

Filmed Testimonies, Archives, and Memoirs of the Mao Era: Staging Unofficial History in Chinese Independent Documentaries

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Abstract

Over the past twenty-five years, many Chinese independent documentary filmmakers have attempted to shed light on times and topics that are vaguely, inaccurately, or insufficiently narrated in official history, such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap famine. Typically, independent documentaries focus on ordinary people's memories, and often feature witnesses who survived various political movements. As they investigate sensitive historical topics as independent filmmakers, they have set up distinctive documentary frameworks to present their historical findings in a convincing and compelling light. This article gives an overview of this body of documentaries on historical topics and analyses how unofficial memory is framed and expressed focusing on three main aspects: the filming of oral testimonies, the use of archival documents, and the role of written memoirs in the staging of the past.

Keywords: Documentary cinema; unofficial history; memoirs; oral testimonies; archives

Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years, various writers, historians, artists, or journalists have addressed the history of the Mao era with a distinctive unofficial 民间 perspective.² This phenomenon is paralleled in the cinema circle, even though independent films on historical issues are still rare compared to those on contemporary topics such as urbanization, marginal and vulnerable groups or rural politics. Emerging at the outset of the 1990s, but mostly produced at the turn of the 2000s, Chinese independent documentaries broke with the conventions of official film by emphasizing the position of the director as an author. Most record with a direct, subjective style the experiences of protagonists seldom represented in mainstream productions. Low budget or self-produced, they circulate in China within the shrinking landscape of independent film festivals or other unofficial screenings. They are also distributed abroad in specialized or academic events, and filmmakers such as Wang Bing 王兵 have even gained an important following on the international film festival and art scenes.

While independent filmmakers work in a largely unsupportive environment, those who focus on historical topics face even more challenges. Typically, their documentaries gather testimonies on personal hardships endured during sensitive times such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward. They are often deemed too political for local independent festivals, and too complex or not cinematically engaging enough for international ones. They might therefore be overlooked in China or abroad, even though they constitute important documents on the Mao era and deserve to be discussed as a coherent body of work for their specific aesthetics too.

The first generation of independent documentary filmmakers—Wu Wenguang 吴文光, Wang Guangli 王光利, Duan Jinchuan 段锦川, and Shi Jian 时—became active at the turn of the 1990s. Influenced by the 1980s Cultural Fever and intellectual debates, they were keen on questioning China's recent past and contemporary issues while renewing the approach of documentary cinema. In the aftermath of the 1989 democracy movement, the film projects they were working on in collaboration with national television stations came to a sudden halt. The political repression and increased control over the media and cultural industries prompted these filmmakers to step back from the film institutions and to definitely break away from official documentary aesthetics. This context of production partly explains why early independent documentaries were so few and far between during the 1990s, and why filmmakers carefully avoided sensitive historical issues. A notable exception was Wu Wenguang, who explored the impact of the Mao era on ordinary Chinese people early on. His interest for such a topic was already perceptible in his first film, *Bumming in Beijing—The Last Dreamers*, 流浪北京—最后的梦想者 (1991),³ which encapsulated the despair of a generation of artists at the turn of the 1990s. Soon after, in *1966, My Time as a Red Guard* 1966年, 我的红卫兵时代 (1993), he

directly interviewed five former participants in Cultural Revolution activism. In the 2010s, he filmed *Treatment* 治疗 (2010) and *Investigating My Father* 调查父亲 (2016), exploring his relationship to his late parents against the backdrop of Chinese history.

Independent films on any topic remained rare until the advent of digital cameras at the turn of the 2000s and after a wider and more diverse group of filmmakers emerged along with independent screenings and festivals. In 2004, Hu Jie 胡杰 made *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul* 寻找林昭的灵魂 (2005), which reconstructs the life of a female poet labelled as a Rightist, then killed in jail during the Cultural Revolution. Because of this film on a sensitive topic, Hu Jie had to resign from his career as a journalist, and since then he has unveiled forgotten stories of political persecution in each of his documentaries. Although the impact of his works is hard to assess given their limited circulation, they should not be overlooked as they were widely discussed on social media and very popular in activist groups.⁴

Other cinematic approaches exist among this small group of filmmakers interested in unofficial history. Renowned directors Wang Bing or Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 have both investigated socialist legacies⁵ or periods such as the Great Leap Forward.⁶ In the 2010s, younger independent filmmakers started to document their relatives' experiences during the Mao era on their own (Qiu Jiongjiong's 邱炯炯 *My Mother's Rhapsody* 萱堂闲话录 (2011); Meng Xiaowei's 孟小为, *The Camera of Socialist Country* 匈牙利照相机 (2013)), or under the framework of the Folk Memory Project 民间记忆计划,⁷ a participative oral history initiative on the Great Leap Famine.

As this brief description reveals, independent directors focus on personal stories overlooked, forgotten, or suppressed from official history. Typically, their films gather testimonies of personal hardships endured during sensitive times such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward, differing greatly from official productions in their content, approach, and their methodology. In contrast to mainstream documentaries, their narrative backbone is formed by testimonies from ordinary witnesses. In some of these works, oral history is presented along with other sources and materials, namely autobiographies, archival documents, and images produced by official institutions, or pictures and memorabilia pertaining to the witnesses. Given independent filmmakers' distrust of official documents and images, these materials are neatly distinguished in their filmic use. In stark contrast to official documentaries, independent filmmakers favour oral testimonies over official footage shot during the Mao era. Although theoretically sound, this preference is nonetheless complicated in practice by a set of parameters. First, it is at times impossible to document or represent historical events without relying on official documents, testimonies, or images. Secondly, recording oral history is a challenging task, as witnesses might be unwilling or unable to testify. Finally, formal choices need to be made in order to transmit this unofficial history effectively to an audience who may only have been exposed to official history. As independent filmmakers give a platform to bitter memories of the Mao era, their films' unorthodox view of the past might be rejected or considered untruthful and incorrect. Thus, they elaborated the filming, narrative, and editing methods discussed below to persuade or convince the audience of the historical truth of the witnesses' discourse.

Besides contributing to our understanding of the past, this body of films also raises crucial questions regarding the production, aesthetics, and reception of unofficial historical discourses in China. What methods do independent filmmakers favour to record unofficial memories? How do oral testimonies interact with other materials on the Mao era, and what types of discourses are they producing? Finally, how do independent directors use film techniques to address the issue of historical truth?

This article aims to fill a disciplinary void between history and film studies and evaluate independent documentaries' contribution to historical debates on the Mao era. Its purpose is not to comment on historical events, but to observe how they are remembered and narrated by witnesses, and how they are transmitted in independent documentaries. Before analysing more closely a selection of major works, I shall provide elements of context and introduce the main issues these documentaries raise with respect to historical and film debates.

Independent Documentaries on the Mao Era: Overview and Challenges

Presenting an exhaustive review of independent documentaries on the Mao era is difficult given their discreet nature. The first task was to compile a filmography, by conducting research on the internet and social media, in the catalogues

of independent film festivals, and in some cases, by directly contacting filmmakers to obtain information about their works. Film copies were consulted in research institutions or during screenings in China and Hong Kong. The general filmography appended to this article is titled “Independent documentaries on the Mao era (1992-2018)” and includes forty-six titles made by thirty-two filmmakers. In addition, forty-one films from fifteen participants to the Folk Memory Project (2010-2019) appear in a separate filmography.

Altogether, these two filmographies amount to around eight-seven films on the Mao era, which represents a very small proportion relative to the overall number of independent documentaries produced since 1991. Two documentaries on historical events were made in the early 1990s: Wu Wenguang’s *1966, My Time as a Red Guard* (1993), and *I Graduated!* 我毕业了 (1992). Although the latter focuses on memories of the 1989 democratic movement and does not directly deal with the Mao era, it is included in the filmography for its implicit depiction of the period. These two early attempts were followed only from the mid-2000s onwards, with the circulation of Hu Jie’s investigative documentaries: *In Search of Lin Zhao’s Soul*, mentioned above, and soon after with another film on the Cultural Revolution, *Though I am Gone* 我虽死去 (2006).

A third and more consistent wave of historical documentaries emerged after 2010, with eight films made in 2013 alone, the most prolific year so far. While the first documentaries were mainly focused on the Cultural Revolution—a sensitive but nonetheless officially criticized period discussed at length in Scar literature in the 1980s—the topics became progressively more diverse. Recent films touch upon earlier periods such as the Land Reform, the Great Leap Forward and the famine, or the Anti-Rightist campaign. A few documentaries even go further back in time, beyond the scope of the period under scrutiny, shedding light on the transition between the Republican period and the Mao era. Xu Xin’s 徐辛 *Pathway* 道路 (2012) records memories from an army veteran labelled a counter-revolutionary in the 1950s despite fighting during the Liberation war. Qiu Jiongjong’s *Mr. Zhang Believes* (痴, 2014), gives voice to a former progressive student who encountered similar misfortune during the anti-Rightist movement because of his family background.

