

From Vérité to Post-Vérité: A Critical Analysis of Chinese “New Documentaries”

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This thesis titled  
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## ABSTRACT

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This study explores the forms, styles, subjects of Chinese new documentary from a comparative and historical perspective. I argue that since the early 1990s, a mode combining direct cinema and cinema vérité has been widely adopted in Chinese documentary. The other modes including the observational mode, the participatory mode, the reflexive mode also emerged in the 90s. For Chinese documentary, the 90s can be termed as the vérité age. In the end of the 1990s, signified by the documentary *Ying and Bai* (1999), Chinese documentary began to break the fetter of direct cinema and opened up a new road to the performative documentary. It is argued that Chinese documentary began to enter the post-vérité age. In this study, I try to put the formal and style changes of Chinese documentary into the specific social and historical context. The “Xinying mode”, which had been dominating Chinese documentary production since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, is discussed in detail. Besides, the 1980s is important for our discussion of the 90s new documentary, since it is in this period that Chinese new documentary began to take shape.

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## INTRODUCTION

The central subject of this thesis is Chinese new documentary. Since the end of the 1980s, a so-called “new documentary movement” emerged in China. This movement is so overwhelming that some researchers called it a “revolution” (Zhu, 1993, p. 638-644).<sup>1</sup> These new documentaries, according to Lin Xudong (2005), “were a world apart from the conventional documentaries” in terms of “subject matter, narrative style, mode of expression and even production technology.”<sup>2</sup> Chris Berry (2007) claimed that “Since 1989 innovative documentary has been one of the hallmark of Chinese film and video” (p. 115).

Almost at the same time of Chinese new documentary movement, the western world also witnessed the significant changes in documentary filmmaking. Researchers such as Paul Arthur (1993), Linda Williams (1993), and Stella Bruzzi (2000, 2006) called these works the 90s new documentaries.<sup>3</sup> In the article *Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary*, Linda Williams put them into the context of the postmodern condition, and argued that, as shown by the title, “truth is ‘not guaranteed’ and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror with a memory” (p. 14). Moreover, she advised:

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1 Zhu is a well-known documentary scholar in China. She has been teaching in the Communication University of China for more than 30 years.

2 Lin is the former professor of the Communication University of China. He is active both in the realm of documentary academic research and documentary production. He served as Juror for the New Asian Currents program at Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival '99.

3 Paul Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)”, in Michael Renov (ed.) *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 108-34; Linda Williams, “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary,” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 3. (Spring, 1993), pp. 9-21; Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition), New York: Routledge, 2006.

Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths. (p. 14)

It is quite meaningful to consider that it is just the “idealistic faith in documentary truth,” which was to an extent declined by the Western new documentary, which constituted the initial impetus for Chinese new documentary. As Lü Xinyu (2003) put it, “it is from the pursuit of ‘truth’ that contemporary Chinese TV documentary movement began its life” (p. 295).<sup>4</sup> In this sense, it is not rootless to argue that “the 90s Chinese new documentary movement is quite similar to the 60s cinema vérité movement of the west” (Shan, 2005, p. 424),<sup>5</sup> and logically, that the 90s Chinese new documentary lagged behind the western contemporaries for about 30 years. In the first part of this thesis, I will mainly discuss the different documentary modes emerged during and after this movement in the 90s.

If one would emphasize the temporal gap between Chinese cinema vérité and that of the west, maybe it is more important to point out how, since the end of the 90s and the beginning of the new century, Chinese documentarians began to break the limitation of the ethos of transparency and unbiased observation, and make the parallel efforts in the exploration of the documentary potential in terms of the aesthetics and epistemology.<sup>6</sup> In theorizing the latest development of the new documentary in the west, Stella Bruzzi

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<sup>4</sup> Lü teaches at Fudan University. It is her who first coined the term “new documentary movement”.

<sup>5</sup> Shan is one of the most important documentary researchers in China.

<sup>6</sup> In the west, the role of cinéma vérité has long been regarded as the crucial historical factor in limiting documentary’s potential and frame of reference. Errol Morris declared: “I believe the cinéma vérité set back documentary filmmaking twenty or thirty years.” In China, even today there are still quite many theorists and filmmakers refute any aesthetical exploration which differs from that of direct cinema/cinéma vérité.

(2006) concluded that “documentary has in various ways returned to its more relaxed roots with dramatization, performance and other forms of fictionalization and narrativisation becoming once more predominant” (p. 8). Similarly, in a seminar held in the Communication University of China (CUC) in 2002, Gao Feng, an influential documentary filmmaker and producer of Chinese Central Television (CCTV), pointed out some new trends in Chinese documentary production, such as the so called *anti-vérité* style, reenactment, and restaging.<sup>7</sup> On the academic side, Liu Jie, a CUC professor, published her new book *Fictionalization of Documentary* in 2007. Although Liu’s book was still far from well developed, possibly due to her limited academic resources, it did fully exhibit the latest development of Chinese new documentary. In short, Chinese documentary, quite similar to the contemporary western documentary, has already entered the *post-vérité age*.<sup>8</sup> In the third part, I will make a detailed analysis on this issue.

The study of Chinese new documentary in the west, generally speaking, began after Lü Xinyu remarkably expounded her ideas of the *new documentary movement* in 2003. The word movement (*yun dong*), a quite sensitive word in China and normally used in the context of politics, tends to lead the interpretation of the new documentary to the direction of ideological and political analysis both in Lü’s own discussions and among most of the western studies. Dai Jinhua (2000), a famous film scholar of the Beijing

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<sup>7</sup>Available at <http://www.filmsea.com.cn/newsreel/commentator/200301160015.htm>. Accessed on Sept. 8, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> The documentaries of Zhang Yiqing, a famous documentary filmmaker of the Hubei TV Station, are typical examples to illuminate this point. As Gao Feng claimed on the seminar held in the CUC in 2002, Zhang’s style is a of the “anti- *vérité*” type. <http://www.filmsea.com.cn/newsreel/commentator/> (accessed 8 March 2009).

University, pointed out that the western acceptance of the Sixth Generation was premised upon such a misinterpretation. She argued that

Just as Zhang Yimou and his films provide and enrich the original Orientalism image of the western people, the choice of the Sixth Generation in the west as ‘others’ once again serves to complement the western free intellectuals’ preexisted expectation of the 90s Chinese cultural sight. Once again, it is deemed as an image to perfect the western free intellectuals’ description of Chinese democracy, advancement, resistance, civil society, and marginal people.” (p. 407)<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Zhang Yingjin (2002) pointed out: “Indeed, political issues have informed much of Western interest in Chinese Cinema” (p. 27). Dai and Zhang’s point was verified again in the field of Chinese new documentary research. As a result, many, if not most, of these studies put emphases on the ideological and political implications and looked down on the examination of the form, style as well as other aesthetic qualities.

Another problem of the previous researchers, in my opinion, lies in their choice of the subject. They attached importance mainly to the “independent” or “underground” documentary and expelled the mainstream documentaries made in the official institutions. More often than not, they were inclined to exaggerate the importance of the independent documentary and even used the independent documentary as examples to explain Chinese new documentary as a whole, as shown in Zhang Yingjin’s *Styles, subjects, and special points of view: a study of contemporary Chinese independent documentary* (2004) and Chris Berry’s *Getting Real : Chinese Documentary, Chinese*

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<sup>9</sup> In Dai’s writings, the new documentary was grouped into the so-called Sixth Generation.



*Postsocialism* (2007).<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, it is their absolute dichotomy between the “independent documentary” and “official” documentary that led them to the dubious or even mistaken stances. Herein I appreciate Matthew D. Johnson’s argument (2006) that “by the late 1990s, ‘new documentary cinema’ could not conceivably be understood apart from the institutions that supported the production and exhibition of works documenting ‘unofficial’ China” (p. 63). This is the only voice I heard in the western writings that warned their ignorance of the role of the state institutions and the mainstream documentary, whereas his argument is still far from well substantiated. Indeed, without enough discussion of the mainstream documentary or the “official” documentary, any description of Chinese new documentary would be incomplete and misleading. In this sense, my research can be deemed as an effort to remedy the previous researches in terms of the changes of the research subjects from the *independent documentary* to the *new documentary*, and the reversion of the theoretical emphasis from the ideological and political analysis to the aesthetic and epistemological exploration.

As to the approach of my research, the most important should be the comparative approach and historical perspective. In the discussion of Chinese new documentary, Zhang Tongdao (2000), a professor of the Beijing Normal University, claimed that

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10 The title of Zhang Yingjin’s *Styles, subjects, and special points of view: a study of contemporary Chinese independent documentary* (2004) shows that the subject of this article is “Chinese independent documentary.” But in the following text we can find that the central goal of this article is in fact to discuss the style of Chinese documentary, rather than that of Chinese independent documentary. In the introduction part, Zhang even clearly maintained: “In this study ..... I focus less on claims to the ‘inherent’ truth content of particular subjects than on the preferred styles in Chinese documentary and the ideological implications of preferring certain styles to others.(my italics)”<sup>10</sup> In the article *Getting Real : Chinese Documentary*, *Chinese Postsocialism* (2007), Berry tried to discuss Chinese documentary as a whole, but most of the documentaries he chose are the independent documentary. In fact, in his writing, the terms “Chinese documentary” is often interchanged with “Chinese independent documentary.” Obviously, Zhang and Berry, together with many others, believed that the independent documentary can be deemed as the representative of the new documentary.

Within the past 10 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese documentary made up the 80 years course of the western documentary. From Robert Flaherty's romantic anthropology, Dziga Vertov's cinema-eye, John Grierson's propaganda mode, Joris Ivens' left documentary idea, Jean Rouch's cinema vérité to Fred Wiseman's direct cinema, Chinese documentary finished all the film homework by video. (p. 76)

Zhang's words imply the possibility of the comparative studies between Chinese documentary and the western documentary. Specifically, Bill Nichols' documentary typology furnishes the general framework for this research. Besides, many other western documentary scholars' arguments, including Michael Renov, Stella Bruzzi, Linda Williams, Carl Plantinga, and so on, are adopted as important academic resources in the following discussion.

Another point I should make is that, although this thesis mainly focuses on the modes and styles of contemporary Chinese documentary, I try to put the analyses into the historical context. In a sense, I try to make an integration of documentary theory and Chinese documentary history in this thesis. Especially in the second part of this thesis, to delineate the trajectory of the development of the new documentary is the main goal.

## PART 1: THE MODES OF CHINESE NEW DOCUMENTARY

### 1. Framework: Bill Nichols' Typology

Documentary is an open field. From Joris Ivens' *Bridge* (1928), John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929), Robert Drew's *Primary* (1960), Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) to the 2008 Israeli animation *Waltz with Bashir*, all of them can be gathered under the rubric of documentary. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a set of formal criteria or any intrinsic property that all documentary works share. This is why Carl Plantinga (1997) claims that documentary, as an open concept, has no essence, "but rather a braid of family resemblances" (p. 14). The concept of "family resemblance" in Plantinga's argument is borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein. This idea is also echoed by British scholar Michael Chanan in his book *The Politics of Documentary* (2007). Chanan writes:

Let us see documentary as a family, or better, an extended family or maybe network of families, even a whole tribe.... The main *branches* of this genealogy would represent particular traditions or even subspecies, each with its own classic examples, which serve as models, paradigms, exemplary instances. (p. 34-35, my italics)

To identify and confirm these main branches is no more than to organize documentary works into several analytic categories. Here we come to documentary typology.

