

Keywords: Independence → Freedom → Activism

Author: WU Wenguang 吴文光 Translator: Michelle DEETER

Abstract

‘Independence’, ‘freedom’, and ‘activism’ are three keywords that define my thirty years of independent filmmaking.

Flora (Flora Lichaa of Université Rennes 2) sent me an email saying that she was editing the third issue of *Chinese Independent Cinema Observer* and the focus of the issue was the key words of the last thirty years of Chinese independent film. Flora attached an editor’s note which listed the key words, including ‘underground’, ‘independent’, ‘folk’, ‘digital video’, ‘individual’, ‘direct cinema’, ‘on-the-spot’, ‘ethics’, ‘auteur’, ‘activism’, ‘film festival’, ‘archives,’ ‘margins’, ‘lowest levels of society’, ‘censorship’, and ‘queer film’. I counted twenty-six key words in all.

I am deeply familiar with most of these key words and I could write a long essay about each of them. For example, ‘film festival’ can be described in two parts: one part is international film festivals, which was the only outlet for independent films in the 1990s, and another part is domestic independent film festivals, which was the spark that led to many independent films after 2000. Another example is ‘direct cinema,’ which became the documentary style I pursued in the 1990s because I liked the works of Frederick Wiseman so much. Another example is ‘queer cinema,’ which I understand to be an alternative name for films about homosexual people. I filmed homosexuals, both male and female, around 2000, but I never turned the footage into films because I felt like I was stealing a story that was better told by someone else. Upon reflection, I think I would hate myself for turning them into films. Then there are words that I know all too well but that I do not have a direct connection with, such as ‘censorship’. I have never had any of my films censored. Even though I do not have a direct connection with censorship, I still have an indirect connection with it. Just because my films have not been censored does not mean that I can evade the censors, or that I am able to escape the censorship and monitoring that are present in other parts of my life.

When Flora sent the key words over, I felt that each one represented an important milestone of the thirty-year journey of Chinese independent cinema. These words contained all kinds of different stories. Flora said I

should pick one word and write an essay about it. My instinct told me to choose ‘activism’ (and it was also my first choice), because I have always wanted to talk about the work I created in the period from 2005 to 2020 and because I have a special fondness for this word.

Yet when I started writing, I instinctively remembered the muddled way in which I started filming *Bumming in Beijing* 流浪北京 (dir. Wu Wenguang, 1990) in 1988. I realised that over the past thirty odd years I gradually became someone that embraces activism, but there is a string of words that run through my career. I changed my mind, deciding that I would write about independence, freedom, and activism.

The first key word, ‘independence’ was the most important key word for me in the 1990s. When I started filming *Bumming in Beijing*, I had the vague impulse to film whatever I wanted to film, but I had no idea how to go about filming it. I didn’t even know the word ‘documentary’, much less what it meant. Similarly, I didn’t know what it was to be an independent filmmaker or that this type of person existed. When I went to the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 1991, I learned the English word ‘independent’. Later one of my most commonly used English sentences was ‘I’m an independent filmmaker.’

At the end of 1991, director Zhang Yuan (张元) was preparing to attend his first international film festival. His first film, *Mama* 妈妈 (1990), was to be screened at the Nantes Film Festival in France. I had only met Zhang Yuan a short time earlier. Before leaving for Nantes, he invited me to eat at a little restaurant near his house on Xidan Second Hutong. He told me his English was terrible and asked me to teach him a few basic English phrases. I wrote about this story in my book, *1990*. I mention it here because I want to explain how I embraced the word ‘independent’ then, and how I used it to define myself---what kind of person I was and what kind of person I was not.

‘Independent filmmaker’ is another important key word to me. You could say that it gave me the confidence and conviction to continue filming the things that I wanted to film in the 1990s. Looking back, I realise that when I left my job at a state television station, I needed a new and meaningful way to describe my identity, something that had a nice ring to it. That was my attitude and it seemed to be the attitude of my friends, like Zhang Yuan, Jiang Yue (蒋樾), and Duan Jinchuan (段锦川). This word was the reason that my friends and I stuck together.

Is ‘independent’ just a label? Or has it gradually evolved into a slogan, a flag that is waved, or even a leather jacket that is draped around us? How did ‘independent’ come to represent consistent creation and not just a label? In 1993 I filmed my second film, *1966, My Time in the Red Guards* 我的1966 (1993). In 1995, after I made my third film, *At Home in the World* 四海为家 (1995), I felt like I was stuck in a mire. The way I made documentaries fell into a pattern: find more money, make a

bigger production, go to more film festivals, get more exposure and more awards. If I kept going on this trajectory, wouldn't I just be a slave to a different master? The reason why I left a state television station was to film the things that I wanted to film, so I asked myself, how could I ensure that I continued to achieve this aspiration?

