From DV to DMs: Chinese Independent Documentaries in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

From DV to DMs: Chinese Independent Documentaries in the Age of Social Media

Zihao Li

Since around 2015, the social media landscape in China has experienced a rapid and extensive process of commercialization. This transformation has not only expanded career and business opportunities for an already established young, cosmopolitan user base, but it has also introduced a variety of lower-class creators, such as rural peasants and migrant workers. Drawing inspiration from their daily experiences, these emerging grassroots voices are now enthusiastically sharing the quotidian moments of their lives online through photos and videos. How have Chinese independent documentaries, a genre that has historically seen filmmakers capturing the stories of marginalized subjects, responded to these developments? This thesis argues that this interaction has given birth to a new documentary paradigm, which is identified here as the *social media documentary*. More than just films that critically address and interrogate the impact of social media in their narratives, this thesis shows that social media documentaries also creatively incorporate social media (or social media-inspired) footage into their production. The distinct nature of this footage effectively sets social media documentaries apart from early DV participatory projects, marking a new phase in what many describe as China's New Documentary Movement.

Keywords

Chinese independent documentary, participatory documentary, compilation documentary, social media, new media, subculture, live-streaming, *We Were Smart*, *Present.Perfect.*.

Acknowledgment

For a long time, I pictured thesis writing as a solitary endeavor, something to be done alone in a quiet room with just a laptop, and perhaps accompanied by a cup of coffee or tea. While this imagination does confirm much of my experience over the past two years, the help that I have received along the way has ensured that I never felt alone.

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Introduction

1 Chinese Independent Documentary and Social media

In early 2019, I returned to China after four years of study in the U.S.. As I attempted to reconnect with my previous life here, I was immediately struck by the discrepancies between my memories and the realities that I was seeing and experiencing. What surprised me was not the complete makeover of my hometown – such physical transformations are expected in any second- and third-tier city in China – but rather the penetration of social media into the daily lives of everyone around me. Suddenly, it seemed, the neighborhood kids, who used to be content with cartoon shows on TV, had now turned their attention to video game live-streaming on Douyu. Middle-aged Chinese, like my parents, who once scolded their children for excessive smartphone use, were now themselves glued to their mobile devices, sending endless voice messages on WeChat. Meanwhile, grandparents, who had previously spent their days chatting in the shaded areas of their gated communities, were now deeply absorbed in Douyin and Kuaishou videos.

Around this time, I also began to notice a trend in China's independent documentary landscape that resonated with my observations. From more conventional films like Wu Hao's *People's Republic of Desire* (2018), Li Yifan's *We Were Smart* (2019), and Daphne Xu's *A Thousand-Year Stage* (2020) and *Huahua's Dazzling World and its Myriad Temptations* (2022), to experimental works such as Zhu Shengze's *Present.Perfect.* (2019) and Wang Yuyan's *One Thousand and One Attempts to Be an Ocean* (2021), these documentaries are connected through their critical focus on the escalating impact of social media in China. This thesis categorizes these films as part of a new documentary paradigm, which I term *social media documentaries.* By examining *We Were Smart* and *Present.Perfect.* as case studies, this thesis will demonstrate that this paradigm is distinguished

not only by its thematic concerns but also by the creative incorporation of social media or social media-inspired footage in the production of these films.

The historical contexts of social media and independent documentary practice in China are crucial for understanding this hybrid format in contemporary times, yet each of these fields is extensive in its own right. This introductory chapter does not seek to provide an exhaustive review of these areas, nor do I believe its scope can accommodate such an ambitious task. Instead, my aim here is to draw out the larger patterns demonstrating how Chinese independent documentaries have historically responded to technological and social transformations, and to pinpoint the specific conditions they are addressing in the present. This chapter will introduce the concept of the New Documentary Movement and situate the emergence of social media documentaries as signaling a new phase within this movement. It will also explore the reasons behind the widespread adoption of social media that I observed, focusing on its implications for the aesthetics and practices of Chinese independent documentaries.

