities. On the other hand, the cameraman Zhao Zhao is an important figure. While persistently recording how the group fights for a transparent, open and lawful procedure, he also raises his own first person voice from behind the camera when interviewing the subjects. In this sense, I consider the film as an important first person film of the 'public selves' that touches grand political issues and directly confronts state power.

IV.   Conclusion

To conclude, among the growing number of first person filmmakers, the three filmmakers analysed in this chapter turn the camera inwards to explore their selves in public spaces in China. While the 'public spaces' in Berry's understanding are multiple and shaped by configurations of different powers, the 'public self' can be seen as an agency, a power that is shaped by - and in turn shaping - public spaces. Through first person filmmaking practice, the 'public self' filmmakers try to disrupt established social relations. Their films as representations of the 'public self' illustrate the changing sense of self in one's own space, and how the varying sense of self has an impact on how one relates to other individuals and the state in contemporary China.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Liang Qichao mentioned 'public morality' in his famous volume 'renewal of the role of the citizen' (*xinmin*)'.[469] Liang states that "modern society required that the allegiance of individuals be widened from an overriding commitment to kinship obligations, the sphere of private morality, to a concern for civic virtue and public morality".[470] These films reflect the agenda of the

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[469] Written in 1899 -1903.

[470] Quoted in Stockman, *Understanding Chinese Society*, 79.

'public self' filmmakers to construct more politicised public spaces and to further understand the self in order to achieve 'public morality'. However, I also observe that while regarding themselves as heroes or saviours within their communities, aiming for revolution, some of their practices also tend to be very problematic.

Regarding the screening, all three filmmakers' films have been shown domestically on the independent film festival circuit, through online video-sharing websites or through DVD circulation. Wu Haohao's *Criticizing China* was first shown at YunFest 2009, and *Kun 1: Action* was first shown at Beijing Documentary Film festival 2009. Both films immediately received many positive responses from the judges and the audience. His perspective on the self and the method of 'action documentary' have been seen as a serious challenge to the conventional Chinese documentaries that usually take a third person viewpoint and focus on the 'others'. *Kun 1: Action* has also been screened at three international film festivals, at Vancouver, Turin, and Rotterdam, which also gave Wu chances to go abroad to meet international audiences and to expand his vision. This has also made Wu Haohao suddenly well-known in the independent documentary community. Both of Xue's films have been shown in the major domestic film festivals. In fact, the beginning of *Beat the Tiger* documents Xue receiving a prize at Beijing independent film festival for his earlier film *Martian Syndrome*.

Being highly productive, Wu has made more than twenty documentaries in two years, which have all taken the form of criticising an institution or a person, or have been in the continuous series '*Kun x: Action*'. These films have been shown at several domestic screening events. Through these practices, he has established his style of openly criticising his subjects on camera to see how they respond to him. This action of directly criticising other individuals is quite unusual in the Chinese context, where traditional 'courtesy' still plays an important role in social practice. However, not everyone likes Wu's style. Some elder filmmakers are tolerant of his films, thinking it is good to have something different, but not encouraging this practice among a wider number of filmmakers.[471] This is also because Wu's personality is highly aggressive, not just how he is presented on camera, but also in real life. Many people think he is very rude, and he uses strong language when approaching others. He also used strongly provocative

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[471] This is reviewed during my chat with the filmmaker Zhou Hao, 2010.

and sexual language in talking to me when I first contacted him. When I refused his request to have sexual relations with him and do translations for him, he refused to accept my interview. However, in recent years, after receiving criticism by many individuals inside the community, Wu has been learning how to 'behave' himself and be polite to others. When I approached him again during my second fieldwork, I was very conscious of what had happened before and even asked a friend to accompany me. To my surprise, he easily accepted my interview this time and has become more humble. When I commented on his behaviour to me last time, he revealed his fragility in being extremely lonely, saying that he wants to change himself and make friends with people.[472] In addition, unlike most Chinese independent filmmakers, Wu openly distributes his own films on DVD at an unusually high price in China, challenging the reality that most Chinese independent documentaries do not have DVD distribution.

