

Confronting the Real, Construing Reality: Artistic Vision and Gaze in Jia Zhangke's *24 City*

Chialan Sharon Wang
Department of English
Wenzhou-Kean University, China

Abstract

This study thinks through the relationship between documentary and truth in Jia Zhangke's *24 City*. Taking into consideration Jia's body of work, it examines the dichotomy between the documentarian and the filmed subjects. The essay argues that, different from Jia's previous works, *24 City* orchestrates a national narrative that remembers, glorifies, and closes off the past. However, there are also moments in the film that reveal a contesting power dynamic between the documentarian and the interviewees in the film. What is revealed in *24 City*, therefore, is the inseparability of truth and lies collaborated among the filmmaker, the filmed subjects, and very possibly the target audiences.

Keywords

Jia Zhangke, *24 City*, documentary, truth, fictionality, postsocialist realism, the subaltern

The Docufiction and Its Problematics

Jia Zhangke's 2009 docufiction,¹ *24 City* (*Ershisi chengji*), chronicles the demolition and history of Factory 420, a state-owned enterprise that manufactures airplane engines. Part documentary, part fiction, the film consists of five interviews with former and current factory workers and four fictional interviews with professional actors of different generations. The context for these interviews is this: the land that provides jobs for thirty thousand workers and accommodates ten thousand workers' families is to be handed over to China Resources, a conglomerate that will build a luxury apartment complex on the site.

Jia being one of the forerunners of China's New Documentary Movement, his fusion of on-the-spot and observational documentation and highly-orchestrated and poetic dramatization in his storytelling demonstrates the proximity of reality and fiction. In *24 City*, the boundary between the presentation of the world as it is and the invention and envisioning of it is constantly erased in that we see social and professional actors tell their stories in both open and closed forms of *mise-en-scène*. While the workers are captured talking and conducting their routine activities in long takes and long or medium shots by a fixed camera, they are also scrutinized in extreme close-ups as the camera dwells on their oftentimes reticent or self-conscious look. As the professional actors tell their scripted stories to fill in historical information of the factory, the workers are seen framed and posing in poetic and contemplative shots as part of an art work. We also hear the synchronized sound recording of the drones of the streets and dull, repetitive movements of workers near the machines punctuated by the soundtrack of pop songs that invoke memory of various generations.

Jia's deliberate choice, in *24 City*, to use professional actors in order to narrate parts of the history of Factory 420 highlights the paradoxical position inhabited by a documentary filmmaker, who can reasonably be expected to be both truthful chronicler and imaginative artist. To use Bill Nichols's classification of documentary to illuminate our understanding of Jia's techniques, *24 City* is observational (in those moments of the film when Jia seems briefly to abandon all forms of directorial control); participatory (when Jia poses questions to interviewees); and reflexive (when he uses famous movie or TV icons to play the roles of interviewees, thus

¹ I use the term "docufiction" to characterize Jia Zhangke's *24 City* after Hsiu-chuang Deppman's illuminating talk on the film at Hamilton College in February 2012. In the talk, Deppman teased out incisively Jia's deliberate conflation of fiction and reality and the highly stylized cinematography and crafting of the film narrative.

allowing the viewer to question the credibility of the genre). The reflexive aspect is particularly clear in the case of the interviewee Gu Minghua, played by Joan Chen. Chen's character makes a tongue-in-cheek comment on how she resembles the eponymous Xiao Hua, played by Joan Chen herself, from the 1980 film. The self-referentiality does not merely make the viewer aware of the staging of the interview; Jia also cleverly invokes two narratives: the collective memory of a Chinese nation that shares in the iconographic recognition of Joan Chen and a personal story specific to Factory 420 hanging on this pop cultural icon.

Sponsored by Shanghai Film Group and China Resources, *24 City* is another attempt by Jia Zhangke to chronicle the swift transformation of China by focusing on those who suffer the impact head-on. In view of Jia Zhangke's body of work and his position in China and worldwide, this present study explores the following questions. In a film that approaches its subjects from various positions and underscores the much discussed relationship between cinema and truth—André Bazin and Dziga Vertov famously expressed their faith in the full potential of film to distill truth from reality—what do filmed subjects mean to the filmmaker? In the case of Jia Zhangke, who belongs to the generation of postsocialist realism, a generation that vows to produce films that “do not lie”² and expose social reality instead of imposing state ideology, how does the relationship between the filmmaker, now an “aboveground” director, and the filmed subjects factor in this generation's mission to uncover the truth? How far does Jia Zhangke's insight into the inseparability between documentary and fiction go towards reconciling the multiple positions he occupies, positions that include that of a detached observer; a social and cultural commentator; a creative artist; and a fascinated individual with collective and personal memories? In his attempt to tell a collective history of the other, what discourse do Jia's neo-realist films construct as his camera pans or tilts across the ordinary people? In a larger context, how does the gaze, in its multiple senses, operate in the textuality and production of film in postsocialist China? In delving into the triangular relationship among the filmmaker, the filmed subjects, and the notion of truth, the study discusses the economy of the two registers of the cinematic gaze: the suturing of the film language and the ruptures of the real captured on screen.

² *My Camera Doesn't Lie: Documentation of Avant-garde Directors Born between 1960s and 1970s* (*Wode sheyingji bu sahuang*), published in 2002, is a collection of dialogues with eight Sixth Generation directors. As Jia's interview includes brief accounts of his biography, the discussion focuses on the filming processes of *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* and the director's thoughts about the films' historical contexts.

