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From Dogma to Polyphony: Aspects of ‘Democratisation’ in Chinese TV Documentaries

Working Paper No. 114

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National Library of Australia.
ISBN: 86905-904-1
ISSN: 1037-4612
INTRODUCTION

The transformations which we are able to observe in Chinese documentary films are not merely changes in style, but generic shifts that reveal substantial modifications in the attitude of the Chinese Government towards the media under market pressure, as well as in the face of radical changes in the horizon of viewing expectations amongst China’s mass media audiences. These changes, the paper argues, are indicators of a society in the process towards ‘democratisation’ and regime modification, a process in which the media are playing an increasingly significant role.

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Signs of ‘democratisation’ in the Chinese media

Since the introduction of the market economy in the 1980s, the Chinese media have been regarded as playing a dual role: to serve the Party and to serve the market, whereby the Party was, and still is, a clear priority. In recent years however, and especially after 1993, we have seen a loosening of this equation towards favouring the demands of the market. The most obvious features here are the transition from sender-centred media to audience-centred media, and the change from the conception of TV as serving the major function of ‘educational tool’ to one of a multi-functional ‘information & entertainment provider’, (Yu 2003: 6) from a local and national outlook to a global perspective, and to aiming for competition with international mainstream media systems.

This change is still primarily a top down process, a shift of the Government’s attitudes towards media from regarding media as ‘political textbook’ producer to a view of the media as a multiple role player, including information and entertainment news provider. After the student democracy movement in 1989, the Government faced the triple problem of meng (boredom), qi (anger), huo (puzzlement) in the media market. As an immediate response the Ministry of Propaganda proposed zhuada fangxiao (controlling the large media institutions while relaxing control over the small stations) and zhuazhong fangbian (controlling centre, while loosening of the margin). A consequence of this policy was that small and media institutes in the margin enjoyed more freedom than the mainstream media institutes at the centre. To meet the challenge of public boredom, the Government allowed the state media to enter the domain of commercial entertainment programming, such as soaps and comedies, as well as partly lifting the embargo on media products from Hong Kong and Taiwan. To
alleviate the pent up public anger, the Government began to permit elites to explore alternative and critical views in the popular, even if politically marginal, press, such as evening and weekend newspapers. The Government also encouraged the CCTV to develop investigative programmes such as Focus (Jiaodian fangtan), News Probe (Xinwen diaocha) exposing corruption and injustice at local and marginal levels, as well as exploring a range of social concerns. The third stage in the Government response, dealing effectively with public huo or puzzlement, is still evolving today, with policies encouraging the provision of information and knowledge. In this respect, a massive investment in current affairs programs, programs about the West, and programs on commerce, science, and new laws are relevant.

The change of attitude also showed itself in the Government’s policies toward establishing commercially viable media groups able to compete with media entering China from the West, from Hong Kong and Taiwan, after China’s successful membership application to the WTO. From 1997, media institutions have been gradually grouped together to establish new and large media conglomerates combining print, publishing, TV, film, and radio in one institution. The significance of this move lies in the decision by the Chinese Government to commit itself to treating the media as business enterprises rather than solely as institutions serving the ideological super-structure of the state. Zhu Rongji’s description of the CCTV as qunzhong houshe or ‘media as the mouth of masses’ in 1998 signalled a sharp deviation from the Party’s principle of the ‘media as the mouth of the Party’. That this kind of shift has not occurred without tension within Government is well illustrated by the Minister of Propaganda’s immediate qualification that nevertheless ‘first, the media should be the mouth of the Party’.

The year 2002 to 2003 saw at least two important reform attempts in Chinese broadcasting: the separation of broadcasting from production, and the operation of channels according to commercially profitable principles. As a result, a large number of semi-dependent and independent production companies have already evolved. Eight channels of sports, transportation, film, arts, music, lifestyle, finance, and science and technology are now in the process of establishing commercially viable systems and management. Also in late 2002, the Minister of Propaganda Li Changchun announced the policy of ‘san tianjing’ (three forms of “closeness”): that the media should be close to reality, (focusing on real social issues); close to the masses, (with information and programs relevant to the population at large); and close to life (with topics concerning everyday life instead of grand political ideologies). This is a significant break with the long-held doctrine that the media is the
mouthpiece of Party and Government. (Zhang 2004) Now the emphasis is on popularity, shifting the judgment of what is acceptable media programming to the consumer. (Yu 2003: 19)

*Market forces*

As competition in the media industry increases, matters of the economy become more important to the organisation of the media institutions. Competition between TV stations in China has becoming stronger since 1993, after the first provincial TV station acquired a satellite link. At present all 31 provincial stations have access to satellites, which means that a normal household can now receive 31 channels plus two CETV channels. At the same time, Hong Kong televisions, including Phoenix, Rupert Murdoch’s commercial station based in Hong Kong, broadcast into South China and other selected areas. Furthermore, cable television is on the increase with sports programmes, news and drama channels. In 2003 about 30 television stations outside China gained permission to broadcast into China. Adding to this media revolution is the rapid rise of popularity of the internet, as well as a substantial increase in the availability of print media, with a total of 2,200 newspapers being on offer in China today.

