

EDITED BY
PAUL G. PICKOWICZ & YINGJIN ZHANG



FROM UNDERGROUND TO INDEPENDENT



ALTERNATIVE FILM CULTURE
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Preface

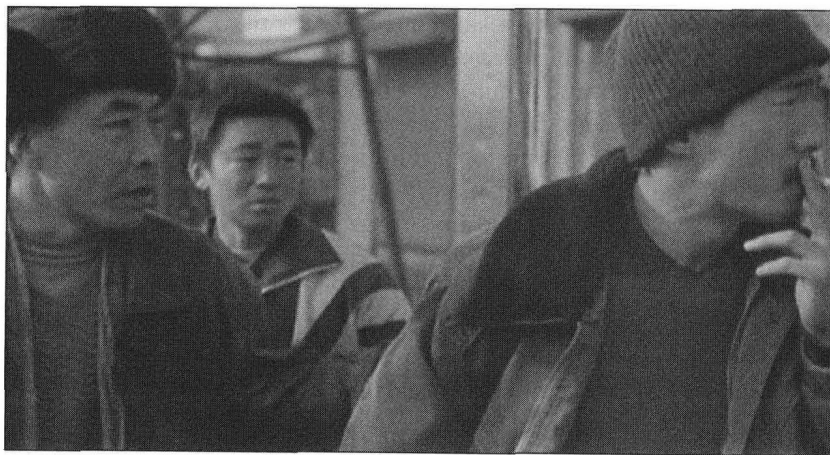
Chinese underground filmmaking attracted international attention in the early 1990s, but media coverage of it has occurred mostly outside China and has been frequently filtered through Eurocentric lenses. On the academic side, a few scholarly works in English from the 1990s could not do justice to the immensely rich materials produced by Chinese underground films, whose social, ideological, and aesthetic significance calls for in-depth investigation.¹

This book seeks to advance research on Chinese underground films in several ways. First, it brings together a group of committed scholars in Chinese studies and film studies whose expertise in a wide spectrum of subjects is combined to shed light on the changing dynamics of Chinese film culture since the early 1990s. As suggested in the book's title, *From Underground to Independent*, the dynamics in question may point to a direction away from "underground" and toward semi-independence or "in dependence" in the new century, but the sheer variety of *alternative* film culture in contemporary China itself provides sufficient opportunities for different, at times contradictory, configurations of cinematic products. Second, this book encourages *interdisciplinary* scholarship and investigates the objects of its study from various methodological perspectives, ranging from historical and literary to sociological and ethnographic. Apart from critical readings of individual works, this book explores alternative film culture through personal interviews, firsthand on-site observations, and media interrogations, from traditional print media to the visual media of film, television, and video, including the new digital media of the Internet. Third, several chapters in this book concentrate on Chinese independent *documentary* filmmaking of the past fifteen years, and this concentration foregrounds a crucial part of alternative film culture in

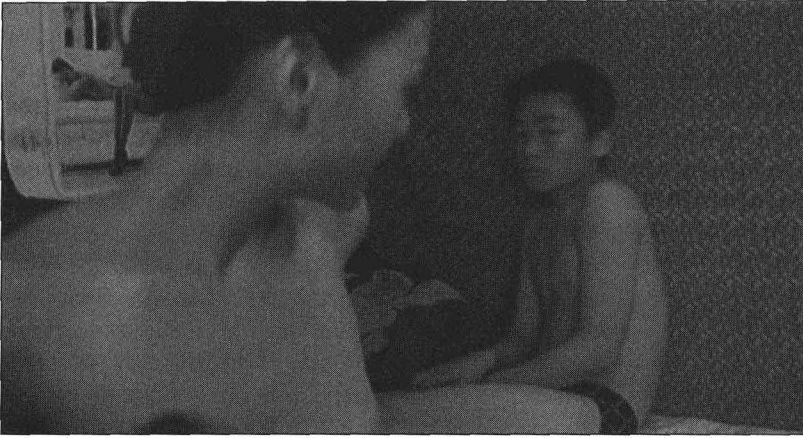
contemporary China that has been previously obscured by an almost exclusive attention to the “sixth-generation” directors of *fictional* films. Fourth, this book facilitates further research by providing a survey of the existing scholarship in Chinese and an introduction to the rare collection of Chinese underground films at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), as well as a filmography and a bibliography that contain Chinese characters for easy reference.