The Indexicality and Fictionality of Documentary

The truth claim of documentary has long been a point of contention. In fact, since the nineteenth century, cinema has been considered as a medium that “indexes” reality. Mary Ann Doane, for instance, has sought to examine the impact of the digital era on the concept of indexicality by bringing together scholarship across disciplines. Revisiting literature of Charles Sanders Peirce’s philosophy on signs, Rosalind Krauss’s discussion on the seventies art, Roland Barthes’s reflections on photography, and Laura Mulvey’s thoughts on death and images, Doane in “Indexicality: Trace and Sign” teases out the connotations of *the index* in relation to photography and cinema. In registering an actual event in the past, photographic and cinematic images bear traces of the real. Such physical intimacy as being part of the actuality, however, is concomitant with detachability due to the isolation and circulation of recorded images. Moreover, to “index” real objects is performative. As a statement announcing the pastness of objects recorded (hence the death of the moment), the index is also a gesture to indicate, to point to, to refer to, and to remind one of a historical event (2-5). In this sense, indexicality also connotes participation of the recorder, be it the machine itself or the human agent, in the event recorded. The ambiguous relationship between cinema and the real makes the truth claim inherent in the genre of documentary an even thornier problematic. If the imprint of reality on the film is at once an intimate trace of the real and a detached indication of it, how sufficient is the fundamental distinction between a feature film in which the reality is a recording of staged performance and a documentary in which the reality is supposed to be everything as presented? In other words, doesn’t the indexicality of cinema already imply an intention to point out, to draw attention to, to pre-select a point of view on a historical event? If, as Doane states, *deixis*—that is, the “pointing at” of the index—“implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations” (2), it leads us to think about what signifiers Jia as a documentarian and an artist fills in the hollowness of images.

Cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema, with which Jia’s films have a strong affinity, highlight the paradox of documentary film: the truth itself is extrapolated at once from an observational camera recording an uninterrupted reality and the filmmaker’s manipulation of the machine to articulate such reality. Specifically, it is Dziga Vertov’s belief that truth can only be discerned by the power of the machine uncompromised by the limits and flaws of humanity and, more importantly, as a result of the filmmaker’s critical eye and acute intuition to apprehend the truth

behind the camera. Calling into question such transcendental vision, scholarship has been done on the influences of ideological underpinnings underlying the inevitable fictionality and arrangement of facts in documentary films. Aspects such as contextualization, interpretation, and visual and acoustic rhythms and patterns all distinguish documentaries from mere documents. In other words, despite its differentiation from the theatricality of feature film, documentary, in its contemplation on historical material and temporality, is an act of storytelling.

In explaining the difference between documentary and feature film, Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro point out that such a distinction does not mean that while the former involves objective, untreated facts, the latter is sheer imaginary and fictional. The spectator looks upon documentary as authentic and incontrovertible evidence, Spence suggests, not because the documentary is closer to truth, but because the narrative structure and features of documentary conform to a set of “conventionalized codes and procedures” that “help establish the authenticity of nonfictional representations” (Spence and Navarro, Ch. 1, location 324). According to Spence and Navarro, these conventions usually entail a static, self-effacing camera, and interviewees speaking in a formal tone. In a tacit agreement between the viewer and the documentarian, the conventionalized form of documentary is almost synonymous with truthful information. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Cowie argues that the image and sound recorded from reality are considered indexical and therefore representing the real because of the belief of the spectator: very much like symbols and signs that bear traces of actuality, documentary itself is a language that is taken to be testimonial, factual, and authoritative. The historiography, in this case the film language, is thus a narrative. The controlled and organized image and sound through an author’s interpretation, instead of uncovering pre-existing meanings, produce them as the filmic narrative is bolstered by a certain ethic, moral, and cultural practice.

Precisely because of the fact that the style or form of documentary predetermines its status as a medium of authoritative representation of reality, the question of whether truth is accurately presented in a documentary is constantly under scrutiny. In a way, whether or not a documentary convinces the viewer of its authority to convey truth is contingent upon whether or not the knowledge constructed in the film conforms to the discursive practices of a particular cultural habitus. In defining the truth value of documentary in light of the Foucauldian notion of knowledge, Cowie writes, “The truth of the nonfiction work arises not through being recorded reality, however, but through the argument it makes in presenting the statements of others—experts, witnesses, participants in the events—directly through

interviews or, in observational documentary, as overheard. . . . Truth, therefore, is not a quality or meaning that is immanent in reality; rather it is an effect of human discourse” (Ch. 1, location 404). In other words, the persuasive power of documentary as a form that recounts reality, the “effect” so to speak, cannot be dissociated from the filmmaker’s subjective production of knowledge and rhetoric as he or she speaks through the camera or speaks for the represented. The sound and image, regardless of whether or not they are captured in non-interventionist long shots and long takes, are put in sequences to tell a story from a specific perspective. The ontological paradox of documentary thus raises the question: What kind of knowledge is constructed, or what kind of reality is produced in the film narrative?

Cowie’s insight into the nature of documentary helps explain why *24 City*, despite its fictional characters played by professional actors, is still granted the status of a chronicle, a narrative form that, by mutual consent between the filmmaker and the viewer, is presumed to be faithfully recording history. The authority thus granted to the form of documentary prompts us to think about how *24 City* produces knowledge and which discursive frameworks operate in them. Indeed, the emotive signifiers that greatly contribute to the poetic rhythm of the film comprise a moving argument made by the seemingly detached auteur: in opposition to the state propaganda of economic reform and modernizing projects, Jia’s film laments and lends voice to those that are betrayed and left behind by the state’s ongoing nation-building. But while the film stages a protest against the state project, portrait shots of workers and long takes that nostalgically linger on various corners of the factory in *24 City* invite, if not force, the viewer to gaze at and study filmed subjects and thus turn the subjects into objects of knowing.

