Sentimentalism and De-politicization:

Some Problems of Documentary Culture in

Contemporary Taiwan

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In recent years, documentary filmmaking in Taiwan has evolved into an enthusiastic cultural practice, outshining, if not replacing, the significance of feature films, which have been suffering for years from poor government subsidiary policies. Although works by award-winning directors such as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang still occasionally appear on the line-up of major international film festivals in Cannes, Berlin or Venice, they do not reflect the general reality of an impoverished feature filmmaking milieu in the island. As a result, low-budget, often self-financed and lightly-equipped production of documentary works seems to be an outlet for those interested in or devoted to filmmaking in Taiwan.

I. DOCUMENTARIES TRIUMPH: REALITY OR MIRAGE?

The year of 2004 was a stage of "triumph" for documentary film in Taiwanese society. The documentary films *Burning Dreams* and *Viva Tonal—The Dance Age* had successful commercial runs in local theaters in spring 2004. Later in the year, *Gift of Life*, a film documenting several survivors from the aftermath of the disastrous 1999

earthquake in Taiwan, was commercially released in theaters island-wide. The film quickly became a success, both at the box office and in media reviews. By a conservative estimate, *Gift of Life* earned roughly fifteen million Taiwanese dollars (approximately half-a-million US dollars), making it the best-selling domestic film in all genres in 2004. Given Hollywood films' overwhelming domination of Taiwanese consumer markets, the ticket sales of *Gift of Life* are seen as an amazing achievement. In the meantime, media reviews and audiences praised the film almost unanimously, making *Gift of Life* a significant cultural phenomenon in Taiwan last autumn, and watching the film became a somewhat ritualistic activity.

Burning Dreams and *Viva Tonal* were both nominated in the Best Documentary category for the 2003 Golden Horse Award,[1] with the latter winning the prize, and *Gift of Life* was awarded a Runner-up Prize in the International Competition at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF) in 2003. However, the blockbuster phenomenon of *Gift of Life* in Taiwan had little to do with winning an award at YIDFF, and nor were the other two films impacted by their local awards. In fact, winning awards in important domestic or international film festivals (except the Academy Awards in the US) does not guarantee rewarding ticket sales in Taiwan. Very often it is quite the opposite, as films with prize-winning credentials suffer a backlash in the box office, with mass audiences shaped by mainstream Hollywood

products considering “art films” to be too serious or difficult to watch.

The reasons behind the success of these documentary films can be found elsewhere. *Burning Dreams* profiles a senior Taiwanese jazz dancer who trains students in Shanghai and adopts a mainstream cinematic narrative and aesthetic as a documenting strategy. The result is a visually appealing, easy-to-digest film with a pleasant tempo and professional post-production, which attracted a substantial audience through its style. *Viva Tonal* is yet another case. This film uncovers and celebrates from a positive angle the colonial history of Taiwan in the 1930s, a period when some of the local bourgeois class enjoyed modernity in their daily lives brought by Japanese colonizers. The co-directors/producers of the film made a smart move to enhance ticket sales: they invited former Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to view the film. Lee has strong emotional ties with Japanese culture and experienced the period of Japanese colonial rule in his childhood.2 Unsurprisingly, he very much enjoyed the historical views presented in *Viva Tonal* and publicized the film. As the first native Taiwanese president ever in the island’s history, Lee has enormous political influence over a considerable number of people who follow his Taiwan Independence stance; thus, his recommendation for the film effectively summoned a much wider audience to the theaters.

The unprecedented box office success of *Gift of Life* also stemmed largely from a

similar advantage, namely the “politicians-as-promoters” effect. This film actually adopted several other promotional tactics before the “politician-promoter” effect boosted sales later on. Those strategies included several private previews to key people within different groups: internet activists interested in documentary culture, who were greatly moved by the film and initiated a campaign promoting the film on the internet, encouraging young people to go to the theaters for this film;[3] selected members of the traditional media (mainly the press), owners and editors, who then offered generous space (such as full-page reports and discussions in the news and arts/entertainment sections in several major newspapers) and frequent exposure before the film’s formal opening in commercial theaters; and, most importantly, a private preview for the chairman of Chunghwa Telecom and the CEO of Sony Network Taiwan.[4] According to reports, they were so touched by the film that the chairman promised to sponsor guaranteed coverage of theaters’ required expenses for three-weeks of screenings and the CEO sponsored a whole set of imported high-tech projection equipment.[5]