1.1 Revisiting the New Documentary Movement

Chinese documentary filmmaking began in 1911 with *War in Wuhan*, a film produced by magician Zhu Liankui that chronicled the military turmoil of the Xinhai Revolution (Cao 2015, 358). While performing in Hankou, Zhu witnessed firsthand the eruption of the conflict and decided to document it using equipment previously acquired from abroad. With the assistance of a foreign collaborator from Mei Li company, the pair ventured into the heart of the war zone, capturing the intense confrontation between the revolutionary army and the Beiyang troops. The documentary premiered in Shanghai on December 1st, 1911, immediately striking a chord with patriotic audiences and achieving immense popularity (Wang 2017). This initial success catalyzed

a wave of documentary productions in the following decades, with notable examples including *Battle of Shanghai* (Dir. Chen Bugao, 1932) and *History of the Nineteenth Route Army's Resistance to Japan* (Dir. Lianhua Film Corporation, 1932). These films not only depicted a China embroiled in relentless revolutions and foreign invasions, but they also served as a conduit for expressing the political statements of their creators. Particularly between 1945 and 1949, both the nationalist and communist parties exploited documentaries to bolster their political legitimacy (Cao 2015, 359).

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the communist party took full control of film production in the country, including documentary filmmaking. During this time, the Central News and Documentary Film Studio, acting on behalf of the party, took the lead. The studio primarily focused on producing documentaries in the form of newsreels, alongside educational and scientific films (Lu 2010, 16). One of the earliest and most iconic examples from this era is *News Clips* (Wang, 2019), which premiered in 1949. These 10-minute newsreels covered a wide array of topics, from politics, leadership, and diplomacy to sports, science, and everyday life [1]. Grounded in the aesthetics of socialist realism [2], these short documentaries were commonly screened prior to feature films in theaters. Their main objective was to cultivate class consciousness and reinforce the dominant political ideology (Lu 2010, 16).

The economic reforms launched in 1978 drastically altered China's political landscape, introducing a market-oriented economy into the previously Maoist socialist state. In the realm of mass media, this change coincided with a sharp increase in private television ownership and the expansion of the national broadcasting system at municipal and county levels (Sukosd and Wang 2013, 93). As a result, cinema attendance in China dwindled, along with the demand for newsreel

[1] In 2009, the Central News and Documentary Film Studio published a series of 10 books that provide detailed insights into each topic covered by these films.
[2] For more information on socialist realism in Chinese cinema, see Jason McGrath's *Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age* (Minneapolis, MN: the University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

documentaries. However, this downturn did not spell the end of documentary filmmaking in China. Instead, it paved the way for the emergence of a distinct television genre known as *zhuantipian*, or "special topic films."[3] Though these programs consciously sought to depart from the socialist realist ideology that characterized earlier newsreels, they remained the products of state-owned TV stations and continued to have a largely pedagogical tone. Delivered in structured scripts, these documentary-like productions consistently employed an authoritative "voice-of-god" narration, addressing the audience in a didactic, top-down manner.

In the late 1980s, the highly regimented documentary scene in China underwent a significant transformation, spearheaded by Wu Wenguang, a former employee of the Kunming television station. Discontented with the contrived and hollow nature of officially sanctioned films, Wu aspired to rejuvenate the documentary spirit with a more authentic representation of reality. This ambition culminated in the creation and release of China's first independent documentary, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (Dir. Wu Wenguang 1990). This pioneering film captured the lives of five artists struggling in post-Tiananmen Beijing, a story that mirrored Wu's own journey as an independent filmmaker in the same politically heated environment. Following this, in 1992, a group of visionary filmmakers met with Wu in a Beijing apartment to discuss the urgent need for more documentaries like *Bumming in Beijing*. While their discussions did not result in any formal manifesto or plan, they united in advocating for independence and creative freedom in China's documentary filmmaking (Wang 2010, 78).