To be sure, in the viewing experience, the desire for the real coincides with the paradoxical functions of film: a stylized narrative that aims to make a statement, to educate, to inform, and to construct knowledge; and a spectacle of sound and image that invites both identification and optical consumption (Cowie, Introduction, location 58). Delving into a subject matter through image and sound not only manifests curiosity about, if not an ethical responsibility for, a certain knowledge, but also executes a desire to produce such knowledge in order to regain a sense of control over something unknown or unfamiliar. Thus the vexed problematic of the temporal and power dichotomy: the historiographical subject that narrates in the present and the historical object to be summoned from the past. I will return to this point later.

Jia's Documentaries and His Moments of Truth

Exposing the human costs of China's rapid economic transition in the past two decades has been the signature of most Sixth Generation filmmakers.³ In his examination of the authorial position of a group of filmmakers that emerged in post-1990 China, Yiman Wang notes that this group of directors who use DV as an affordable, portable, therefore democratic documentary device has managed to sever all ties from the state's propaganda; and that these directors have also succeeded in distancing themselves from the commercial films that began to emerge from China's developing capitalist market. Mindful especially of the new possibilities in cinematic narrative thrown up by this group of documentary filmmakers, Wang sees them as "amateur-authors," as "author and the amateur are connected by their common stress on the independent creative consciousness of an individual fully immersed in his/her material circumstances" (18). In Wang's shrewd deliberation, this group of DV documentarians, of whom Jia Zhangke is considered the godfather, embraces their "dual passion of self-expression and faithful documentation" (20).

Underground, independent, highly mobile, resistant to signing up to any ideologies, these new documentarians pride themselves on being solo social observers rather than doctrinarians. More important, they are explorers following their subjects without firm control of what is going to happen and also without scripts (actual or in mind) for their protagonists. The spontaneity, on-the-spot recording, and self-conscious, individual decision-making lead Wang to compare them to writers, painters, and poets. Artists with a mission to reveal social injustice, these filmmakers, according to Wang, nonetheless maintain a contradictory relationship with their filmed subjects: following their subjects everywhere to capture their most private, or even obscene moments, the violation of codes of decorum establishes an extremely close relationship between the documentarian and the subjects. However, because of the amateur-authors' insistence on remaining non-interventionist, their work endures and displays the distress of witnessing the irreversible inhumanity and tragedy the subjects have to go through without offering any sort of relief or consolation. In other words, the autonomy, independence, and solitude of postsocialist DV documentarians' art are sometimes combined with an unwillingness, powerlessness, or inability to change the conditions of their subjects.

It is, then, not at all surprising that Jia, on more than one occasion, has spoken about his preference for a non-interventionist recording of reality. In a way that

³ I am aware of the various designations of filmmakers that were born in the 70s and emerged in early 90s. The term "Sixth Generation" is used in the article advisedly.

further links him to his younger peers in the New Documentary Movement, Jia's philosophy as a filmmaker is heavily influenced by Bazin's conception of cinematic realism and the tradition of Direct Cinema and *cinéma vérité*. Unlike his peers, however, Jia is not as disturbed by the dilemma regarding the truth claims of a documentarian, nor the moral responsibility. In his book *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, Zhang Yingjin discusses the ethical dilemma of self-positioning of the New Documentary filmmakers who are confronted with the question of an artist's right to re-present the world with anything other than dispassionate, minimalist filming techniques. Among the examples Zhang enumerates, Wang Chao concedes to the impossibility or the preposterous self-entitlement of an intellectual to speak for the subaltern, while Wu Wenguang's contribution emerges from a perception, attained years after his earlier works, that an artist's vision is at best individualist and personal. Recognizing the inevitable subjective perspective of an artist, Jia nonetheless believes in a filmmaker's capacity to reveal the truth in his or her perception of the world. In an interview with Sun Jianmin, co-author of the screenplay for *Still Life (Sanxia haoren)*, Jia distinguishes reality from what he calls "the real world" that he perceives. For him, since reality is impossible to approach, "all the realist (*jishi*) methods are there to express the real (*zhenshi*) world of [his] inner experience" (qtd. in McGrath 110).⁴ As Jia infuses his artistic vision in a seemingly passive recording of reality, "the real," as an aesthetic, "truer" experience, is decidedly imaginative. To describe the real as an inner experience that conceives of cinematic images as an artist's vision, therefore, not only privileges the intuition and interpretation of the artist's eye as something that goes beyond referentiality, but also unquestionably puts a hierarchical distance between the elitist filmmaker and his or her subjects, whose vulnerability is revealed at once by the social situations they are relegated into, and by the deprivation of their agency in the film's rendition of their situations.

In Jia's feature films, which record the nation's development for the past two decades, the protagonists are quite often everyman and woman whose stories are told as part of an under-represented group. Jia's body of work consciously sheds light on the crossroads China is confronted with, between the nation's rising status in global economy and underclass citizens' anxiety and sense of loss. Despite Jia's observational aesthetics, his feature films engage ethically and pathetically with significant historical junctures or national projects: a pickpocket that is left out of his older social circle and behind a developing capitalism in a small town (*Xiao Wu [Xiao*

⁴ Here I use Jason McGrath's translation. The original quote in Chinese is as follows: "對我來說，一切紀實的方法都是為了描述我內心經驗到的真實世界" (Sun 99-100).

wu], 1998); a performance troupe funded by the government struggles to transform into a market-oriented business (*Platform* [Zhantai], 2000); a group of disaffected young drifters whose lives are dictated and marginalized by national crises during China's "reform and opening up" (*gaige kaifang*) (*Unknown Pleasures* [Ren xiao yao], 2002); migrant workers from the Shanxi Province only to be trapped in the theme park in Beijing that boasts of famous architecture from around the world as a snapshot of globalization (*The World* [Shijie], 2004); two characters forced to migrate across different provinces to Sichuan searching for family members in the ruins left by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam (*Still Life*, 2006); and in *24 City*, another massive dislocation of state-owned factory workers since the 1950s. Compared with the moral ambiguity in his contemporaries' works, Jia's work is more articulate, albeit subtle, in his criticism of national projects or state policies that could be detrimental to lives of ordinary people.

