

Yunnan: Another Thread in Chinese Documentary Filmmaking

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The most important Chinese documentaries between 1957 and 1982 were the twenty-one documentaries called ethnic minority social history science documentaries (shortened to ethnic minority documentaries 民记片). You can refer to *Oral History of the Precursors of Chinese Ethnographic Film* (published by Yunnan People's Publishing House, 2015) for more information. At that time, there were many different types of documentary media, such as newsreels and educational films covering military, agricultural, and scientific topics, but they belong to the category of special topic films (专题片). Only ethnic minority documentaries had the quality of documentaries. Ethnic minority documentaries, characterised by their political and academic duality, incorporated politically-oriented illustrative commentary, visual montage, and objective documentation. After the Cultural Revolution, the Göttingen Institute of Science, Education, and Film in Germany collected these documentaries and they became representative works of Chinese ethnographic film. The films were subtitled into English and distributed in Europe and America. Ethnic minority documentaries represented Chinese society of that time comprehensively and were independent from the Western documentary system. Why is it that after so many years, so few Anglophone scholars know of this series? The answer is complicated. My own understanding is that documentaries from former socialist countries are not included in the history of documentary study. For example, we don't know if any documentary series were produced in the Soviet period, we only know that feature films from the Soviet Union were very good. What kind of documentaries did they make? I haven't seen a single ethnographic film from the Soviet Union. *Ulysses' Gaze*, a film by Greek director Theo Angelopoulos, begins with an excerpt from a documentary about a village in Serbia. We don't know what was filmed in Eastern European socialist countries either. In the 1950s, Czechoslovakia cooperated with the August First Film Studio to shoot *The Road Leads to Tibet*, a film documenting the construction of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway. In 2005, we screened three ethnic minority documentaries at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan. The Japanese scholars were surprised, telling us they did not know that this collection of films from China existed. For this reason, ethnic minority documentaries are the most important documentary materials from the 1950s to the early 1980s; in-depth research on this topic is desperately needed. This is what I refer to as the first thread, from 1957 to 1982.

From the end of the Cultural Revolution to the 1980s, changes occurred that led to the emergence of a new documentary films. This was mainly related to ethnological academia. Two organisations played an important role in this process, the first being Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, where I worked. The Academy set up a film crew in the early 1980s to continue to film ethnic minority documentaries in the way that they were filmed before. The crew used celluloid film and celluloid filming techniques. At that time, the concepts of visual anthropology and ethnographic film, which had originated in Europe and the United States, were introduced to mainland China. This revolutionised the

concept of ethnic minority documentaries. People no longer referenced class struggle ideology while filming—rather, they saw the culture and customs of ethnic groups as the most important themes. Visual images were shot as a mean of investigation. It was an extremely complicated and interesting process. Before the Cultural Revolution, ethnology was called Marxist ethnology and it had a system of guiding principles. In the 1970s and 1980s, after the way of thinking changed, we started to be influenced by Western ethnology. We started to shoot what we saw and what we got from our fieldwork. This completely changed our previous approach, that is, using visual images to cater to written commentaries. I took my camera to the villages to shoot and then edited according to the material I had shot. Even though the themes were similar, the meaning and the thinking had changed. Later academics used to view ethnic minority documentaries with a critical eye, believing they had no value and were full of political messages. They wanted to adopt the techniques of documenting the reality.