At first sight, most of these documentaries resist the assignation of a well-circumscribed historical period. Unlike mainstream productions, they do not present an exhaustive narrative on a particular event, but rather, a record of the protagonists’ memories as they emerge during conversations and daily activities. These documentaries investigate the Mao era from a contemporary perspective and are as such strongly rooted in the present time of the shooting. One of the difficulties in constituting this filmography was therefore to distinguish between documentaries focusing primarily on memories of the Mao era and those explaining contemporary issues by looking at their historical causes.

Some of the titles thus constitute borderline cases: Huang Wenhai’s 黄文海 *We* 我们 (2008) gives an historical account of political activism in China through portraits of persons from various age groups; Zhu Rikun’s 朱日坤 *The Dossier* 档案 (2014) narrates Tsering Woesser’s late awakening to her Tibetan identity. The film starts by showing the writer and activist reading her personal dossier and recollecting her childhood during the Mao era. *Shanghai Youth* 上海青年 (Gao Zipeng 高子鹏 and Wu Meng 吴梦, 2015) is another case in point. The ‘political Lexicon’ published together with the film states: ‘This movie records [the Rusticated Youth’s] later years as an attempt to reveal an episode of history that has completely changed the fate of a whole generation. But in fact, this episode is not concluded yet—we are still in the middle of it.’⁸ Indeed, in this eight-hour documentary, the directors film the ongoing struggle of Shanghai-born Rusticated Youth sent to Xinjiang who have not yet been fully rehabilitated. They regularly organize protests to claim a retirement pension consistent with their late relocation to their hometown. As they reach their sixties or seventies, they are still identified as ‘Rusticated Youth’ 知青 and remain at odds with the current Shanghai administration. Unlike other cultural productions, these documentaries are therefore not filmed out of nostalgia,⁹ but to shed light on the challenges some protagonists still face today.

Comparing past and present daily experiences is another common point of these films. In *Shanghai Youth*, as in other films, filmmakers reveal how past difficulties remain acute for protagonists, which in turn stresses a sense of continuity between the Mao era and today. This is also the case in the Folk Memory Project. In this series of films on the Great Leap famine, filmmakers reveal a situation of persisting poverty in the countryside. Access to electricity, medicine, and even proper food remains difficult for some elderly survivors of the famine, who nonetheless claim that ‘the situation is much better today’.

The loose adherence of these films to the genre of historical documentary and their emphasis on daily life, present time, and continuities has been noted by other scholars. Analysing the ‘personal documentaries’ dealing with the ‘haunting experience of socialism’,¹⁰ Qi Wang attributes this to China’s post-socialist nature, as well as to the identity of filmmakers such as Wu Wenguang, Wang Guangli, and even Wang Bing who belong to what she calls the ‘Forsaken Generation’.¹¹ But the fact that post-80 and post-90 filmmakers are also engaged in filming memory indicates that generational distinctions are perhaps not entirely effective here.

Apart from offering counter-narratives of the Mao era, these documentaries also set themselves apart aesthetically by rejecting the expository mode¹²—a form familiar to audiences around the world for its use of educational voice-over illustrated by visuals. Whereas Chinese official documentaries tend to paint history in broad strokes, following a clear periodization, and focusing on prominent political figures, independent documentaries shift our attention towards the local, ‘ordinary citizens’ and ‘everyday history’, giving voice to personal stories at odds with grand historical narratives. They seldom rely on archival footage from the Mao era, unlike compilation films 文献片 frequently broadcast on Chinese television. When independent filmmakers resort to archival footage, it is generally contrasted with the witness’s account: filmed testimonies are presented as the authoritative narrative rather than the official archive, thus allowing usually silenced or marginal voices to become the main source of historical knowledge.¹³ This amounts to a complete reversal of value between archival documents and contemporary testimonies, and constitutes a fundamental challenge to official history writing.

This choice is neither only fuelled by opposition to official historiography nor caused by a mere aesthetic rejection of mainstream documentaries. It is also and more importantly the result of a lack of reliable archival materials on the Mao era. In a sense, the recent surge of independent documentaries on the Mao era is a direct reaction to a phenomenon of state-engineered amnesia, or what Paul Ricœur calls a ‘manipulated memory’.¹⁴ The Chinese project of state legitimization has generated an historical narrative that omits and distorts, while public discourse on the Mao era is limited. This, in turn, weighs on the very activity of remembrance, which may cause deformed or maimed collective and individual memories. The risks of repeating past mistakes because of history’s gaps and taboos are acutely felt by independent filmmakers, and their films aim precisely at countering this form of amnesia. Filming *1966, My Time as a Red Guard* was for Wu Wenguang, who describes himself as ‘neither a participant, nor a clear-headed external observer’,¹⁵ a way of understanding the Cultural Revolution as ‘the word Red Guard [...] had fallen into a historical abyss’.¹⁶ The documentary is an assemblage of interviews with five former Red Guards and excerpts from propaganda documentaries made during the Cultural Revolution. It offers a nuanced portrait of Red guards by inviting mature witnesses to share memories of their youth. Prompted by the filmmaker’s questions, the use of personal memorabilia and the re-enactment of political songs, their emotional and corporal memory is reactivated, leading some to betray ambiguous feelings of nostalgia while at the same time expressing distance with the movement.

Since Chinese official history reflects the point of view of the ruling institutions, historians and independent filmmakers alike are confronted with ‘the fundamental problem [of] constructing evidence where no documents exist’.¹⁷ Indeed, if past propaganda images are sometimes used as a contrast or a contextual aid in documentaries like *1966*, they certainly cannot provide insights on individual, lived experiences of the Mao era. To fill this gap, independent filmmakers produce their own records by interviewing ordinary witnesses of the Mao era and survivors of past political campaigns.

The renewed importance of personal accounts of historical experiences is by no means specific to China. In other national contexts where documentary films have been instrumental in transmitting a popular memory previously kept away from the public sphere,¹⁸ studies in film and media have revealed the importance of ordinary people’s memories not only to unveil concealed historical facts, but also to act as an agent of change in contemporary societies.¹⁹

Oral history has however its own issues, since it is based on subjective—and at times failing or distorted—memories of witnesses who are presented as ‘ordinary people’. Because they are not sanctioned by institutions, popular memories face issues of authority and legitimacy vis-à-vis official history and expert discourses in mainstream media. In China, the humble status of ‘ordinary’ witnesses may generate distrust: as filmmaker Hu Jie points out, some viewers do not accept his documentaries’ version of history, especially when the films mainly rely on one witness’s account.²⁰

Independent filmmakers' need to provide evidence and convince viewers has prompted them to find specific filming protocols and editing devices aimed at showing that the filmed testimonies are an authentic account of the subjective experience of the witnesses. This is in a way already addressed by the choice of medium—in contrast with fiction films, documentaries are theorised around scientific and legal concepts placing the audience in the role of 'juror of the film as evidence'.²¹ Many prominent Chinese independent filmmakers such as scholar Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明 refer to documentary films as 'evidence brought to the court of society', an idea shared by film historian Shan Wanli 单万里 on etymological grounds.²²

Within the documentary film form, specific filmic protocols and *mise-en-scène* can further reinforce the perceived authenticity of the witness' accounts, and therefore legitimate (or not) their discourses. For instance, unveiling the filming process to show filmmaker and film subjects interacting, displaying undisputable documents and additional footage supporting the witness's claim, or revealing a close link between documents and discourses are common strategies to suggest the authenticity of documentary narratives. What editing and filming techniques do independent directors resort to in order to present their historical findings as consistent and truthful? I will investigate this issue by discussing various answers found by independent filmmakers while distinguishing their films according to the sources and materials they are based on: oral testimonies; archival images or objects pertaining to the witness; and written memoirs. This three-part distinction reflects the varying nature of material used and their historical and filmic value for the directors. Oral testimonies are recorded by the filmmakers and are usually the most trusted material, while official documents generally represent the least trusted sources. The editing of these films might therefore indicate a hierarchy between these materials and the filmmaker's distinctive view on history.

The documentaries discussed here have become over time major reference points. Made by very different filmmakers, they cover most of the period which saw independent documentaries develop (1992–2018) and are all successful in their own ways in articulating an unofficial historical discourse thanks to the memory of witnesses and compelling cinematographic means.

My analysis starts by examining representative works based on the most common source: oral testimonies. The staging of different types of filmed testimonies will be explored, and their significance regarding unofficial historical discourses will be assessed thanks to various examples.