It is precisely Jia's aesthetic attention to the bare existence and struggle to survive of the marginalized and underprivileged, together with his ambition to take on and question the recent economic development of China, that secures his international status as a Chinese filmmaker with a penetrating view of contemporary China. Chris Berry commends Jia's work for what he sees as its resistance to both the teleological progress of modernism and the "aspirational realism" whose Hollywood-style narrative similarly projects towards materialistic success. Berry classifies Jia's works as on-the-spot realist films with his amateur actors, location shooting, and sync sounds, but sets this director apart from other realist filmmakers. According to Berry, Jia's works evoke a strong sense of history, even though they present a narrative of development but not direction. Recognizing the tendency of Jia's films to foreground contradiction, disorientation, and the underside of the prosperity promised by capitalism, Berry compares Jia to the Fifth Generation directors. In Berry's words, Jia's work "shares quite a lot in common with the retrospective critical modernist perspective of many early Fifth Generation films, which look back in despair at the ruins of the socialist project after the calamity of the Cultural Revolution" (126). Zhang Yingjin takes the point in a slightly different direction. In tracing the development of China's new cinema, Zhang underscores a similar trajectory shared by the Fourth, Fifth, and the Sixth Generations: as each generation is defined by its aesthetic innovations as a way to break free from dominant political ideologies, such an effort is usually offset by a return to "the more or less conventional form of melodrama," or even to state-sanctioned productions (Zhang, "Directors" Ch. 4, location 2074).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Jia's documentation of China under economic

transformation since the 80s, along with his transition from underground to “aboveground” with *The World* in 2004, invites perusal of his self-proclaimed position as a social observer and commentator. For it is also because of Jia’s international popularity and his newly-cemented auteur status (putting him on a par with his avant-garde predecessors) that critics have begun to cast doubts on his integrity as one of the forerunners of the New Documentary Movement. Given that his audiences are, on the one hand, international and, on the other, made up of handfuls of aficionados of underground and experimental films within China, there seems to be a socioeconomic gap between the group of people his camera zooms in on and those who actually watch and appreciate his works. Tracing the development of Jia’s increasingly refined international arthouse aesthetics in his camerawork throughout his career, Jason McGrath notes the predicaments faced by China’s independent filmmakers: “in order to have any significant audience, they must successfully move either toward the international art cinema market, in which case they may be accused of pandering to foreigners, or toward the Chinese studio system, in which case they risk accusations of caving in to the authorities or to the mainstream audience” (106).

Indeed, as Jia’s films continue to catch global audience’s attention and garner awards in major international film festivals, observations of the scholars mentioned above once again point us toward the relationship between the auteur and the subject matter he pursues. Recall Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*, where themes and tropes such as the feudal and patriarchal system, gender norms, Cultural Revolution, and Communist chauvinism are explored and criticized. These works by the Fifth Generation directors also raise questions of self-Orientalization that panders to the international audience with sexualized female characters and invented rural rituals. As scholars have argued, these films seem to play into Western assumptions about China by representing it as culturally backward and politically repressive, which justifies the aesthetic values and humanism displayed in the films as tokens of Third-World cinema in the Western world (Dai 89-92).

In presenting to the world his poignant perspective as a “cinematic migrant worker” (*dianying mingong*)—a term Jia Zhangke uses to describe himself as someone who negotiates with the state studio system and travels across the country to speak for the subaltern—Jia may, in *24 City*, also be risking turning his chronicles of China into a global spectacle for arthouse consumption on the one hand, and reinvoking an idealized image of the working class that has always been glorified and reified in the nationalistic ideology of Chinese communism on the other. One thing is

clear: *24 City* sets itself in opposition to the state ideology in its depiction of a community whose fate is intertwined with the military factory. In the film, against the backdrop of the much panegyricized Cold War narrative, the workers are portrayed as lost, languished, and somewhat discontented. But the film is undeniably composed of elegiac sound and image that simultaneously mourn the demolition of the factory and celebrate the burgeoning hope reflected in the modern, luminous model of the new apartment complex. The irony of this film is, though, that very often, its attempts to focus on individual workers whose voices have been submerged under state ideology result in yet another idealized representation of workers.

Before the poetic orchestration of sound and image in *24 City*, Jia's artistic rendition of the reality he perceives through his camera has already pronounced itself in earlier neo-realist feature films. In *The World* and *Still Life*, for instance, we see a refreshing yet questionable gesture with which Jia infuses his realist presentation of contemporary China with fantastical vision. Jia boldly uses animation in *The World* to express the surreal experience his characters encounter in a postmodern world of anomie, where alienated human relation is temporarily redressed by text messages. In *Still Life*, a critical strand that condemns capitalism runs through the narratives of two couples. We see the recurrent motif of capitalism: the breathtaking landscapes in both Han Saming's hometown and the Three Gorges have been subsumed under the monetary values of RMB and USD banknotes. We also see a building taking off like a rocket into the air and a migrant worker walking on tightrope across the sky at the end of the movie, both of these being highly symbolic scenes that express uncertainty in the future and the migrant workers' vulnerability and constant exposure to imminent death.