At that time, only universities and state-affiliated research institutions had the ability to make films. In the early 1980s, the film crew at Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences used celluloid to film the Hani people, while film professors at Central Nationalities University in Beijing filmed the Yao people. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Jilin Academy of Social Sciences cooperated with directors from Hong Kong to make a series on shamanism in northern China. At first, these were filmed on celluloid, and later they switched to digital video, going through both celluloid film and tapes. This is why I argue that China's documentary film has a pre-independent documentary period from the early 1980s to 1990. Why do I put it like that? In 1990, Wu Wenguang (吴文光) finished editing his first independent documentary, *Bumming in Beijing* (流浪北京). Before that, the most important documentaries were ethnographic films. As I just said, from 1984 to the early 1990s, scholars from Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, Jilin Academy of Social Sciences, and Central Nationalities University were using new ideas and methods to make ethnographic films. This new trend triggered theoretical discussions. In 1982, the most important ethnic minority documentary filmmaker, Mr Yang Guanghai (杨光海) (of Bai ethnicity, from Yunnan province) wrote an article in the third issue of a magazine called *Ethnological Research* (民族学研究). The article is entitled 'Retrospect and Prospect of Chinese Ethnic Minority's Social and Historical Science Documentary Films' (中国少数民族社会历史科学纪录影片的回顾与展望) and suggests using the term ethnographic films (民族志电影) instead of ethnic minority documentaries (民记片). That was the first time that a mainland Chinese scholar openly proposed the nomenclature of ethnographic films. This suggestion indicates a turning point in the history of Chinese ethnographic films. State agencies were no longer the predominant force for the production of this genre, and the action of individual academics and academic groups was becoming the main driving force for its development. Some might ask, how could Yang Guanghai make this proposal while he was not well-educated? I asked him this question myself. He said there was a teacher who knew English in the library of the Institute of Ethnology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences where he worked. That teacher was translating a book on visual anthropology and Yang learned of these new ideas from the teacher. Unfortunately, Yang had forgotten the teacher's name.

In 1988, Yu Xiaogang (于晓刚), Wang Qinghua (王清华), and Hao Yuejun (郝跃骏), three scholars at Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, published the first academic paper on visual anthropology. This shows that new ethnographic film genre appeared in China before 1990 and it exhibited continuity—it continued the traditions of the ethnic minority documentaries made between 1957 and 1982, whilst breaking with that tradition in the meantime. It adopted the theories and methodologies of European and American ethnographic films, and eventually evolved into Chinese visual

anthropology today. I think this was a particularly important period that has been neglected by many people. Ethnographic films do not belong to independent documentary films; however, they are intricately connected to independent documentary films. Rather than one being a subgenre of the other, they are both part of a network. Over the past thirty or more years, Chinese documentary cinema has produced ethnographic film (民族志影像), independent film, village film, intangible cultural heritage film (非遗影像), and industry films for television and film. Independent documentary is the most eye-catching subgenre but it is not the only one. It is a bit biased if we refer to all these types of documentaries as independent documentaries. What's interesting is the way these subgenres intersect and how that has become the norm. Some independent documentary filmmakers are not part of the state system but they are identified as ethnographic filmmakers and are able to spend a lot of time doing fieldwork and making in-depth observation and documentation of a topic, a region, or a community, such as Ji Dan (季丹), Lin Xin (林鑫), Feng Yan (冯艳), Gu Tao (顾桃), and Mao Chenyu (毛晨雨). Their films have surpassed the level of most professional film and television anthropologists.

It is generally agreed that *Bumming in Beijing* marked the start of independent documentary in China, while in reality, the material used in *Bumming in Beijing* was originally filmed by China Central Television (CCTV) for the series *The Chinese* (中国人). Zhu Xiaoyang (朱晓阳) (now an anthropology professor at Peking University) was the project manager, and Wu Wenguang and Lu Wangping (卢望平) filmed the series in 1989. Films of that period cannot be called independent documentaries, but the revolution of documentary films had started from within the system. Back then, individuals could not afford analog video recording equipment—filming alone cost over RMB 100,000, not to mention post-production. For this reason, it was impossible for individuals to make films. Only people who worked in television stations were able to film a subject that interested them, because they could take advantage of financial resources, equipment, and editing suite at their disposal. After the incident in Beijing in June 1989, *The Chinese* was suspended. Wu Wenguang took some of the materials that had already been filmed and edited *Bumming in Beijing* using equipment owned by Yunnan Television Station. This was the first film that was completed outside of the system and the first film that observes everyday life from a personal perspective. It established the style of Chinese independent documentaries. After that, the reform within CCTV continued. In the 1980s and early 1990s, CCTV cooperated with television stations from the United Kingdom and Japan to produce special topic films *Heart of the Dragon* (龙之心, 1984) and *The Great Wall* (望长城, 1991). These two films influenced the development of independent documentaries, because *Bumming in Beijing* was only screened in small circles, while the other two films could make use of the platform provided by state television stations to let more people see new shooting and editing approaches. Everyone called this new technique the “butt-following technique” (跟屁股法) because you would follow people around in order to film them. This was not possible before, because in the past filmmakers had to follow the plan and shoot according to the script. Films like *Heart of the Dragon*, *The Great Wall*, *Bumming in Beijing*, *The Square* (广场, dir. Zhang Yuan 张元 and Duan Jinchuan 段锦川, 1996), *No. 16 Barkhor South Street* (八廓南街16号, dir. Duan Jinchuan, 1996), and *The Other Bank* (彼岸, dir. Jiang Yue 蒋樾, 1995) influenced ethnographic films. They were considered to be the Chinese version of observational cinema, and were imitated by many.

