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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Demolition, Documentary and the Politics of Minjian on Contemporary Chinese Screens

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Abstract

China's transformation in the reform era has been most immediately experienced by many ordinary citizens in spatial terms, as existing urban communities have been dispersed and their environments levelled, to be replaced by 'spaces of flows' that prioritise speed, mobility and circulation. A wide range of Chinese films have represented this experience from the perspective of existing urban communities. This article argues that in certain 'unofficial' documentaries produced outside China's state-sanctioned channels of production and distribution, using small, highly mobile digital video cameras, an engagement with grassroots communities has opened up a new space on screen, in which a critical questioning of the developmental ethos driving contemporary China becomes evident. A close analysis of Ou Ning's *Meishi Street* (2006), Shu Haolun's *Nostalgia* (2006) and Du Haibin's *A Young Patriot* (2015) will illustrate how the unofficial spaces of localised, grassroots cultures (*minjian*) are represented in these works as sites of resistance to the coercive imposition of a globalised modernity on Chinese cities.

Keywords

Documentary; China; *chaiqian* (demolition and relocation); *minjian*; independent cinema

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A pair of old-timers pedal slowly through a demolished wasteland on a tricycle. One of them holds a camcorder and videos the ruins as they pass. Next we see them in their local bathhouse, where the owner's intellectually impaired brother mourns the neighbourhood's passing with a song. The old man frames the singing boy with his camera, and the final shot of the film is from the camcorder's perspective. So ends Zhang Yang's *Shower* (*Xizao*, 1999), with a fictionalised, pathos-ridden depiction of ordinary Beijingers documenting their neighbourhood's end. Half a decade later, a subtitle introduces a scene in another Chinese film: 'October 12, 2005. Taoranting Park. Zhang Jinli uses the digital video camera we gave him for the first time.' As the image pans around a typical Beijing park, we hear a voice behind the camera comment, 'It's about time I learnt how to do this.' So begins *Meishi Street* (*Meishi Jie*, 2006), one of an array of independently made Chinese documentaries of the twenty-first century that attempt to engage very directly with the views and experiences of ordinary Chinese citizens in an era of momentous change.

These two scenes reflect an expansion in the range of authorial voices in China's audio-visual culture in the digital age. *Shower* appeared on the cusp of the arrival of cheap, mobile digital technologies in China, marking the end of filmmaking as the exclusive preserve of a small group of professionals trained in official film schools or state-owned television. While *Shower* hinted at this change through a fictionalised vision of Beijing residents taking up a video camera to shoot changes taking place around them, *Meishi Street* is actually shot, in part, by one of its on-screen subjects—Beijing restaurateur Zhang Jinli. *Meishi Street* is part of a wave of *minjian dianying* (民间电影)—or 'unofficial films'—that appeared in the first decade of the twenty-first century in China; films made outside state-sanctioned channels of production, often by figures not associated with the professional filmmaking elite. In many of these unofficial works, citizens such as Zhang Jinli are no longer 'represented' on screen by professional actors, but take centre stage, sometimes behind as well as in front of the camera.

Unofficial films in China were facilitated by the arrival of relatively cheap, highly mobile digital video cameras from the late 1990s, which afforded many Chinese citizens the opportunity to make audio-visual work outside state-controlled structures for the first time. The mobility of these devices was twofold. First, their small, lightweight nature allowed access to people and situations that would have been difficult, if not impossible, using bulky broadcast-standard video equipment or 16-millimetre film cameras.¹ Second, the increased access to image making enabled by these devices introduced an unprecedented level of social mobility into Chinese audio-visual discourse—for the first time films could be potentially made by people from a broad range of social classes, ethnicities, professions and geographic locations. In this article, I wish to consider some of the ways in which the mobility afforded by this unofficial film culture in China has provided a new space on screen for engaging with and representing unofficial, localised cultures comprising views, experiences and life practices of ordinary citizens outside the political and economic elites. In this sense, unofficial films represent an implicit challenge to state-sanctioned articulations of what constitutes Chinese

1 For various social and economic reasons, consumer analogue video cameras were not widely available in China at the height of their popularity in the West during the 1980s and 1990s, and so their impact on the development of Chinese film was less dramatic than that of digital cameras. There were, however, a small group of independents who began making work using their own analogue video equipment as early as the mid 1990s, including Hu Jie and Zhao Liang, both of whom became prominent figures in Chinese film in the 2000s.

culture. In particular, I am interested in how, through various aesthetic strategies, the representational space of unofficial film becomes one in which a critical questioning of the developmental ethos driving contemporary China becomes evident. ‘Demolition documentaries’ like *Meishi Street* provide a particularly useful case study for examining how this on-screen space becomes a site of critical contestation, because they home in on one of the major flashpoints between ordinary citizens and the Chinese state in contemporary times: *chaiqian* (拆迁), or the demolition of people’s homes and their forced relocation.

For many Chinese, *chaiqian* has been one of the key ways in which the country’s social, economic and physical transformation has been experienced during the reform era that has played out since 1992.² As such, this experience provides a prism through which a broad range of attitudes towards the changes in China—including critical views—might be refracted. The pervasiveness of this experience also means it has been represented in a range of both official and unofficial film productions, providing some useful points of reference when considering what is distinct about unofficial works. Broadly speaking, officially sanctioned films have portrayed people enduring *chaiqian* as more or less powerless, impassive and resigned in the face of changes playing out around them. In contrast, a range of unofficial films have provided a space in which individuals have been able to articulate an explicit contestation of *chaiqian* and the economic logic behind the process, often through critical verbal commentaries conveyed in voiceovers or interviews. In *Meishi Street*, for example, we hear Zhang Jinli offer commentary from behind the camera as he records the destruction of his neighbourhood and his protests against this action. In Shu Haolun’s *Nostalgia (Xiangchou)*, 2006—another key demolition documentary made the same year—the filmmaker articulates one of Chinese cinema’s most explicit questionings of the developmental logic driving the country’s modernisation program, through a highly critical voiceover. In a third example from more recent times—Du Hai Bin’s *A Young Patriot (Shaonian, xiao Zhao)*, 2015—we observe the gradual change in attitude and worldview of a young ‘patriotic youth’ under the influence of a range of experiences, including the forced demolition of his elderly grandparent’s home. In all these films, the foregrounding of individualised subjectivities through verbal commentary, combined with a range of more film-specific aesthetic strategies, plays a key role in politicising the on-screen space.

