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Truth and Resistance

Aesthetics, Production, and Marginalized Voices in Independent Chinese Documentary

Abstract: This paper delves into the significance of independent Chinese documentary filmmaking, focusing on the aesthetics, production, and representation of marginalized subjects. Beginning with the influence of direct cinema, the study examines how the unobtrusive presence of the camera functions as a key documentary method by Chinese independents, who claim to capture reality in a more authentic and truthful manner. Production is complex, involving a delicate balance between leveraging state resources and resisting official narratives. The paper discusses the blurring boundaries between "official" and "unofficial" filmmaking in China's post-socialist landscape. Moreover, it investigates how independent documentaries often focus on marginalized groups, to challenge the official "lies" behind the ideological-oriented rhetoric. However, the ethical implications are also critically addressed, particularly regarding issues of exploitation and the romanticization of the subaltern.

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1. Direct Cinema, Documentary Mode and Truth Claims

Independent Chinese documentaries are known for their dissident stance, socially engaged focus, and commitment to documenting (*jishi*) outside the official system, often touching on the sensitive nerves of the authorities. Key features include direct cinema, observational style, alternative production methods, and a focus on marginalized subjects. These documentaries challenge official narratives, offering critical perspectives on post-socialist China and reshaping documentary as both method and standpoint.

Independent Chinese documentary filmmaking is tied firmly to the practice of direct cinema and the style of observational mode, which has been encountered by Chinese documentarists Duan Jinchuan and Wu Wenguang in the documentary film festival of Yamagata. There had been academic discussions on direct cinema before, but Duan and Wu's visit of the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival truly marks a turning point. They returned with both works and concepts of Frederick Wiseman and Ogawa Shinsuke. Long takes, synchronized sound, tracking shots naturally with no intervention of shooting process from the filmmaker are some characteristics of direct cinema, which are widely adopted by independent documentarists in China, who strive to highlight a sense of authenticity and naturalness of the reality that we all inhabit. These functions as innovative aesthetics of "new" documentaries that greatly differ from the "old" expository mode of documentary with scripted texts and focus on grand historical narratives and figures. A new term *xianchang* started to emerge in the early 1990s, not only in the field of general cultural production, but also in the discussions of documentary aesthetics and practice, particularly by some Chinese independents, for example, Wu Wenguang.¹ He embraced the notion of *xianchang gan* (the effect of liveness) that could be directly understood as being "in here and now."² Dai Jinhua mentions that it refers to a focus on documenting and constructing a notion of presence or immediacy, particularly at a certain historical point, as it foreshadows an intense and irresistible sense of reality, provoking pursuit of authenticity and resistance to institutional norms.³

Regarding the interpretation of *xianchang*, Luke Robinson suggests two categories: one with a material-based meaning, which highlights the embodied presence of the filmmaker being on the spot; another one stands for a space on screen, which signals the documentary aesthetics committed to capturing every second of filmmaking on the scene.⁴ This approach is closely related to realistic aesthetics in a socialist tradition that might be easily connected to socialist realism in the past. Therefore,

¹ Dai 2018 [1999]: 219, Berry 2006, Robinson 2010.

² Wu 2000: 274-275.

³ Dai 2018 [1999]: 200.

⁴ Robinson 2013: 29.

these documentarists tried to avoid that connection by redefining “realism” – is it the reality that represents *renmin* (the folk)? In this matter, documentary makers intended to re-invent their own documentary poetics and aesthetics by showing a strong preference on the observational mode and a sense of truth-seeking, to capture the real fragmentation of people’s daily lives. It functions as a “marker” of truth,⁵ which was used to be covered and distorted to serve the political propaganda. This type of truth in essence could be understood as an “ideological truth,”⁶ emphasizing the mainstream idea of nationalism, materialism and Confucianism represented and mediated in the documentaries produced in state-sanctioned system. Accordingly, independent documentary filmmakers attempt to show “another” reality that is different from the official narrative and offer more access to the hidden history and experience that has been neglected by the state; people keep documenting and unveiling to reject the “voice-of-God” and try to make their own ways of representing their own reality. Besides confronting censorship and rigorous political conditions, some believe that the seemingly less subjective angles of direct cinema suit the Chinese reality of unbalanced power relations between the state and the people by not attracting unwanted attention perfectly.⁷ By the same token, the style of direct cinema and non-interventional aesthetics has gained legitimacy in the name of “truth” in China, where people have less access to an authentic historical past and thus the demand for “truth” and “objectivity” serves as a shield against official pressure.⁸