Categorization is fundamental for one to make sense of experience. As George Lakoff (1987) put it, "there is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action, and speech" (p. 5). When we see something as a kind of thing, for instance, a fish,

we are categorizing. Categorization is also essential to reasoning, since we reason not just about individual things or people but about categories of things and people. To reject categorization is to reject communication.

In the field of documentary research, Paul Rotha (1936), Erik Barnouw (1974), Michael Renov (1993), and Bill Nichols (1983, 1991, 1994, 2001) respectively presented their own principles and methods to categorize multifarious documentary films. Among these different typologies of documentary film, Bill Nichols's theory has been more widely discussed and accepted. Some critics claim that Nichols's typology is "the most influential and widely used" (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 3). According to Nichols (1991), the modes of documentary representation are basic ways of organizing documentary texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions. They are derived from "common ingredients," such as textual configurations, shared ideologies, common aesthetic assumptions, etc. They effectively reveal the dominant organizational patterns in certain documentary. From Nichols's seminal 1983 essay *The Voice of Documentary* to his latest book *Introduction to Documentary* in 2001, Nichols's documentary typology experienced some notable adjustments and amendments. In *The Voice of Documentary* and *Representing Reality* (1991), Nichols divides documentaries into four modes: the expository mode, the observational mode, the interactive mode, and the reflexive mode. In *Blurred Boundaries* (1994), he adds a new mode to his typology – the performative mode. In his later work *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols further develops his typology and adds another new mode: the poetic mode, and changes the term "interactive mode" to the "participatory mode."

Below is a general introduction to the six modes of documentary representation. The poetic mode represents reality in terms of “a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations” (Nichols, 2001, p. 102). It stresses the mood and tone, not the persuasion, and the rhetorical elements remain underdeveloped. The expository mode is related to the Griersonian tradition. The voice-over narration, which is often called “voice of God,” addresses the spectator directly and works toward the didactic ends. The observational mode developed from the availability of more mobile, synchronous recording equipment. It “refrains from didactic voice-over narration, prefers filming ordinary people, seeks transparency with synchronous dialogue under location conditions, and entrusts the spectators to reach conclusions on their own” (Zhang, 2004, p. 123). In the participatory or interactive mode, the filmmaker actively interacts with other social actors. This mode emphasizes “the truth of an encounter rather than the absolute or untampered truth” (Nichols, 2001, p. 118). Interview styles and interventionist tactics are the evident signs of this mode. The reflexive mode focuses on the processes of the negotiation between the filmmaker and the spectator and it experiments with more complex forms. Nichols (2001) claims: “Rather than following the filmmaker in her engagement with other social actors, we now attend to the filmmaker’s engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well” (p. 125). The performative mode stresses “the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker him- or herself” (Nichols, 2001, p. 131). It engages the spectator less with rhetoric commands or imperatives than with a sense of its own vivid responsiveness.

Two essential points should be specifically mentioned on Nichols's documentary mode theory. One is that different modes are not necessarily incompatible, and more often than not, it may feature a mixing and modification of mode (Nichols, 1991). A given mode furnishes a general structure to the overall film, but it does not dictate or determine every aspect of the organization of the film. As Nichols (2001) puts it, "considerable latitude remains possible" (p. 100). The other point is that although different modes emerge chronologically, and latter modes do arise in part through a growing sense of dissatisfaction among filmmakers with former mode, it does not mean that this is an evolving process and the latter mode is necessarily superior to the former mode. In *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols claims: "A new mode is not so much better as it is different, even though the idea of 'improvement' is frequently touted, especially among champions and practitioners of a new mode" (p. 101). He also mentions:

new modes signal less a better way to represent the historical world than a new dominant to organize a film, a new ideology to explain our relation to reality, and a new set of issues and desires to preoccupy an audience.

(Nichols, 2001, p. 102)

But this point – whether conscious or not – is often neglected by some critics. Maybe the sharpest critical remarks on Nichols' theory come from British scholar Stella Bruzzi. In her two editions of *New documentary*, Bruzzi (2006) accuses Nichols's documentary typology of providing "a family tree that seeks to explain the evolution of documentary along linear, progressive lines" (p. 3). It is "a Darwinian model of

documentary history” (p. 3). She claims that the table, which summarizes the general sketch of the modes in Nichols’s *Blurred Boundaries*, is

breathtakingly simplistic, and exemplifies the fundamental problem with the family tree which is that it impose a false chronology onto what is essentially a theoretical paradigm, so the Expository documentary is attribute to 1930s, the Observational documentary to the 1960s, and so on through to the Performative documentary, attributed to the 1980s-90s. (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 3)

Bruzzi’s argument is echoed by Michael Chanan (2007), who argues that Nichols’ mistake roots in his neglect of documentary history (p. 24). In China, there is an even more obvious misreading of Nichols’ theory. In a book published in 2008, based on Nichols’ early article *The Voice of Documentary*, Professor Ren Yuan (2008) claimed that what Nichols presented was a historical description. Rather than four modes without evolving meaning, Ren argued they are four phrases in documentary developing history (p. 48).

## 2. Vérité: A Combination of Direct Cinema and Cinema vérité

As a typical observational documentary, direct cinema emerged in the early 1960s in the US and Canada. In a sense, it is a result of the technical breakthrough such as a new generation of 16mm cameras light enough to rest on the cameraman’s shoulder, fitted with lenses and film stock which allowed filming in available light, and capable of shooting in synchronization with portable tape records. Rather than manipulating reality to make a polemic argument through narration or editing, the basic strategy of direct

cinema is to bring the camera to the scene and observe the ongoing event as accurately as possible with minimum interference and interpretation of the filmmaker. Robert Drew (1961) describes his principles in this way: “I’m determined to be there when the news happens. I am determined to be as unobtrusive as possible. And I’m determined not to distort the situation” (p. 82). Ideally, in direct cinema all the sounds and images should be recorded at the moment of observational filming. Honoring this spirit of observation, in post-production the filmmaker normally adopts no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects. The goal of direct cinema, as it were, is to address contemporary experience and convey the sense of “unmediated and unfettered access to the world” (Nichols, 1991, p. 43). Direct cinema filmmakers and critics often refer to it that direct cinema is “window on the world”, and direct cinema filmmaker is “a fly on the wall”. The implicit philosophical basis for direct cinema, according to Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, is “a version of empiricism” (Allen & Gomery, 1985, p. 233). It presumes the empiricist notion that the world and its truths exist. If observed closely enough by an unbiased observer, reality will reveal itself to us.

At the same time of the emergence of direct cinema in the United States, cinema vérité, the participatory documentary in Nichols’ theory, was developed by French filmmaker Jean Rouch, sociologist Edgar Morin, and others. Rather than unobtrusive observation, Rouch and other cinema vérité filmmakers adopted portable camera and recording equipment as tools of provocation and confrontation. Its focus is the encounter of filmmaker and social actor. Cinema vérité filmmakers believe that if there is a truth here it is the truth of a form of interaction that would not exist were it not for the camera.



Obviously it is contrary to the premise of direct cinema that what we see is what we would have seen had we been there in lieu of the camera. In this sense, cinema vérité, as Henry Breitrose (1986) noted, wanted to be a “fly in the soap...visible for all to notice” (p. 47), which draws almost all the attention of the viewer.

The discrepancy between these two rival practices and philosophies, which is described as a clash between “the pragmatic empiricism of the North Americans” and “the dialectical subtlety of the French” is evident. Eric Barnouw (1974) summarizes:

The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of cinema vérité tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch cinema vérité artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the cinema vérité artist espoused that of provocateur. (p. 254)

This opposition is not limited only to the theoretical realm. The direct cinema filmmakers and the cinema vérité filmmakers are far from compatible with each other. Rouch accused that direct cinema filmmaker accepted “too readily and uncritically” everything he saw (Marcorelle, 1963, p. 115). The direct cinema group claimed that *Chronicle of a Summer*, the most important representative of cinema vérité, was less powerful than their texts because it “seemed to have been manipulated arbitrarily both in shooting and editing” (Freyer, 1971, p. 438). Richard Leacock criticized that the only focus of *Chronicle* is the filming.

In China this kind of conflict has never happened. In fact, documentarians and critics have seldom made a distinction between direct cinema and cinema vérité. Such techniques as synchronous sound, long take, unobtrusive observation, interview, and minimized voiceover narration are all combined into a specific term “documentary method/*jishi shoufa*.” In Chinese documentary practice and theory exploration, the different strategies and philosophies of direct cinema and cinema vérité have always well combined together. Neither direct cinema nor cinema vérité, Chinese new documentary seems more like the style which Brian Winston terms as “vérité”. According to Winston (2008), vérité is “a bastard form that reduces the rigor of direct cinema practice to an easy amalgam of hand held available-light sync shooting and older elements” (p. 210). He argues that vérité films often contain direct-cinema-style material, but also use commentary, interviews, graphics, reconstruction and the rest of the original realist documentary repertoire. As mentioned above, this kind of combination of different representation modes is not uncommon in documentary practice. Nichols (2001) points out:

A film identified with a given mode need not be so entirely. ....The characteristics of a given mode function as a *dominant* in a given film: they give structure to the overall film, but they do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organization. Considerable latitude remains possible. (p. 100)

In fact an obtrusive characteristic of the 90s new documentary in the west, as Paul Arthur (1993) puts it, is “a perhaps unprecedented degree of hybridization” (p. 127), in which different modes and styles of representation are included.

### 3. Synchronous Sound and *jishi shoufa*

The first new documentary that established a model for its followers is the widely acknowledged documentary *Odyssey of the Great Wall /Wang changcheng* (1991,) made by China Central Television (CCTV) and the Japanese Tokyo Broadcasting System, Inc (TBS). This documentary was made between the winter of 1989 and November 1991. The total length is 624 minutes. It covers the local history, culture, and other related issues about the Great Wall. Many critics believe that *Odyssey* is the first one which fully adopted the documentary method in Chinese documentary practice. It greatly influenced the developing direction throughout the 90s in that *jishi shoufa* it adopted soon dominated Chinese documentary filmmaking. In fact, there are still other documentary practices laid the foundation for the innovation of *Odyssey*. According to Shi Jian's writing, it is from the end of 1980s, especially in 1988, some filmmakers began to describe real life with *documentary language/Jishi yuyan*, including Shi Jian, Wu Wenguang, Chen Zhen, Chen Jie, Wang Zijun, and others. Some of them form a nongovernmental film group named Structure/Wave/Youth/Cinema, which takes one letter each from their names in pinyin Romanization - Shi Jian, Wang Zijun, Kuang Yang, and Chen Jie. They began the so-called "new documentary movement." They are the first ones to begin to experiment with documentary method. In this period, the important works includes Shi Jian and Chen Jue's *Tian'anmen* (1991), Wang Zijun's *Scattered Recording of the Capital City/Jingcheng sanji* (1991), Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers/Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiang zhe* (1991) and some others. Before the making of *Odyssey*, aesthetic experiments were

conducted by these documentarians. Wang Zijun recollected that the directors of *Odyssey* watched the rough cut of *Tian'anmen* before he made *Odyssey*. Although some central ideas of the new documentary emerged in the early works, none of them gained the same influence as that of *Odyssey*. Some critics argue that the broadcasting of *Odyssey* is more important than its aesthetic innovation, since the broadcasting means that the documentary method was formally accepted by the highest official media institutions (Li, Liu, Wang, 2006, p. 401).