Advertising has become a major source of income for the broadcasting media. For instance, the advertisement income at the CCTV increased from 44.45 million RMB in 1998 to 70 billion in 2002. (CCTV Editorial 2003: 27) That market success has become the number one criterion can be been shown also to be official CCTV policy of ‘one centre, two basic points’ (clients at the centre: meeting the demands of market and the requests made by clients). (CCTV Editorial 2003: 302) The Government now funds less than 10% of the CCTV budget. The continuation of the 10% subsidy has another reason: it gives Government the right to appoint key personnel.

The sharp increase of income from advertising has seen the policy change visibly in the recent addition to the CCTV slogan ‘TV media is the mouth and voice of Party and Government, *but also the voice of the people.*’ (CCTV Editorial 2003: 41) Everywhere we note the shift from government directives to ‘speaking according to facts and realities’ (Yang 1998: 55), from ideological messages to ‘strengthening TV development; increasing the quality of programmes; and encouraging TV production.’ (Yang 1998: 463) Now it is the declared aim of TV stations to compete with international media outlets such as the CNN.
In terms of programs, more and more CCTV offerings address ‘service’. As a result, we see more programs of ordinary people’s lifestyle, stories, events, and more dialogue programs, with experts, concerned social groups and ordinary people, instead of the fare of ‘speeches of leaders.’ Increasingly, ordinary people appear as program guests, raising their own concerns of daily life. Service programmes such as *Life, At Your Service, Health, Business, Chinese Medicine*, or *Daily Food*, provide information about housing, employment, education, cars, medicine, the stock market, food, and shopping. The Party is of course not entirely forgotten. Still in 2003 the official media doctrine is to remain in touch with the masses, but do not lose sight of the Party’s principles. Nevertheless, the dominant media profile today is no longer determined by overt monolithic government control; instead, the profile now foregrounds its four main functions of media: offering programmes of news and current affairs, mass education, information, and entertainment.

**Audience participation and audience feed-back**

More and more frequently, ordinary people have begun to appear on the TV screens both as themes and subjects, as well as active participants in the exchange of information and opinions. More and more programs are produced according to ratings, and audience feed-back has become an indispensable measure of successful programming. Ratings have become a popular measurement for the success of Chinese media. Independent media survey companies have emerged and every station has its own market research department. In addition, the media industry is increasingly wooing universities and their media specialists to conduct market research and recommend commercial strategies.

Talk shows and documentaries outside the sphere of government interference have become a dominant feature of what is being offered on TV in China today. As Yang observes, ‘the mass of people have a right to be a part of the communication process by freely expressing their opinions. The mass media should be a forum for them to participate in, while at the same time, the Government should protect the audience’s right to do so.’ (Yang 1998: 175) Participation then means that audiences play a significant role in the televised communication process by being invited to studios, being interviewed and filmed and having their feed-back recorded for public consumption. Even if programmes such as the *Legal Report, Focus, News Probe* and *Oriental Horizon* (*Dongfang shikong*) function as means of justification for government policies, even these series tend to be increasingly shaped by
audience requests. Now almost all television stations have audience feedback departments to answer audience mail, emails and phone-ins.

At the same time, while participatory audiences signify part of the market face of Chinese TV, this does not mean that participation automatically constitutes a critical public sphere. Primarily at this stage, audience participation and feedback guarantee the success and survival of TV stations in the new market economy. That ‘audience participation in TV’ in itself is ‘an indicator for democracy’, as Yang argues, is open to challenge. (Yang 1998: 379) Other factors need to be taken into consideration.

Outside media pressure

None of these changes could have occurred in isolation, of course. No doubt, China’s entry to the WTO is the biggest challenge to the domestic media. Never before had China paid so much attention to media developments in Britain, France, Germany, Italia, USA, Japan, South Korea and India, in search for a unique system able to match the international media system and suitable to the Chinese combination of state control and commercial success. Chinese TV management has evolved with an eye on and under the pressure of developments elsewhere such as Britain, USA, Europe, Japan, India and South Korea. This is patently obvious when we look at the 2000 establishment of the English language channel 9 by the CCTV, as well as the radical restructuring of the management of the CCTV. The advantages of US management were not lost on the Chinese Government media advisers: ‘1. increased awareness of channels; 2. ease of dealing with international TV stations; 3. congenial to democratic decision making; 4. efficient; 5. good use of resources; 6. focussed programs.’ (CCTV Editorial 2003: 61-2) This realisation is also reflected in the declared strategies embraced by the CCTV, to regard content quality as an important principle; to look at the media in terms of market exploration; and entry into the global media market. As scholars have proposed for some time, ‘in the socialist market economy, Chinese television should adopt a model of co-existence of commercial and public TV; by fostering the development of commercial TV, Chinese television could become truly strong and so occupy a place in the world.’(Wu 2004: 69)