The rebellious passion of these documentarians was what inspired Chinese film scholar Lu Xinyu to describe their endeavors as the "New Documentary Movement." In her analysis, Lu

[3] For a detailed account on the development and aesthetic of *zhuantipian*, and how these films served as a vehicle for state ideology before the rise of the New Documentary Movement, see Qing Cao's chapter in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 13.

adopts a periodization approach, carefully delineating the internal dynamics of this movement. She demarcates it into two specific phases: an inaugural phase starting in the late 1980s, anchored by Wu's creation of *Bumming in Beijing*, and extending to the mid-1990s; this is succeeded by another phase that begins in the mid-1990s and continues onwards. Despite the distinctions between these phases, Lu emphasizes the movement's capacity to consistently "reveal new, and often painful, forms of reality," as China navigates its tumultuous transition into a post-socialist economy (Lu 2010, 15). In practical terms, these unsettling truths center around the lived experiences of marginalized communities, including stories from low-income workers, sex workers, sexual minorities and ethnic groups.

For Lu, the concept of individualization serves as a key lens through which to differentiate between the documentaries of the two phases. Yet, the interpretation of this concept shifts contextually. Referring to the initial phase, Lu notes that most filmmakers from this period were born in the 1960s and early 1970s, many of whom actively participated in the pro-Democracy protest in Tiananmen square (Lu 2010, 35). Such formative experiences instilled an entrenched skepticism in them towards the state's authoritative governance, including its domination over documentary production. In this light, individualization is largely perceived as an ideological position, standing in direct opposition to the official top-down perspective. Arguably, the most evident manifestation of this stance is their emphasis on ordinary citizens, whose narratives had been persistently sidelined in the past. While in practice, this emphasis resulted in a diverse range of subject matters explored in the early documentaries, these efforts converged towards the collective goal of "establishing a new self-awareness and a different societal awareness at a distinctive historical moment" (Lu 2010, 20).

At the same time, the individual perspective in these documentaries is also reflected in their observational style. Departing from the scripted and staged conventions of *zhuantipian*, filmmakers in the initial phase drew heavily from the Direct Cinema style of Frederick Wiseman. They also found inspiration in Japanese documentaries, particularly in the works of Ogawa Shinsuke. As a result, these filmmakers frequently utilized techniques such as synchronized sound, long takes, and tracking shots, all of which emphasized a direct and immediate capture of reality. This unscripted method laid the foundation for a defining characteristic of Chinese independent documentaries, fittingly termed "on-the-spot realism" (*jishi zhuyi*). Chris Berry's examination of this spontaneous style highlights the motivation of Chinese independent filmmakers in post-socialist China to "operate under the imperative to get real" (2007: 115). From this vantage point, reality, when juxtaposed with structured narratives, is marked by inherent uncertainties that can arise at any given moment. Instead of attempting to control these unpredictable elements, this new approach indicates a conceptual shift toward a non-interventionist way of documentation that embraces them. It places filmmakers as witnesses to events, rather than orchestrators of the scene.

In the second phase of the New Documentary Movement, the principle of individualism remained crucial, though its meaning evolved to represent a particular form of expression. Lu points out that during this period, there was a noticeable influx of younger filmmakers. These individuals came from various backgrounds, including fine arts, multimedia, and avant-garde art; some were motivated purely by a passion for self-expression (Lu 2010, 34). Their entry into the documentary scene was influenced by two contrasting developments. Firstly, while the direct repercussions of the Tiananmen incident had largely receded, leading to a less politicized climate, economic disparities were exacerbated by accelerated market reforms. Secondly, as early independent documentaries gained recognition, mainstream TV programs began to incorporate

many of their realist filming techniques. In response to these conditions, filmmakers of this period quickly expanded their lens to cover subjects affected by the rising tide of commercialism. In doing so, many aimed to distance themselves from the founders of the movement by carving out their own voice. Often, this desire led to a departure from the purely observational style of the first phase, steering them towards a more diversified approach to documentary representation.

