

Keyword: Ethics

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Abstract

This article briefly introduces and evaluates the ethical issues Chinese independent cinema has encountered since it was born. I examine the changes in the boundaries of ethics in defining the concept of ‘Chinese independent cinema’.

Does Chinese independent cinema have its own unique ethics? I think at least it has its own unique ethical issues. When we have defined the term ‘independent’, independent cinema has set itself up with corresponding ethical requirements. The connotation of independence in independent cinema has different meanings in different countries. In the field of Chinese independent cinema, the early concept of independence was derived from a specific historical background. It meant that the production of films was no longer dependent on the old television system and the state-run film studios. It developed its own, new production path, and it also required the subjectivity of the filmmakers. ‘I made an independent film’ – the question is, is it really an independent film that you made? Can you really call yourself ‘independent’? Are you praising yourself for the purity of your filmmaking process, your good motivations, and your ability to make unique works of art?

Therefore, independent cinema does not only require the filmmaker to just be intellectual in terms of the filmmaker's subjectivity and qualification, but it also requires moral awareness. For the limited audience of Chinese independent cinema, independent cinema, which emerged in a unique historical context, must be truthful. It means that it should not endorse certain political ideas but measure and reset everything based on individual experiences and insights. It must express one's own unique experience and individuals' real struggles – all within a particular historical context. It also requires the filmmaker's talent, as well as their courage.

The filmmakers' artistic cultivation, perspicacity, moral awareness, and courage of expression are significant indicators for Chinese independent cinema, in which ethical issues are very firmly embedded. China's unique history of film and television development determines that the independent film, which emerged around 1990, has an important reference; it has its own enemy, the counterpart it must oppose and transcend – the film studio or television station. The primary ethical relationship

behind this is cinema's adherence to reality. I used to call Chinese independent cinema 'honest cinema' (诚实电影). Although since its beginning independent cinema has developed multiple dimensions, this very stringent requirement for realism dominated the ethos of independent cinema for a long time.

Perhaps today, one would use philosophical terminology to discern the relationship between artistic creation and reality, debating in very profound terms about how unprecedented it is to bind cinema to reality. But that is how the history of independent cinema unfolded back then. It had a tremendous cultural impact at the time. And realism still has extraordinary meaning today. Although we cannot impose it on the filmmakers, we must provide space for its existence.

After its production practices and aesthetics had developed further, independent cinema began to be treated with more scepticism. The aesthetic issue was also an ethical issue. At the time, people thought that independent films were too keen on using long takes to present marginalised characters, the poor, and the vulnerable, such as thieves, prostitutes, and gangsters, which in fact indicated their lack of care for reality. Today, perhaps it still conveys the interests of male filmmakers, although caring for the bottom rungs of society is still their principal value.

Independent cinema began to shift gradually. It became more concerned with the 'mainstream' groups in society, with structural issues such as national politics, moving its camera to a certain extent from the poor, the vulnerable, and the suburbs, to the cities and the so-called mainstream groups.

Later on, after 2010, the primary ethical debates in the field of Chinese independent cinema mainly related to documentaries. In particular, the emergence of Xu Tong's (徐童) documentaries gradually brought about an awakening and a long-term debate on the ethics of Chinese independent documentaries. The work of other filmmakers, such as Wei Xiaobo (魏晓波), has also been discussed on various occasions. Can we 'exploit' the subject on such a scale and show the privacy of others to the audience? Of course, some asked, what if everything was done by consent but not by force? From my point of view, people had previously had some private conversations about independent documentaries. Still, ethical discussions had not become widespread, and ethical issues were rarely raised publicly, out of affection for, and in defence of, independent film. In screenings in Hong Kong and the documentary forum of the China Independent Film Festival (中国独立影像年度展) (CIFF) in 2011, this issue was brought up, which stimulated extensive discussion. In particular, the 2011 CIFF established a 'Real Character Award' (真实人物奖) (the first one went to Tang Xiaoyan [唐小雁] in *Fortune Teller* 算命 [dir. Xu Tong, 2009] and *Old Mr Tang* 老唐头 [dir. Xu Tong, 2011], the second to Lao Hao in *Born in Beijing* 京生 [dir. Ma Li 马莉, 2011]), encouraging film subjects to come to the

fore and discuss together the ethical issues in documentaries, as well as the ontological issues such as the relationship between objective truth and represented truth in documentaries. The topic of ethics has since become more and more public. In terms of practice, the independent documentary circle has become more cautious when it comes to relevant subject matter and subjects, which in fact indicates that since then, people have gone through a process of ethical reflection.

Ethical issues in Chinese independent cinema are very complex, especially after independent film festivals were forced to shut down and independent production became increasingly difficult. Moreover, many independent filmmakers have extended their works into the (mainstream) theatrical realm, so the perception of ethics and the sense of self-discipline are also changing. The intervention of commercial capital and higher authorities has placed the field's ethical issues in a larger context, complicating them further. Many issues become increasingly unclear in changing contexts. I suggest that we do not generalise about the ethical issues of Chinese independent cinema but rather analyse them in the context of specific cases. We should consider the context of the time, historical change, and the development of a domestic moral consciousness. In this way, we could obtain constructive views rather than applying an absolute standard and value to everything.

Appendix: Explanation of the annual 'Real Character Award' (Wang Xiaolu, 2011)

The CIFF has created an award for the subjects filmed in documentaries: the annual 'Real Character Award'.

We mean by 'real character' here is a concept of 'archetypal character' (原型人物) that focuses on documentaries' subjects. The term 'archetypal character' is used here in recognition of the relationship between documentary and reality. This relationship is sometimes inevitable and ontological and sometimes unethical. When the archetypal character comes and communicates with us, we can see a reverse intervention. In documentary history, we are familiar with the director using footage of the subject to complete their intervention or interpretation of reality. Nowadays, the subject's presence often has the power to deconstruct the director's work. Of course, this is not necessarily the case.

The purpose of our annual 'Real Character Award' is therefore obvious – above all, we hope it could deepen our understanding of documentary ontology. Of course, we do not necessarily assume that the truth, as stated by the archetypal character, contains a higher authority than the truth as interpreted by the filmmaker. Meanwhile, this does not diminish the subjectivity of the documentary director, nor

does it deprive their right to subjective expression.

The establishment of the ‘Real Character Award’ is also based on recognising the particular stage which Chinese documentaries are at. With the development of Chinese independent documentaries over the past twenty years, more and more ethical disputes have emerged. We do not shy away from the fact that the ‘Real Character Award’ is intended to balance the filmmaker’s authority in interpreting the footage. But we do not advocate an overly strict ethic; we want to create an atmosphere of negotiation.

Again, this ‘Real Character’ will bring out more dimensions of reality. We are willing to trace reality more deeply, to interact and facilitate dialogue with a richer reality. This intention seems to derive from outside the ontology of documentary. This is not the case. We hope that certain realities can be more fully expressed and presented. And the archetypal character has that power.

The above is part of our intention. So how do we choose the annual ‘Real Character’ – or the archetypal character? We want to see if the archetypal character can generate a certain kind of on-the-spot dialogue. He/she should potentially stimulate aesthetic and social discourse in academia.

We also consider how well he/she is represented as an archetypal character, both in his/her own life and in the documentary. We sometimes also need to consider the symbolic force he/she has in history and society, such as their profound representation of a certain aspect of contemporary reality. Of course, he/she may also be a historical figure.

The award does not encourage the artistic creativity of the filmmaker or the performance of the subject. It is more about looking at the archetypal character as a medium to expand scholarly discourse, calling for a warm and caring touch, and inspiring a kind of power to intervene in the present.

Tang Xiaoyan, winner of the first ‘Real Character Award’, as noted below:

We’re inspired by her expression in the film, that is, her courage to live, by the rich social issues she conveyed and by our doubts about her way of living in the film. Her presence will help explore the questions of the ontology and ethics of documentary, as well as to indicate our own existential situation.