DOCUMENTARY CINEMA IN CHINA

The importance of documentary cinema in China
Given traditional aesthetics with its emphasis on moral messages (*wenyi zaidao*) and the creation of imaginary worlds (*yijin*), documentary film was not a natural genre in China. *Wenyi zaidao* requires morality as a story ingredient, which is difficult to achieve in the documentary mode without fictionalisation. *Yijin* emphasizes the invention of an imaginary world and meanings that are generated and communicated through that world, which, again, contradicts the realist style of documentary film. Nonetheless, under the influence of Soviet cultural policy, and especially Lenin’s view that film is the most powerful tool for mass education and that documentary film is a forceful form of visualised political argument, documentary film became hugely important in China. (Situ 2001: 188) Since 1950s, documentary in China has been understood as a genre somewhere between news (as cinematic news release) and special topics (*zhuanti pian*), embracing national achievements, political unity, and the celebration of particular historical moments, as well as Communist and other national heroes. The essay style and lyrical scripts, and voice-of-God narration are dominant in both. In addition, *zhuanti pian* is also characterised by intense attention to the composition of images, perfectly framed, meticulous description of details with close-ups, studio lighting, fragmented images that illustrate words, and the separation of sound from images; there are little or no interviews, nor location sound; we find ample use of music to foreground themes, while the cinematic events are heavily controlled by the filmmaker. As a result, almost no Chinese documentary film paid attention to ordinary individuals before the early 1990s. Portrayals such as that of Nanook in *Nanook of the North* did not exist.

It was only in the early 1990s then that Chinese filmmakers and critics were in a position to re-define and theorise the documentary film genre from a cinematic perspective. There are several reasons for this transformation: the market began to reject the propaganda content of the political documentary; communication with the West increased sharply and with it acquaintance with a broad range of documentary cinematic options; a need to produce Chinese documentary films for the Western markets; an explosion of scholarly, critical reassessments of the Chinese cinematic tradition, and the long-standing and rigid association of documentary film making and the political leadership began to weaken. In turn, the redefinition of documentary film had an indirectly influence on the redirection of documentary film production in China. The main landmark in this evolution was the 1993 transference of the China News Documentary Film Studio to the CCTV, which made documentary film a part of television. The reasons for this political act were as follows: film proved to be too expensive; and documentary film was viewed to be too important to be left

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to elitist aesthetics and should instead continue to function as an essential element of mass culture.

In spite of such governmental intervention, documentary film-making has since the 1990s acquired its own momentum, encouraging the right to some public expression of opinions and the display of individual perceptions of society. These filmmakers work inside and outside the system. Increasingly questions are being raised by film makers, producers, film theorists and film critics that address not only the generic mechanisms of documentary film making but transcend the boundaries of cinema. (Situ 2001: 191; Lü 2003: 253-78) What kind of relation between Party, Government and ordinary people should be reflected? Should documentaries continue to remain the tool of Government doctrine? Should ordinary people be encouraged to participate in documentary film and documentary filmmaking? What are the new aesthetic confines of documentary film?

Documentary film in China today

Today, documentary film making is a major industry in China. Almost all television stations now produce a variety of documentary styles, and the stature of TV stations is being judged by the standard of their documentary films. (Ren 1997: 24) A style of documenting ‘real’, ordinary people, people on the margin, and work-a-day stories as they happen around us is now the dominant mode. As Li notes, three major changes characterise Chinese documentary films today: ‘a change of media channels from film to television; a change from ‘single voice narration’ to ‘multi-voice narration and location sound’; from seeking the ‘truth’ and the ‘no-me’ stage to the ‘me’ stage’ that emphasizes a personal style. (Li 2002: 260-71) Another three transformations are observed by Li Cunli, from ‘lecturing to ‘allowing reality to talk’; from ‘heroism’ to the ‘consciousness of ordinary people’; and from literary expression or ‘expressionism’ to ‘documenting the humanities’, the ‘documentary of the heart’. (Li Cunli 1999: 290-3) However, this does not signal the disappearance of zhuanti pian, visualised political theory or argument in the mainstream culture still engendered by the Government.

Increasingly, public awareness of the power of media, as well as their willingness to participate, makes the cinematic construction of the ‘real’ an inevitable evolution. As documentary film producer Chen Hanyuan observes,

Nowadays ordinary people appear very natural in front of the camera. They are not shy at all. Some discuss the fees we should pay them for filming them, some even remark on our right to use their images. They are actively engaging with us about what our films are about, raising interesting
questions. Their narrations are smooth and their ideas are different, sometimes very opinionated. All this could hardly be imagined in the 1980s. Even more surprisingly, people from the country, the unemployed, or even monks, have gradually not only attracted our cameras, but also become central characters in our documentary films. (Chen 2001: 677)

**Brief definitional description**

In spite of indisputable Western influences, both industrial and cinematographic, Chinese documentary film makers and theorists postulate a generic format somewhat different from the conventions that have evolved in traditions outside China.