The subsequent section is dedicated to filmed testimonies combined with the use of visual and personal archives (documents or objects belonging to the witness). *1966, My Time as a Red Guard*²³ is an early attempt at narrating the diverse personal experiences of Red Guards, and their current opinion on the movement. By contrast, the more recent *Though I am Gone*²⁴ takes the opposite point of view by giving an account of one of the first murders perpetrated by Red Guards thanks to the vivid testimony of the victim's widower, and rare historical materials.

Finally, I will discuss the relation between written and filmed testimonies, with an analysis of two films based on or related to memoirs written by former Rightists. *Fengming, A Chinese Memoir* 和凤鸣 (2007), is Wang Bing's second film. It is a minimal *mise-en-scène* of the oral testimony performed by a former journalist who was punished during the Anti-Rightist movement and wrote a noted autobiography. As a counterpoint, Qiu Jiongjiong's docu-fiction, *Mr. Zhang Believes*, will allow a discussion on adapting and recording memoirs.

Against Amnesia: Filmed Testimonies, Ordinary Witnesses and Engaged Filmmakers

All the documentaries included in the filmographies rely on oral testimonies. Far from being unquestionable and transparent, 'an audiovisual testimony is always in some sense "staged", staged in that the interviewee would not be speaking if not for the occurrence of the filming, and staged in the sense of being put into a scene, a *mise-en-scène*'.²⁵ To understand independent documentaries on the Mao era, it is necessary to analyse the filmed or 'staged' testimonies they contain, and what Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker call the 'testimonial apparatus'.²⁶ Since the apparatus implies a filming subject, a witness and an audience, this section focuses on the choice of protagonists, the filming method, and the effect on the audience.

The controlled and elitist nature of official history explains why independent filmmakers have turned their cameras towards ‘ordinary people’, that is, protagonists who do not belong to the leadership class, such as elderly villagers in the Folk Memory Project. Launched by Wu Wenguang and choreographer Wen Hui 文慧 in 2010, this participatory initiative aims at recording the rural population’s experience during the Great Leap famine (1959-61). The project was prompted by the looming disappearance of ageing witnesses considered to be the last living sources of popular memory on the Great Famine. Indeed, in the Chinese context, filming testimonies of survivors of political violence appear not only crucial to fill the gaps of official history, but also urgent, as witnesses are passing away without transmitting their experience. The Folk Memory Project core team is formed by young filmmakers from the countryside who regularly return to their home villages to conduct interviews with old people. A series of documentary films, interview transcripts, diaries, and theatrical performances have been produced, documenting everyday life in the countryside now and in the past.²⁷ As most of the old people interviewed were telling their story for the first time²⁸ and no other documents on these individual cases exist, the collected testimonies constitute an important body of unofficial archives for a local history of the Great Famine.

Even when protagonists are presented as ‘ordinary’, or happen to be the filmmakers’ relatives,²⁹ their stories are far from anecdotal, as they depict acts of personal resistance, or everyday life during times of crisis. Similarly, independent documentaries feature forgotten individuals who fought for their ideals and are presented as counterexamples of the State and Party leadership. In the opening monologue of *Looking for Lin Zhao’s Soul*, Hu Jie recalls how he heard about the young Rightist executed during the Cultural Revolution, describing her resistance to the ‘lies and fears’ created by the Anti-rightist movement. ‘Thinking by herself’³⁰ and keeping up writing even while in jail, she became a role model for him and inspired his subsequent works, including *Spark* 星火 (2013). Hu Jie’s investigative style and choice of politically sensitive topics are akin to those of filmmakers such as Xie Yihui 谢贻卉 or Han Song 韩松 who unveil unknown stories of political violence.³¹

To transmit these narratives, independent filmmakers had to create conditions allowing the filmed subjects to tell their experiences in a personal and subjective way. The Folk Memory Project documentaries precisely illustrate this point. At the outset, the young filmmakers knew close to nothing about the Great Famine, a topic almost absent from their high school history books, and seldom discussed at home. Recording old peoples’ memories was also no easy task, as their first rounds of films illustrated. The witnesses failed to remember, to express themselves clearly, or they turned to conventional speech patterns that only revealed a persistent ideological domination or the fear of testifying.³² To circumvent these obstacles and gain the witness’s trust, the filmmakers elaborated participative and performative strategies. Many sequences show them interacting with filmed subjects not as interviewers, but rather as relatives or social workers, even using the ‘performative mode’³³ to speak casually with the witnesses.³⁴ In Folk Memory Project co-founder Wen Hui’s two documentaries (*Listening to Third Grandmother’s Story* 听三奶奶讲过去的事情 (2011) and *Dancing with Third Grandmother* 和三奶奶跳舞 (2015)), she deliberately uses her background as a choreographer and dancer to bond physically with an estranged member of her family, her father’s aunt Su Meiling 苏美玲. The two women often share the screen in scenes where they playfully chat, perform facial exercises, hand and bodily gestures side to side in a mirror-like framework that highlight their ‘female kinship’³⁵ and differences. Their joyful intimacy is palpable onscreen, and these interactions gently and organically lead Su Meiling to tell her personal and often painful experiences as a child bride from a family of landowners. Far from constituting a linear and structured narrative on the Mao era, her testimony jumps up and down the chronology of her life, focusing mostly on the bodily events that have marked the different stages of her existence as a rural woman, using them rather than dates to organize her thoughts.³⁶ These methods stand in stark contrast to many oral history film projects that rely on a systematic testimony apparatus from which the filmmaker seems ‘absent’, so that the witness takes centre stage.³⁷

Instead, Chinese independent filmmakers use a performative documentary mode that underline their presence in the testimony apparatus. Hu Jie’s monologue at the outset of *In Search of Lin Zhao’s Soul*, and the wobbly images betraying his reactions are all signs indicating his existence behind the camera. The filmmaker’s personal and emotional engagement in the testimony apparatus means in most cases his endorsement of the witness’s narrative. During the shooting process, many independent filmmakers form a bond with the protagonists, allowing them to behave spontaneously, which often means more emotionally too. They are often seen bursting out in anger, fighting back tears or expressing resentment. These manifestations of emotions, overt or subtle, play an important role in persuading the filmmaker and ultimately the audience of the testimony’s authenticity. In contrast, the filmmaker’s perceived absence from the testimonial apparatus and lack of engagement with the protagonist generally indicates distance and distrust

towards the witness. To illustrate this, one can refer to a Cambodian ‘memory film’. In *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2012), director Rithy Panh’s framing of his protagonist is remote and unempathetic. The former director of the Security Prison 21 (S21) under the Khmer Rouge regime, Duch is first introduced to the viewer from behind the bars of the prison cell where he is awaiting trial. His narrative is not openly contradicted by the interviewer whose voice remains unheard throughout the film. Ultimately, the filmmaker’s distance and lack of engagement leads Duch to lose his self-confidence and even to contradict himself, hence destroying his testimony’s truth value. Unlike this example, Chinese independent documentaries strive to demonstrate the authenticity of the witness’ account by revealing the filmmaker’s engagement in the testimonial apparatus. Visibly affected by ‘ordinary people’s’ memories of hardships during the Mao era, the filmmakers turn their emotional narratives into compelling testimonies for the audience too.

Testimonies, Archives, and Personal Memorabilia

Although independent testimonies are clearly considered by filmmakers as the most important historical material, objects, official images, and documents kept by protagonists as personal archives may play important roles in their documentaries too. While these various materials are all displayed for their historical and authenticating value, their use varies from film to film according to their status vis-à-vis official history. For instance, in *1966, My Time as a Red Guard*, Wu Wenguang uses propaganda images for expressive rather than merely illustrative or authenticating purposes. The film’s fourth chapter is composed of clips from the 1966 eight-part newsreels series *Chairman Mao Receives the Red Guards for the X Time* (毛主席第x次接见红卫兵) alternating with contemporary talking head interviews with former participants. The faces of anonymous young Red Guards in the newsreel alternate with those of forty-something witnesses in front of Wu Wenguang’s camera. When the witnesses recall this moment of collective hallucination, the slogans, gestures, and exuberance of their youth reappear as they speak, in a faint echo to the mass hysteria seen in the archival footage inserted between the interviews. At this point, the audience realizes that the binary opposition between archives and contemporary testimonies is gradually fading into a more complex and nuanced tableau.

Elsewhere in the film, the witnesses’ personal archives are used to facilitate the resurgence of past emotions and memories, and contribute to further blurring the boundaries between past and present. For instance, the materiality of his personal items triggers protagonist Hu Xiaoguang’s 胡晓光 memory of past gestures. The son of revolutionary martyrs, Hu Xiaoguang joined the Red Guards early on, and he kept many memorabilia from his youth, including texts he wrote himself, or the musical score of a propaganda song that he proudly presents to Wu Wenguang. The filmmaker takes a more active role in this interview, asking Hu Xiaoguang to sing, the camera panning from the music sheet with the lyrics, to Hu Xiaoguang’s face, then to his fingers following the rhythm. Hesitantly at first, Hu Xiaoguang performs a song ending with a call to murder. The camera records a wide range of emotions on his blushing face, from pride and passion in the beginning, to embarrassment as his smile fades when he realizes the implication of the last words. Finally, a delayed laughter marks his return into the present time of the interview and the awareness of the rolling camera.

