

Introduction: The Interdependence of Individual Practices

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In 2020, we founded the *Chinese Independent Cinema Observer* with the aim of raising the visibility of and promoting research on Chinese independent films and film culture. The need to define the meaning of Chinese independent cinema arose from the meetings of the editorial board that took place prior to the creation of the journal. Although this need has already been addressed by an extensive body of publications on Chinese independent cinema that has emerged over the last two decades (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006; Lin 2010; Berry and Lü and Rofel 2010; Robinson 2013; Edwards 2015; Pernin 2015; Zhang and Zito 2015; Pickowicz and Zhang 2017), these publications only partially reflect the current situation, which has changed beyond recognition since the tightening of state restrictions following the appointment of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012. As the authorities cannot be aware of, and ban, all illegal film production, these restrictions have mainly targeted the promotion and exhibition of independent films, requiring in particular the closure of all independent film festivals that were held in various cities throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

Before the closure of these festivals, independence commonly referred to films that were not submitted to state censorship (see Chris Berry's article). In other words, it was defined as resistance to the state, and by extension to the domestic market censored by the state. It is true that independent filmmakers were in reality never entirely cut off from this market, and some, like Zhao Liang (赵亮) and Wang Chao (王超), regularly navigated between the inside and the outside. But most independent directors firmly rejected any form of dependence on it. This resistance thus delineated the boundaries of independence for the vast majority of independent filmmakers.

However, this criterion no longer seems valid, as some directors now submit their films for censorship. Indeed, since it has become impossible to hold screenings of independent films in locations open to the public and outside the state-controlled market, independent films are now largely unknown to the Chinese public, who can only access them through illegal downloading. A wish to access this local public, coupled with the emergence of a cinephile audience willing to watch images alternative to the mainstream, has prompted more independent directors to enter the market while trying to maintain their independent mindset. Interestingly, some of these films, such as *Kaili Blues* 路

边野餐 (dir. Bi Gan 毕赣, 2015) and *Girls Always Happy* 柔情史 (dir. Yang Mingming 杨明明, 2018), are still considered independent. Meanwhile, other filmmakers still remain outside this market because they want to continue portraying topics and viewpoints that will not pass censorship. Most of them still live in China, despite the repressive environment, while others have settled permanently or temporarily abroad. Among exiled filmmakers, some like Fan Popo (范坡坡) have started to shoot in their host countries, others like Wang Bing (王兵) return to China for their filming, while still others, like Zhu Shengze (朱声仄), use footage from the Chinese internet. These films are either self-produced or produced by Chinese and/or non-Chinese private companies. They are then selected for international film festivals and screened in museums, universities, and cinemas outside China.

These recent developments, both inside and outside the state-controlled market, speak to a wide range of production, distribution, and exhibition practices. This variety is also reflected in the films themselves, which feature diverse topics and forms ranging from fiction to documentary and the experimental. The difficulty of formulating a comprehensive definition of independent cinema in today's China due to this extreme diversity was highlighted during the 2021 conference 'Reassessing Chinese Independent Cinema: Past, Present... and Future' organised by Newcastle University as part of the Chinese Independent Film Archive project. Beyond this difficulty, one may even ask whether the notion of 'independence' is still relevant to recent films made by directors who refused to enter the market in the past but have eventually changed their mind. And what about films that passed censorship the first time round but whose exhibition was banned after their theatrical release? Unable to provide definitive answers to these questions, we guest editors decided to invite filmmakers, producers, critics, and researchers to write about key notions and films that they considered themselves to be independent. It is in this spirit that we built this issue around a keyword approach.

To this end, we compiled the following list of keywords based on our existing knowledge on the topic: underground (地下), avant-garde (先锋), amateur film (业余电影), independent (独立), grassroots (民间), DV, individual (个人), direct cinema (直接电影), objectivity (客观性), truth (真实), on-the-spot (现场), sequence shot/long take (长镜头), margins (边缘), vulnerable groups (弱势群体), subalternity (底层), migrant (盲流), sincerity (诚实/忠实), ethics (伦理), activism (行动主义), film exhibition/festival (影展/电影节), alternative space (替代空间), censorship (审查), archive (档案), author (作者), queer moving images (酷儿影像), gender (社会性别), and feminism (女权主义/女性主义). This list was in fact more indicative than restrictive, since we invited contributors to select a word in the list or choose a word not appearing in it. Some chose the same terms: five decided to write about 'independent' or 'independence', three about 'memory', three about 'feminism', and two about 'individual'. Presenting several articles about a same keyword allowed us to bring together varied and complementary views on this keyword, especially when authors had different profiles. For

instance, the term ‘independent’ was addressed by two academics, two filmmakers, and a producer.

