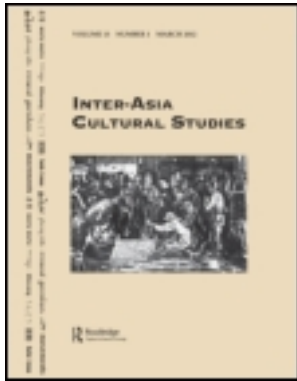


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:
Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Inter-Asia Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riac20>

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Version of record first published: 10 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Li-Hsin Kuo (2012): Writing people's histories with lenses—a brief review of The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement , Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 13:4, 644-646

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2012.717608>

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Writing people's histories with lenses—a brief review of *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*

Li-Hsin KUO

After the prolificacy in contemporary documentary film production in China since the 1990s, and a number of journal articles in which such documentary production and its phenomena are researched,¹ we finally have a relatively thorough anthology of studies on the new documentary movement in China for the English-speaking world. *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record* (henceforth *The Movement*) is the first of its kind, co-edited by two well-known Western scholars who specialize in Chinese cinema, culture and politics—Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel—as well as by Lu Xinyu, a key scholar in this field in China. The timely publication signals an arrival of maturity in the study of this crucial visual medium in the Chinese setting, which may generate immense significant value both academically and politically.

The Movement is composed of four parts. Part I offers a well-balanced orientation of the historical overview in three chapters from different perspectives. Berry and Rofel concisely sketch the scene of current documentary culture in China, with a more observational but fully-engaged stance, and summarize briefly the content of each chapter in their Introduction. They are engaging because these two Western editors possess rich knowledge on Chinese cultural and socio-political realities to date. An authoritative critic in Chinese documentary cultures, Lu Xinyu, in her chapter of the detailed account and re-assessment on the rise of China's new documentary films, purports to anchor the understanding of the movement by closely contextualizing it within the Chinese historical movement and social developments. The first part of

the anthology ends with a documentarian's perspective towards this film movement, in which Wu Wenguang, a pioneer of on-the-spot documentary realism in independent documentary film,² depicts his experiences of making a 'one person's film' with a digital video (DV) camera.

Part II presents two articles that analyze documentary works in which marginalized social groups are involved, and their different questions of identity discussed. Lu Xinyu's heavy article on Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*³ interrogates the state policy of marketization that has led to the disappearance of China's socialist ideals, witnessed in this film through the vanishing factories and workers as symbols of a once collective identity and belief for the socialist China. The other chapter, by Chao Shi-Yan, on the contrary investigates micro-politics by focusing on two films regarding lesbian identity and gender politics. The editors give an intriguing title for this section, 'Documenting Marginalization, or Identities New and Old,' which, for me, might have a connotation, such as: if both the collective identity of old socialism and the homosexual identities of the new era are bound to be marginalized today, then, perhaps the new social identities and their differentiated politics, which emphasize more the value and dignity of individuality, could be a rescue, and indeed an exit for the deprived and disillusioned people to re-enter politics or the public sphere.

In the third section of *The Movement*, three articles examine documentary spaces of various functions or concepts. Paola Voci's chapter looks, through a number of documentary films, at normally 'invisible'

locations and marginal people in Beijing that are seldom seen in conventional or official representations of the capital city. In another approach to studying the city's spatial engagement with Chinese independent documentary films, Seio Nakajima, in his chapter, extensively explores film clubs in Beijing, and how they serve as productive spaces for these films to be viewed, circulated and discussed. Berry and Rofel, in the last chapter of this part, offer a comprehensive analysis of how China's independent documentary films create an alternative narrative and culture, from the aspects of themes, form, spaces of production and viewing, and the archive.

The final section of this book includes four chapters that discuss the relationships and interactions between documentarians and their subjects. The issues of ethics, intrusion, authorship and exploitation are at stake and scrutinized in these writings.