Analysed in film studies terms, this sequence sits in between a talking-head interview and a re-enactment. It is however not a ‘testimony *in situ*’,³⁸ differing as such from the gestures recorded by Rithy Panh when he filmed former Khmer Rouge prison guards performing what used to be their daily duties in *S21 The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*.³⁹ In this sequence, Wu Wenguang invites the witness to relive the scene, and treats him as an actor playing his own role in the past, a strategy that Claude Lanzmann described as making ‘knowledge incarnate itself’.⁴⁰ Here, Hu Xiaoguang’s physical memory exceeds and replaces his ‘narrative memory’ as he is overwhelmed by anachronistic emotions. The resurfacing of past gestures and language in *1966* seems to indicate that personal archives can trigger remembrance in a similar way as the original site of trauma in *S21 The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*.

1966 gives a complex picture of the witnesses’ relation to history, beyond the clichés of the propaganda footage, and the protagonist’s current critical or nostalgic discourses. The witnesses who are the most critical of the Cultural Revolution such as Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮 and Xu Youyu 徐友渔 acknowledge the fundamental importance of their experience as Red Guards for the construction of their identity. However, those who hold more ambiguous views of their past remain cautious except when Wu Wenguang’s testimonial apparatus tricks them into revealing a subconscious or underlying nostalgia for that time. Hu Xiaoguang says he favoured ‘literary or verbal struggle’ 文斗 over physical violence, but adds that he ‘didn’t think it was wrong to beat people’. Similar conflicting emotions are expressed by the only female witness, Huang Ling 黄玲, especially when she narrates the beating of a school teacher, her face flushed

at once with shame and glee, perhaps. Hu Xiaoguang later concludes that the Cultural Revolution ‘was a historical moment, a glorious one’ that represents ‘the most significant things [he] has done in his life’, even if he ‘does not look at [the events] through the angle of correctness (正确)’. Even though all express distance with the Cultural Revolution in the film’s last chapter, their past political passion remains somewhat alive in their contemporary selves, something that Wu Wenguang reinforces by his choice of mise-en-scène and editing.

The usual function of archive images and documents—representing the past in the contemporary context of the film, and giving historical weight to personal narratives—may also be complicated by their symbolic value as another film demonstrates. *Though I am Gone*, Hu Jie’s documentary about one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution, reveals how teacher and Vice-Principal Bian Zhongyun 卞仲耘 was beaten to death by high school students at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. Hu’s film combines two documentary efforts: the filmmaker’s own footage, and Wang Jingyao’s 王晶珪 (Bian Zhongyun’s widow) photographic documentation of his late wife’s murder. Hu Jie’s investigation is based on Wang’s personal photographic archives and other material evidences, as well as on cross-interviews with witnesses. This double documentary structure, exposed in the fast-paced editing of the opening sequence, is meant to strengthen the film’s historical demonstration. Throughout the film, the intricate relation between the two documentary efforts is consciously exposed for authenticating purposes. For instance, when Wang guides Hu through the school where Bian Zhongyun was beaten to death, Hu’s camera pans from Wang’s analogue printed images to their site of origin, while Wang’s voice reconstitutes the crime scene on- and off-screen, indicating also how he took the pictures. In the editing of the sequence, the material quality of the photographs is emphasised by the camera’s constant circulation between the photo albums, Wang’s hands pointing at them, and the very building where they were shot. These situated testimonies identify the crime scene on the pictures with the site where the documentary is shot, and clearly present Wang’s photos as evidence.

This editing mode is related to Hu’s concern with proving the truthfulness of unofficial history to audiences primarily exposed to official narratives. The film’s authenticating effort is further reinforced in the last part, shot in Wang’s apartment, as the old man decides to show Hu the last material traces of his wife. In a room decorated with reproductions of famous Renaissance artworks, Wang opens a suitcase and displays on the bed Bian’s clothes and the bandages enveloping her body on her last day. While Wang keeps on talking on- and off-screen, the viewer is exposed alternatively to individual and family portraits of Bian, Wang’s photographic proofs, reproductions of artworks, and finally, to the traces on the fabric. For Wang and Hu, the final items constitute irrefutable evidence, since the painted insults, blood, and bodily fluid still visible on the stiffened pieces of fabric are a direct imprint of the victim’s body and testify to the condition of her death with even more authority than indexical photographic evidences. But rather than mere judicial proofs, the mise-en-scène of the objects evokes the conditions of visibility of relics,⁴¹ as Bian’s clothes are preserved and kept away from the profane. Thanks to the reproducing ability of digital film, the stained clothes proving the ‘unique presence’ of Bian, ‘authenticated by contact’ with her body, become a ‘disseminated presence, able to dispense her power everywhere’.⁴² If the personal archives and relics are integrated in the movie for their authenticating power, their staging and the Christian iconography reinforce the symbolical value of Bian’s death, expressing Hu and Wang’s critical stance on the Cultural Revolution. As the documentary ends on this visual memorial to Bian, Wang’s late wife becomes a martyr of communism, and the unofficial memories of ‘ordinary people’ attain a status of a ‘sacred; yet secular historical truth’.⁴³ While in most independent documentaries personal archives are routinely used to prove unofficial narratives, in this film, they also hold the ‘sacred’ qualities of relics. Besides proving Bian’s ordeal, they commemorate a victim incarnating humanistic values opposed to the Cultural Revolution.

While the two films under scrutiny here use similar materials to depict the Cultural Revolution and Red Guards’ actions, the role of objects and the perspectives on history are very different. In *1966*, the glorious memorabilia and the ideals embedded in them are used mainly to reveal embarrassing feelings and memories concealed under an ideological varnish. The nostalgia and embarrassment expressed by some of Wu Wenguang’s protagonists leave an ambivalent impression to the audience, a distancing reinforced by lighter sequences with the female rock band Cobra (眼镜蛇乐队) filmed in the process of rehearsing and performing a satirical song about the Cultural Revolution. In contrast, in Hu Jie’s film, the historical objects hold the ‘sacred’ status of relics. Hu Jie’s mise-en-scène of the widower’s suffering endorses a much clearer rejection of the Red Guard movement. No matter how these two films differ from one another, their mise-en-scène of objects and images aim at discussing and opening perspectives on official and personal archives.

Documentary Staging and Adaptation of Memoirs

Another set of films are based on or closely connected with a textual source: the memoirs of the witness testifying in the movie. These documentaries seem therefore not to be telling ‘anything new’ that the text didn’t previously reveal. What is then the role of filmic renditions of memoirs? The relation between these texts and their documentaries will be discussed in the two analyses below.

Wang Bing’s *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* can be considered a ‘documentary adaptation’ of He Fengming’s 和凤鸣 memoirs published in 2001, in which she recalls her experience of the Anti-Rightist movement. As young journalists based in Lanzhou during the Hundred Flowers, He Fengming and her husband earnestly took part in the campaign only to find themselves harassed, punished, and then sent to two separate camps. There, they endured incessant labour and starvation, maintaining sporadic contact by correspondence. When He Fengming was finally allowed a conjugal visit in the early 1960s, she found out her husband had died a week before she arrived at his camp. Later, her Rightist label continued to impede her career and basic survival, especially during the Cultural Revolution.

Interestingly, her tragic story had already been adapted by writer Yang Xianhui 杨显惠 in a collection of novellas inspired by interviews with camp survivors (2003). This book was in turn adapted by Wang Bing in *The Ditch* 夹边沟 (2010), a neorealist fiction film taking place in Jiabangou 夹边沟 camp and featuring non-professional actors playing the role of prisoners with a striking form of distancing.⁴⁴ In 2018, he released *Dead Souls* 死灵魂, a collection of testimonies of He Fengming’s fellow survivors of the Anti-Rightist movement constituted over a period of 12 years. Likewise, informed in part by He Fengming’s memoirs, Ai Xiaoming has pieced together the memories of these elderly activists in a monumental investigative film *Jiabangou Elegy: Life and Death of the Rightists* 夹边沟祭事 (2017). He Fengming’s story has therefore circulated in various forms between her own memoirs, Yang Xianhui’s book, and Ai Xiaoming’s and Wang Bing’s films, and one could wonder why this narrative remained significant for these different authors. Perhaps the first rendering of He Fengming’s memoirs in a documentary form is the most intriguing of all, since it seems to be the closest to the original text, without however mentioning the existence of the book. Here, I will focus on untangling the formal attributes of this documentary to reveal its specific contribution in transmitting He Fengming’s story.