Positioning China’s unofficial documentaries

Meishi Street, *Nostalgia* and *A Young Patriot* can all be understood as part of what Zhang Zhen calls China’s ‘urban cinema’, a diverse body of work that has developed since the early 1990s displaying ‘a singular preoccupation with the destruction and reconstruction

2 Although tentative steps to reform China’s centrally planned economy had been taken in the 1980s, these moves were largely placed on hold after the ‘Tiananmen Movement’ and the subsequent military intervention that ended these protests in the Spring of 1989. It was not until 1992, after Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Southern Tour’ of Special Economic Zones, that the central government began instituting policies to systematically open China’s economy to outside investment and introduce market mechanisms. For this reason both 1989 and 1992 are cited as key dates in the reform process—the former for foreclosing the possibility of political reform and the latter for Deng’s decisive endorsement of market-driven economic measures.

of the social fabric and urban identities of post-1989 China'.³ These are films concerned with representing, dramatising, interrogating and, to varying degrees, critiquing the social and physical impacts of the top-down 'modernisation' of China that has occurred under the auspices of a newly marketised economy in the reform era. Examples of urban cinema that focus specifically on the *chaiqian* experience range from some early, rather anodyne films made within state-owned studios such as *Stand Up! Don't Bend Over* (*Zhan zhi luo! Bie pa xia*, Huang Jianxin, 1992), to semi-independent works such as *Shower* and *24 City* (*Ersishi cheng ji*, Jia Zhangke, 2008), to 'unofficial', independent documentaries such as *Meishi Street, Nostalgia* and *A Young Patriot*.⁴ Although Zhang uses the term 'Urban Generation' and 'urban cinema' interchangeably, I will use the latter in line with Yomi Braester's call for 'a critical approach that cuts across genres and generations', thereby forestalling the promulgation of a largely fictional 'generational' understanding of Chinese cinema's development.⁵ For this reason, I also avoid the recently proposed term 'iGeneration' to describe China's contemporary image-making culture.⁶ The sheer diversity evident in Chinese film, both in terms of filmmakers' ages and backgrounds, and the content and style of their work, means that a generational understanding of Chinese cinema is no longer, I believe, accurate or critically useful.

The diversity of contemporary Chinese filmic output has been partly enabled by private, but officially recognised, production companies that arose in the wake of policy reforms in the 1990s, breaking the state-owned studios' former monopoly on recognised production.⁷ One of the earliest of these private firms, Imar Film Co., was founded in 1997 and produced *Shower*. Jia Zhangke's Xstream Pictures, founded in 2003, is another key player. Despite their positioning outside state-owned institutions, however, these companies are obliged to 'purchase' state-owned film studio logos for each production and work under a studio's nominal supervision to gain access to Chinese cinemas.⁸ In practice, this means submitting a 1,500-word script summary for the approval of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) before production begins, and submitting the finished film for final approval before release.⁹ Alterations to films are invariably demanded, and completed films are sometimes

3 Zhang Zhen, 'Bearing Witness: Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of "Transformation" (*Zhuanxing*)', in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007, p. 2.

4 For a survey of commercial features focused on the demolition experience, see Yomi Braester, 'Tracing the City's Scars: Demolition and the Limits of the Documentary Impulse in the New Urban Cinema', in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007, pp. 161–80.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

6 For more on the 'iGeneration', see Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu and Luke Vulpiani, 'China's iGeneration Cinema: Dispersion, Individualization and Post-WTO Moving Image Practices', in *China's iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Matthew D. Johnson, Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu and Luke Vulpiani, Bloomsbury, New York and London, p. 9.

7 Zhang Zhen provides a detailed account of these reforms in 'Bearing Witness', pp. 11–15.

8 Sebastian Veg, 'Introduction: Opening Public Spaces', *China Perspectives*, no. 1, 2010, p. 4.

9 *Ibid.*

refused release altogether. Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian zhu ding*, 2013) is a recent example of a high profile work that did not to gain approval at the final stage. Without SAPPRT's imprimatur, no feature film can be released in Chinese cinemas. In this manner, the state continues to exercise a diffuse but crucial influence over the semi-independent sector.

Ou Ning, Shu Haolun and Du Haibin belong to a slightly different subset of China's urban cinema—*minjian dianying*, or 'unofficial cinema' (also known as 'independent cinema')—existing outside state-sanctioned channels of production and distribution.¹⁰ Although the earliest unofficial Chinese productions occurred in the early 1990s, with titles such as Wu Wenguang's documentary *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (*Liulang Beijing: zuibou de mengxiangzhe*, 1990) and Zhang Yuan's drama *Mama* (1990), it was the arrival of cheap digital cameras in the late 1990s that saw a massive expansion of the unofficial sector, particularly in documentary.¹¹ A number of prominent Chinese filmmakers, such as Jia Zhangke, began their careers making unofficial productions, but later moved to the semi-independent realm.¹² Others, such as Ou Ning, Shu Haolun and Du Haibin have chosen to remain in the unofficial sector, free of direct censorial restraints but also restricted in terms of accessing the mainstream Chinese film market. Their independent positioning has an important bearing on what their films can say and depict, even as they overlap in terms of thematic concerns with the urban cinema produced in the semi-independent and state-owned realms.