Following Wu Haohao, Xue Jianqiang is also a challenging figure in the community, just as it is shown in his film *I Beat the Tiger When I was Young*. As I noted above, this film also documents how others respond to his film during his interaction with filmmakers and the audience. Some filmmakers and critics point out that Xue's problematic action within his filming practice, contradicts what he says. For example, as Guo Xizhi mentions in the film, though Xue emphasises self-exploration, he in fact aggressively turned his camera on marginalised others suffering from neurasthenia, and he even lies to his subjects. As I note above, when 'Martian' asks him for the tape, he lies that he was not filming, and even beats 'Martian' up badly. In fact, the other character, Xiaodong, was not clear whether Xue filmed him or not. Although in *Beat the Tiger* Xue openly criticises the elder documentary filmmakers' problematic strategies of filming others for their own ends, in *Martian Syndrome*, Xue also films his subjects for his own filmmaking purposes, although he does not cut off his own voice. In *Beat the Tiger*, he criticises all others who do not share his agenda, allowing no room for divergence.

Ai Weiwei's *Laomatihua*, on the other hand, has received a much wider response, as the film has been circulated online and distributed through a large number of DVDs. Wu Wenguang regards Ai's filmmaking practice as 'completely action', as Ai does not make

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[472] Author's interview, 2010.

films as art works but has tried his best to circulate the films to let more people know of his actions. This is a strong critique of the contemporary Chinese independent documentary world, in which most filmmakers film others' lives and keep what they filmed as their personal artistic achievement, rather than disseminating the social issues they have filmed to a much larger population.[473] In addition to *Laomatihua,* the artist political activist Ai Weiwei has also initiated some other political activist projects investigating the anti-human treatment of Chinese individuals by institutions of authority, such as Yang Jia's cast in his film *Yige Gupi de Ren* (A Lonely Person) (2010). For these events, Ai also asks his assistants to document the whole investigation, edits the footage into films and circulates the films online or through DVDs. Such political activist films made by Ai Weiwei's studio have raised social awareness among a number of students and cultural art practitioners. In doing so, Ai and his group further disrupt the contemporary Chinese legal system. To individuals, Ai's practice and films have raised more public awareness and advocated more individuals to participate in social-political action. These films also provide examples of how individuals react to each other.

In addition to these three filmmakers, some other filmmakers have also made similar films that represent the self in public social spaces, such as the villager filmmakers, Li Ning, and Ai Xiaoming. Their films also deserve special attention and illustrate features of how individual selves behave themselves in public spaces and interact with other individuals and organisations. I will mention their films in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

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[473] Author's interview, 2010.

Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will first summarise the key focus and my main arguments of this research on first person DV documentary filmmaking practice in twenty-first century China. I will then make some suggestions for future research. Focusing on how first person filmmaking turns the camera inwards on the maker self, the key research questions were twofold: on the one hand, how is the self represented on camera in a contemporary Chinese context? What does the filmic self-representation explore? On the other hand, during the process of filmmaking, how does the first person filmmaker position his or her self within complex relations with others, the society and the state? In other words, I explore two elements in this practice. Firstly, I take the *film text* as an aesthetic and cultural object, and examine how it has constructed a self in the filmic representation. Secondly, I examine the *filmmaking* as a practice and a form of social participation, through which individual filmmakers as agents are actively constructing representations of their own selves and their subjectivities.

To explore these questions, I have conducted textual analysis, combined with semi-structured interviews with the chosen filmmakers, which helped to understand the practice from the filmmakers' perspective. Turning the camera inward on themselves, these first person filmmakers explicitly exhibit their subjectivity and raise their personal voices. I argue that in the era of 'depoliticised politics',[474] this practice can be seen as a form of provocative social participation that stimulates important individual critical thinking and helps to form a new kind of political subjectivity, to reconstruct political values and reactivate the political space in China. These films as camera-mediated self-representations illustrate the individual selves as multi-layered and conflicted, situated in complex social relationships among family members, between individuals as individuals in society, and between individuals and the state. Overall, while these films and the filmmaking practice reflect some aspects of the changing concept of individual

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[474] Wang, "Depoliticized politics," 690-1.

self in contemporary China, they further contribute to the construction and constitution of the individual subject in China, as powerful generators.

I have developed my argument through six chapters, each of which has answered certain aspects of the research questions I asked in the introduction.