However, the biggest factor behind the record-high ticket sales for *Gift of Life* came from the incumbent Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian. Wu Yii-feng, director of the film, invited President Chen to attend the premiere show, accompanied by the Minster of Education. Chen was moved by the film, and his tear-shedding became headline

news the next day. After the screening, the president praised the work and strongly recommended that everyone see the film. Furthermore, in his nationally televised speech at Taiwan's National Day ceremony on October 10, 2004, President Chen gave another special mention to *Gift of Life*, urging Taiwanese people to follow the tenacious spirit reflected in the respectable survivors depicted in the documentary film. Ma Ying-jeou, Taipei City Mayor and a charismatic political star of the Nationalist Party (KMT), went to the theater and was also moved by the film. He shed tears too, and the film became news again. The multiple effects brought by these two influential political figures are obvious. According to local press reports, officers in the Presidential Palace requested that all employees take leave during work hours to see the film together, paid by the Palace (*Apple Daily*, October 18, 2004). Also, owners of quite a few corporations followed this idea and ordered or encouraged their employees to see the film collectively. For instance, the manager of the news department at the Taiwan Television Company required the entire team to see the film, tickets paid by the company, as part of an educational training program, and the employees were asked to submit reports on their viewing experiences (*United Daily News*, October 22, 2004).

II. WHEN SENTIMENT OBSCURES SUBSTANCE

It is intriguing for a documentary film such as *Gift of Life* to generate such positive

reactions from both politicians in power and business leaders. Director Wu is founder of Fullshot Communication Foundation, an NPO team that does documentary production and training, and the stated objective of their documentary team has always been to record and expose reality and social injustice. The Taiwanese government and the economic ruling class have never been famous for upholding social justice.[6] Furthermore, the most miserable aspects of the 1999 earthquake are not so much the natural disaster itself as man-made calamities, including maladministration in rescuing survivors and restoring the seriously struck areas, and misuse of the massive donated materials and money.

This puzzling situation stems from the content of the film itself. *Gift of Life* follows four sets of survivors whose family members were killed in the earthquake, and depicts how they tried to rebuild confidence and the will to continue their own lives. Though the characters documented in the film and their misfortunes undoubtedly win sympathy and respect from audiences, I find the film frustratingly problematic. *Gift of Life* takes a sentimental approach to express the difficult realities its subjects are facing, and, for me, the tone throughout the film set by the director is moralistic and didactic. The film reduces, indeed effaces, structural/political wrongdoings to individual misfortune, and by taking advantage of the admirable courage demonstrated by these subjects who strive to live, the film subsequently exploits these

characters, and de-contextualizes/de-politicizes the meanings of “misfortune” and “life.”

It seems to me that such a problematic work should receive some critical reviews in Taiwan, since there are productive cultural and film critics (though I have to say that non-academic, professional art/cultural criticism is not yet sufficiently exercised in Taiwan). To my surprise, during the fervent first several weeks of screening *Gift of Life* in theaters with people waiting in line for tickets, there were few writings in the press or other media spaces that took a critical view on the film.[7] Almost all the reviews complimented the achievements of the film, and celebrated the resulting elevation of Taiwanese documentary culture, including the film’s breakthrough success in commercial theaters.

The promotional strategy and resulting cultural phenomena of *Gift of Life* has encouraged other documentary filmmakers to follow in the same the mode. Three documentary works, *Stone Dream*, *Jump! Boys*, and *Happyrice* endeavoured to launch commercial runs in theaters in the first half of 2005. *Jump! Boys*, a film documenting the gymnastic training of a group of schoolboys, shied away from sensational promotion. However, the other two works applied similar promotional tactics used by *Gift of Life*. There was full-page press coverage of the relevant information and reports (which normally would not be so generously provided to other artistic or

cultural events, let alone documentary screenings) on these two works prior to their openings. Besides the press, promoters for *Happyrice* initiated another wave of promotion on the internet. And, both films adopted the "politician-promoter" strategy: President Chen was invited again to the premiere screening of Stone Dream, and Premier Xie Chang-ting, accompanied by Director of the Council for Cultural Affairs, attended the opening screening of *Happyrice*.