Understandably, this book does not claim to be comprehensive in its coverage of Chinese underground and independent filmmaking. For instance, while presenting a critical analysis of Jia Zhangke’s *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), this book does not include a study of Jia’s first aboveground feature, *The World* (2004), nor does it focus on other prolific independent directors (e.g., Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan) or important recent works (e.g., Wang Bing’s *West of the Tracks*, 2001; Li Yang’s *Blind Shaft*, 2002).² Nonetheless, even though comprehensive coverage is beyond its scope, this book does challenge conventional wisdom and contains thought-provoking, sometimes eye-opening discussions of alternative film culture in contemporary China.

Two terminological clarifications are warranted here, the first concerning “underground” (*dixia*), “independent” (*duli*), and other related terms used to describe this alternative film culture, the second concerning its delicate positioning vis-à-vis politics. First, the reader is advised to keep in mind that there is a range of opinion (even constructive debate, as summarized in Chen and Xiao’s chapter) about the precise language that should be used when characterizing *nonstate filmmaking* in China. In general, “underground” is a term



Two homicidal migrant miners looking for their next victim in Li Yang’s *Blind Shaft* (2002)



A country boy's first sexual encounter in Li Yang's Blind Shaft (2002)

preferred by overseas media and embodies expectations of the subversive function of this alternative film culture in contemporary China. A majority of young filmmakers themselves, however, favor “independent,” a term that has gained more currency in Chinese media and scholarship, not necessarily due to censorship pressures. More often than not, “independent” means a cinematic project’s independence from the state system of production, distribution, and exhibition, rather than to its sources of financial support, for filmmakers increasingly depend on the private (*minyng*) sector and foreign investment, thereby revealing their status of “in dependence” as joint or coproducers, or even contracted media workers (as elaborated in Berry’s chapter). From time to time, “avant-garde” (*xianfeng*) and “personal filmmaking” (*geren dianying*) are also used to emphasize the aesthetic styles of the young generation, although these terms describe more than the mode of production and cover a larger group of directors who may actually work, at least occasionally, within the state-owned studio system. Personal filmmaking is thus connected to such terms as “sixth generation,” “post-fifth generation,” and “newborn generation” (*xinsheng dai*), all of which designate a large, diverse group of directors working assiduously in “postsocialist” China, a new historical period that witnesses fundamental contradictions as well as exhilarating opportunities.³

Second, fundamental contradictions in postsocialist China have engendered honest differences of opinion about the “political” thrust of underground and independent works. Here, differences may have emerged from different conceptions of “politics.” Does a film have to be openly dissident or explicitly subversive of party authority and power to qualify as “political”? Some scholars, especially those overseas, say yes. Others define the “political” differently,

and thus find the political in even the most self-indulgent and narcissistic works. Understandably, even Chinese directors themselves are divided as to their self-positioning to postsocialist politics. While some may thrive on political controversy by astutely acquiring and cashing in on their “political capital” overseas (as did Zhang Yuan in the 1990s), others insist on the “apolitical” nature of their work, strategically distancing themselves from the previously cherished roles of intellectuals as spokespersons of the nation and the party. In response to the unsettled question of the political in underground filmmaking, the contributors will be “talking to each other” in this book in order to stake out alternative positions in this stunning development of Chinese culture. It would be misleading and perhaps a bit dishonest to pretend that we have all the “answers” at this preliminary stage of study. Rather, our aims are to promote various approaches and, through internal dialogue in this book, to give the reader a sense of the excitement and challenges associated with exploring a dynamic new cultural phenomenon in contemporary China.