In Chapter One, I reviewed the current studies on first person filmmaking practice and Chinese independent cinema, within which first person filmmaking in China is situated. On the one hand, I noted that existing Western studies by scholars such as Renov, Russell, Lebow and Rascaroli focus on first person / autobiographic / autoethnographic documentaries, or personal cinema in the Anglo-European social context. Predominantly examining the socio-political implications of this practice in the 'West' and how the individual self is represented on the textual level, they do not explore how the aesthetic and ethical choices of these filmmakers have been informed by a notion of self that is socially and culturally grounded in the 'West' . On the other hand, I examined the most discussed concepts in the current studies of Chinese independent cinema, such as 'post-socialism', 'underground' / 'independent', 'personal/individual filmmaking'. I noted that while most current studies tend to focus on how these films function as personal historiography that counterbalances the political constraints and mainstream cinema, few studies have explored the filmmaker self on the level of the individual. Through reviewing what has been achieved and ignored in current studies, I reaffirmed my focus on examining both the film text and the film practice. I have built up my hypothesis of seeing this practice as an action that functions both internally for greater self-understanding for the filmmakers and externally as a form of social-political participation contributing to China's ongoing modernisation process.

In Chapter Two, I explained the methodology and the research process that I have gone through in collecting and selecting the films, and in analysing the film texts and filmmakers. After developing my focus on the filmmaker self, I conducted my first fieldwork in December 2009, to collect the films to be studied in this thesis. In analysing the films, I realised that auteur theory, which has been frequently used to study filmmakers, is not entirely relevant when analysing first person films. Whereas the auteur theory is intended to detect signs of individual authorship in

circumstances of collective production such as the Hollywood studio, the first person documentaries that I analysed here are made by single authors and focus on the self. This means the process of detection is not necessary. Instead, my focus has been placed on how the setting, camerawork, and sound have constructed the self on camera and created a particular perspective. Realising the limits of textual analysis in exploring the films made by the self and about the self, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the filmmakers in my second fieldwork in the summer of 2010. The interviews have played a complementary but influential role in exploring in great depth the filmmakers' personal trajectories and production experiences. Finally, I made a selection of three groups of films to be studied in this thesis (in Chapters Four, Five and Six), which are two groups of films exploring the self in the familial space and one group of films examining the self in public spaces.

In Chapter Three, I explored the key notion underpinning the study of first person filmmaking in China – the individual self. This is to situate the articulations of the individual self that emerge in the films analysed in Chapters Four, Five and Six. I identified five themes on the construction of the individual self as it emerges in these films, including 1) the collective sense of self; 2) paternal authority and gendered expectations; 3) filial duties and expectations of familial obligations; 4) the changing relationships between individuals and the state; 5) the social interactions between individuals as individuals in their own right. The first three themes concern the constitutions of individual self through family relationships. The themes of paternal authority and filial duties further mirror the fourth theme which is the state authority and the submission of individuals to the state. The last theme of how individuals interact with each other outside the familial space extends the familial relations which historically dominate the interpersonal social relations. I discussed these five themes within the context of the discursive history throughout the twentieth century China, when the construction of the individual self has been articulated through huge ideological shifts. The exploration of these five key themes is not only to understand the self in these films, but also to understand the intention of this filmmaking practice, and to see how this practice has further constructed the self by transgressively pushing the boundary of current familial and social ethics.

In Chapter Four, I observed that the three films *Nightingale, Not the Only Voice*; *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple*; and *Home Video* primarily investigate the three female filmmakers' problematic family relations accumulated in recent family history. I noticed that the context of increasing individual mobility and autonomy in contemporary China, as discussed in Chapter Three, has allowed these three women to investigate what has confused them for a long time. Following the proliferation of women's 'individualised writings' in the late 1990s, three women take the camera to explore 'unspeakable' problematic family relations, and mostly present themselves as the 'speaker', the first person investigator. This leads me to argue that given their dual role as both a daughter and an independent individual 'outsider', their filmmaking has much wider social implications. On the one hand, they have gone beyond the stereotyped obedient passive image of the daughter by challenging the traditional 'father (the old) - son (the children)' relationship; on the other hand, they present themselves within complex familial relations, and think highly of the family as a collective which has constructed their sense of self.

