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BY KERRINE GOH
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Independent Documentary Film in China



The independent documentaries began to exhibit in China around year 2000. From the beginning it was revealed as an interesting media capable to bring to the Chinese audience both domestic and foreign information. The accuracy and depth with which this genre gets to represent the social reality of China, have helped it to achieve the recognition as one of the most energetic and dynamic fields in the contemporary cultural production.

"Independent Documentary" is known in China as taking place outside the

official platforms, with enough autonomy that allows it to show an alternative reality outside the institutional discourse. In a country where all cultural contents must be reviewed and approved by a censorship committee, the independent documentary film sector turns out to be one of the most effective formats when it comes to avoiding censorship to show different sides of the complex reality.

Perhaps this is the reason why many Chinese visual artists, under the feeling that their creativity is forced to become trapped in order to serve the interests coming many times from the market economy and others from the patriotic discourse, choose this way to show their subjective version of reality which is often banned in their artistic creations. Since back in the 90's Wu Wenguang set the precedent to document, camera in hand, the life of that time Beijing, numerous multidisciplinary artists like Ai Weiwei, Cao Fei, Hai Bo, Li Yifan and Jiang Zhi among many others, have repeatedly used this media to approach the different audiences with their points of view, thoughts and reflections about the multiple social realities of the Asiatic giant.

The topics these film directors like to put across are usually social problems, especially addressed to the population lifestyle, rural and urban realities, the effects of globalization and predatory urbanization, and migratory movements, in order to give the voice to new emerging cultures, ethnic minorities and the incipient civil society, to show the audience a heartbreaking reality totally opposite and separate from the official speech in many cases.

But working detached from the official platform involves, besides the risk of censorship, the lack of funding for projects as another major problem. At present there is no formal system for raising the funds necessary for these productions, and of course, Chinese television channels, always under the control of national or regional governments, don't appear to be positioned in the near future as promoters of these type of production or exhibition. Therefore, most of the times must be private funds that directors themselves are forced to look for in order to produce their works, or often must be themselves with their own capital who fund their own projects. Regarding the exhibition, it will be festivals, competitions or alternative prizes which are responsible to provide any visibility and recognition to the film directors and their documentaries.

As a result the directors are forced to work with very tight budgets. While new technologies such as *Digital Video* are helping to produce good quality documentaries with reduced costs, the budget shortages favor the development of creativity, resulting in the growth of formulas and singular solutions: from the use of the real characters as the starring actors, to the altruistic engagement of colleagues and friends in the production process in order to provide their vision, knowledge and experience for the correct implementation of the project.

Surprisingly, and despite the short career and the commented difficulties, today China concentrates the largest independent documentary film production worldwide. This is because the restlessness and creative energy of young Chinese population are not comparable in other places of the planet. Some international organizations are recently interested in financing some documentary projects, but are actually the new Chinese non-profit organizations, timidly created under the country opening process, which are responsible for providing funds and support the production, distribution and exhibition of these documentaries.

In 2001 Zhu Rikun established the **Fanhall Films Studio**, which through its web www.fanhall.com would be the first platform that aims to connect different audiences with the Chinese independent documentary production. This helped that, in 2003, two new film festivals began to give visibility for independent productions which today have emerged as important platforms for the independent film promotion: the **Yunnan Multiculture Film Festival** in Kunming and the **Independent China Film Festival** held in the city of Nanjing. In 2005 two new channels were established in Beijing: the **Caochangdi Workstation**, independently developed by the film director Wu Wenguang, and the **Indie Workshop** with the Beijing Film Academy support. Both aimed at expanding the independent production knowledge in China. In 2006 was the renowned art critic Li Xianting who, from the artistic community of Songzhuang, founded the **Li Xianting's Film Fund**, and in 2009, located in the now world-famous art district of 798 **Iberia Center for Contemporary Art**, would give shelter to **CIFA**, the Chinese Independent Film Archive, which recently began its solo career.

What characterizes all these organizations is their academic orientation and their interest on the independent film can be considered as another artistic icon in what today are Contemporary Art and Culture. All the

organizations still retain an active role, not just supporting the production and exhibition by recording studios and screening halls, but promoting the research, documentation and collection of the documentary founds forming the phenomenon of Chinese Independent Documentary too.

However, while in the beginning *Internet* was one of the main allies of these productions by facilitating the films distribution and visualization, today, ten years later, the tight control that the Chinese Government still exercises on this media due to its ability to reveal itself as a threat against the social control and population stability, limits seriously the role of the biggest global digital platform. As a result, the independent Chinese documentary seeks its own alternative channels by partnering with other independent initiatives like literature, poetry and other art forms developed in undergrounds circuits, establishing a vibrant and creative network and a restless community of thinkers, analysts, producers and critics.

But the question arises, and in the unlikely event that China's civil society will ever be able to open doors to the democratic system, is it going to be able to keep up the creative energy, freshness, independence, and the singularity that today characterize the Chinese Independent Documentary?

by Esteban Andueza

Esteban Andueza is an Spanish Art Curator based in Beijing. Graduated in Asian Studies and Master in Collecting Contemporary Art, he works in different independent and institutional projects for artistic and cultural exchange between Spain/Europe and China/Asia. Recently he is developing a Chinese Independent Documentary Film Program to show in different cities in Spain.

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