From a technical standpoint, the transformation seen during this phase owns much to the advent of DV technology. Given that many second-phase filmmakers lacked formal training or extensive experience in the field, the simplicity of mini DV cameras naturally positioned themselves as the ideal tools for these emerging documentarians. The affordability of these devices also provided them with the freedom to experiment with different stylistic choices without the burden of financial constraints. Zhang Hua's filmmaking journey is a particularly intriguing example of those who embraced DV technology. Initially featured in Li Jinghong's documentary, which depicted her failed attempt in running a beauty parlor, Zhang later adopted the DV camera herself for her own documentary, *The Road to Paradise* (Dir. Zhang Hua, 2006). In this film, she explores the life of a female teacher recently diagnosed with breast cancer, focusing on the strained relationships within the protagonist's family. Using a combination of reflective and performative techniques, Zhang poignantly captures the raw emotions and complexities of these interactions. This deeply personal approach to documentary-making is representative of what Wu Wenguang termed "DV individual filmmaking," a production method that dominated this period (2010, 49). Luke Robinson further observes that this emphasis on the intimate aspects of documentary narratives marks a shift in the movement from "public" to "private" storytelling (2010, 177).

While Wu's *Bumming in Beijing* is broadly acknowledged as the starting point of the New Documentary Movement, pinpointing its conclusion proves more challenging. In Lu's timeline,

she somewhat ambiguously designates the end date as the "present," implying that, up until the book's 2010 publication, she did not see the movement as having conclusively ended. This vagueness prompts several important questions: Is Lu suggesting that the movement continues to evolve? And if so, could it still be evolving even a decade after her observations? For Lu, the transition between the movement's initial two phases is deeply intertwined with the historical contexts of their respective times. Such contexts, as she insightfully notes, are molded by the convergence of socio-cultural, political, economic, and technical forces. With this perspective in mind, one wonders: In the decade following Lu's analysis, hasn't there been any discernible development in China capable of initiating a new phase, or at the very least, introducing a distinct dimension, to Chinese independent documentaries? Expanding upon Lu's framework, this thesis suggests that the rise of social media - which began its rapid commercialization in China starting around 2015 - constitutes precisely that kind of transformative change.

1.2 Social Media in the Age of Internet Plus

The history of social media in China has closely followed its progression of internet development. Shortly after China established a permanent connection to the worldwide web in 1994, bulletin board systems (BBS) and online forums became the dominant forms of online interaction. In 1996, this landscape began to expand further with the launch of QQ's instant messaging service (Kent et al. 2018, 1). The early 2000s witnessed an explosion of internet users, bringing about a multitude of new platforms. User review sites, such as Dianping, debuted in 2003, and by the following years, blogging and social-networking platforms had also started to gain traction (Chiu et al. 2012). Media scholar Guobin Yang, writing on this burgeoning scene, argues that the proliferation and broad acceptance of these digital platforms signaled the birth of a

"nascent public sphere" (2003, 461). Drawing from Jurgen Habermas, Yang highlights that, in contrast to the unilateral flow of traditional media, these digital spaces – ranging from listservs to chatrooms – enable Chinese users to actively shape public discourse through collaborative dialogue and information exchange. While state censorship casts a persistent shadow, Yang provides multiple examples where users have innovatively devised counter-control strategies to circumvent these restrictions.[4] Even today, social media remains one of the few public spaces in China where citizens can, if only temporarily, voice their concerns, rally for protests, and on occasion, effect tangible change.

By the early 2010s, however, the mainstream narrative surrounding social media in China began to change, gravitating towards the concept of *self-media* (*zimeiti*). This notion finds its roots in a 2003 report written by US journalists Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis for the Media Center at the American Press Institute. In this report, they introduced the term *we-media* to describe the participatory form of journalism they witnessed on the South Korean news website, OhmyNews (Bowman and Willis, 2003:7). The following year, Fang Yudong, the founder of Blogchina, cited this term in a blog post, drawing on Bowman and Willis' report (Yu 2017, 54). In a footnote, he proposed that *we-media* could be directly translated as *women meiti* (we-media), or, alternatively, as *zimeiti* (self-media), both encapsulating the spirit of *gongxiang meiti* (sharing-media). Around 2013, as noted by Kecheng Fang, the term *zimeiti* started drawing considerable attention on the Chinese internet, quickly overshadowing then-common terms like "traditional media" and "new media." Although *self-media* was initially a term for non-institutional content creators, Fang's comprehensive review of industrial reports suggests that in China, it is mainly perceived as "an

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[4] One of the most prominent strategies is the use of homonyms and "misspelt" words. For specific examples, see Jason Q. Ng's *Banned on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China's Version of Twitter (and Why)* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013).

