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The Butterfly Effect: Migrant Portrayal and Globalized Production and Exhibition of Chinese Independent Documentary Films

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Abstract

Chinese independent documentary films arose as practices of “politics of difference” from the early 1990s represented by *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990), which depicts artist immigrants assembled from parts of China at Beijing. Ten years later, China entered WTO in 2001 and then onwards, globalization is kept being displayed as a key subject matter in Chinese documentaries, and the production, circulation and reception of Chinese independent documentary films grow to be more commercialized and industrialized in terms of both content selection and formal patterning. This paper proposes to sample *Last Train Home* (2010), *Up the Yangtze* (2008), and *Umbrella* (2009) as representative portrayals about new migrants in a globalization era to show the changes happened in formal terms. Meanwhile, those films are representative in the way from financing, editing to exhibiting of showing the butterfly effect of globally consumption on cultural commodities. I will argue certain contextual specificities are selectively exposed and eliminated in globalized documentary filmmaking practices.

Keywords: migrant figures, globalization, modernization, independent documentary, documentary aesthetics

“Histories of figures” or “figures in history”: how do these documentaries portray migrants?

In general, what is concerned in *Bumming in Beijing* lies with individual characters, and following individuals they transit to the other side: the true features of history; while as to *Last Train Home*, *Umbrella*, *Up the Yangtze*, and *Inutile*, those documentaries with a pre-arranged planning, are more interested in foregrounding the textuality of history by means of analyzing their individual samples. If Wu Wenguang could represent a sum of independent documentarians, especially those in the 1990s, in one distinguishing way it is through this “histories of figures” concern, which assumes history is not pre-given but only consisted of specificities. In contrast, with co-production background, Fan Lixin et al.’s films suggest the “figures in history” tendency, where history is constructed as a universal process even though there are a variety of different contexts and paths to a “common good”. In China, migrants are parameters of an official process of “modernization”; those who are adjustable to the mainstream process would be accepted while those don’t adapt to the wholeness might feel split and even be thrown away, by the so-called “the wheel of the history”. However, does everyone agree with the homogeneity of history? First of all, let’s go through the figures and histories constructed in both kinds of documentaries.

Bumming in Beijing is shot from an eye-level or even bottom view, in terms of both the camera angle, and Wu Wenguang’s attitude to the characters and the historic period. This film shows a position of “within”. The everyday lives of five young artists are documented, who come to Beijing after their abandoning the state-assigned jobs and thus lose the fixed state of living condition from the provinces, to pursue their artistic dreams but bearing living on the “invisible” margins of society. Although different in profession (painters, stage play director, editor, or free-lance photographer) and gender, they commonly suffer from the unbearable heaviness of being, namely, the state of split between pure dreams and difficult realities. Their split states are consequences in the late 1980s from the eased household register system which endorsed more moving freedom for people to a national wide to flow into urban central cities particularly Beijing. We should note that their pursuit of “pure dreams” is for “a better life” on the spiritual level, essentially “freedom”, while the city like Beijing stands for their imagined utopia. Those floating population was called “blind influx”.

The reason why *Bumming in Beijing* could be defined to take a position “within” is that at first Wu Wenguang (the director of *Bumming in Beijing*) is a member of the “blind influx” himself. After three years’ working as a inside “system” journalist in Kunming Television Station, he quitted the job and moved to Beijing in 1988, the year in which he began to record the raw materials of his five comrades of the same

spiritual and economic situations. His impulse of documenting is explained as a spontaneous outcome, affected by the ethos of a historic period of youths' pursuing spiritual utopia (a free state of living instead of a restrained life) (Lv Xinyu, p. 6). This spontaneity inevitably shapes the formal properties of *Bumming in Beijing*: the loosely organized episodic structure, made of the five artists unrelated life fragments, to expose their everyday split states; long takes record conversational interviews between Wu Wenguang and the individual artist in his/her private room, with the individuals face-to-face communicating/self-exposing to the fixed camera/Wu Wenguang/audiences even at an expense of redundancy; the camera follows details of the actions and expressions of the filmed subjects which could constitute why and how they are there in their social positions. Those formal traits unconsciously characterize many independent documentaries in the 1990s e.g. *The Other Bank* (1995), *Back to the Phoenix Bridge* (1998), etc.