Before the 90s, most of Chinese documentary works were based on prefabricated scripts. As Sun Yushen (2003) maintains,

The TV of the 80s can be called 'Literature TV' or 'Writer TV.' Many writers began to participate in the writing of TV *special theme program/zhuantipian*. The narration of every work is almost beautiful literature, which can be published as a book without any modification and become a best seller. (p. 5)

*Odyssey* broke this pattern. All the images and sounds in this documentary were collected on the location. A director Yi Ping (1993) said: "we borrow words from English Grammar to generalize this new realist style: present progressive" (p. 559). The directors abandoned the scripts written by several famous writers. Instead, they began to write on the scene with the camera. Two anchors lead the camera deep into the scenes besides the Great Wall, observed the local people's lives, and communicated with them before the camera. Technically, this is well based on the realization of the synchronous sound

recording. The general director Liu Xiaoli launched the principles for the shooting. He declares:

“All the clips should have sync-sounds and sound effects from location. The intent and theme should be expressed by the objects their own. No dubbing in postproduction is permitted. The sound engineers should cooperate with the cameramen. They are a unity.” (Liu, 1993, p. 532)

Directional microphones, remote microphones, and even a three-route sound mixing desk were adopted during their shooting. The emphasis of sound exalted the status of sound director. As Leacock maintained several decades ago, “there will be no such thing as a cameraman; there’ll be filmmakers. There’ll be no such thing as editors, there’ll be filmmakers. It’ll become an integrated process” (Cameron, Shivas, 1963, p. 17). This practice pattern was established in *Odyssey*, and from then on the use of synchronous sound became an inevitable element of documentary representation in China. When Drew’s *Primary* was made, some critics claimed: “There is a feeling in the air that cinema is only just beginning.” This same is true in China. As Shi Jian claimed, this new documentary method in fact overwhelmed the Chinese TV screen throughout the 90s (Shi, 2008, p. 186). On the academic side, researchers began to theorize the nature of TV image. The synchronous sound rewrote the understanding of TV language in China. Professor Zhu Yunjun (1993) called what *Odyssey* brought was “a revolution on the screen” (p. 638). She argued:

We must have a new understanding to ‘TV image’. TV image is different from cinematic image. Its most important characteristic is that it comprises

the motion and sound of the living object in certain temporal space. Without the synchronous sound of the objects and the environment, it is not real TV image. (Zhu, 1993, p. 639)

When direct cinema emerged in the US, the filmmaker claimed that in their cinema “the story tells itself through pictures, not through word logic, lecture logic, written logic or interviews.” Obviously, just as Zhu, they also deemed synchronous sound as an essential part of the picture.

#### 4. Encounter of Filmmaker and Subject: The Participatory Documentary

In the beginning of the book *Introduction to Documentary*, Bill Nichols makes an impressive argument: “Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it” (2001, p. 1). Herein Nichols looks at documentary discourse on a higher level. Not only the narrated story itself, but the unseen filmmaking process behind the camera is also taken into consideration. In a conversation between Fredric Jameson and Michael Chanan, Jameson makes a similar point. He argues:

Supposing that the documentaries we’re talking about – they ostensibly are exploring pieces of reality and de-familiarising them and so on – but supposing there’s a second narrative level in which what we’re not seeing but what is present all the time and what the film is really about, is the drama of the documentary film-maker – that is, an actor who has a certain mission. So the whole film can be seen as a kind of dramatic act in this larger, unfilmed story, which is this film-maker doing something to these

clichés or conventions. ...So we have a second level of narrative, in which the documentary film is an object in that narrative rather than being an aesthetic object in its own right. (Homer & Kellner, 2004, p. 133.)

The “second level of narrative” – filmmakers’ communication with the subjects and filming process - was combined into the film text as early as Dziga Vertov’s classic *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). In Vertov’s writing, the level of narrative was discussed in the name “a small secondary production theme – the film’s passage from camera through laboratory and editing room to screen” (1984, p. 289). In the 1960s Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin most significantly developed Vertov’s ideas and practice, which epitomizes by *Chronicle of a Summer*, the paradigm of *cinéma vérité* as well as the reflexive documentary. In Bill Nichols’ documentary typology, *cinéma vérité* is ascribed to the participatory or interactive mode. He concludes that

We [viewers] expect that what we learn will hinge on the nature and quality of the encounter between filmmaker and subject rather than on generalizations supported by image illuminating a given perspective. We may see as well as hear the filmmaker act and respond on the spot, in the same historical arena as the film’s subjects. (Nichols, 2001, p. 116)

In Chinese documentary history, *Odyssey* is the first one which fully takes the filmmaking process into the final text. Two anchors, Jiao Jiancheng, a dramatic actor, and Huang Zongying, who acted in film as early as 1940s, guide the cameras deep into the Great Wall. Jiao has been living in the northwest of China and has a quite similar appearance and accent to the local people beside his familiarity with the Great Wall. He

actively communicates with the subjects and impels the development of the events before the camera. By his dialogue and action, the subjects are evoked to join in the events and exhibit their own lives and ideas. The general director Liu Xiaoli argues:

The anchors in this documentary neither speak sitting in the studio nor talk standing on the scene with microphone in hands. They are required to be a role of the program. This role is both the audience's eye, and the lens of the camera. At the same time, they can actively communicate with the subjects, make the subject and object combined together, and accomplish the ideas and atmosphere the director wants. (1993, p. 533)

Some critics believe that the most important breakthrough of *Odyssey* in term of the TV expression is the impressive performance of the anchors. Zhu Yujun argues: “The anchor is like a drumstick shaking life. It endows the image and sound with light and rhythm.” (p. 642).

Besides the direct encounter between filmmaker and subject, there are also many interviews adopted in *Odyssey*. According to Nichols' theory, the participatory documentary can be further divided into two components. One represents filmmakers' “direct encounter with their surrounding world,” the other represents “broad social issues and historical perspectives through interviews and compilation footage” (Nichols, 2001, p. 123). In his earlier article *The Voice of Documentary*, Nichols did not make this distinction yet. He described this mode as the *string-of-interviews films*, *interview-oriented film*, and *interview-based film*. This influential article was translated into Chinese in the early 1990s by Ren Yuan and Zhang Yuping. It is also one of the earliest



translated articles on documentary in China. Ren (1991) named this mode - the interactive mode and participatory mode in Nichols' later writings - as "interview and dialogue mode"/*Fangwen tanhua shi* (p. 86). This name was written into an important book *Chinese Applied TV Aesthetics* (1993). In others articles, Ren went so far that he defined documentary as an art of interview (1991, p. 49). Indeed, interview, as part of the "documentary method", is the most popular component in the new documentary of the 1990s.

Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers/Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiang zhe* is acclaimed as the first independent documentary. In this documentary, Wu follows five provincial artists struggling to establish their artistic careers in Beijing and catches the impressive changes in their lives over three years. The basic editing strategy is to fully abandon voice-over narration and by the juxtaposition of a series of interviews and the observational footage to develop the narrative and deepen the theme. Contrary to the foregrounding of the anchor's performance in *Odyssey*, both the sound and image of the filmmaker are carefully avoided in *Bumming*. Bill Nichols argues each mode of documentary representation has the "ideological qualities" of its own. In Wu's *Bumming*, the interviews provide a fresh look at the social reality. In fact, considering the age long propaganda tradition, in the context of China interview of ordinary people has even more democracy meanings. In a different context, when the ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougal employed interview to give the tribal people their voice, it was deemed as a great breakthrough and, as it were, perceived as "combating, at least in part, the alienating exoticising of tribal life that used to be the

norm” (Winston, 2008, p. 191). The reinstitution of direct address through the interview successfully avoided some of the central problems of voice-over narration, namely “authoritative omniscience or didactic reductionism” (Nichols, 1983, p. 265). More precisely, “Interviews diffuse authority.” (p. 265) In the Chinese New Documentary Movement Conference held in 1991, Zhou Chuanji, professor at the Beijing Film Academy, argued that for a long time, the right of the ordinary people to speak on the screen had been trampled, and it was time to change it (Li, Liu, Wang, 2006, p. 402). From this perspective, it seems not so difficult to understand why Chinese documentarians are so zealous about interview.

### 5. Pure Direct Cinema

A new mode of documentary representation arises in part through a growing sense of dissatisfaction among filmmakers with previous mode (Nichols, 2001, p. 100). Soon after 1993 when more and more TV documentary columns were established, the combination of observational sequence and interview became a cliché. The first pure direct cinema, or the observational documentary in Nichols’ typology, was made under this background.

In 1993, Duan Jinchuan, a leading figure in the development of the new documentary, attended the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival, which, in his words, exerted the greatest influence on him (Lü, 2003, p. 71). At this festival, he got the chance to watch some international documentary films, including Fredric Wiseman’s works. As well known, besides the observational style, Wiseman’s films features the stable subject of public institution. Alan Rosenthal (1971) maintains that his works focus on “a series of

activities that take place in a limited geographical area with a more or less consistent group of people being involved” (p. 69). After watching Wiseman’s *Central Park*, Duan and his friend Zhang Yuan, a representative of the Sixth Generation, tried this approach in *The Square/Guangchang* (1994). This documentary observes the random activities in *Tiananmen Square*, one of the most symbolic public sites in China. There is no voice-over narration, interview, narrative, plot, or central role in this documentary. Both the style and the theme of *The Square* are all highly Wisemanian. When Duan and Zhan showed this film to some artists in Beijing, it was widely misunderstood. Duan concludes that this does not mean the documentary approach is flawed. It is only because Chinese audiences are not used to this kind of viewing experience (Li, Liu, Wang, 2006, p. 213). Three years after *The Square*, Duan made a more influential documentary *Number 16 Barkhor South Street* (1997), which brought him several international prizes. This documentary concentrates on a public place - the office of a Lhasa neighborhood committee. Duan captures the apparently unaware Tibetan people in their equally unaware daily lives. Without much trace of the filmmaker on the screen, the camera on the scene conveys a sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the reality. Because of the similarity of Duan’s works and Wiseman’s, some critics deem Duan as Wiseman’s disciple (Lü, 2003, p. 325). Indeed, Duan self-consciously studies Wiseman’s films as well as direct cinema theory. He maintains: “In the beginning our production is based on ardor, intuition and self-confidence. It’s later that we find some practical supportive theories. No doubt direct cinema is a feasible choice.” (Mei, Zhu, 2004, p. 130).