Like other documentaries made by Wang Bing,⁴⁵ *Fengming* is both a cinematographic achievement in itself, and a preparation to the fictional adaption of Yang Xianhui’s book in *The Ditch*. It constitutes also the first outcome of a long-term investigative historical project on the Anti-Rightist movement that culminates in *Dead Souls*, released in 2018. As ‘research material’, *Fengming* presents itself as a direct recording characterised by temporal and spatial unity. In great contrast with other documentaries, history is only narrated by a single witness, without any additional archive footage or documents. However, this apparent simplicity hides a complex work of historical reconstitution and documentary mise-en-scène.

Wang’s editing creates the illusion of a continuous shooting process carried out over a whole night, by limiting cuts and restricting the variation of frames. At the same time, when He interrupts her narrative to go to the toilet, blow her nose, or switch on the lights, Wang decides to keep filming. These mundane actions seem at first incongruous compared to the gravity of her testimony, but they reinforce the apparent continuity of the interview process, and therefore its perceived authenticity. Locating the testimony apparatus in He’s very ordinary living room also conceals the staging of a testimony so crucial that it should ‘never’ be interrupted, except for natural necessities. In this aesthetic framework, the slight variations of scales and angles, as well as two short inserts showing windows at sunset and sunrise are as much an attempt to recreate the supposed continuous chronological order of the shooting, as they are further evidence of interruptions.

Although orally expressed, He’s memories are visibly based on a prior written account: she expresses herself with a consistency and an accuracy rarely seen in spontaneous testimonies.⁴⁶ Despite the tragic nature of her story, her attitude remains also extremely stoic throughout the film, while her voice transmits memories loaded with extreme emotions (anger, sarcasm, love, pain), something that is rather rare in more ‘spontaneous’ testimonies. Wang’s minimal filming style parallels the witness’s contained attitude: his camera is kept at a certain distance from the protagonist during the

testimony, briefly framing her up to the chest and shoulder during the most emotional anecdote, when she realises her husband died a week before her visit. Wang's distancing is in tune with He's own control over emotion and narration. Reconstructing together the time of the interview and the chronology of the narration, Wang and He could be both credited as the film's authors given the underlying influence of the text on the 'testimony apparatus'. However, the documentary does not merely consist in re-filming He's text. The film's apparent continuity heightens the testimony's perceived authenticity, while the ordinary film setting suggests that her painful experience of political violence wasn't unique. Indeed, in the epilogue she is seen answering a phone call from a fellow survivor, which highlights both that she is part of a group of survivors, and that her activities today are frequently linked to her experience in 1957.

Whereas He Fengming's memoirs are the unnamed source of Wang Bing's film, *Mr. Zhang Believes*⁴⁷ is more explicitly recognized as an adaptation. This unconventional docu-fiction draws from the autobiography of Zhang Xianchi 张先痴, a former Rightist who spent over two decades in political camps. The English title of the book, *China Gulag*,⁴⁸ is an explicit reference to Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Interestingly, *China Gulag* too proved inspiring to more than one filmmaker, as Hu Jie also shot a short documentary on the topic.⁴⁹

Mr. Zhang Believes is Qiu Jiongjiong's attempts to express Zhang Xianchi's ironical conclusion on his experience as a political prisoner. Born in a wealthy family connected to the Kuomintang 国民党, Zhang was a progressive student and a communist as a young man, decidedly opposed to his father's politics and lifestyle. Nevertheless, he was labelled a Rightist because of his family background and the betrayal of friends and fellow writers. After two decades in the camps, he definitely turned his back on his communist ideals and became a 'real Rightist'.

Mr. Zhang Believes roughly follows the chronological order of Zhang's youth until his imprisonment. However, Qiu's editing makes frequent transitions between various filmic materials: interviews, fictional adaptations of the autobiography and other staged scenes conveying Zhang's most intimate memories, as well as surreal sequences stemming from Qiu's imagination. This complex movie would require more elaboration than this article allows. For the sake of clarity, I will focus on the relation between the original text, the staged sequences, and the interviews to discuss the use of textual and verbal sources.

Strictly speaking, the film's documentary footage consists of the protagonist's testimony shot in Zhang's home, in an informal setting allowing the old man to digress often and to speak subjectively rather than factually about his experience.⁵⁰ Shot from behind the interviewers, the black and white images are often half obstructed by curtains or other domestic elements, emphasising the ordinary setting of the testimony apparatus, as well as distance with the filmed subject. But this *mise-en-scène* does not have the same effect as in *Fengming*. Here, the mundane setting highlights Zhang's ironical distance with his personal tragedy and Qiu's casual and at times provocative attitude towards the old man.

Zhang's childhood and youth are depicted in staged sequences with two actors (a child and a young adult), and are adapted from his memoirs, or inspired by conversations between Qiu Jiongjiong, Zhang Xianchi and his wife Yang Wenting 杨文婷. Interestingly, these conversations were allegedly recorded by chance when the camera was supposed to be off.⁵¹ This 'stolen' material, whether staged or in a documentary form, expresses the most intimate stories, unveiling Zhang's sentimental life and childhood in details that do not appear as such in his memoirs. The fictional sequences are shot on a Chinese opera stage located on a parking lot owned by one of Qiu's relatives.⁵² On this cheap and secretive film set, Qiu manages to reconstitute Zhang's Nanjing childhood home and various other places including exterior settings such as city streets and battlefields. Despite its makeshift and theatrical quality, the film set nonetheless renders vividly the atmosphere of Republican China and after, thanks to the creative use of props and painted backgrounds: Zhang's childhood Japanese driver operates a car that is a simple painted replica on a wall, and a series of tableaux reminiscent of silent cinema evokes his time as a PLA soldier posted in a Yi minority village.

Qiu's use of theatrical props in the fictional scenes reveals his interest in using a surrealist aesthetics to reconstitute memories. One sequence shows Zhang as a child reading a novel in a public library, while a cohort of camp prisoners, including himself as a young adult in the 1950s, enters the frame, silently warning him about his fate. Anachronisms and the splitting of characters into several actors are used in other surreal sequences, such as the prologue featuring several

political figures and thinkers. Marx and Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and then Mao Zedong are discussing in the afterworld the necessity of violence to achieve revolution. In this conversation, Mao sounds like the most unabashedly cruel of all, which suggests that this point will be illustrated later. Indeed, at the climax of the movie, Mao reappears, this time played by three different actors sharing the same filmic space, an empty circus or a theatre stage. As in the prologue, the actors are not an embodiment of Mao. Rather, they are 'actors playing actors playing Mao',⁵³ and their role is to caricature three distinct facets of the Chairman. Later in the sequence, the filmmaker himself plays a short cameo role in the theatre backstage area. While one of the actors playing Mao is putting makeup on his face, Qiu Jiongjiong, dressed in his everyday clothes, asks him about the meaning of the 'Five Black Categories' 黑五类 and of 'class origins' 阶级出身. The director is quickly arrested and taken away by a group of soldiers, reminding us of the inherent risks of engaging with history, and perhaps also pointing at those faced by independent filmmakers.⁵⁴

In *Mr. Zhang Believes*, the protagonist's memoirs have inspired the film script, and also the voice-over, which consists of direct quotes from the book, read by Qiu Jiongjiong in the first person. The interviews recorded by Qiu provide yet another source of information complementing the autobiography without any overlapping, since they slightly differ both in terms of content and tone. Since Zhang's memories are documented twice by the adaptation of the memoirs and by Qiu's interviews, the whole film presents itself as a montage of mutually reinforcing cross-references. This strong backing allowed the filmmaker to choose an overtly unrealistic treatment for his fictional adaptation. The fictionalised scenes are clearly presented as playful reconstitutions, marking a reflexive and often comical distance with the historical narrative.

Qiu's use of highly performative and theatrical means is of course in sharp contrast with the filmic treatment of memories in the above documentaries in which the filmmakers strive to legitimise unofficial narratives. Authenticating strategies are nonetheless present in *Mr. Zhang Believes*, even though, beside those contained in the documentary footage, they are used in a more playful way, and for expressive purposes. Acknowledging that staged scenes, especially the surreal ones, are historical fantasies gives the whole film an ironic tone. China's political past is depicted as a cruel circus where idealism is doomed. In this sense, archival photographs and objects, fake (on stage) or real (in the interviews), are not used for their indexical and authenticating power only, unlike in Hu Jie's films. Whereas fake props abound in Qiu's adaptation, they are of course absent from Hu's short documentary, apart from a doctored wedding picture that Yang Wenting jokingly shows him at the end of the film. On it, the faces of Zhang Xianchi and Yang Wenting are pasted on the body of an anonymous couple dressed lavishly for a wedding ceremony, recreating a picture that they could not afford to take at the time of their real wedding.⁵⁵

While documented and archival sources (personal items, memoirs and direct testimonies) form the main material of the historical narrative contained in Chinese independent documentaries, forged images and artifacts can be summoned in these films to address, underline, or allude to a lack. In Hu Jie's *Book of Gelagu* 格拉古之書 (2013), the lack of an original wedding picture refers to the couple's low income and political status at the time of their wedding; in the case of Qiu's film, fake documents and theatrical props point to the lack of transmission of personal narratives of historical experiences. Nevertheless, the forgery is comically acknowledged, which helps to distinguish these props from historical items providing legitimate unofficial narratives.