In Chapter Five, I examined the other three films *Nostalgia*; *My Family Tree*; and *Family Phobia* which document the disruption of three male filmmakers' family spaces and structure caused by rapid urbanisation. I noted that the making of these three films took place within the technological context of the rise of digital video and participatory media, which played a key role in encouraging self-expression and social-political participation through DV filmmaking. I found that like the three female filmmakers, these three male filmmakers also take a dual role. Their filmmaking practice comes from a position not just as a pure 'insider' within their family, but as a socially-situated individual with strong social concerns, whose self as the 'seer' observes how the rapid transformation of socio-economic conditions has had an impact on their own family homes.

In addition, my analysis of their film texts has led me to understand the conflicted role of their own selves, in relation to their families and the state. Presenting themselves as the 'speaker', the 'voice-over' (through sound or written text), and also even as the 'seen', their familial self-representations depict how on the one hand, family as a traditional institution has placed constraints on their selves as they seek to develop their

own lives in the state-forced decollectivisation process. On the other hand, they still seek protection, and identity formation, through their families, especially when the family has become the site where the tension between individuals and the state plays out.

In Chapter Six, my focus turned to the first person filmmaking that explores the selves in public spaces, through examining five films made by three filmmakers, Wu Haohao, Xue Jianqiang, and Ai Weiwei. Based on Chris Berry's conceptualisation of 'public spaces' as multiple sites where different power configurations and relations play out, I observed how these individual selves participate in the filmmaking in the 'public spaces' as important agents, who are not just passively shaped by the forces and relations in existing public spaces, but are challenging that. My analysis shows that the context of the withdrawal of the previous socialist welfare system, leaving individuals with little institutional protection[475] while the state still maintains powerful authority, is the motivation for these three individuals' 'action' filmmaking in public spaces. By 'action', I mean they present themselves as a power, taking filmmaking as a political act, trying to reactivate the political space in China's 'depoliticised era'.[476]

According to my observations, these five films depict the insecure, rebellious, rights-conscious and problematic 'public selves'. On the one hand, the two young filmmakers Wu Haohao and Xue Jianqiang present themselves, along with their peers, as being left out in their own individual spaces, longing for emotional and social care. On the other hand, all three filmmakers are actively participating in social events and challenging established social relations. Nevertheless, my analysis also shows that while regarding themselves as heroes or saviours in their communities, some of their practices also tend to be ethically highly problematic.

These six chapters all together have built up my understanding of first person documentary practice in the first decades of twenty-first-century China. While in the first three chapters, I described the initiative, hypothesis and methods of my research, in the other three chapters, I analysed these films and filmmaking practices thematically in

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[475] Yan, *The Individualisation of Chinese Society*, 288.

[476] Wang, "Depoliticized politics".

some depth. After this detailed examination of eleven films made by nine filmmakers, I argue that first person filmmaking in contemporary China is an important form of social participation. These filmmakers do not just actively deconstruct their selves for self-understanding, but also further probe the current problematic social relations. Their films reflect some aspects of how individuals conceive their selves, in relation to the changing role of the family as a traditionally formed collective institution, and in relation to China's modern state which still plays a powerful authority role in individuals' lives.

Nevertheless, I see this Ph.D. research as a continuous and ongoing project. Opening up debates on the individual filmmaker self as a social agency, and documentary as social participation, it offers some suggestions for further research in related fields. Firstly, apart from the eleven films and nine filmmakers discussed in this thesis, some other first person films that I did not study here also deserve scholarly investigation in the future. This includes, as I mentioned earlier in the thesis, first person films made by 'subaltern selves', including the villager documentary project which has produced a series of villager amateur films entitled *My Village* (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009), and *My Name is Fenfen* (dir. Guo Lifen, 2008). These films are all made under the supervision of the established documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang. They can be seen as 'autoethnographic films', exploring the filmmakers' social identity as subaltern individuals. For the villager documentary project alone, there are rich video and written archives to be explored. In addition to the annual *My Village* documentary series made by villagers Wang Wei, Shao Yuzhen, Zhang Huancai, and Jia Zhidan from 2006 onwards, there are substantial email exchanges between the villagers and filmmaker Wu, which function as production diaries. In early 2010, Wu Wenguang himself also made a first person film *Bare Your Stuff* (168 minutes, 2010), constructed out of video archives filmed over several years by Wu's assistants and the villagers themselves. This film reveals Wu's involvement in the project since 2005, and how the communication with these 'subaltern' filmmakers has helped him to understand his own social position as the self-claimed intellectual superior.