If on the academic side Andre Bazin is the most critical scholar for Chinese documentary filmmakers and researchers, Wiseman is definitely the most influential western filmmaker in China. As Lü Xinyu puts it,

I believe that for Chinese documentary, Wiseman is a significant figure.

This is not necessarily because of his compelling attendance of two international documentary conferences held in China this year [1997]. It is also because that even before he came to China, his documentary ideas have bloomed on the soil of China. (2003, p. 325)

Indeed, the observational mode of representation as represented by Wiseman's work is especially appealing to Chinese documentarians, who are struggling to resist the didactic tradition of the "voice of the Party." But this does not necessarily mean that Wiseman's film ideas are correctly understood in China. On the contrary, Wiseman's works are discussed imprecisely among Chinese documentarians as well as researchers. Like the western audiences of direct cinema in the 1960s, the impression of reality and the illusion of objectivity are so powerful that, more often than not, they miss the inevitable construction and mediation of the filmmaker. Shi Jian recalls that in the early 90s, they believed documentary means "to truthfully and objectively record events and things" (Lü, 2003, p. 150). Ren Yuan (1992) argues that the nature of documentary is no more than "the redemption of the objective physical world" (p. 56). Another researcher Zhu Jinghe (1994) claims that "Truthfulness is the base and life of TV and film realist arts. Further, this truthfulness is a concept from journalism, rather than that of fictional and performance arts" (p. 17). Yang Tiancun (1992) argues that documentarians, like

Wiseman, should only passively use the recording function of camera, rather than exhibit its expressive abilities. Although it seems quite pity, “it is well worth to realize its highest goal- truthfulness” (p. 50). In the early 60s, Henry Breitrose (1964) commented on direct cinema that: “One often wonders whether the films are made by men using machines ... or by machines alone” (p. 35). The disappearance of the filmmaker is regarded as the representation of the highest level of documentary production. Wiseman presents them a perfect paradigm. In a sense, almost all of the Chinese documentarians in the early 90s are no less than the adherents of Wiseman.

However, ironically Wiseman has no such belief in so called objectivity in documentary. Wiseman claims that his films are “totally subjective. The objective-subjective argument is from my point of view, at least in film terms, a lot of nonsense.” (Rosenthal, 1970, p. 70). Elsewhere he claims that the objectivity claim is “a lot of bullshit” (Levin, 1971, p. 321). When Wiseman expressed this idea at the documentary conference in China, Chinese documentary filmmakers and researchers were quite confused. Lü Xinyu (2003) writes:

Wiseman indeed used the word *subjective* to describe himself. This is quite different from our common understanding of *subjective* and documentary.

When he expressed this idea at the conference held in Shanghai, it aroused many discussions among his Chinese colleagues. (p. 326)

Lü, like many others, is rather reluctant to acknowledge status of the filmmaker’s subjectivity in documentary practice as Wiseman does. Her book contains her own

explanation for Wiseman's idea of subjectivity in order to reconcile with her original understanding of Wiseman as well as the nature of documentary in general.

A comparison of documentaries may exhibit this discrepancy. In *Number 16 Barkhor South Street* there is a sequence about an official of the neighborhood committee interrogating a woman thief. Unlike any other part of this documentary, this sequence is shot by two cameras. Duan is quite uneasy about it. In order to keep the objective impression, he tries to edit this sequence in a way to make it looks like being shot by a single camera. This case reveals how Duan is alert to keep his documentary as an objective record of the reality, rather than a polished narrative. This choice echoes David MacDougall in his ethnological documentary film *To Live with Herds* made in 1972. Although he shot by two cameras, MacDougall did not cut in footage from both positions. He maintains: "By intercutting shots from two or more camera positions we found we were taking away from that immediacy by invoking a style of fictional film making...." (MacDougall, 1982, p. 8).

Wiseman obviously does not restrict himself in this way. He claims: "I don't manipulate the events, but the editing is highly manipulative and the shooting is highly manipulative..." (Aftab, Weltz). In Wiseman's documentaries, parallel editing is quite common, although he always use only one camera shooting. A case in point is the sequence in *Law and Order*, which shows a policeman helping an old black woman to find her purse. The woman sits in the police car. The police officer fills out a form, then goes out to search for the purse. The woman keeps sitting in the car. The camera keeps facing the old woman even after the policeman is gone. The next shot is of the policeman

searching for the lost purse in the rain. Then Wiseman cuts back to the woman. She sits in the car quietly and waits for the policeman. Once again, the film cuts back to the policeman, who is still searching. Suddenly, it cuts to a close-up of a purse. Then the camera zooms out and the policeman enters the frame and picks up the purse. In the final shot, we cut back to the woman in the car, seeing the door opened by the policeman, who he gives the purse to the old woman. This kind of parallel editing has hardly been used in Chinese documentary, since it is deemed as a violation of the chronological order and shows too much artificial manipulation by the filmmaker. Wiseman goes even further. There is a kind of parallel editing in Wiseman's films which Nichols (1991) calls "strange juxtapositions" (p. 41). Nichols mentioned that when Wiseman cross-cut in *Titicut Follies* between forced feeding of a patient and the later preparation of the same patient for burial. This juxtaposition has even more thematic meanings.

For the Chinese new documentary documentarians in the 90s, the most famous slogan of shooting is "follow, follow, and follow," which means that the camera should always passively follow the subject and never go ahead of it. Wiseman's shooting is different and much more flexible. A case in point is the close-up of the purse in the sequence mentioned above. This shot is anything but an objective record of the process how the policeman finds the purse. In fact, it provides a new point of view, which does not belong to any social actor, but belongs to the camera or Wiseman himself. In this sequence, the camera no longer just follows the social actor's movement. It is no longer a passive recorder of the event in front of the camera. The camera becomes an independent,

active participant in the narrative. The camera returns to the original position of an objective observer and recorder only when the policeman enters the frame.

In another sequence of *Law and Order*, a policeman comes upon an elderly black man lying unconsciously on the grass. Together with another policeman, he lifts the man into a police wagon. The first shot of this sequence is a long shot of the black man. Then the policeman enters the frame. Herein Wiseman repeats the same control of the camera and the editing as the previous example.

## 6. The Reflexive Documentary

Under normal circumstance, a documentary viewer is inclined to regard the events shown on screen as the only object that needs to be interpreted, rather than including the formal and ideological qualities of the film. The reflexive mode of representation breaks this model. It brings the filmmaker and the filmmaking process into the film text itself. The impression of unimpeded access to reality is intentionally broken. The problems and issues of representation of the documentary become the “second theme.” As Bill Nichols (2001) puts it, “the processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer become the focus of attention for the reflexive mode” (p. 125). “Being reflexive”, as Jay Ruby argues:

means that the producer deliberately and intentionally reveals to his audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused him to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present his findings in a particular way. (1977, p. 35)



From this perspective, although in *Odyssey* the filmmakers, the anchors and their interactions with the subjects are widely represented, the film can hardly be regarded as reflexive. Its objective is to construct another kind of transparency, which does not so different from the observational mode. It did not take a long time for the mainstream media in China to adopt the pattern formed in *Odyssey* into their standard production, especially in journalistic programs. The first effort to reveal how the official journalists conduct their work and implicitly question the truth claim of the state media apparatus was made in Zhang Yuan and Duan Jinchuan's *The Square*. This documentary begins with following the journalists, including Shi Jian, who has become at that time an influential producer of CCTV, to go to the police station. This police station is in charge of the order and safety of Tian'anmen Square and is called the "The First Police Station on the Earth". The camera captures how the interviews are conducted. A policeman, obviously not good at verbal expression, is interviewed. A woman, one of the crew, tells him what to say. But the crews do not get what they want from this policeman. When the camera is turned off, the crew does not conceal its superior status and leaves the interviewee embarrassedly standing there, as they leave silently. In another interview, the journalists direct a group of children to behave mendaciously before the camera. When the journalists interview another group of children who are organized to watch the ceremony of raising the national flag, the woman anchor induces the interviewed children to utter some empty declarations of their love for the country and the Party. This is the first representation in Chinese documentary of the backstage of the state media apparatus from a non-official position. In fact, it is also the only one until now. If not for the close

personal relationship of Duan Jinchuan, Zhang Yuan and Shi Jian, it is hard to imagine the independent documentarians could get the chance to make a documentary about the official media. To a great extent, this documentary successfully overthrows the ideological myth of the state media.

In the article *The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film* (1977), Jay Ruby points out that “parody mocks or ridicules communicative forms, conventions, and codes, it can be said that parody has reflexive qualities” (p. 38). In 1999, Ju Anqi, a student of Beijing Film Academy, made an experimental film *There’s a Strong Wind in Beijing/Beijing de feng henda*. Like Marceline Loridan in *Chronicle of a Summer*, Ju goes to the streets, school, restaurant, hair salon, even restroom, to ask the same questions: “Is the wind strong in Beijing?”, “Are you happy?”, and “Do you like Tian’anmen Square?” Different people make quite different responses. Someone asks in reply skeptically: “What do you want?” Some angrily betel him that he is insane. In a hair salon, when Ju asks several waitresses whether the wind in Beijing is strong, the girls stop their works and stand in the corner seem to be at a loss as to what to do. They are silent and very nervous. Some critics claim that this sequence seems too “bloody”. Ju explains that he makes this on purpose:

I don’t want to represent them objectively. What I want is to amplify the reality. We’ve watched too many interviews that seem to be gentle and objective. But for me, to watch them is harmful. They conceal a kind of violence. I am quite disgusted with the news interviews in the traditional

sense as well as the suspicious objectivity some documentaries claimed. I want to deconstruct them. (Hou, 2006, p. 186)

As shown in the examples above, the reflexive documentary in China mainly focuses on the filmmaking process, rather than the self of the filmmaker. In fact, although there are many first person documentaries in as early as the 1980s, the self shown on screen has never been really personalized. All the narrators adopt a public personality, in a manner which signifies certain class, education background widely acknowledged as appropriate by officials and masses. After 2000, several independent documentarians began this kind of attempt. In Yang Dina's *Home Video* (2001), she explores the frustrated marriage of her parents and the dysfunction family. It perfectly fits in the subgenre of "self-therapy documentary" – a term coined by Paul Arthur (2007). But this kind of exploration is so rare, that it is hard to find more examples of this kind in Chinese documentaries, especially in the official media.