The artist's attempt to inscribe the filmed subjects into his vision and inner experience is best illustrated in his documentary *Dong (Dong)*, which Jia made alongside *Still Life*. Jia follows the painter Liu Xiaodong from Fengjie, Sichuan to Bangkok, Thailand in his creation of paintings entitled "Hotbed" I and II. In the documentary, Liu talks about his fascination with the human body and his role as an artist while he meticulously adjusts the poses of rural laborers working for the demolition in the Three Gorges Dam project and a group of women in Bangkok. Jia expresses his admiration for and sense of a shared vision with Liu in his interview with Tony Rayns, specifically when he points out the fact that the rocket was indeed the design of the painter. Just as Liu is seen completing his works, however, we also see how Jia gradually paints his vision of the world in *Dong*. In documenting Liu's trips, his visits to the family of a migrant worker who was killed in an accident on a construction site, and snippets of the painter's contemplations and descriptions of his

life as an artist, Jia's pensive camera occasionally pans away from the artist in an expressive language to capture what seems to be left out of Liu's aesthetic theorization of the world and his own life. In these moments, filmed subjects are putatively given time and space for their autonomous narratives. We see one of the migrant workers, Han Saming, who plays one of the protagonists in *Still Life* and used to be a real-life miner in Shanxi, walk away from his spot where he was placed by Liu along with his fellow workers and stare into the landscape of Sichuan; there are also sequences where the camera detaches itself from documenting Liu and follows one of the models calling and going home after seeing a news report on the flooding of her hometown. Nonetheless, through camerawork, we constantly see Jia's almost competitive expression of personal perspective and aesthetic rendition of human subjects while he records an artist's journey and his philosophical views on art.

The Gaze: Rupture or Complicity?

If, for other documentary practitioners, to capture images of ordinary people's lives eventually turns him or her to a confrontation with his or herself, Jia's more assertive attitude regarding a realist filmmaker's position in representing reality and conveying truth, whether through documented images or fictional conceits, is sometimes challenged in the camera's confrontation with the world. In *24 City*, we see moments when the confrontation between the artist's vision and the reality captured yields incongruity that resists, if not frustrates, the suturing intention of the camera.

The issue of representing the subaltern gets even thornier when it is noticed that the protagonists in Jia's films tend to be allegorical. Jia's earlier films depict more or less the reform era during which he came of age. As they shed a spotlight on those that were left behind or edged out by the tidal changes of the economic reform, a deep sense of nostalgia permeates these films as the filmmaker looks back on this transitional epoch and recalls the younger generation's anxious expectation of a promised future of capitalism that remains elusive and sometimes detrimental. Specifically, other than embodying confusion and disaffection, the real and fictional interviewees also present a composite picture of those that are lost in history and preserved in cinematic memory. Although *24 City* consists of personal memories laced with historical references, it is indeed an exploration of the stories of the other. Contrary to Jia's other films that portray changes, disruptions of traditional values, and dislocations, *24 City* looks into a community that has been frozen in time and

isolated in space from the rest of the rapidly transforming China. The camera serves as an agent that mediates between the “forgotten” truths inside the factory and the viewers on the outside as it channels the interviewees’ stories. History unfolds with excerpts of poetry, pop songs, and sentimental soundtrack that mark out successive time periods. Instead of presenting ruptures and disorientation of drastic changes marked by demolition, displacement, and breakups of human relationships, the story about the relocation of Factory 420 seems to be a project of producing a palpable past buried in history.

The effort to remember the past in *24 City* brings to mind Philip Rosen’s discussion of what documentary signifies in his article “Now and Then: Conceptual Problems in Historicizing Documentary Imaging.” Taking as his point of departure Dziga Vertov’s temporal reversals and contextualization of innocent mundane events in his documentaries, *Kino-Glaz* and *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Rosen illuminates the way documentary film embodies a modernist aesthetics of temporality, which stresses breaks and changes to differentiate the present from the past and thus projects a progressive view of history. The attention to the vanishing past that needs to be at once recalled through storytelling and severed from the present in documentary foregrounds the aporia of documentation: while re-presenting reality demonstrates the filmmaker’s desire to attain a sublime moment in which the documentarian’s present is collapsed with the historical past, documentation simultaneously announces the pastness of such reality and draws a line between the filmmaker and the filmed subject.

While Vertov’s films experiment with the notion of time, before conceding to the irreversible order of modern temporality, by deliberately disrupting the temporal order of events and thus politicizing them, *24 City* seems to normalize unambiguously the history of Factory 420 into a developmental narrative of national progress. With the chorus of workers singing the factory anthem in the background, the film opens with throngs of workers in uniform filing into the factory in the morning, which cuts to workers repeating monotonous movements in dangerously close proximity to machines. We then see a sea of nondescript workers in blue uniforms again; this time they are sitting in the lecture hall to observe a ceremonial transfer of property from the government to the conglomerate. As the camera cuts between hundreds of anonymous faces and a high-ranking official standing on stage giving a formulaic speech, a sentimental soundtrack rises, followed by a high-angle shot of a lone worker walking up a stairwell. It seems that the anonymity of the workers sitting in the lecture hall is about to be subverted by individual difference. Nonetheless, what follows are the interviews which compile a

chronology of historical watersheds and generational transitions: retirees' lifelong dedication to and sacrifice for the military factory from Cold War to Cultural Revolution; laid-off workers' struggle for survival after the economic reform; a former manager's coming-of-age adolescence; a success story of the bourgeois class, up to a prodigal daughter's reunion with her family after witnessing her mother toiling among other workers in the factory. Whether the interviewees tell a story of unwavering loyalty, grievances, disavowal, fond memories, or self-redemption, the film unfolds a sentimentalized story of the symbiotic relationship between the workers and the factory with theme songs invoked by each interviewee's presence. In its indulgence in putting together a nearly melodramatic montage of memory, instead of bringing the state ideology to task, *24 City* produces a national ballade of unsung heroes. It not only performs the ritual of evoking and commemorating the past, but attempts to close it off.