Hu Tai-li, director of *Stone Dream*, aims to document the ethnic mixing and acculturation among different immigrant groups in Taiwan through the life of an elderly veteran named Liu Pi-chia. A visual anthropologist, Hu invests "professional" effort by using extensive footage drawn from her fieldwork. Liu is a "Mainlander," referring to the roughly three million people who retreated to Taiwan with the KMT regime in 1949, and Hu tries to show how he finally admits that he is a "Taiwanese" after more than half a century's life on this island, and is willing to die here. The political conflict between Mainlanders and so-called Taiwanese, namely those who emigrated from coastal China several hundred years ago, has intensified since the 1990s, particularly after the shift of ruling power in 2000 to the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In the case of Liu, his wife is Taiwanese, and the geo-political identity of Liu's son is clearly oriented towards Taiwan instead of China, in stark contrast to the father. However, commentary by critic Wang Mo-lin

points out that the veteran's words in film's conclusion conveniently match the DPP government's political propaganda advocating an assimilated identity for Taiwan.[8]Wang sees the veteran's final reply, anticipated and to a certain extent elicited by the director's way of asking questions, as a politically correct message to meet the mainstream demands of society and the ruling party. The message in the film carries good will, but it obscures the fact that the collective psyche of most Mainlanders in Taiwan is not as easily managed as this film suggests, and the political/psychological discrepancy between most Mainlanders and Taiwanese is still an overt or covert political crisis.

Happyrice profiles four aging rice farmers in southern Taiwan who are contented with their life-long toil in the rice field, which provides them with a meagre existence. Co-directors Yen Lan-chuan and Zhuang Yi-zeng take a humanitarian approach, documenting these farmers with painterly lighting and good camerawork, making the subjects and the philosophy of these farmers' lives immediately accessible. The humane, emotional touch of this two-hour documentary illustrates and glorifies manual-labor farmers, whose relationship with both the farming economy and soil is more moral than professional. They are respectable people, but they nonetheless serve largely as misrepresentations of the serious and complicated agricultural problems in contemporary Taiwan. Commentaries regarding this film during the previews were

again unanimously positive, praising the film's admirable efforts as a genuine tribute to the last generation of manual-labor farmers, who are disappearing from Taiwanese society. The directors hope to focus people's awareness on the devastating situation of agriculture in Taiwan, but then produce a film that only draws on viewers' nostalgia for a romanticized image of aging rice farmers. Both *Stone Dream* and *Happyrice* take human interest as the documentary approach, and like *Gift of Life*, they sacrifice the more complicated and urgent realities behind the characters.

III. HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Why, one might ask, has the language of sentimentality served as such an indispensable ingredient in formulating mainstream "taste" in Taiwanese documentary filmmaking, in turn shaping how local audiences see and understand society? There are multiple reasons behind the prominence of sentimentalism and de-politicization in much of the documentary production in contemporary Taiwan. It may help to first briefly reflect on the history of interrelations between politics and documentary film in Taiwan. In addition, there are cultural factors that need to be analyzed. Let me start from the historical and political aspects.

Prior to the 1980s, documentary practice in Taiwan, similar to other authoritarian-military regimes, primarily meant political propaganda serving the state's ideological purposes. Under martial law, rigidly enforced on the island by the ruling KMT, it was

not feasible to touch on the “dark side” of social reality, let alone political issues, by way of filmmaking or any other form of expression. People had no freedom of expression under KMT rule, a long period extending more than three decades following the end of Japanese colonization in 1945.

The decade of the 1980s was a dramatic and spirited age in the political history of Taiwan, when opposition movements challenging the legitimacy of the KMT regime surged and forced the ruling party to lift martial law in 1987, followed by a series of democratization projects. These changes led eventually to a shift of ruling power in 2000 to the DPP with Chen Shui-bian taking the presidential office. During the second half of the 1980s, several young people formed the “Green Unit” with portable video cameras, documenting major political/social street demonstrations, witnessing military police brutality towards demonstrators, and playing back roughly edited footage at numerous political campaign sites. Several other film teams, such as the Third Image Lab, emerged and undertook similar practices. Under the absolute control of the media—especially electronic media—exercised by the KMT government, video images by these filming squads exerted considerable influence in focusing people’s collective rage against the KMT and accelerated the process of democratization. These documentary works are of course political, but their views are one-sided and simplistic, with but one clear objective: to help overthrow the corrupt

KMT regime.