## 7. The Change of Subject

To define Chinese new documentary, besides the mode and style, the change of subject must be taken into consideration. Kristin Thompson maintains that "at intervals over the past few centuries, a notion has surfaced that the life of lower-class figures presented with the appearance of objectivity is more realistic than that of middle- or upper-class subject" (1988, p. 205). In documentary filmmaking, the introduction of working-class or peasant characters began from Grierson and the British documentary movement. Grierson argued that

Realist documentary, with its streets and cities and slums and markets and exchanges and factories, has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it, and where no ends, sufficient for the purposes of art, are easily observed. (1979, p. 41)

For the documentarians of that time, this was no less than a radical change. Grierson claimed in 1937 that “The thought of making work an honored theme, and a workman, of whatever kind, an honorable figure, is still liable to the charge of subversion” (1979, p. 77). Although Brian Winston argues that this claim in fact “overstated the case,” Grierson’s words do reveal that since its beginnings documentary realism features lower class subjects. This is also why Paul Rotha generalized that “Documentary must be the voice of the people speaking from the homes and factories and fields of the people” (1935, p. 113). As far as Chinese documentary is concerned, they have long been isolated from the western documentary tradition, but they also choose the “ordinary people”/*laobaixing* as the subjects of their works, which in fact constitutes a defining characteristic of Chinese new documentary.

Before the end of 1980s, the figures shown on TV were all political leaders, worker models, heroes, and others who made great achievement. No ordinary people get the chance to be shown on screen. As Shi Jian puts it,

at that time, the normal people entering our view and shown our TV screen is like to go upon the historical stage. The TV screen is like a paradise, highly selective about who it shows and ruled by propaganda principles. Only when you are to be propagandized and extolled, could you be shot. It

is impossible for the normal people to be shown on TV. (Li, Liu, Wang, 2006, p. 247)

The change begins in documentaries such as *Sand and Sea* (1990), *Odyssey of the Great Wall* (1991), *Bumming in Beijing* (1991), and so on. In *Sand and Sea*, the filmmakers choose a peasant in a desert of Inner Mongolia and a fisherman near the Yellow Sea as the subjects. It exhibits their ordinary lives in the dramatically changing times. In *Odyssey*, the narrative concerns the peasants and citizens living beside the Great Wall. In *Bumming*, all the five people represented are marginalized and lead a ordinary life, although they are all pursuing their dream of art. It is due to the change of subject of *Bumming* that Dai Jinhua takes it as the beginning of Chinese new documentary. She argues:

I feel it is indeed the beginning of Chinese new documentary. No longer big event, no longer big life, no longer big shot, it is a crowd of marginalize people in the city and their so called basic necessities of life. (Li, Liu, Wang, 2006, p. 86)

In 1993, CCTV launched its new program *Eastern Horizons/Dongfang shikong. Living Space/Shenghuo kongjian* is part of it, which broadcast a ten-minute short documentary every day. It is the most influential documentary program in China in the 90s. Most of its subjects, if not all, are ordinary people, just as its slogan shows “Let ordinary people tell their own stories”. The influence of this slogan is so powerful that for a long time not only the audiences, but the colleagues of the local TV stations all regarded documentary as only good for telling the story of ordinary people and their ordinary lives. Chen Meng,

the producer of *Living Space* who coined this slogan, acknowledged that this is no less than a side effect of his program (Lü, 2003, p. 232). Chen believes that documentary should also focus on “big events, big problems” and take on some more important social responsibilities. Of course problems of this kind are not limited to Chinese documentary. As Brian Winston argues, since private intimacy was put on the screen, the documentary has turned into melodrama. He says: “I believe the documentary tradition effectively precluded the opportunity for analysis exactly in favor of emotionalism and aesthetic pleasure” (Winston, 2008, 155)

Chris Berry concludes that the new documentaries in the early 90s share several characteristics, including that “the focus is directly on contemporary city life in China among educated people like the documentary makers and the filmmakers themselves” (2007, p. 118). He argues that it is until the documentaries such as *Diary of Tai Fu Xiang/Taifuxiang riji* (1998), *Out of Phoenix Bridge/Huidao fenghuangqiao* (1997), and *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road/Jianghu* (1999) that the educated elites were no longer the subject matter (Berry, 2007, p. 121). As shown above, this generalization is obviously far from the fact.

## PART 2: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### 1. Didactic Tradition and “Xinying Mode”

The rise of direct cinema in the United States is highly related to documentary filmmakers’ dissatisfaction with the then dominating Griersonian documentary. As Drew argues, the problem with the documentary was that in tradition documentary films the logic and rhetorical power was carried by the narration rather than by the images themselves, reducing documentaries to little more than illustrated lectures (Drew, 1985, p. 223). Similar is the upsurge of Chinese new documentary. To better understand this historical process, we should first make clear what the *old* documentary is in China.

Chinese film production after 1949 was rigorously controlled by the government, from the selection of content and theme, matters of censorship, planning and production, management in distribution and exhibition, to the creation of suitable cinematic mode and style. Film was regarded as a tool for mass education and its only task was to fulfill national political and economic agenda. To a great extent, this principle of documentary production was laid by the arguments of Lenin and Mao Zedong.

Due to historical reason, Chinese film production was influenced greatly by the former Soviet Union. As early as the establishment of the PRC in 1949, it is the Soviet documentarians that came to China to direct Chinese documentarian to make the documentary about the celebration of the founding of the *New China* (Shan, 2003, p. Lenin’s arguments on newsreel and documentary film were introduced into China and became “the dominant idea had been directing the Chinese newsreel and documentary

production for quite a long time” (Shan, 2003, p. 142). Among them, an important speech of Lenin on newsreel and documentary film production had been often adopted:

Newsreel is not only to report the news, and it is not only to objectively reflect the event, but is a highly political visualized comment. Newsreel practitioners should study how to make political comment from the excellent paradigm of our party and Bolshevik newspapers. They should become the Bolshevik journalists with camera held in hand. (Shan, 2003, p. 142)

This argument, simplified as “visualized political comment,” was widely spread, which in fact became the standard definition of documentary film and dominated Chinese documentary ideas for more than three decades.

Lenin’s points were quite consistent with Mao’s. As early as 1942, Mao delivered a critical speech *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*, in which he proposed the important idea of *revolutionary art/geming wenyi*. He argued that revolutionary art should serve the revolution career. The political value became the most important standard, if not the only, to evaluate art works. The revolutionary art idea had been carried through the whole Mao’s era before the end of the 1970s as the highest principle of art production. Only after Deng Xiaoping began the reform policy did its influence gradually wane.

During Mao’s era, most of the influential documentaries were made by the Central News Documentary Film Studio (*Zhongyang xinwen jilu dianying zhipianchang*, or *Xinying Studio* in short), which was established in 1953. Like any other merchandise



productions, documentary film was produced according the strict plan made by the government. As Ni Zhen (1994) puts it,

The film production institutions of our country were established as an imitation of Soviet management system in the 1950s. This mechanism of production and distribution was based on a combination of government and enterprise. Films were produced under the mandatory plan of the government. (p. 38)

Soon after the establishment of *Xinying Studio*, Zhou Yang, the Deputy Minister of the Propaganda Department, made a speech on the task of documentary film production. He said: “The important task of the newsreel and documentary film is to elevate people’s socialist thoughts and feelings. ....it should conduct directly the socialist thoughts education to the people” (Shan, 2003, p. 148). To perform the required functions, a production procedure was virtually prescribed. The scripts were normally finished first. They were fundamentally dominated by political dogma. Then the cameramen shot the required images according the scripts. Due to the limitation of technology and apparatus, there was almost no interview or location sound in these documentaries. Only under certain extremely important circumstance could synchronous sound and interview be adopted, which required rather sophisticated preparations of the filmmakers. The commentator always adopts an official and authoritative tone. The accompanying non-diegetic music normally goes throughout the text. When Michael Chanan discusses the side effects of the emergence of sound on documentary production in the early 1930s, he argues that: “The bulk of documentary production all too readily succumbed to the

overuse of both music and commentary, and far from fulfilling its cinematic vocation, descended towards a form of illustrated radio” (Chanan, 2007, p. 117). To a great extent, this is also an appropriate appraisal of Chinese documentary before the end of the 1970s. Since almost all the documentaries made in *Xinying Studio* adopted such a pattern, it is widely called *Xinying mode*. Within the framework of Nichols’ typology, *Xinying mode* typically exhibits the characteristics of the expository documentary. Bill Nichols argues that in the expository documentary, the commentary is presumed to be of a higher order than the accompanying images (2001, p. 107). Judged from the production procedure of *Xinying mode*, this argument is well verified.

As an illustration of political ideologies, the *Xinying mode* documentary film dominated Chinese documentary since the 1950s. As a researcher declared, the documentary films of this period could be divided into two categories: “films illustrating governmental policies, and films showing the people’s applause of such policies” (Chu, 2007, p. 69). Any effort to get rid of *Xinying mode* would take great political risks. Aesthetic experiment would be criticized as capitalist, bourgeois and hostile to workers, peasants, and soldiers/*gong nong bing*. Those who violate this pattern would possibly be criticized, sent to jail or some remote exile, or even executed (Chu, 2007, p. 60).

It is not until the 80s when the new documentary emerged in the realm of TV, and the political atmosphere had greatly changed, that the *Xinying mode* gradually lost its dominant status. But the management system and production pattern had never changed even after the overwhelming social reform of the 1980s. As Shan puts it,

Abiding by its unique rule, this system has been running steadily since its establishment. Except for the several turbulences happened in 1958 and 1976 because of the well known reasons, it has never changed substantially throughout the 30 years. The reform of the 80s has never disturbed the basic framework of this system and its interior economic relationship either. (2005, p. 391)

This stubbornness ordains its final fate. In 1993, the 40 years old Central News Documentary Film Studio (*Xinying Studio*) was annexed by the Chinese Central TV Station (CCTV). In is also in 1993, documentary begin to “overwhelm the TV screen” all over China.

## 2. The Rise of TV Documentary

Both in the west and in China, the rise of television exerted critical influence to documentary film production. In the end of the 1950s, the technique innovation in TV production laid the foundation for the emergence of cinema vérité in the US. As Issari and Paul (1979) claimed: “Cinema vérité, then, was a direct beneficiary of filming techniques which had to be innovated in television in order to achieve reality and immediacy of new coverage, sports events, interviews, documentaries, etc (p. 61).

The technical innovations included a new generation of 16mm cameras light enough to rest on the operator’s shoulder, fitted with lenses and film stock, which allowed filming in available light, and capable of shooting in synchronization with portable tape recorders (Chanan, 2007, p. 166). These innovations made it possible for documentary filmmaking to break away from the long established cinematic methods and started experimenting

with new styles. For the first time the fly gets the chance to stay on the wall as well as plunge into the soap.

Besides the technology and the apparatus, TV institutions also provided the platform for the documentarian to conduct the aesthetic innovation. In the US, as Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985) point out, it is ABC and the sponsor Bell & Howell make it possible for Drew team's works to secure a network showcase (p. 224).

In China, the importance of TV for the development of documentary far exceeded the innovation of new technique and apparatus. During the 80s, Chinese TV industry experienced meteoric development. TV stations not only provided funds, apparatus, and human resources for the documentary production, but more importantly they endowed the documentarians with greater freedom to make aesthetical experiments. In fact, it is the exploration of the TV communication methods from the early 80s to the early 90s that documentary approaches are developed, which are quite different from the rigid documentary filmmaking patterns of film studios. During this process, the fetter of *xinying mode* has been broken, and a fresh new *documentary mode (jishi shoufa)* is established. TV gradually replaced film studios and became the central stage for documentary production in China.