Conclusion

This overview of the various ways independent filmmakers engage with the Mao era has foregrounded the specificity and difficulties of working in a context of monopoly of official history over the plurality of personal memories. Because they aim at revealing untold stories, Chinese independent filmmakers have mainly focused on interviewing ordinary people and survivors of political violence. Their films therefore collect suppressed or forgotten memories and narratives seldom featured in mainstream media. By doing so, they challenge official history in its approach, method, and narrative content. As a result, many of these filmmakers face political oppression and erasure from the public sphere, reminding us of the years of persecutions and oblivion experienced by the very protagonists they film. Despite mounting difficulties, freedom limitations, and the constant monitoring of their activities, individuals such as Hu Jie, Ai Xiaoming, and, to a lesser extent, Wang Bing, continue their gruelling work on these issues, often in relative isolation.

In this context, to film the memory of individuals whose experience was never recorded, these filmmakers set out to work as independents, engaging affectively and personally with witnesses, and using personal items and archival documents to trigger remembrance and emotions. Their documentaries help reconstruct the struggles of important yet forgotten figures persecuted during the Mao era.

Because the unofficial status of their films might undermine their truth claim, independent filmmakers seek to demonstrate that they convey an authentic expression of the witness's experience of the Mao era. To do so, they use an array of strategies during the shooting and at the post-production stage. Many will emphasise the organic link between the film and its sources – written memoirs, archives, testimonies and personal memorabilia, as in the case of Hu Jie's films, and to a certain extent, in Qiu Jiongjiong's docu-fiction. Most rely on a set of editing devices and a documentary *mise-en-scène* that unveil or recreate the filming conditions, show the interactions between witness and interviewer, and articulate these narratives in an emotional and therefore compelling manner (Folk Memory Project). The staging of testimonies reinforces their perceived authenticity by revealing a personal experience whose emotional content impacts the filmmakers and thus is able to be affectively transmitted to an audience (*Fengming*).

In a context of a monopoly over history and distrust of historical narratives, it is not surprising that filmmakers work in series, or engage in participative projects, and that their films overlap and reference each other as well as literary works. More than just indicating shared interests across the literary and cinema fields, the intricate relations between these works is further evidence of the perceived necessity of validating unofficial narratives by accumulation and cross-referencing. This is obvious in the method of some of the filmmakers: Hu Jie multiplies interviews with various witnesses, choosing the most authoritative ones (usually, footage featuring direct witnesses; emotional testimonies; images containing material evidences such as archival objects, letters and so on). The Folk Memory Project also relies on this strategy of authentication by accumulation of testimonies presented as evidence, ranging from transcribed interviews, diaries and personal notes written by the filmmakers, to documentary films and photographs. This accumulation of witness accounts and their artistic re-enactments in theatrical performances produce a 'body of evidence'⁵⁶ or unofficial archives that are not only aimed at preserving and transmitting the local experiences of rural populations during the famine, but also, at mutually legitimizing themselves thanks to their great number. In that respect, far from outshining each other, Wang Bing's *Dead Souls* and Ai Xiaoming's *Jiabianguo Elegy*, two monumental films both documenting the Great Leap forward and the ensuing famine, consolidate their respective findings and validate each other.

Recording personal memories and translating them into various art forms is also a way of exorcising the historical traumas and political suffering of 'ordinary witnesses'. These documentary depictions seek to repair historical damage and some give the filmed protagonists a heroic status on par with other figures favoured by official history.

This process of rewriting history from a personal perspective is grounded in a critical view of the past and of the legacies of the Mao era as they manifest themselves today. This critique encompasses the official history's disregard for experiences of political suffering. Acknowledging the heavy toll of political history on ordinary people's lives, these filmmakers attempt to alleviate it to some extent, by recording their plight, giving them a space to express their grief and remember their life. This process often starts by turning the gaze towards family members and relatives, and other neglected witnesses of history.

An active approach to repairing the injustices of history is at play in the Folk Memory Project when participants film the whole process of finding out the names of famine victims in each village, in order to erect memorial stones commemorating those who died from the famine. The third and fourth round of films from the Folk Memory Project records this whole process, from the collection of the victims' names through participative interviews to the setting of the stone, and the commemorative ceremonies organised with the villagers. Other filmmakers engage in a similar memorial endeavour. Hu Jie's *Though I am Gone*, discussed earlier, as well as his more recent *Spark*,⁵⁷ both include sequences aimed at commemorating victims of political movements. *Spark* even ends with a list of names, a device that almost has become a trope of 'activist' documentaries and videos on recent events.⁵⁸ The independent filmmakers' attempts at narrating a subjective history of the Mao era seem to be as much a 'historiographic effort, as it is a grieving process [...] both for the collective memory and the individual memory.'⁵⁹

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General Filmography (not exhaustive), compiled by the author and date

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Hu Jie 胡杰, *Spark* 星火, 2013, 100 min.

Hu Jie 胡杰, *The Book of Gelagu* 格拉古之书, 2013, 38 min.

Hu Jie 胡杰, Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明, *Red Art* 红色美术, 2007, 70 min.

Huang Wenhai 黄文海, *We* 我们, 2008, 102 min.

Lin Xin 林鑫, *San Li Dong* 三里洞, 2006, 172 min.

Liu Wei 刘伟, *The Sacrifice* 牺牲, 2012, 62 min.

Ma Zhandong 马占东, *Hai shi wan* 海石湾, 2011, 52 min.

Mao Chenyu 毛晨雨, *I Have What? Chinese Peasant War: The Rhetoric to Justice* 拥有, 新中国农民战争: 修辞学的正义, 2013, 103 min.

Meng Xiaowei 孟小为, *The Camera of Socialist Country* 匈牙利照相机, 2013, 56 min.

Peng Xiaolian 彭小莲, Louisa Wei 魏时煜, *Storm Under The Sun* 红日风暴, 2009, 137 min.

Qiu Jiongjiong 邱炯炯, *My Mother's Rhapsody* 萱堂闲话录, 2011, 106 min.

Saipulla Mutallip, *Qarangghu Tagh: The Villages Afar* 黑山: 遥远的村庄, 2014, 90 min.

Shen Jie 沈洁, *Ghost Festival* 鬼节, 2012, 45 min.

Shu Haolun 舒浩仑, *Nostalgia* 乡愁, 2005, 70 min.

SWYC (The Structure, Wave, Youth, Cinema Experimental Group) 结构、浪潮、青年、电影实验小组, *I Graduated!* 我毕业了, 1992, 64 min.

Wang Bing 王兵, *Fengming, A Chinese Memoir* 和凤鸣, 2007, 186 min.

Wang Bing 王兵, *Dead Souls* 死灵魂, 2018, 495 min.

Wang Yunlong 王云龙, *Comrades in Arms* 战友, 2011, 90 min.

Wang Yunlong 王云龙, *The Spokesman* 代言人, 2013, 69 min.

Wang Yunlong 王云龙, Han Yi 韩翊, *To Justify Bu Qinfu* 还卜琴父以美丽, 2011, 92 min.

Wu Wenguang 吴文光, *1966, My Time as a Red Guard* 1966年, 我的红卫兵时代, 1992, 165 min.

Wu Wenguang 吴文光, *Treatment* 治疗, 2010, 80 min.

Xie Yihui 谢贻卉, *Rightist Li Shengzhao's Hunger Report* 右派李盛照的饥饿报告, 2012, 47 min.

Xie Yihui 谢贻卉, *Juvenile Laborers Confined in Dabao* 大堡小劳教, 2013, 104 min.

Xu Tong 徐童, *Shattered* 老唐头, 2011, 100 min.

Xu Xin 徐辛, *Karamay* 克拉玛依, 2009, 356 min.

Xu Xin 徐辛, *Pathway* 道路, 2012, 113 min.

Xu Xing 徐星, *A Chronical of My Cultural Revolution* 我的文革编年史, 2007, 80 min.

Xu Xing 徐星, *Zuixing zhaiyao* 罪行摘要, 2013, 120 min.

Zhang Dali 张大力, *Looking For the Lost Veterans of 1979 / My 1979* 寻找79越战消逝的老兵/我的1979, 2008, 180 min.

Zhang Ke 张珂, *Youth Cemetery* 青春墓园, 2005, 23 min.