Furthermore, this method reflects the fact that people who were involved in the independent film realm – be they filmmakers, producers, critics, or researchers – have more fragmented visions of the field since the suppression of independent film festivals. As a matter of fact, the social interactions that occurred during public and collective events have been replaced by private and individual discussions. At least these private discussions could be held in person before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, because it has been impossible or extremely difficult to travel to and from China, discussions between people based inside and people based outside have become virtual, or have simply stopped. Hence, for researchers, producers, and distributors based outside, it has been particularly difficult to meet independent directors and keep informed of their latest productions (see Karin Chien’s article). All these people thus have a very partial knowledge of the field. In response to this situation, this issue aims to strengthen dialogue by proposing a bilingual version of all articles (with one exception due to ethical issues) written not only by academics, but also by critics, producers, and filmmakers. Naturally, this dialogue does not replace impromptu in-person interactions. However, it allows us to maintain a written record of the contributors’ knowledge and experience, which is invaluable in a context in which the authorities try to erase all signs of independent cinema within the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Bringing together contributions by a variety of authors implies a diversity of forms in terms of length, writing style, and reference standards. For this reason, this issue does not uniformly adopt the epistemology of the academic article. The first dossier features eleven articles that propose a conceptual analysis of key terms that have dominated the academic field since the early 2000s. Even if these articles are mainly written by academics, their styles differ in that the Sinophone and Anglophone academic worlds do not use the same standards of publishing. I would also like to point out that these articles do not build on Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* (Williams 1976), which has been a key reference since the 1980s for studies articulated around a keyword approach. Rather, for all the reasons explained above, this first dossier provides general but non-exhaustive overviews or personal explorations of the keywords addressed. The second dossier presents nine personal essays by independent directors on keywords that reflect their interests and questions regarding their respective filmmaking practices. The third dossier includes five film reviews and analyses by junior researchers that focus on both a film and a keyword. It supplements the first two dossiers that only include short film analyses. This makes a total of twenty-five articles that explore the meaning of twenty different keywords related to Chinese independent cinema.

The fourth and last dossier presents four articles that were initially published in 2000 in the magazine

of the film club Practice Society (实践社), which was never officially distributed. These articles are transcripts of debates that followed screenings of Chinese independent films, among which are the first documentaries made with High 8 and Mini-DV cameras (see Zhang Yaxuan's article). Although these articles do not directly focus on keywords, they seemed relevant to this issue because they illustrate that some notions, which appear in all or several of these articles, were intensely discussed by filmmakers and film lovers who were seeking to define the distinctive characteristics of independent documentary films. At that time, these notions were also discussed by filmmakers working for television stations, which is not surprising as the first independent documentary directors came from the television industry (on this topic, see the second issue of the *Chinese Independent Cinema Observer*). Thus, despite an apparent nominal continuity, these key terms were used differently by independent directors and their (former) television colleagues. Debates organised by the Practice Society played a major role in the refashioning of these words, hence allowing independent filmmakers to sever ties with the television industry and define their own identity.

These four dossiers describe more than twenty years of the history of Chinese independent cinema, each one referring to a specific time period. The periods addressed here are these, in chronological order. The fourth dossier, named 'Archives', focuses on the turn of the last century, also called the digital turn, when the first small-scale productions were made outside state-controlled studios and screened in film clubs like the Practice Society. The first dossier, named 'Articles', refers to the rise of independent films and festivals and their decline, which spans across a period of two decades. The third dossier, called 'Film Reviews and Analyses', examines films that were made during this twenty-year period. Finally, the second dossier, named 'Personal Essays', mentions this past two decades, but most importantly reflects on the present and looks forward to the future. This whole history does not provide a single definition of independent cinema in the PRC. However, it can serve as a basis for looking beyond the idea of independence as resistance to the state. This is not to say that this criterion is no longer relevant, but that it needs to be amplified to address recent developments. The question thus arises: is there continuity across these periods of time, other than the resistance to the state? To answer this question, I suggest that independence can also be thought as an interdependence of individual practices.