emerging commercial sector," broad enough to "include any new forms of monetization on social media platforms" (2021, 1). For most, this relates mainly to news accounts on WeChat and Weibo, as well as video and livestreaming channels on Bilibili and Kuaishou. But it also extents to less expected contributors, such as popular personalities answering questions on Zhihu. In conclusion, Fang sees the rise of *self-media* as indicative of a growing commercial trend in China's social media landscape. In this setting, grassroots participation, once celebrated as a symbol of social media's democratizing power, has been domesticated and reshaped by the financial logic of digital platforms, becoming central to their legitimizing discourse (ibid., 15).

Such a change is not abrupt but rather a consequence of China's broader economic reorientation and the implementation of two government policies that support this transformation. After Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012, prompting home-grown technologies became a cornerstone of his plan to sustain the country's economic growth (Keane 2016, 71). Central to this was the Internet Plus (*huliangwang jia*) initiative, introduced in the Government Work Report by the then-premier Li Keqiang in March 2015. This policy signified a strategic shift from China's previous dependency on foreign exports and investments, aiming instead to combine the capabilities of the internet and other information technologies with traditional sectors, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and transportation. Concurrently, Li Keqiang unveiled the Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation (*dazhong chuangxin, wanzhong chuanye*) policy. Positioned against the background of a rapidly expanding global economy and internet developments, this plan sought to harness the grassroots creativity of China's citizens for its economic advancements. According to Li Keqiang, the Internet Plus and Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation policies operate in a complementary relationship: while the Internet Plus initiative forms the infrastructure

for a robust digital economy, it simultaneously facilitates the growth of individual entrepreneurs (Li and Tong 2018).

In many ways, the objectives of the Internet Plus policy resonate with what has been theorized as platformization. Drawing from research on business studies, political economy, and software studies, Dutch scholars Thomas Poell and David B Nieborg conceptualize platformization as “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems. (Poell and Niebeorg 2018, 4276). In their brief exploration, they illustrate the concept by focusing on cultural industries, with particular attention to the production of games and news across leading Western platforms, such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft (GAFAM). They argue through platformization, these cultural commodities have become fundamentally contingent, evolving to be “increasingly modular in design and continuously reworked and repackaged” (ibid., 4275). Yet, for all their insights, Poell and Nieborg also acknowledge the geographical constraints of their study, noting its Western-centric perspective in a globally-relevant topic. Addressing this, Kloet et al.’s 2019 research offers a more localized look at China, expanding the discussion beyond specific industries to broader social and cultural dimensions. They contend that while the general principles of platformization certainly apply to China, its distinctive political environment introduces added complexities (2019, 250). Contrasting many global examples where platform growth largely hinges on market dynamics, the Chinese government’s regulatory reach and active interventions consistently eclipse the autonomy of platforms. Although such an oversight is commonly believed to impede the process of platformization, the consonance between platforms’ profit objectives and the state’s developmental goals has intriguingly fostered a collaborative relationship (Zhang 2020, 233). Consequently, Kloet

et al. suggest that China's platformization is advancing at an even more rapid and intense pace than in traditionally tech-forward areas like the US and Europe (2019, 251).

Within this context, platformization has swiftly permeated Chinese cinema, most notably giving rise to what is known as IP films. Making their debut in 2014, IP films refer to films that are derived from pre-existing cultural icons and materials – encompassing comics, novels, films, toys, music, and video games – all of which fall under the umbrella of intellectual properties. Examples of these films include *Tiny Times* (Dir. Guo Jingming, 2013), an adaption of the director's own best-selling novels, and *Forever Young* (Dir. He Jiong, 2015), which took cues from the director's widely acclaimed 2004 song bearing the same name. While this strategy might appear innovative, Jinying Li notes that it is actually reflective of transmedial franchising, a method long employed by major Hollywood studios like Disney and Universal (200, 205). However, what distinguishes IP films, particularly as a genre introduced by Alibaba and Tencent, two of China's largest internet companies, is their integration of platform logics into their production, distribution, and consumption processes. As Li points out, the rise of IP films essentially marks a paradigm shift from "content" to "contact," where the primarily aim of these film is to build and maintain constant communication and connectivity with the audience (ibid., 208). In order to forge this bond, IP films have become increasingly fragmented and intertextual, emphasizing momentary emotional outbursts over a unified narrative. Within this contact zone, the audience, driven by their desire for interaction, often imparts their ideas to these films, typically through comments and micro-bloggings. However, this valuable communicative labor is rarely recognized and, therefore, remains uncompensated by production companies.