When discussing the revolution in Chinese documentary film, it is important to note the changes in technology. One of the key features of celluloid is the need for staged photography. Back then, a roll of film stock would only last a few minutes. If you were doing something and you ran out of film stock, you would have to shout ‘cut’ and quickly replace

the film stock. Everyone had to stop what they were doing, the camera would start rolling again, then everyone took their places, and you could finally start again. Wasn't it staged photography? Besides the political reasons, you have to trace the technical reasons; there were technical limitations. Before the Cultural Revolution, it was impossible to record synchronous sound for ethnic minority documentaries. Filmmakers had no choice but to bring audio recording equipment to collect some sounds and then dub in post-production. The overall effect was rather fake. At the dawn of the video era, most television stations continued to avoid synchronous sound in special topic films; they continued to use dubbing and soundtracks to create the effect. This continues to the present. Reviewers like myself have seen many documentary films that still use the dubbing approach; these filmmakers consider the special topic films from state television, BBC documentaries, and National Geographic documentaries as models of best practice. A lot of people who were influenced by special topic films use this style of shooting. The site itself is not important; it is only there to create an impression. There has been a resurgence of this style.

Digital video (DV) appeared in 1996, ushering in a boom period of development for independent documentaries and ethnographic films. People who had extricated themselves from the system, such as Wu Wenguang, Du Haibin (杜海滨), and Wang Bing (王兵) came to the fore. Before DV, it was impossible to make films without the support of television stations, which was why in the beginning the majority of the independent documentary filmmakers were those who worked at television stations, such as Hao Yuejun (郝跃骏) and Liu Xiaojin (刘晓津) in Yunnan, Peng Hui (彭辉) and Liang Bibo (梁碧波) in Sichuan, and the directors of *Bumming in Beijing* all took advantage of the filming and editing equipment of television stations. Until 2003, at the first Yunnan Multiculture Visual Festival (Yunfest), half of the films came from people working at television stations. Li Xiaoshan (李小山), who worked at CCTV, said that their television station had two capable people. He was one, guiding the editing of some independent directors, such as the director of *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (回到凤凰桥, dir. Li Hong 李红, 1997); the other was a technical expert who helped solve problems that directors encountered. It was not until the emergence of DV in 1996 that individual documentary filmmakers had the opportunity to truly make films independently. The first people who used DV were from Yunnan. Why, do you ask? In 1996, Panasonic held an exhibition show in Kunming and Tan Leshui (谭乐水) of Yunnan Television Station got his first camcorder. He graduated from Communication University of China and soon started his 'visual writing' (影像笔记的写作). In the same year, he took the camcorder from Panasonic to our friend Xu Ye's (徐冶) house (Xu previously worked as the photo editor in chief of *Guangming Daily*). The next thing Tan did was to encourage Wu Wenguang and me to buy camcorders. I bought a Sony VX1000 and took it to Diqing in Yunnan province to make films. Liu Xiaojin used the same machine to film the Cultural Heritage House created by composer Tian Feng (田丰). In between using analogue video and DV, there was a brief period when people used Hi8, but we don't see many works that were filmed on Hi8. The main examples would be *The Elders* (老人们, 1999) and *Gongbu's Happy Life* (贡布的幸福生活, 1999), both directed by Ji Dan. In 2003, her works were screened at Yunfest, making them exemplary of Chinese independent documentary filmed using Hi8.

DV is closely related to the development of both independent documentary film and ethnographic film. As for my own experience, I went to the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences in 1993 to investigate ritual performances. There was no filming equipment available then so I took photos and made paintings. In 1995 I returned to Kunming and joined Liu Xiaojin, Tan Leshui, and Zhou Yuejun (周岳军) (of Kunming Television Station) to form the Compound Eye Group ("复眼"小组). Dragonflies and flies have compound eyes, so we used those two characters in the name of our group.