One of the key ways unofficial cinema has expanded filmic representation in the People's Republic is through a direct engagement with *jieng* (基层, literally 'the grassroots')—or the prosaic, everyday life playing out in places outside the official spaces associated with nationhood and state power. Zhang Zhen describes the change that this engagement has brought about:

Suddenly, the vivacity of the texture of quotidian life, with multiple voices in multiple inflections emanating from multiple concrete localities, enters the cinema space as never before.¹³

As Zhang notes, the 'social indexicality' she describes is a contrast to the allegorical images of pre-1949 rural life 'cinematically enriched and eternalised' in key films of the 1980s such as *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, Zhang Yimou,

10 The term *minjian dianying* comes from Zhang Zhen, pp. 15–21. Zhang identified Jia Zhangke as the key figure in China's unofficial cinema, but Jia's status has clearly shifted since he began making officially recognised productions in 2004. Zhang's definition of unofficial cinema, however, remains very much applicable to filmmakers like Ou Ning, Shu Haolun and Du Haibin.

11 In contrast to the digital era, directors making unofficial work in the 1990s mostly still emerged from the Beijing Film Academy or state television. For more on this period see Lü Xinyu, 'Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement: Engagement with the Social', trans. Tan Jia and Lisa Rofel, in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lü Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2010, pp. 15–32; and Chris Berry, 'Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism', in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007, pp. 115–34.

12 For more on Jia Zhangke's transition from unofficial to official filmmaker, see Valerie Jaffee, 'Bringing the World to the Nation: Jia Zhangke and the Legitimation of Chinese Underground Film', *Senses of Cinema*, no. 32, July 2004, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/feature-articles/chinese-underground-film/>

13 Zhang Zhen, p. 20.

1987).¹⁴ It is also a direct challenge to the idealised images of the Socialist Realist style of the Maoist years and its vestiges in the contemporary ‘main melody cinema’ of the state-owned studios.¹⁵

In more recent writings on Chinese film, the quotidian life Zhang evokes has been theorised as *minjian* (民间)—the physical and mental spaces that lie outside sites associated with state power, and their state-driven articulations of nationhood. Sebastian Veg describes *minjian* as a place of complex interplay between individual subjectivities and the authoritarian structures governing life in China:

Independent cinema ... has sought to provide visual images of how the private stories of ordinary individuals are shaped in public spaces, spaces in which they are subjected to the public gaze and the great institutions that control modern life, but in which they try to give voice to their individual values. This space can also be described as the ‘unofficial’ space referred to in Chinese as *minjian*.¹⁶

The depiction of *minjian* on screen is an attempt to overwrite the space and time of the state and nation—constituted in official spaces like Tiananmen Square and the official narratives promulgated by institutions such as state media and main melody cinema—with personal and subjective experiences, views and responses to the changes of the reform era. The physical mobility afforded by digital cameras, and the social mobility they have facilitated in terms of the origins of moving images in today’s China, has been crucial in the development of unofficial cinema and the centrality of *minjian* to unofficial representations.

The rapidly changing environment that urban cinema depicts has been conceptualised by some scholars as ‘post-socialist’—a specifically Chinese version of the postmodern condition. According to Chris Berry, Chinese post-socialism is marked by a ‘loss of faith in grand narratives’ and a ‘polyvocal and eclectic culture with no single source of authority’.¹⁷ Sheldon Lu similarly views post-socialism as a historical condition in which ‘the masses have lost faith in the ideology of socialism’.¹⁸ While conceptualising China as a post-socialist state illuminates the nation’s unique mix of a market economy and Leninist political structure, it is an increasingly problematic way of describing the contemporary experience that urban cinema represents on screen. Large numbers of adult Chinese in the twenty-first century have never lived under a system that is socialist in anything but name—even fewer directly experienced the centrally planned economy of the Maoist era. Rather than being the key historical reference point against which present-day developments are understood and judged, Maoism is but one of a range of historical experiences against which Chinese citizens measure their contemporary condition.

14 Ibid. p. 3.

15 Keith B. Wagner, et al., p. 9.

16 Veg, p. 8.

17 Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution After the Cultural Revolution*, Routledge, New York and London, 2004, pp. 11–12.

18 Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu, 2007, p. 205.

The term ‘post-socialist’ also does not convey the central role that state-corporate forces have played in forcibly instituting the transformation to a market-driven, globalised economy. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed account of the relations between the state and private capital in China’s post-1980s development, but, as Ho Cheuk-Yuet writes of the urban real estate sector that has driven the *chaiqian* process across China’s cities. ‘The government’s power is all-embracing, spanning from upstream supply of land resources and control over the production of property assets to the downstream elicitation of demand and surveillance of market activities.’¹⁹ Carolyn Cartier has also demonstrated the crucial role the state’s territorial classification strategies, implemented by city governments, has played in fuelling the redevelopment and expansion of urban areas since the 1980s.²⁰ In other words, there has not simply been a societal ‘loss of faith’ in socialism in China; the state, in close alliance with corporations that are themselves often state owned, has played a leading role in dismantling the social and economic structures of the pre-1992 era, marketising urban environments through the commercialisation of land use rights.²¹

At a ground level, the change in China since the early 1990s can be understood as a forcible replacing of a heterogeneous range of urban environments and modes of life with a homogenised, globalised, consumer-driven modernity. For ordinary Chinese this transformation has most immediately been experienced in *spatial* terms. Existing urban environments—and the modes of life these environments make possible—have been levelled and replaced with what Yingjin Zhang, drawing on the ideas of Manuel Castells, calls ‘spaces of flows’.²² These new spaces—comprising office towers, shopping malls, chain stores and chain eateries, international hotels, airports, highways, high speed train links and multiplex cinemas—are designed to improve the mobility of global capital and its attendant elite of transnational consumers. The new modernity is about replacing old, relatively stable urban communities with environments in which speed, mobility and circulation are paramount—a condition somewhat akin to the ‘liquid modernity’ Zygmunt Bauman has described in the contemporary West, in which the ‘determining role of economy’ has become all-pervasive, untying the needs of capital from ‘traditional political, ethical and cultural entanglements’.²³ But where liquid modernity in the West has arisen gradually as an extension of early modernity’s brute rationality and dissolving of pre-modern social and economic relations, in China the rationality of a globalised late modernity has been very quickly and rigorously imposed on a range of existing modes of urban life by an authoritarian state. In conjunction with certain carefully circumscribed social and economic freedoms, especially in relation to leisure, investment and consumption, the state has deployed its control of land to ‘materialise

19 Ho Cheuk-Yuet, *Neo-Socialist Property Rights: The Predicament of Housing Ownership in China*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2015, p. 3

20 Carolyn Cartier, ‘Territorial Urbanization and the Party-State in China’, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2015, pp. 294–320.