For the viewer made aware of the film's status as a cross-national coproduction between Japanese production companies, China's state-owned Shanghai Film Group, Xstream Pictures, which was cofounded by Jia and his long-term working partner and cinematographer Yu Lik-wai, and China Resources, the enterprise that, in the film, is to take possession of the land on which Factory 420 is situated, there is more than a glimpse to be had into a particular sort of ideological negotiation. This is one between the international cultural industry, independent filmmakers, state censorship, and commercialism. *24 City* shows an ambition to have it all: it sheds a sympathetic light on those forsaken by the state they built and at the same time honors the changes that take place. And as the moving images are punctuated by verses from Yeats, China's Misty Poetry (*menglongshi*) writer Ouyang Jianghe, and Post-Misty Poetry (*houmenglongshi*) writer Wanxia, as well as from classical Chinese poems, including lines from the classic novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the film is also an eulogy that celebrates and immortalizes the beauty in human physical labor, the Chengdu City itself, the transience and regeneration of life and history, and the reflections on humanity.

The aestheticization of human experience in *24 City* therefore turns the interviews and the silent shots of sight and sound of the factory into a cultural spectacle. Specifically, interspersed with the collage of personal testimonies are factory workers who hammer, weld, and build parts of airplane engines and contracted workers who tear down the factory piece by piece and construct the new apartment complex. Like *Still Life*, labor figures as the mainstay and the victim of the progress of the country in *24 City*. In both *Still Life* and *Dong*, the camera dwells upon and gazes at the male physiques. The bare bodies of the workers

become a trope of the nation's confrontation with and vulnerability to modernization and transformation. The laborer's body toils over the Three Gorge Dam project and is transformed, deformed, and mangled by it, most obviously when one of the workers is crushed by a collapsing wall of a building in the process of demolition. In the narrative of both *Still Life* and *Dong*, the migrant worker's body has become a site of both inclusion and exclusion. While the collective body is the indispensable workforce of the nation, it also suffers from the predicaments brought about by what it builds: displacement, exploitation, and death.

In the case of *24 City*, Jia's camera searches through the empty factory and looks into the visages of the workers. This is a community that is written into the national history and excluded from the outside world as an enclosed community operating directly under the administration of the state. Here, exclusivity has two meanings: the community is both privileged and forgotten. In a scene where the first interviewee, Guan Fengjiu, reaches out his hand and brushes through the hair of a retired worker that he looks up to, it is almost as if he vicariously acts out the keynote affect of the documentary. Throughout the documentary, the camera also follows a security guard who, performing his duties, checks various corners of the factory and bikes through the lanes of the workers' apartment complex. With the sentimental soundtrack and point-of-view shots at objects he discovers in the factory, the silent social actor also acts as a proxy that rehearses the theme of searching for past memories. However, as the camera movement guides the viewer's look, it is indeed the discovering of some sort of evidence or presence of the past that indicates the absence of any real story or history. And indeed the long takes and long shots that prompt the act of looking and searching ironically underscore an absence behind Jia's carefully orchestrated docufiction. It is the persistent act of "looking" and "telling" that sustains the narrative. Confessions and reminiscing make up an ethnographical text linked to a site of demolition and reconstruction to be read into.

Uncovering the story of a community is clearly what Jia had in mind in the making of the film about Factory 420. Jia reveals how he sorted through the stories of interviewees and looked for those which best represented what he calls "common collective memory" for inclusion in the movie. He had to leave out personal stories that were too dramatic to be identified with as the experience of particular generations at a particular historical moment. In this sense, if the Fifth Generation directors' dedication to the search for roots led them to invent a mythical China as an atonement for the cultural destruction during the years of Cultural Revolution, Jia's realist yet orchestrated representation of what he describes as a "China locked in

memory” (Jia 256) seems to be an attempt to conjure up a totalized picture that serves as a backdrop of the country’s postsocialist experience. With the “uncovering” of memories locked up, the film indeed produces a past that unfolds in the present. One might question how far such a presentation imbued with an artist’s invention is from the raw reality that this forerunner of the Sixth Generation vows to expose.

In both Jia’s narrative films and documentaries, there have been quite a few occurrences of the camera’s direct encounter with the crowds. As a signature of the Sixth Generation filmmakers, the strong presence of the camera constitutes parts of the texture of Jia’s films. Certainly, the breaking of the fourth wall as such asserts and values an on-the-spot realism. But it also underscores the inherent paradox in Jia’s efforts in presenting the real. As early as the first of Jia’s feature films, *Xiao Wu*, shots of non-actors on the streets who from time to time glance at the camera create a tension between the filmmaker who wishes to tell a scripted story and the real-life people who constantly disrupt the illusion of viewing experience. The tension lies in the fact that the filmmaker is at once separated from his subject matter (read: *laobaixing*, commoners who in his films are those swept up in and disoriented by the quick transition of China from socialism to capitalism) and involuntarily disempowered for becoming a spectacle or novelty to be looked at, as the fourth wall is broken down and the filmed subjects look back at the camera. In a scene that is often talked about by film scholars, *Xiao Wu* is handcuffed by the police to a pole on the street and draws a curious crowd to gawk at the humiliated and dehumanized pickpocket. About this scene Jia mentioned that this was indeed an improvisation, as during the shooting of the film they had to roll the camera whenever there were fewer people on the street. And this very last scene was scripted on the spot to take advantage of the gathering of a crowd to recreate a scene from *The True Story of Ah-Q* (*Ah-Q zhengzhuan*) by Lu Xun in which Lu comments on China’s indifferent and curious spectators that feast on personal tragedies (M. Berry 47-49). In this scene, however, where Jia intends to invoke sympathy from the viewer by portraying a social outcast subjected to the brutality of capitalism and an apathetic, unreflective society that tends to overlook or deride those who are victimized by the system, the viewer is simultaneously unsettled by a few individuals’ gaze into the camera. Theirs is a gaze that, caught on camera unawares, looks back at the filmmaker and the viewer with a curious, puzzled, yet non-participatory look. This unguarded, untrained, therefore alienating gaze into the camera thus inadvertently resists inscription and challenges the credibility of an artist’s work of representing the collective.