Since the end of the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping launched the reform and open policy. The long-term ideological dogma was weakened. The economic development and social reconstruction became the theme of the whole 80s. Deng claimed that "practice is the only criterion of truth," and called upon the Party to "emancipate the mind." Under this background, the TV industry got dramatic development. In 1979, there were only 48.5

million TV sets all around China. This number grew rapidly with a speed of several millions or even more than ten millions increase per year. To 1994, the total amount of TV sets was 274.87 million. Every one hundred people owned 23 TV sets (Shan, 2005, p. 392). In the meantime, Chinese film industry got into a hobble. The amount of the film audience in 1979 was 29.3 billion person-times. By 1999, the audience size was about 1 billion, only one thirties of the 1979 figure.

In this period, TV stations expanded rapidly. In 1983, the central government established a new department to administer the radio and TV industry - the Ministry of Radio and Television. A new policy was set down: to “build TV stations at four administration levels” (*siji ban dianshi*), covering the nation, provinces, cities, and counties. Previously TV station as a privilege was restricted to the national and provincial levels. This policy greatly encouraged the local governments’ enthusiasm to build their own TV stations. From 1982 to 1988, the number of television station increased eight times from 47 to 442.

This fast expansion of the TV stations required more TV programs, among which documentary is an important part. Different from the stubborn production procedure and the strict political censorship of *Xinying Studio*, the TV stations normally gave the documentarians much more flexibility and freedom in term of the choice of subject, theme, style, and so on. Especially with the rapid growth of communication between China and western countries in the realm of economics and culture, TV plays a more active role. Many important TV stations established their own International Departments, whose tasks were to make documentaries for the foreign audiences. In 1983, the CCTV

adjusted its interior institution and particularly strengthened the International Department. Shanghai TV founded the Documentary Section in the same year. Soon after, it established the independent External Reporting Department. By 1984, as many as 19 provincial TV stations had set up their own External Reporting Departments (Fang, 2003, p. 310). These departments got the best environment for the documentary production. As Lü Xinyu (2003) observes, the earliest experiments on documentary style were all conducted in the international department (p. 17). Under the name of international communication, the TV documentarians got more chances to watch the foreign documentaries and learn from their foreign colleagues. Since the targeted audience was westerners, they also had enough reasons to refuse the stereotype of *Xinying mode* and experiment on new ideas and aesthetical styles. As Fang Fang (2003) concludes, “it is from the external propaganda that [Chinese] documentary idea really began to change” (p. 308).

### 3. Evolvement of TV Documentary in the 80s

The development of TV realistic language or “documentary mode/*jishi shoufa*” had a clear trajectory throughout the 80s, which well embodied in the individual documentary works made in this period. In this part, I will discuss how realism as a style took root in Chinese documentary. I argue that the exploration of documentary mode is greatly overlapped with the probe the approaches, techniques and principles of TV communication in the 80s. The internationally cooperated projects promoted the development of documentary as well as TV programs and columns. The elements of documentary mode developed in this period.

As a part of the strategy of international communication, CCTV began to make documentaries in cooperation with the foreign TV institutions. The joint projects provided the opportunities for the Chinese documentarians to learn directly from their foreign colleagues. Since China had long isolated from the outside world, most of Chinese people had no clear ideas about how to make professional TV programs as well as TV documentaries. This first large-scale documentary series made in this way is *The Silk Road* (1981), made by the CCTV and Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) from August 1979 to May 1981. At that time, the cooperation with a capitalist TV institution was regarded as a signal of emancipated mind in the TV field (Zhu, 2002). As the documentary's name shows, the central subject of this documentary is the Silk Road. The Silk Road has been an important path for economical and cultural transmission that linked China with India, Persia and Mediterranean countries for over 2000 years. This road extends over 4000 miles. It enables people to transport trade goods, while at the same time serves as a link for the spread of knowledge, ideas, and cultures between different parts of the world. CCTV and NHK formed a joint shooting team, and they shared the same raw footage, while the postproduction was made respectively. In Japan, this documentary series was divided into 14 parts, each of which is 50 minutes long. It was broadcasted on a fixed time every month. The social influences in of *The Silk Road* in Japan are tremendous. It is reported that the watching rate rose about 3 times than normal (Pei, 1981). In China, the length of different parts varied from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, and the broadcast was also not regular. In fact, at that time there were few columns on Chinese TV and most of the programs were isolated unites, without specific

duration or regular timetable. As could be expected, *The Silk Road* incurred little attention in Chinese society. This comparison makes Chinese TV producers began to think about the principles of TV communication they had not realized. When the next large scale documentary series *Talking about the Changjiang River/Huashuo changjiang* made jointly by CCTV and another Japanese TV institution was broadcast in 1983, many new elements were adopted. For the first time, the anchors appeared on the screen and communicated with the audiences directly, although they still sit in the studio, rather than on the scene.<sup>11</sup> The duration of each part was 20 minutes. The broadcasting timetable was also rigidly prescribed: 7:45 every Monday night. *Changjiang* got great success. The watching rate reached as high as 40%. (Shi, 2008, p. 48) So many critics argue that *Changjiang* invoked the first climax of documentary production and watching in China.

By the cooperation with Japanese colleagues, Chinese documentarians got the chance to know the new development of TV apparatus as well as documentary ideas. Before that, Chinese documentarian used the spring driving 16mm camera, without synchronous sound recording. The film length in one reel is 100 feet. Due to the technical limitations, the longest shooting time in one shot is 22 seconds. According to the regulation of the official institutions, the film ratio could only vary from 3:1 to 5:1. Under this circumstance, it is impossible to imagine Wiseman's freedom to experiment his observational approach. What documentarian could do was to best use the limited resource and complete the assignment. In shooting these two documentaries, Japanese brought some new apparatus. The camera is no longer driven by spring, but by battery

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<sup>11</sup> In honor of the contribution of Chen Hanyuan, the producer and writer of *Changjiang*, to the development of anchor on Chinese TV screen, he was endowed with "Special Contribution Prize" by Chinese Radio & TV Academy. See Shi Yi (2008), p. 56.



cell. The length of the film in one reel is 400 feet. More importantly, it could capture the synchronous sound. Rather than traditional scripts, voice-over narration and music, for the first time some sequences were dominated by synchronous sound, the structures of which were formed by the shooting process.

This new aesthetic element in *The Silk Road* and *Changjiang* was only sporadically appeared. A more systemic experiment toward this direction was conducted in the documentary *Talking About the Great Canal/Huashuo yunhe* in 1986, three years after the broadcast of *Changjiang*. This is the first large scale documentary made solely by Chinese documentarians. From the mid 80s, video camera had been introduced into Chinese TV production. *Great Canal* was shot completely by video camera. The anchors Chen Duo and Hong Yun, the same as in *Changjiang*, stepped out of the studio and began to communicate with the ordinary people on the scene. The totality atmosphere was intentionally captured. Interview as a technique was widely employed. The image of ordinary people emerged on screen. Although there was still the powerful influence of didactic tradition, *Great Canal* had shown some rudiments of the new documentary of the 1990s. This documentary won great success. The watching rate reached as high as 30%, far exceeded any TV drama or film (Zhu, 2002). Documentary had established its status as the most important TV program since then. Different from any other TV programs or fictional films, the audiences were fascinated with the immediacy, transparency and impression of truth. As Zhang Fengzhu (1987), a professor of the CUC, puts it,

[*Great Canal*] attracts the audiences by “truth”. No matter the interview, script, shooting, or postproduction, the crews strive to reach the truth. No

decoration, no adulteration. The appearance of the Great Canal and the local people's lives is literally represented. It not only foregrounds the beauty, fortune, and happiness, but represents the ugliness, poverty, sorrow. The Great Canal has a glorious history as well as the *status quo* which need amelioration. Without any decoration, the image of the Great Canal is constructed vividly. Only in this way, the image could possess feeling of reality, convincing power, and artistic appeal.

On the academic side, a fact should be mentioned is that many discussions were led under the name of TV program, rather than documentary. For example, in an article Ren Yuan (1987) called *Great Canal* as "TV series program." He argued that "To theorize the experience of *Great Canal* may be revelatory to blaze a way in how to follow the principle of TV communication and make the most of the advantage of TV" (p. 19). It is not until the founding of Chinese Documentary Academic Committee in 1993 that the term documentary is widely accepted both in the field of documentary production and the documentary research realm (Gao Feng, 2002).

Although many ordinary people were represented in *Great Canal*, they were far from the protagonists. The general theme was still the culture and history of the Great Canal. The first effort to take the ordinary people as the central subject was made in *Sand and Sea/Shi yu hai* (1989). This 30-minute documentary won the first Asian-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) Prize for China in 1991. Two peasant families were the subjects of this documentary. They lived far away from each other and led quite different lives. But they also encountered similar questions such as to get rid of poverty and to

keep the harmony of the family. They were alternately represented and a parallel structure was constructed in this documentary. Similar to the previous realist documentaries this documentary adopted such techniques as synchronous sound, interview, long take, handheld camera. Although voice-over narration was still adopted in this documentary, but it was mainly introductory and far from didactic. Rather than those grand themes of previous documentaries, *Sand and Sea* put its emphasis on the fates, lives, and emotions of the ordinary peasants. Some intimate dialogues between the filmmaker and the daughter and son of the family in the desert were quite moving. Their private lives and emotions were successfully captured by the camera and well represented on the screen. Although there was music on the soundtrack, *Sand and Sea* presented almost all the necessary elements of the “documentary mode,” which got wide spread in and after the new documentary movement.

#### 4. The New Documentary Movement

Cinema vérité emerged in the early 1960s in the US as a full-fledged *avant-garde* aesthetic movement. It is not only a group of works sharing common stylistic characteristics, but, as David Bordwell (1980) argues, “polemics, theories, and activities which constitute both internally coherent positions and explicit challenges to already existing styles” (p. 1). So does the new documentary in China. Many critics, say, Lü Xinyu (2003), argue that only the documentary adopting the “documentary method” – synchronous sound, long take, and so on – can be called documentary, whereas those traditional documentary which features didactic voiceover narration and ubiquitous music cannot (p. 13). They give them another name: *special-theme project/zhuanti pian*. But

what the new documentary challenge is not just the previous styles, or limited in the realm of documentary production. More political agenda which is not necessarily consistent with the official ideology was gradually implanted into some documentaries near the end of the 80s, whereas the mainstream documentaries are still of the traditional mode. This is the bud of the so-called underground documentaries, although they were all made in the official TV stations. The dramatic changes of social and political atmosphere brought forward by what happened on June 4, 1989 made these documentaries lose the validity in the official media. The concept of underground or independent documentary was born. To examine this period of history, the “new documentary movement” provides us an appropriate perspective.