The reason why I did not include these films in my thesis is that although they are enunciated through a first person narrative, they explore more their makers' social

identities or their resistance to the 'given' social roles, rather than putting the problem of the individual at the centre of focus. However, how their selves are constructed by their social (subaltern) identities, and their efforts to rebel against or challenge such roles, as well as to challenge state power (as the 'public selves' do in Ai Weiwei's film), also reflect certain aspects of the changing perceptions of individual self in contemporary China. For this reason, I aim to extend my study to cover these films in the future. In addition, more first person documentary films have emerged during my research process, which I had to exclude as they fell outside my timescale. These include Wu Wenguang's *Treatment* (80 minutes, 2010), made at the same time as *Bare Your Stuff*, which is a personal memoir that is nostalgic about his mother who has passed away.

One film that has specially caught my attention is *Tape* (168 min, 2010), made by the dancer, performance artist, and filmmaker Li Ning. The film has recently received much attention in the independent film world, after being shown at Yunfest, Rotterdam International Film Festival, and other domestic and international film festivals. In this self-portrait personal documentary, Li Ning documents closely his personal life since 2005. Unlike the representations of the *familial self* and the *public self* discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, *Tape* interweaves the private and the public aspects of Li Ning, portraying him as a highly conflicted figure, dedicating himself to art while being stuck in an environment where the 'normal' people only care for conventional issues of job and marriage. On the one hand, the film stages Li Ning's personal familial conflicts with his mother and wife, and his private sexual life, explicitly on camera. On the other hand, it documents Li Ning's solo art performance, or performance with the students of his dance troupe in public spaces, such as on streets, in an empty building, or in residential areas.

In addition, this film violently challenges the ethical norms. On the one hand, the film reveals his problematic relationship with the subjects he films, as in some places he lies to his mother about his filming, or keeps recording when his wife or his mother rejects being filmed. On the other hand, his unfiltered filmic self-representation of individual privacy and sexuality places the audience in an uncomfortable and upsetting position. From this perspective, the film deserves further exploration both textually and contextually, on the aesthetic and ethical level.

Another young filmmaker that has attracted my attention is a young female dancer, amateur filmmaker Zhang Mengqi, who has so far produced two first person video documentaries *Self-Portrait With Three Women* (75 minutes, 2010) and *Self-Portrait: At 47 KM* (72 minutes, 2011). Like most filmmakers discussed in this thesis, Zhang Mengqi takes her small DV camera to explore the familial side of her self. For Zhang, the making of both films functions as a journey of self-discovery and self-understanding. While in *Self-Portrait With Three Women*, she explores her relationship with her mother and grandmother, and illustrates her search for her dreams and love with burdens from the previous two generations, in *Self-Portrait: At 47 KM*, she goes back to her grandfather's village to reconnect to the rural and the past, through conversation with older members of her family.

Secondly, I believe the approach of examining first person documentary filmmaking practice in the contemporary Chinese context as a form of social-political participation can be expanded to analysing this practice in other social contexts, and to examine documentary filmmaking in general. This approach has gone beyond conventional film studies, which primarily approaches the aesthetic and social implications of the film texts. In this approach, the filmmaker as a social agent is given significant focus: he or she is not just positioned in the field of film production, but is also seen as an individual, a public citizen with certain social roles positioned within the larger society. Looking beyond the first person filmmaking practice in contemporary China, we can also examine how the filmmaker as a socially-engaged individual makes first person films as a form of social-political participation in other cultural contexts, such as in America and Western Europe, Japan, Eastern European countries, India etc.

In addition to examining the specific socio-political, cultural and technological conditions that have cultivated the practice of exploring the self, we can explore, from the filmmaker's point of view, how he or she has further expanded or challenged social relations through the act of filmmaking. Furthermore, we can look at documentary practice in general, especially in the age of social media, and examine how the filmmaker acts as a social agent when participating in filmmaking. Exploring such questions, we admit the idea of the individual filmmaker as an active agent, who is not

only shaped by the social structures and power relations in their society, but is also proactively shaping it.