A brief summary of individual chapters follows. In chapter 1, “Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China,” Paul Pickowicz situates underground filmmaking in the political economy of postsocialist China and correlates underground filmmaking to similar trends of personal expression and narcissistic self-fashioning in popular culture in general and urban youth fiction in particular. In chapter 2, “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video,” Yingjin Zhang urges the reader to go beyond Chinese independents’ repeated claims to truth and objectivity by analyzing their styles, subjects, and points of view and by exploring questions of subjectivity and audience in the production and circulation of underground films in China and abroad.

After two overviews of crucial issues, the next three chapters deal with independent Chinese documentary. In chapter 3, “‘A Scene beyond Our Line of Sight’: Wu Wenguang and New Documentary Cinema’s Politics of Independence,” Matthew Johnson zooms in on Wu Wenguang and uses his career as a pioneer of “new documentary cinema” to illustrate the processes of divergence and convergence in China’s official, semiofficial, and unofficial mediascapes since the early 1990s. In chapter 4, “‘Every Man a Star’: The Ambivalent Cult of Amateur Art in New Chinese Documentaries,” Valerie Jaffee argues that the ideal of amateurism constitutes a core component of Chinese independent filmmaking, and this argument informs her meticulous analysis of three documentary works, one each from Wu Wenguang, Zheng Dasheng, and Zhu Chuanming. In chapter 5, “Independently Chinese: Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, and Chinese Documentary,” Chris Berry extends this discussion to two other significant documentarists and details the noticeable effects of a three-legged system (the party-state apparatus, the marketized

economy, as well as the foreign media and art organizations) on this group of independents, who are believed to represent a model of independence different from that of either the former Soviet Union or the United States.

In chapter 6, "Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism," Tonglin Lu problematizes the notions of unrestricted freedom and global modernity because, for her, Jia's film dramatizes the dilemmas of underprivileged inland youths left behind by China's overzealous drive to pursue transnational capitalism. In chapter 7, "Chinese Underground Films: Critical Views from China," Chen Mo and Zhiwei Xiao take us back to China in the 1990s, when scholars negotiated through cracks and fissures in the Chinese censorship system and managed to intervene in underground and independent filmmaking as it developed under extremely difficult circumstances. In chapter 8, "Film Clubs in Beijing: The Cultural Consumption of Chinese Independent Films," Seio Nakajima continues to emphasize the actual Chinese cultural scene by leading us through an ethnographic tour of the little-known operations of film clubs in Beijing, organizations that reveal much about the field of cultural consumption in urban China. Particularly noteworthy are Nakajima's extensive catalogues of Chinese underground films shown in four major Beijing film clubs. Finally, in an appendix entitled "The Chinese Underground Film Collection at the University of California, San Diego," Jim Cheng surveys the UCSD collection of underground Chinese films, perhaps the largest single holding of its kind in a university library system.

The editors wish to thank Jim Cheng for building and constantly expanding a unique collection of Chinese underground films at UCSD and for organizing a well-attended Chinese underground film festival in 2003. Acknowledgments are also due to other invited speakers who attended the festival: Nick Browne of UCLA, Cui Zi'en of the Beijing Film Academy, and Richard Madsen of UCSD. In addition, we appreciate the patience and cooperation of all contributors, people who have enriched our understanding of alternative film culture in contemporary China and whose pathbreaking research will certainly generate new interest and new scholarship in the years to come.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Bérénice Reynaud, "New Visions/New Chinas: Video-Art, Documentation, and the Chinese Modernity in Question," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, 229–57 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

2. For preliminary analyses of such recent works in English, see Jian Xu, "Representing Rural Migrants in the City: Experimentalism in Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Close to Paradise* and *Beijing Bicycle*," *Screen* 46, no. 4 (2005): 433–49; Lü Xinyu, "Ruins

of the Future: Class and History in Wang Bing's *Tiexi District*," *New Left Review* 31 (2005): 125–36; Ban Wang, "Documentary as Haunting of the Real: The Logic of Capital in *Blind Shaft*," *Asian Cinema* 16, no. 1 (2005): 4–15.

3. For a brief discussion of these terms, see Yingjin Zhang, "Rebel Without a Cause? China's New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking," in *The Urban Generation*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006). For post-socialism, see Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Paul G. Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism, in *New Chinese Cinema: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau, 57–87 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China

Paul G. Pickowicz

In late fall 2004 a Hong Kong news daily breathlessly reported that “underground filmmaker” Jia Zhangke was “joining the mainstream, with official approval.”¹ In the past, it was said, Jia had “secretly created” such outstanding works as *Artisan Pickpocket* (aka *Xiao Wu*, 1997), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) in his “small two-room studio in a dark Beijing basement.” These low-budget films were acclaimed internationally, but rejected by officialdom and denied standard distribution in China.² By contrast, the report stated, his new, “legitimate,” and very expensive movie, *The World* (2004), filmed at the socialist state-run Shanghai Film Studio as a coproduction with United Star (Hong Kong), Office Kitano (Japan), and Celluloid Dreams (France), failed to win the Golden Lion award at Venice, though it will be screened in China. “It’s the work that I’ve spent most time and energy on,” Jia observed, “but so far it hasn’t landed a prize.”

According to Jia Zhangke, it was an overture from the state film bureaucracy in late 2003 that resulted in his movement from underground to aboveground creative activity. He added that Wang Xiaoshuai (*Beijing Bicycle*, 2000) and other leading underground filmmakers were successfully wooed by the state at about the same time. Jia said he agreed to work aboveground because he wanted his films to be viewed beyond the confines of international art-house venues. He wanted the Chinese people to see his work. “If you want to reach a wider audience, you have to go through the system,” he conceded. “It’s just the way it is.”

The pesky Hong Kong reporter asked Jia if he now had to engage in “self-censorship.” A bit defensive, Jia claimed that “I didn’t change,” the censorship system had changed in ways that supposedly allowed greater artistic freedom these days. When it was pointed out that Jia’s earlier underground films are still



A distant view of the theme park in Jia Zhangke's The World (2004)

banned, Jia actually came to the defense of the censors. "It's an issue involved with previous [state] opinions on underground films," he stated. If the authorities permitted his blacklisted films to be shown, "it would mean they'd have to overturn the verdict on underground films that they've had for ten years."

Jia Zhangke's posture seems riddled with contradictions. He was flattered to be courted by the state and given access to its vast resources, but quickly recalled that not long ago "whenever I heard a police siren, I'd jump out of bed to check if the film rolls were hidden." Now he wants to make films for the vast Chinese audience, but he does not want to "cater to their commercial taste." Former underground filmmakers, he says, should guide the people "towards appreciating the sense of modernity in our movies." Underground artists who have not yet been seduced by state patrons are skeptical of Jia's sense of optimism. As one pointed out, "The government has appeased these directors in order to better control them. Now they can bring down the axe at any moment."³

With the appearance in the early 1990s of Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (1993) and other feature and documentary works, underground filmmaking became an undeniable fact of Chinese cultural life. By 2003 there was a virtual explosion of underground filmmaking. Individual underground works have received some critical attention outside China, but there have been few attempts to evaluate the genre as it has taken shape over the entire ten-year period. Indeed, the Hong Kong article on Jia Zhangke's apparent transition to aboveground activity raises more questions than it answers. Conceptual problems abound. For example, what do we mean by "underground film" (*dixia dianying*)? Is it a useful term?

One advantage of the term "underground" is that many Chinese filmmakers (including Jia Zhangke) choose to use it themselves. It is part of their identity. People outside the underground camp, including both friends and foes of the movement, also use the term. "Underground film" seems better than

“independent film” (*duli dianying*), a concept in the American art lexicon that suggests a small art-house movie privately financed by someone like Robert Redford. “Independent” in the American setting means independent from “Hollywood.” This American distinction between “independent” and “Hollywood” has little to do with the role of the state, since almost all American filmmaking takes place in the private sector (see Chris Berry’s chapter).

If scholars and critics decided to make exclusive use of the term “independent” to refer to the early films of Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Jia Zhangke, it would be necessary for them to point out that in the Chinese case the concept means independence from the Chinese state rather than independence from the sort of powerful private conglomerates that have dominated Hollywood. It is true that in the early decades of Chinese filmmaking (from the early twentieth century to 1937), Chinese filmmaking was in fact almost totally controlled by the private sector, including such legendary studios as Lianhua and Mingxing. Chinese government-controlled filmmaking began in fits and starts only in 1938 at the beginning of the Pacific War and picked up a measure of steam in the postwar period with the nationalization in 1945 of two studios in Shanghai and one in Beijing. But during the late 1930s and 1940s the industry was dominated by the private sector, including such stellar enterprises as the Wenhua and Kunlun studios.⁴

The Communist Party moved aggressively to strengthen the state filmmaking sector after it came to power in 1949.⁵ By 1953 private filmmaking was completely eliminated and played no role whatever in the nearly forty years of exclusively state-controlled socialist film production that followed. During that period, all filmmakers worked for the state, and all production, censorship, and distribution was controlled by the Communist Party or its state organizations, as was nearly all film-related critical and scholarly publishing.

In the early 1990s younger filmmakers began very quietly to challenge what remained of the system of state control of Chinese filmmaking. The term “underground,” though not without problems, does a better job of capturing the unofficial nature of the work and the clear intention of these young artists to resist state control.⁶ To put it starkly, most of their work was (and still is) illegal. For reasons that will be explained later, the state was not inclined to enforce the law in a rigorous way, but the activity of almost all early underground filmmakers was illegal nonetheless.

What about the suitability of the term “private” filmmaking? It is true, of course, that all underground filmmaking since the early 1990s has been private in the sense that the state does not provide meaningful funding, including American-style National Endowment for the Arts-type production grants. As a rule, funding for underground projects must come from nongovernment sources, including both domestic and foreign. But in the Chinese case “private” is a misleading label because to many readers it might suggest “capitalist,” “commercial,” and

“motivated by profit making.” To those who have seen many of these works, it seems highly unlikely that typical Chinese underground films are motivated by “capitalist goals.” The people who make them are clearly entrepreneurial, but they are artistic, cultural, and political entrepreneurs more than they are economic entrepreneurs. The filmmakers want greater freedom of expression, including freedom from oppressive and restrictive political and bureaucratic controls, more than they want vast sums of money. Clearly they are not the least bit opposed to money making, but, thinking realistically, they understand that there are unlikely to be many money-making opportunities for them in the near or even distant future. For every Jia Zhangke now courted by the state, there are a thousand underground filmmakers who will never be wooed. And even Jia, poised now to enter the mainstream, insists he is motivated by access to audience, not money.

In the end, it appears useful to acknowledge that unofficial, nonstate work is indeed “underground” in many respects. Most producers of this work submit neither their scripts nor their rough cuts to state film bureaucrats as required by the law. Others submit the scripts, but then complete production, and even screen their films for private audiences, before getting an official response from the state.

Still, the term “underground” poses difficulties, and some Chinese filmmakers and scholars prefer not to use it. One reason is that the films are not really made “underground.” Underground suggests politically illicit, secret production that stands in subversive opposition not only to state domination of the film industry, but more importantly to the state’s and the party’s domination of political life. To some extent, underground filmmaking started out in a highly critical mode in China in the early and mid-1990s with fine works like Tian Zhuangzhuang’s devastatingly oppositional *The Blue Kite* (1993) that treated unwelcome state intrusions in family life in Beijing in the 1950s and 1960s. But politically critical production is not a major characteristic of more recent underground filmmaking. For instance, there are oblique references in some films to the ghastly events of spring and summer 1989, but no works that deal explicitly with the bloodletting and persecutions that followed the popular demonstrations staged in Beijing and elsewhere.

In truth, there is no term in either Chinese or English that perfectly captures the Chinese filmmaking phenomena described in this volume. The character of the movement seems to change each year with the latest flood of works. Many analysts will persist in using “underground,” even though most of the films in that category are in view well aboveground during production, even though the state is fully aware of the activities of unofficial filmmakers, and even though very little of the work is explicitly oppositional in political terms. Indeed, much of it is surprisingly apolitical. To avoid conceptual problems, some writers in China prefer to use the politically neutral term “post-sixth gen-