We see similar moments in *24 City*. It is true that factory workers responded to Jia’s advertisement and volunteered to tell their personal stories about 420, and that

compared with *Xiao Wu*, *Dong*, and *Still Life*, interviewees in *24 City* are much more articulate and engaged informants, who serve as the viewer's gateway to the history of a relatively privileged and isolated community dependent on and betrayed by the socialist state. However, the director, in his brief interactions with them, reveals a desire for a narrative that tells of the ups and downs of the nation, completed by individual stories that make up a poetic totality of national history. As if to enhance the drive of the narrative and to titillate the viewer with untold stories left out of the interviews, Jia inserted in between interviews what he calls portrait images of the workers. In Jia's interview with Dudley Andrew, he notes,

This is nothing like taking still photos. For the most important thing is that, in that silence and through the camera, we are trying to capture the subtle changes of expression, to display the intense activities of the inner world, as you just said, to look for certain kinds of traces and vestiges. I also had a strange feeling when I was shooting the portrait images after the interviews. During those three to five minutes of shooting, I felt as if we were mourning silently for the lives and the stories of the past. (Andrew 81)

Through these portrait images, Jia assumes the role of a poetic auteur, one who not only observes the world but discerns the interiority of humanity and extracts out of political rhetoric repressed personal narratives. Through his montage, Jia Zhangke's poetic insight foregrounds an alternative order of the world that contests the official history. Long takes like these in which the passing of time is made perceptible and the workers stand motionless in front of the camera reaffirm Jia's claim to confront reality without circumvention. They also encourage the viewer to study and *read into* these workers' physical appearance in search of other stories behind the images. Though detached, the documentarian commands an artistic authority that has privileged access to truth in his own close study of his protagonists.

Nonetheless, unexpected interactions of the filmed subjects with the camera in a scene turns the viewer's subjective gaze into an objective one, which indeed frustrates the viewer's desire for a narrative. These two factory workers that are shown earlier to be doing their job and fiddling with a cellphone also pose, like a few other workers or their family members, in front of the camera for a portrait shot. As one of them starts to tickle the other and causes him to break into smile from time to time, we are reminded of the fact that these workers are aware of the standardized meaning of being in front of a camera: it can mean assuming a character, following or

playing along with certain unspoken rules, and not breaking the unity of character before the camera stops rolling, for there is supposed to be a story to be told. Compared with the non-participatory crowd in *Xiao Wu* and even with the fetishized bodies of the laborers directed and positioned by Liu Xiaodong, this revealing complicity is no less unsettling. Again it is an unintentional parody of the truth claims of the documentary itself, and it throws the viewer into a momentary doubt: what if there is no collective story to tell, no matter how privy the viewer might be to the “real story” of Factory 420 as generations of stories successively unfold in front of his or her eyes? If we go back to questions I posed earlier, which ended with a question about the filmmaker’s desire, we might say that what is at stake is what Jia wants to see or wants his viewers to see in his filmed subjects. If what he calls “the real” is his inner experience and intuitive imagination of the world, then to imagine a story for at least three consecutive generations in China (particularly the generation that came of age after the economic reform of China in the 80s) can be understood as a fantasy about national myth on the part of the filmmaker. However, this short clip demonstrates a moment of defeat for both the filmmaker’s and the privileged viewer’s desire for a “real” story, a story about a socialist regime’s transition into a supporter of capitalism that causes a violent change in ordinary people’s lives. In this sense, as Jia historicizes his documented images which circulate in the Western world and are hailed by international festivals, his works also constantly, and involuntarily, disrupt the continuity of a narrative and threaten to debunk the truth claims of the artist.

It is in precisely moments of rupture like the ones discussed above that we see the limits as well as the power of cinema. As the desire to present the reality as it is distinguishes documentary from narrative films, *24 City*, in its highly choreographed poetry that verges on subjecting the workers to an objectifying gaze, nonetheless reveals an excess to the artist’s vision of reality. Indeed, the looking back of the workers in portrait shots in a way interpellates them into the economy of an artistically rendered historiography, with their images studied, scrutinized, and interpreted, since their returning gaze seems to only passively consent to their roles assigned by the narrative of the film. But the improvisation of the two workers brings to light the fact that the real-life interviewees or filmed subjects might also be engaged in performance as the professional actors do. Whether they participate in the intended story of “China locked in memory” or not, the subjects posing and telling stories in front of the camera invent their identities as the film rolls. In this sense, this kind of performativity in *24 City* manifest in the interaction between the camera and the filmed subjects brings to the fore the inseparability between truth and lies.