We made films and held screening events. In 1996, upon Tan Leshui's influence, I bought my first camcorder. I went to film Kawagarbo Mountain in northwestern Yunnan. I have roughly 200 hours of footage, the majority of which is about this mountain. For the past few years I have been editing it and have edited more than ten short films which compose the Kawagarbo series. Tan Leshui continued to film the Dai people and the history of the ethnic minorities survey. Compound Eye Group was active for a number of years. We watched each other's materials and gave feedback. I think that this form of group activities is very important. Sato Ken (佐藤贤), a Japanese scholar, wrote a paper describing the tradition of Chinese independent documentary, which can be traced to literary groups of the 1970s and 1980s. These literary groups evolved into video groups. Liu invited me to act as an anthropological consultant for two documentaries she was filming. One was called *The Story of Guan Suo Opera* 关索戏的故事 (1995) and the other was *Tian Feng and His Cultural Heritage House* 田丰和他的传习馆 (2005). There was a composer at the China National Symphony Orchestra named Tian Feng who was deeply concerned about the rapid decline of folk music in Yunnan. For that reason he moved from Beijing to Kunming and created a peasant school called the Cultural Heritage House (传习馆). It was located in a village near Kunming. Tian recruited dozens of students from a number of different ethnic minorities. They lived and ate together and learned folk music and folk dance. Liu Xiaojin was one of the earliest female documentary directors in China. She started working at Yunnan Television Station, then worked at China Central Television. While studying at university, she was part of a literary group with Wu Wenguang and Yu Jian (于坚). They were students from Yunnan University and mainly majored in Chinese literature. They frequently met at No. 6 Shangyi Street in Kunming. They discussed all kinds of topics, including literature, art and ideals, and created a special space for themselves. No. 6 Shangyi Street was a house owned by Wu Wenguang's father, but it has since been demolished. Yu Jian later wrote a poem called 'No. 6 Shangyi Street' (尚义街6号), putting it on the map of the modern Chinese literature scene. So No. 6 Shangyi Street was such a group. One of Liu Xiaojin's earliest works was *In Search of the Cobra* 寻找眼镜蛇 (1999), a documentary about the work and life of female artists in Beijing. Eventually the Cultural Heritage House closed for various reasons, and Tian Feng died. After the Cultural Heritage House closed, Liu Xiaojin stopped filming documentaries and met up with the farmer-musicians to start Yuansheng Studio (源生坊). Liu Xiaojin is still running Yuansheng Studio today. Artists from different ethnic minorities come to the studio to learn and then go back to their villages to teach heritage music and dance to the next generation. She has used this method to run the studio and also taken many photos. She is in the process of compiling and publishing these materials.

Everyone knows everyone in Yunnan. Poets, painters, and people at the Academy of Social Sciences come together to form a loose network. Yunnan is marginal in a way, but from an anthropological point of view, the margin can be viewed as another centre. If you observed Yunnan from the standpoint of Southeast Asia, Kunming is the hub that connects Han culture, Qinghai-Tibetan culture, Southeast Asian culture, and even Zomia mountain culture. From 1999 to 2002, the Göttingen Institute of Science, Education and Film cooperated with the East Asian Visual Anthropology Research Institute of Yunnan University, using educational resources from the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. A total of twenty visual anthropology masters students were trained through the programme. These graduates constitute the backbone of Chinese ethnographic film production and talent training. At the same time, scholars and philanthropists in Yunnan have worked with these graduates to put on Yunfest for ten years. In 2000 we began Village Visual Action (乡村影像的行动), a project that started in Yunnan and moved to Guangxi, Sichuan, and Qinghai. The project has trained hundreds of farmers and herders to make their own documentary films. We are currently considering how to break the limitations that film puts on visual documentary.

We want to expand the fixed approach of filming, editing, and screening into a framework that includes investigation, archiving, and building knowledge databases. We hope to gradually build a visual database at the levels of individuals, villages, and academics. On this basis, we hope to develop internal and external communication and share among communities and ethnic groups to promote the local culture.