We should not understand the term ‘jilu pian’ (documentary film) in the contexts of West. In the West, the development of documentary film has various schools and streams, which are generated from the different historical contexts of different societies. In China, the term ‘documentary film’ gained its significance in the 1980s and 90s from the understanding of the term as resistance to the term *zhuangti pian*, ‘Special Topics’. (Lü 2003: 13)

No longer can documentary film be equated with *zhuanti pian* (visualised political theory), nor is it any longer a news film, nor even a TV art film: documentary is now firmly defined as a genre with real people and real events at its centre. As Ren states:

Documentary is non-fiction film or a video product which reports and records accordingly on political, economic, cultural, military and historical events. Documentary film directly represents real people and real events, made-up fictional events are not permissible. The main narrative reporting includes interview and film location. This means the use of selection, waiting for and catching the right moment for recording real people, real events, in real environments and real time. This for ‘real’ is the life of documentary. (Ren 1997: 3)

In addition, ‘real people’ means largely ‘ordinary people’ and especially people at the margins of society, a special mode of cinematic ‘individualisation’. According to Lü, ‘this is the most important contribution by contemporary Chinese documentary filmmakers. Their documentary film movement is about … poor people in city, country migrants, the disabled, cancer sufferers, orphans, ethnic minorities, and stories in poverty areas.’ (Lü 2003: 691)

Given the focus on this kind of subject matter and the realist techniques developed to do it justice, it should perhaps not be surprising to find that some Chinese observers of documentary film have taken the important step to claim publicly that ‘the emphasis on objectivity and truth in documentary film making inevitably links with the idea of democracy, an open society and the freedom of speech’. (Situ 2003:186)
The ‘democratic’ potential of documentary film

‘The reason for our films appeared untrue,’ suggests Liu ‘is mostly not because of what we filmed is not real, but because that we filmed the real into the unreal! Or because the real thing becomes unreal after being filmed.’ (Liu 2001: 814) That this should be so was the result of, for example, the absence words from documented subjects, the absence of interviews and location sound, and the dominance of perfectly framed images with studio lighting, foregrounded theme music and the authoritarian mode of the voice of God narration serving ideological dogma.

That documentary film should be free of ideological messages and political doctrine is however only one way of realizing the genre’s democratic potential. There are other avenues, such the new focus on the presentation of actual social reality, the break with traditional aesthetics, and the reduction of editorial manipulation. As Andrew Basin once observed, editing is the enemy of the ‘perception of democracy’. But perhaps the most promising avenue towards bringing out the democratic potential in documentary film genre is the introduction of participatory strategies, and in particular increased audience participation. This can take many forms, but, as Ren rightly notes, ‘directing by the audience itself is the highest level of participation’. (Ren 1997: 246)

From dogma to polyphony

Political dogma tends to be a monological discourse, a one way communication hostile to any democratic process. In all its forms, democracy is heavily dependent on the interplay of many and opposing voices, in short, polyphonic negotiation. As Bakhtin describes polyphony in Dostoevsky’s works, polyphony as a dialogic interplay of multiple voices replaces authoritarian monologism by allowing different and oppositional voices to compete with one another. In Dostoevsky work, he argues, we are dealing with a ‘fully realized dialogical position which confirms the hero’s independence, inner freedom, unfinalizedness and indeterminacy’. (1973:51) The linguistic-semiotic principles at work here can be taken as an analogue to actual socio-political situations, as well as the specifics of media discourse.

When we consider the history of documentary film in China, even a summary view strongly suggests that we are dealing with the evolution of a genre from monological towards polyphonic modes of presentation, from authoritarian to participatory cinematic conventions.
However, not all monological films are of necessity authoritarian, just as not all participatory documentaries could be called ‘democratic’. Other factors have to be considered.

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence for arguing that there is an increase in ‘democratic films and film-making’. This does not mean that authoritarian styles have disappeared. Even after the introduction of interviews into documentary film in the mid 1980s (the first attempt at using interviews on television was *Heshang* in 1986), authoritarian styles have been associated with governmental propaganda, no matter whether what is presented can be said to be ‘real’ or not. Authoritarian modes are generated not only by a dogmatic voice of God narration, ideological editing and fragmented images, but also when a film, in spite of its artistic use of a range of cinematic strategies, largely reflects the single voice of the Party.

For instance, the recent *Fire Incident (Dahuo lintou)* (2002) is the story of how the Shengyang fire brigade battles a horrendous fire at an oil refinery in Shengyang. This award winning documentary film contains interviews of fire brigade conducted by supervisors, members of the fire fighter unit and nearby residents, describing what happened. The interviews all convey one single message: that fire fighters are brave and are prepared to die in the course of their duty. The narration and interviews dominate, with images of long takes, location sound, and yet important information, especially the cause of the disaster remains concealed. Pressing questions are avoided: Who was or should be responsible? Have there been adequate precautions? Were the decisions made in trying to reduce the fire appropriate? Could the death of the fireman been avoided? The film ends with several fire fighters receiving awards from the Government: the formula of documentary heroism.