It is a shame that the political opposition movement, fizzing in the 1980s, does not seem to have widened people's deeper understanding of politics or the notion of "political." Since the 1990s, Taiwanese society has devoted most of its energy to election campaigns for political seats among adversary parties, and conflicts based on political interests have intensified. Democracy has been simplified and equated to political elections, where nearly non-stop election activities each year transform the island to a place of endless "campaign festivals" that provoke people's collective fanaticism and mutual hostility. On the other hand, overwhelming consumer culture pushed by globalization weakens, if not engulfs, the concerted effort toward cultural development that looked so promising in the late 1980s, when artistic expression of all sorts became possible. Moreover, Taiwan's international status continues to be marginalized by China. The collective subconscious state of mind is shaped by Taiwan's exclusion from international society and lack of a clear national identity, and Taiwanese people are in turn "self-oblivious" or "self-exiled" from the world, throwing their energy and passion into largely trivial domestic political affairs, quite often simply a "storm in the kettle," so to speak.

A paradoxical phenomenon results from such a situation: while the government, politicians, media, and general public are fanatic about internal political conflicts,

interpreting everything from a simplified, quasi-political view and demanding partisan acts in a dualistic divide, they in effect de-politicize or push aside the real issues that demand serious, rational political analysis and debate. This habit-forming condition is rooted in Taiwan's specific historical and socio-political context, and may partially explain the general absence or incapability of structuring a problematic with dialectic substance in most Taiwanese documentary works.

Aside from the historical and social context in which politics interacts with documentary film, this specific society with its history breeds a culture that shows a strong bent to sentimentalism. What we have here in Taiwan is simultaneously an immigrant society, and a society that is fast in economic development but slow in learning to develop a mature civil society. On one hand, Taiwanese people have developed a pragmatic, quite often opportunistic, mentality towards life, stemming from being immigrant society that still suffers from an unclear national identity and an indefinite future due to China's international political blockade, and the experience of being colonized centuries ago (by the Dutch, then by the Japanese) and then suppressed over the decades. At the same time, Taiwan is an Asian society that has transplanted Western democracy and party politics, condensing its imitation process in only a decade and half. As a result, most people do not have a complete understanding of civil rights or notions of the public sphere, etc. When these two layers of social

characteristics mix together, one finds a certain kind of fatalist mentality reflected in many Taiwanese people. There is a tendency to resort to self-pity and to rescue themselves on their own as individuals, without thinking of uniting in collective strength to change their fate.

IV. DEMANDING MORE FROM DOCUMENTARISTS

Documentary filmmakers who take serious interest in public/political issues are expected to provide a vision for people to gain a broader understanding towards their state of being, immediate society, and the world they live in, so that they can confront structural injustice and thereby empower themselves and change their lives. Regrettably, many of Taiwan's influential documentary filmmakers have long failed to take that approach in developing Taiwanese documentary culture. The proposed approach is certainly a winding path for documentary filmmaking, and is more challenging and demands higher self-expectation, but I think it is only through this approach that documentary film can potentially build subjectivity for itself, and thereby resist ideological incorporation by state apparatuses.

The films discussed above, however, take a much easier and safer approach. Take Wu Yii-feng's *Gift of Life* as an example again. The director emphasized the amount of time and effort invested in the making this work (four years was devoted to producing the documentary, said Wu). One can recognize the effort, but this has little to do with

creating a documentary with insightful revelations or intellectual impact. One cannot really walk out of the theater, stimulated by the emotionally charged messages from the film, and know anything that he or she did not know before from such an approach. *Gift of Life* does not even provide a slightly sophisticated understanding of the more complex stories behind each person, which may help situate our knowledge of their lives in a complicated reality, instead of escaping into just another tear-shedding ritual. Rather, the film reduces its function to moral preaching, suggesting the audience not ask questions, accept transient fate, and be courageous. This kind of message is most welcomed by the ruling classes, for it never intends to disclose the policy errors or institutional problems; it therefore helps sustain the legitimacy of the state and the status quo.

I have been using Wu Yii-feng's *Gift of Life* as the most representative case to depict some of the major problems in Taiwanese documentary culture. Aside from the outstanding phenomena exemplified by the film, there are other reasons that Wu's work and his documentary style need to be so scrutinized. Since Wu and the Fullshot team started making documentaries in 1990, they have produced a number of sincere works based on ordinary people's stories and the hardship and courage of the down-and-out. While the subjects documented are all decent and real, the films tend to take a humanitarian approach towards these people, which mobilizes the audience's

sympathy or admiration, but the extent of vision for a structural understanding of social issues is often narrow or completely absent. Under Wu's supervision, the Fullshot Foundation has been commissioned for a number of years by the Council for Cultural Affairs to offer documentary filmmaking training sessions to interested members island-wide. The program uses Wu's documentary approach as the standard model for instruction.[9] Consequently, Wu has become arguably the most influential figure in Taiwan's documentary environ, and the accumulated impact of his work and teaching is significant. Although the persistent concern with the lower social class reflected in Wu's works or those by the Fullshot team are sincere, I don't think the approach exercised in them is able to have much use in helping establish a civil consciousness among viewers.

