

Negotiating Realists: The Sixth Generation of Chinese Filmmakers

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to discuss the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers by focusing on two aspects: their contribution to constructing a realistic cinema in 1990s' China and their ambiguous relationship with the state, the West and the market, a relationship that shifts between rebellion and compromise. By thus illuminating the two aspects of the Sixth Generation cinema, I aim to provide a revealing glimpse into the 1990s' Chinese society where full-speed reforms have brought heartening as well as disturbing changes.

Chapter 1 will examine the composition of the Sixth Generation and provide more background for understanding their works by relating the Sixth Generation to their contemporaneous generation group of the 1960s. Chapter 2 will do a close reading of major Sixth Generation films and filmmakers with the emphasis on their unique realistic concern. Apart from a historical as well as a China-specific examination of key concepts like cinematic realism and documentary, feature filmmaker Jia Zhangke and his *Xiao Wu*, and documentary filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan will be the main objects for close textual analysis. Chapter 3 will focus on the Sixth Generation's collaborative as well as oppositional relationship with the state, the West and the market, all of which have combined to give the Sixth Generation cinema its present look and will continue to determine its future direction of development. The conclusion offers a look at the present state of these young filmmakers and tries to map where they are going in face of greater competition brought by foreign competitors (especially Hollywood) in the wake of China's entry in the World Trade Organization.

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Introduction

In 1982, a “Youth Shooting Group” was established inside provincial Guangxi Film Studio. Major members of this group were students of film production freshly graduated from Beijing Film Academy that year (within the film circle they had a collective nominator “Class 78”). It was the first of its kind in Chinese film history, that young filmmakers were trusted upon graduation with such responsibilities and freedom in film production. Starting from 1983, this shooting group turned out a number of films whose unprecedented thematic treatment and artistic innovation caused a big buzz at the time. Among the early vintage of this group are *One and Eight* (Zhang Junzhao, 1983), *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987). They are what would later be known as the “Fifth Generation” in Chinese filmmaking. The most widely known among them are Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang, whose works like *Yellow Earth* (Chen, 1984), *Fairwell My Concubine* (Chen, 1993), *Tempress Moon* (Chen, 1996), *Red Sorghum* (Zhang, 1987), *Ju Dou* (Zhang, 1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, 1991), *To Live* (Zhang, 1994), and *Blue Kite* (Tian, 1993) have entered the list of world cinema classics.

Before we enter the discussion of the actual generations of Chinese filmmakers, a clarification of the word “generation” seems necessary. While this “generation” discourse might seem too clear-cut in chronological terms to be possible to a western reader, it actually bespeaks one of the most fundamental features of contemporary Chinese cultural history. Over the last half century, China had been through the bliss and pains of trying to

establish a clean, independent nation (the 1950s), falling into the trap of zealots' communism (the 1960s and 1970s, the Cultural Revolution), working hard to stand on its feet again and open up to reforms on all sides (the 1980s, 1990s and up till the present). Values have been constantly established, changed, smashed, mixed and rebuilt. Quickly shifting sociohistorical scenes determined the experiences and thinking patterns of people born into and living through different decades, thus they tend to talk about themselves and others in generational terms.¹

Though the generational discourse in Chinese cinema seems somewhat abrupt for the Fifth Generation was actually the first to be named on this generation list by an unknown author,² the general cultural milieu in early 1980s quickly accepted this term and immediately put it into frequent use. The Fifth Generation became a point of reference in film discourse and, as we shall see in the following discussion, when the

¹ Examples of the generational discourse are: "May 4th Generation," "Liberation Generation," "1945 Generation," "Playful Generation", which are used to roughly divide and define Chinese intellectuals and representative thinking patterns in the 20th century. Other similar usages mainly appear in contemporary literary history, like the "Third Generation" referring to the Red Guards and the "Fourth Generation" referring to the intellectual youth who were mainly urban students in the 1970s and sent to the rural regions for re-education. These definitions are not final and often overlapping (sometimes confusing), but together they form an interesting typography in discussions of contemporary Chinese cultural landscape. See, Liu Xiaofeng, "Sociological Thoughts and Notes on the May 4th Generation," (*guanyu "wusi" yidai de shehuixue sikao zhaji*), *Reading*, 1989, no. 5. Also see, Dai Jinhua, *Scenery in the Mist: Chinese Cinema Culture 1978-1998 (Wu zhong fengjing: zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998)*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000, p.382-383.

² It is starting from the Fifth Generation that film critics began to track back and forward in Chinese filmography to divide filmmakers into roughly defined "generations." As the Fifth Generation largely flourished in the 1980s, directors immediately before them, i.e. those made films in late 1970s (mainly in 1979) were considered the Fourth Generation. Since the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) produced a big cultural blank period during which only eight revolutionary operas were produced and shown to the whole country, the Third Generation then naturally fell with the group of directors who worked largely between 1949 and 1966 under the guidance of the Communist government. Going back from there, the Second Generation include directors of the 1930s and 1940s when sound film started to dominate the scene, while the First Generation refer to those early filmmakers who set the cornerstone of Chinese cinema and mainly worked with silent film. Representatives of each initial groups are Zheng Zhengqiu, Zhang Shichuan, Sun Yu (the First Generation), and Cai Chusheng, Fei Mu (the Second Generation). See Dai Jinhua, *Scenery in the Mist: Chinese Cinema Culture 1978-1998 (Wu zhong fengjing: zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998)*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000, p.382-384.

Sixth Generation—the protagonist in this thesis—first emerged on the horizon and whose **shape** was still undecided, they were referred to as the “Post-Fifth Generation.” Though **members** of both generations tend to deny their alleged membership,³ the striking **proximity** in thematic concerns and stylistic features as manifested respectively in their **works** as a group confirm the legitimacy of such a generational discourse.

Directly related to the Fifth Generation’s subtle reflections on and criticism of Chinese history is their unique experience of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the unprecedented reforms starting in early 1980s. Failed practice of an idealistic communism, sufferings and sacrifices of the individuals over the years in various historical vicissitudes, apparent failure of traditional values, a tentative search for an effective, quick yet hopefully peaceful path to modernity and prosperity, China’s past and future, all these big questions have been grating the minds of Chinese intellectuals since the 1980s. The Fifth Generation filmmakers joined in the heated disputes of the time with their cinematic statements.

In a filmographic sense, the 1980s might be called the decade of the Fifth Generation. Headed by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, the Fifth Generation marks the formal entry of Mainland Chinese cinema into international acclaim with their well known lush, rural, historical costume drama, exquisite cinematography, state-funded safe bets and top international festival honors. Starting in early 1990s, a group of young filmmakers who later are recognized as the Sixth Generation emerged and came into prominence in China as well as in world cinema. Instead of making pretty pictures set in

³ Zhang Yimou is quoted as saying "I didn't know who the first four generations were," and adding, by way of explanation, "The Chinese like everything to have a number." See Richard Corliss, "Crouching China, Hidden Agenda," *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

the rural past like their Fifth Generation predecessors, the Sixth Generation makes gritty films set in the urban present. "The emperors and concubines have been replaced by grungy malcontents, spitting out obscenities in sync-sound and grooving to hard rock... A night at the Peking Opera gives way to an all-nighter in the Beijing mosh pit."⁴ Parables of the past are replaced by realistic depictions of the present.

Does the Sixth Generation really represent a break away from their Fifth Generation antecedents? Or on the contrary do they show continuity in their concern for society, historicity and humanity, only in a different style? Again, a look at the larger picture of cultural disputes over modernity in China might shed some light on this question.

When comparing the last two decades of the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals are largely rooted in a thinking pattern of binary oppositions: the 80s are defined in terms like "integral, political, idealistic, constructive, holy, transparent" and the 90s are more or less "dismissed" as fragmental, commercial, materialistic, deconstructive, secular and chaotic.⁵ While intellectuals and filmmakers in the 1980s still had a strong missionary sense, actively engaged in critical reflections on the past while making hopeful predictions of the future, social thinkers in the 1990s found themselves confronted with a

⁴ Richard Corliss, "Crouching China, Hidden Agenda," *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

⁵ Li Tuo et al. "A Discussion of Modernity in Cultural Studies" (*mantan wenhua yanjiu zhong de xiandaixing wenti*), a dialogue between Li Tuo, Dai Jinhua, Song Weijie and He Li, *Bell Mountain (zhong shan)*, China, 1996: 5, p.180, 184. Quoting Dai Jinhua and He Li, then a graduate student in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Beijing University.

A perfect example of this enlightenment impulse is to be found in *Heshang (Yellow River Elegy)*. For a description of this ground-breaking TV miniseries and a discussion of the ideology of enlightenment implied in it about Chinese intellectuals, see Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and*

somewhat embarrassing present to deal with—the immediate future that the 1980s had looked forward to with so much zeal.

In the 1990s we could already see effects of post-communist China's headlong plunge into the whole-scale social and economic reforms. Though political nominator like "communist" still manages to stay on the surface to maintain an appearance of coherence, drastic changes are taking place in all aspects of the society in the direction of capitalism. Economy has indeed boosted tremendously; but unprecedented problems also surfaced. Quick privatization of old state-owned factories have left millions of urban workers jobless, yet social welfare and insurance systems are far behind in growth to take care of that disturbing void. Increasing pace of urbanization has lured millions of peasants from rural regions who, upon arrival, find no ready jobs waiting for them and become nameless migrants. Gaps between the rich and poor are enlarging; corruption is rampant. Traditional morals are tossed away in the pursuit of imported values and fashions. Human relationships are ready to be redefined every day. The ordinary Chinese feels increasingly lonely, isolated and neglected.

In the middle of all this, the officially approved and promoted "main melody" cinema sits comfortably on praising the "positive" side of the reform and the Chinese Communist Party's sage leadership over all these years. It refuses (and frequently forbids others) to look at the other side of the story, the seamy side of the wonderful reform era and people's private sufferings in their daily lives.⁶ Naturally the task falls on the

Ideology in Deng's China, Chapter 3: "Heshang and the Paradoxes of the Chinese Enlightenment", Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.118-136.

⁶ In an important speech in 1994, Chinese President Jiang Zemin explained the meaning of "main melody" (*zhu xuanlu*) as in accordance with "patriotism, collectivism and socialism...belief in honest work in exchange for a better life". Wang Gengnian, vice head of Film Bureau of China, added that any film reflecting the guiding spirit of the age (i.e. in line with the Party's policy of reform) belongs to the "main

shoulders of conscientious, frequently independent, filmmakers who form a major part of the Sixth Generation. Instead of harking back to the past like the Fifth Generation, Sixth Generation filmmakers find dramatic stories unfolding right in front of their eyes. Different times spawn different filmmakers, but in the case of the Fifth and Sixth Generations we can still see the same preoccupation with the fate of individuals caught in rapidly changing times; only they have chosen different reference points—the Fifth Generation’s gaze was toward the past while the Sixth Generation’s attention is locked on the present.

In the following discussion I’ll delve into the main body of this paper, i.e. the contributions of the Sixth Generation in constructing a contemporary realistic cinema in China and the group’s struggles to negotiate for a decent existence among the conflicting as well as colluding forces of the state, the West and the market. By thus illuminating the two aspects of the Sixth Generation cinema, I aim to provide a revealing glimpse into the 1990s’ Chinese society where full-speed reforms have brought heartening as well as disturbing changes.

Chapter 1 will examine the composition of the Sixth Generation and provide more background for understanding their works by relating the Sixth Generation to their contemporaneous generation group of the 1960s.

Chapter 2 will do a close reading of major Sixth Generation films and filmmakers with the emphasis on their unique realistic concern. Apart from a historical as well as a China-specific examination of key concepts like cinematic realism and documentary,

melody” too. See, “1999: the Third Climax of Chinese Cinema”, *Economic Daily (Jingji Ribao)*, Beijing: Dec.9, 1999.

feature filmmaker Jia Zhangke and his *Xiao Wu*, and documentary filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan will be the main objects for close textual analysis.

Chapter 3 will focus on the Sixth Generation's collaborative as well as oppositional relationship with the state, the West and the market, all of which have combined to give the Sixth Generation cinema its present look and will continue to determine its future direction of development.

In conclusion I'll take a look at the present state of these young filmmakers and try to map where they are going in face of greater competition brought by foreign competitors (especially Hollywood) in the wake of China's entry in the World Trade Organization, an event that is destined to bring more dramatic changes to the Chinese society.

Through this case study of the Sixth Generation, I hope to demonstrate how the experience of these young filmmakers could serve as a reflection on and of the 1990s' China, a cultural landscape that is characterized by contradictions but sustained by continual negotiations between contradicting forces and for which the logic of simple dichotomy –margin versus the center, official versus unofficial—does not work.

Chapter 1: Defining the Sixth Generation

1. Many Names of the Sixth Generation

In the beginning the Sixth Generation was simply referred to as the “post-Fifth Generation”.⁷ Steadily their identity became clearer and a whole array of names has been used to call this group of young directors, most of whom received their education in film in Beijing Film Academy or the Central Theatre Academy, China’s two leading schools in film and theatre. In China they won neutral-sounding titles like “independent filmmakers”, “independent filmmaking movement”, “new documentary movement”, “Class 85” and “Class 87” of Beijing Film Academy,⁸ “new image movement”, and “new urban film.” In Europe and America, apart from being known as China’s new “Urban Generation”,⁹ they are endowed with more politically charged appellations like representatives of “China’s underground film”, “China’s dissident film” and “Beijing underground.”¹⁰ In Hong Kong and Taiwan they become “Mainland underground film” or more dramatically “The Righteous Seven” (*qi junzi*)¹¹, which is a political innuendo comparing the seven “dissident” filmmakers whose films were banned by the government to the seven revolutionary martyrs sacrificing their lives to bringing about democratic

⁷ Ni Zhen, “Footsteps of the Post-Fifth Generation” (*hou wu dai de bufa*), *Dazhong dianying*, Beijing: 1989:4.

⁸ “Class 85” and “Class 87” refer to their educational background. Many of these young filmmakers were enrolled in Beijing Film Academy in 1985 and 1987.

⁹ “If rural China and the mythical past provided the emotional landscape to the Fifth Generation directors and their films, these latecomers, whom we call the ‘Urban Generation,’ train their cameras squarely on the everyday reality of contemporary Chinese urban life.” See “The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society in Transformation,” symposium at New York University, March 2-3, 2001, “Introduction,” <<http://www.nyu.edu/tisch/cinema/urbangen/intro.html>>.

¹⁰ From February 23 through March 8, 2001, the US Film Society of Lincoln Center presents “The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema in Transformation,” a two-week, 11-film retrospective. From March 2 through 8, 2001, the New York Screening Room presents “Beijing Underground,” a weeklong six-film tribute.

¹¹ The term “qi junzi” originally referred to the seven martyrs who sacrificed their lives in proposing a democratic and republican government toward the end of the Qing Dynasty.

reforms in late Qing Dynasty.¹² From this variegated and overlapping terminology we can see the complexity both in the Sixth Generation's composition (including both feature film and documentary) and the larger cultural reception ground where viewers tend to see what they want to see, e.g. those outside China seem to tend to emphasize the "dissident" and "underground" elements in the Sixth Generation cinema, which is not totally incorrect but definitely incomplete.

2. Composition of the Sixth Generation

At closer inspection and for the convenience of discussion, we can divide the Sixth Generation filmmakers into two subgroups when they first appeared on the cultural stage in early 1990s.

First, there are "radical" independent filmmakers who make films outside the official production framework. This group breaks free, at some cost, from the shackles of official filmmaking system and censorship and works either self-funded or dependent on the auspices of overseas funding. Representatives are Zhang Yuan (*Beijing Bastards*, 1993; *Sons*, 1996), Wang Xiaoshuai (*The Days*, 1993; *So Close to Paradise*, 1998), He Jianjun (*Postman*, 1995), Ning Ying (*On the Beat*, 1995), Zhang Ming (*Rainclouds Over Wushan*, 1996), Jia Zhangke (*Xiao Wu*, 1997; *Platform*, 1999), Lu Yue (*Mr. Zhao*, 1998), etc.

Second, there are new documentary filmmakers who started a so-called "New Documentary Movement" in China. The most salient proponents of this group are Wu

¹² Among them were "veteran director from the Fifth Generation, the Sixth Generation directors, documentary filmmakers who mainly worked in form of video and even unprofessional video producer". Dai, Jinhua, Dai, Jinhua, *Scenery in the Mist: Chinese Cinema Culture 1978-1998 (Wu zhong fengjing: zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998)*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000, p.385.

Wenguang (*Bumming in Beijing: the Last Dreamers*, 1990; *1966, My Era of the Red Guards*, 1993; *At Home with the World*, 1995; *Jiang Hu*, 1999), Duan Jinchuan (*The Square*, co-work with Zhang Yuan, 1994; *No.16, Barkhor South Street*, 1994); Jiang Yue (*The Other Bank*, 1995); Kang Jian'ning (*Life*, co-work with Gao Guodong, 1995; *Yin Yang*, 1997), Zhang Yuan (*The Square*, collaborative piece with Duan Jinchuan, 1994; *Demolition and Relocation*, 1998; *Crazy English*, 1999); Jia Zhangke (*Public Space*, 2000), etc.

In most current talks of the Sixth Generation, the second group I mentioned here seems to be missing. The reasons why I not only include them in here but consider them as a major component of the Sixth Generation are that, like their feature filmmaker colleagues, these new documentarists show the same thematic concern for documenting as well as creating images of contemporary China. In fact, in some extreme but ingenious cases like Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu*, Ning Ying's *On the Beat* and Zhang Yuan's *Sons*, we find the line between narrative film and documentary become very fuzzy.¹³ Not to mention the fact that filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yuan are seriously trying their hand in documentary filmmaking while documentary filmmakers like Duan Jinchuan are considering making narrative films.¹⁴

It is highly necessary to note that the Sixth Generation is a group under constant reshaping and does not limit to these two groups mentioned above. As a matter of fact,

¹³ For example, Zhang Yuan's *Sons* depicts a family shattered by the father's alcoholism and insanity, mother's constant nagging and the two deadbeat sons hitting hard times following their father's example. In reality the family was the director's downstairs neighbor and the happenings in the film were what staged in their real life. Zhang invited them to re-enact their plight and in the father's case, Zhang actually went to the mental hospital and "borrow" him for the film. See, *Harvard Film Archive Bulletin*, Harvard University, Jan./Feb.2001, p.11. For a more extensive discussion of these films see Chapter 2 of this paper.