A similar example is the documentary film *My Father (Fuqing shi ben du bu wan de shu)* produced by Nanjing Television in the same year. The film is narrated by narrators in standard Mandarin. The film features the son and daughter of the central character, the father. It is the eulogy of a 50 year old man who has died in an attempt to save public property in an accident. The title suggests that the story is presented from his children’s point of view, and yet we never hear a word spoken by the children, in spite the fact that some of the interviews with their father’s colleagues, neighbours, and friends are conducted by the son. Son and daughter are portrayed solely for showing ‘the story’ as a story told by children. Again, we are presented with some ingredients of advanced documentary cinematography, fragmented images, theme songs, carefully designed image frames, all dominated by the monologic voice of heavy narration uniting everything into one single view of what the government thinks about the man: his self-reliance in supporting his in-laws, his wife and children after accepting
government redundancy policies; his endurance without complaint; and his ultimate sacrifice to save government property from destruction. We look in vain for an alternative view. What we get instead is, as Liu so succinctly put it, a documentation that makes the real ‘unreal’. Even in 2002 the single voice documentary film sponsored by the Government does exist, even if it is not popular on the media market.

What we are looking for, then, is a combination of cinematographic features that produce a polyphonic assemblage of voices, in the broad sense of including the nonverbal aspects of film. Nor should we be satisfied with a merely quantitative measure of such an assemblage. The number of participants, the amount of feed-back, the number of interviews, the mere quantity of data of perceptual actuality, etc. alone by no means guarantee the exploration of the ‘democratic’ potential of documentary film making. What seems to be essential here, in the Bakhtinian sense of polyphony, is that the many-voiced film offers a rich diversity of opposing positions which the film viewer must negotiate in order to constitute a socially realistic picture.

Film analyses: from dogmatic to participatory documentation

*Song of Life* (*Shengmin zhi ge*, 2002) presents the longitudinal portrayal of a girl who has been asked by a dying woman to dedicate herself to studying medicine. The film depicts a woman writer at the age of 30, dying of cancer. She selects a 12 year old village girl with a name similar to her own and donates all she owns to enable her to pursue her studies. They meet at the hospital shortly before the writer’s death. In order to support the girl’s study at high school and medical college, her own parents and the woman’s parents make sacrifices to support her. At various stages the young girl wants to quit studying because she feels that the tuition fees are too much for the two families. The film ends as the girl, now at university, has fulfilled her benefactor’s wish: the girl has made the grade to be able to study medicine.

*Song of Life*, a documentary in the mould of the extraordinary in ordinary lives, displays a certain reticence in making ideational statements. The film took some 7 years to make, allowing the viewer to follow the process of seeing the young girl at the various stages of her struggle to fulfil her benefactor’s wish. There is no doubt that the film is meant to promote the Government’s call to society to support the education of rural children. And yet, with the presentational emphasis on interviews a somewhat different picture emerges, one that emphasizes a general humanism rather than Communist heroics. The minimal script is
determined by the course of events and a degree of emotional engagement on the part of the
director. Although the topic of heroism is still visible, the documentary escapes the long
ideological tradition as a result of its focus on a narrow circle of ordinary individuals and the
absence of any allusion to officialdom.

*Old Mirror (Lao jingzi, 2002)* records how a local writer and a theatre company go
about producing a dance drama in a remote village. The writer discovers a 90 year old woman
who has been waiting for her husband’s return for 70 years. Ten days after their wedding, her
18 year old husband confesses that he is a Communist and will have to leave her to join the
Red Army. He gives her a mirror as a present, and tells her that it might take him 5, 10, 20,
even 40 years to return, but return he will as soon as the Revolution is completed. He also
asks her to learn to write. Waiting, his wife writes her diary and uses her mirror for 70 years,
combing her hair, in the firm belief that her husband will yet return. People have told her that
her husband had probably died, and suggest to her that she remarry and have children.
However, she refuses all proposals, keeping her promise.

As her story unfolds in interviews, during visits to her modest hut and the filming of
her impoverished existence, the director at the same time shows the many difficulties to be
overcome in transforming her story into a dance drama. The documentary highlights the
current generation’s critical evaluation of the old woman’s life and their contrasting values.
Once again, the film employs minimum narration, with ample use of location sound,
interviews, natural lighting, and unintrusive, chronological editing. The story could be read as
the official praise for the old woman from Jiangxi, the birthplace of the Red Army, who
believes in her husband’s return as firmly as the peasants believe in Communism. Yet the
discussions and conflicts within the theatre group question the ‘morality’ of a husband who
makes unrealistic promises and raise the question whether it is wise for a woman to spend her
life waiting in vain. This realism is productively juxtaposed to the central character’s selfless
sacrifice. Perhaps the film can be allocated to the popular documentary subgenre depicting
‘the extraordinary lives of ordinary people’, with minimal ideational ingredients and the use
of a deliberate, naïve realism of presentation.