Through a "within" perspective, those documentarians insist to achieve at least two aims, on the one hand, the "documentary impulse" (Braester, Yomi, p. 161-180) and the realistic aesthetics emphasizing the filming subject's relation with objectivity. As a witness on the spot, they give the history its true color through the everyday redundancies of individual experiences, the long take is preferred rather than montage to keep the authenticity and completeness of time and space, and conversational interviews are adopted to let the burying truth uncovered. Subsequently, those documentarians like Wu Wenguang values constructing an intimate relation between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects, which often triggers the problematic of documentary ethics. On the other hand, during the filmmaking process, simultaneously the filmmaker himself/herself finds resonance and identify with his subjects, such as in *Bumming in Beijing*, Wu Wenguang and his five comrades all live and work against the pre-given restrains from the system (household register system, or television system) to individuals. Actually the migrants in *Bumming in Beijing* stand for the "other" to the "system"/the mainstream/the official, while the latter formally is represented by the television documentary especially newsreels aesthetics of "typicality", which is propagandistic but consists of techniques used in "figures in history" group.

Most of the techniques in *Bumming in Beijing* are used to maintain the completeness of an event or the slice of life of a person, therefore guarantee the particularity of the individual. In contrast, the completeness is not the central interest of *Up the Yangtze*. We can notice many a time it breaks done boundaries among stories of single characters, basically from montage construction, to transcend to a level of totality. This film tells a story dominantly from the filmmaker's first-person voice over about his individual experience of "farewell trip" to The Three Gorges on

the eve of the reservoir area submerging, many years after his first tour there as a child brought by his grandfather. A sense of nostalgia runs through the first-person perception and mediation. The subdued texture of his English voice and the comparison between past tense and present tense result in a feeling of witnessing a progressive history, however, from a viewpoint of a heterogeneous culture. Uses of juxtaposition: black-and-white fragment, portraying Chairman Mao swimming in Yangtze, and the folk song, symbolizing the voice from his grandfather, are applied in this film, to make a contrast between the pre-modern and the process of modernization. Compared to Li Hong's *Back to the Phoenix Bridge*, which also adopts first-person narrative to tell the individual vicissitudes of several nannies marginalized in Beijing corners, the voice over in *Up the Yangtze* is not that subjective but rather informative to provide the official temporal homogeneity of proceeding modernization. Besides, two individual fates are sampled in this documentary, a 16-year-old girl Yu Shui, coming from a most bottom family dwelling in an illegal shore side shack which is forced to move out to town before the submerging, and a 19-year-old boy Chen Boyu, belonging to a middle-class family of Chongqing City (a cosmopolitan place as portrayed in this film), both are hired on probation by the "farewell trip" houseboat ("Victoria Queen"). Therefore, the film at least has three ongoing lines: the filmmaker, Yu Shui, and Chen Boyu, an ample narrative stratification. The film spends time to construct the two young's different growing-up pains facing life on "Victoria Queen", and conflicts are created and captured when between them and the Chinese servants on boat who are westernized and standardized. But the biggest conflict takes up at the end with a dramatic situation: Yu Shui as the one who is reluctant to get on the boat is accepted and adjusts to it, while Chen Boyu as the one who wishes to make a fortune on the boat is kicked out. The filmmaker creates opportunities for the filmed subjects to explain why the dramatic ends are achieved, which points to their personalities preoccupied by their different social classes. The sense of fatalism indicates that the documentarian doesn't concern with the authenticity of individual experiences but the relations between individuals and the historic background, namely, the causality between modernization and the individual fates. The specific personal experiences are typified to provide evidence for a historic text. It is interested in the universality of history more than the history of specificities.

Last Train Home also pays attentions to the theme of causality: how the power of "the wheel of history" influences family membership and the fate of new migrant generation, through crystallizing the moment of the Spring Move, the key moments of migrant works' life (as Spring Festival is the only chance once a year for them to reunion and maintain family membership) and the key concerns of the worldwide

audiences converge (the humanist curiosity of a progressive changing China). While *Umbrella* and *Inutile* show their global horizons through the interrelated episodic structures, which suggests the narrative is actually shaped by globalization of production, and individuals belongs to each episode are unaware of their pre-given everyday routine, as a “global worker”. If *Bumming in Beijing* and the alike “histories of figures” documentaries indirectly reflect one historic moment of Chinese modernization, through their focuses on “blind influx”, especially the intellectuals and student dreamers, *Up to Yangtze* category shows more self-consciousness to the historical oneness, and tends to integrate individual fractured surfaces into a wholeness. In that case, their portrayals of migrant emphasize a sense of the individual’s passiveness and attribute their fatal conditions to the social classification which is created by China’s process of modernization. We could see the cause-effect dialectics and “history line” underlying the “figures in history” kind of documentaries, and their grand narrative themes of “family”, “coming-of-age”, etc. as universal appeals are intentionally casted to meet multicultural audiences.