¹⁴ Again, for a more extensive discussion on this point, see Chapter 2 of this paper.

toward the latter half of the 1990s more and more young filmmakers started to work within the system and make films compatible with both the political and commercial frames present in China. Examples are Zhang Yang (*Love Spicy Soup*, 1997), Jin Chen (*Love in the Internet Age*, 1998), Shi Runjiu (*A Beautiful New World*, 1999), etc. They often have had a formal education in film or theatre and had tried hand in experimental filmmaking like the more prominent independent filmmakers mentioned above.¹⁵ They seem to be readier to embrace a commercial cinema. As we shall see, veteran underground filmmakers like Zhang Yang, Wang Xiaoshuai and Lu Xuechang also started to join these younger “main-streamers” in late 1990s and began to make market-compatible films. This makes the commercial part of the Sixth Generation more like a continuing, later stage in its development than an absolute separate group dividing from the two teams we mentioned above. Furthermore, the title “realism” also applies to their films to some extent for like their more unflinching underground colleagues, their camera is also directed to the urban and the private. Their style and picture are definitely more upbeat and fashionable; yet again that is another realistic facet of contemporary China. Realism doesn’t mean showing only the downside of life.

As we shall see, over the time Sixth Generation directors would change their style and thematic stand, and choose a more flexible route between feature film and documentary, underground arthouse film and popular commercial cinema. The final part

¹⁵ For example, Jin Chen, the director of popular films like *Love in the Internet Age* and *Love Story by Tea*, confessed, “At school, I originally studied theatre directing and often did filming exercises that were quite rebellious. But now that I direct films for the general market, my work is much more restrained. Have you heard of a Chinese phrase “the golden mean” [a Confucian concept about balance and order and avoiding extremism]? I think this is the state of Chinese film right now -- taking the middle path and not addressing any political problems. What I basically wanted to do -- and couldn't do completely -- was to make films that had absolutely nothing to do with politics, nothing to do with socialism, nothing to do with the Communist Party.” See Stephen Short, “The Current State of Chinese Cinema is Very Dire,” interview with Jin Chen, *Time Asia*, Oct.26 2000,

of this paper will show how the pressure posed by the market joins that from the state has forced these young filmmakers to rethink their thematic as well as aesthetic stance and come up with more adaptable strategies in order to survive and shine. Prepared by such knowledge we will not be surprised to see how members of the first “radical” group later agreed to make more accessible films in line with the government’s ideologies as well as catering to the appetite of the general public (e.g. Zhang Yuan’s *Seventeen Years*, 1999; or Lu Xuechang’s *A Lingering Face*, 1999). Also, the ideologically liberal group of New Documentary Movement has many members with a background in state-owned television networks. The complexity of the tension as well as collaboration between the state and the market leads to the equally complex and rich cinematic landscape drawn by the Sixth Generation.

For the clarity of discussion I will limit the textual analysis in Chapter 2 to the two groups clearly stated here, for it was because of their distinctive work that the Sixth Generation first came into prominence and was identified as a group. Starting from Chapter 3 and continuing to the end, later commercial-cinema members of the Sixth Generation will be incorporated to bespeak and enrich the issue of how these young filmmakers are constantly making adjustments among conflicting as well as colluding forces of the state, the West and the market, and changing lanes between independent art house film and commercial cinema. The institutional space that the Sixth Generation finds itself in is evasive and slippery as a result of the constantly changing relationship between the state and the market, yet it is exactly that indefiniteness and openness that makes the Sixth Generation a fascinating topic.

3. The Sixth Generation and the 60s' Generation

Before we delve into the actual films of the Sixth Generation, it is both interesting and pertinent to note that the Sixth Generation constitutes a generational cultural landscape not just in terms of filmography. Put in the larger historical background of contemporary Chinese sociopsychological and cultural configurations, the Sixth Generation might be argued to be part of the last generation of the Chinese communist era: those born in 1960s and early 1970s (toward the end of the Cultural Revolution).

Most of these young filmmakers were college students in the 1980s, as can be told by two of their many names: "Class 85" and "Class 87," the years when they entered Beijing Film Academy. It just happens that, while the Sixth Generation started to make their voice heard on the silver screen, their sixties-born counterparts in social and cultural sectors other than cinema also began to be engaged in serious reflections on their unique identity and spiritual origins in generational terms.¹⁶

Li Wan, a young scholar of Chinese popular music and a leading theorist of the sixties generation, tries to reason about the concept of generation in this particular context: "

Essentially, 'generation' is not a temporal term. It more connotes the common destiny of a group of people. At first it manifests itself as a shared experience, then there is a feeling of helplessness toward that shared experience, and then the whole life (of this particular group) will be swung around by that early shared experience."¹⁷

¹⁶ An ideal example is a collection of poetic as well as argumentative essays called *60s*. Xu Hui, ed., *60s* ("liushi niandai" qizhi), Beijing: Central Editing and Translation Publishing (zhongyang bianyi chubanshe), 2001.

¹⁷ Li Wan, "Starting to remember the past while so young », Xu Hui, ed., *60s* ("liushi niandai" qizhi), Beijing: Central Editing and Translation Publishing (zhongyang bianyi chubanshe), 2001, p.74.

To annotate that melancholic but fuzzy definition, Xu Hui says more clearly: “

I used to propose the concept of ‘people born in the 1960s’, by which I mean: we were born in the 1960s; we didn’t have a clue when the world was caught in the middle of drastic change. After we grew up and heard about the excitement of that grand era (the Cultural Revolution), our regret was tremendous. We were dumped rather carelessly by the sixties and became its most insignificant, featherweight epilogue. The title of Cui Jian’s 1994 (rock) release probably best bespeaks our situation: ‘Eggs Born by the Red Flag’. Our birth came too late... Thus is our destiny: on the one hand we are not ready to take insignificance for granted for after all we once rode the fading wind of the grand era. *That experience left in us seeds of hope and aspiration and we will never be able to be like those born in the seventies who are, historically speaking, a blank sheet.* On the other hand, we cannot find an outlet for our energy and grand aspirations because an increasingly regularized and systemized society is containing our creativity.”¹⁸

Since their birth, the sixties generation has been through major shifts in contemporary Chinese history: the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and post-1979 reforms and commercialization that have been continued with gathering momentum to the present. Even before they became aware of that influence, their childhood and adolescence have been heavily marked by the romanticism of a revolutionary period (despite the fact that it was drawing to an end). Their belated membership—as a result of their belated birth—made it impossible for them to actually participate in any of that grandness or grand bitterness: their parents and older brothers and sisters have had full claim to that “glory.” At their best, they are interested observers of that part of history. Their voice is thus replaced by a self-conscious silence; they are fully aware of their observing role and keep it into their adult years. If they had learned most of their basic values and worldview in their early years, then in the years to come their biggest task would be to unlearn them. They are caught in a tremendous chasm in which crisis in both spiritual belief and material living is taking place in every aspect of Chinese society.

¹⁸ Xu Hui, ed., *60s* (“*liushi niandai*” *qizhi*), Beijing: Central Editing and Translation Publishing (zhongyang bianyi chubanshe), 2001, p. 78-79.

“This generation (from the sixties) has an inborn, perpetual sense of distance. It becomes an observer of history. By “observer” it means that all that happens in history keeps a distance from him. He’s been through the Cultural Revolution and was educated under grand aspirations, yet he has never been a real participant in all this because it has not had any real connection with him. Later, a materialistic society came along and he’s been through the biggest changes in Chinese society over the past twenty years. Yet this experience denies his roots that were nurtured by idealism and moralism, which creates another distance (distancing) and makes him reluctant to embrace a new era without reserve...In contrast, the generation born in late seventies never has this sense of distancing. From the very beginning, the seventies generation is in a reality of getting rich, competition...they are gain-oriented and they worship realistic (this-world) struggles.”¹⁹

It is no mere coincidence to see how this self-distancing, objective, observing viewpoint is present in many of the Sixth Generation films, in which we can discover a subtle nostalgia for a remote childhood and the desire for a truthful representation of the present.

Unlike the Fifth Generation who are often noted for their serious cinematic reflections on history and historical trauma, young filmmakers of the Sixth Generation finds little history to lament upon. While Cheng Kaige’s gaze is guided by a soul-searching journey in *Yellow Earth* and *Child King* and while Zhang Yimou is bent on telling dissident stories against pre-communist feudal tradition (*Raise the Red Lantern* and *Ju Dou*), the Sixth Generation finds that the present is a more ideal object for contemplation. For them the Cultural Revolution is either a vague chapter in their memory of early childhood or, more hilariously and unusually (in the eyes of the elder who have been trapped in the throes of that period), an object for jubilant nostalgia (e.g. Jiang Wen’s *In the Heat of the Sun*, 1995; Lu Xuechang’s *The Making of Steel*, 1998). With the beginning and deepening of social and economic reforms in present-day China, the Sixth Generation finds the historical Real is actually unfolding right in front of their

¹⁹ Li Wan, “Starting to remember the past while so young », Xu Hui, ed., *60s* (“*liushi niandai*” qizhi),

eyes. Their gaze is locked on the present instead of the past and they need a realistic film consciousness and language to express that concern for the present. Thus perhaps it is no wonder that they often show disdain for or indifference to the quasi-allegorical, epic style of their predecessors. Their concern is to have a realistic representation of China captured in its palpable organic form.

Thus motivated, most of the Sixth Generation filmmakers focus their filmic stories on the life and fate of the common man, which might be read as a quietly rebellious and courageous gesture against the “heroes” in the state’s “main-melody” cinema and in imported Hollywood blockbuster films. As is explained in the bulletin of Harvard Film Archive when it held a special director-in-person screening of eleven Sixth Generation films (most of which belong to the first “independent” subgroup I mentioned above) in February 2001, “

Like the society it aims to reflect and engage, contemporary Chinese cinema has undergone a tremendous transformation in recent years. While political pressures, financial difficulties, and competition from Hollywood have seriously impeded the development of state-sponsored, mainstream Chinese cinema, younger filmmakers have quietly begun to make films that are attracting increasing critical attention at home and abroad. More than sixty such young directors are working “outside” the state-owned studio system in various ways...this emergent cinema departs significantly from its predecessors in its politics, values, and artistic sensibility. Taking leave of the melodrama of Chinese history and politics—a central preoccupation of socialist-era cinema—these newcomers, the “Urban Generation”, train their cameras squarely on the everyday reality of contemporary Chinese city life. The subject matter and stylistic orientations of these films are intimately intertwined with the rapid modernization and social dislocation occurring in urban China today...There is a powerful documentary pulse in the works of these young directors, aiming for a heightened sense of reality. By insistently blurring the boundary between fiction and reality, they begin to subject the cinematic medium itself to critical scrutiny.”²⁰

Beijing: Central Editing and Translation Publishing (zhongyang bianyi chubanshe), 2001, p.83.

²⁰ “The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society in Transformation”, *Harvard Film Archive Bulletin*, Harvard University, Jan./Feb. 2001.

In the following chapter I'll examine the Sixth Generation's hallmark sense of realism and history by doing a close reading of major films by the two subgroups of the Sixth Generation: independent feature filmmakers and leading documentarists of the New Documentary Movement. As Robert Stam argues in the editorial to the chapter on "Question of Realism" in his anthology of film and theory, "

While on one level film is mimesis, representation, then it is also utterance, an act of contextualized interlocation between socially situated producers and receivers. To say the art is 'constructed' should not be the end of discussion but the beginning. We have to ask 'constructed for whom?' and in conjunction with 'which ideologies and discourses?' In this sense, art is a representation not so much in a mimetic as in a political sense, as a delegation of voice.²¹ A socio-discursive approach to the issue of realism shifts the emphasis from "is the representation mimetically correct?" to the question "which social voices and discourses are represented here?" The challenge now, perhaps, is to avoid a naively "realistic" view of artistic representation, without acceding to a "hermeneutic nihilism" whereby all texts are seen as nothing more than an infinite play of signification without reference to the social world."²²

It is exactly in that socially empirical spirit that we are going to examine the roots of the Sixth Generation's impulse for an earthy realism.

Chapter 2: Realism in Sixth Generation Films

1. Defining Realism in Sixth Generation Films

Defining realism has always proven to be a tricky task for reality is composed of many layers: physical, social, psychological, spiritual, etc. Kristin Thompson agrees in

²¹ Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Introduction: De Margin and De Center," *Screen* Vol.29, No. 4, 1988. They distinguish between "representation as a practice of depicting" and "representation as a practice of delegation". Quoted from Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000, p.228.

²² Robert Stam, and Toby Miller, eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000, p.228.

her neoformalist film analysis, “indeed any artwork can be said to be realistic on the grounds of some criterion or other...all art has natural links to reality, for no one could create perceptual objects wholly apart from some aspect of one’s experience of the world.”²³ Using the neoformalist approach to cinema studies, Thompson defines realism as a defamiliarizing formal trait that appeals to what she calls “realistic motivation” on the part of the spectator in the interpretation of a film.²⁴

A glimpse back at the history of world cinema tends to give the impression that, except maybe for the groundbreaking Lumière years and early teens of the last century when naturalism began to be introduced in narrative and acting, realism in cinema seems always related to a defiant gesture: its primary opposite being classical Hollywood-style studio shooting. However, within different national contexts, a realist cinema can be a very specific rebellious move against extra-studio-per-se factors. For example, Italian Neorealism (1942-1952), arguably the most salient showcase of realism in film history, initially came out as an outcry against Mussolini’s “white-telephone” films—colossal historical epics and sentimental upper-class melodramas.²⁵ French New Wave cinema in the 1960s first situated itself in opposition to the current “Cinema of Quality,” classical French norm that follows the Hollywood’s too-neat example. Realism in Chinese Sixth Generation cinema shares that rebellious trait—for Chinese-specific reasons.

²³ Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 197.

²⁴ Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 198-9. She explains the concept of “motivations” as: “Motivations are sets of cues within the work that allow us to understand the justification for the presence of any given device. If the cues ask us to appeal to our knowledge of the real world (however mediated that knowledge may be by cultural learning), we can say that the work is using realistic motivation. And if realistic motivation becomes one of the main ways of justifying the work’s overall structures, then we generalize and perceive the work as a whole as realistic.”

First, Sixth Generation filmmakers consider their works a break away from the Fifth Generation cinema. Director Zhang Yuan once said, "The Fifth Generation used to say they don't want to do what directors before them did; well, we say, 'don't be like the Fifth Generation.'" As a matter of fact, realism in cinema is not new in China, only that with the Sixth Generation this concept takes on new meanings and forms. The Fourth Generation was the first group of post-Cultural-Revolution filmmakers. In their films, largely due to their education by Soviet teachers before the Cultural Revolution, there is a strong presence of Socialist Realism imported from many Russian and Eastern European films of the time. Then the Fifth Generation came along, with an unprecedented passion for and sensitivity to the formal qualities of film as a language. But that does not erode realism from their works. In a roundabout way, which is perhaps what they have learned from their experience in the Cultural Revolution years when keeping mouth shut or knowing how to say things in a slant way were keys to survival, they tell stories and reveal a kind of inner reality in a seemingly apolitical way. As Klaus Eder has observed, "The Fifth Generation film-makers do not speak about policy. They avoid all earlier forms of policy and its vocabulary. Yet they all make films about the life of their society. To put it another way: modern Chinese cinema is strictly bound to its society, with authors and directors who have developed a strong interest in the social reality of their country."²⁶ This is certainly also true of the Sixth Generation more explicitly on the social layer. Dismissing the works of their Fifth Generation predecessors as too polished,

²⁵ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 1997, p.462.

²⁶ Klaus Eder and Deac Rossell, eds. *New Chinese Cinema*, London: National Film Theatre, 1993, p.12.

the Sixth Generation decides to place their camera in the dusty, make-up-free streets of 1990s' urban reality.

Second, realism in Sixth Generation cinema is precious in its subtle defiance of the official "main-motif" cinema supported by the government. Often depicting the endurance and hard work of wonderful socialists or Party cadres, this cinema in strict accordance with government ideologies often serves to showcase the sagacity of the CCP leadership and presents only the grand prospects of current social reforms. The seamy side of the story is pushed to the margin, which the Sixth Generation picks up and establishes as the focus in their alternative accounts of reality.

Third, realism in Sixth Generation cinema, in its own right, serves as a document of and a reflection on contemporary Chinese social reality. As Jia Zhangke, the young director of phenomenal *Xiao Wu* has expressed, “

As a director, I'm very excited and stimulated by what I see around me. China is in the midst of great change, with so many things disappearing before our eyes. I think there's a responsibility to film that, so that in the future we'll be able to see how it really was. With this kind of creative work, I can't wait. If I'm able to shoot, then I must shoot.”²⁷

André Bazin praises Italian Neorealism as having “an exceptionally documentary quality that could not be removed from the script without thereby eliminating the whole social setting into which its roots are so deeply sunk,” and that there is “a revolutionary

²⁷ “Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director,” *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I023/feature/feature.htm>>.

humanism” preserved in the Italian neorealist cinema’s “adherence to actuality.”²⁸ Interestingly, in Sixth Generation cinema we can spot most of the Italian neorealist formal features and, more importantly, sense their concern for the common man caught in the whirlpool of social upheaval.

As has been brilliantly discussed by Bazin and later summarized and reinforced in a neoformalist perspective by Kristin Thompson, the formal features of Italian Neorealism include concentration in subject matter on the working and peasant classes, a broken, episodic narrative that largely depends on chance events and coincidences, use of non-actors (or what Bazin calls “an amalgam” of professional and non-professional actors), location shooting, and open ending.²⁹ As we shall see, all these characteristics have manifestations in Chinese Sixth Generation cinema.

Arguably the most notable debut piece of the Sixth Generation cinema is Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards* (1993).³⁰ Its rough storyline runs along the struggle for survival of a small-time rock band in Beijing. “We’re all social outsiders.”—Such is the daring

²⁸ André Bazin, *What is Cinema*, vol.2, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p.20-21.

²⁹ André Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism—Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” and “The Bicycle Thief”, see his *What is Cinema*, vol.2, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, see Chapter 7, “Realism in the Cinema: *Bicycle Thieves*,” p197-217.