Zhang Min 张民, *My Whole Life* 我这一辈子, 2007, 100 min.

Zhang Ming 章明, *60* 六十, 2009, 184 min.

Zhong Jian 种键, *Try to Remember?*, 2005, 60 min.

Zhu Rikun 朱日坤, *The Dossier* 档案, 2014, 128 min.

Folk Memory Project

Filmography (2010–2019) (not exhaustive), by the author and date, compiled with the help of Caochangdi Workstation's artists in residence

Guo Rui 郭睿, *Grandfather, Great Famine* 爷爷的饥荒, 2013, 75 min.

Guo Rui 郭睿, *The Rivers and Sisterhood* 河流与女人的吟唱, 2014, 72 min.

Hu Tao 胡涛, *Old People and My Village* 山旮旯, 2013, 70 min.

Hu Tao 胡涛, *Legend* 古精, 2015, 93 min.

Jia Nannan 贾楠楠, *My Grandpa's Winter* 贾夫奎的冬天, 2011, 30 min.

Jia Zhitan 贾之坦, *Revolution in Baiyun Village* “一打三反”在白云, 2012, 80 min.

Jia Zhitan 贾之坦, *I Want to Be a People's Representative* 我要当人民代表, 2013, 78 min.

Li Xinmin 李新民, *Back to Huamulin* 回到花木林, 2011, 75 min.

Li Xinmin 李新民, *Huamulin 2012* 花木林 2012, 2012, 75 min.

Li Xinmin 李新民, *Huamulin, Boy Xiaoqiang* 花木林, 小强啊小强, 2013, 76 min.

Li Xinmin 李新民, *Huamulin zhi bei* 花木林之碑, 2014, 70 min.

Luo Bing 罗兵, *Luo Village: Me and Ren Dingqi* 罗家屋: 我和任定其, 2011, 80 min.

Luo Bing 罗兵, *Luo Village: Pitiless Earth and Sky* 罗家屋: 天地无情, 2012, 75 min.

Luo Bing 罗兵, *Luoja Village: Farewell, Luojiang Bridge* 罗家屋: 永别落江桥, 2013, 73 min.

Shu Qiao 舒侨, *Shuangjing Village, I'm Your Grandson* 双井, 我是你的孙子, 2012, 78 min.

Shu Qiao 舒侨, *Shuangjing Village, I Want to Marry You* 双井, 我要嫁给你, 2013, 74 min.

Shu Qiao 舒侨, *Shuangjing Village, I'm a Paralyzed Person* 双井, 我是瘫子, 2014, 78 min.

Wang Hai'an 王海安, *Attacking Zhanggao Village* 进攻张高村, 2012, 86 min.

Wang Hai'an 王海安, *Believing in Zhanggao Village* 信仰张高村, 2013, 71 min.

Wang Hai'an 王海安, *Poeming Zhanggao Village* 诗歌张高村, 2014, 70 min.

Wen Hui 文慧, *Listening to Third Grandmother's Story* 听三奶奶讲过去的事情, 2011, 75 min.

Wen Hui 文慧, *Dancing with Third Grandmother* 和三奶奶跳舞, 2015, 15 min.

Wu Wenguang 吴文光, *Investigating: My Father in 1949* 调查: 1949年的父亲, 2013, 60 min.

Wu Wenguang 吴文光, *Because of Hunger: Diary I by Wu* 因为饥饿: 吴日记之1, 2013, 90 min.

Wu Wenguang 吴文光, *Diaocha Fuqin: Dang'anjuan*, 调查父亲: 档案卷, 2014, 30 min.

Ye Zuyi 叶祖艺, *The Gleaners* 拾穗, 2014, 94 min.

Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇, *Self-Portrait with Three Women* 自画像和三个女人, 2010, 70 min.

Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇, *Self-Portrait: at 47 km* 自画像: 47公里, 2011, 77 min.

Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇, *Self-Portrait: Dancing at 47 km* 自画像: 47公里跳舞, 2012, 77 min.

Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇, *Self-Portrait: Dreaming at 47 km* 自画像: 47公里做梦, 2013, 77 min.

Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇, *Self-Portrait: The Bridge at 47 km* 自画像: 47公里架桥, 2014, 77 min.

Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇, *Self-Portrait: Dying at 47 KM* 自画像: 47公里之死, 2016, 70 min.

Zhang Mengqi 章梦奇, *Self-Portrait: Window in 47 km* 自画像: 47公里的窗, 2019, 110 min.

Zhang Ping 张苹, *Losing Home* 归乡, 2014, 39 min.

Zhang Ping 张苹, *No Land* 冬天回家, 2016, 40 min.

Zou Xueping 邹雪平, *Children's Village* 孩子的村子, 2012, 85 min.

Zou Xueping 邹雪平, *The Starving Village* 饥饿的村子, 2010, 76 min.

Zou Xueping 邹雪平, *Satiated Village* 吃饱的村子, 2011, 88 min.

Zou Xueping 邹雪平, *Trash Village* 垃圾的村子, 2013, 82 min.

Zou Xueping 邹雪平, *Fool's Village* 傻子的村子, 2014, 80 min.

Notes

- 1 This article was initially published as a shorter book chapter in Veg, Sebastian, (ed.), *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019, 137-160. It is republished here with permission from the Hong Kong University Press, with additional updated materials. The text is the result of my postdoctoral research (ANR-RGC project “New Approaches of the

- Mao Era,” CEFC) and also draws on my PhD dissertation *Pratiques indépendantes du documentaire en Chine. Histoire, esthétique et discours visuels (1990-2010)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015).
- 2 See Veg, Sebastian. “Introduction: Trauma, Nostalgia, Public Debate.” In Veg, Sebastian, (ed.), *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019, 1-18. and Veg, Sebastian. *Minjian. The Rise of China’s Grassroots Intellectuals*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
 - 3 *Bumming in Beijing—The Last Dreamers*, 流浪北京—最后的梦想者 (1991). The full references of Chinese independent documentaries on the Mao era appear in the appended filmographies. Other films – fictions and documentaries from China or other countries that do not directly address the Mao era appear in footnotes only.
 - 4 See Judith Pernin, “Independent Documentaries and Online Uses in China: From Cinephilia to Activism,” in *Post-1990 Documentary: Reconfiguring Independence*, ed. Camille Deprez and Judith Pernin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 233-247.
 - 5 Jia Zhangke, *24 City* 二十四城记 (2008); Jia Zhangke, *I Wish I Knew*, 海上传奇 (2006); Wang Bing, *West of the Track*, 铁西区 (2003).
 - 6 Wang Bing, *The Ditch*, 夹边沟, 2010, 112 min (fiction), as well as two documentaries: *Fengming, A Chinese Memoir* 和凤鸣 2007, 186 min. and *Dead Souls* 死灵魂, 2018, 495 min. See my review of *Dead Soul*: Pernin, Judith “WANG, Bing 王兵. 2018. *Dead Souls* (Si Linghun 死灵魂). 495 min. DVD: Icarus Films and Grasshopper Film.” *China Perspectives*, 2019-3, 69-70.
 - 7 This project is discussed later in the article. See also Zhuang Jiayun, “Remembering and Reenacting Hunger: Caochangdi Workstation’s Minjian Memory Project,” *The Drama Review* 58 No. 1 (2014): 118–140; Zito, Angela. “The Act of Remembering, the Xianchang of Recording: The Folk/Minjian Memory Project in China.” *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2015): 20-35; Li, Jinying. “Memory Resurrected in HD: Collective Digital Video Filmmaking as Production of Counterhistory in the Folk Memory Project.” *Camera Obscura* (Durham, NC) 31, no. 91 (2016): 174-185; Hu, Lidan, “Self-Portraiture and Historical Memory: Zhang Mengqi’s Documentary Practice.” *Critical Arts* 33, no. 2 (2019): 29-41; Meng, Jing. “Documenting the Past: Performativity and Inter-Subjectivity in the Memory Project.” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 10, no. 3 (2016): 265-282.
 - 8 Gao Zipeng, ed., 上海青年观影手册 [A Handbook to the Documentary Shanghai Youth], (Self-published, 2015), 3.
 - 9 See Yang Guobin, “China’s Zhiqing Generation: Nostalgia, Identity, and Cultural Resistance in the 1990s,” *Modern China* 29 No. 3 (2003): 296.
 - 10 Qi Wang, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 12.
 - 11 Ibid., 5.
 - 12 For a definition of the various documentary modes, see Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
 - 13 A notable exception is Mao Chenyu’s film essay, where the filmmaker’s voice acts as the witness’s critical account: *I Have What? Chinese Peasant War: The Rhetoric to Justice* (2013).
 - 14 Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 216. For a reappraisal of the idea of collective amnesia in the Chinese cultural context and a reading of Hu Jie’s documentaries, see also Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 320 p.
 - 15 Wu Wenguang, “DV: 一个人的影像” [DV: Personal videos], in 镜头像自己的眼睛一样 [The Camera Lens is like our Own Eyes], edited by Wu Wenguang (上海文艺出版社, 2001), 203.
 - 16 Ibid. 211.
 - 17 Paula Rabinowitz, “Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory,” *History and Theory* 32, No. 2 (1993): 129. Expression qualifying Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), and quoted here, with all contextual and historiographic specificities aside.
 - 18 See for instance Rithy Panh’s documentaries or *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), by Joshua Oppenheimer and al..
 - 19 Leshu Torchin, *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, eds., *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory, and the Performance of Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). See also Camille Deprez and Judith Pernin, eds., *Post 1990 Documentary – Reconfiguring Independence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
 - 20 In an interview conducted in March 2015 in Nanjing.
 - 21 Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real, the Documentary Film Revisited* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 127–242. Full quote: “The legal tradition casts the documentarist as the witness to the original scene (and even more overtly, the interviewee as witness to data unfilmed or unfilmable). But science casts the documentary film audience as jurors of the film as evidence. Documentary mimesis is grounded in assumptions about the nature of evidence that come from using the camera as a scientific instrument,” 141.
 - 22 See interviews transcribed in Judith Pernin, “*Images en mouvement. Pratiques indépendantes du documentaire en Chine (1990-2010)*” (PhD diss. EHES, 2012), 452–6 and 457–62, respectively.
 - 23 A reedited version with a commentary by Wu Wenguang is available online: <http://www.isuntv.com/pro/ct3155.html> (last accessed on 16/10/2015).
 - 24 On this film, see also Jie Li, “Virtual Museums of Forbidden Memories: Hu Jie’s Documentary Films on the Cultural Revolution,” *Public Culture* 21/3 (2009): 539–54.
 - 25 See Janet Walker, “Rights and Return: The Perils of Situated Testimony after Katrina,” in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*, ed. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker (London and New York: Routledge/AFI Film Readers, 2010), 85.
 - 26 This concept was defined as an adaptation of ‘cinema studies’ psychoanalytically informed ‘apparatus theory’ so as to conceive of testimony as “a kind of ideological, institutional technology . . . that produces the details and emotions of suffering in and through the constitution of the spectator subject.” See Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, “Introduction—Moving Testimonies,” *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*, ed. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, 8–14.
 - 27 The project’s participants are also involved in actions aimed at alleviating problems such as pollution, poverty, or the lack of cultural activities and basic infrastructures in villages. See the collection of interviews at Duke University Library: <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/memoryproject>.
 - 28 Except in Luo Bing’s films featuring a villager targeted during the Land Reform who wrote several volumes of memoirs. See Judith Pernin, “Performance, Documentary, and the Transmission of Memories of the Great Leap Famine in the Folk Memory Project,” *China Perspectives* 2014/4 (2014): 17–27.
 - 29 See for instance Shen Jie, *Ghost Festival* 鬼节 (2012); Meng Xiaowei, *The Camera of Socialist Country* 匈牙利照相机 (2013), Wu Wenguang, *Treatment* 治疗 (2010).