Ultimately, IP films illustrate the way in which mainstream commercial cinema in China has adapted to the expansive ecosystem of social media, positioning itself as a strategic business

model that boosts the revenues of these platforms. The efficacy of this model is undeniable, with *Tiny Times* becoming one of the most commercially successful film series in China. Similarly, the impact of platformization is also evident in the rise of micro-movies (*wei dianying*), which are formalized, commercialized short films that circulate exclusively on Chinese social media and streaming sites (Zhao 2013). However, such a commercial trajectory does not extend to social media documentaries. In cases such as *We Were Smart* and *Present.Perfect.*, both films exceed two hours in runtime and feature narratives that require undivided viewer attention. Moreover, unlike IP films and micro-movies, which find their audience in mainstream theaters and on popular streaming platforms, these documentaries are primarily screened at universities campuses, film clubs, art centers, and international festivals. As such, it remains questionable whether these films were able to recover their production costs, let alone achieve profitability.

Indeed, from their inception, Chinese independent documentaries have not been driven by profitability as their artistic motivation. This sentiment is echoed by Wu Wenguang, who has characterized commercialization as a constraint looming over all Chinese filmmakers (Wu 2010, 54). From an alternative perspective, Luke Robinson interprets Chinese independent documentaries as a socially engaged form of public culture that strives to "raise awareness through increased visibility" (2015, 69). Correspondingly, Lu Xinyu makes a similar claim, perceiving them as a medium that offers reflections on contemporary issues and aids in understanding the present (2010, 48). What then are the issues that social media documentaries address in the highly commercialized landscape of Chinese social media? Both *We Were Smart* and *Present.Perfect.* explore subjects closely associated with an emerging online phenomenon, commonly referred to as wanghong (literally "internet red"). As the following section will show, this phenomenon has not only provided new insights into traditionally marginalized individuals in China, but it has also

precipitated profound transformation of the country's visual culture. These developments, as the thesis contends, are the key aspects with which social media documentaries engage.

1.3 Wanghong and Content Overflow

"Wanghong," a contraction of "*wangluo hongren*", is a vernacular term for influencers and internet celebrities in China (Han 2021, 317). This cultural phenomenon began in the late 1990s with a handful of Chinese writers who created and shared highly performative works on BBS (Sun and Xin 2019, 19). By around 2005, a new trend emerged as various individuals gained notoriety by deliberately exhibiting aspects conventionally considered unattractive, thereby sparking online debates and curiosity. In contrast to earlier examples, most wanghong of this period interacted with their followers through a combination of imagery and text, especially on forums like Tianya Club. In 2015, the concept of wanghong extended beyond its cultural influence to take on an economic aspect when Danial Zhang, then CEO of Alibaba, pointed out its commercial viability, coining the term "wanghong economy" (Fang and Wang, 2015). From that point, the term wanghong correspondingly became to describe individuals "defined by their acute ability to convert internet viewer traffic to money with various, replicable and profitable economic models" (Han 2021, 317). Such a case is Papi Jiang, one of the first wanghong to parlay her online popularity into substantial business success. Merely a year after stepping into this new industry, by March 2016, with her 8 million social media followers, Jiang secured a 12-million-yuan investment from venture capitalists, and her net worth was estimated at an impressive 100 million yuan for that year (Wen 2016).