In 2006, Chris Berry argued that Chinese independent cinema could not completely escape the state, notwithstanding 'all the rhetoric of standing alone (*duli*)'. In this sense, Berry proposed the idea of 'in dependence' on the state, instead of independence from the state (Berry 2006, p. 111). Expanding on this idea, Zhang Zhen and Angela Zito contended, in 2015, that independent filmmakers have furthermore been interdependent on multiple social actors:

Indeed, at every turn we confront the irony that the digital, on the one hand, facilitates forms of radically *private* film production and audience habits of small-screen consumption while simultaneously linking up makers and consumers, curators and censors ever more swiftly into wider *publics*. These publics allow for speedier circulation of films made in digital video, more discussion, and quicker formations of public political and aesthetic discourses. While the personalization may provide a *sense of independence* (which, to be sure, has profound creative results), the spreading and tightening of networking surely bespeaks a growing *actual interdependence* among writers, directors, producers, distribution entrepreneurs, and audiences (Zhang and Zito 2015, p. 21).

So, according to Zhang and Zito, after the Chinese ‘in dependent’ films of the digital turn, we have entered into a ‘post-digital round’ characterised by ‘new publics’ (Zhang and Zito 2015, p. 22). This interdependence of social actors is, in my view, an essential element in the definition of Chinese independent cinema across its whole history, as evidenced in the four dossiers of this issue.

The digital turn

Before digital cameras entered the Chinese market in 1997, it was impossible to make a film without the direct or indirect support of a state-sanctioned studio or television station. First High 8, for a small minority of filmmakers, and then DV led to a transition from collective to individual filmmaking practices. Social trajectories were individualised not only because independent filmmakers no longer belonged to a work unit, but also because most were migrants coming to big cities like Beijing to take an active part in the artistic and intellectual effervescence of that time (Johnson 2006, p. 49). In response to these developments, some Chinese academics stressed that the word ‘generation’ was no longer relevant to describe these independent directors (Mo and Xiao 2006, p. 148). This term was commonly used until the Sixth Generation to bring together filmmakers from the same era who shared similar styles and interests. Yet, even if the first independent films made in the 1990s with the support of state-sanctioned production channels shared many similarities, the emergence of digital technologies then resulted in a diversification of the filmmakers’ backgrounds, as well as of the style and topic of their films, which made it difficult to group them under the same generation. Abandoning this term also reflected the desire expressed by independent filmmakers to be considered as individuals claiming their own subjectivity after having experienced collectivism during the Mao era. Debates held by the Practice Society highlight the issues and concerns of five of these filmmakers and of members of the audience during the transition period between the first independent films and the digital turn. In this way, they allow us to understand the nature of changes that resulted from this individualisation.

Among the questions asked during the discussions republished in the fourth dossier, many concerned the technical and practical aspects of film shooting, editing, and post-production. This is not surprising given that independent filmmakers were learning to use new digital technologies. Moreover, as Luke Robinson underlines, their films, all documentaries, emerged from practice, and not from theory (Robinson 2013, pp. 15-16). Apart from these, there was a special interest in the relationship between the filmmakers and the people filmed, in part because individual modes of filmmaking enabled directors to create a direct relationship with their protagonists. Directors Du Haibin (杜海滨) and Wu Wenguang (吴文光) both evoke the relationship of friendship and trust that they were able to build with the subjects whom they filmed in their respective documentaries, *Along the Railway* 铁路沿线 (2000) and *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* 江湖 (1999). This said, both are aware that they do not belong to the same underclass as their characters, vagabonds for Du and performing farmers for Wu. The fact that those in front of the camera mostly belong to the lower stratum of society raises questions about the relationship of power between the filmmaker and the people filmed. Indeed, Zhu Chuanming (朱传明), director of *Beijing Cotton Fluffer* 北京弹匠 (1999), points out that the very fact of turning on the camera creates an unequal relationship with those in front of the lens.

Ethical issues are also discussed in relation to the public. Duan Jinchuan (段锦川), director of *No.16 Barkhor South Street* 八廓南街16号 (1996) and *The Square* 广场 (1994), says that he seeks to propose an alternative to the ‘falsehoods and lies’ told by the CCP by representing ‘the characters and events as they are, as fully and truly as possible’. This approach allows him to provide the audience with an open interpretation of the reality unfolding in front of them. Film critic Zhang Yaxuan (张亚璇) also argues during the debate about *Along the Railway* that documentary film is valuable because it ‘provides you with the possibility to judge and think’.