- 30 Quoted from the film's opening monologue.
- 31 See Xie Yihui, *Rightist Li Shengzhao's Hunger Report* 右派李盛照的饥饿报告 (2012); Xie Yihui, *Juvenile Laborers Confined in Dabao* 大堡小劳教 (2013); Han Song, *Beida Wuyijiu* 北大五一九 (2013).
- 32 As such, these films are vivid illustrations of sociologist Guo Yuhua's writings. See bibliography.
- 33 See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.
- 34 See Pernin, "Performance, Documentary, and the Transmission of Memories of the Great Leap Famine in the Folk Memory Project."
- 35 Zhang, Zhen, "Staging the intimate-public camera: Wen Hui's documentary practice with her third grandmother," *Studies in Documentary Film*, 14:1, 7. See also Zeng, Jinyan. 2021. "Desiring Feminism in Chinese Documentary." *Chinese Independent Cinema Observer*, No. 3: 142-162. for a feminist reappraisal of the independent documentaries, and Wen Hui's contribution to this body of works.
- 36 As Zhen Zhang states, "By directly facing and addressing the camera together, they invite the public to enter the intimate space of their encounter and participate in the *dajian* 搭建 of a shared public space of women's experience, memory, and world-making." Zhang, Zhen, "Staging the intimate-public camera: Wen Hui's documentary practice with her third grandmother," *Studies in Documentary Film*, 14:1, 17. *Dajian* is a notion developed by Wen Hui in her creative practices meaning "setting-up/building/constructing through human connection" (Ibid. 8). This method has strongly influenced the whole operating mode of the Folk Memory Project, in particular Zhang Mengqi's work. See Pernin, Judith. "Performance, Documentary, and the Transmission of Memories of the Great Leap Famine in the Folk Memory Project." *China Perspectives* 2014/4 (2014): 24-27.
- 37 See for instance Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 276.
- 38 See Janet Walker, "Rights and Return: The Perils of Situated Testimony after Katrina," 85 and following.
- 39 In *S21 The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003, 101 min). On this topic, see Deirdre Boyle, "Trauma, memory, documentary, Re-enactment in two films by Rithy Panh (Cambodia) and Garin Nugroho (Indonesia)," in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*, ed. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, 155-172.
- 40 Claude Lanzmann quoted in "Le lieu et la parole, Interview des Cahiers," in *Au sujet de Shoah: le film de Claude Lanzmann*, ed. Bernard Cuau (Paris: Belin, 1990), 298.
- 41 The editing alternating between Bian Zhongyun's photographic portraits and her "relics" evokes the Turin Shroud, an object bearing qualities pertaining to both figurative and imprinted artifacts. On imprints, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2008), 77.
- 42 Ibid., 90.
- 43 Wang Jingyao claims that his "personal tragedy carries a more general significance." He adds that his interest in Christianity does not reflect a religious faith, but rather, a set of common values of "love and humanism."
- 44 See Sebastian Veg, "The Limits of Representation, Wang Bing's Labor Camp Films," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6 No. 2, (2012):173-187. He Fengming's distanced personal account in the documentary has perhaps influenced the acting in *The Ditch*.
- 45 See Judith Pernin, "La persistance de la misère: *Les Trois sœurs du Yunnan* et *L'Homme sans nom*, études cinématographiques de Wang Bing," *Études Chinoises* 34-1 (2015): 45-72.
- 46 Compare, for instance with the uncertainty of the former Red Guards in 1966, or the interviews of old villagers in the Folk Memory Project.
- 47 This discussion is based on the director's cut (2014, 270 min). A shorter international version of 135 min was screened at the Festival del Film Locarno in August 2015.
- 48 Zhang Xianchi, 格拉古轶事 [Galug Anecdotes] (New York, Taipei: Fellow Press, 2007) was published in the United States and in Taiwan and circulates also on the internet. According to conversations with Qiu Jiongjiong in August 2014 in Beijing, the filmmaker first went to interview Zhang who gave him his book. After reading it, Qiu Jiongjiong promptly wrote a script based on the memoir and his interviews.
- 49 Hu Jie, *The Book of Gelagu* 格拉古之书 (2013). Formally, this short is similar to *Though I am Gone*, with Zhang Xianchi's book in the role of Wang Jingyao's photographs, and his past belongings displayed as authenticating personal archives.
- 50 Another important documentary scene (in color this time) shows Zhang Xianchi and other former rightists reading the official texts and editorials causing their persecution.
- 51 See also this interview by Tang Zehui, '如何亦庄亦谐地讲一个老右派的故事?' [How to tell the story of an old Rightist with both gravity and humor?], 纽约时报国际生活, 22 May 2014, URL: <http://cn.tmagazine.com/film-tv/20140522/tc22chi/zh-hant/>, (last accessed on 29/11/2014).
- 52 Qiu Jiongjiong comes from a family of Sichuan opera artists, and he is also a painter. His most recent film is a fiction called *A New Old Play* 椒麻堂会 (2021) and revisits the history of the second half of the 20th century through the life of an actor.
- 53 Tang Zehui, *ibid.*
- 54 The cast includes independent filmmakers and/or film festival organizers, suggesting an analogy with 1950s intellectuals.
- 55 Curiously, the wedding ceremony of Zhang Xianchi and his first wife is staged in Qiu Jiongjiong's film with a particular focus on the process of taking the wedding picture.
- 56 See Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, "Introduction—Moving Testimonies," in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*, ed. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker, 15.
- 57 Hu Jie, *Spark* (2013).
- 58 Such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. See Ai Weiwei, *4851* (2009).
- 59 Paul Ricoeur, "Histoire et mémoire," in *De L'histoire au cinéma*, ed. Antoine de Baecque and Christian Delage, (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1998), 23.