In the current era, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, video-sharing sites such as You Tube, and mobile cameras have become crucial tools to assist, encourage, and even organise activist movements, and to spread shared values among much larger populations, such as during the Egyptian unrest in early 2011. In this context, documentary filmmaking practice is more significant as a form of social-political participation, and the individual maker becomes more of an active agent, whose ability to effect change and raise public awareness is immense.

In Spring 2011, a UK-based symposium[477] named '*i-Docs*' examined the "rapidly evolving field of interactive documentary",[478] in "an era of pervasive computing, social media and a networked 'information society'".[479] It paid special attention to the interactive features of current documentary filmmaking practice, which can be seen as a kind of social participation of the user / maker in the digital age.[480] The ongoing symposium has opened up debates on the initiative of users as documentary makers or content collaborators, the ethics of participation, and the role of interactive documentary in activism, which hopefully will stimulate more studies on these topics.

Thirdly, in the domain of Chinese film studies and Chinese cultural studies in general, more research can take the individual self as the central focal site for exploration. To some extent, the 'autobiographical' can be seen as an important dimension of art and cultural production in contemporary China. As I mentioned in Chapter One, '*geren yingxiang*' - the individual/personal filmmaking and 'auteur film' - are important aesthetic features of Chinese independent cinema that have attracted much scholarly

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[477] The symposium was on 25 March 2011, organized by the Digital Cultures Research Centre, University of the West of England. The second one is on 22 -23 March 2012 at the Watershed Media Centre in central Bristol. Information accessed [online] through: http://www.dcrc.org.uk/blogs/call-participation-i-docs-2012 [8 Nov, 2011].

[478] Quoted from the agenda of i-Docs, accessed [online] through: http://www.dcrc.org.uk/category/blog-tags/i-docs [8 Nov, 2011].

[479] Ibid.

[480] With the emergence of new forms of digital documentaries, such as "Web-docs, docu-games, photo-reportages, trans-media projects and locative narratives". These "new languages of factual communication" have challenged "the established linear narrative of documentary".

attention. In fiction films, it often refers to the fictional representation of the filmmaker's autobiographical and first person experiences, while in documentary films, it usually refers to a personal approach and an individual vision in representing what the filmmaker sees through the camera. In addition, as I discussed in Chapter Four, the women's individualised writings during the 1990s and early 2000s are also predominately (semi)autobiographical,[481] exploring the writers' own personal experiences through first person narrative.

In addition to the works of professional filmmakers and writers, there is an increasing number of personal amateur videos largely visible on the Internet through the domestic video-sharing and social networking sites which function as new personalised distribution channels. These include *toudou.com, youku.com, v.ku6.com* and social networking websites such as *weibo.com*, as I mentioned in Chapter Five. Like elsewhere, the boom of digital technology and new media in China has facilitated the rise of personal video content produced by DV cameras, webcams, and mobile phones. As Berry and Rofel mention: "If China's reputation for a rigorously policed internet limits your expectations, the local equivalent of You Tube – Tudou.com may surprise you, too. Here a vibrant amateur version of the same on-the-spot style found in television reporting also dominates the scene. All kinds of videos stream off the screen, from personal videos and reflections on home life to oral history and recordings of local events – some of them contentious".[482] These very diverse videos on non-conventional screening platforms, such as the 'smaller screens', "the DV camera, the computer monitor – and, within it, the internet window – and the cell phone display screen"[483] have recently caught scholarly attention.

In her recent book *China on Video*, Paola Voci provides an innovative, timely and in-depth examination of the more edgy and diverse video content on these non-conventional screening platforms. Voci's study focuses more on how these smaller-screen movies as *light* realities redefine Chinese cinema, and how the 'smaller screens'

[481] Wang, *Personal Matters*; Wang, "Reproducing the Self"; Han, "On the tendency towards creating individualized fiction in the 1990s"; Chen, "Shanghai Baby as a Chinese Chick-lit"; Wedell-Wedellsborg, "Between Self and Community."

[482] Berry and Rofel, Introduction, 3.