21 For a detailed account of how the Chinese Communist Party manages, influences, and largely still owns China’s market-driven economy, see Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers*, Penguin Books, London, 2010.

22 Yingjin Zhang, ‘Thirdspace Between Flows and Places: Chinese Independent Documentary and Social Theories of Space and Locality’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin, Chow Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2013, p. 323.

23 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA, 2000, p. 4.

new urban consumer landscapes' that have forcefully overlain existing urban spaces.²⁴ While a considerable amount of literature—some of it cited above—has detailed the complex political economy of this urban transformation, less attention has been paid to the ways in which the experience of development has been represented by ordinary citizens on the receiving end of state-corporate plans and actions. Cinema, as a visual medium, is particularly suited to making visible the spatial aspect of this rapid transformation.

Representations of China's transformation are the mainstay of urban cinema generally, but it is only in unofficial works like *Meishi Street*, *Nostalgia* and *A Young Patriot* that we see a distinct resistant questioning of the new, globalised modernity that has been rolled out across the country. In officially recognised works, even of a semi-independent nature—such as the aforementioned *Shower*, or Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, 2006) and *24 City*—we are confronted by characters exuding a resigned sense of melancholy in response to the radical remaking of their surrounds.²⁵ In contrast, *Meishi Street* portrays restaurateur Zhang Jinli's strident protest against his forced removal and relocation through homemade banners and signs publicly displayed around his home and business. *Nostalgia* articulates a direct questioning of the state's developmental logic through the filmmaker's angry and emotive voiceover. Most radically, *A Young Patriot* traces the central character's gradual questioning of the state-sanctioned worldview he has been taught at school and university under the impact of a range of experiences, the most crucial of which is the forced relocation of his elderly grandparents and the demolition of their home. And while none of these films specifically articulate an alternative mode of contemporary urban life to the one being imposed upon China's cities, I want to suggest that through their utilisation of digital technologies to represent a range of street-level views and experiences, these films hold out the possibility of a different kind of globally engaged urban culture, based on the heterogeneous needs of localised communities rather than the accumulation of transnational capital. A close analysis of *Meishi Street*, *Nostalgia* and *A Young Patriot* will help explicate these claims.

***Meishi Street*: Documentary as archive, archive as resistance**

Meishi Street initially began purely as an attempt to create an archival record of an area slated for demolition.²⁶ Ou Ning, a graphic designer by trade, had been drawn into filmmaking via an unofficial screening group called U-theque (*Yuan ying hui*) that he ran in Guangdong, southern China, from the late 1990s.²⁷ Commissioned by the German 'Shrinking Cities' project to make a work about Beijing, Ou was drawn to Dazhalan, a small but densely populated zone of narrow alleyways (*hutong* 胡同) lying immediately south of Tiananmen Square. The area was once part of the 'Chinese City' set aside for Han Chinese residents by the Manchu rulers of

²⁴ Cartier, p. 306.

²⁵ The important exception to this passivity in Jia's characters is *A Touch of Sin*, in which the main characters enact various violent responses to common social problems or injustices in today's China. It is thus unsurprising that SAPPRT did not pass this film for release in Chinese cinemas.

²⁶ Details of *Meishi Street*'s genesis are taken from Dan Edwards, Interview with Ou Ning, Beijing, 6 March 2010.

²⁷ Before *Meishi Street*, Ou Ning had collaborated with fellow U-theque alumni Cao Fei to make the documentary *San Yuan Li* (2003), about an eponymously named area in Guangzhou, southern China.

the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), and even today the district is home to some of Beijing's oldest and poorest Han families. However, Dazhalan's prime location saw it earmarked for major redevelopment in the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, including the demolition of the main thoroughfare, Qianmen Dajie, and its reconstruction as an 'ancient' commercial street, complete with expensive brand name stores and international food and beverage chains such as Starbucks. In 2005, Ou Ning set about creating a video record of this area before the demolition and reconstruction crews moved in.

Ou's project took a different turn when he stumbled upon local restaurateur Zhang Jinli hanging banners outside his business on one of Dazhalan's main arterial roads, Meishi Jie. Zhang's signs were protesting against the impending demolition of the street as part of a road-widening project to improve car access to the area. Specifically, Zhang was angry about the high-handed manner in which the authorities were dealing with local residents and the paltry compensation packages being doled out to forcibly evicted residents. Zhang's charismatic and articulate personality inspired Ou to give him a digital camera and ask him to document his fight for just compensation. The easy-to-use nature of digital technologies allowed Zhang to quickly master the device and contribute in a decisive way to the finished film. His presence behind and in front of the camera not only makes clear that *Meishi Street* is an individualised response from a subject within the affected community to the *chaiqian* process, but his verbal articulations and self-recorded actions also lend the film a distinct politicised tone.

The background to the struggle we see in *Meishi Street* is introduced via a brief intertitle at the beginning of the film. No reference is made to the specific redevelopment of the Dazhalan area, but the intertitle notes that the widening of Meishi Street is part of the Beijing government's city-wide program of Olympic-related redevelopment. The opening scenes are in an observational style, as viewers are introduced to Zhang, the setting of Meishi Street and the fight by local residents for compensation for the compulsory demolition of their homes. After a meeting of residents in which they discuss their dispute with the authorities, the film cuts to the sequence alluded to earlier, in which Zhang playfully learns how to use a digital camera given to him by Ou Ning in a local park. The scene marks a shift in the film's representational register, from observation to direct participation by one of the on-screen subjects in the production of the film's images. The sequence also illustrates the mobile and easy-to-use nature of digital camera technology, and the importance of these attributes to *Meishi Street's* mode of production. Many sequences after this are either narrated by Zhang from behind the camera or feature Zhang setting up the camera and carrying out various actions before the lens, making clear his significant contribution to the finished work.