The relationship with the Chinese public is very important, as explained by Wu who wrote a book in addition to his film in order to access a wider public, as exhibition channels for independent films were then very limited in China. Films clubs like the Practice Society contributed significantly in connecting these independent films and their directors to local audiences. Thus, from this digital turn, Chinese independent cinema entailed not only new modes of individual filmmaking, but also new modes of interaction or interdependence between individuals.

The rise and decline of independent films and festivals

Apart from the first article by Chris Berry, which presents a general overview of the meaning of independence, other articles in the first and third dossiers outline various kinds of social relationships in which independent filmmakers have been embedded. First, networks of interdependence

have been created around the production, distribution, and exhibition of Chinese independent films. Karin Chien explains that she founded dGenerate to distribute Chinese independent films to North-American audiences and remunerate the filmmakers to help them sustain their creative work. Her main source of supply was the independent film festivals that emerged in several Chinese cities shortly after film clubs were formed. Fan Xiang (樊响) points out that film clubs, ‘by sowing film appreciation, have helped cultivate a new generation of Chinese cinephiles, filmmakers, screenwriters, critics, curators, many of whom later became key figures in the once-thriving independent film festivals.’ Yu Yaqin (余雅琴) describes the main film clubs that emerged at the turn of the century and notes that they contributed in the ‘awakening and rise of civic culture’. Indeed, Fan stresses that clubs and later festivals were also places of meeting and debate for artists, academics, critics, filmmakers, and cinephiles. These events thus contributed to the development of new modes of organisation and thinking. As ‘alternative spaces’, they were nonetheless mobile and uncertain due to their illegal status. As Zhang Yaxuan indicates, screenings usually took place in venues not specifically designed for this purpose, such as bars, art galleries, libraries, and universities. These four articles clearly indicate that film clubs and independent festivals were at the centre of networks revolving around common areas of interests and values that created an interdependence between critics and cinephiles in search for alternatives to the mainstream, distributors and programmers looking for new and exciting independent films, directors wishing to show their films to local audiences, owners who agreed to lend their venues, and finally, organisers and volunteers who made all these connections possible.

Many films programmed in these events continued to focus on the grassroots or margins of society. Following the debates held by the Practice Society, the relationship of filmmakers and protagonists who do not belong to the same social stratum has remained a significant question. This ethical issue, which mainly concerns documentary films but can also be extended to feature films, has raised fierce controversies among the independent film community. Wang Xiaolu (王小鲁) provides an overview of these controversies, the most important of which targeted the use of the image of a female sex worker in *Wheat Harvest* 麦收 (2008) by Xu Tong (徐童). These debates further stimulated reflections on ethics in relation to aesthetics among academics, critics, and filmmakers.

A key argument already mentioned by independent filmmakers at discussions organised by the Practice Society is that independent films differentiated themselves from censored productions because they give the floor to the people and convey their reality as honestly and truly as possible. Such an approach is very difficult to achieve in the state-controlled industry as mainstream films have to convey a positive image of the Chinese society in order to pass censorship (see Zhang Zanbo’s 张赞波 article). This is the framework adopted by Luisa Prudentino, who argues that several independent feature and documentary

films centred on migrant workers highlight the subjectivity of the characters in a poetic manner, hence proposing an alternative to the ‘paternalistic, even voyeuristic’ gaze adopted by television documentaries. On a different topic, Max Berwald describes how Hu Jie (胡杰), in *Songs from Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声 (2016), interviews the residents of a Miao village devoted to Christianity, whose stories undermine the official discourse that modernity was brought by the CCP.

Another approach postulates that documentary filmmakers can construct their relationships with the subjects filmed and/or with the audience through shooting, editing, and post-production. Xu Kaiyang (徐开阳) argues that Zhang Zanbo manages to erase the distance that separates him from the rural population, subject of *Falling from the Sky* 天降 (2009), through a discursive relationship between moving image, written text, and spoken language. Wen Hao (闻豪) analyses the ‘affective link’ between the filmmaker Feng Yan (冯艳) and her character that is made visible in a negotiation scene filmed in hidden camera in *Bing'ai* 秉爱 (2007). Luke Robinson interprets the notion of *xianchang* (现场) as an aesthetic of precarity that encompasses the mode of production (unstable financial situation of independent directors), modes of distribution and exhibition (outside state-controlled channels), the subjects of the films (social and economic margins), and the audience (making the viewer feel the precarity of the people filmed). The affective dimension of documentary filmmaking mentioned by Wen and Robinson is also present in Zeng Jinyan’s (曾金燕) article, in which she pinpoints several strategies used by documentary filmmakers to express support for female protagonists, such as showing solidarity and care with them on and off the screen.