*My Family (Wo de jia 2002)* is narrated by a 20 year old woman whose mother is
serving a life sentence in prison. Her mother has killed her father when she finds out that that
the father has sold their 8 year old son in order to settle his gambling debts. After the mother
has been sentenced, their house is destroyed by fire, leaving the then 12 year old and her 4
year old sister homeless. To alleviate the situation, the local police bureau has undertaken to
look after the two girls since then. Nine years later the two sisters tell the police that they have one burning wish: to find their missing brother. The police bureau then takes the elder sister along in search of the boy. The film accompanies them to North-east China from Shangdong, as they follow the few traces they have. With help of local police and village people they finally locate the boy, who now lives with a new name and has only vague memories of his former family. The film records the frustration and joy in seeking the boy, as well as the harrowing emotions as the family is reunited.

Although the film certainly shows the dedication of the police towards a prisoner’s family, it is unpleasantly invasive in its depiction of the intimate emotions of a tragic family, the tearful reunion of the son with his sister, and the mother’s gratitude to the police woman who has found her son. Nonetheless, the film gives a realistic portrayal of human relations in prison, as well as of the interaction between police officers and ordinary people. Again, the minimal scripting is to be noted. The story is narrated from the sister’s point of view, with location sound, natural light, a realist camera style, and mainly chronological editing contributed to the ‘reality’ of the story. Remnants of doctrinal intrusion may be seen in the consistently positive manner the police are portrayed in this documentary.

*The Day We Meet Again (Chongfeng de rizi 1998)* portrays a couple who meet after many years of separation. A mainland soldier who was forced to follow the Nationalist Army to Taiwan in 1948, one year after he had married, leaving behind his young wife and their son, now returns to Shanghai to see her again after 40 years. In the meantime she has remarried, with children by her second husband. The reunion brings good memories as well as sadness. They decide to travel together to Taiwan to make up for the years they have missed. When they announce their intention, the woman faces pressure from her grown-up children who want their mother to stay. Her presence qualifies them to be entitled to a larger flat.

Following the events, from the day the pair meet at the airport to the day they contemplate their dilemma, the director uses interviews, location sound, and chronological cutting, with a minimum of narration. The film ends with the Taiwanese man deciding to stay in Shanghai to find a satisfactory solution. In contrast to the strong authorial guidance of earlier documentaries, the open-endedness of this documentary invites a range of interpretive positions as well as public debate. If there is any message, it is the suggestion of the
selfishness of the new society and nostalgia for the care with which the older generation consider the needs of their family.

*Exams (Kaoshi 1999)* follows the lives of four 10-14 year old girls as they prepare for the entrance exam at the Central Music Academy in Beijing. All four are none Beijing residents. Their parents move with them to Beijing, renting small houses close to the Academy, in order to secure private tuition in preparation for their entrance examinations. They have lived there for some time, from six months to two years. The childrens’ mothers have quit their jobs to look after them and supervise their practice when their private teachers have left. The children are shown to face enormous pressure: they will they be unable to pay back what their parents have given to them, nor will they be able to face their schools, relatives and friends should they fail.

The film records the girls’ daily routines, their music practice from early morning to late at night, according to a tight schedule. We witness their stress before the exam, the examination process, the exam itself, and, after the exam, the girls reactions to receiving their results. Only one out of four pass the first test, but none of them passes the second examination. One of the girls is applying for a visa to go to the United States for another test, while the other three, bowing to their ambitious parents, continue to practise until one day they hope they will be able enter the Music Academy.

The documentary is dominated by an interactive style, with an emphasis on interviews, observation of the subjects’ activities, the use of natural lighting, a hand-held camera, location sound, with continuing chronological editing. Disturbing as this film may be, its message is entirely generated by the events portrayed. The results of the examinations are unpredictable, dictating a trajectory of events rather than fulfilling some pre-scripted message.

*18 Miles (Hailu 18 li, 2002)* has no narration, no interviews. It records the first 8 hours of work of a fishing village starting at dawn. Every day at low tide the village people walk 18 miles out towards the ocean. They carry their nets and digs, pushing their bicycles to muddy spots rich in clams. The film records the work teams as they dig, collect nets packed with clams, and return to shore as the ocean rises. Back on shore we see the villagers sort and wash the clams at the market.

The cinematography is beautifully executed, with long shots, medium level shots, and close-ups, the juxtaposition of one shot over another, the location sound of digging, walking, talking, and sounds of ocean waves. Between shots we are provided with intertitles separating
the different stages of labour, with the camera focusing on crowds of workers rather than on individuals. The film seems to say no more than ‘Look at that!’ offering minimal authorial guidance and so leaving the construction of cinematic meaning largely to the viewer.

*Valley in the Mist* (*Wugu*, 2002) is a documentary in the self-reflexive mode. It has no script, but simply records a crew of Han Chinese television crews who plan to make a film about an ethnic minority, its scenery, village, costumes and folk songs. The film opens with a long take as the director drives to the valley of an unidentified ethnic minority. The image chain of the moving vehicle is overlaid by the sound over of the village chief singing a song. The director then encounters a series of villagers who demand increasingly high payments for the menial tasks he asks them to perform. In his negotiations, such as trying to borrow local costumes or a buffalo, the director is guided by a young boy who offers his services for 2 Yuan or whatever the film crew is prepared to pay him. He accompanies the crew for a whole day, carrying camera equipment and negotiating prices with the locals. We learn that while the villagers support one another freely without any exchange of money, they engage in sharp monetary practice when they deal with ‘intruders’. The film concludes with the village chief singing his song and the director, at the end of the day, paying the boy 120 Yuan as a reward.