Paola Voci has identified *Meishi Street's* park sequence as an example of the 'light' video culture she argues has developed in China around mobile phone cameras and other small video devices.²⁸ This culture comprises highly personal, often short and amusingly playful works particularly suited to online platforms, that are resistant to being framed by 'market, art, or political discourse'.²⁹ This is a vernacular video culture rich in localised references, satire and language. Although *Meishi Street* is longer and more overtly politicised than many of the short online videos Voci analyses, she identifies the various sequences in the film that foreground Zhang's playful, exhibitionist tendencies as examples of light video culture, arguing that this

28 Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller Screen Realities*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010, pp. 162–5.

29 Ibid., p. xx.

narrative thread ‘only partly intersects with the serious and civic struggle’ in which Zhang is ‘wholeheartedly engaged’.³⁰ Voci’s work is invaluable for the way it examines a complex field of audio-visual production in today’s China outside the traditional film and television realms. I want to offer, however, a slightly different reading of *Meishi Street*’s ‘playful’ sequences—one that views the film’s record of Zhang’s civic struggle and his moments of playfulness as an integrated attempt to open a new kind of representational space on screen that is central to the film’s celebration and validation of China’s grassroots *minjian* culture, against the views and actions of a state that places its conception of national advancement above all other modes of life and culture.

The moments of ‘light’ video culture that Voci argues appear almost despite Ou Ning’s political intentions are in fact integral to the film’s reclaiming and validation of Meishi Street and its community as *minjian*—a space partly shaped and regulated by the state, but also comprising subjectivities, connections, rituals and relationships that play out around, and sometimes against, these regulatory structures. In contrast to the passivity of ordinary Chinese as portrayed in many examples of official urban cinema, the community around *Meishi Street* is represented as one in which the state’s heavy handed approach to modernisation is viewed with scepticism, anger and a degree of resistance. Residents draw on local social networks and cultural practices to contest the changes being imposed upon them, to the extent that contestation is possible in an authoritarian environment such as Beijing. For example, the film features many scenes of Zhang Jinli interacting with friends from the local area while they exercise in the local park or sing *karaoke* together, but these friends *also* share their difficult experiences dealing with the local government and demolition firm, and plan their fights for just compensation by swapping information and advice. Throughout the film, Zhang also videos his own homemade protest banners and those of his neighbours, strung from homes and businesses along Meishi Street. These banners are rich in historically diverse, localised cultural references, from quotes from Chairman Mao to calls to meet with the ancient Chinese judge Bao Gong, famed for his fairness and integrity. The practice of writing protest banners and posters itself has a rich political lineage in modern China, stretching back to public political debates during the Cultural Revolution. In one sequence, Zhang attracts attention to his banners by loudly serenading passers-by from his restaurant’s rooftop, an action played knowingly for the camera that he sets up to video his song. Protest and play, sociality and resistance, are intertwined in the representation Zhang creates through the images he shoots, all underlain by the rich, localised culture of the area.

On a deeper level, many playful scenes in *Meishi Street* make visible the complex layering of history that underlies the local community and its culture—a history that will be evacuated once the street is demolished and the residents relocated. At one point, for example, we see Zhang carefully cutting out sheets of paper coins in his cramped home, before burning the fake money in the street as an offering to his deceased mother. This is a Beijing variant of a ritual practiced across China on various traditional festival dates. In several other sequences throughout the film, Zhang videos himself bolstering his fighting spirit by singing *karaoke* versions of Maoist-era revolutionary songs alone in his home at night, turning the revolutionary ethos of the early Communist movement against Beijing’s present-day authorities. Shortly after Ou gives Zhang a camera, we hear the restaurateur joking from behind the lens with his chefs in the dingy kitchen of his business: a small, family run establishment typical of the eateries that sprang up all over Beijing during the

30 Ibid., p. 162.

immediate post-Mao decades of the 1980s and 1990s. Elsewhere, Zhang videos himself cooking local snacks for his young adult daughter. These images of the local, vernacular culture of the area function as both a record of a historically layered world disappearing as the film progresses and a touching portrait of what is elided in the state's narrative of homogenous national development. The lively and often playful creativity informing much of this culture forms a sharp contrast to the images of people being evicted by police and their homes bulldozed that are interspersed throughout the film as the local community is gradually destroyed. The representation and validation of the local specificities, historical density and place-based nature of *minjian* culture functions as an implicit questioning of, to quote Yingjin Zhang, the state's representation of China as 'a single gigantic space-time unified by the powerful centripetal ideologies of nationalism and globalisation'.³¹ Furthermore, the cutting between interludes focused on local culture and life practices, and the violent eviction of local residents and the rapid destruction of their homes, makes clear the coercive manner in which one mode of urban life is being forcibly dismantled by the authorities to make way for another, demonstrating the authoritarian and top-down manner in which development is driven by the Chinese state's control over land resources. This is not the smooth, harmonious modernisation described in state media, but a contested process of land use appropriation and community dispersal. The depiction of local life and culture also highlights what is being lost through this process.

The representation of *minjian* is given a final politicised charge in *Meishi Street* by Zhang Jinli's episodic commentary throughout the film, offered from behind the camera as he shoots. In several sequences, for example, he moves down the street framing empty lots where the homes of his friends and neighbours stood until recently. From behind the lens he recounts details about the former residents and the forced demolition process. Between these comments he offers scraps of memories from his own life in the area, such as references to the school he attended as a boy. These scenes are a graphic example of the way unofficial cinema represents *minjian* as reinscribing individual subjectivities, experiences and responses upon public spaces that have been forcibly rendered subservient to the collective political, economic and social projects of the state. As the buildings of Meishi Street are flattened and memories associated with the site dispersed to make way for the flow of private vehicles into the area, Zhang Jinli fights a rear-guard action against this transformation by using words and video images to reinvest the progressively levelled site with localised memories, community bonds and culture. It is the physical mobility of digital cameras that allows this grassroots intervention in the state's representation of its developmental project.