The textual artificiality of documentary composed by the collusion between the filmmaker, the filmed subjects, and even the arthouse audience in *24 City* seems to translate into recent discursive construction in Jia's film production, which calls for further exploration of the notion of "documenting China" in the trajectory of Jia's works. From his first breakout short in 1995, *Xiao Shan Goes Home*, the pioneer of China's New Documentary Movement has made his way from the position of an underground, independent filmmaker whose works circulated on the Internet, private screenings, unofficial film societies, or in the form of pirated DVDs, to an international award winner, and finally to a state-approved director. It is a similar path to that taken by several of his Sixth Generation contemporaries such as Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, and Wang Xiaoshuai. In 2011, *Yulu (Yulu)*, a documentary produced by Jia Zhangke and directed by six up-and-coming filmmakers, was premiered in Beijing. *Yulu* features twelve success stories of self-made Chinese in the fields of real estate, art, theater, education, fashion, media, and music. Compared with the marginalized and powerless captured in Jia's previous films, the subjects represented in this work of collaboration indeed epitomize some sort of "Chinese dream" (for lack of a better expression), especially in the way they are presented through the film's highly stylized artwork. As Jia plans to build the first arthouse theater in Beijing, his documentation now seems to take the route of elitist, aesthetically sophisticated arthouse production. After the line between independent and "main melody" (*zhuxuanlü*) films has been gradually erased and is less and less applicable to the postmodern China, and as the artistic vision has now been sensitized to, if not compromised by, the general public's increased knowledge of the effect of the media, the notions of truth and reality associated with the postsocialist Chinese documentary have been revealed to be quite muddy. Instead of some distilled, incontrovertible truth, what the hybridization of fiction and reality in *24 City* exposes might be just how the notion of truth is a contestation among discourses. As the mainstream culture in China gradually shifts from authoritative party propaganda to global popular culture, *24 City* seems to demonstrate at once urgency and limitations of authorial control. Whether the effort to craft collective memory aligns the film with state ideology or caters to the bourgeois taste of the new rich, the director's formal choice allows one to see the complexity that is at stake in the representation of documentary film.

Works Cited

Print Publications

- Andrew, Dudley. "Encounter: Interview with Jia Zhangke." *Film Quarterly* 62.4 (2009): 80-83.
- Berry, Chris. "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Postsocialist Chinese Cinema: In the Now (and Then)." *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*. Ed. Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger. Chicago: Intellect, 2009. 111-28.
- Berry, Michael. *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures: Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy"*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Cheng, Qingsong 程青松, and Huang Ou 黃鷗. *Wode sheyingji bu sahuang: xianfeng dianyingren dang'an (shengyu 1960-1970) 我的攝影機不撒謊：先鋒電影人檔案（生於 1960-1970） (My Camera Doesn't Lie: Documentation of Avant-garde Directors Born between 1960s and 1970s)*. Jinan: Shandong Huabao Publishing, 2010.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011. Kindle ebook file.
- Dai, Jinhua. *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Studies in the Work of Dai Jinhua*. Ed. Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow. London: Verso, 2002.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Indexicality: Trace and Sign." Introduction. *Indexicality: Trace and Sign*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane. Spec. issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18.1 (2007): 1-6.
- Jia, Zhangke 賈樟柯. *Jia xiang 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke dianying shouji 賈想 1996 - 2008 : 賈樟柯電影手記 (Jia Zhangke's Note on Filmmaking 1996-2008)*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2009.
- McGrath, Jason. "The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic." *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. Ed. Zhang Zhen. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 81-114.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010.
- Rayns, Tony, and Anne Sytske Keyser. "Before the Deluge." *Sight and Sound* 18.2 (2008): 10.
- Rosen, Philip. "Now and Then: Conceptual Problems in Historicizing Documentary Imaging." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 16.1 (2007): 25-38.
- Spence, Louise, and Vinicius Navarro. *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2011. Kindle ebook file.

- Sun, Jianming 孫健敏, and Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. “Jingyan shijie zhong de yingxiang xuanze: Jia Zhangke fangtan lu” 經驗世界中的影像選擇 (“Selecting Images in the Experiential World: An Interview with Jia Zhangke”). *Jia xiang 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke dianying shouji* 賈樟柯 1996—2008 : 賈樟柯 電影手記 (*Jia Zhangke's Note on Filmmaking 1996-2008*). Beijing: Peking UP, 2009. 84-102.
- Wang, Yiman. “The Amateur’s Lightning Rod: DV Documentary in Postsocialist China.” *Film Quarterly* 58.4 (2005): 16-26.
- Zhang, Yingjin. *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*. Honolulu: U of Hawai‘i P, 2010.
- . “Directors, Aesthetics, Genres, Chinese Postsocialist Cinema, 1979-2010.” *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*. Ed. Zhang Yingjin. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Kindle ebook file.

Filmography

(in alphabetical order of English title)

- Ershisi chengji* 二十四城記 (*24 City*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. Prod. Jia Zhangke, Shozo Ichiyama, and Wang Hong. Perf. Joan Chen, Lü Liping, Zhao Tao, and Chen Jianbin. Cinema Guild, 2008.
- Dong* 東 (*Dong*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. Prod. Yu Lik-wai, Zhu Jiong, Chow Keung, and Dan Bo. Perf. Liu Xiaodong. dGenerate Films, 2006.
- Zhantai* 站台 (*Platform*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. Perf. Wang Hongwei and Zhao Tao. New Yorker Video, 2000.
- Sanxia haoren* 三峽好人 (*Still Life*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. Prod. Xu Pengle, Wang Tianyun, and Zhu Jiong. Perf. Zhao Tao and Han Saming. New Yorker Video, 2006.
- Ren xiao yao* 任逍遙 (*Unknown Pleasures*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. Prod. Shozo Ichiyama, Li Kit Ming, and Masayuki Mori. Perf. Zhao Weiwei, Wu Qiong, and Zhao Tao. New Yorker Video, 2002.
- Shijie* 世界 (*The World*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. Prod. Hengameh Panahi, Takio Yoshida, and Chow Keung. Perf. Zhao Tao and Chen Taisheng. Zeitgeist Film, 2004.
- Xiao wu* 小武 (*Xiao Wu*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯. Prod. Li Kit Ming and Jia Zhangke. Perf. Wang Hongwei and Hao Hongjian. Hu Tong Communications, 1998.
- Yulu* 語路 (*Yulu*). Dir. Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯 et al. Prod. Jia Zhangke et al. Xstream Pictures, 2011.

About the Author

Chialan Sharon Wang is Assistant Professor of English at Wenzhou-Kean University. Her fields of interest include Chinese-language cinema and literature and postcolonial studies.

[Received 15 August 2012; accepted 20 December 2012]