The consciousness of the “Other”: globalized production and exhibition

We could easily get the different perspectives of the recent co-production documentaries and those in the 1990s, as suggested by *Bumming in Beijing* and *Up the Yangtze*, in terms of an “outsider” stance or a “within” point-of-view. However, outside of what and within what? The answer should be derived from an investigation to the subjects of the “other” existing in the two categories of documentaries.

It is obvious and noteworthy that the recent group is by various means connected to global horizons. Take Fan Lixin (the director of *Last Train Home*) as an example, in a self-statement, he emphasizes that the financial crisis of 2009 inspired the production of *Last Train Home* in thematic terms. He claims the suffering of the Zhangs is to a great extent due to the financial crisis, which is caused by “the greed of Wall Street businessmen and nonfeasance of western financial supervision”¹ in another side of the world. Fan Lixin concludes this connection as a typical “butterfly effect”². This concentration and global consciousness is shared by several other filmmakers, whose documentaries put China’s modernizing process into global context to consider, with sensitivity to the subject matters of “vicissitudes of small potatoes in big times” or its variations. Whose attentions are these essay-like documentaries going to attract and argue with? The instant answer is the worldwide especially oversea documentary patrons and buyers, who throw out their curiosities on conflicts and its reconciliation which we could see from the key words of some

¹ Fan Lixin (2009). *Thoughts on 2009 documentary: Fan Lixin*. Retrieved from Sinoreel Web site <http://sinoreel.com/1295>.

Citation is translated by me.

² Id.

documentary investing organizations. Take two examples³, the first one is the “Promising Director Plan” (新锐导演计划) held by Discovery Channel, which at the earliest lade international interests on Chinese independent documentarians through three annual selecting programs. It is worthy noticing what are the topics they assign: “China’s new vista” (2003), “touching stories with Chinese characteristics in a globalizing era” (2004), “Chinese new era: China’s active responses to the tide of globalization and modernization” (2005), “sketching China: using truth stories to portray individual contributions to China’s modernization” (2006). Compared to the second example, CNEX’s annual themes (“money”, 2007; “dreams and hopes”, 2008; “home for next generation”, 2009; “crisis and turning point”, 2010; “youth and citizen”, 2011), as a part of the selective process to investment, we could see their common concern lies with connecting China’s ongoing to the globe context to consider its changes, and the most crucial and universally concerned change is China’s modernization. Literally those thematic assignments are various in permutation and combination, but essentially they crystallize the interests of oversea audiences, which determine the thematic and aesthetic choices of the independent funding-seeking documentarians.

As to *Last Train Home*, various awards from oversea film festivals justify Fan Lixin’s insight into this global co-production and distribution line, as well as a theatrical releasing in Vancouver; however, it’s still hard to imagine an independent documentary being released in Chinese circuit. IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam)’s comment straightforwardly points out its appeals to success, that “it is a breathtaking film, truly reflecting a world widely engaged issue”⁴. As implied, firstly it is an entertaining film of good storytelling techniques, secondly it is able to call forth and meet the expectations of viewers. To put it another way, it is a film both internationalized and professionalized to the audiences of cultural disparity.

Another Chinese documentarian Zhang Yiqing also advocates its internationalization, who claims it as an “internationalized” film, with “storytelling clarity beyond previous domestic documentary levels”⁵. As a documentary filmmaker who advocates documentary viewing engagement and enjoyment, Zhang Yiqing’s

³ About “Promising Director Plan”, see

http://www.gzdoc.com/cn_2006/main.asp?top_menu_id=f9eay04jdo0f220060314130510cate&category_id=1bo1xe00y7g0uc20061010115130cate; about CNEX annual themes, see http://www.cnex.org.tw/cnex_all.php/9.html. Citation is translated by me.

⁴ See an article written by Sun Shaoguang, the cinematographer of *Last Train Home*, retrieved from <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/8828600/>.

⁵ For details, see http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_49e59f740100gao0.html.