Zhang's images, commentary and protest actions throughout *Meishi Street* are examples of the crucial role digital technologies have played in facilitating a close filmic engagement with *minjian* in China's unofficial cinema, both in terms of modes of production and on-screen representation. *Meishi Street* also illustrates how this engagement, especially in relation to the process of *chaiqian*, has led to the creation of politically charged works that question and contest the rapid imposition of new spaces associated with a globalised modernity upon Chinese cities in the reform era. Where officially recognised, semi-independent works tend to elide active contestation of the state's 'modernisation' program, unofficial films like *Meishi Street* are able to represent *minjian* as a site of conflict that includes a questioning of the state's particular vision of a globalised nation.

31 Yingjin Zhang, p. 321.

***Nostalgia*: ‘Do people truly worship these skyscrapers?’**

Nostalgia is another documentary sitting at the unofficial end of China’s contemporary urban cinema, made in Shanghai around the same time Ou Ning made his film in Beijing. Like *Meishi Street*, *Nostalgia* depicts the historical layering evident in existing communities in the filmmaker’s home city, and the pathos of loss as these communities are dispersed and their environments destroyed. More explicitly than Ou’s documentary, however, *Nostalgia* directly questions the developmental logic underpinning China’s contemporary modernisation program through the filmmaker’s voiceover. Shu also explicitly discusses the new mode of urban life being imposed on Chinese cities, and questions its desirability.

Nostalgia evokes Shanghai’s complex history through its setting in Dazhongli, a neighbourhood of narrow alleyways, or *lilong* (里弄), lined by *shikumen* (石库门), townhouse-like structures that incorporate elements of both Western and Chinese architecture. These buildings’ distinctive style is a product of the colonial modernity imposed on Shanghai by powers such as Britain and France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the consequent intermingling of Western and Chinese cultures. In the 2000s, many *shikumen* near Shanghai’s centre were bulldozed to make way for high-rise office towers and hotels. A few had their facades retained as the buildings were gutted and rebuilt to host modern chain stores selling luxury designer brands, supported by an array of bars and cafes. *Nostalgia* depicts a long-standing community within one of these *lilong* neighbourhoods—actually where the filmmaker grew up—just before the residents are relocated and the area destroyed. Unlike Ou Ning in *Meishi Street*, Shu Haolun does not collaborate with a local resident to make his documentary, but rather connects directly with the Dazhongli community through his family and his own personal childhood memories.

Initially, Shu’s film takes an unabashedly nostalgic approach—the director even expresses his desire to ‘write my nostalgia through my lens’ after hearing about the imminent demolition of his childhood home. In this way, Shu deploys a strategy Lü Xinyu identifies as common in the work of many unofficial Chinese documentarians. ‘Nostalgia’, Lü writes, ‘has become both a kind of refusal of but also a reflection on modernity.’³² Shu’s film, however, is not a refusal of modernity per se, but rather a refusal of a particular mode of contemporary globalised modernity and the top-down manner in which it has been imposed on Chinese cities. Shu refuses the emptying out of historical memory underpinning this process and the roughshod way in which the views and wishes of existing residents have been ridden over.

Shu ‘writes’ his nostalgia through his lens in a variety of ways, such as interviews with his grandmother about the family’s history in the area dating back to the 1930s. On a more personal level, Shu uses old pop songs, television clips, his own verbal recollections and short dramatisations to evoke Dazhongli’s *minjian* culture during his childhood of the 1980s. At that time a collective way of life still existed that included state-owned breakfast stands, state-issued food stamps and the watching of a communal television in the neighbourhood committee office. In this way, throughout the film’s first hour, Shu describes a distinctly urban existence in and around Dazhongli that is nonetheless decidedly at odds with life in the contemporary city. In Shu’s childhood, Shanghai’s historical layering was clearly evident in the fabric of everyday experience. The neighbourhood’s physical structure was a remnant of the colonial modernity under which Shanghai was originally forged, with its uneasy intermingling of Chinese and foreign styles. Upon this was layered the socialist modernity of the Maoist

32 Lü, p. 37.

era and 1980s, with its collective ethos and distinct social structures. Both forms of modern life were grounded in relatively stable communities and powerful identifications with local areas and people, despite Dazhongli's big city setting. The film's nostalgic tone makes clear that the particular modernity of Shu's childhood is now decidedly of the past, even if the neighbourhood is still standing as he shoots. Wandering lanes around his old home, Shu notes that the neighbourhood committee office bears little resemblance to the communal meeting place of his memories, and that virtually all his contemporaries have long since moved out of the area, some immigrating to other countries. The only long-term residents we see in the film are people of his grandmother's generation. The forces of globalisation, introduced under the auspices of the state's control over land and carefully delimited market forces, have clearly changed the shape of Dazhongli's local community in the years preceding the area's demolition. Nonetheless, the area's elderly residents and still-standing old houses provide some link to a shared past, even for those who have moved out of the area.

In the final twenty minutes of the film, Shu's tone changes markedly, from one of nostalgia to questioning anger, conveyed through visual strategies and voiceover. The shift occurs with Shu's first direct reference to the contemporary era physically cutting into the Dazhongli area. Significantly, this intrusion is in the form of a freeway—a key element in the urban infrastructure of contemporary modernity, with its emphasis upon rapid mobility and circulation. Shu relates a story about his first love through voiceover and dramatisation, ending with a re-enactment of his younger self attending an all night film screening with his girlfriend of the time. He returns to the present via an exterior shot of what is left of the local cinema. Part of the building became a dancehall, Shu explains, while the rest 'became a symbol of this era's progress—an elevated expressway'. As he speaks, the camera pans across the old cinema's exterior, finally framing the expressway looming over the aging structure. An image of the road then crossfades to a massive crane and a partly constructed high rise building towering in the sky, the image framed by the ground-level ruins of a demolished neighbourhood. 'The huge cranes are like iron monsters madly running around the city', Shu intones. The sequence reflects a visual strategy Shu deploys throughout *Nostalgia*, shooting from the ground level of old neighbourhoods to frame the domineering presence of glass and steel towers that dwarf them. Shanghai's transformation is rendered in spatial terms, as the new skyline is represented as a remorseless, impersonal force steadily overriding existing residents.