[483] Voci, *China on Video*, xx.

create new kinds of public spaces "where collectivity and individuality are negotiated and where the boundaries between elite and popular culture are effectively blurred and disolved".[484] I would turn the focus on to the individual makers of such "light"[485] video content, and examine their initiatives, and the ethics of producing, distributing and sharing these videos. I believe that this would provide enormous and valuable material for exploring the conception and formation of individual identity in contemporary China.

Therefore, looking beyond first person filmmaking in China as an important part of individual/personal filmmaking, we can ask: Can cultural productions, including both professional auteur filmmaking and amateur video making, be seen as a mode of social participation in a contemporary Chinese context? If so, how do they further construct the maker self, especially those works based on autobiographical representation? Lastly, the ethical dimensions of presenting the self on camera and screening it to an audience, known or unknown to the maker, need more complicated analysis. While I emphasise the power of the personal camera in exploring social injustice and for self-understanding, I also notice the problematic and complex interactions between individuals as individuals. The ethical issue becomes even more serious in an age when individuals can easily film themselves and upload personal videos on the video-sharing sites and circulate them through social networks. At the turn of this century, the filmmaker and scholar Jon Dovey analysed British reality TV programmes as first person media, and criticised the inversion of public and private under neo-liberalism, where the individual experience of the self as the consuming subject has replaced the collective experiences of identity formation.[486] He pointed out that as the over-exposure of the private and the intimate has made the distance between the inner and outer world collapse, "we have in some sense lost our relationship with reality itself, and therefore our sense of self is in crisis".[487]

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[484] Ibid., xx-xxi.

[485] Ibid.

[486] Dovey, *Freakshow*, 176.

[487] Dovey, *Freakshow*, 88-9.

While Dovey's criticism was aimed at first person content on the traditional medium of television around ten years ago, in ten years' time the increasing amount of self-made first person content will have filled virtual public space with the private and the intimate, not just in Western society. In contemporary China under globalisation, the rocketing amount of personal content circulated through social network media has changed identity formation from collective memories to individual experience. In addition, the over-exposure of self-expression and personal images has not just encouraged public voyeurism, but also largely invaded other individuals' personal lives. While I was writing the thesis, some first person content has raised many debates and some personal persecution of the makers. For example, in the summer of 2011, a personal video of an actress Gan Lulu taking a shower, recorded by her mother, has been uploaded on video-sharing sites and widely circulated on the social networks.[488] This has raised heated debates on what can and cannot be shown on the virtual public space.[489] Some believe that the intention of Gan and her mother was to raise publicity for Gan, others think it was morally wrong and criticise Gan and her mother for doing it; in addition, there are also people who think it is not a serious moral issue, and something only to laugh at.[490] Therefore, focusing on the increasing amount of personal video content, further studies could explore features of China's modern social ethics that are constantly in the dual stage of construction and transition.

Meanwhile, based on detailed analyses of a body of films and filmmakers, I hope this Ph.D. thesis offers some insights into first person DV documentary practice in contemporary China. I believe it explores some characteristics of the complex changing relations between the public (*gonggong*) and the private (*siren*) space, between the collective (*jiti*) and the personal (*geren*), between the individual (*geti*) and the party-state (*dangguo*) in post-socialist China. In addition, by examining this practice, it shows some traits of the notion of individual self that are different from the discussion of 'self' in current Western studies of first person films, though in some cases, similarities have emerged. By doing this, I hope it contributes to the current debates in the international

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[488] The video can be accessed [online] through http://v.ku6.com/show/1RK-N1VhiH2CMil6.html [7 Jul, 2011]

[489] Such as the critics on http://city.ifeng.com/special/ganlulu/ [7 Jul, 2011]

[490] Such as the audience's response to Gan and her mother in a TV programme on Henan TV, accessed [online] through http://v.ent.163.com/video/2011/3/V/2/V6T6VQ8V2.html [7 Jul, 2011]

field of first person filmmaking, and studies on contemporary China, and also offers some directions for further studies.