I then asked myself, what is the core meaning of 'independent'? I decided that it was 'freedom.'

This brings me to the second key word I would like to discuss— 'freedom'. Although this wasn't one of the twenty-six key words that Flora sent me, I believe that it was one of the key words for my work after 'independence', as I have explained above. My relationship with this word started in 1998, which was when I used a digital video camera to make *Jiang Hu* 江湖 (1999).

And so, 'independent' returned to its original meaning, which is the freedom to decide things. 'Independent' was not just a flag that was raised, and it was not an empty slogan or unfulfilled aspiration. 'Independent' was a practical and real word, something that could be translated into action.

Thanks to digital video, I didn't have to worry about trivial things like making a proposal, choosing a topic, and talking about money. Using a handheld camera, I could film by myself. I could film what I wanted, for as long as I wanted. So 'filming freely' was not just a dream, it was an idea with legs. After *Jiang Hu*, I made *Diary: Snow on 21 November 1998* 日记: 1998年11月21日, 雪 (1999), *Public Space* 公共空间 (2000), *Dancing with Farmworkers* 和民工一起跳舞 (2001), *Xunzhao Hamuleite* 寻找哈姆雷特 (2002), *You Are Foreigners* 你的名字叫外地人 (2003), and *Fuck Cinema* 操他妈电影 (2005).

I continued in this way until 2004, when I struggled with a new problem. Why did I create things? What was the ultimate goal of creating things? At that point, I hit a stumbling point in my life as I turned fifty. My colleagues were encountering new problems. Perhaps this was the unproductive period of my middle age. My struggles were related to the subjects of my film, that is, the vulnerable groups in society, such as wandering performers and the lower-level migrant workers. I encountered ethical criticism and ethical problems. Was I helping the subjects of my films by filming them? Who was being exploited and who profited? The one behind the camera or the film subject? How much have filmmakers been alert to this or reflected critically about this?

I couldn't find answers, so I stopped making films. I didn't make any new films between 2005 and 2009.

At this time, I got involved in social projects. In 2005, I founded the Caochangdi Workstation (草场地工作站), a space for discussing and learning about film and theatre. In the same year, I started a project called the Village Documentary Project (村民自治影像计划). I made video cameras available to ten villagers. One year later, all of the villagers had finished their short films and the official project came to an end. This project gave me a new sense of purpose. Watching people who normally carried hoes and sickles pick up video cameras to make films that would never be made or imitated by ‘professionals’ helped me realise what gave film its vitality. The upshot was that the villagers did not stop filming in 2006. The project continued in a different form.

When a rock rolls downhill it can take another rock along with it. The rock that was brought into motion after the Village Documentary Project was a project that took place in summer 2010. Ten people returned to their home villages and interviewed people who were affected by the three-year famine and those people a documentary out of the interviews. Many of the participants were documentary filmmakers and art school students born after 1980, and of course the filmmakers from the Village Documentary Project also participated. I was one of the dozen or so people who visited a village, but instead of going to my home village, I went to the village where I was an educated youth *zhiqing* (知青) during the Cultural Revolution. This was the start of a project that was later called the Folk Memory Project (民间记忆计划). It was first called the Starving Project (饥饿计划), because of the two kinds of nourishment that people lacked—historical memory and creation.

The Folk Memory Project was brought into being thanks to the Village Documentary Project; it celebrated its tenth year in 2020. A total of twenty-seven directors have completed sixty-one documentaries.

New questions have cropped up during our ten-year journey:

If interviewing old people about their memories is not merely a temporary expedient for further creation, then what value does the project have?

How should we deal with realities such as lonely older people and children that are left behind in the countryside?

If the reason filmmakers return for their village is not just for making a film, then what other things can they do while they are there?

If art can become a way to be involved with real life problems, then how can art turn into action?

Usually the phrase ‘art activism’ refers to opposition and protest. This kind of activism should always be respected. In a similar vein, if the aim of art activism is to build things for the future, then don’t

we need builders as well as fighters?

Art is intertwined in the realities of villages and makes change possible. For those returning to their village for the Folk Memory Project, this was an attempt at activism.

As of 2018, 222 participants have visited 339 villages and conducted 1532 interviews with older people, which was compiled into an oral history database called the Folk Memory Archive.

In 2013, five participants solicited donations for the installation of a memorial honouring deaths from the Great Famine.

In 2013, five of the participants set up reading rooms in their villages.

In 2020, Zhang Mengqi (章梦奇) created a public space called the Blue House (蓝房子) in her village.

In 2021, Hao Yongbo (郝永博) created a space called the Hao Zhaozhuang Museum (郝赵庄博物馆) in his village.

The Folk Memory Project is still ongoing, and my questions have not been fully answered. Perhaps they can never be fully answered; perhaps new questions will continue to crop up. I am excited that I am able to collaborate with young people and fully appreciate the power of art.