After the story about the old local cinema, Shu moves for the first time into one of the high-rise spaces of the new modernity—a five-star Four Seasons Hotel that looms over Dazhongli, occupying the space where a local rice shop once stood. Shu enters the luxury space and interviews one of its managers on a balcony overlooking his old home. 'This kind of view is getting rarer in Shanghai,' the manager comments as he looks out over the colonial-era homes. 'But foreign guests really like it.' The elevated view is directly aligned with the position of Shanghai's floating population of transnational tourists and business people. The manager expresses the hope that some of Dazhongli can be preserved and converted to restaurants and nightclubs, so the 'culture can be retained in a way that suits the trend of the times'. Looking over his old neighbourhood, Shu comments angrily in the voiceover. 'So all the *shikumen* houses in which generations of Shanghainese lived will either be demolished to build skyscrapers or converted into another Xintiandi?' he asks bitterly. Shu then explains Xintiandi is a well-known Shanghai neighbourhood that was 'preserved' by being converted into an area of 'high-end restaurants and fashion stores', attracting 'cash flows' by providing a space for tourist consumption. The neighbourhood, originally called Xing Changli, was renamed Xintiandi (新天地, literally 'New Heaven and Earth') after its redevelopment. Xintiandi is precisely the kind of 'space of flows' that Yingjin Zhang associates

with contemporary globalisation, as places associated with home and community are ‘increasingly superseded by spaces characterised by circulation, velocity and flow’.³³ John Urry similarly regards sites of movement and ‘consumption excess’ as integral to the ‘high carbon mobile life’ of today’s global economic elites.³⁴ Using Dubai as the emblematic site of consumption excess, Urry describes the creation of a ‘luxury-consumer paradise’, built using migrant labour divorced from any form of collective representation or legal rights, and based upon the dispossession of those formerly occupying the site. These sites of consumption excess often feature ‘simulated environments’ that reproduce iconic structures or historic settings.³⁵ Xintiandi is not, of course, on anything like the scale of Dubai, but the dynamics underpinning its creation and function are similar. As Shu’s film details, in much more explicit terms than *Meishi Street*, the new globalised, consumer modernity being rapidly imposed upon Chinese cities demands the dissolving of older, localised communities based upon tight social bonds, and the destruction of their neighbourhoods—or the reconstruction of their neighbourhoods as places of consumption excess. Either way, these locations must be converted to sites primarily designed to allow a continual flow of people in the form of a highly mobile elite of consumer travellers and business people, accompanied by flows of transnational capital.

Shu once again conveys the impact of this remaking of Xintiandi in visual terms. He explains that thousands of local residents were relocated to the city’s outskirts so they could ‘give their old world to this new world’, as his camera evokes the perspective of the area’s banished, ‘outmoded’ residents by panning across the new shopfronts from knee height. While his careful use of elevated and ground-level perspectives up to this point has shown the new modernity to be a seemingly unstoppable force looming over Shanghai’s residents, in the Xintiandi sequence he visually implies that this process of change has actually lowered the socioeconomic standing of the city’s older communities, as they are made to look up from knee height on the old *shikumen* that were once their homes.

In conjunction with its visual strategies, *Nostalgia* explicitly questions the desirability of this new, globalised modernity being imposed on Shanghai through the filmmaker’s voiceover. Following the sequence on Xintiandi, we see glossy promotional footage of the city’s glittering, contemporary high-rise skyline. Much of this is shot from a bird’s-eye view sweeping over the city, or from inside the shiny new skyscrapers, in contrast to the lower resolution, ground-level images shot by Shu in his old community. Over this promotional footage, the filmmaker asks in voiceover, ‘Do people truly worship these skyscrapers?’ He answers his own question. ‘I doubt it’, the assertion reinforced by an intertitle spelling out his words. He continues: ‘Do the times really drive everyone to chase so-called fashion, pursue the so-called “modern”, and love the neon lights at night? I don’t believe it.’ The sequence offers a much more definite refusal of our era’s particular brand of globalised modernity than Zhang Jinli’s more localised protests documented in *Meishi Street*. *Nostalgia* also spells out the mobile, consumer lifestyle being laid over the spaces of the old community in much more explicit terms than Ou’s film.

For all their contestation of the developmental ethos driving the remaking of Chinese cities, however, it is notable that neither *Nostalgia* nor *Meishi Street* contain any suggestion

33 Yingjin Zhang, p. 322.

34 John Urry, ‘Does Mobility Have a Future?’, in *Mobilities: New Perspectives on Transport and Society*, ed. Margaret Grieco and John Urry, Ashgate, Farnham, 2012, pp. 7–10.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

of an organised *collective* resistance to what is being done to the communities on screen. No doubt this is partly because any form of politicised organising in China provokes a swift and harsh reaction from the authorities. However, these films' reticence in explicitly articulating a collective vision for how China's present and future might be different is also, perhaps, a product of contemporary modernity's all-pervasive logic. Zygmunt Bauman notes that individual choices have been systematically uncoupled from the possibility of collective action in the increasingly individuated societies forged under the contemporary global economic order, rendering this order impervious to any logic but its own remorseless reproduction.³⁶ Bauman's observations are primarily based on life in the contemporary West, but a similar dynamic is observable in today's consumerist and increasingly individualised China, reinforced by a highly coercive and authoritarian state specifically targeting any form of collective organising. The tightly knit community Shu evokes in *Nostalgia* is already in an advanced state of dispersal before the bulldozers even arrive—as noted, most of his generation has left long ago, leaving only elderly residents like his grandmother and his own nostalgic reminiscences. Collective resistance to change, no matter how unpopular the changes might be among the affected community, never appears on *Nostalgia's* agenda. Similarly, *Meishi Street* shows a vibrant urban culture in the process of being destroyed, but ultimately the community is unable or unwilling to confront the authorities in any kind of collective opposition to what is being done. Instead, through these unofficial films, we have a form of individualised cultural resistance that questions the inexorable, destructive force of the state's vision of modernisation, and shows something of the human and cultural cost of the destruction being inflicted on Chinese cities.