The economic and political reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping drastically changed Chinese society as well as individual mindset. Western theories and ideas flooded in. The hegemony of the official ideology seemed no longer a matter of course. In the culture field, different artistic experiments were conducted in painting, music, literature, film, as well as TV documentary. Specifically, near the end of the 80s, a new style novel arose in literature production, including Liu Zhenyun's *Unit/Danwei* (1987), Fang Fang's *Scenery/Fengjing* (1987), Chi Li's *Boring Life/Fannaorensheng* (1987), Liu Heng's *FuxiFuxi* (1988), and so on. Different from the traditional revolutionary realism, these works no longer focused on politicians and “heroes,” but ordinary people. In terms of the style, they abandoned artificial techniques but objective description. They were called “*neo-realism novel/Xinxieshi zhuyi xiaoshuo*”. As a critic puts it ,

The so called neo-realism novel, simply speaking, is the literature which are different from the traditional realism as well as the modernistic *avant-garde* literature, but a new trend emerges in the recent trough of novel production. The approach of the neo-realism novel is still to represent the reality. But its emphasis lies in the redemption of the original atmosphere of the real life. It sincerely faces the reality and human life. (*Zhong Shan*)

It reduces the tint of forthright and utilitarian political propaganda, and pursue a more rich and broad state. (*Zhong Shan*)

Another critic argues:

Caring about the ordinary people's survival and real emotion, neo-realism filters into the so far fake and decorated realm. It deconstructs the realism stereotype by a natural narrative which features some kind of redemption. What neo-realism does is to revert human to human her- himself, rather than anything else, such as a historical tool controlled by some principles or a socially prescribed ideal role. It is in fact a work of human illumination. (Ma, 2002)

This deviation of neo-realism novel from dominant official ideology is quite similar to what happens to the TV documentary. In 1988, Shi Jian began to make his documentary *Tian'anmen*. Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing*, Wang Zijun's *Prose of the Capital City/Jingcheng Sanji*, and some others all started in this year. *Tian'anmen* is a project of CCTV, which is, together with *Odyssey of the Great Wall*, and another documentary *Chinese/Zhongguoren*, made for the forthcoming celebration of the 40 anniversary of the

PRC. There is a prologue at the beginning of *Tian'anmen*: “We respect life, as we respect history.” According to Shi Jian, this prologue is

a refusal of the machine-made implantation of the ‘left’. We should watch this society in a view of our generation, and tell people that the society can also be examined in this way. This is a responsibility, or, say, a social responsibility. (Li, Liu, Wang, 2006, p. 247)

In this documentary, a shot implicitly reveals the change of subject as well as the viewpoint. This shot begins in the palace, arises and cross the wall of the palace, and descend to the bustling bazaar and civilians outside. The camera no longer fixes on the grand events or elites, but focuses on the ordinary people’s ordinary lives. As for the style of *Tian'anmen*, it is far from direct cinema or cinema vérité. Rather, Shi Jian does not hesitate to express his ideas and emotions by means of voice over narration and music. This is of course based on the free social environment in 1988, the eve of the Tian'anmen Event in 1989.

June 4, 1989 is widely regarded as the watershed of modern Chinese history.<sup>12</sup> In Dai Jinhua’s words, the political catastrophe of 1989 is a suddenly descendent curtain, which obstructs the visual field of the reality and the history (2000, p. 242). *Tian'anmen* and other similar documentaries no longer fit the new censorship principle set by the new officials and the more strict propaganda policy after 1989. Under this background, these documentaries lost the identities of official products as well as the possibility to broadcast. As a result, they turned from “mainstream” to “independence.” *Tian'anmen* as

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<sup>12</sup>See the theses of The June 4 Democracy Movement Conference held in Beijing on May 10, 2009. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/chinese/simp/hi/newsid\\_8050000/newsid\\_8054400/8054441.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/chinese/simp/hi/newsid_8050000/newsid_8054400/8054441.stm) (assess on July, 15, 2009)

a project was canceled by the CCTV. Using his own money, Shi Jian finished it and sent it to an international film festival. Because of this, Shi Jian was criticized and removed from the documentarian position. Though, *Tian'anmen*, together with Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing*, is regarded as the magnum opus of Chinese independent documentary.

In 1988, Wu Wenguang and some other documentarians were making *Chinese*. This documentary experienced the same fate as *Tian'anmen*. Like Shi Jian, Wu Wenguang used parts of the materials for *Chinese* to finish his project *Bumming in Beijing*, which is widely acknowledged as the first and the most important representative of Chinese independent documentary. This is also why Lin Xudong claims that *Bumming in Beijing* is a “by-product” of the documentary *Chinese* (Mei, Zhu, 2004, p. 26).

Except for the official propaganda, most other voices were stringently prohibited. More documentarians began to use a more covert means to express their dissatisfaction with the political reality. As Duan Jinchuan puts it, “June 4 exerted a huge strike on the intellectuals, which made them to reflect some problems and express their own ideas independent from the official system.” (Wang, 2000, p. 148) In another interview, Duan Jinchuan claims that

In the past we are under the pressure of the powerful propaganda tools.

What we face is a mighty mouthpiece. So when we begin the independent documentary production, we have a strong belief that without destruction there can be no construction, and we need to fight against an extremeness by another extremeness. (Lü, 2003, p. 88)

Under the circumstance after 1989, it is not possible to express opponent ideas publicly. The pursuit of “truth” by means of “documentary method” best shields them from possible criticism or punishment. The naked reality captured by the camera provides an implicit condemnation of the official rhetoric. From this sense, although the new documentary adopts many similar elements as the direct cinema in the US in the 60s, Chinese documentarians such as Shi Jian, Duan Jinchuan, are much more radical than Drew or Leacock, who are typically liberalist.

In June 1991 Shi Jian gathered a few close friends who were making realistic style documentary and organized an independent documentary group, ‘Structure-Wave-Youth-Cinema’ (SWYC). Shi Jian claimed: “this [SWYC] is the first non-mainstream non-governmental film organization since the foundation of the PRC, and these people are also the earliest independent documentary producers in China” (Shi Yi, 2008, p. 183). To gather momentum, Shi Jian organized a conference on the new documentary in the TV School, Beijing Broadcast Institute (BBI, after 2004 its name is Communication University of China) from 21 to 22, December 1991.<sup>13</sup> Shi Jian entitled this meeting “New Documentary Movement Conference”. But before this meeting, Wang Jiyang, the vice president of BBI and also the head of TV School, informed him to remove the word “movement”. The reason was that “Tian’anmen Event” had just passed by, the word “movement” was too sensitive. On this meeting, Shi Jian read a manifesto on behalf of the group of SWYC. He declared the emergence of the “new documentary movement”.

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<sup>13</sup> Beijing Broadcasting Institute (BBI) is the most important university for documentary education in China. In 2004, its name changed to Communication University of China (CUC). Among the 11 interviewees Lü chose as the leaders of the new documentary movement in her book, 7 of them graduated from BBI.



Most of the important works, which adopted the “documentary mode” attended this meeting, including *Bumming in Beijing*, *Tian’anmen*, *Odyssey of the Great Wall*, and some others. *Sand and Sea* was invited, but for some reason the directors did not come.

This movement, together with the group SWYC, was short-lived. Deng Xiaoping’s speeches in southern China in 1992 brought about a new wave of economical reform. The whole social environment in which the media run changed again. Although there are always some documentarians, such as Wu Wenguang, kept outside the official media and made independent documentaries, most of those who participated and led the new documentary movement entered the state institutions and tried to realize their ideals for documentary in the mainstream media. A case in point is Shi Jian. He soon became a producer of the program *Oriental Horizon/Dongfang shikong* in the CCTV, which is the most influential documentary program in China throughout the 90s. Shi Jian maintained: “When the official media opened the doors, the respectability of documentary was lifted to a new level. It is no longer necessary for this kind of organizing work.” (Shi Yi, 2008, p. 186) The group SWYC broke down in 1993. In a sense, from 1993 the main stage of the new documentary has changed from the independence to the mainstream media - CCTV and other provincial TV stations.

The achievement of the new documentary movement is embodied in the dramatic development of documentary in the state institutions. In 1993, Shanghai TV established the first documentary column “*Documentary Editing Room/Jilupian bianjishi*”. CCTV founded *Oriental Horizon/dofang shikong*, in which a 10-minute-long documentary was broadcast daily. In the same year, the first professional documentarian organization Chinese TV Documentary Academic Council came into existence. Shi Jian concluded:

The ideas of the new documentary which had been pursued by only a few people infiltrated into the public media and accepted by the mass, and then a huge documentary wave was revoked and swept the screen of the whole 90s. (Shi Yi, 2008, p. 186)

In a sense, Shi Jian's words best revealed the feat of the new documentary movement.

### PART 3: THE ROAD TO POST-VÉRITÉ

The emergence of cinema vérité as a filming approach seemingly declared the death of the previous documentary and the rebirth of documentary film as a genre both in the 60s west and the 90s China. What cinema vérité brought forward, in James Blue's words, is "something close to a modern religion." He argues: "Cinema vérité has its orthodoxies, its heresies, its unitarians and its fundamentalists" (Blue, 1965, p. 22). Similar is in China. Lü Xinyu (2003) claims that: "The word *documentary/ji lu pian* is an ideal mark post of this movement [the 90s new documentary movement] in China. For some Chinese documentarians, *documentary* is a sacred concept. They defend its authenticity just like defending their own faith," and what these documentarians held is "something like a religious emotion" (p. 13). It seems quite easy for the cinema vérité filmmakers and viewers to overlook the construction and mediation of cinema vérité film and accept its truth claim. Two reasons about this phenomenon are put forward by Brian Winston. He argues the first reason is "the particular excitement and enthusiasm engendered by the technological advances in 16mm equipment." The other is "the deep-seated cultural position of the photographic apparatus as scientific" (Winston, 2008, p. 165). When it comes to the context of Chinese documentary, the background of the long-term mendacious official propaganda lent cinema vérité and direct cinema even more authenticity and credibility, which in fact made it the only legitimate filming approach for Chinese documentary for nearly ten years.

Similar is the western documentary production for a long time since the emergence of cinema vérité. Almost any experiment or innovation deviating from the

ethos of transparency of cinema vérité was reviled as heterodoxy. Documentary became a hostage of cinema vérité. Under this background, it seems quite understandable how Robert Drew could dismiss most previous documentaries with the simple word “fake” (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 51), and why Lü Xinyu denied any previous Chinese documentaries to be documentary at all. Many documentarians and theorists took issues with the advocator of cinema vérité both in the west and in China. As early as 1963, Joris Ivens and Jean-Luc Godard questioned the truth claims of the cinema vérité filmmakers at the conference held in Lyons, France (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 52). Some critics accused the style of cinema vérité as “cinema manqué” (Crawford, 1964, p. 38) and “cinema banalité” (Earle 1977, p. 179). Emile de Antonio (1980), whom Thomas Waugh called “long a dissenter from the cinema vérité mainstream of the sixties” (1976, p. 33), argued: “Cinema vérité is first of all a lie, and secondly a childish assumption about the nature of film. Cinema vérité is a joke. Only people without feelings or convictions could even think of making cinema vérité” (1980, p. 211). Among the different accusation against cinema vérité, Noël Carroll’s words may be the most vivid. He claimed: “Direct cinema opened a can of worms and then got eaten by them” (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 53).