Bill Nichols has theorized various modes of documentary, among which an “observational mode” stands for a non-intervened documenting process of the filmmaker in front of the camera through synchronized sound and images.⁹ According to him, this mode strives to achieve a sense of immediacy, spontaneity, and a peculiar “presence” on the scene that reinforces the significance of documentary’s truth claims and objective engagement with reality.¹⁰ Adopting direct shooting of the filmed subjects, filmmakers attempt to present at an event yet avoid the presence of the camera, as if they are simply a “fly on the wall.”¹¹

Chinese practitioners found this a useful tool to document and represent reality in an unobtrusive manner, which perfectly fits Chinese agenda of social transformation at the time.¹² The historical turning point of 1989 has engendered lost identities and struggle, public discussion and space, where new opportunities and innovations could be fostered. For people living under collectivism and totalitarianism, it emblemizes the overthrow of the “old system” and the formation of independently

⁵ Ibid.: 181

⁶ Wang 2014: 90.

⁷ Wang, Q 2014: 128.

⁸ Lü 2003: 10.

⁹ Nichols 2010 [2001]: 109.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 110.

¹¹ Ibid.: 114.

¹² Zhang 2010: 124.

autonomous identities. Conflicts, impasses and introspection are intended to be the impulse for documentarists to think about the arrival of new formats, aesthetics, and representations on two levels: the formal and the ideological. According to Zhang Yingjin, documentary methods allowed filmmakers to approach reality and truth much more closely, while the preference on direct cinema carries ideological significance by aligning with the people rather than authorities.¹³ There is so much tension between the old and new order, the old socialist system and the post-socialist China, in which filmmakers and artists must go with the flow of a modernity adjusted in the marketized economy and conditions of one sort or another.¹⁴ Upheaval triggers more historical blanks, which inspire people to rethink their position and fill in the blanks with their own stories. People started to chase the reality in their own ways – became both creators and witnesses of it, rather than living in a “false” reality that propaganda suggests. This is a distinct feature of Chinese independent cinema in the 1990s, which tends to unmask a “raw, underlying reality by stripping away the ideological representations that distort it.”¹⁵ It is the people’s fear living in lies, distrust of the authority, and the “discredited worldview” that trigger their trauma, who attempt to reveal the mainstream ideology through the authenticity and the true reality crystalized in everyday struggle and ordinary life.¹⁶ Therefore, the historical compensation lays the foundation for a legitimacy of authenticity in China, as the “old” realism has been disassociated from the context at the time. It requires transformative power to be against the authority and its derived mechanisms of representation, echoing what Lü says, that China’s “new” documentaries emerge on the opposite of a “special topic program” (*zhuantopian*) that mostly uses expository modes with ideologically driven voice-overs and scripted texts.¹⁷ For Chinese independent filmmakers, unscripted texts and handheld cameras – emphasizing spontaneity, improvisation, and arbitrariness – are central to the documentary’s truth-claim. This approach resists old socialist traditions and gains significance by asserting authenticity through the documentation of everyday reality. An objectifying force is highly involved in the documenting process and contributes significantly to direct cinema, which underlines the filmmaker’s non-intrusive filming behind the camera, serving for the claimed rational and objective analysis of the filmed subject. The aesthetics of direct cinema is therefore prevalent in the documentary practice, and gradually

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ McGrath 2008: 131.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 132.

¹⁶ Anderson 1990: 202.

¹⁷ Lü 2003: 59. The assertion has been criticized later by which the binary opposite does not imply that “old” documentaries, such as specific-topic-program-like newsreels or reportage-based works, should not be acknowledged as documentaries. These older forms, despite often serving as propaganda tools for the Party, contribute to the complex trajectory of contemporary independent Chinese documentaries. While many were created as mouthpieces for political agitation, they nonetheless engage with the “motivated visions of reality”. For details, see Wang 2023: 27; Wang 2014: 126.

affects practitioners' understanding of seeking the truth, asserting that "my cameras don't lie."¹⁸

However, the debate on this direct cinema style is often related to whether the observational long takes contribute to documentary's truth claims. While an "objective" long take appears to allow the audience to focus on selective details and form their own interpretations, it deliberately erases the filmmaker's personal involvement and subjectivity. This, in turn, seems to "close the discursive spaces" where history and personal memory critically intersect.¹⁹ Chinese independents tend to regard the "zero degree writing" (*lingdu shuxie*) or nonpolitical type of "automatic writing" (*zidong shuxie*) as an absolute form of objectivity and impartiality, because they refuse to be "a messenger of the mainstream ideology."²⁰ However, the blind pursuit of this objectivity from a "misguided faith in observational cinema"²¹ minimizes the filmmaker's involvement, as much as possible allows the filmed subjects to speak about their "truth"; this seems to overlook a crucial point that Trinh T. Minh-ha ever reminds us, that (documentary) filmmaking can only represent a "reality that runs away, reality (that) denies reality," because you have to "give the realism an artificial aspect."²² It thus seldomly counters the official ideology and the mainstream discourses simply through authorial non-interference and a seemingly objective camera, for they may forget that "words, like images, are not always trustworthy."²³ Even the documentarist Duan Jinchuan, who used to follow Wiseman's direct cinema style, criticized that a series of long takes can also be disinteresting – using one extreme to counter another.²⁴

It appears that this nonpolitical and non-intervened observational filmmaking has offered independent documentarists much more confidence and faith in representing a true reality of Chinese people, making them maintain a deliberate calmness and restraint behind the camera, which is highly different from the previous newsreels-alike program within TV stations. However, the pursuit of "self-erasure" and "absolute objectivity" seem to inadvertently reflect a hesitation in conveying authentic stories and the everyday lives of ordinary people, as this approach relies heavily on the constraints of what is captured within the camera

¹⁸ This was a title of a book, *Wode Sheyingji Busa Huang*, published in 2002 by Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou. It introduces some avant-garde filmmakers born in the 1960s and 1970s and their work. However, this manifesto-like assertion was also criticized by Yingjin Zhang, who discussed on the perception of truth claims and the dilemma as well as power dynamics among filmmaker, filmed subjects and the audience in terms of identities and self-positioning. Later, this title comes to represent the manifesto of truth claim of some independent documentarists. See Yingjin Zhang 2006: 23-46.

¹⁹ McGrath 2008: 148, Qi 2014: 131.

²⁰ Zhang 2006: 26.

²¹ Zhang 2004b: 14.

²² Trinh 1993: 40.

²³ Zhang 2004b: 15.

²⁴ Lü 2003: 88.

frame.²⁵ While documentary may aim to reveal a “hidden truth” and give voice to the voiceless, this cannot be confined to merely resisting certain aesthetics – namely, an expository “voice-of-God” mode that is prevalently used in the state-owned institutions. Simply positioning itself in opposition to the official rhetoric cannot, and should not, constitute its sole mission.²⁶ Perhaps Chinese independents could represent filmed subjects, particularly the marginalized ones, in a more emotional, subjective and affective way and carry more personal embodiment and experiences. Using these diverse approaches does not imply that the “truthfulness” is diminished, and chasing “truth” and “authenticity” is not necessarily essential to documentary. Filmmakers do not have to attempt to depoliticize their work by distancing themselves from the mainstream ideology and striving for objective observational approaches. While their motivation is understandable, the social transformation of the post-millennium era has altered the social context. The persistent pursuit of an objective truth without critical reflection, or deliberate disregard of their presence, seems to be rigid, especially when portraying subjects whose representations often need to be politicized rather than simply documented. As Zhang Yingjin noted, the debate is perhaps not about whether the camera can capture reality or whose cameras lie, but rather about independent documentarists’ desire to reclaim the subjectivity of their cameras.²⁷ The truth claim is somewhat subjectively perceived, yet it is veiled in the myth of pure observation.

2. Being *Duli* (Independent)—Beyond the Official and Unofficial Binary

Not only documentary aesthetics, but also the notion of “independent” warrants an in-depth discussion, particularly in terms of production. Much of the discourse gravitates towards an “official-unofficial” binary opposition, where the primary criterion for independent filmmaking in China is its detachment from state-controlled systems and institutions. It is crucial to note that after 1949 (the year that the Communist Party China officially became the regime), and especially by 1953, all the private sectors of filmmaking that existed before were eliminated. From then on, filmmaking belongs to the state-controlled system or film-related departments.²⁸ *Duli*, which literally means “lonely standing” in Chinese, has a strong undertone of departure from the official. In cinematic field, it ties to film production and circulation outside of official channels. It concerns censorship issues and directly affects how film activities are organized. In this regard, the notion needs to be differently understood than it is in the Western context, particularly in the US, where “independent” generally denotes self- or privately funded art-house films produced

²⁵ Zhang 2010: 127.

²⁶ Ferguson 1995: 12.

²⁷ Zhang 2006: 27.

²⁸ For Chinese filmmaking in private sectors, please see Zhang 2004a: 58-83.

outside Hollywood. Chinese independents are not able to produce documentaries successfully under the rubric of any cultural institutions, which is to say that there is no infrastructure of filmmaking within the state-owned system for them, including film studios, financial resources, and film-related networks. Thus, people easily view documentary filmmaking within this strict binary opposition of “(non)independent,” which has sparked considerable debate. Some argue that Chinese documentaries cannot be understood as “independent” solely based on their association with or detachment from the state.²⁹ Post-1980s sociopolitical and economic conditions have created a dynamic landscape where documentary practices oscillate between market forces and political ideology. Wu Wenguang, Shi Jian and other earlier independents were committed to “resisting the ‘corrupt’ filmmaking tradition” from within the system, as they unwaveringly defined the independent documentary in two aspects: independent production and thinking.³⁰ They took advantage of institutional resources, such as expensive film equipment, and worked for TV stations, using the infrastructure of the establishment to challenge its norms while still operating within its framework. Some of them managed to navigate the system while secretly working on independent projects.³¹ While private production is less possible to be achieved, many of them negotiated with the state, either pushing the boundaries of independent filmmaking or leveraging the TV system through active engagement. Due to the economic transformation that affects the media reform, these independents were required to cater to market demands for viewership set by official TV stations. What ordinary audiences wanted became trendy at the time—people enjoyed watching themselves on screen, telling their own stories.

In this way, the notion of “independent documentary” seems to be ambiguous in terms of the increased demand for documentary content driven by marketization; the boundary between state and private independent filmmaking also appears to be blurred.³² Nevertheless, despite of the conglomeration of party-state system and radical marketized economic monopoly of cultural production, one should acknowledge that the “unofficial” film production is truly a thorny issue to grapple with. Whether filmmakers should seek government approval is a question worth considering, as it significantly shapes our understanding of “marginalization” and power relations in the following discussions.

In addition, the notion of independence remains controversial also due to its insidious political implications. To both Chinese and international audiences, independent Chinese documentaries often symbolize political dissidence, contesting officially sanctioned representations and narratives. These filmmakers are perceived as antagonistic to the party-state’s ideology and are frequently

²⁹ Wang 2019.

³⁰ Zhang 2010: 121.

³¹ Chen and Mo 2006: 144.

³² Berry 2006: 117, Lü 2010: 15.

celebrated at international film festivals by Western film critics, scholars, and general audiences. The “independent” label functions as a signifier, unceasingly producing an “other” side of China. On one hand, it stands in opposition to the red socialist China as per the doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party; on the other hand, it invites audience to experience an “alternative” China through a highly realistic and authentic lens. The content of these works reflects a social reality that deviates significantly from domestic ideological propaganda. It problematizes the party-state’s political agenda and governance in a disruptive but mundane way, showcasing how ordinary people (*laobaixing*) are marginalized through poverty, displacement, surveillance, silencing and disenfranchisement.

However, Chris Berry and Paul Pickowicz argue that it is overly simplistic to frame independent documentary filmmaking solely through a political stance and ideology, and/or to position “heroic political dissident” filmmakers in binary opposition to a “ruthless police state”.³³ While censorship issues are an inescapable part of dissident visual cultures, these works should not be narrowly interpreted as “banned films from China.” Such an interpretation risks reducing filmmakers to “bankable dissidents”,³⁴ who supposedly take advantage of this label to gain attention from Western audiences and international film festival organizers. Focusing on the hidden narratives and authentic perspectives revealed by Chinese documentary filmmakers, the notion of “independent” is inextricably linked to international cultural agents, who view dissidents as aligning with their fundamental agendas of promoting Western democracy. Simultaneously, the concept of independence is reinforced and even defined through the “extra-diegetic facts” of the films themselves, which shape cultural expectations and imaginations of an oriental nation within a post-Cold War mindset.³⁵

3. Representing the Marginalized—*Diceng* Narratives

Representing marginalized subjects seems to be an important mission of independent documentaries. These is a collective portrait of Chinese *diceng*, the powerless, the subalterns, and the disenfranchised, who live on the edge of the society: sex workers, drug addicts, homosexuals, and migrant workers, the homeless and people with mental illness. They are understood as “lower class people” (lit. translated from Chinese, *diceng*). Filmmakers strive to represent the masses, the voiceless, and ordinary people who are underrepresented in the social reality in transition. However, being at the “opposite” position of the mainstream society, which in this case stands for political and economic authority of the party-state rather than the crowds or the public, these subjects are regarded as undesirable

³³ Berry et al. 2010, Pickowicz 2006: 10.

³⁴ Valerie 2006: 102.

³⁵ Dai 2018 [1999]: 151.

representations, particularly in the “main melody” (*zhuxuanlü*) of the government narrative, and therefore downplayed in the official discourse. Marginalized subjects embody a sense of subversion in relation to the official narrative, posing challenges to legislative power and administrative forces of the party-state. By focusing on this theme of individuals suffering under an authoritarian regime in a transformative era, independent documentaries exposed the *darker sides* of society and the indifference of the state machine, because *diceng* as disruptive and counter-narrative political subject offer an opportunity to create alternative discourse that differs from the mainstream one. As independents document marginalized people in an authentic way, Lü regarded it as “subaltern spirit” (*diceng jingshen*),³⁶ which stands for its potential value—divorced from the mainstream value system, highlighting a sense of multiplicity. The voice of ordinary people is made heard by documentarists, who capture moments of their daily lives rather than serving as a mouthpiece for the party-state that embraces the “official narrative.”

Xu Tong’s *Wheat Harvest* (2008) tells us a story of a young girl who uses her body to make a difficult living in Beijing. The protagonist Miao migrates from rural region of Hebei to Beijing and works as a sex worker to earn money for her dad’s illness back home. The film focuses on Miao’s sick father and her life in her hometown, narrating her struggle as a daughter who is unable to fulfill her father’s expectations by not being a son—someone who could earn money for the whole family and take care of him. Then the filmmaker shifts the lens to Miao’s life as a sex worker in Beijing, documenting her daily life and work through an observational camera. The documentary creates a stark contrast between the rural Hebei province and metropolitan Beijing by cross-cutting scenes of Miao’s travelling between the two places (fig. 1 and fig. 2). This contrast accurately represents the huge gap in terms of class and economic resources between urban and rural areas, which exactly impacts people’s everyday lives under the agenda of China’s Deepen Reforms (*shenhua gaige*). Miao barely has options to make a living in her hometown, not only because she is a girl, but also because the capital city Beijing has been exploiting resources from neighboring rural regions. She faces double marginalizations: she is a daughter at home; she is migrant and sex worker in Beijing. She belongs to the “lower class”, and who she is vividly depicts the social inequality and her lack of social legitimacy, seamlessly embedding the story into a broader collective portrait of marginalized individuals.

³⁶ Lü 2003: 304.



Fig. 1: Screenshot from *Wheat Harvest*: 02:51



Fig. 2: Screenshot from *Wheat Harvest*: 32:07

As mentioned earlier, the representation of the marginalized is often connected to discussions of social and political issues. The tension engendered by class conflicts among different social groups further reinforces the inherent political nature of the *diceng*. It can serve as a form of counter-narrative to the mainstream, revealing and challenging the hegemonic structures of the dominant, legitimized discourse. In China, “mainstream” often refers to legitimate, institutionalized, and official dimensions; it also conforms to the market and the party-state-oriented ideology. In *Wheat Harvest*, Miao’s private life is meticulously documented: from how she works with her customers, rents a small place in Beijing as her workspace (it is called

“paofang” in film, which means “the place to fuck”) and seeks potential “clients,” to how she navigates her personal relationships alongside the demands of her profession. As a worker in a stigmatized profession and a woman that is made invalid and unacknowledged by mainstream values, these details of her life can be seen as acts of resistance against dominant narratives—where the very act of documentation becomes a form of opposition. Miao’s stories are unheard and dismissed by mainstream discourse due to the *filth* and moral decay in their “degenerated” choice to be a sex worker, a profession considered utterly undesirable and unacceptable in the Chinese traditional value system.³⁷ Miao talks about her personal taste of men among those customers and her feelings and thoughts about the relationship between a prostitute and a customer—simply just to take advantage of each other mutually—one seeking money and the other seeking sex. These individual’s voice and stories sharply contrast with the bright, harmonious, and positive tone promoted by the state—especially in the emblematic year of 2008, marked by the Beijing Olympics, which reinforced the mainstream and universal values embedded in harmony, health, sunniness and positivity. To independent filmmakers, to document (*jilu*) becomes a tool for witnessing and social critique. It highlights the political nature of *diceng*, in which the existence of marginalized people troubles the social order. Just as Miao’s stories tell the audience, beneath the grand narrative of the state (*daguo xushi*), how much sacrifice and suffering have people like her, the lower-class and marginalized ones, endured? What costs have they had to pay? *Diceng* serves as a synonym for untold stories; the focus of the *diceng* counters the delegitimization.³⁸

Sex work is highly stigmatized yet remains prevalent in Chinese society. On the one hand, the economic development has triggered desires and mushrooms of different sex-related venues; on the other hand, the state actively engages in elimination all kinds of prostitution-related activities by implementing *yanda* (“hard strike”) campaigns against sex work.³⁹ As is shown in the documentary, Miao mentions that their sex business is made harder due to occasional crackdowns from authorities, which requires constant vigilance. In the end, Miao has to give up her sex work completely even after switching to several places, with her “boss” having been arrested by the police and sentenced for “organizing collective prostitution” (fig. 3). Despite the fact she has to end her career, the documentary shows us the strategies and tricks that she and her friends (other sex workers) have adopted to circumvent censorship and crackdowns. These are implicated in the daily scene and become a

³⁷ In the mainstream narrative, for example, in the newsreels or reports, sex workers are allegedly said to be shameful about their work. This is largely due to the way the government and mainstream discourse strives to frame and stigmatize sex work as a “deviant occupation.” They face risk of legal persecution and moral condemnation, with such “immoral” sex being seen as dangerous, disgraceful, undesirable, deviant and diseased.

³⁸ Braester 2017: 38.

³⁹ Jeffreys 2004.

vital part of their life—to survive and to be resilient in a critical environment. What they have done to save their work and what the filmmaker has documented profoundly carries publicity and political significance in a way that it disrupts the dominant discourse of a “dark side” of society.

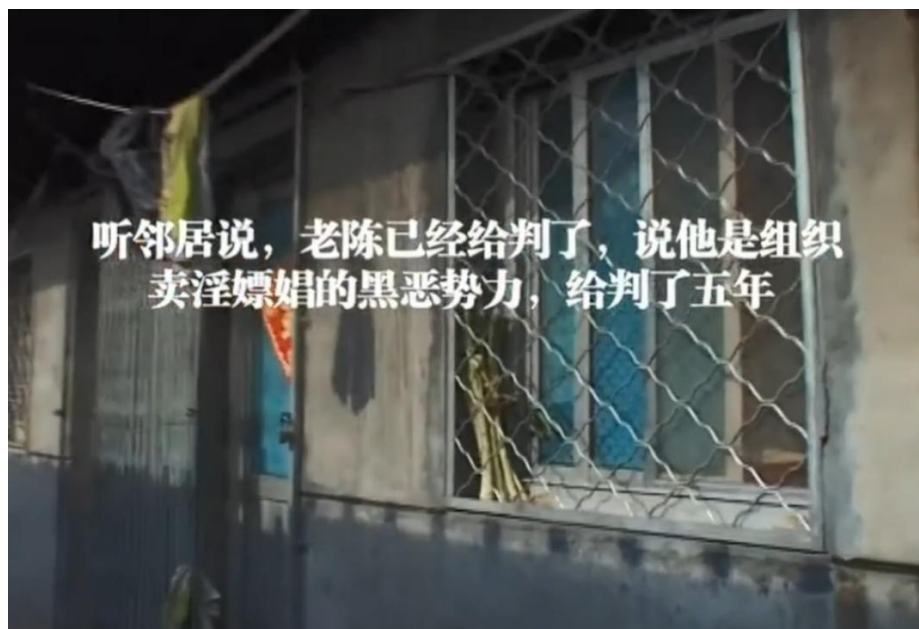


Fig. 3: Screenshot from *Wheat Harvest*: 1:04:11

It is also a political choice for the filmmakers to focus on *diceng*, expressing resistance against the “illegitimacy” often associated with the marginalized. Lü believes that the rise of digital videos (thereafter as “DV”) has enabled independent documentary filmmakers to break this unequal power dynamic of viewing and being viewed, creating a dialogue between the “other” and the self.⁴⁰ She indicates that many filmmakers themselves come from a *diceng* background, turning their works into self-expression and representation of the community.⁴¹ However, this viewpoint is questionable in the sense that she romanticizes the notion of the marginality and overstates the digital filmmaking practice, which readily conceals the ethical concerns between the filming and filmed ones. As Sheng argues, while the proliferation of DV has facilitated to document subalterns, it does not mean that these filmmakers automatically and naturally “blend into the masses,”⁴² and share the marginality. The portability of DV practice should prompt filmmakers to reflect on the power relations and ethical issues, rather than assuming that they are as marginal as their filmed subjects, which exempt them from being accused of

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 248-259.

⁴¹ Ibid.: 256.

⁴² Sheng 2015: 100.

exploitation. How do we not turn the filmed subjects into a spectacle? As Sheng writes, this presents a serious “ethical and political issue that has to be defined actively by the filmmaker.”⁴³

I believe that the portrayal of the marginalized should not be justified solely as a form of resistance to official discourse, or valued only for its political significance within the larger context. We cannot oversee the potential problems within the discourse of independent filmmaking itself, nor can we ignore the violence imposed upon marginalized people through a lens. A sentiment of solidarity among those who claim to share a so-called “common *diceng* fate,”⁴⁴ let alone of delving into what truly constitutes this “common” fate, should not romanticize the marginality of these groups while turning a blind eye to the ethical dilemmas, power dynamics, and violence that may arise in the process. I will continue to use *Wheat Harvest* as a telling example to illustrate the implicit ethical considerations and violence that are produced through the representational act of *diceng* and the observational camera.

This documentary brings about several problematic ethical questions. For instance, the filmmaker’s continued filming and later kept the material after one of the filmed subjects explicitly requested not to be filmed; the film revealed personal addresses in details of the subjects; the filmmaker ignored Miao’s request to stop filming when she underwent a gynecological examination with other unrelated female patients at the scene. The filmmaker’s admission that the production and public screenings occurred without the consent of the filmed sex workers undermines the equal relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects, as well as disregards the principle of “informed consent” in documentary filmmaking. Additionally, the filmmaker failed to have mutual respect and a sense of care or support for his subjects, particularly when focusing on such a controversial topic. These indicate the filmmaker’s disregard for unbalanced power relationship and ethical concerns that triggers the exploitation of the *diceng*, as well as a lack of awareness of the responsibility and respect owed to them.

What is most surprising, however, are some arguments suggesting that the criticism from feminists was simply an attack based on a moral judgment of Xu Tong as a cisgender, heterosexual male director, and that these critiques were framed as an “oppressive context” intended to pressure him into apologizing.⁴⁵ Such views positioned the feminist critique of the film in opposition to “documentary ethics,” with some claiming that “the entire documentary discourse has become the target of feminist activists’ protests.”⁴⁶ There were even calls for these protesters to watch more independent Chinese documentaries, arguing that independent filmmakers like Xu Tong, who is himself *diceng*, walk the path of the marginalized. He dedicates

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lü 2003: 4.

⁴⁵ Lü 2016: 296.

⁴⁶ Ibid.: 295.

himself to giving voice to marginalized groups by selling his own property to fund his documentary filmmaking.⁴⁷

These views seem to be rigid. The lack of infrastructure and unpromising environment of independent Chinese documentary, including the official suppression and the marginalization of the whole “*duli*” discourse, as well as filmmaker’s “emergency” and “humanitarian impulse” to voice the voiceless,⁴⁸ cannot justify the violence and exploitation that occur in the representation of the *diceng*. As an independent filmmaker, Xu Tong is indeed marginalized by the authorities and mainstream society. However, he cannot share this marginality with his *diceng* subjects simply through his “field work” into the sex work communities that exist in legal and moral gray zones, which “would put his life in risk, challenges and danger.”⁴⁹ It reminds us of what Pooja Rangan comments on the “immediations of the documentary tropes,” where she questions the seemingly inclusive gesture of inviting dehumanized people to perform their humanity in participatory documentaries.⁵⁰ In our case, Xu Tong seems to put himself in the discourse of marginalization by trying to make a connection between himself and the sex workers, which exactly exemplifies his strong will to invite Miao and her friends to perform their marginality in the name of humanity. However, as Rangan puts it, when humanity becomes a primary principle, “it can turn into an alibi for discriminatory and violent acts.”⁵¹ When performing *diceng* becomes his priority, the violence and potential exploitation of his filmed subjects appear to be invisible. Miao and her friends serve as “inspirations” of Xu Tong, who went to places where “marginalized” people are just to seek a filming topic. This inspiration is in disguise of a strong humanitarian impulse to represent the marginalized through the immediations of the documentary’s truth-claim, which produces a power that lies not only in the filmmaker’s hand-held camera, but also in his detached observation. Through this pure and objectively authentic observational lens, the status of the marginalized one is reinforced and they are further alienated within a patriarchal space.

This reinforcement of the *diceng* status and the ethical violence is explicitly highlighted in the contextualized circumstances of independent documentary filmmaking in China. Given that China lacks proper ways of circulation and production, many of the filmed ones do not fully understand what “independent documentary” entails, while they are frequently exposed in film festival sphere in both domestic and international spaces. As Abé Mark Nones points out in his criticism of imbalance power relations in Wiseman’s direct cinema: To what extent are the filmed subjects as socially marginalized ones troubled by their power

⁴⁷ Ibid.: 301.

⁴⁸ Rangan 2017: 1-22.

⁴⁹ Lü 2016: 303.

⁵⁰ Rangan 2017: 6.

⁵¹ Ibid.: 6.

dynamics to the filmmakers that is reinforced by the circumstances?⁵² Indeed, this dynamic complicates the ethical relationship between the camera, the director, and the subjects, however, it still cannot be the excuse of Xu Tong's omission of his filmed subjects' request and consent regarding the production and circulation. The situation is even more complex when the whole discourse of representing *diceng* moves from China to the world. International film festivals have become a site for Chinese independents to seek opportunities and resources, however it also highlights a tension between a "Western external understanding of China's *diceng* and our own internal interpretations of the marginalized reality."⁵³ The embodiment of marginality in China, when spectated through a gaze – whether from the West or the East – often takes on a voyeuristic or spectacle-like dimension. In the act of watching the suffering from afar, the violence on the filmed bodies is enhanced. Western audiences, in particular, rely on these marginalized individuals to satisfy their need for a "truth" about distant others.

⁵² Nones 2015: 37.

⁵³ Lü 2018: 250.

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Media reference

Wheat Harvest. China 2008, Xu Tong, 99 Min.

List of Illustrations

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