A Young Patriot: *Chaiqian* as political disillusionment

Du Haibin's 2015 documentary *A Young Patriot* illustrates the ongoing prevalence of *chaiqian* in China, as well as the continued interest of independent documentary makers in this process. The film also reflects the growing sophistication of unofficial documentaries, through the broad range of issues it touches upon and its careful structuring. *A Young Patriot* focuses on five years in the life of Zhao Chantong, who at the beginning of the film is nineteen years old and a fervent nationalist. The film mixes observational footage with interviews, mostly with Zhao, but also occasionally with his family members. Zhao's reflections are expressed both through traditional talking-head images, and voiceovers that play out over observational scenes. The mobile nature of digital cameras, and the cheap production mode they enabled, allowed Du to engage with Zhao's life over a prolonged period and range of geographic locations.

Over the course of five years, Zhao's nationalist sentiments and enthusiasm for a future in which he anticipates China growing 'stronger and stronger' is steadily tempered by a range of incidents. One of the earliest of these is a summer spent working as a doorman at a hotel in his hometown of Pingyao in Shanxi Province. Despite expressing strong anti-Japanese sentiments early in the film, Zhao says he is surprised to find that Japanese guests are far more polite to hotel staff than local Chinese tourists. At university in Chengdu, he complains about nepotism and non-consultative decision making. During his first summer break from tertiary study, he is confronted with the stark poverty lingering in some rural areas when he teaches at a remote mountain school in Sichuan Province. Space precludes detailed discussion of these episodes here. One of the most crucial experiences to influence Zhao's thinking,

³⁶ Bauman, p. 6.

however, comes towards the end of the film, when his elderly grandparents' home—in which Zhao spent much of his childhood—is forcibly demolished to facilitate the city government's 'embellishment plan' of a riverside area in Pingyao.

As in *Nostalgia*, the machines associated with urban redevelopment are represented as monsters in *A Young Patriot's* demolition sequence. Our first glimpse of the frontend-loader being used to smash down the riverside area is through a window in Zhao's grandparents' home. The machine suddenly looms over the building before descending on a neighbouring structure. Later, Zhao climbs onto the rooftop with his own camera to video the machine's destructive work. Shots of his filming are intercut with images of Zhao's grandfather in the house. The old man is highly distressed by the noise and dust that invades his home as the surrounding buildings are torn down. At one point, a wall crashes down into his courtyard from a neighbouring property. On the rooftop, tears begin to silently run down Zhao's face as he shoots the levelling of the area.

Like *Meishi Street* and *Nostalgia*, *A Young Patriot* depicts the affective emotional impact on ordinary Chinese citizens of dispossession, forced relocation and the destruction of homes in which they have spent most of their lives. Zhao's grandfather is rendered catatonic by his relocation to the city's periphery, and he passes away shortly after. Du's innovation is to show how a young subjectivity, initially shaped by the nationalist, pro-Communist Party culture that surrounds him, is slowly transformed under the pressure of a chain of experiences that are common and everyday in today's China. *Chaiqian* has been central to the remaking and sustained growth of China's urban economy over the past two decades, confronting Zhao with the fact that the national 'strength' he celebrates in the opening scenes of the film has been achieved at huge emotional, psychological and financial cost to ordinary urban dwellers—including his own family. By closely following the development of Zhao's subjectivity in his crucial young adult years, Du illustrates how a chain of diffuse events—including the experience of *chaiqian*—leads to a questioning of China's political and economic model, and the developmental ethos that has driven the country's growth for almost three decades. More than either *Meishi Street* or *Nostalgia*, *A Young Patriot* links the experience of *chaiqian* to a raft of other social problems in China today, from authoritarian governance, to corruption, to severe deprivation in certain rural areas, demonstrating how everyday experience contrasts with and tempers state-sponsored narratives of 'national strength'.

Conclusion

While the Chinese state has promoted a narrative of unified national progress in the reform era, China's 'unofficial' urban cinema has opened a different kind of representational space on screen, through a very direct engagement with the unofficial space known as *minjian*. Digital cameras have facilitated this engagement, through their own accessibility and mobility, which allows their users to easily enter and move through a range of private and public urban spaces. Rather than overwriting this everyday space with ideas and narratives of the nation and national advancement, these films have opened up spaces of politicised representation from the ground up, providing grassroots perspectives that provide a questioning contestation of the changes being imposed on Chinese cities and the authoritarian manner in which these changes have been instituted. In contrast to the homogenised national space of state discourse, unofficial documentaries such as *Meishi Street*, *Nostalgia* and *A Young Patriot* portray myriad localised cultures and views, as well as the sometimes fiercely contested changes, struggles and confrontations that have

taken place on a local level as China has moved from a centrally planned economy to a globalised, market-driven system overseen by a state that remains highly authoritarian. By opening up the space of *minjian* on screen, in all its varied, localised and historically layered complexity, these films offer a subtle cultural resistance to the disempowering mechanics of urban rejuvenation in the reform era, and the social and historical erasure that has been central to the imposition of a globalised modernity on Chinese cities.

Although these documentaries do not explicitly articulate the possibility of organised resistance to the coercive *chaiqian* process, to finish I want to suggest that a certain utopian possibility lies within their very mode of unofficial production and circulation (mostly via screenings in cafes, bars and galleries, and informal DVD distribution). These films are products of a film culture that creatively utilises the consumer goods of the globalised corporate age to produce representations that are not shaped according to the needs of the state or commercial imperatives, but by local subjectivities responding in individualised ways to national and global trends. In their very mode of production, using cheap, mobile cameras and digital editing equipment, these examples of China's unofficial cinema hold out the possibility of another kind of modern Chinese culture—shaped not by the demands of global capital, but by historically grounded individuals and creative endeavours engaged with, but not rendered powerlessly subject to, developments on a global scale.

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