

Keyword: Chinese Independent

A Diaspora of Meaning

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Abstract

The political shifts of the last decade have transformed the meaning of two keywords ‘Chinese’ and ‘independent’. These key words form the backbone of dGenerate (dGen) Films’ mission-driven work to distribute Chinese independent films to North American audiences. Whereby in the 2000s an uncompromised definition of ‘Chinese’ and ‘independent’ informed dGen's acquisition policy, the availability of such strictly defined work narrowed to a trickle by the mid-2010s. Significant regulation and new enforcement tactics by authorities drove both a migration of filmmakers out of mainland China and a new negotiation of censorship within mainland China. This, in turn, posed a crisis of meaning. It is through encountering new work by groundbreaking filmmakers, that dGen has embraced more complex, diasporic, and contradictory meanings of ‘Chinese’ and ‘independent’.

In the past thirteen years, since we started dGenerate Films (dGen) in 2008 to distribute Chinese independent films, the words ‘Chinese’ and ‘independent’ have skidded, somersaulted and transformed meaning. When we started acquiring films, we defined Chinese as those filmmakers living and making films in mainland China. We defined independent as the choice not to submit to China’s state censorship system at the distribution stage. In starting dGen, our objective was twofold: to return revenue to ‘Chinese’ filmmakers and participate in the sustainability of their filmmaking practice; and to make available their ‘independent’ films, unmediated by Western points of views, to audiences in North America.

A decade later, we found our two-fold mission to have disappeared, shorn of meaning by changes in laws and political realities. I’m reminded of an independent film programmer in China turned international sales agent who said matter-of-factly, ‘My programming career was ended by the Chinese Communist Party’. There came a time when the independent film festivals in China ceased to operate or went dark to the public. Where before dGen could find a wealth of Chinese independent work to acquire and release from attending these independent film festivals, by 2017, the supply

through the festival gates was choked off. Chinese independent films as we had defined them—films made outside the censorship system by those filmmakers living and working in mainland China—had been driven into the hermetic margins or out of the mainland.

There are terrific articles, particularly ‘Filmless Festivals and Dragon Seals: Independent Film in China’ by Markus Nornes (Nornes 2019) that document in detail this slow-sudden transformation. There was the evening in 2012, when electricity was cut to prevent the opening night screening of a major independent film festival. 2013 and 2014 saw the detention of festival organizers and the confiscation of China’s largest independent film archive. Then a new national film law, the Film Promotion Law, appeared in 2017, forbidding films not approved by censors from screening anywhere in the world, at risk of extreme penalties.

Several independent filmmakers and key figures left during these years for New York City, Hong Kong, Berlin. In 2012, dGen arranged a residency for filmmaker/curator Zhu Rikun (朱日坤) and filmmaker Wang Wo (王我) and their families at the Jacob Burns Film Center. Not long after, they resettled their families in upstate New York and along the east coast. Filmmaker/festival founder Cui Zi’en (崔子恩) and filmmaker Zhao Dayong (赵大勇) are amongst those who have also migrated to the States. Filmmaker/artist Ai Wei Wei (艾未未) set up base in Berlin and now the UK. Filmmaker/scholar Zeng Jinyan (曾金燕), filmmaker/festival founder Ying Liang (应亮) and others found a way to Hong Kong and to sites beyond. Their choices were varied, but often motivated by family safety and personal freedom. A few may have moved in order to continue to stand in a refusal of censorship. Most of these filmmakers persisted in making films in China or about China. Some returned regularly to mainland China, before the pandemic, to continue their film projects.

A larger number of independent filmmakers have stayed in mainland China. And in staying, they are showing how they can tell stories, from their own points of view, and navigate an emboldened and opaque power structure. There are still a handful of films made each year, without submission to censorship, but these films have little to no opportunity to show domestically. For the most part, the filmmakers who have stayed, through immense creative capacity, are negotiating a new impossible reality of meaning, one of ‘independent’ films approved by censors.

Within the world of the dGen collection, an early example of this negotiation is the filmmaker Pema Tsenden. Pema was the exception we made in the dGen collection from the beginning. His films pass censorship. In more than a hundred years of cinema history, Pema is considered the first Tibetan filmmaker to make films about Tibet, in the Tibetan language, with Tibetan cast and crew. To practice his craft and exist as a Tibetan filmmaker in China, Pema must work within the censorship system.

It is through his persistence to make work and his insistence in telling Tibetan stories, that he has created a daring and extraordinary language of cinema, where visual metaphor and narrative allegory create new pathways for meaning to skid, morph, and transform.