Bérénice Reynaud and Zoe Meng Jiang (江萌) examines the ways in which female directors, who are still poorly represented in the Chinese independent film scene, decentre the male gaze by presenting their own representations of female protagonists. Bérénice Reynaud argues that Li Yu (李玉), in *Lost in Beijing* 迷失北京 (2007), first reproduces the male gaze but ultimately subverts it by the film’s end, when the protagonist disappears from the sight of the two men who were both fighting to raise her baby. Zoe Meng Jiang examines the way in which Yang Mingming, in *Female Directors* 女导演 (2012), deflects the male gaze and conveys her own truth about friendship and emancipation.

One way some filmmakers have replied to controversies about ethics is to make images about themselves or about their own communities. An example is the Folk Memory Project (民间记忆计划) that includes young filmmakers returning to their hometowns to interview old villagers about their memories of the Great famine (see Wu Wenguang and Zou Xueping's 邹雪平 articles). Paul Pickowicz explains that some films included in this project not only document traumas of the recent past that the party-state has tried to conceal, but also involve local villagers in the process of filmmaking and remembering. He takes the example of the documentary film *Children’s Village* 孩

子的村子 (dir Zou Xueping, 2012) which involves local children who follow the filmmaker with their cameras and interview her. This connection between filmmaking and community building is also illustrated in the article about moving images marked by LGBTQ identities. Chao Shi-yan (赵锡彦) points out that the digital turn entailed the development of non-fiction stories that have ‘reflected and reinforced the formation of local *tongzhi*/queer community’.

The variety of responses to ethical issues reflects the diversification in styles and themes that resulted from the digital turn. It also confirms that relationships between filmmakers and their protagonists and audiences have remained essential to defining the identity of independent cinema in the PRC. Thus, the notion of independence has fluctuated amidst the continuous reshaping of the relations of interdependence in which filmmakers have been embedded. Film clubs and independent festivals provided a platform for these new forms of sociability that were collective, but not in the Maoist sense of the term. It would be more accurate to say that it was a spontaneous, dynamic, and non-centralised mode of organisation in which individuals were interdependent but respected individualities. In other words, it was a way to reconsider social interactions beyond the dichotomy between the individual and the collective (see Cong Feng’s 丛峰 article). However, since independent festivals were strictly forbidden, these networks of interdependence have been partly broken. Independent filmmakers have returned to individual and scattered practices or have entered the domestic market.

Reflecting on the present, looking forward to the future

So, what is next? Formerly independent filmmakers who are trying to make films within the Chinese film industry are now embedded in an even more complex network of interdependence with film professionals and audiences. Those who still refuse to submit their films to censorship continue to reflect on the relational dimension of independence. Some articles presented in the second dossier provide an insight into the recent directions taken by these filmmakers. To give a few examples, Zhang Mengqi (章梦奇), a participant in the Folk Memory Project, has been spending more time in her village since the beginning of the pandemic, while trying to maintain collective work with other participants in the form of regular workshops hold on Zoom. Zou Xueping explains that the subjects of her documentaries have also become the main viewers since the closure of independent film festivals. Gan Xiao'er (甘小二) questions his relationship with Christian peasant audiences to whom he screened his documentary film *Raised From Dust* 举自尘土 (2007), which tells the story of a Christian peasant family. He deplores the lack of access to the general public, but demonstrates at the same time how difficult it is to maintain any artistic quality when trying to pass censorship. Jiang Nengjie (蒋能杰) explains why he believes that making the voices of ‘the disadvantaged and underprivileged’ heard still remains important in order to raise awareness of the public and trigger

social changes. Lin Xin (林鑫) describes the way in which he tries to build a collective memory from individual interviews in order to help the interviewees resist forgetting. Conversely, Li Xiaofeng (黎小锋) argues that documentary films cannot help the people being filmed, and can even get them into trouble. According to him, documentary filmmaking is a cathartic and creative experience that is only meaningful for himself. These examples can be seen as individual attempts to define new forms of social interactions or interdependence after the suppression of independent film festivals and the closure of Chinese borders.

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