³⁰ Zhang Yuan, born in 1963, graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1989 and started his filmmaking career in advertising and MTV programs. His early films include *Beijing Bastards* (1992) and *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), a gay-themed chamber piece about a public sex cruiser under interrogation by an abusive police officer. In the meantime he also makes documentaries, all of which are thought-provoking. E.g. *The Square* (*Guangchang*, 1994), in which he captures the daily life going on at Tiananmen Square, China’s most important public locale; *Demolition and Relocation* (*Dingzihu*, 1998), in which he directs attention to the ongoing urbanization program in Beijing; and *Crazy English* (1999), a vivid portrait of Li Yang, a strangely charismatic teacher and public speaker who advocates with success an original (even strange) method of learning English through gestures and gesticulation. *Crazy English* serves as a

statement of the growling young rockers in the film. Having Cui Jian, China's most phenomenal rocker in the 1980s play himself in the film and mixing concert performances by seminal Mandarin musicians He Yong and Dou Wei with scenes of aggressive anomie, *Beijing Bastards* is often cited as the first Sixth Generation film.³¹ The film is noted for its unprecedented unflattering realistic touch. As a matter of fact, the unflinching uncovering of the crooked life of disaffected youth sent the film onto the official "to be banned" list.

Soon films in the same realistic vein came out in spate, among which the most notable are: *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*, by Wang Xiaoshuai, 1994), *Postman* (*Youchai*, by He Jianjun, 1995), *On the Beat* (*Minjing Gushi*, by Ning Ying, 1995), *Rainclouds over Wushan* (*Wushan yunyu*, by Zhang Ming, 1996), *Sons* (*Erzi*, by Zhang Yuan, 1996), *Xiao Wu* (by Jia Zhangke, 1997), *Call Me* (*Hu wo*, by Ah Nian, 2000) etc.

In terms of subject matter, though unlike its Italian predecessors whose preoccupation with the working and peasant classes was predicated by their capitalist social context, the Sixth Generation offers a microscopic inspection of contemporary Chinese society in flux. Its attention is focused on the common people and social underdogs and its unrelenting gaze for the real often delves into "a wide spectrum of social experiences and issues—disability, alcoholism, homosexuality, mental illness, prostitution, criminal activity, bohemian life style, migrant work, and the widening gap

metaphorical depiction of a China engaged in changing itself at a frightening pace. See, The 52nd Locarno International Film Festival, Film Program, 1999, <<http://www.pardo.ch/1999/htm/prog/CAT/r081.htm>>.

³¹ Richard Corliss, "Crouching China, Hidden Agenda," *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

between the poor and the rich,”³² all of which has rarely received sufficient treatment either in Fifth Generation cinema or in government-sponsored “main melody” films.

Narrative-wise, the dominant story-telling mode in Sixth Generation cinema embraces a loose, episodic structure. *Beijing Bastards* is a visual collage that combines episodic narration, instant sentiments, fragmented scenes and excerpts of the performance spectacle of Cui Jian (China’s most famous rocker)’s concert.³³

In *Postman* we have an introverted, hapless postman slowly getting intertwined with the life of people whose letters he secretly (and illegally) opened. The storyline is at best sketchy, zigzagging in and out of the passionate or desperate confessions of people who on the surface live a life no different than anybody else’s: here is a secret prostitute, there are two gays, and further there are an old couple whose son chooses to leave home with his lover for a purer life in the west (Tibet?) and finally supposedly commits suicide, etc.

In *Call Me*, glimpses into different people’s life are made possible by a means of communication more modern than regular mail: pagers. Backed up by a big boom in the electronic communications business boosted up by the entry of Motorola, Ericsson and a bunch of other international big names, the film communicates the complexities of contemporary Chinese urban life through paging-message-like episodes.

Similarly we can find this episodic feature in *On the Beat*, *Xiao Wu* and *Rainclouds over Wushan*. Highly colorful characters from all strata of contemporary

³² “The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society in Transformation”, *Harvard Film Archive Bulletin*, Harvard University, Jan./Feb. 2001.

³³ Dai, Jinhua, *Scenery in the Mist: Chinese Cinema Culture 1978-1998 (Wu zhong fengjing: zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998)*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000, p.415.

Chinese society drift in and out of the life of a central character (e.g. a district policeman in *On the Beat* and a small-time pickpocket named Xiao Wu in *Xiao Wu*), or in the case of *Rainclouds over Wushan*, three characters that seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with each other are made to meet toward the end of the film and unfold a rather abrupt moment of drama.³⁴

The end of these films often lacks a comfortable closure. After the screening of *Postman* at Harvard Film Archive on Feb.16, 2001, I found a lot of people in the audience asking each other what I was also wondering about the film's end: what on earth does that sudden shot of the postman and his sister making love in bed mean? Because up till that minute everything portrayed about the sister-brother relationship has been low-key and contains nothing unusual about it (well, seemingly so, for now the end reverses all previous impressions.) The spectator has to work hard with imagination, memory and critical analysis of the whole film in order to make sense of the end. Similarly, we are largely left on our own to resolve about the future of Xiao Wu, or what has really happened between Mai Qiang and Chen Qing in *Rainclouds over Wushan* to explain why there is this sudden show of passion and remorse that doesn't surface until the last minute of the film.

³⁴ In *Rainclouds over Wushan*, the three characters are: Mai Qiang, an introverted thirty-something guy who directs boat traffic on the Yangtze river and lives a loner's life there at the station; Chen Qing, a widow who has a son going to the primary school and who is planning to break free from an ambiguous relationship with her boss at the local hotel where she works; and Wu Gang, a young policeman who is about to get married and having a gold ring made for his fiancée. Somehow because of some seemingly impossible joke (Mai Qiang goes to seek sexual service with Chen Qing and is somehow discovered by her hotel boss who becomes jealous), the three come to close encounter toward the end of the film. Like many of the other Sixth Generation films, the story in this film is almost as frail as slapdash, as if to offer an excuse for their presence there and the more important intent behind the thin story line is to reveal, without hyperbolic daze of the cinema craft, the actual living state of petty people like these three characters.

Also notable is the fact that all of the films discussed here have used nonprofessional actors whose unpolished (and perhaps unspoiled) acting exactly communicates the sense that the story is for real. *Beijing Bastards* recruited real rockers. *On the Beat* had real policemen play themselves and the erred street urchins featured in the film are said to have been caught during the actual shooting. *Xiao Wu* and *Rainclouds over Wushan* both feature people who have never had any experience in acting before. More dramatically, *Sons* has a problematic family reenact its real drama and insanity on the screen.

Location shooting is a prevalent practice among the Sixth Generation who has a reputation for shooting in the streets. They tend to opt for an aesthetic of scarcity and simplicity, setting their films in black and white (e.g. *The Days*; *On the Beat*) or in a color tone so desaturated that only a stoplight cuts through the monochrome monotone (e.g. *Postman*). Compared to the Fifth Generation, Sixth Generation films have few stately artifacts or echoes of the fine arts; no images pop your eyes in wonder.³⁵

What is more, the Bressonian attention to diegetic sound in these films is also significant.³⁶ The television news broadcast in *Rainclouds over Wushan* that informs about the Three Gorges project; the radio broadcast about forthcoming city “crackdown” (*yanda*), the soundtrack of *A Better Tomorrow* flowing out of a video shack, and popular music floating on every corner of the streets in *Xiao Wu*; and not to mention the rock of Cui Jian in *Beijing Bastards*—all this helps locate the characters and the story in a

³⁵ Richard Corliss, “Crouching China, Hidden Agenda,” *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

³⁶ About Bresson’s use of diegetic sound, see David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc. 1994, p.506-509.

specific time frame and serves as a precise reference to reality outside the proscenium of the film. All is for the real.

Thus the poetics of the everyday becomes the guiding principle in Sixth Generation films. The boundary between documentary and fiction film becomes increasingly blurred.

2. A close reading of Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu (Artisan Pickpocket)*³⁷

³⁷ Jia Zhangke, born in 1970, graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1993 with a bachelor degree in film theory. His debut work in video *Xiao Shan Returning Home* won the award for plot at 1995 Hong Kong Independent Film Festival. At the age of twenty-eight, his debut piece in film *Xiao Wu* won eight big prizes at seven prestigious international film festivals. They are: the 48th Berlin International Film Festival (Germany), Wolfgang Staudte Award and Asia Film Promotion Association Prize; the 3rd Fushan International Film Festival (South Korea), New Mode Prize; the 17th Vancouver International Film Festival (Canada), Dragon and Tiger Prize; the 20th Nantes Three Continental International Film Festival (France), Golden Globe Prize; Belgian Film Archive Annual Award 1998, Golden Age Award (Belgium); Italian Fellini Spirit Film Festival award; the San Francisco International Film Festival's \$10,000 best-film prize. It was also a featured selection at the New Directors/New Films series, jointly presented by New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Lincoln Center.

About the film *Xiao Wu*: Like the anti-heroic subject matter shared by most Sixth Generation films, Xiao Wu, the eponymous protagonist is a smalltime pickpocket in Fenyang, the provincial dirt-town in Shanxi Province that is in fact the director's hometown. The world is changing at breakneck speed around this scummy but likeable petty criminal who seems forever dressed in a suit two sizes too large. In the midst of reform and progress, he is someone left behind. The storyline is more about relationships than events. One by one in the film and for reasons he can't understand, Xiao Wu loses friendship (his old buddy Xiao Yong no longer wants to be seen with him for he is still a pickpocket), romantic love (the karaoke girl Meimei for whom he slowly grows a likeness for disappears without telling him), and family love (he is chased out of home by his father who swears that "I should have drowned you in a urinal when you were born." Nothing seems reliable; relationships, as well as so many other terms, seems to be under constant re-definition and Xiao Wu is a loser because he can't pace up with the change.

In fact, the original working titles for *Xiao Wu* were "Jin Xiaoyong's Buddy, Hu Meimei's Sugar Daddy and Liang Changyou's Son," a curt summary of the three vignette relationships of Xiao Wu with Xiao Yong, Meimei and his family. Jia is keenly aware of the Chinese-specific definition of an individual, i.e. not in terms of the person himself but on account of his relationships to others. He endeavored to write a film about a character caught within these human relationships during the large-scale societal changes brought about by two decades of economic reform and opening up. As Jia admitted, the original working titles were inspired by Cultural Revolution rhetoric. He used to read a Cultural Revolution-era *People's Daily* article criticizing the poet Ai Qing. It described him as 'Ding Ling's friend, so-and so's partner, so-and-so's buddy.' "And it struck me that for so many years Chinese have never had their own identity. When you identified someone, you'd always put him in the context of his relationships to other people: He's so-and-so's friend, so-and-so's child. But the only thing he isn't is himself," Jia observes. See, "Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director," *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V051023/feature/feature.htm>>.

As Jia Zhangke's debut film, *Xiao Wu* has been hailed as one of the most interesting films produced by the Sixth Generation and is often seen as representing a myth of low-budget independent underground cinema in China.³⁸ With a slim budget of RMB 400,000 yuan (around \$50,000 US dollars, merely enough for the production of the title of a US blockbuster), a 16mm camera (which is considered "amateur" compared to the standard 35mm film that is used for theatrical distribution), a cast of non-professional actors, a crew working for nothing (aka 'deferred payment'), and no official approval from the Film Bureau (thus kept from public distribution), *Xiao Wu* has been through the complete spectrum of financial as well as institutional shackles that Chinese independent cinema has to experience.

The film begins with a close-up of a hand striking a match and lighting a cigarette.³⁹ It then cuts to a listless-looking guy in long shot standing across a dusty street with a cigarette in his hand; then close-up again, this time we see the back of the guy's head—he is waiting for something; a bus comes; he gets on the bus. (Later on we know

³⁸ To quote but a few of the lavishing praises *Xiao Wu* has received:

"By far the most interesting film from China this year (1997), XIAO WU starts out looking like an exercise in grungy social realism but gradually reveals itself to be something much more surprising." USC online archives, Asian Film Connections, China section, University of Southern California, ©1998-2002, <<http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/asianfilm/china/xiaowu.html>>.

"(In Jia Zhangke and his *Xiao Wu*) we discovered not only a film but a true auteur. This doesn't happen very often. Nothing in his film is made up to please us. We believe in every scene and every frame in his film. In that small town in China, we empathize with his character and his feelings. Jia will become one of those great directors like Moretti, Abbas and Woody Allen who help keep the human essence," remarked the Wolfgang Staudte Award Committee of Berlin International Film Festival. Quoted and translated from "Making a Myth of Low-Budget Filmmaking" (chuangzao dichengben dianying de shenhua), <www.tom.com>, retrieved May 23, 2002, <http://cn.tom.com/cooltom/star/zhuanti/jiazhangke/pingjia_1.htm>.

³⁹ I'm talking about the film proper here. But it also helps to know that before the title and credits, there is a "preparational" shot of an ordinary street scene: some guys are lingering in the city of Fenyang. The accompanying soundtrack is an excerpt of the widely popular *xiaoping* (short comic play) repertoire of the

that he is Xiao Wu, the eponymous protagonist of the film). In the bus Xiao Wu is asked to buy a ticket, but he brushes away the request by replying that he is a policeman. We now see him in medium shot, sitting next to a passenger. A close-up of his hand again, this time attempting to lift something (a wallet?) from his neighbor's pocket. We don't see if he does it successfully because now the montage cuts to a medium shot of a drab country extending beyond the front of the running bus. Hanging from the rear view mirror is a portrait of Mao Zedong swaying to the rhythm of the bus's movement: the symbol of an obsolete authority who no longer has control over today's China. The scene cuts back to Xiao Wu in medium close-up, but still we are not sure about this character because the light bouncing off his spectacles prevents us from seeing the expression in his eyes. This shot lasts about two seconds. Coming next is what seems to be the front gate of a town courthouse. A swarm of obscure-looking people stands there reading something on the wall and Xiao Wu is among them, all in medium long shot. As Xiao Wu wanders around in the crowd, looking purposeless, we hear a high-volume public radio broadcast announcing denunciation of criminals and a coming street clampdown campaign. Such is the beginning of *Xiao Wu*.

With natural lighting, everything we see so far has a somewhat drab, definitely unpolished look. We are either pressed right against Xiao Wu (seeing his hand, the back of his head, even his face though not so clearly), or kept at a distance from him (seeing the space where he is). Xiao Wu never looks at the camera once: he is unaware of our existence. Thus from the very beginning we are in the role of an anonymous observer.

famous entertainer Zhao Benshan. The excerpt chosen here is apparently a sarcastic attack at corruption, a rampant deploring phenomenon in present-day China.

Jia Zhangke seems to have a strong propensity for (medium) long shots, static long takes and the straight-on camera angle.⁴⁰ For example, when the karaoke girl called Meimei is ordered by her boss to hang out with Xiao Wu for some time to make up for her earlier “bad” service, we are presented with scenes of their walking in the streets. In one particular frame we see them try to cross a street crossing. The straight-on camera angle is as if we were watching them from across the street. Buses and bicycles and passers-by bustle around them; we can’t see their faces clearly nor can we hear what they are speaking; we just see them walk. The camera remains static through the whole scene. No dramatic build-up is linked to that shot; it exists as if just to show us their existence and that of the street and the world at that brief moment.

In another similar scene, we again face Xiao Wu in the streets; this time he is by himself. We see him stand listlessly in front of a closed shop as if not sure what to do or where to go. The street is quiet but not deserted; people pass him by. A man rides a tricycle full of apples, entering the frame from the right, slowly and at his ease. When he passes by Xiao Wu, we see the latter lifting an apple, out of habit?, from the cart without the owner’s knowledge. The apple guy exits the frame from the right. Xiao Wu continues

⁴⁰ Jia’s second film *Platform* (2000) is staged more extensively in static long takes. “Charting an entire decade (from 1979 to 1989) in the lives of young performance troupe members in remote Shanxi, Jia Zhangke’s three-hour *Platform* registers the seismic shifts in China’s cultural landscape during Deng Xiaoping’s era of reform via carefully placed cultural artifacts throughout its episodic narrative. With an eye on the liberalization of sexual relations as China opened up to the West (one girl who speaks coyly of kissing finds herself, a few years later, having to deal with an abortion; a son ultimately urges his long-suffering mother to divorce his adulterous father), Jia has his ensemble cast go from singing about Mao Zedong’s birthplace to break-dancing to Leslie Cheung’s ‘Monica.’ Subversively ending his portrait in 1989 (the year of the student demonstrations and June 4th), Jia signals the time through an apposite clip about fleeing Hong Kong from John Woo’s *The Killer*, playing on an off-screen, barely noticed TV. Beautifully shot by Yu Lik-Wai (himself director of the estimable *Love Will Tear Us Apart*) and staged largely in static, long takes, the film, like Jia’s debut, the remarkable *Xiao Wu*, confirms a talent whose sensitivity to the minutiae of everyday life, coupled with a rigorous, observational film style, may well make him one of the master filmmakers this side of the millennium.” *Camera-Style* online archive, <<http://www.camerastylo.com/archive1.htm>>.

to stand there. After a while, we see the apple guy entering the frame again, this time from the left side; he is still riding his tricycle full of apples. He stops, asks or says something to Xiao Wu, and then leaves again, riding out of the frame from the right side. There is no drama of any kind and apparently the guy doesn't know that Xiao Wu has stolen an apple of his. All this takes place within one take; the camera angle always stays in its straight-on position and we see everything in a steady long shot. Again, in terms of plot, this shot is apparently "useless" because it doesn't contribute to any dramatic aspect of the film. It looks more like a cinematic tableau of a brief moment in 1990s' China. With no lines, added music score or prewritten plot design, this scene, along with many others in the film, strikes me as something strangely familiar and intimate. This is made possible by its unpolished ordinariness and the lack of apparent dramatic intent there. Rather than inducing the spectator to identify with the characters or forcing him into the role of investigator through more frequent use of close-ups and jittering following camera, many scenes in *Xiao Wu* are staged comfortably in long shots or medium long shots, thus making the spectator feel more like an observer watching from a distance—which again confirms the inner connection of Sixth Generation filmmakers to the sixties generation that we have talked about earlier. As Jia himself confesses,

"I'm infatuated with the surface. I don't want the camera to penetrate beneath the surface because when you enter a character's inner world with the camera—I mean the kind of subjective entry—you already start to make interpretations about the character. I want to keep the camera in its "seeing" position, and by that I must let the camera see only what I can see, and the who thing stays only on the surface...That's why I say the most important thing in *Xiao Wu* is the need to stay on the surface. Surface alone is enough. We only need to see how he speaks, where he lives and the people and events he runs into. As to whether one can see through the surface and gain some understanding, that's the business of the audience not the director. I can only and am willing only to offer people with the surface stuff, nothing more. That's why this film needs an audience who knows how to see through the surface.