Key art from Pema Tseden's *Old Dog*

But during these years, dGen struggled with this shift in meaning of 'Chinese' and 'independent'. Driven by a specific mission, we found ourselves facing a choice. Do we acquire and release 'uncensored' films made by Chinese filmmakers living 'outside' of mainland China? Or do we acquire and release films, 'approved by censors', made by filmmakers living 'inside' mainland China? To acquire 'uncensored' films about China made by filmmakers living and working 'in' mainland China is now, at best, a rare opportunity.

We struggled with these questions. Do we redefine 'independent'? Or do we redefine 'Chinese'? How do we choose, and in choosing, are we compromising or capitulating? We belaboured this debate and sought advice from longtime colleagues in the field. In the end, the films themselves revealed the false dichotomy and provided a path forward through the dilemma. During this period, I encountered the feature-length documentary *Of Shadows* 影 (2016) by Cui Yi (崔谊), a Chinese filmmaker living in Montreal and filming in China. I fell in love with the visual language of her work, it felt new and her point of view distinct, different from anything I had seen. After watching this film, I wanted everyone to encounter this work. The acquisition of her film opened our collection to expand the meaning of 'Chinese'. It now includes filmmakers living outside of mainland China.



An image from Yi Cui's *Of Shadows*

Shortly after, I was lucky to view Yang Mingming's (杨明明) film, *Girls Always Happy* 柔情史 (2018). dGen distributes her earlier medium length film, *Female Directors* 女导演 (2012). In her debut feature, I thought Yang Mingming had found an undeniably fuller expression of her voice. I was stunned by her filmmaking audacity. She dared to expose the bitter rivalry and deep love that ties many daughters to their mothers. She dared to cast a prominent independent film figure as her lover in the film and poke great fun. Here is an artist with a singular and essential point of view on the intersection of gender, power, money and art in contemporary Beijing. Because Yang Mingming lived and worked in China, she submitted and obtained the approval of the censorship

bureau. And yet. I found her film more daring and more exciting than anything else I'd seen that year. Again, I wanted everyone to encounter this work. Driven by that desire, we expanded the word 'independent' to include filmmakers who found space to create something completely new within the structure of censorship.



Writer / director / actor Yang Mingming in *Girls Always Happy*

In the end, the films demanded that we liberate the word 'independent' to account for filmmakers who navigate a totalizing power structure while living and working in China. This liberation allowed us to acquire and release films like *The Widowed Witch* 北方一片苍茫 (dir. Cai Chengjie 蔡成杰, 2017), a first feature shot over ten days, with friends and family, on a shoestring budget in mainland China and submitted to censorship. The films demanded that we expand the meaning of 'Chinese' to include the diaspora of Chinese filmmakers. We shifted our view to include works by filmmakers in Hong Kong, starting with the acquisition and release of films like *Lost Course* 迷航 (dir. Jill Li 李哲昕, 2020) and *We the Workers* 凶年之畔 (dir. Wen Hai 黄文海, 2017).

For American film audiences and indeed the American film industry, there is little to no distinction in these varied meanings of 'Chinese' and 'independent'. The question on this side of the Pacific instead shifts to who and what can be 'American'? In 2021, dGen acquired and released the debut feature of Wang Qiong (王琼), *All About My Sisters* 家庭录像 (2021). Qiong filmed her work in China but had moved to the U.S. by the time she was editing and finishing the work. A film gaining prominence in the 2021 awards race is *Ascension* (2021), the debut feature of Jessica Kingdon, similarly filmed in China and finished in the U.S. Is one film viewed as more American than the other? Last year, the Golden Globes mis-categorized the US-filmed, US-financed and US-released film *Minari* (2020) by Lee Isaac Chung as a foreign film. How does the U.S. industry absorb this slippage in meaning and borders in 'Chinese' films?

dGen, now in partnership with longtime distributor Icarus Films, has worked hard to make these films accessible in as many diverse exhibition structures as possible. This ranges from a founding partnership with Amazon Createspace; to collaborating on a retrospective with MoMA on twenty years of Chinese independent documentary; to regular screenings at microcinemas like UnionDocs and repertory theaters like Anthology Film Archives. We operate in waters roiled by consolidating American market forces and Chinese political shifts. The space for distribution of independent work has narrowed. Theatrical distribution in the U.S. is in a permanent constriction. And despite the

proliferation of online platforms, attention for cinema has weakened. The dominant cultural medium may now be video games.

Words are porous, attempting only to sketch at these deeper contradictions, complicated truths and impossible realities we at dGen and Chinese independent filmmakers navigate each day.

Bibliography

Nornes, M., (2019). Filmless Festivals and Dragon Seals: Independent Film in China. *Film Quarterly*. 72(3), 78-86.