The democratic tendency of this film lies in its stark difference if compared with the Government sponsored, standard portrayals of Chinese minorities – their typically happy and colourful lifestyles and the unity of the nation. In *Valley in the Mist* we look in vain for a well controlled script that binds the images into a coherent onticity of filmed objectivities. Absent is the well-worn narration that lends the images of costumes, local practices, songs and scenery their (un)natural cohesion. Instead, we are confronted with unscripted accidentalities which, nevertheless, leave an impression of a society that may look strange, but in the end forces us to accept its perhaps surprising behaviour. As a result, the film viewer feels empowered to interpret without having to strain against a doctrinal mode of presentation and the picture of a social harmony that is imposed rather than emerging from what is seen and heard.

*Election* (*Haixuan* 1998) was produced by the CCTV’s *News Probe* program. The film covers one week’s of a village election in Liaoning. It opens with a journalist visiting the village as the inhabitants are told that an election will soon be held. She records the announcement at a meeting, the reaction of the villagers, and interviews the candidates, people with leading roles in the village as well as some peasants. She asks if the candidates are confident to win and if so, why. The story unfolds smoothly until a new candidate comes
forward. He is old, has no political background, nor any experience of leadership. His only claim to suitability is that he wants to contribute to his village, and firmly believes that he will do as good a job as the others.

The new candidate promotes his own campaign by visiting the homes of peasants, asking them to support him. To the surprise of most people, he makes it into the final round, a contest between him and the village Party Secretary. This is a suspenseful situation because should the Party Secretary lose, it is not only he who loses face, but also the Government. The implication would be that the Party had appointed the wrong person for many years. The film records the day the two competitors prepare their election speeches, their feelings and attitudes to winning or losing; the performance of their speeches and the answers they give the voters. The Party Secretary gives a grand and well prepared speech, while his opponent offers no more than a few brief statements, with hardly any policy, but the assurance that he will give his very best. The film records the tension that is building between the two candidates as they wait for the final count.

The whole election process is largely recorded with location sound, the journalist’s explanations, a hand-held camera, natural lighting, and interviews, vox-pop style. In the end, the Party Secretary wins by the narrowest of margins. The film concludes with interviews gauging various reactions to the election result.

Non-cinematic, democratic features include the minimally scripted format, the manner in which village life is permitted to emerge in the course of events, the way the villagers are able to voice their opinions, the openness of the election event and its unpredictable outcome, the openly voiced criticism of government policies, and the people oriented decision making process revealed during the election.

_Lulu and Me_ (Lulu he wo 2002) portrays a middle aged man in Shanghai who has been given a meagre redundancy pay-out by his work place. Initially, he manages to make a living and support his family by repairing broken light fittings and lamps. His initiative is praised by the Government and the Shanghai TV station celebrates his success in a brief documentary film. When the station revisits him several years later they find him unemployed, divorced, and passionately attached to his dog Lulu. Employing interviews and an observational style, the film records his daily life, the way he unsuccessfully negotiates relations with several girl
friends, his inability to relate to his son, and the generous, even if sometimes rough, attention he grants his dog.

_Lulu and Me_ could be said to explore the democratic potential of documentary film in that it presents a fairly unpleasant person whose loneliness and unattractive lifestyle is at least partly caused by the social system. Once celebrated as a hero in the new market economy, he is now abandoned to an increasingly undignified existence. The critique of the protagonist’s own flawed personality and the critique of the state are inextricably intertwined to form an uneasy portrayal of a not so admirable social system. This is strengthened by the observational style of portrayal, the absence of any ideological doctrine, and the uninhibited performance of the central character.

_Along the Railway (Tielu yanxian, 2000)_ well exemplifies the democratic potential of documentary film making in terms of production ownership, method, stylistic strategies, and ways of approaching the subject, including the absence of a pre-shooting script. Shot with a high-8 video camera, this award winning film from China’s first Independent Film Awards is shot by an independent filmmaker, a film student from Beijing Film Academy. He films his subjects after he becomes one of their friends.

The film documents a group of people aged between 9 and 20 who live at rubbish tips along the railway of Baoxi in Shaanxi province. They either have no homes, or escaped home, or no money to return home, or they have been driven out by their families, or have no idea where their homes are. Most of them are not local residents who have left their villages, county, towns, or city for a job or children who have run away from their parents. The filmed subjects have no names; instead they are known by the names of the provinces they come from, Xinjiang, Hennan, Sichung, or Dongbei (North-east). The film documents their daily lives along the railway; how they find food; pick up left-overs from passengers or rubbish bins; how they sleep, in the open by a camp fire, or lying along the stations; how they interact with each other, and how they are treated, for instance, the way they are abused verbally and physically by station security guards and nearby residents; and mostly how they see themselves and the society around them.