For me, one of the most significant insights in these analyses in *The Movement* has to be their tight framings within China's recent political history and immediate social realities. Certainly, studies of documentary cultures quite often would inescapably be contextualized in specific societies or environs, in which films are produced and read. However, as the editors emphasize, this influential movement in documentary culture has salient 'Chinese characteristics'. As Berry and Rofel (2010: 7) put it:

This rapidly changing historical context, with its stark contrasts, provides the impetus and the rationale for the New Documentary Movement, in the political, social, and technical senses of the term 'movement.' It addressed new political themes, filmed social subjects marginalized by mainstream and official media, and transformed audio-visual culture in China, including not only independent documentary and amateur work on the internet but also broadcast television and fiction feature film production.

Berry and Rofel continue to demonstrate their admirably conscious and knowledgeable

understanding of local circumstances in the People's Republic of China, regarding how this specific tool of visual discourses has been used. They keep reminding the English-language readers in academic circles that the appropriation of DV cameras in China continues to have a highly contrasting difference from that in the West. Instead of applying DV as a common way to create manipulated images or special effects, as do Western filmmakers, Chinese documentarians use the DV camera as an affordable and handy tool to witness or encounter harsh realities by recording them in a straightforward, un-manipulated fashion. It is the potent instrument for Chinese documentary filmmakers to struggle against the omnipresent speech control from the state, and claim back their rights to represent social or political realities, which have been largely distorted or entirely concealed by mainstream media.

Since independent documentary films in China often possess such a kind of explicit or implicit intention of advancing the audience's awareness of bleak realities with great urgency, Berry and Rofel further remind us that, rather than being 'objective,' distant observers of the real world, Chinese documentarians quite often place themselves as participants who are closely involved in or negotiate with that real world. This renders the West's commonly accepted notion of objectivity invalid, or practically unimportant, in China's new documentary movement. The reflexive view of this kind presented in *The Movement* reveals an extremely valuable understanding, which should be credited to the two Western editors of this anthology.

Lu Xinyu repeats and reinforces many of the viewpoints of her co-editors but with a more definitive tone. In her two seminal articles, previously published in Chinese versions in her own books, Lu forcefully clarifies the political significance of the use of DV in this movement. Although DV enables accessibility to the documented subjects and productivity in individual documentary works, the individualization in the movement, Lu argues, is not so

much channeled into a self-indulgent exercise in developing personal aesthetic style as a way to resist the dominant ideological control. DV and individualization in China's documentary movement, says Lu, should be understood by grounding the phenomena within the social and political development of this nation.⁴

For instance, in her weighty elaboration of Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*, Lu stresses that any reading of Wang's film has to be deeply rooted in the recent and contemporary history of marketization and capitalization in China, which victimizes working class people as well as the nation's claimed faith on people's value. 'Magisterial'⁵ though it may sound at times, Lu's analysis of *West of the Tracks* nevertheless offers a critical vision with macro-history necessary for us to have a better grip on understanding the complex realities in both the documentary movement and political situations in China today. One of Lu's (2010: 47) comments on this documentary movement may well serve as a conclusion for this anthology:

The New Documentary Movement faces various challenges as it continues to forge documentaries that confront mainstream views. The commercialization of history and culture, the adoption of global aesthetics, and the nostalgic interest in recovering cultural objects from the Chinese past offer new challenges for filmmakers in the New Documentary Movement. They will need to continue to examine how representations of reality, aesthetics, and their individual positionings can challenge both state- and market-sponsored representations of the past and present.

Acknowledgement

This article is sponsored by the State Innovative Institute for the Studies of Journalism & Communication and Media Society at Fudan University.

Notes

1. The editors of this book provide a selected list of the published articles/book chapters. See Berry *et al.* (2010: 253–254, note 3).
2. Wu's first work, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990), is commonly regarded as the threshold of the new documentary movement in China.
3. Wang's film is a nine-hour documentary classic, detailing the production process in the closing steel factories, as well as workers' lives in them in the City of Shenyang, northeast of China.
4. See Lu (2008).
5. A word borrowed from Berry and Rofel (2010: 11).

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