claims could be considered as an affirmation on the standardization and professionalization of *Last Train Home* and its self-consciousness on film language maturity. Integrating storytelling techniques into documentary which is supposed to get rid of manipulation on real ongoing (especially emphasized by the independent filmmakers in the 1990s), on the other hand suggests the conception of truth/reality in *Last Train Home*. Obviously, what is truth and how to approach truth are not the main concerns of Fan Lixin, instead, it is what truth can do that motivates him to indulge into the migrant workers' lives whose social class he doesn't belong to; therefore he has to pay out his compassion and imagination to different social existences. However, this rarely happened in the independent documentaries in the 1990s, whose filmmakers persist to reach truth states only after they have identified and formed an intimate relation with the filmed subjects. Herein one of the reasons of the within position of the 1990s group of filmmakers emerges, that the one behind the camera is self-involved on the spot with the ones in front of the camera. At this stance, many an independent documentaries adopt improvisational capturing techniques coined as "fly-on-the-wall" by direct cinema, inputting a large amount of time on the spot, nervously waiting for the instant events to come. When they have collected enough raw materials from the spot, they put them together with minimum operation. However, both *Up the Yangtze* and *Last Train Home* are more rhetoric to different degree, often visualizing social stratum and minimizing interviews which was the authentic way for the filmed character to orally construct a history of his own. Here their constructing freedom is limited. Its implication to us is that documentaries such as *Last Train Home* which relies heavily on the pre-production arrangement to make a story line always clear, more counts on by the audiences' tastes.

Compared to the self-funding conditions of independent documentaries such as *Bumming in Beijing*, which was shot by means of "hijacking"⁶ cameras of television stations, *Last Train Home* is a co-production documentary with various and worldwide funding, sponsors including IDFA Jan Virjman funding, Sundance, ITVS, SODEC, Canadian TeleFilm, CanWest-HotDocs, Canadian Art Concile art funding, etc. and fundamentally, this film is supported by NFB (National Film Board of Canada). All the funding are strived via the method of "pitching", namely, publicly presenting a documentary idea to various oversea purchasers, once it gets funding, its distribution is meanwhile affirmed. Some of the purchasers are from television network such as BBS, Discovery, etc., some of them come from film festival sections,

⁶ By "hijacking" it means a filmmaker who is connected with the system could take this advantage of using the official cameras and identity to shoot his/her own films when the official missions have been completed and the cameras are available to be borrowed. For details, see Xing, Li (2006). *Images being forgotten: Origins of Chinese independent documentary. (Bei yi wang de ying xiang: Zhongguo du li ji lu pian de lan shang)*.

and some are nongovernmental organizations such as CNEX. Different buyers have diverse interests, in order to successfully obtain the funding from them, the presentation should avoid cultural obstacles meanwhile be engaging in terms of both content and form. Obviously choosing a “world widely engaged issue” is vital in the aspect of content, meanwhile generic features are good formal vehicles for filmmakers to achieve attentions, particularly employing the principles of visualizing conflict and dramatics which are common in fictional films, and adopting them will blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction.

Undoubtedly, “pitch” forces competitors to negotiate the portrayals of individual figures in a documentary with the taste of the oversea buyers, and mediate the fragmented everyday life of the subjects into a story filled with contrasts between part and whole, “small figure” and “huge context”; emotional experience is favored for creating story engagement, the grand narrative of “family” or “coming-of-age” is a good choice. However, BBC might prefer more commercialized documentary series, while CNEX advocates “cinematic” and art house documentaries. It is in this sense the presentation of pitching is the crucial process for the documentarians to find their identity and to be aware of the subjects of the “other”. Clearly the “other” to the “pitching” documentaries is the multicultural audiences of a world wide. If those films could be conceptualized as a kind of “multicultural documentary” and then be analyzed, it is more explicit their functioning as a communicating medium between China and the global audiences.

Conclusion

Migrant figure is a meaningful parameter to cut in to explore the issue of modernization and globalization of China, which to a large extent would attract attentions from oversea viewers as a sensitive topic. Set against different stages of proceeding moments of modernization, migrant figures are exposed in various ways. On the one hand, in terms of social identity and classification, the intellectuals, artists, young students or females gathering from provinces to central urban areas with a pursuit for a better life, are replaced by migrant workers from 1990s documentaries to recent ones; however their aspiring after a better life is without change. On the other hand, as *Bumming in Beijing* and *Up the Yangtze* stand for, two groups of documentarians focusing on portraying migrant figures in different historic stages, however, formally and aesthetically different, with emphasis on either specificities of history or universality of history. Consequently, their portrayals of migrant figures show different degrees of self-consciousness of setting individual fates into a historic context.

Compared to the anti-official and against the mainstream attitude which drives independent documentarians to make efforts to give truth/reality/history its true

features rather than to screen a pre-given reality shaped by the dominant ideologies, 1990s independent documentaries indicate the filming subjects identify themselves as the other to the official “system”. While co-production documentaries are aware of employing storytelling charms to realize their role of communicator to stand in front of audiences coming from various cultural backgrounds. Those documentaries suggest a potential for Chinese independent documentary to be professionalized, standardized, and commercialized. However, to what criteria do those documentaries professionalized, standardized and commercialized? If that is the criteria attributed by the western cinematic traditions, will that meet the domestic documentary market?

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