The documentary is filmed with location sound and natural lighting. It consists of many long takes as the camera is made to observe the subjects’ actions. They are shown as they sing and chat around the camp fire, or tell their stories in interspersed dialogues with the
film-maker. We hear the director’s questions, and see his shadow on the image. While we not see him directly, we witness an attack on him by one of the group’s ‘big’ brothers, who tries to stop him filming because he suspects him of being a policeman in disguise. *Along the Railway* presents a picture, very different from official accounts, of people who are the victims of the market economy and family tragedies: peasants who leave their land for a better life in city, but can’t find jobs. One of them is unable to return to his home-town because he has no money and because his identity card has been confiscated by the police; and a young boy who cannot tolerate being beaten by his step father.

*Participatory strategies in the ‘Legal Report’*

By far the most ambitious attempt at exploring the possibilities of popular participation in the documentary form is the ‘Legal Report’ (*Jinri Shuofa*). Screened daily by the CCTV to more than 900 million viewers and with well over a thousand episodes to date, this program has evolved into a frontrunner in popularity and participatory experimentation. The ratings consistently show that both its subject matter and its presentational mode continue to hold mass appeal. By introducing to the general public thinking in terms of legal processes in relation to traditional morality the program quite obviously meets a much needed informational and educational function. By opening its presentational process up to public participation the program responds to a quite different demand, one that can be fulfilled only by the gradual evolution of a public sphere. The paper argues that the *Legal Report* is an attempt at a first step in this direction.

The success of the program is due in part to a now well established *narrative formula*. If we distil from the empirical story materials each episode’s core pattern we arrive at a succinct narrative type. From a narratological perspective, the myriad variants of the *Legal Report* share a common structure that can be summarized into a formula with ten main ingredients, as follows:

1. an initial situation of injustice or suffering (a crime, a dispute, an accident, a moral infringement);
2. a confrontation between one or more perpetrators of a crime and its victim(s) or between opponents in a dispute;
3. an investigating reporter;
4. interviews;
5. a court verdict (given or pending);
6. an expert providing specialised legal knowledge;
7. a discussion of the case and its legal and moral implications;
8. a tension between traditional moral expectations and the legal process;
9. a didactic component: citizenship education in matters legal; and
10. multiple audience response options by phone, letters, and e-mail.

Essential to this narrative structure is the way the public have increasingly been involved in the programming process. The *Legal Report* is participatory in a number of ways, by multiple audience feedback, interviews of members of the public as well as legal experts, panel discussions, and the incorporation of public opinion in subsequent episodes. As a result, the audience feedback is not merely an incidental, additional attraction of the *Legal Report*, but an integral feature that affects the didactic effectiveness of each episode, as well as the legal consciousness raising of the series as a whole. By involving the viewers on a massive scale via e-mail, telephone and letters, the editors are able to plough public response back into the evolving series, resuming topics, referring back to earlier discussions, and keeping the debate topical and alive as if in a vastly extended college lecture theatre. In spite of its obvious didactic function, the polyphony of public voices that characterize the *Legal Report* make the program a leader in the introduction of the kind of negotiation of the diversity of public opinion that is an essential condition for the possibility of the emergence of a media public sphere.

**CONCLUSION**

The ‘democratic’ potential of documentary TV in films and other programs is beginning to be realised in China in a variety of ways. At the level of program content we have observed a shift towards ordinary subjects under ordinary and not so ordinary circumstances, a decline in dogma and ideological abstraction and a foregrounding of events of social life, with often unpredictable incidents, and the new focus on the hitherto concealed margins of society. This has led also to making public criticism of the specific failings of individual government agencies and officials as well as of the system as a whole a permissible or at least tolerated topic.
At the level of media discourse and presentational mode, we have noted a decline in the prominence of monological, authoritarian guidance and the emergence of polyphonic styles, the reduction in doctrinal voice-of-God narration, and a diminishing of message controlled editing in favour of long takes, long shots, hand-held camera technique, and an increase in the use of interviews, as well as non-scripted filming. While the Government sponsored, authoritarian documentary is by now means dead, it is now challenged by the growing presence of a variety of new documentary film styles, permitting the democratic potential of the genre to come to the fore. While none of these presentational innovations can be argued to guarantee by themselves a more democratic form of film making, in combination they do suggest that China is on the way towards embracing more open and self-critical ways of viewing the world. The rise of semi-dependent and independent film makers and production companies adds significantly to this trend.

Finally, participatory strategies in a variety of TV programs, including documentaries, are certainly on the increase, strengthening such claims. We have observed the powerful and so far unhindered public approval by TV ratings of a polyphony of opposing voices in certain programs, a sign, the paper concludes, that one of the necessary ingredients of an emerging public sphere, the public expression of opinion ‘in an unrestricted fashion’, that is, free from domination, is beginning to announce itself. (Habermas [1964] 1974: 49)
REFERENCES:


