

Foreword: **Documenting Asia Pacific**

Chi-hui Yang

I.

Dynamic political and economic conditions, innovations in production and distribution technologies, increased access to international finances, and the migration of moving images from theaters to galleries to online spaces have made more relevant and critical the practice of documentary filmmaking in Asia.

The task of representing new social realities has generated significant movements—both political and aesthetic—in non-fiction filmmaking from Beijing to Manila to Jakarta. Engaged *vérité*, documentary/fiction hybrids, personal essays, and experimental collage are being used to explore the consequences of globalization and neo-liberalism, fraught family histories, religious conflict, and the role of the state in everyday lives. An inquiry into how Asia's contemporary cultures and politics are being visually represented reveals localized movements that together are testing and reshaping the idea of documentary itself.

Co-guest editor Kuei-fen Chiu and I are pleased to present this special issue of *Concentric*, "Documenting Asia Pacific"—a collection of research papers, articles, and dispatches that act as a starting point for what we hope to be continued and deeper examination of non-fiction moving image practices through the region. While not representative of all the documentary scenes and movements in Asia, the ideas explored here provide a framework for how the historical moment is being considered visually, and how the technological moment is opening new ways of reflecting reality.

Three memorable events from 2012 help to frame this conversation. June saw the annual convening of the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas (ASEAC) Conference in Singapore, under the theme, "The Politics, Practices, and Poetics of the Archive," while August witnessed the veiled government shut-down of the Beijing Independent Film Festival, a significant gathering of filmmakers from across China and recognized source for engaged filmmaking and politics. The course of the year also saw the noted arrival of a new generation of young

Cambodian documentarians, the products of both an urgent local movement and international financing and co-production. Together, these events offer a sense of the political, institutional, and aesthetic frameworks which documentary filmmakers in Asia are both working within, and responding to.

II.

The creative risk, pace of production, and political rigor that have characterized China's independent documentary scene over the past decade are nothing less than astonishing. Exploring bold, new formal territory (through experimentation with duration, reimagining of the interview, and play with fiction), the films have also offered vital counter-narratives which crack fissures in the official state story, through a commitment to documenting the experiences of those on the margins of society. Filmmakers such as Xu Tong (*Fortune Teller*), Liu Jiayin (*Oxhide I & II*), and Wang Bing (*West of the Tracks*, *Fengming*) have led this wave, and recognition internationally, where their films can publicly be presented without censor, has been significant. A figure central to this new wave is the sixth-generation filmmaker Jia Zhangke, who in his fluid play between documentary and fiction, and complex position with the state as an independent turned state-approved filmmaker has had considerable influence. In this issue, Chialan Sharon Wang's "Confronting the Real, Construing Reality: Artistic Vision and Gaze in Jia Zhangke's *24 City*" examines one of his more recent hybrid works and asks whether the choice between fiction and non-fiction is a valid one, and whether either genre is capable by itself of representing China's new reality. Jia's own political position as a filmmaker is implicated here and resonates with the experiences of those filmmakers and festival organizers at the 2012 Beijing Independent Film Festival, who were forced to present works in private spaces after venue electricity was unceremoniously shut off in what was largely interpreted as an intervention by government officials concerned by the gathering.

The kind of formal play that Jia engages in can also be seen in the (though altogether different) work of Malaysian filmmaker Amir Muhammad, the subject of Fiona Lee's paper, "Spectral History: Unsettling Nation Time in *The Last Communist*." A "semi-musical" documentary, *The Last Communist* inserts performance and camp into an essayistic portrait of Chin Peng, the exiled former leader of the Malayan Communist Party, and, as Lee argues, questions official state narratives, while at the same time offering new, temporal avenues to consider national histories. *The Last Communist* was banned from being screened in

Malaysia, and while Muhammad recently has stepped away from filmmaking to focus on writing, he contributes a short dispatch to this issue outlining the documentaries he has mused about making. The dispatch by film critic Kong Rithdee offers the state of documentary filmmaking in Thailand.

Besides Southeast Asia, another regional focus in this issue is Taiwan. Documentary scholar and filmmaker Hu Tai-Li teases out the development of films made by or on the indigenous people on the island, while a collective article by film directors/producers Tsung-lung Tsai, Li-ping Yu, and Chin-yuan Ke gives an overview of environmental documentary in Taiwan. Independent filmmaker Anita Wen-Shin Chang also reflects on the implications of engaging the filmed subjects in the production process.

The question of the visual archive and its function in relation to contested national histories is one examined by filmmakers throughout the region confronting unresolved legacies of the twentieth century. How are private, commercial, state, and public archives defined and controlled, and how can histories be re-examined and constructed through them? How might filmmakers respond to the absence of an archive? And what of the digital turn? Explored at depth at the 2012 ASEAC Conference and in several papers here, the role of the archive in contemporary documentary is a critical conversation and one which opens complex questions. In Yu-lin Lee's "The Digital Emergence of a New History: The Archiving of Colonial Japanese Documentaries on Taiwan," newly digitized films made during the Japanese colonial period not only make available images heretofore unseen by many, but also question their indexical relation to the past: How does one define a digitized artifact in relation to its original? What happens to history when it is digitized?

Gaik Cheng Khoo's "Of *Diminishing Memories* and *Old Places*: Singaporean Films and the Work of Archiving Landscape" continues this conversation by looking at recent Singaporean documentaries that function as "nostalgia" films and therefore archives in themselves, in a nation where continual erasure and transformation are embedded into its geographic limitations and economic progression.

YouTube as a global public/commercial archive and facilitator of continued globalization of culture is examined in Celine Parreñas Shimizu's "Can the Subaltern Sing, and in a Power Ballad? Arnel Pineda and Ramona Diaz's *Don't Stop Believin': Everyman's Journey*." Questions of transnational stardom, subalternity, and diaspora intersect in the case of Filipino Arnel Pineda, the new lead singer of the American band Journey, discovered and recruited via YouTube,

reframing the US and Philippines' shared colonial past through the refrains of a pop song.

The absence of the archive is a critical question as well. For those nations whose moving image histories did not survive conflict and change, or simply were not preserved, how to recover the past and represent it is a central concern. Annette Hamilton's "Witness and Recuperation: Cambodia's New Documentary Cinema" surveys how a new generation of filmmakers is seeking to build and repair a visual archive, and reconcile the nation's recent, tragic past. While for the past two decades Rithy Panh has been Cambodia's singular, pioneering documentarian, 2012 saw the emergence of a number of young filmmakers, all deeply indebted to Panh's inquiry of memorialization and testimony, but each with distinctive voices. The international recognition of Davy Chou's exploration of Cambodia's cinematic past, *Golden Slumbers*, and of Lida Chan's look at forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge, *Red Wedding*, at festivals throughout Asia, Europe, and North America is a hopeful sign of things to come; these films represent the kind of commitment and urgency that characterize much of the new non-fiction production in Asia.

The lines of intersection linking documentary filmmaking practices throughout Asia are many and varied, with shared approaches and concerns situated along both formal and political axes. We are pleased to share this collection of writings, yet we are aware that not all important questions have been asked. Professor Abé Mark Nornes, upon our invitation, has written a response to the issue to provoke further discussion. My colleague Kuei-fen, in her Afterword, picks up some of the questions posed by Professor Nornes. We very much hope that what is put together here will contribute to the larger conversations taking place.

About the Author

Chi-hui Yang is a film programmer, lecturer, and writer based in New York. As a guest curator, Yang has presented film and video series at film festivals and events internationally, including the MOMA Documentary Fortnight, Robert Flaherty Film Seminar ("The Age of Migration"), Seattle International Film Festival, and Barcelona Asian Film Festival. From 2000 to 2010 he was the Director and Programmer of the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, the largest showcase of its kind in the US. Yang is also the programmer of "Cinema Asian America," a video-on-demand service offered in the US. He is currently a Visiting Scholar at New York University's Asian/Pacific/American Institute.