

Keyword: Grassroots Exhibition

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Abstract

The term *minjian* (民间) exhibition – or grassroots exhibition – refers not only to the fact that the exhibition institutions are unofficial but also to the fact that most of the films shown do not have a ‘dragon seal’ or ‘studio label’. In China, where censorship is strict, and there is a lack of arthouse cinemas, these exhibitions have offered film lovers a completely different experience of cinema-going and communication. Since the 1990s, *minjian* exhibition institutions have emerged in China, and they have been inextricably linked to the production, distribution, and criticism of independent cinema in China. The vicissitude of *minjian* exhibition institutions is, therefore, somewhat indicative of the cultural values of Chinese society. With this in mind, examining the trajectory of independent exhibition may help us understand changes in Chinese society.

The term *minjian* exhibition refers not only to the fact that the exhibition institutions are unofficial but also to the fact that most of the films shown do not have a ‘dragon seal’ or ‘studio label’. In China, where censorship is strict and there is a lack of arthouse cinemas, these exhibitions practices have offered film lovers a completely different experience of cinema-going and communication. Although not every exhibition institution has its own physical screening space, the existence of *minjian* exhibition has opened up a virtual space for us, which is accompanied by the awakening and rise of civic culture.

1. Emergence

In the mid-to-late 1990s, with the rise of the CD-ROM industry and frequent communications with people overseas, *minjian* film organisations began to emerge. Most of the initiators and participants in these film organisations were young film fans, and the venues were often cafes and bars. For example, the café-brand Sculpting in Time (雕刻时光), which has several branches in China today, was then a stronghold for screening (mainly pirated) art films near the Beijing Film Academy.

These organisations often started by viewing rare foreign classics or art films and then moved on to so-called ‘underground’, ‘independent’, and ‘experimental’ cinema. However, such organisations were difficult to sustain, as their activities were loose and their participants often changed. Many of them were just ephemeral.

None of the early *minjian* exhibition organisations existed for very long, but they had made a profound contribution, as many of their key participants later became significant curators, directors, and critics in China, who have influenced Chinese independent cinema for nearly thirty years.

With this trend, there emerged some relatively regular *minjian* film screening groups in some cities, among which the most influential were 101 Film Studio (‘101’) (电影101工作室) in Shanghai, the U-theque Organisation (缘影会) in Guangzhou, Practice Society (实践社) in Beijing, and Free Cinema (自由电影) in Shenyang.

Founded on 1 October 1996 by only seven people, 101 Film Studio is considered to be the first *minjian* film organisation in China. In 1999, 101 Film Studio changed its name to 101 Film Office (电影101办公室), and all its activities became free and open to the public, while the organisation’s operating costs came from donations from its members. The screening resources came from recorded copies of films from foreign television stations and even some VCDs and videotapes purchased at high cost from overseas.

According to the then-participants’ recollections, many films screened there didn’t have subtitles, and the screening condition was also quite basic, but the screenings were always packed. In 1998, 101 screened Jia Zhangke’s (贾樟柯) *Xiao Wu* 小武 (1997). Perhaps inspired by Jia’s work, some participants attempted to make short films themselves. Around 2007, Xu Yuan (徐鸢), one of the founders, began to curate films for the Shanghai International Film Festival (上海国际电影节), and 101 Film Studio slowly decreased the frequency of screenings.

In 1999, the U-theque Organisation was founded in Shenzhen, and in 2000 it centred its activities in Guangzhou. It was a *minjian* film organisation that combined multiple activities, including screening, criticism, publishing and production. Apart from screening art films and independent films, promoting local experimental films was an important feature of the organisation.

Ou Ning (欧宁) was the founder of the U-theque Organisation, and artists Cao Fei (曹斐) and Jiang Zhi (蒋志) were key members. At that time, Ou Ning used to purchase some niche art films from Hong Kong for screening in the mainland, attracting a group of young people interested in the

subject, many of whom were artists, writers, and media professionals.

In his article, ‘The First Tide in the South and South of the South’ (初潮在南方及南方以南), scholar Cao Kai describes the U-theque Organisation in detail. He suggests that these rare films that circulated in the Pearl River Delta played a significant role in a cinematic enlightenment, which means that the U-theque Organisation indeed had a profound impact on experimental media production in the Pearl River Delta. In 2004, implicated in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* incident, the U-theque Organisation was forced to shut down.

In April 2000, Dong Bingfeng (董冰峰) launched Free Cinema in Shenyang. Most of the core members were students or graduates of the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts and students from the Chinese literature departments of Liaoning University and Jilin University. Their first event was called New Images of China (中国新影像), which focused on the then ‘underground’ and ‘semi-underground’ Chinese independent films.

Beijing’s Practice Society was founded on 1 April 2000 by Yangzi (杨子), who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1998. Inspired by the Youth Experimental Film Group (青年实验电影小组) founded by Jia Zhangke, Wang Hongwei (王宏伟) and Gu Zheng (顾铮), Yangzi’s Practice Society emphasised production more than screening. It is also clear from their manifesto that one of their objectives was ‘to take the right of visual expression away from the aristocratic industry’.

In 2001, Practice Society and *Southern Weekend* co-founded the first Unrestricted New Image Festival (映像展), which was held at the Beijing Film Academy. It is also recognised as one of the first unofficial *minjian* film festival. In 2003, due to a screening at their Nanjing branch, Practice Society was investigated for ‘failing to submit its activities for approval’. In the same year, Practice Society was closed down.

2. Climax

In 2003, the establishment of the three major *minjian* film festivals (Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival [云之南纪录影像展], China Independent Film Festival [中国独立影像年度展], Beijing Independent Film Festival [北京独立影像展], and the prevalence of internet culture, led to the proliferation of exhibition organisations of all sizes, such as Fanhall Studio (现象工作室) and Trainspotting Cultural Salon (猜火车文化沙龙) in Beijing, Tianjin Film Fans’ Kindergarten (天津影迷幼儿园), Chengdu Jungle Screening (成都丛林放映), No. 66 Changsha Screening Room (长沙66号放映室), Kunming Amateur Film Society (昆明业余电影社), and the Luoyang Film Archive (洛

阳电影资料馆)。The participants in these groups were not only film fans in the general sense but also independent film enthusiasts and creators. During this period, a number of well-organised *minjian* exhibition organisations focused on screening Chinese independent films and documentaries.

Around 2010, several *minjian* exhibition organisations began to emerge on a national scale, notably Cinephile Collective (齐放) and Pure Movies (瓢虫映像). The prototype of Cinephile Collective appeared in 2006, initiated by Indie Workshop (影弟工作室) and dozens of other screening groups, venues, and organisers across the country. Cinephile Collective was a collection of many *minjian* organisations that interact loosely and only join together to do some activities or joint screening events when necessary.

Pure Movies was born in 2012, and, at its peak, it held simultaneous screenings in eleven cities across the country. All the members were volunteers who connected online without meeting each other in person. One of the founders, Yang You (杨侑), was at the heart of the organisation. His job had nothing to do with film, but he had contributed to independent documentary screenings for years.

Although Pure Movies was just a *minjian* volunteer organisation, it was to a certain degree well-organised, and included a committee, a film programming team, local organisers, and ordinary volunteers. This ensured the security of film copies and the timely and effective promotion of activities nationwide. The combination of online and offline also allowed for continuity of the activities. Yang You believes that, compared to other *minjian* exhibition organisations, the most important feature of Pure Movies was a large audience and the continuity of activities. He emphasised publicity and promotion, especially on the WeChat public account. In March 2013, Pure Movies' WeChat public account was registered. After a year, it was fully taken over by the Chengdu branch and began to circulate across the country.

3. Undercurrent

Unfortunately, in 2016, the Film Industry Promotion Law (电影产业促进法) was introduced, which imposed strict regulations on *minjian* exhibition and penalties if a venue showed a film without the permission of the relevant authorities. This posed great challenges to *minjian* exhibition in China. In 2019, Pure Movies started to restructure. In addition to setting up a committee, it also attempted to expand its influence by giving talks, programming thematic exhibitions, and putting out calls for films. However, due to the pandemic, among other reasons, Pure Movies' nationwide activities had by December 2021 been on hiatus for over two years, and its key members were 'scattered', leaving the nearly 10-year-old *minjian* exhibition organisation facing closure. In response to this, Yang You

said: ‘It doesn’t matter whether it is Pure Movies or not; there will always be someone doing this (screening).’

It is true that since 2016 there has been a collective decline in old *minjian* exhibition organisations and *minjian* film festivals on the one hand, and the rise of new organisations and events on the other. Many of today’s exhibitions are held in a small number of art cinemas and cultural institutions, which often come with a screening fee. This means that they have to accept a certain amount of censorship, but generally there aren’t too many differences from the previous screening activities. In my view, the new *minjian* exhibition practices that have emerged in recent years have the following features:

1. Guerrilla-style screenings, with which most organisations tend to ‘move from one place to another’, without a fixed venue, and with little continuity.
2. Awareness of copyright has increased. Compared to around 2000, when many of the sources for *minjian* exhibition came from pirated discs or were licensed for free by the filmmakers, today the younger generation of exhibition organisations not only rarely screen pirated copies, but also pay royalties through ticket sales, for example, which demonstrates their awareness of copyright.
3. Short films have replaced feature films. In recent years, there have emerged several short film festivals in China. Apart from their significance in encouraging young directors’ filmmaking, perhaps one of the crucial factors is that the form of the short film is more flexible and can more easily evade the ‘film law’. Therefore, we can see the spirit of Chinese independent cinema in some short films, which perhaps can be understood as another inheritance.

Finally, it should be noted that there are many such *minjian* exhibition organisations across the country, in various forms and at various times, but it is impossible to list them all here. However, I believe that the vicissitude of *minjian* exhibition institutions somewhat indicates the cultural values in Chinese society. With this in mind, examining the trajectory of independent exhibition may help understand changes in Chinese society.