Chinese documentary was eaten by the worms too, although the earliest warn against this danger came well before the zenith of the new documentary movement. In 1992 when cinema vérité had not been fully recognized among documentarians and not been widely discussed by critics, Zhong Danian, a CUC professor, wrote an article *Realism Is Not Truthfulness/Jishi Bushi Zhenshi*. He claimed that realism is only a choice of style, which is not necessarily part of the nature of documentary. “As a technique of

expression, no matter it is realistic or expressionistic, long take or montage, location sound or scripted narration,” Zhong (1995) argued, “it is only an organizational model or method adopted by the filmmaker when he artfully represents the physical reality” (p. 30). Having realized the possible misunderstanding of cinema vérité, Zhong Danian warned: “Any effort to promote a specific filming technique or style to the status of fundamental principle is dangerous, and it is quite possible to be denied by the later experience. So does documentary realism.” (p. 33). Rather than widely accepted, Zhong’s argument evoked criticisms from others.<sup>14</sup> In the powerful current of cinema vérité, Zhong’s voice seemed lonely and untimely.

In tracing the historical process of how American documentary broke the fetter of cinema vérité, several theorists put forward their generalizations, such as Thomas Waugh, Michael Renov, Linda Williams, Bill Nichols, and so on. Perhaps the first attempt to describe the new direction which is “markedly distinct from the cinema vérité impulse which dominated the sixties” is Thomas Waugh’s discussion (1976) of “the new documentary of the 70s.” From the perspective of the social functions of documentary film, Waugh pointed out the thematic confusion, egotism, and ideological contradictions inherent in cinema vérité and how it failed “to meet the increasing need for explicit sociopolitical analysis.” The new documentary made extensive use of the collage of vintage document and commentary as well as interviews and monologues to construct

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<sup>14</sup> From 1992 to 1995, there was a debate mainly between Zhong Danian and Yang Tiancun, an editor of Communication University of China Journal. All the articles were published on this Journal. Yang argued that documentary realism is close to phenomenal realism, which is different from the traditional concept of “realism”. In his opinion, documentary realism warrants the objectivity and truthfulness, and constitutes the essence of documentary.

serious social analyses. Furthermore, Waugh argued that this shift from cinema vérité to the new documentary of the 70s echoes a similar transition in 1920s when the poetic documentary was replaced by Griersonian documentary. He maintained:

Both transitions were characterized by a reassessment of the previous era's technical revolution, by a movement from 'formlessness' to 'form', from poesis to thesis, from the celebration of surfaces to the probing of meanings, from the ecstatic experimentation with new resources to their consolidation in the services of specific analysis, questions, and statements. (Waugh, 1976, p. 35)

Different from the perspective of Waugh, Michael Renov (1995) offered another overview of a broad shift in documentary filmmaking style since the 70s, which was termed as "post-vérité age" in his discussion. The old idea of pure objectivity was replaced by the assertion of the subjective identity of the filmmaker within the text of the film. Renov called this change "perform the self," by which the presentation of the historical world becomes inevitably bound up with the self-inscription of the filmmaker. In addition, Renov traced this shift to the concept of local knowledge, which is elaborated by Clifford Greetz. Greetz (1983) argued that the preference to general theories in the social science had given place to a "scattering into frameworks," a movement away from "universalist" modes towards "a keen sense of the dependence of what is seen upon where it is seen from and what it is seen with" (p. 4). This argument, in Renov's opinion, provides an explanation to what happened in the documentary filmmaking in the post-vérité age. Renov's points got support from Paul Arthur. In his analysis of the new

documentary of the 90s, Arthur (1993) argued: “the new documentary’s most salient quality is an explicit centering of the filmmaking process and a heavy ironized inscription of the filmmaker as (unstable) subject, an anti-hero for our times” (p. 127).

This new trend is so dynamic that it far exceeds the traditional expectation of documentary film. To theorize this new phenomenon, Linda Williams claimed that it is necessary for us to change our traditional understanding of documentary truth at all. She argued:

Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths. (Williams, 1993, p. 358)

It is easy to find that Williams put forward a new epistemological foundation for documentary film. Along this same direction, Stella Bruzzi went even further. She argued that “documentaries are a negotiation between filmmaker and reality and, at heart, a performance” (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 186). This idea itself is quite insightful. But she seems to go overboard in her rejection of Nichols’ typology as well as documentary typology itself.

Bill Nichols first discussed this mode of representation in 1994 in his book *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. As the latest emerged member in Nichols’ typology, it is termed as performative documentary.

Rather than a realist representation of the historical world, he claimed, the performative documentaries “give added emphasis to the subjective qualities of experience and memory that depart from factual recounting” (Nichols, 2001, p. 131). Such expressive elements as subjective camera movement, impressionistic montage, dramatic lighting, compelling music, and so on are freed from their subordination to a logic (Nichols, 1994, p. 100). As the title of the book shows, Nichols argued that performative documentary even more dramatically blurs the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction.

In China, performative documentary came forth in the end of the 90s. In describing the documentary film history before the 1970s, Richard Barsam pointed out that to a great extent it was molded by “a relatively small number of masters, individual filmmakers whose unique cinematic vision and style were principal factors in shaping its development” (1992, p. 366). In the end of 1990s in China, it is almost all by one filmmaker’s efforts that opened up this new aesthetic route. This filmmaker is Zhang Yiqing, a director of Hubei TV Station. In 1999, Zhang made his documentary *Ying and Bai: ‘99 Chronicle/Ying he bai: ‘99 ji shi*. In this documentary there are two protagonists. One is Ying, a tamed male panda. The other is Bai, a female animal trainer who is mixed blood of Italian and Chinese. Ying has no companion, and Bai is single. They have been living together in the same room for about 14 years. Although this documentary shares some common features with cinema vérité, such as location sound, pure observation, it employs some other techniques far different from cinema vérité, including sentimental music, stylized deep-lens shots, and other expressive elements to construct a poetic



subjective world. What Zhang Yiqing struggled to represent is not the physical world, but mainly a kind of mood and emotion experienced by Ying and Bai.

Maureen Furniss (1998) argued that all moving image works should be deemed as existing on a continuum characterized by the poles “mimesis” and “abstraction”. If the previous documentaries struggling to imitate the actuality as far as possible constitute the pole of mimesis for Chinese documentary, it is *Ying and Bai* that foregrounds the possible existence of the opposite pole. It evoked a tremendous sensation soon. At the 2001 Sichuan International TV Festival, *Ying and Bai* won four prizes, including the “Best Feature Documentary”. In 2002, Professor Gao Xin wrote that: “The success of Ying And Bai vividly revealed that the ideas for documentary creation will experience deep changes in China. I doubt that these changes will bring something subversive to the traditional ideas for TV documentary production” (p. 58). The latest development in recent years did verify Gao’s judgment.

This documentary won Zhang Yiqing great glories. However, it evoked even more severe criticisms at the same time. Many researchers believed that the central problem of this documentary lies in its violation of the objectivity and truthfulness principles, which are widely deemed as the essence of documentary. Some critic argued:

Truthfulness is the essential attribute of documentary. It originates from human history and social reality, and it should be an objective record. This is why no subjective fabrication be permitted in documentary production. No filmmaker’s subjective envision or mood be used to replace the reality of the subject. Before Zhang Yiqing began his shooting, Ying and Bai led

a primitive and natural life. Yet based on his own visual experience, Zhang Yiqing adopted visual techniques to encode *Ying and Bai*'s images and fabricate a pre-installed visual impact, an unusual life style. There is no denying that Zhang Yiqing's methods run counter to the documentary spirit. (Chen Jiangli, 2006, p. 107)

Another critic pointed out that:

What this documentary broke through is not only the traditional visual expression, but it overly inflated the intrinsic implication of documentary. It made this documentary go towards subjectivity, rather than objectivity. To an extent, it betrayed the principle of truthfulness and lost its real value as a unique form of TV art. (Liang Pengfei, Yin Jun, 2002, p. 22)

Obviously this position is no more than a continuation of the idea of cinema vérité, which dominated Chinese documentary production during the 90s. But Zhang Yiqing has his own understanding of documentary truthfulness as well as the documentary philosophy. He alleged: "as to the documentary truthfulness, I put more emphasis on the inner truth and the real mood" (Zhang, 2008, p. 60). He believes that compared with other mode and style, cinema vérité does not have any preexisted advantage. He argued:

Realism is only a technique, not a standard. Especially we cannot use this standard to judge whether a film work is a documentary or not. Different feelings to the same thing determine the differences of expression. We should not employ only one form to express the tremendously different feelings. (Zhang, 2008, p. 59)

Although seemingly quite simple, this idea to an extent added a new chapter to Chinese documentary in the early new century. It is easy to find that Zhang Yiqing's declaration echoed Zhong Danian's argument that "realism is not truthfulness".

On the academic side, a systemic analysis on Zhang Yiqing's documentaries came from Liu Jie, a professor of the CUC. She maintained:

At present a misunderstanding of documentary is popular. Many believe that realism is absolute necessary for documentary. People put more emphasis on its objectivity, actuality, and the quality of reproduction. Documentary filmmaker is prone to hide any trace of her- himself, in order to show viewers a pure living reality. This choice itself constitutes a style. It should be unimpeachable. However, we still have other choices. To avoid observing the physical world, to keep from following camera and a record of pure procedure, and try to collect the materials in real life, which focus on the inner life, follow the fluctuation of mood, record the state of life, exhibit the filmmaker's own comprehension. This is also a non-ignorable method and direction for documentary production. (Liu, 2005, p. 66)

After *Ying and Bai*, Zhang Yiqing made another documentary *Kindergarten/You er yuan* in 2004, which is of the similar style. Music, stylized camera movement are widely used here. This documentary won Zhang Yiqing several international prizes too. In theorizing his own documentary ideas, Zhang Yiqing claimed:

I have long believed that documentary is something personalized. It is an approach for the filmmaker to represent and explain the world. The border

between documentary and fiction film and novel is quite limited. Documentary also comprises lots of imagination, construction, inspiration, and passion. When a filmmaker begins her/his creation, it is in fact very difficult to differentiate between what is reality and what is not, because now this reality should have become a reality within your subjective world. (2008, p. 59)

Herein Zhang Yiqing reached the same position as Nichols', who elaborated how documentary shares the "blurred boundaries" with fiction. Indeed, it is Zhang Yiqing who for the first time avoided the trap of cinema vérité and opened up a new route towards the post-vérité age for Chinese documentary. In 2009, Jia Zhangke, the most famous representative of the Sixth Generation, made the film *24 City*. In my opinion, the most prominent characteristic of this film lies in its combination of documentary and fiction. The social actors and their real lives are juxtaposed with professional actors and the scripted stories within this film. Jia Zhangke goes further, but in the same direction as Zhang Yiqing.

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