I am not taking a dogmatic view here, confining documentary film to the function of being a political weapon against the state or other ruling powers. Furthermore, I do not think the screening of documentary works at commercial theaters with considerable ticket sales is automatically problematic either—the rigid view that documentary film has to remain fringed in terms of its aesthetics or audience size is not for me. It would be wonderful to see documentary films winning for themselves an influential position equal to feature films some day in Taiwan. But, under the mainstream consumer culture in film ecology today, that wonderful world is still far

from becoming a reality. What I am trying to ask, and analyze, here is, what is the meaning or significance for this cultural mirage in Taiwan, as reflected in the glorious ticket sales and the enthusiastic celebration of *Gift of Life*, *Happyrice*, and other films?

A number of local critics justify celebrating the phenomena of these films' widespread distribution and financial success in commercial theaters by saying that given the extremely difficult environment and decline of the Taiwanese film industry, the symbolic significance of documentary works is worth applauding. However, I would argue that, with manipulated operations to get more media exposure and audience participation, documentary culture may face a possible paradox of trading its end for its means—to surrender the disclosure of deeper, complicated realities in order to create a digestible, emotionally appealing product. One can hardly imagine a work like *Tie Xi Qu: West of Tracks* by Chinese documentary filmmaker Wang Bing (2003) appearing in Taiwanese documentary culture. It isn't that we do not have socio-historical material as epic and heavy as Wang's admirable work, but the pragmatic mentality of documentary filmmaking, with sentimentalized and de-politicized approaches, decisively excludes any possibilities for such production. There are talented and committed documentary filmmakers in Taiwan, who could produce decent works; filmmakers, critics and audiences all need to be more alert of this

dominant cultural ecology of Taiwanese society in which local filmmakers are easily trapped.

Footnotes:

1. The Golden Horse Award is the major film competition event held annually in December in Taiwan for works produced by domestic and overseas Chinese filmmakers.

2. In the booklet enclosed in the film's DVD case, Lee's recommendation reads: "It was a period of time, a golden age, during the Japanese governing in Taiwan when social stability, economic affluence, cultural plurality, and young people with hope, innovation and progressive thoughts all once existed. For me, it was a lived history . . . seeing *Viva Tonal*, I seem to return to that spirited youth."

3. Young people are both the major Internet users and the vast majority of people who go to movie theaters today in Taiwan.

4. Chunghwa Telecom is the biggest and most profitable telecommunication company in Taiwan, and the government is the largest shareholder.

5. Movie theaters in Taiwan require a fixed payment from local documentary film producers to guarantee a certain period of screenings, in case ticket sales fail to cover the theaters' basic expenses. *Gift of Life*, promoted by President Chen later on,

prolonged its screening period to over two months in the Taipei area.

6. Drawing on a recent example, publicly owned Chunghwa Telecom, whose chairman sponsored the commercial release of *Gift of Life* in 2004, plans to sell its government shares to domestic and foreign investors. The privatization scheme of this highly profitable company is considered to be unjustifiable among its employees, as well as by the general public. The Chunghwa Telecom labor union organized a major strike on May 17, 2005 and formed a picket line in front of the company headquarters, but the police, at the request of the employer, over-enforced its power by breaking into the picket line and taking away two key union members. The Council of Labor Affairs has sided with the employer and the police rather than for Chunghwa Telecom employees.

7. According to my research, other than scores of commentaries that praised this film unreservedly, only three articles raised questions from a critical view, including my article “Documentary Film: the New Confessional? *Gift of Life* and the State of Society and Culture in Taiwan,” published in *China Time*son October 12, 2004.

8. Wang Mo-lin, “Do Documentary Films Care about Realities?” published on April 5, 2005, *Coolloud Forum*, www.coolloud.org.tw.

9. Over the years I have been invited to the training sessions more than once to give lectures and see students’ works, and hence learned more or less about this

documentary training program. Besides the training programs, Wu has also been teaching for nine years at the Institute of Documentary Film of the Tainan National College of Arts, the only postgraduate program of its kind in Taiwan.