Nobody has the right to give instructions about other people's life. I hope my film stays on the track of non-involvement. Of course cinema can not avoid involvement because when you choose to shoot in a certain way you are already involved and start to make decisions of filming what and not filming what. I hope I can restrain myself...I appreciate an author's attitude, and in my case that is non-revision, non-involvement. This is a rebellion against the God-like omnipresent viewpoint."⁴¹

Thus the characteristic static, straight-on camera placement in *Xiao Wu* implies Jia's attitude of equality toward his subjects. The old moral privilege of the camera is replaced by a desire for objectivity. "

My principle is to face the truth as objectively as possible, as free of any prejudice as possible. It is this sense of distance and control that makes me feel 'I'm a witness.' I often emphasize that 'I'm not an intruder,' nor an 'on-looker.' The camera eye represents all that I want...I love the word '*dangxia*'(now and here); it makes me feel present."⁴²

A subtle observational stance is thus established and continued throughout the whole film—until the last shot where it is reversed and heightened most unexpectedly.

The film ends with Xiao Wu being caught and handcuffed to a steel cable on a street sidewalk. While the audience still sits comfortably in his observing role and watches Xiao Wu, who obviously looks a little embarrassed and uncomfortable as he keeps pushing at his spectacles, all of a sudden the camera swings away from him and points at people who, like the audience in the theatre, are looking at Xiao Wu. More interestingly, we see some of them begin to shift their attention from Xiao Wu and turn to look, interested or unaware, shy or startled, at the camera, and thus at us—the audience of

⁴¹ "Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director," *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I023/feature/feature.htm>>.

⁴² Quoted and translated from "Getting Straight with Jia Zhangke" (*ba jiazhangke chedi gao qingchu*), dialogue between Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yaxuan and Jian Ning. See, *Century Online China Art Networks*, © 2000-2002, <<http://www.cl2000.com/film/dypx2.shtml>>, p.2-3, <http://www.cl2000.com/film/dypx2_p2.shtml>, <http://www.cl2000.com/film/dypx2_p3.shtml>.

the film. Through such a totally unexpected maneuver, the relationship between the story on the screen and the audience is reversed and complicated.⁴³ Jia explains his intention in introducing such self-reflexivity at the end of his film,

“I want to convert the audience into ‘the observed observer.’ The audience finds out that they are now in Xiao Wu’s shoes, feeling very uncomfortable just like him. I want the audience to be touched so that everyone would reflect on his own way of dealing with others. The chief purpose here is to have the audience reflect on their attitude of being observers, to disturb them.”⁴⁴

Jia surely succeeds in that attempt. Through the unexpected last-minute reversal, the spectator’s comfortable observational role is bared and defamiliarized, and early impressions of realism aroused by the unpolished, actuality-looking shots come back here

⁴³ In his eulogizing review of *Xiao Wu*, Charles Tesson, editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma*, has a brilliant discussion of the presence of the camera in the film. “The camera exists to be forgotten so that it can better exist. The vitality of *Xiao Wu* comes from the inner pulse of every shot. This is neither a cinematic hoax (a camera-free reality) nor a cinematic disillusionment (camera as a reality-recording machine only). This is a mutual activity connecting the audience and the irreducible double recognition (of life and cinema). Since we admit that reconstructing the recorded raw reality is not enough, then from where comes the impression of *vérité* in the film? We might think that it comes from the flux caused by the existence of the camera over the long shooting process.” The above is translation by the author of this paper, for Tesson’s article in French, see Charles Tesson, “Le temps d’aimer, le temps de sourire,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jan. 1999, p.25-26.

⁴⁴ Charles Tesson, “Entretien avec Jia Zhang Ke,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jan.1999, p.27-29. Jia Zhangke shot *Xiao Wu* without a formal script and as a matter of fact, this final shot came as an improvisation. As Jia has talked on various occasions that Godard and Bresson are the two French directors he loves, it might be no surprise to see traces of their influence on him. The beginning of this film where Jia shows Xiao Wu with a close-up of his hand striking a match—that method of presenting a character with close camera work is one of Bresson’s favorites. Other familiar reminders of Bresson’s style are austere-looking images, subdued acting, profuse use of off-screen background sound, etc, all of which are easy to discover in *Xiao Wu*. Jia’s love of long shots might be a break from Bresson though. As for the “improvised” last shot, that certainly clicks with Godard who talks about his filmmaking in such terms: “I improvise but with material which goes a long way...In a single day if one knows how to go about it, one should be able to complete a dozen takes. Only instead of planning ahead, I invent at the last minute. This isn’t improvising but last minute focusing. You must have an all over plan and stick to it...I write the key moments of a film, which gives me a plot with seven or eight point—which scene—they belong to. The thing that helps me get ideas is the setting. Often I start from there.” What is more, Charles Tesson also points out the similarity between Xiao Wu’s last shot and the drowning scene in Renoir’s *Boudu*. In the latter Renoir did not hesitate to integrate images of onlookers on the bridge who were watching the shooting. For Tesson’s remark, see Charles Tesson, “Le temps d’aimer, le temps de sourire,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jan. 1999, p.26. For a succinct summary of Bresson’s style as mentioned above, see David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc. 1994, p.506-509. For Godard’s discussion on his films, see Tom Milne, *Godard on Godard*, Paris: Da Capo Press, 1972, p.173, 179.

with an accentuated confirmation: we are not just observers; we are also part of Xiao Wu's experience and existence. It is not just his life, time and space; it is ours too. All is of the real and for the real.

Another feature that heightens the sense of realism is the abundant use of popular music as the background sound. *Xiao Wu* is set in 1990s' China and all the songs in there are those en mode during those years: "Heart Raining" (*xin yu*), "Fairwell My Concubine" (*ba wang bie ji*), Richard Clayderman's piano scores, etc. Like a time machine, these sound tracks immediately tune a Chinese spectator's sensory mode toward his experience and memory of those years if he was in China and had heard those songs then.

Worthy of special mention here is "Heart Raining," a song that has appeared repeatedly in the film on four different occasions, each with its own significance and suggestiveness. A beautiful but ordinary duo about love, "Heart Raining" became popular in 1995 and could be heard at every street corner. In *Xiao Wu* it appears in such representative locales: as music video on television as Jin Xiaoyong, Xiao Wu' old-time buddy, orders and presents it to the public as a pretentious sign of his success in business; in a karaoke lounge where Xiao Wu first meets Meimei; in a funeral store, an unlikely place that seems to use karaoke as a promotional device to attract people and potential customers; and in a deserted public bathhouse where Xiao Wu, who has kept refusing to sing in front of Meimei, sings his heart out, alone. Thus in turn the same music score becomes the vehicle of commercial abuse, prostitution-smacking entertainment business, strange mixture of commercial promotion (of the funeral store) and popular entertainment, and for Xiao Wu, baring the innermost personal sentiments. It is on this

last occasion that our heart suddenly thaws and falls for Xiao Wu, for his tenderness and loneliness. A lost loser in other spaces, he becomes his own hero and soprano for that brief moment. He sings loud and the camera angle rises slowly with the increasing volume of his voice. With it we see the darkish, moss-covered bathhouse wall and overhead of that, a patch of grayish, lonely sky. That's where Xiao Wu's singing goes.

Xiao Wu is lost and lonely because in an age voting for survival of the fittest chameleon, he is someone who can't deal with change. He is a pickpocket with scruples. He takes cash, but deposits victims' ID cards in mailboxes so that the police can return them to the victims of his trade. He is a shy loner who puts on a nonchalant appearance, lost in the big social change yet too proud to admit his isolation. Pickpocketing is the only way he knows how to make a living on, and he sticks to the old values of promise and brotherhood while his newly rich buddy Xiao Yong tosses friendship behind to embrace a more polished and philistine life style.⁴⁵ Xiao Wu's poignancy bears out the larger moral panic that Chinese society tries to push to the back of its mind. Through the unobtrusive camera Jia observes the unspoken wounds of post-Deng China. In the process of change and progress, the price paid is the loss of innocence.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Unlike Xiao Wu who is unable to adjust and remains a pickpocket, his previous best buddy Xiao Yong who was also a thief before suddenly becomes a "model entrepreneur" because of his prosperous business in cigarette trafficking and karaoke bars (bordellos), both of which he glossed with terms borrowed from official propaganda: free trade and entertainment. Xiao Yong considers himself a legitimate businessman and doesn't want to know Xiao Wu any more, looking down upon the latter as a reason for shame. Xiao Yong gets married but neglects to invite Xiao Wu to his wedding banquet; however, Xiao Wu, feeling hurt, still doesn't forget to fulfill his previous promise to give Xiao Yong a nuptial gift of cash. Xiao Yong refuses to accept Xiao Wu's wedding gift, calling it dirty money. See "Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director," *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I023/feature/feature.htm>>.

⁴⁶ As the director admitted, "My initial idea was to find a character who worked with his hands, someone without much connection to contemporary society, like a tailor in a small city, or a shoemaker, or a cook-an artisan supporting himself by very traditional means. I wanted to see his experience in the midst of the change China is experiencing now." Jia eventually found his artisan among his own friends. A high school

A subtle invocation of real life and a deep humanistic concern are thus achieved throughout the film using such techniques as straight-on camera angle, synchronous background sound, natural lighting and the use of non-professional actors.⁴⁷ The boundary between drama and documentary keeps getting blurred, especially in the last shot where reality itself makes a direct announcement and gives us a glare in the face.

As Jia has expressed on various occasions, he is fascinated with *dangxia* (now and here) and is most interested in observing and capturing how ordinary Chinese people are being influenced by the larger social vortex of precipitous reforms and seeking happiness by all means. For him real life is dramatic enough to provide ready food for filmmaking, and perhaps it comes as no surprise that he, like Zhang Yuan, also makes documentaries at the same time.

Similar tendency to blur the line between drama and documentary in film can be discovered in the works of many other Sixth Generation filmmakers. Ning Ying's drily comic *On the Beat* (1995) is a perfect example in point. Shot in black and white, this film lacks a centralized plot and patiently evolves around the seemingly boring yet quietly

classmate working as a prison guard in Fenyang mentioned to Jia that another classmate had been locked up for pickpocketing. When Jia inquired whether the guards and inmates could talk, his friend related, "Sure, we often chat and play cards or chess. And this guy is really bizarre! He's always talking about philosophy, questions like what's the point of living? What will become of humanity later on?" etc." Jia is fascinated by the picture of a petty criminal pondering big questions that seem to be far removed from his immediate actuality in the midst of huge social change. Hence we see Xiao Wu, a petty thief that has an entire world of his own and whose method of making a living—pickpocketing—is traditional and artisanal. "In the context of an entire society moving ahead, seeking to pursue happiness, Xiao Wu is someone unable to deal with the changes..." says Jia, "in this age, people have lots of pretexts for what they're doing; they can use a single euphemism to change the reality, and that makes it legal. But a pickpocket is different. He's always a pickpocket, and his actions will always be those of a pickpocket." See "Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director," *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I023/feature/feature.htm>>.

⁴⁷ The film states that all the characters in it are interpreted by non-professional characters. The protagonist *Xiao Wu* is played by Wang Hongwei, Jia's classmate and colleague and who is also the producer of the film.

dramatic life of a cop, his colleagues and the petty criminals he deals with on any ordinary day. All the characters are played by nonprofessionals. The cops are played by real cops, who act out the boredom and fecklessness of their real life on the silver screen (they even keep their real names in the film). Malefactors featuring the funny, exasperating interrogation scenes are said to have actually been apprehended during the shooting of the movie (a drunk, a man selling pictures of women in bathing suits aka “porno”, a possible stalker, a card hustler, and a dog owner who cursed a policeman).⁴⁸ Like *Xiao Wu*, the film's soundtrack is largely the background noise of the streets, public radio or TV, from which the “main melody” oozes in to serve as a counterpoint to the close-up inspection of real life of the common people.

Another notable Sixth Generation feature presentation similarly bordering on narrative film and documentary is Zhang Yuan's *Sons* (*Erzi*, 1995), a docu-drama about a real-life Beijing family contending with the father's abrupt, visceral descent into alcoholism and mental illness. Here in an even more dramatic way, Director Zhang Yuan reenacted the plight of his downstairs neighbors, a retired couple (former professional dancers) and their two deadbeat sons, who hit hard times following their father's alcohol-abusive example.⁴⁹ A whiny complaint from the drunken, out-of-control father registers: “...All achievements belong to the authorities; all flaws belong to the individuals. What am I?!” Like *Xiao Wu*, he is another lost, lonely soul, failed in and estranged from all

⁴⁸ Shelly Kraicer, review of *On the Beat* at the 1995 Toronto International Film Festival, *A Chinese Cinema Page*, Review Archive 1995-1996, <<http://www.chinesecinemas.org/beat.html>>.

⁴⁹ To shoot the film, Zhang Yuan went to the mental hospital and “borrowed” Mr. Li, the father in the story, and re-enacted the family's troubles with the four family members playing themselves in the film. The title was suggested by the father himself, who told Zhang Yuan, “Only some men are fathers, but all men are sons.” *Harvard Film Archive Bulletin*, Harvard University, Jan./Feb. 2001, p.11.

relationships and repressed in his failure and confusion. Without the caring, concerned camera of Zhang Yuan, we might have never been able to learn about such seemingly small-scale yet painfully profound tortures in private lives and individual souls. More often than not they would have been obscured and obliterated under the bigger backdrop of hilarious change and progress.

Sixth Generation independent cinema is teeming with such works manifesting extraordinary concern for the private, a reality that is largely neglected in official “main melody” or commercial cinema. They crack open the ignored fissures, wounds and scars of contemporary Chinese society, lending a gaze at the finer (not necessarily prettier) texture of social change. Breaking free from the polished elitist tale of China told by their Fifth Generation predecessors, the Sixth Generation directs their gaze at a more real and immediate China. Though often known as China’s new “urban cinema” in comparison to the Fifth Generation who situates their drama in a rural China, Sixth Generation cinema smells much earthier. Unflinching observation of *dangxia* (now and here) has replaced polished remembrance of an allegorical past. In addition, we’ll see a more direct representation in this reality-conscious vein in the New Documentary Movement, whose members constitute another important part of Sixth Generation filmmakers.

3. New Documentary Movement

As Bill Nichols points out in his *Introduction to Documentary*, defining documentary is as slippery a task as defining “love” or “culture.” At its best the definition of documentary is relational and comparative, a “fuzzy concept” that takes on different

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meanings and connotations within different defining frameworks.⁵⁰ One such framework is the historical period. For example, Dziga Vertov's "Kino Pravda" (along with "Kino Eye") was intended to promote the socialist realism advocated in the early years of Soviet Union; the 1930s' newsreel-style documentary work reflected a Depression-era sensibility and a renewed political emphasis on social and economic issues; the 1960s'

⁵⁰ Bill Nichols proposes four angles from which to define documentary: institutions, practitioners, texts (films and videos), and audience. More specifically, documentaries might be considered what the organizations and institutions that produce them make. Though Nichols admits that this definition sounds circular, it nevertheless serves as a useful label for us to immediately determine which films are documentaries and which are not. Second, we can define documentaries by their authors: those who label themselves as documentarists provide a delineation of what documentaries can look like. Again, Nichols warns us at the same time to be aware of the historical variability implied in such a subjective defining manner, which on the hand, also contributes to the dynamic quality of documentary itself. As a form of representation, documentary is under constant change as its practitioners keep expanding boundaries in their practice. Third, we can distinguish documentaries by certain conventional textual features that are especially assigned to documentaries, e.g. interviews, location sound recording, cutaways from a given scene to provide images that illustrate or complicate a point made within the scene, a reliance on social actors or people in their everyday roles and activities, an inner informing logic (instead of plot) that serves as the organizer of the film. More specifically, we can group different documentaries in terms of movements (e.g. cinéma vérité, direct cinema, free cinema, etc.) and periods (e.g. 1930s' newsreel tendency as the result of a Depression-era sensibility; 1960s' emancipated, more personal style made possible by the introduction of lightweight, hand-held cameras and synchronous sound recording system). Furthermore, we can categorize documentaries by their different modes of production: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. Fourth, documentaries may be defined its relationship to the audience, i.e. documentaries are films that can create among their audience an assumption that the filmic text's sounds and images have their origin in the historical world they share. In the mind of the viewer the relationship between images in the films and reality in which they are produced is indexical and evidential.

As Bill Nichols constantly reminds the reader in his defining process, all the above suggested boundaries of the concept of documentary are mutually permeable and in constant shift. Yet the common function/purpose of all documentaries may be said to communicate some knowledge to its viewer and stimulate in him a desire to know more about the world. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, Chapter 2: "How Do Documentaries Differ from Other Types of Film?" p. 20-41.

Worthy of note is that Michael Renov, in his 1993 attempt to construct a poetics of documentary, offers a set of four discursive functions (which he alternatively terms as "principles of construction, function and effect specific to nonfiction film," "modalities of desire", and "impulsions which fuel documentary discourse"): to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; to express. See, Michael Renov, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary," in Michael Renov, ed. *Theorizing Documentary*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 21-32.

Compared to Nichols and Renov's theorizing on how to define documentaries, a more specific attempt at actual defining might be Erik Barnouw's highly acclaimed and widely loved book: *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. In it he categorizes documentaries according to the different roles of the filmmakers as in relation to their films. Sections in his book have titles like: "Prophet," "Explorer," "Advocate," "Observer," "Discover," etc. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

direct cinema came as a breakthrough against old preachy documentaries (and technically as a result of the introduction of lightweight, handheld cameras and synchronous sound recording equipment), etc. In his wonderfully written history of documentary, Erik Barnouw makes it a point of constantly relating to the specific historical and social context that gives rise to the birth of each documentarist group or style.⁵¹ As we shall see, a precise definition of the New Documentary Movement in 1990s' China also heavily relies on recognition of the social and political bindings and breakthroughs from which it is born, and the word "documentary" takes on a much more concentrated (if narrower) meaning in the specific Chinese documentary discourse. Its boundaries might still be fuzzy and constantly shifting as new attempts and styles keep pouring forth to enrich the movement, but the New Documentary manages to delineate its unique identity by making clear what it is NOT.

Before the 1990s, the function of documentaries in China was largely determined by ideological priorities. The general public's impression of documentary is mainly divided between two genres. One is the short scientific or cultural film, e.g. the functioning structure of the bee society, the demo cooking of "West Lake Vinegar Fish" or other famous dishes as a sample of Chinese cuisine culture, etc. This was often shown before a feature film in the cinema. The other is what the Chinese call "zhuanti pian" (a verbatim translation would be "special-topic film", i.e. documentaries with a predicated theme or topic—often related to history, and the pre-written script must gain official approval before the production can actually begin). Examples are special-topic TV

⁵¹ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

documentary series on the history of the Communist Red Army's Long March, the fifty-year history of the People's Republic of China, history of the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, biography of Mao Zedong or other major founding figures in the history of the People's Republic of China, etc. Such special-topic documentaries are almost without exception sponsored and produced by state-owned TV stations, hence the majority of them smack of propaganda work. In terms of style, such documentaries are very much like what Robert Drew deplored about traditional American documentaries before his introduction of direct cinema: preachy, often containing a know-it-all voiceover commentary; the script comes first and images and sounds are captured and composed in order to correspond to the script; the protagonist represents the heroic great leaders or the History—the audience are supposed to be lectured on, to be educated and believe.

The picture began to change in late 1980s with the shift from planned economy to market economy. Previous strict ideological control, which dictates that every citizen is first and foremost a political being, began to open up to a more liberal thinking mode that allows for multiform ideological expression. The impersonal, omniscient voice dictated by the official and (thus) only legitimate viewpoint is replaced by a shift of attention to the present day and the authentic lives of common people who live in this very era. Beside the continuous appearance of special-topic documentaries that relate collective history and interpret collective memory (often under state orders and auspices), new documentaries in the 1990s turn their camera to the bottom strata of Chinese society. Unplanned, with no apparent manifesto, these new documentarists and their practices came to be seen as a "movement" due to the proximity of their thematic concerns and their common goal in searching for new grounds of documentary expression. The most

remarkable filmmakers of this group include: Wu Wenguang (*Bumming in Beijing: the Last Dreamers*, 1990; *1966, My Era of the Red Guards*, 1993; *At Home with the World*, 1995; *Jiang Hu*, 1999), Duan Jinchuan (*The Square*, co-work with Zhang Yuan, 1994; *No. 16, Barkhor South Street*, 1994); Jiang Yue (*The Other Bank*, 1995); Kang Jian'ning (*Life*, co-work with Gao Guodong, 1995; *Yin Yang*, 1997), etc.

While in the west the word “documentary” connotes a whole range of genres and concepts, in contemporary China “documentary” (*jilupian* in Chinese) has a more specific and subversive connotation. In the context of 1990s' China, documentary defines itself by what it is NOT: it is the opposite of “special-topic films”; its guiding mode is not “to persuade and promote”, but “to record, reveal or preserve; to analyze or interrogate; to express” and more defiantly, to provoke.⁵²

In the particular context of reforming China, the direct motive of New Documentary Movement is to uncover and document an alternative social reality, to analyze the texture of reform and change in places and lives where their effects are most intimately felt, and to express the filmmaker's concern for the now and here, for the people—especially those on the lower strata and margins of society. In much the same way that drastic social uproar awakened an sharp awareness of time and human conditions and brought forth the booming prosperity of documentary during and following the World War II in Europe and North America, the dramatic, bewildering changes taking place in contemporary China incite an unprecedentedly acute sense of the passage of time in the minds of the artists and filmmakers who feel the urge to record

⁵² The terms of documentary's discursive modes here are borrowed from Michael Renov. See, Michael Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” in Michael Renov, ed. *Theorizing Documentary*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 21-32.

everything and every change before it disappears into the abyss of history. In a sense, the collective work of the New Documentary Movement is an alternative visual history of fin-de-siècle China, documenting the pains and struggles, strengths and weaknesses born from that special era.

Lu Xinyu, leading scholar of the New Documentary Movement emphasizes the concept's thematic and humanistic aspect in her definition of "documentary":

(we might say that documentary is) a mode of recording reality through the medium of video in order to find a stand point in multi-viewpoint cultural coordinate and to observe and describe the relationships between society, nature and human beings. The ultimate aim is to search for the *raison d'être* of human beings out of humanistic concern."⁵³

Technically, the majority of new documentaries seem to tilt heavily toward what marks direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* in the 1960s' West: cancellation of the omniscient voiceover commentary, minimum use of prewritten script, profuse use of synchronous sound (with or without interviews), etc.⁵⁴ Both in thematic and aesthetic choices they are looking for ways to break away from the old gloss-over lecturing special-topic films.

⁵³ Lu Xinyu, "Chinese Documentary: Concept and Values" (*zhongguo jilupian: guannian yu jiazhi*), *La Jeunesse (xin qingnian)*, updated May 25, 2001, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=zgjlpgnyjz>>.

⁵⁴ As we shall see in the following discussion, it is very hard to summarize the common aesthetic characteristics of these new documentaries because they are very diversified. While people like Duan Jinchuan is a conscious practitioner of direct cinema and makes absolute non-intervention as his guiding line in shooting, other filmmakers tend to be more experimental and flexible. Wu Wenguang is very open to all styles of expression and discovery. Younger members like Ju Anqi seems to be more "violent" and actively provoking with his *Windy Beijing*, in which he asks around in the streets "do you think the wind in Beijing is very severe?"—much in the same manner as Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer*. However, it is still risky to say that the whole New Documentary Movement has been informed by direct cinema or

Here I'll take a closer look at the texture and scale of New Documentary Movement by reading into its representative films and filmmakers. While my textual discussion will concentrate on independent documentary filmmakers, I'll also briefly mention the development of new documentary within the system (more specifically, in the state-owned television network). As we shall see, though members of the latter group don't necessarily look as prominent when considered on an individual basis, their work forms an indispensable part of the whole New Documentary Movement.

4. Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan

cinéma vérité, since no systematic and sufficient evidence is yet available to prove this point. Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan did mention in their interviews that exposure to Frederick Wiseman's works has informed their own works, but again such acknowledgement is sporadic. We haven't yet had about talk of systematic introduction of direct cinema, cinéma vérité or other distinctive documentary movements in China. However, this will be a fascinating aspect to keep an eye on in future research.

Furthermore, with the passage of time, new principles might replace previously believed-in ones. Early practitioners like Wu Wenguang, Jiang Yue and Duan Jinchuan at first tended to use interviews a lot. As Duan explains, at that time they just felt the desire to present an alternative, unmediated point of view. "Anything, as long as it doesn't belong to the voice of 'I,' I will present it to the audience without any change." Hence the abundant use of interviews in their early films. But this has changed a lot in their later works in which they are more conscious of the documentary language. However, we should admit that part of this fuzzy diversity is due to the fact that the new documentary film is still in its forming stage in China. While more and more practitioners, professional and amateur, have begun to join the club, very few of them seem to look at their own works in a better informed, more conscious manner. This has to do with each filmmaker's age and experience, and we can expect to see more conscious reflection on new documentaries as they prosper and mature.

For interviews of Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan, see, "Jiang Hu Q & A" (*jianghu wenda*), Apr.23, 2000, notes prepared by Zhang Yaxuan, source: Practice Society (*shijian she*), published at *La Jeunesse (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=jhwdsjs>>; "Interview with Duan Jinchuan" (*Duan Jinchuan fangtan*), source: updated Feb.22, 2000, *La Jeunesse (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=djctf>>. A whole collection of their talks and interviews are available in Chinese at in "Chinese Pioneers: Documentary Special Issue 2" (*zhongguo xianqu: jilupian zhuan ti er*), *La Jeunesse (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/zhuan ti/jlp2.php3>>.

In 1988, a *mangliu* artist named Wu Wenguang started to make what later would be hailed as the founding piece of the New Documentary Movement in China.⁵⁵ It is *Bumming in Beijing: the Last Dreamers*. Later Mr. Wu admitted that when he started shooting this film, the word “documentary” had never suggested itself in his mind.⁵⁶ He just felt this urge to record what was going on in his life and with his other *mangliu* artist friends.⁵⁷ In his film, the neglected life of alternative minor groups often pushed into the dark corners of contemporary Chinese society surfaced and became the focus of a film for the first time. Stylistically, in *Bumming in Beijing* as well as *1966, My Era of the Red Guards* (1993) and *At Home with the World* (1995), Wu tends to use a lot of interviews to heighten the sense of authenticity. Though inexperience and a passionate desire to present something as less mediated as possible (as opposed to the highly polished and heavily mediated special-topic films) led to the somewhat slipshod appearance of Wu’s early

⁵⁵ The Chinese word “mangliu” connotes a state of blind, aimless vagrancy. While in late 1980s it was used to refer to the anti-mainstream artists and “intellectuals” who considered vagrancy as a gesture of free spirit, in the 1990s this word began to be used to define the larger, less romantic group of peasants who have been uprooted from their homes and lands by the surging economic reforms and who flooded the big cities each cherishing a hope of getting better fed and clad. “If vagrants of the eighties still had an ideal to search and fight for on their collective unconscious, then this ideological halo has totally faded out. What is left is the stark, unpoetic coarseness and hardship of life itself.”

Born in Yunnan, China in 1956, Wu Wenguang went to the countryside after graduating from high school in 1974, and worked as an elementary school teacher for three years. Entered the Department of the Literature at Yunnan University in 1978, and graduated in 1982. Taught at a junior high school for three years, and joined a television network in 1985 to work as a news journalist for four years. Left the TV station in 1989 to become an independent documentary filmmaker and freelance writer. His documentary films include: *Bumming in Beijing-The Last Dreamers* (1990); *1966, My Era of the Red Guards* (1993), *At Home in the World* (1995) and *Jiang Hu* (1999), Source: Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Organizing Committee, <<http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/catalog/99/eg/05/005.html>>.

⁵⁶ As I have mentioned earlier, this was probably a result of the impregnation of the misconception of “documentary” in the mind of the public by the then Chinese film market along with the communist government. The word “documentary” reminded people of the short scientific or culture films or special-topic films.

⁵⁷ Lu Xinyu, “Documentary: Private Writing—Interview with documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang,” *Documenting China (jilu zhongguo)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, forthcoming in June 2002.

documentaries, we can already observe the budding spirit informing the whole New Documentary Movement, i.e. a serious reflection on what is going on, an intense concern for the underrepresented social groups that have been constantly effaced from the glossy picture of reform and progress.⁵⁸

Till today Wu's most mature film might be *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* (1999), an on-going documentary made after shooting and living for months with the subjects of his film.⁵⁹ At the center stage of this film is a vagrant performance/entertainment troupe named "Yuan Da" ("far and large", meaning promising). An entertainment group originating from and wandering in the countryside, "Yuan Da" is one of those "big tents" typical of the 1990s rural cultural scene.⁶⁰ Run by a father and son duo, it travels around

⁵⁸ Yet Wu Wenguang is dissatisfied with his early works, accusing them of lacking the earthiness and the real roots of existence he wants to capture. As he later reflected on *Bumming in Beijing*, he expressed relentless disappointment at himself and those vagrant friends of his, saying that compared to the real, earthy life of the larger groups on the truly low strata of Chinese society, their self-righteous search for spiritual freedom in Beijing felt like "an illusion, unreal. Not to mention those artists, all feel like very fragile, like group masturbation...I consider my films from those days are garbage." See Lu Xinyu, "Documentary: Private Writing—Interview with documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang," *Documenting China (jilu zhongguo)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, June 2002.

⁵⁹ It is an "on-going" project because Wu has not just made a film out of it. What is more, like an ethnographer, he is establishing the "big tent", the vagrant performance/entertainment troupe featured in *Jiang Hu*, as the subject of a series of documenting projects: film, book, interviews recorded on cassettes, etc.

Director's statement: "*Jiang Hu* is a particularly Chinese word, and hence one that is especially hard to translate. The two Chinese characters denote "river" and "lake," but the word implies something quite different than a geographic entity. The word can mean leaving one's familiar turf on a dangerous journey without any sense of the future, in effect wandering "another life." Or it can mean being thrown out of home and onto the street. In this sense, then, the characters in my film are not pursuing a so-called gypsy existence. Instead, these people who were so anxious to leave home to follow a life on the road eventually dream of making a lot of money and returning home, their existence devoid of such romanticism of the road. Ten years ago, I shot my first fully independent documentary, *Bumming in Beijing - The Last Dreamers*. It was the story of five young artists from the provinces who go to Beijing to pursue their dreams of art. Now, what fascinates me and what I have chosen to document is a group of young farmers ... they've left their homes to travel, pitching tents as they go where they perform their songs and dances. I think the reason they fascinate me is because our fates have all been thrown out "onto the road." Source: Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival Organizing Committee, 1999, <<http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/catalog/99/eg/05/005.html>>.

⁶⁰ Like the gypsies or circuses around the world, they carry with them a collapsible big tent everywhere they go and the big tent forms the theatre for all their performances.

various nondescript suburbs near Beijing. Its repertoire features karaoke pop songs and young women dancing in homely bikini outfits. Yet with the 50th national anniversary closing in, government officials are tightening their regulations on show troupes. Business is bad, local gangsters want a cut of the pie, and the police hint that they can help, but for a price. The boss hasn't paid the performers for months, and frustration is rising under the single tent roof. Supported by his intimate relationship formed with the troupe members after living for months with them, Wu captured the hilariousness, sadness and frustration that the people in there have experienced in their most palpable form.⁶¹

Though the narrative of the film is largely broken and its structure feels like a loose string of fragments, we could feel Wu's sincere concern and equal attitude toward his subjects. Months of living together have rendered him an intimate member of the troupe. Rather than interviews in his early films, we see young troupe members speaking to Wu (and thus to the camera and to us the audience) like buddies, confessing to him (and thus to the camera and us) fears and secrets of themselves and others. Enabled by the highly mobile and penetrating digital camera that he used, Wu has managed to plunge deep into this social particle and bares its texture to us:

⁶¹ Members of the "Big Tent" are often randomly recruited from the countryside or construction sites where people from the countryside often convene and work as manual workers. Often they are teenagers or young people in their early twenties with some talent for or interest in arts (mostly singing and dance). They come with a dream for fame, money and freedom toward the outside world. They ride out of the countryside but are rejected by the cities. Geographically and figuratively, they live on the borders between the rural and the urban. "More often than not they can only stay outside the Fourth Ring of Beijing, the conjunction part between the rural and the urban where crime rate is often the highest," says Wu Wenguang, in Lu Xinyu, "Documentary: Private Writing—Interview with documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang," *Documenting China (jilu zhongguo)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, June 2002.

“We never film from a tripod. Often we just hold our camera in hand or put it on the table or bed, wherever appears convenient at the moment...we also gave the camera to people who felt curious about it. They played with it and after a while felt it was not mystic any more. They soon got used to its presence.”

The result is a convincing and provoking POV from below, as equals. As Wu argues, “this is not ‘THEIR’ life, but OUR life.”⁶²

Duan Jinchuan is another prominent figure in the New Documentary Movement.⁶³ Different from Wu Wenguang’s marginal stance, Duan is interested in exposing the “mainstream” and the mechanisms of power.⁶⁴ For example, he is obsessed with filming meetings, all kinds of meetings, and the best example of that obsession would be his most critically acclaimed *No.16, Barkhor South Street*. Another film of his that is widely talked about is *The Square*, a collaborative piece with Zhang Yuan, the forerunner of the Sixth Generation feature film that I already talked about earlier in this chapter. Both of *The Square* and *No.16, Barkhor South Street* choose a space whose workings are symbolic of

⁶² Lu Xinyu, “Upon the Ruins of Utopia—New Documentary Movement in China”, *Documenting China (jilu zhongguo)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, June 2002, p.5.

⁶³ Like Wu, Duan’s background was also in state-owned television. He graduated from Beijing Broadcasting Institute as a major in artistic editing (*wenyi bianji*) and volunteered to go and work in Tibet Television Station in 1984. Hence a lot of his films are about life in Tibet. Duan’s major works include, *Tibet* (1991), *The Square* (co. with Zhang Yuan, 1994), *No.16, Barkhor South Street* (1994), *Qing Pu* (co. with Wen Pulin), and *Tian Bian* (2001).

⁶⁴ As Duan acknowledges, his major breakthrough was brought by exposure to the works of Frederick Wiseman at the Yamagata Festival in 1993. There he had his first encounter with Wiseman’s *Zoo*. “My most important discovery (from that experience) is,” says Duan, “Wiseman can extend any concrete environment called ‘institution’ to the whole society. You can discover large-scale social problematics from anywhere.” “I Must Stay with You Everyday: Duan Jinchuan” (*wo bixu tiantian he nimen zai yiqi: Duan Jinchuan*), updated on June 4, 2001, *La Jeunesse (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=wmbxttgznyq>>.

the inner mechanisms of Chinese society: the Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, and a residence community committee office in Lasa, capital city of Tibet.⁶⁵

Using mostly what Duan calls "short focus," *The Square* is intended to expose the Tian'anmen Square as a stage where all people on it become performers in a certain way. When asked if the people filmed in *The Square* were aware of the presence of the camera and the fact that they were being filmed, Duan replied,

All the great direct cinema films share one thing: the profuse and precise use of 'metaphors.' The choice of scenes, the structure of the film, the activities of people in the film, all are teeming with 'metaphors.'"⁶⁶

The Tian'anmen Square is metaphorical because it is laden with historical memories and ritual implications, all of which consummates in a palpable yet unnamable

⁶⁵ No.16, Barkhor South Street is the office of a residence community committee (*jumin weiyuanhui*, often abbreviated as "*juweihui*"), which is located near the center of Lasa, Tibet. A residence community committee is the most basic level of the Chinese government administration and where the most direct and intimate contact between the Party/government and its people takes place. Often its chair members consist of old or retired people living in the community, which in China give these committees joking names like "white-haired team", "small-feet investigation team" (the latter referring to the fact that some of the old women members had their feet bound in their childhood and thus still had the now obsolete small feet). *The Square* is a collaborative piece done with veteran independent feature filmmaker Zhang Yuan. It chooses as its protagonist as well as center stage the Tian'anmen Square, a highly politicized and densely symbolic locale in Beijing.

Like *No.16, Barkhor South Street*, *The Square* features no single story line. It simply films the people passing by on the Square everyday, all sorts of people: old and young, soldiers, foreigners, country bumpkins, people from outside Beijing, etc. They do all sorts of things: taking pictures, playing kites, pickpocketing, sightseeing or simply passing by. Duan's theory is "everybody is doing a show, and they do it most naturally and unconsciously, until this accumulates to a certain point, they themselves will be shocked to see their own performance." See "I Must Stay with You Everyday: Duan Jinchuan" (*wo bixu tiantian he nimen zai yiqi: Duan Jinchuan*), updated on June 4, 2001, *La Jeuness (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=wmbxttgnzyq>>.

⁶⁶ Duan is a conscious, devoted practitioner of direct cinema. Cf. 68. Source: "E-mail Interview with Duan Jinchuan" (Duan Jinchuan de E-mail fangtan), updated on Nov.23, 2000, *La Jeuness (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=djcdef>>.

ambience that makes people going there feel different and “staged” and start to comply unconsciously to that big show with their own unintended performance. For Duan, the Square becomes the guiding and shaping metaphor of the stage, and whether the people in the film were conscious of their performance or not, the show is already there because the stage is there, always.

In shooting *No.16, Barkhor South Street*, which won the Prix du Cinema du Reel (Paris, 1997), Duan’s guiding principle in filmmaking is one of noninvolvement. Before the actual shooting started, he said to the residence committee members featured in *No.16, Barkhor South Street*, “

I must stay with you everyday. I cannot miss anything. Whether you think something is important or not, it is always important to me.”⁶⁷

Thus through the defamiliarizing exemplification of two representative public spaces, “one open the other closed,” to use his own words, Duan manages to highlight the subtleties of power exertion in the most mundane circumstances in China.

⁶⁷ Obviously his attitude and method reminds one of those of Richard Leacock. Though on various occasions Duan acknowledges his indebtedness to direct cinema, his method of shooting is more consciously planned than Leacock’s passive, patient, absolutely non-involving waiting for the dramatic moments to reveal themselves. Talking about *No.16, Barkhor South Street*, Duan said he used only 4.5 meters long of film and the total footage adds up to only nine hours, an enormous discount compared to Drew and Leacock’s “waste” of film footage. The final version of *No.16, Barkhor South Street* lasts 100 minutes, so the ratio of filmed and used footage is an amazing 4:1. Instead of total non-involvement, Duan’s role as the filmmaker was quite an involving one around the actual shooting. The shooting started by the end of 1994 and finished in October the next year. During that period, Duan and his cameraman became the virtual members of the residence committee. They went there everyday, stayed, chatting, sipping tea and helping do some of the routine work. His close relationship with the subjects of his film created a very auspicious circumstance so that when the actual shooting started, his subjects no longer regarded it as something alien or intruding. For a rounder description of the making of *No.16, Barkhor South Street*, see “I Must Stay with You Everyday: Duan Jinchuan” (*wo bixu tiantian he nimen zai yiqi: Duan Jinchuan*), updated on June 4, 2001, *La Jeuness (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=wmbxttgznyq>>.

5. Blurred Boundaries, Generational Response

Before we close the discussion of documentary filmmaking, it might help to mention two more filmmakers because their practice bespeaks most obviously the blurred boundary between fiction and documentary filmmaking in the Sixth Generation experience. They are Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke. As I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, the feature films of both directors have a strong documentary characteristic (Zhang's *Sons*; Jia's *Xiao Wu*). More tellingly, they also make actual documentaries. Zhang Yuan's *The Square* (1994, collaborative piece with Duan Jinchuan), *Demolition and Relocation* (*Dingzihu*, 1998), and *Crazy English* (1999) are among the most widely known.⁶⁸ Jia Zhangke made a documentary called *Public Space* (*gonggong changsuo*) in 2000.⁶⁹

In a way quite similar to Duan Jinchuan, Zhang Yuan and Wu Wenguang—perhaps not surprisingly—Jia shows great interest in the metaphorical implications of numerous mundane locales in China and the general sentiment of “on the road” and instability hidden in those spaces. Stylistically, Jia retains the same distance in *Public Space* as in *Xiao Wu*. One of his principles is: “I don’t hand-hold my camera.”

⁶⁸ *Demolition and Relocation* highlights the hidden tension in the ongoing urbanization program in Beijing. *Crazy English* features Li Yang, a strangely charismatic teacher and public speaker who advocates with success an original (even strange) method of learning English through gestures and gesticulation. The film serves as a metaphorical depiction of a China engaged in changing itself at a frightening pace. See, The 52nd Locarno International Film Festival, Film Program, 1999, <<http://www.pardo.ch/1999/htm/prog/CAT/r081.html>>.

⁶⁹ Jia made his first documentary as early as in 1995; it was called *That Day, in Beijing* (*na yi tian, zai Beijing*). The shooting was finished but he never moved to the editing part. *Public Space* is a response to the Korean Jeonju Film Festival’s “Three People, Three Colors” project that is designed to promote the development of digital film.

Thus we discover a more stable and sober, consciously observateur stance in *Public Space*. Compared to Wu Wenguang's active penetration into the existence of the filmed subjects or Duan Jinchuan's familiarity with the operation of his chosen institution, Jia's style is more distanced and self-restrained but no less powerful.⁷⁰

Before we close this chapter and move on to the power struggles and negotiations that Sixth Generation filmmakers are caught in, the discussion would not be complete without mentioning new documentaries produced by state-owned television stations. Though the people who make these TV documentaries do not appear as individualistic and prominent compared to their more colorful colleagues in the independent camp I talked above, their collective and systematic efforts are in no way to be dismissed as obscure, commonplace and insignificant. Two reasons support my argument:

First, though produced on the official state-owned television platform, the documentary programs in the 1990s have demonstrated the same thematic concern for the previously underrepresented groups that characterizes the works of independent documentary filmmakers. The best example in point would be China Central Television (CCTV)'s brand documentary program "Living Space." Opened in October 1993 and

⁷⁰ Jia's *Public Space* has no central characters or guiding story. Within the length of thirty minutes, the film shows a number of locales related to the notion of journey: the waiting room of a suburban train station at late night, a bus stop in a mining district in dusk, a running bus whose destination is not clear, a small restaurant converted from an unused bus, the waiting room of a long-distance bus stop that has multiple functions as billiard room, dancing hall, etc. People of different ages and identities pass by these locales and their activities are recorded—not followed. Again, Jia manages to stay on the surface and doesn't try to penetrate into stories behind these spaces and people and their brief encounters. As Jia expresses in his notes to *Public Space*, he is fascinated with the obscure and blurred quality of those spaces, e.g. the triple functions of the bus stop's waiting room-billiard room-dancing hall. Through such overlapping spaces we can see the underlying complex social shift that is responsible for that multiplicity. What Jia wants to communicate is an atmosphere particular to a certain space. In achieving that effect of being present, *Public Space* contains no voiceover, no narrative, and no subtitles. All the sound elements come from the shooting spot but their appearance in the final film is edited and remixed in order to communicate the ambiance more effectively. See "DV Workshop (6)—*Public Space*," *Art World*, Shanghai, Dec.2001, p.20-23.

launched daily for around fifteen minutes in golden evening time (between 7:30 and 8:00pm), "Living Space" marked the total systemization of new documentary as a movement in China. The short films presented here are intimate looks of lives of authentic ordinary Chinese people who otherwise have never had a chance to enter the center stage of visual history. "A history written by common people", "tell *laobaixing* (the people)'s own stories", these slogans of "Living Space" have become new catch phrases in China today. Acutely aware of the oppressive and exploitative potential of the camera, Chen Meng, the executive producer of "Living Space", dictated to his staff to spurn their government consciousness and intellectual sense of mission and treat the featured subjects like "friends and relatives".⁷¹ Thanks to CCTV's incomparable advantage of absolute nationwide coverage, "Living Space", along with "Oriental Horizon", soon became arguably the most popular and widely viewed short documentary program ever existent in China.⁷²

And this is perhaps the greatest contribution of the TV programmatization of documentary to the New Documentary Movement. Popular television helps to prepare a consumer base for further development of new documentaries, and through such an officially-approved and wide-reaching medium, a systematic and legitimized concern for underrepresented ordinary people is confirmed. Originally "Living Space" focused on

⁷¹ Lu Xinyu, "Upon the Ruins of Utopia—New Documentary Movement in China", *Documenting China (jilu zhongguo)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, June 2002, p.13.

⁷² My friend Ms. Hu Jingcao of CCTV has kindly informed me of recent changes happening to "Oriental Horizon." Originally there were four sections: 1. "Offspring of the Orient" (dong fang zhi zi); 2. "Living Space" (sheng huo kong jian); 3. "Music TV" (yin yue dian shi); 4. "Focus Moments" (jiao dian shi ke). Later "Music TV" was canceled and replaced by "Face to Face" (mian dui mian), in which "the host talks about something that happens recently and that he thinks important." Now "Face to Face" is replaced by "Linking Time and Space" (shi kong lian xian). The new "Oriental Horizon" consists of 3 subsections:

blind areas of the vision of traditional official media, e.g. urban poverty, migrant workers flowing from the rural regions, the physically challenged people, cancer patients, abandoned children, minority nationalities, poverty-ridden regions, numerous workers newly laid off from previously state-owned factories, etc. "Living Space" manages to direct the public's gaze to the unflattering side of the generally glossed-over picture of reform. In today's China, the word "reform" is not just a catchy abstract nominator used to summarize all the profound social as well as political changes; it is shaking the very basis of Chinese social structure and is changing the lives of people in a most drastic way. For millions of unprivileged families and people, it's not about embracing the change or choosing to stay behind; it's a matter of life or death. "Living Space" is attentive to that troublesome pulse, for the real.

Second, some of the most prominent and mature documentary filmmakers have a background in television and they keep shifting their roles between independent and official channels. For example, before becoming an independent filmmaker, Wu Wenguang had worked in Yun'nan Television as a news journalist for four years. For a long time in his independent career, income from work in television was a major funding source for his work. Kan Jian'ning, whose *Yin Yang* is considered one of the most mature pieces the New Documentary Movement has ever produced, has always been a regular employee of Ningxia Television. (The most recent news has it that he has become the vice director of Ningxia Television). Jiang Yue, an absolute independent documentarist, has produced over thirty short documentaries for CCTV's "Living Space." Duan Jinchuan came from Tibet Television. By crossing boundaries between independent

"Linking Time and Space," "Children of the Orient," and "People's Stories," the last being exactly previous "Living Space,"—only the title changed.

filmmaking and making documentary programs for state-owned television, these filmmakers manage to keep up their experimental spirit while being able to promote their influence in a steady way. Without such a subtle and ongoing collaboration between the independent and official platforms, the new documentary might not have reached its present-day scale and formed into a movement.⁷³

Furthermore, with the advancement of technology and the advent of the digital video camera, New Documentary Movement in China is tapping into even greater space. In what Jia Zhangke calls “a coming era of amateur film,”⁷⁴ personal visual expressions and stories from the side of the hitherto silent public become totally possible. Alongside the official “main melody”, different voices also can be heard and history becomes histories—written by the people (in every sense and definition of that word) themselves.

Perhaps not surprisingly at all, while Jia Zhangke often talks about his interest in *dangxia* (now and here), Wu Wenguang is perpetually concerned with *xianchang* (meaning “the scene, the spot, on the spot”).⁷⁵ For the two groups of filmmakers we have

⁷³ Television’s promotion of documentary does not just stay on the production and distribution level. It also creates room for communication between documentary filmmakers. In 1996, CCTV’s “Living Space” organized the “China Documentary Short Film Contest” which is continued till today on an annual basis. Every year short documentary films produced by local and regional television networks enter the contest. In 1997, “Living Space” organized and sponsored so far China’s biggest international documentary festival (Beijing). Documentaries screened and discussed range from works by international big names like Frederick Wiseman, various documentary filmmakers from television networks nationwide and for the first time in an official occasion, independent documentary filmmakers of China’s own produce. Lu Xinyu, “Upon the Ruins of Utopia—New Documentary Movement in China”, *Documenting China (jilu zhongguo)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, June 2002, p.13.

⁷⁴ See “DV Workshop (6)—Public Space,” *Art World*, Shanghai, Dec.2001, p.22.

⁷⁵ One of Wu’s many documenting-culture projects is a book called *Xiangchang*. According to Wu, *Xiangchang* takes the form of dossiers; eighty percent of its content is various interviews and notes of the process of documentary filmmaking. See, Lu Xinyu, “Documentary: Private Writing—Interview with documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang,” *Documenting China (jilu zhongguo)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, June 2002.

talked about in this chapter, whether some of them prefer to stay in their proper domain of fiction or documentary filmmaking, we already see a strong documentary streak in the fiction films. Boundaries between drama and documentary are blurred; filmmakers change tracks as they feel the urge to. While feature filmmakers like Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke are moving toward documentary filmmaking, we also hear documentary filmmakers like Duan Jinchuan express wishes to try narrative filmmaking.⁷⁶ Thematically both groups demonstrate an unusual sensitivity to the change and its effect on ordinary people in present-day China. Artistically both groups turn out ingenious works experimenting with the cinematic language in search of a more realistic and responsible representation of actualities. Such common goals and blurred boundaries are meaningful: they reflect the call of an age. A China caught in the vortex of change needs a more realistic and sober cinema to make sense of that change. To that call these young filmmakers emerged and offered their generational response.

In the above discussion we've already noticed the flexibility of Sixth Generation filmmakers in realizing their artistic goal. As we shall see in the third chapter in greater detail, such resilience is reflected most fully in their ability to negotiate between different channels from the state to the market and the west for a sustainable existence.

⁷⁶ In an interview Duan mentioned that he is making preparations for a narrative film. "It's an experiment. I hope to make a narrative film in documentary manner. Just like in a documentary we record what happens first and what happens next, in this narrative film I want things to develop on their own. It hasn't started yet but I think it's going to be fun. Some of the work will be like that in all narrative filmmaking: we'll have a script, at least part of it, and actors too. But the rest will be largely improvisational. We hope the actors can actually immerse themselves into the chosen environment. For example, have the actors form a family and let the family live in a chosen environment. We can see how they fare, if they will be able to mix and identity with other real families, etc. This is fun. Before we always take too seriously what is real and what is not; in fact such things are very hard to get at. In documentary filmmaking we always emphasize its authenticity, that it is not fiction, now we'll intentionally blur that boundary and see what the result will be." See, "Interview with Duan Jinchuan" (*Duan Jinchuan fangtan*), source: updated Feb.22, 2000, *La Jeunesse (xin qingnian)*, <<http://movie.newyouth.beida-online.com/data/data.php3?db=movie&id=djctf>>.

Chapter 3: Negotiations with the State, the West and the Market

1. State Censorship

In China the state film bureau regulates all production and distribution matters of the film industry. In the old days (except for the Cultural Revolution years during which film production totally ceased), the state-producer was solely responsible for the salaries of filmmakers and had the single say in deciding which films were to be distributed for public exhibition. In 1993, fundamental reforms that were taking place in all aspects of the Chinese society spread to the film sector. In January that year, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television issued ten new articles of opinion and decreed clearly that from then on market should be the major yardstick by which to measure film production. More specifically, it put an end to the monopolistic role of the Chinese Committee of Film Importation and Exportation ("China Film Co.") in film distribution, explaining in Article Two that "all state-owned film production units are to contact local distribution units directly on their own."⁷⁷

This pushed the previously state-sponsored studios into self-financing by finding private sponsors and commercializing their products. A whole variety of survival strategies came out of need, including co-production, financial participation and even simply sale of "production quotas". However, establishing market as the guiding line in film production was not matched with grip-loosing gestures on the part of the censors.

⁷⁷ "Some Opinions on Reinforcing Reforms in the Film Industry", *Dianying Puji*, March 1993, Beijing, p.3-4.

“No film is to be distributed, exhibited, imported or exported before being examined by the censorship office of the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television,” says one of the key censorship regulations updated in 1997.⁷⁸ Any trespassers of that line will be punished according to the degree of their “crime.” In 1994, a group of young filmmakers (Wang Xiaoshuai with *The Days*, Zhang Yuan with *Beijing Bastards*, He Jianjun with *The Postman*) and documentarists (Wu Wenguang, Shi Jian, Chen Ju, Ning Dai) received an urgent facsimile arrived from the Film Bureau during they stay in Rotterdam. They were there attending the Rotterdam Film Festival but the fax insisted on immediate cancellation of the planned projection of their films under the pretext that their works hadn’t been “approved” by the censorship office yet. This is not untypical of the situations Sixth Generation filmmakers have often found themselves in. The punishment such intractable filmmakers receive is: no studio has the right to work with them; no institution is supposed to lend them production equipment—which pushed them even further into the underground. Many of Sixth Generation independent films were shot guerrilla-style in the streets of major cities, using leftover stock from other productions,

⁷⁸ This is Article 2 of “Film Censorship Regulations” issued in January 1997 by the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, P.R.China. Usually the censors examine the script first and then the film from beginning to end. At this stage if approval is obtained, the bureau can still limit the entry of the film into national market or on the contrary limit its exportation. The Film Bureau is supposed to let know its response within thirty days after the submission of the film but the bureaucratic slowness always procrastinates the process. This gives rise to bizarre situations, forcing the filmmakers to decide either to renounce the showing of their films in an international festival or to jump into the first flight available with their own copies without waiting for the censorship visa—all at risk of being punished at their return. As for “illegally produced” films (by independent filmmakers who have not been accredited by the Film Bureau, e.g. the majority of the Sixth Generation), they are simply banned. In the 1980s the censorship relented but in March 1995 a meeting of officials of culture, film and propaganda took place in Changsha (provincial capital of Hunan). Hence a new word of order was imposed on the filmmakers: they are now asked to illustrate so-called “main melody” in their works. More precisely, “main melody” means celebration of the endurance of good socialists in face of the trials of life; staying with the “main melody” means staying away from all discordance notes. China is opening to the global market, but the censorship becomes more virulent because the government doesn’t want to lose control. See also, Bérénice Reynaud, “La censure en Chine”, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no.526, July/August 1998, p.36.

and then smuggled outside the country for editing and distribution. Most had their debut screening in the West. Within their home country, like many of the films we are discussing here, they have been drastically cut, shelved for years or banned outright.

Zhang Yang's passport was confiscated in 1997 when the Cannes Film Festival invited and screened his *East Palace West Palace*, a film that is probably the first of its kind dealing outspokenly with the underground gay world in China. The editing of He Jianjun's *Postman* was halted by the censors; the film had to be smuggled out of China, and was completed with a grant from the Rotterdam Film Festival. In 1996, Wang Xiaoshuai made *Frozen* under the pseudonym Wu Ming (literally meaning "nameless") for fear of government retribution. Another of his films, *So Close to Paradise*, a noir study of gangsters in Shanghai, was reshot, recut and withheld for five years before it saw the light of the day. Jia Zhangke shot *Xiao Wu* despite the censors' rejection of his script; he was banned from directing, but went ahead as "independent." Jiang Wen, the actor/director whose *In the Heat of the Sun* (1995) became the quintessential example of commercial as well as artistic success in 1995, invited the wrath of China's Film Bureau by traveling overseas with his second film *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000) without going through the proper channels.⁷⁹

"I think the government takes movies too seriously," Ning Ying (director of *On the Beat*) commented with irony and humor in 1995. As film critic Richard Corliss has curtly compared the censors to the police officer in *On the Beat*, they must believe that "they are protecting the vulnerable minds of the proletariat." In quizzing a man charged with selling porno (actually just pictures of women in bathing suits) and hearing him

protest that the pictures are art, the officer retorts "for cultured people this is art...But what if it falls into the hands of a hooligan?"⁸⁰

The sad fact as a result of such tight censorship is though many of these films have won prizes at Western festivals, few of them have been shown officially in China. Though full of artistic potential and desperate to reach the general Chinese public, Sixth Generation films still have many hurdles to pass before they can see the light of the day in their home country.

2. Gaze of the West

Underneath the state's tight rein over filmmaking, the survival strategy of Sixth Generation filmmakers is naturally seeking help and attention elsewhere, i.e. outside the national boundaries. Thus we see a peculiar scenery in contemporary Chinese cinema: difficult, nitty-gritty pictures keep scooping top international film festival honors; the harsher the state's efforts to suppress or impede these films, the louder international fanfare for what is sung of as a rebellious gesture in filmmaking. In vying for a recognizable existence abroad, Sixth Generation films meet (sometimes deliberately) the gaze of the West who is looking for either a mystic Orient or subversive anti-communist representation born of the regime itself.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Jiang Wen entered *Devils on the Doorstep* at the 53rd Cannes Films Festival, 2000 without the approval of the Chinese censorship office. The film won him the Committee Award at Cannes that year.

⁸⁰ Richard Corliss, "Crouching China, Hidden Agenda," *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

⁸¹ The success in the West of the Fifth Generation cinema, which casts a timeless and imaginary past in modernist aesthetics, is a classical example of orientalism. Describing the Fifth Generation phenomenon as "fleeing from one trap while falling into another," film and cultural critic Dai Jinhua points out how Fifth Generation directors like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, in films that were intended to be a critical reading of history and tradition, inadvertently internalize "the fantasy of the Other/West for an imaginary China

Such an orientalist attitude is subtly reflected in the publicity Sixth Generation film has received in the West. For example, when reporting on the exhibition of Sixth Generation films in New York, critic Richard Corliss says, "if you want to know what's going on in the Mystic East besides swordfights and Hollywood exile, here are some films worth a subway ride, or maybe a plane trip."⁸² Later on in the same article he remarks on "oriental exoticism" by referring to what happened to the Fifth Generation:

"Giving sizzle to this sweet-and-sour cinema (of oriental exoticism) was Gong Li, the star of Zhang (Yimou)'s and Chen (Kaige)'s best-known films, and a statuesque beauty whose defiant sensuousness roiled under her tight silk dresses. As one close watcher of Mainland movies noted at the time, 'Chinese films might not have become an international phenomenon if Gong Li had been flat-chested.'"⁸³

In the eyes of the classic western viewer who seeks for a romantic representation of the exotic sensuous, Chinese filmscape becomes the (female) body of a distant culture and ideology. In contrast to its Fifth Generation predecessors, the Sixth Generation cinema offers a different body physique for the western gaze: this time, not so

that is pre-modern, a splendid spectacle of exoticism and an ancient land ruled by repressed desire." More specifically, Dai situates her discussion of the "orientalized" Fifth Generation in a China-specific postcolonialist context. By "postcolonialism" she means "a benign form of Western colonization, a civilized aggression greeted with ambivalence by the local elite." Directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige are considered part of the local elite, who, in adopting Western cinematic aesthetics, were nevertheless entrapped in orientalism. See, Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, Verso Books, forthcoming in July 2002, "Introduction." Also see, Dai Jinhua, *Scenery in the Mist: Chinese Cinema Culture 1978-1998 (Wu zhong fengjing: zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998)*, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000, p.241-341. For a more extensive discussion of the Fifth Generation, see Klaus Eder and Deac Rossell, eds., *New Chinese Cinema*, London: National Film Theatre, 1993; Nick Browne et al., eds., *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, Section One "Film in the People's Republic"; Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995; Régis Bergeron, *Le cinéma chinois*, Aix-en-Provence: Institut de l'Image, 1997.

⁸² Richard Corliss, "Crouching China, Hidden Agenda," *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

⁸³ Richard Corliss, "Crouching China, Hidden Agenda," *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

sensuous or romantic, but its believed-in oppression kindles even great interest for voyeurism. Yes, voyeurism, that is probably the proper word to describe the western gaze and the intention behind that gaze on Chinese cinema—looking for the inner scars and fissures of a different, often defiled culture.⁸⁴ In the eyes of the typical Western critic, sound assessment of artistic achievements in Chinese cinema is overshadowed by an eagerness to find political subversiveness. As Director Zhang Yimou acutely pointed out in his complaint letter to the Cannes Film Festival in 1999 with regard to the withdrawal of his two film *Not One Less* and *The Way Home*, “

...I cannot accept that when it comes to Chinese films, the West seems for a long time to have had just one ‘political’ reading: if it’s not ‘against the government’ then it’s ‘for the government.’”⁸⁵

Not surprisingly in that eagerness for anti-communist elements we can find cases of misreading of the filmic text. For example, in commenting He Jianjun’s *Postman*,

⁸⁴ From the very beginning the discourse of Orientalism is imbricated with the construction of gender. As Edward Said summarized in 1985: “We can now see that Orientalism is a praxis of the same sort, albeit in different territories, as male gender dominance, or patriarchy, in metropolitan societies: the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem and the despotic—but curiously attractive-ruler. Moreover, Orientals like Victorian housewives were confined to silence and to unlimited enriching production.” Though the female characters interpreted by Gong Li in Zhang and Chen’s films are in an oppressed rather than ruling position, their rebellion against feudal patriarchy establish them as strong and advantageous. See, Edward Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” *Cultural Critique* (fall 1985), p. 103. Quoted by Matthew Bernstein in his introduction to *Visions of the East*, see Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997, p.3.

⁸⁵ This is Zhang’s letter to Gilles Jacob; the text is a translation from the Chinese original posted in the Internet Edition of the *Beijing Youth Daily*, April.20, 1999. In it Zhang said, “I have decided to withdraw my films *Not One Less* and *The Way Home*...the reason is I feel you have seriously misunderstood these two films and it is a misunderstanding I cannot accept. My two films both concern beloved theme. *Not One Less* expresses our deep love for children and this whole national cultural situation for us today and our concerns for the future. *The Way Home* sings the praises of the truth and purity of love between a man and a woman. These are feelings common to all mankind. There fore it is surprising that you critique my films on ‘political’ grounds. This is nothing but political or cultural prejudice...I hope this discrimination against Chinese films can be overcome in time. Otherwise it will not only be an injustice to me, but also to other Chinese directors, including the next generation of young directors and their works.” Quoted from Eileen Chow, “Screening Modern China: Chinese Film and Culture,” syllabus, Fall 2001, Harvard University.

In the background of the post office we have noticed a woman at her work: standing at a table she sends out a rhythmic tattoo stamping letters (two beats on the ink pad, one of the envelope). For most of the film it is just background noise (a sound, representing the brisk manual labor needed to keep a clumsy old machine like the Chinese postal system functioning). But there is a feral energy to her pounding. Sometimes she wails like Krupa; she seems to be working out her erotic frustrations. And perhaps we have thought, for a second, that the actress has a sullen sensuality that is wasted in a bit player's role."⁸⁶

Of course interpretations are open to each particular viewer, yet still it is interesting to see how a typical Western critic could read so much into one detail. One always sees what s/he wants to see. Another example of such interesting difference in interpretation is about Ning Ying's *On the Beat*.

"*On the Beat* is a quietly scathing portrait of a society in transition, where collective ideals (which, in practice, boil down to empty slogans and authoritarian bureaucracy) are starting to conflict with individualism and a desire for privacy. Ning's style, which uses distant long shots for public space and reserves close-ups for homes and the police station, reflects this split."⁸⁷

Whether that interpretation of Director Ning Ying's use of long shots is accurate or not is open to question. In *On the Beat* a more subtle reader might see from the same long shots images of a traditional city under siege of westernization and capitalization:

"...a gate from the old city wall, marooned in a sea of traffic; a parade of steamrollers, behemoths of progress rolling down a narrow alley to some construction site, scattering cyclists in their path. Her most affecting scene is a lingering overhead shot of a beautiful traditional hutong (Beijing alley) neighbourhood: but, as the camera pans up, the screen slowly fills with a sea of the characterless, massive new apartment buildings that are colonizing Beijing."⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Richard Corliss, "Crouching China, Hidden Agenda," *Time*, 3 March 2001, <<http://www.time.com/time/sampler/article/0,8599,101297,00.html>>.

⁸⁷ Steve Erickson, "China gall: Defying the state-run studio system, a new generation of Chinese filmmakers flaunt the truth", *Time Out New York*, Issue No. 283, February 22-March 1, 2001, <<http://www.timeoutny.com/film/283/283.film.newchinese.box.html>>.

⁸⁸ Shelly Kraicer, review of *On the Beat* at the 1995 Toronto International Film Festival, *A Chinese Cinema Page*, Review Archive 1995-1996, <<http://www.chinesecinemas.org/beat.html>>.

Ning Ying is said to talk often about the "Coca-Colaization" of China: the irresistible onslaught of commercialization, cheap Westernization, and the threat this poses to traditional culture. Given the generic concern for *dangxia* (now and here) that all Sixth Generation members share in their realistic representation of a present-day China in dramatic change, such interpretation of their films might be more precise and complete.

Thus we could see the imprecision or even willfulness in critiques like,

"...Sixth Generation's open hostility for a system that has left the post-Mao citizenry contemptuous, afraid, uncertain and above all restless. If there's one theme coursing through many of the new generation of Chinese independent films, it's the notion of being trapped in an intense present. Reluctant to look back, hesitant to look ahead, resolved to dwell in a bleak, quotidian, centralized reality, inside over-compartmentalized cities, the characters in Sixth Gen films differ from the dysfunctional souls of recent American independent film in that they're starved for capitalism rather than consumed by it -- though they've learned to air their dirty laundry like the Americans."⁸⁹

Now the critic sounds indeed overly confident here in speaking about Chinese starvation for capitalism. As many of the films we have talked about here examine issues of alienation and isolation caused by full-speed reform and fast capitalization, it is hard to agree that these thoughtful filmmakers are so one-dimensional as to expose and criticize only the communist, authoritarian side of the trap that all contemporary Chinese find themselves (including the filmmakers) in. Similarly, the pioneer figure of Sixth Generation cinema, Zhang Yuan made *Crazy English* (1999), a documentary about Li Yang, a wildly successful promoter who teaches English in a demagogue way: he leads auditoriums full of Chinese in shouting out English phrases. While *Crazy English* more likely serves as a metaphorical depiction of China engaged in changing itself at a frightening pace, some Western critics have suggested that the film is a subtle exposé of

mob psychology, with allusions to Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Hearing that, Zhang laughs and says, "That's going too far."⁹⁰

The classical western reviewer is not unaware of the danger of such over-acclaim of these films based more on their political message rather than artistic value. Again, as critic Richard Corliss has realized,

"There is a temptation for Western viewers to scrutinize these films with a Chinese censor's eyes, looking for political criticism or social irony in every frame. Of course, what is belligerent folly to the censor is political bravery to us. Some of the festival prizes given to Sixth Generation films seem like citations awarded for valor in the face of institutional myopia, rather than for cinematic achievement. And sometimes, the story behind a Sixth Generation work is more compelling than the story in it..."

But, "

...All right, but why not give points for integrity? The message may be simple, even brutal, but it is authentic. In *Frozen*, a performance artist literally kills himself for his art, and a friend says, "He sacrificed his life to show that he lived among murderers." Squeeze a little of the melodrama from that statement, and it could apply to the Sixth Generation filmmakers: They risk their careers to deliver uncomfortable truths. If it is hard to find heroes in these movies, it is easy to see the heroes behind them."⁹¹

It seems that international film festival awards sometimes become badges for valor and courage, or in Corliss's words, "points for integrity." But that "integrity" can be questionable, maybe a little disturbingly. As Fifth Generation Zhang Yimou remarks,

Looking back now at *Red Sorghum* or *Yellow Earth*, they both have warm blood and life, which are missing in the works of the Sixth Generation. I think this is because the Sixth Generation was subject to practical considerations. It cannot be resisted: the need for money, the dilemma caused by censorship, and

⁸⁹ Andy Bailey, "FESTIVALS: Generation X-6; Chinese Indies Take to the Streets," *Indiewire*, Feb.23, 2001, <http://www.indiewire.com/film/festivals/fes_01China_010223_NY.html>.

⁹⁰ Erik Eckholm, "Feted Abroad, and No Longer Banned in Beijing," source: *The New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1999, retrieved at *Bebeyond*, ©1999-2002, <<http://www.bebeyond.com/KeepCurrent/Recommended/ZhangYuan.htm>>.

⁹¹ Richard Corliss, "Bright Lights", *Time*, March 26, 2001, Vol.157, no.12, <<http://www.time.com/time/asia/arts/magazine/0,9754,103002,00.html>>.

the awards at international film festivals... Deliberate calculation is no good. Some Sixth Generation directors I know are too smart. They understand too many things: they are well-informed about the outside world and so familiar with the path to success that their filmmaking becomes an unemotional process. For instance, when they make underground films, at a very early stage when the films are being edited, they have already contacted foreign embassies and secured the channels to export the films. When Kaige and I were making *Yellow Earth*, he knew little about the outside world, but he had an urge to talk about culture and history. At that time I knew this film would be outstanding."⁹²

To survive in a confusing environment as 1990s' China is no easy task; often one has to negotiate his way through various conflicting forces. The Sixth Generation breaks free from state censorship but finds themselves somehow end in the trap of the orientalist gaze of the West. They have this wonderful concern for reality and *vérité* but first of all they have to make sure that they have a viable existence and make their voice audible. They might be a little more worldly and sophisticated than their western followers would like to believe, but again, their style reflects the larger social context in which they work and which they try to capture in their film.

3. Double Stakes: Collusion with the State and the Market

The growth of the Sixth Generation is a constant negotiating process. In trying to break free from the grip of state censors they ask for help and attention in the West, where they fall into the trap of orientalist gaze (sometimes unconsciously, sometimes consciously). Yet time proves that the greater trial has just begun, in which forces of the state and the West join hands in the name of capitalization. "In the historical circumstances formed after 1989, the flourishing of consumerist culture in China is more

⁹² Eileen Chow, "Screening Modern China: Chinese Film and Culture," syllabus, Fall 2001, Harvard University.

a political than just an economic event because the permeation of this consumerist culture in public daily life has in fact resulted in a process of reconstructing the ruling ideology. In this process, popular culture and official ideology permeate into each other and the mixture coming out of that interaction becomes the leading ideology in contemporary China.”⁹³ The almighty market becomes what every other concern has to succumb to. Capitalist reforms are taking place on every layer of Chinese social and cultural structure; film becomes first and foremost a commodity. Market is the absolute national as well as global “main melody” whereby discordance means bare chance of survival. Underground filmmaking seems not a viable long-term option for a career.

Thus many of Sixth Generation filmmakers have a crisscrossing career track and show increasing willingness and resilience to work with the state-owned studios as well as international funding. After his passport was confiscated in 1997 for the entry of *East Palace, West Palace* at the Cannes Festival, Zhang Yuan went through a period of “self-criticism” before starting shooting again. The result was two features in cooperation with the government's film bureau, one fictional (*Seventeen Years*, 1999)⁹⁴ and one

⁹³ Wang Hui, “Cultural Studies and Cultural Criticism in 1990s’ Mainland China” (*jiushi niandai zhongguo dalu de wenhua yanjiu yu wenhua piping*), *Film Art (dianying yishu)*, Beijing, 1995.1: p.16. For a more extensive critical literature on the question of the state, popular culture and consumer culture in China, see Deborah S. Davis, ed. *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, University of California Press, 2000. Virginia Cornue, “Practicing NGOness and Relating Women's Space Publicly: The Women's Hotline and the State,” in Mayfaor Yang, ed. *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 68-94. Jing Wang, ed., *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 9:1, Special Issue “Chinese Popular Culture and the State,” Duke University Press, 2001.

⁹⁴ *Seventeen Years* is about the parole home visit of a woman who has spent 17 years in prison for killing her stepsister. Zhang Yuan was allowed to film, for the first time in China, inside a prison ward. In the film, prison warden Xu takes Liu Li, the parolee, home to her mother and stepfather (whose daughter she killed 17 years ago) for the traditional family reunion at New Year's Eve. Xu then becomes, as does the camera, an eyewitness to the subtle emotional exchanges amongst the three family members - their love for one another is expressed in a reserved manner: Liu Li's remorse, her mother's anxiety and fear, her stepfather's silent struggle to rise above his pain, and ultimately, their determination to live happily and peacefully as a family. Yan Hong, “Art Is Nothing But the Power of Truthfulness: Independent Producer Zhang Yuan,” From Air China Inflight magazine, Vol. 54, No. 5, 1999, retrieved at USC online archives, Asian Film

documentary (*Crazy English*, 1999). "I've been making films for almost 10 years now, and virtually nothing has been seen by Chinese audiences...that's something that has really frustrated and pained me," sighed the director. Thus in order to reach his home audience Zhang allowed the censors to review the scripts and edited versions of his new features. In the case of both *Seventeen Years* and *Crazy English*, some last-minute cuts were required. But the reward is public screening of both in China. Both pictures have proven to be a success among the general public. When asked if he has lost his edge, Zhang said, "All artists have to make choices, and these become limitations...Limitations are not necessarily all bad, but as an artist you still have to make sure that what you are doing remains real."⁹⁵

While Zhang Yuan was working on *Seventeen Years* in 1999, a film that is said to be conventional in both plot and narrative rhythm,⁹⁶ Wang Xiaoshuai showed up with a new, carefully plotted film *Dream Pastoral* (*Menghuan tianyuan*). Both of these two pioneer underground filmmakers expressed wishes for change: “

Before I was only interested in expressing my own unique feelings and did not care much for the audience. At that time making film was the sole purpose. Now it's different. I hope that people can see, hear and empathize with my feelings. I hope they encourage me,” said Zhang Yuan.⁹⁷

Wang Xiaoshuai agreed with him, saying “

Connections, China section, University of Southern California, ©1998-2002, <<http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/asianfilm/china/zy-review1.html>>.

⁹⁵ Erik Eckholm, "Feted Abroad, and No Longer Banned in Beijing," source: *The New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1999, retrieved at *Bebeyond*, ©1999-2002, <<http://www.bebeyond.com/KeepCurrent/Recommended/ZhangYuan.htm>>.

⁹⁶ Wang, Fanghua, "Tendencies of the 'Sixth Generation' Directors" ("diliudai" daoyan de zouxiang), 2001.2.

⁹⁷ Ding Yulan, "Decoding Zhang Yuan—Interview with Zhang Yuan", *Mother Tongue (muyu)*, 2000.5, Hankou, China, p.88-97.

After trying out with several experimental films, I found that if we deem film as a thing to be viewed and appreciated, it should tell an interesting story and allow the audience to follow the story with an understanding smile and not feel tired even until the end of the film.”⁹⁸

Another veteran Sixth Generation filmmaker Lu Xuechang expressed similar views. Lu’s *The Making of Steel* in 1998 was heavily critiqued by the Chinese censors for its treatment of touchy subjects such as alcohol, drug addiction and casual sex and is reported to have undergone six edits before satisfying the authorities.⁹⁹ In an interview with *Time Asia* in 2000, Lu said “

The most important thing for me is to get to communicate with the Chinese audience through my films, so I am determined to continue working with the government.”¹⁰⁰

Lu’s second feature film *In Broad Daylight* (*Guan tian hua ri*, 1999) is said to be quite traditional too in terms of narrative and plot design. While these veteran independent filmmakers of the Sixth Generation are active in “reforming” their style and work mode in pursuit of national exposure and market, other younger members of the generation work passionately to form what is called “New Mainstream Cinema” in China, i.e. a cinema that aims at a high niche in market and popular culture. As the Chinese filmscape is constantly shifting along with changes in the country’s economic as well as political climate, young filmmakers born of the Sixth Generation are constantly changing lanes and opening new paths. In the ending chapter we’ll take a further look at that shifting picture with emphasis on adjustments predicated by the market “main

⁹⁸ Ding Yulan, “Decoding Zhang Yuan—Interview with Zhang Yuan”, *Mother Tongue (myu)*, 2000.5, Hankou, China, p.88-97.

⁹⁹ *Harvard Film Archive Bulletin*, Harvard University, Jan./Feb. 2001, p.11.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Short, “Creating Hollywood-Style Movies Will Be Suicide for Us”, interview with Lu Xuechang, *Time Asia*, Oct.26 2000, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/interviews/2000/10/26/int.lu_xuechang.html>.

melody.” With China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, further marketization seems to be an inevitable path for the Chinese film industry to step onto.

Conclusion: Where are they going?

1. Identity Crisis

With the increasing and inevitable commercialization of film, Chinese filmmakers are experiencing an identity crisis. Currently there is a very sharp conflict among Sixth Generation directors between those who favor art house movies and those who favor commercial filmmaking. Jia Zhangke, director of *Xiao Wu*, seems to be a stubborn proponent of independent arthouse film. Talking about the possibility of not being able to show his films immediately, he says, “

...that's not a big problem. So, you can't show it today. Sooner or later you'll be able to show it. It's a film, after all. Films are long-term investments. Zhang Yimou and the Fifth Generation came up together, as a group. A group has its benefits, its power, but it also erodes individual creativity and the burden of responsibility. Among the younger generation of directors, we say: This is my film. I take full responsibility for it.”¹⁰¹

Jia’s second film *Platform* retains *Xiao Wu*’s thoughtful reflection on change. A dense 198-minute glimpse into the survival frustrations of an itinerant provincial theatrical spanning from 1979 to 1989, *Platform* follows telling changes in the troupe’s repertoire from propaganda operas to break-dancing punk musicians and keeps reminding one of Wu Wenguang’s *Jiang Hu*. Quoting a favorite two-line poem by his friend, well-known poet Xi Chuan, Jia ends an interview by reciting what could be read as the battlecry of a new, independent generation of Chinese film artists:

¹⁰¹ “Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director,” *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I023/feature/feature.htm>>.

The crow solves the crow's problems (*Wuya jiejue wuya de wenti*)
I solve mine (*wo jiejue wo de wenti*)¹⁰²

Though the phenomenal success of *Xiao Wu* has helped Jia to pay for the film many times over and won him funding from Japanese legendary actor-director Takeshi Kitano for *Platform*, and a post-production deal hammered with France as well as rights presold to France,¹⁰³ film distributors are said to have generally stayed away from him and his Sixth Generation compatriots. Few of their films have ever had a theatrical release in the United States. Their movies are often short on traditional chinoiserie and share a formal rigor—showing a preference for long shots and subtle fragmented storytelling—that's a hard sell in the United States as well as in any popular consumer market. It is reported that in an attempt to make his film more audience-friendly, Jia has made a 150-minute "final cut" out of the original 198 minutes of *Platform*. Ironically, sometimes the economic realities of the American art-house movie industry can be more censorious than any oppressive government.¹⁰⁴ The Sixth Generation directors will have to learn how to meld the artistic and commercial sides of filmmaking.

As Director Zhang Yimou has pointed out: "

There are two realities in Chinese filmmaking: First, there is the political reality—the censorship of one's work; second, the commercial reality—the

¹⁰² "Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director," *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I023/feature/feature.htm>>.

¹⁰³ Andy Bailey, "FESTIVALS: Generation X-6; Chinese Indies Take to the Streets," *Indiewire*, Feb. 23, 2001, <http://www.indiewire.com/film/festivals/fes_01China_010223_NY.html>. Also see, "Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director," *Beijing Scene Online*, cover story, Volume 5, Issue 23, August 27 - September 2, 1999, <<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I023/feature/feature.htm>>.

¹⁰⁴ Steve Erickson, "China Gall: Defying the state-run studio system, a new generation of Chinese filmmakers flaunt the truth," *Time Out New York*, No. 283, February 22-March 1, 2001, <<http://www.timeoutny.com/film/283/283.film.newchinese.box.html>>.

requirements of the box office. A film director must conform to these two realities, even if it means compromise. After he's adapted himself to these two restrictions, he may add his own artistic characteristics and retain his individual style. I don't think you'll see any transformation of these realities for the next 30 or 50 years.

Han Shanping, head of Beijing Film Studio, is known as an open-minded support figure behind young filmmakers. Talking about his role as a diplomat or statesman in contemporary Chinese cinema, he prefers to call himself "investor" and says his major work is to help young filmmakers (like Feng Xiaogang,¹⁰⁵ Lu Xuechang) to solve their differences with the government. When asked if a non-censored Chinese cinema is possible in face of increasing "loosening up" in the industry, Han is quoted as saying, "

This is very hard to predict, but I believe the industry will gradually open up, with changes occurring more and more rapidly. Last year, the government announced it would now permit foreign companies to come into China and collaborate with domestic companies to make movies and manufacture filmmaking and recording equipment. Many American, European and Japanese companies have already come to China. Will there be a time with no censorship at all? I'm afraid this will not happen. But the government is steadily allowing for greater variety in content.¹⁰⁶

2. New Mainstream Cinema

In 1999, the two cornerstones of China's film industry: Beijing Film Studio and Shanghai Film Studio, adopted what the press hailed as the "Hope Project" in film

¹⁰⁵ Feng Xiaogang is widely considered as China's most commercially adept contemporary director. *Be There or Be Square*, his 1998 romantic comedy about Beijing transplants in Los Angeles, broke box office records as China's highest-grossing domestic film. Also extremely popular and financially successful are *A Sigh* (2000) and *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001). "Business is first. Second is art," that's what Feng Xiaogang believes in. Justin Lowe, "Celebration of Chinese Cinema," *AsianWeek*, Sept.14-20, 2001, http://www.asianweek.com/2001_09_14/arts_chin_cinema.html.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Short, "Commercialization is the Only Way Forward for Chinese Directors", Web-only interview with Han Sanping, President of the Beijing Film Studio, China's oldest and largest, *Time*, October 26, 2000, http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/interviews/2000/10/26/int.han_sanping.html.

industry. A group of young filmmakers proposed for “New Mainstream Film” as a direct collective response to increasing commercialization of Chinese film industry. Shanghai Film Studio nodded to that suggestion and the Youth Film Studio was soon established. Within a year seven scripts were finished and assigned for shooting.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile Beijing Film Studio launched a similar “Youth Project” and assigned the shooting of seven films to seven young directors, together with a production funding worth 15,000,000 RMB yuan. What were the motives behind such a generous gesture? As explained by Wang Gengnian, vice head of China Film Bureau, they hoped to cultivate a group of new directors who would be able to handle the challenges about to be brought in by foreign film industries in the wake of China’s entry into the World Trade Organization.

For the young directors who benefited from such projects, though the budgets available were still stingy, it was better than nothing. In their new assignment work one could observe an important change in style from their previous films. Instead of grouping under the old banner of marginal realism, they were ready to try (and have proven to be able to do so) commercial cinema. To name but a few: Lu Xuechang’s *In Broad Daylight* (*Guan tian hua ri*), Wang Rui’s *Soaring Panther* (*Chong tian fei bao*), Jin Chen’s *Love in the Internet Age* and *Love Story By Tea*, Guan Hu’s *Hair Tangling Up* (*Toufa luan le*), etc.

Though some of these films seem to have a different commercial position as opposed to the rebellious early works of the Sixth Generation, their subject matter (which is often about city life) and concern for the neglected private bespeak their preoccupation

¹⁰⁷ “Di liu dai daoyan jiannan jieban”, Wang Fanghua, source: *China Youth*, March 15, 2000, <<http://news.sohu.com/20000315/100098.html>>.

with a different facet of contemporary Chinese reality. The tone sounds more upbeat and enterprising, but the attention for the isolated, love-wanting individual is never too far away. As young director Jin Chen (*Love in the Internet Age*) has confessed, “

What I want to show the most is the different kinds of lives that people are leading in China. That's all. In reality, everyone knows that our country has a lot of problems. But personally, I'm not interested in producing anything political. I'm more interested in communicating with people's hearts and spirits. I want to talk about issues of the heart, not issues of society.”¹⁰⁸

Lu Xuechang, director of *The Making of Steel*, talked about his new film *In Broad Daylight* that when he first accepted the script he was at a loss. It was not until that he found out it could be rendered into a film about people, about the common people that he felt better assured. Ah Nian, director of *Call Me*, also feels that his mission in filmmaking is to describe and register the “now and here” (*dangxia*). Similarly, Zhang Yang, director of *Spicy Love Soup* and *Shower*, understands film in terms that “the power of film comes from its concern with the present living state. That’s why all of my films try to show the spiritual state of people of the present age.”

The Sixth Generation finally began to take the popular reality of the masses into account. People love to be given a clear, coherent storyline to follow and the “Three Musketeers from the CTI”¹⁰⁹ scored an admirable artistic as well as commercial success

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Short, “The Current State of Chinese Cinema is Very Dire,” interview with Jin Chen, *Time Asia*, Oct.26 2000, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/interviews/2000/10/26/int_jin_chen.html>.

¹⁰⁹ The Three Musketeers of CTI are Zhang Yang (*Spicy Love Soup*, 1998; *Shower*, 1999), Jin Chen (*Love in the Internet Age*), and Shi Runjiu (*A Beautiful New World*). *Spicy Love Soup* has won the Best Debut Film at the Fifth University Student Film Festival in 1998; *Shower*, a small-budget film of 3,000,000 RMB yuan, has won awards at Toronto International Film Festival (Canada) and Saint Bastian International Film Festival (Spain). *Love in the Internet Age* has won the Hua Biao Award while the upbeat *A Beautiful New World* has earned both critical and popular acclaim as the epitome of “New Urban Cinema.”

because they know and care about that need. The market has the final say and that is why even the two pillars of early uncompromising independent cinema, Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai, have started to move toward the “center” and the commercial.

3. Facing the Challenge Brought by the WTO

In the wake of its entry into the WTO, China will import twenty foreign films a year. Open international competition poses great pressure on the domestic film industry. As the film producer and investor, Han Shanping talks with glee about future cooperative opportunities with Time Warner, HBO and Columbia Pictures and the prospect of making American dollars along with Hollywood.¹¹⁰ But the filmmakers seem to be less optimistic.

While adamant independent filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Wu Wenguang still maintain their idealistic independent status by pursuing projects of their own interest,¹¹¹ most of the other young filmmakers of the Sixth Generation are quick in making adjustments to face the coming greater trial in the wake of China’s entry into the WTO and China’s film industry opening up to foreign competition. In a sense, Chinese filmmakers are thrown into a position more “independent” than before; only the previous rebellious idealistic hue of that word is now replaced by a more materialistic connotation:

¹¹⁰ Stephen Short, “Commercialization is the Only Way Forward for Chinese Directors,” web-only interview with Han Sanping, President of the Beijing Film Studio, *Time*, October 26, 2000, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/interviews/2000/10/26/int.han_sanping.html>.

¹¹¹ As we have learned from previous discussion, Jia still works mainly in the art house vein with foreign funding won by his fame established after *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*. Following his unique sensitivity of *dangxia* (now and here), he is also doing documentary work at the same time, e.g. *Public Space* (2000). Wu continues his documentary work and more broadly and precisely, various “documenting” projects that record contemporary China and publish in media like documentary film, video, audio, note taking and writing. What is more, he is also dedicated to encouraging and helping new, younger documentarists by holding documentary ciné-clubs in Beijing and hosting a column called “DV Studio” in Shanghai-based art magazine *Art World*.

they are on their own to find funding through private investors. This dire reality could be killing to the artistic spirit that already starts shrinking and it hurts the filmmakers to see that change. Lu Xuechang's view is probably representative of that concern:

We have to learn to compete in a commercial market and this is very difficult. But at the same time, I don't advocate just making a purely commercial film. Because if we really tried to go down that road, and try and emulate Hollywood movies, we just could not compete. It would be suicide for the domestic industry. We are too far behind. I saw a movie that attempted to use special effects and computers, and Hollywood-type directing, and it only succeeded in looking like a poor imitation. I think the only way to resolve this problem is to try to make movies with unique Chinese characteristics, to bring our own unique experiences as Chinese into the film. If we can do this successfully, we will have something original and commercial at the same time...I think it is imperative that movies remain an art form with great characters. And it is possible to create a movie that is an artwork and also commercially viable. The biggest challenge we are facing is learning to build a bridge between the commercial and the artistic in Chinese film.¹¹²

A look at the other two pockets of Chinese cinema might be heartening in that line. Taiwanese films, meanwhile, have won international recognition even though the island's film industry has been in decline, with annual output dwindling to 20 films and funding coming from the government or abroad. Yet Taiwan still manages to produce some of the world's best filmmakers, including Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang and Ang Lee. Similar financial concerns abound in Hong Kong, home to headline-grabbing art-house directors like Fruit Chan and Stanley Kwan. The interdependence of mainstream and non-mainstream cinema is perhaps most prominent here: Chan and Kwan came through the ranks of commercial cinema during the mid-and

¹¹² Stephen Short, "Creating Hollywood-Style Movies Will Be Suicide for Us", interview with Lu Xuechang, *Time Asia*, Oct.26 2000, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/interviews/2000/10/26/int.lu_xuechang.html>.

late-1980s, when the industry was enjoying a golden age. Now, however, these directors have to seek financing elsewhere.¹¹³

Aside from efforts on the part of the filmmakers to find a bridge between art and commerce, logistical support in the form of professional investors is also highly necessary. As Wang Xiaoshuai has cried, "what Chinese independent cinema needs is a group of investors who supports our efforts so that we wouldn't waste our time and creative energy in search of money."¹¹⁴ With international funding already starting to pour in, and the state film bureau unlikely to relax its control in near future but possibly and gradually do so in the long run, Chinese cinema will continue to negotiate its way through these various conflicting and colluding forces. How this process will impact on the Sixth Generation filmmaking and Chinese cinema in general will prove fascinating to watch. "Deng Xiaoping used a parable to describe how we should run our economy," Zhang Yuan is quoted as saying in an interview, "...crossing the river by feeling the stones, one at a time...I think China's artists also have to think this way."¹¹⁵

(The End)

¹¹³ Jacob Wong, "The Chinese conundrum," *The Courier UNESCO*, Oct. 2000, <http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_10/uk/doss24.htm#top>. Jacob Wong was the head of Asian cinema programming for the Hong Kong International Film Festival from 1997 to 2000.

¹¹⁴ Bérénice Reynaud, "Feuilles d'un carnet de voyage en Chine", *Cahiers du cinéma*, no.526, July/August 1998, p.37.

¹¹⁵ Erik Eckholm, "Feted Abroad, and No Longer Banned in Beijing," source: *The New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1999, retrieved at *Bebeyond*, ©1999-2002, <<http://www.bebeyond.com/KeepCurrent/Recommended/ZhangYuan.htm>>.

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