Filmography

CHINESE LANGUAGE TITLES:

English Title	Chinese Title	Filmmaker	Year of Release
Bare Your Stuff	亮出	Wu Wenguang	2010
Criticizing China	批判中国	Wu Haohao	2008
Fuck Cinema	操电影	Wu Wenguang	2005
Family Phobia	家庭恐怖	Hu Xinyu	2010
Home Video	家庭录像	Yang Lina	2001
I Beat the Tiger When I was Young	年轻时也打老虎	Xue Jianqiang	2010
Jiang Hu	江湖	Wu Wenguang	1999
Kun 1: Action	Kun 1: 行动	Wu Haohao	2008
Laomatihua	老妈提花	Ai Weiwei	2009
Laotou	老头	Yang Lina	1999
Martian Syndrome	火星综合症	Xue Jianqiang	2010
Mei Shi Jie	煤市街	Ou Ning	2006
Memory of Home	关于家的记忆	Yu Tianqing	2009
The Men	男人	Hu Xinyu	2003
My Name is Fenfen	我叫芬芬	Guo Lifan	2008
My Family Tree	家谱	Yang Pingdao	2008
My Sister	我的姐姐	Hu Xinyu	2006
Villager documentary project	村民影像计划		
- My Village 2006	我的村子2006	Shao Yuzhen	2007
		Wang Wei	2007
		Zhang Huancai	2007
		Jia Zhidan	2007
- My Village 2007	我的村子2007	Shao Yuzhen	2008
		Wang Wei	2008
		Zhang Huancai	2008
		Jia Zhidan	2008

- My Village 2008	我的村子2008	Shao Yuzhen	2009
		Wang Wei	2009
		Zhang Huancai	2009
		Jia Zhidan	2009
Nightingale, Not the Only Voice	夜莺不是唯一的歌喉	Tang Danhong	2000
Nostalgia	乡愁	Shu Haolun	2009
Oxhide I	牛皮Ⅰ	Liu Jiayin	2005
Oxhide II	牛皮Ⅱ	Liu Jiayin	2010
Self Portrait: Three Women	我的自画像和三个女人	Zhang Mengqi	2010
Self Portrait: 47KM	我的自画像－47公里	Zhang Mengqi	2010
Scrap	饭碗	Zhu Yi	2008
Tape	胶带	Li Ning	2010
They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple	不快乐的不止一个	Wang Fen	2000
Treatment	治疗	Wu Wenguang	2009
Unknown Pleasures	任逍遥	Jia Zhangke	2003

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-------------------- Six O'Clock News (1996, USA).

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Rigg, Marlon. *Tongues Untied* (1989, USA).

Xiaolu, Guo. *We Went to Wonderland* (2008, UK/China).

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Ai Weiwei	艾未未
Ba Jin	巴金
Cui Ying	崔莺
Deng Xiaoping	邓小平
Dong Zhongshu	董仲舒
Fei Xiaotong	费孝通
Feng Youlan	冯友兰
Feng Yan	冯艳
Gao Yihan	高一函
Guo Lifen	郭丽芬
Guo Moruo	郭沫若
Hu Jie	胡杰
Hu Shi	胡适
Hu Xinyu	胡新宇
Ji Dan	季丹
Jia Zhangke	贾章柯
Jia Zhitan	贾之坦

Jiao Guocheng	焦国成
Liang Qichao	梁启超
Lu Xun	鲁迅
Lu Xinyu	吕新雨
Mian Mian	棉棉
Mu Zimei	木子美
Shao Yuzhen	邵玉珍
Shen Congwen	沈从文
Shu Haolun	舒浩伦
Tang Danhong	唐丹鸿
Wang Fen	王分
Wang Hui	汪辉
Wang Wei	王伟
Wang Xiaolu	王晓鲁
Wang Xi	王西
Wei Hui	卫慧
Wu Haohao	吴昊昊
Wu Wenguang	吴文光
Xiaodong	晓东
Xu Jilin	许纪霖

Xu Tong	徐童
Xue Jianqiang	薛鉴羌
Yan Yunxiang	阎云翔
Yang Pingdao	杨平道
Yu Yingshi	余英时
Yang Dezhen	杨德贞
Yin Zhiguang	尹之光
Yu Dafu	郁达夫
Yu Luojin	遇罗锦
Yin Xiaofeng	尹晓峰
Zhang Ailing	张爱玲
Zhang Huancai	张焕财
Zhang Jie	张洁
Zhang Mengqi	章梦奇
Zhao Liang	赵亮
Zhao Zhao	赵赵
Zhou Hao	周浩
Zhou Shoujuan	周寿元

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Yang Pingdao, 13 July, 2010.

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