Meanwhile, the shift in the wanghong paradigm has greatly expanded the demographics of this online community, both in size and diversity. Whereas it may have been possible to recognize,

or at least be familiar with, most wanghong in the early 2000s, the current scale of this network renders such familiarity simply impractical. According to Topklout's market research, as of March 2023, there are over 9 million content creators in China with more than 10,000 followers each; among them, 0.3% command fan bases that exceed 10 million (Topklout 2023). Although many still originate from urban and cosmopolitan backgrounds, an increasing number are emerging from rural areas, typically with less formal education and lower socioeconomic status. Amid this expansion, some rural creators have found remarkable success. Take, for example, Liu Mama, a quintessential middle-aged farmer from Dongbei, the northeastern region often dubbed China's Rust Belt. In 2015, Liu began exploring Kuaishou, China's leading video-sharing and live-streaming platform, initially as a leisure activity. Remarkably, within a mere three years, her account saw meteoric growth, reaching fourteen million followers. By 2018, news reports indicated that Liu Mama was earning close to a million yuan each month, far outstripping the average local farmer's monthly income of roughly four thousand yuan in that year (Liu 2018).

However, the very creative endeavors that catapulted figures like Liu Mama to fame as wanghong also carry inherent risks and challenges. Jian Lin and Jeroen de Kloet, in their study of these rural creators, characterize them as members of an "unlikely creative class," who routinely confront obstacles related to state and platform governance (2019, 10). In their everyday operations, these creators must continually navigate the murky waters of opaque algorithms and vague regulations, with any missteps potentially leading to shadow bans or outright account terminations. Additionally, without formal contracts with their hosting platforms, these creators lack the standard protections typically afforded by labor legislation, leaving them with little control over their working hours and conditions (Zhou and Liu 2021, 2). These challenges are exacerbated by the pervasive threat of cyber-bullying, as wanghong are frequently subjected to "public shaming,

humiliation, and harassment" (Zhao 2019, 223). The convergence of these factors casts China's social media landscape as a domain of contradictions, providing opportunities for social mobility and personal transformation while simultaneously laying snares of vulnerabilities. This thesis suggests that this ambivalence towards social media is central to the narratives of social media documentaries, which serve as reflective commentaries on the complexities of online existence in the age of Internet Plus.

Another significant shift in the wanghong landscape is the move towards video content, coinciding with the emergence of platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou and Xigua Video. While these platforms theoretically provide equal access to users across China, their actual user demographics tend to be socially stratified. This is reflected in the preference of rural content creators, like Liu Mama, for platforms like Kuaishou, which caters primarily to audiences in smaller cities and towns (Li 2020, 3770). Despite the internal dynamics within this grassroots population, Craig et al. have noted that the content created by these individuals frequently embodies a certain sense of mundanity that originates from their daily experiences (2021, 148). This simplicity, far from being a drawback, has been cherished by viewers as a testament to authenticity, a quality that has grown all the more valuable in a virtual world that often favors the polished and artificial. For example, since 2017, Liu Suliang and his classmate Hu Yueqing, known online as the "Huanong Brothers" (which translates to "Chinese Rural Brothers"), have been capturing the attention of viewers with their genuine portrayal of rural life. Hailing from Jiangxi Province and originally working as farmers, they have created a niche for themselves by documenting their everyday activities on the farm, such as caring for bamboo rats, pigs, and dogs. Liu's videos, in which he speaks in a strong rural accent, wears simple clothes, and at times finds it challenging to construct full sentences, have not deterred their online success. As of November

2023, they boast 6.27 million followers on Bilibili and 3.65 million followers on Xigua Video, securing their status as some of the most popular rural wanghong in China.

In addition to farming, a myriad of daily tasks are increasingly captured and shared on social media platforms, including cooking, eating, unboxing, and even sleeping. These seemingly mundane activities, often considered monotonous and trivial by mainstream media, consistently draw devoted online audiences. This trend, as Chinese film critic Xiaolu Wang insightfully notes, reflects an intensification of the performativity of everyday life, fueled by the escalating recognition of the visual appeal of these ordinary routines among individuals in China (2022). More importantly, it is progressively blurring the boundaries between reality and its mediation, to the extent where they become not only intertwined but often indistinguishable (ibid.). In this environment, it is not uncommon for viewers to feel, or even develop the illusion, that their engagement with this content creates intimate connections with online creators, perhaps even more so than those in their real-life interactions. However, this dynamic raises crucial questions for Chinese independent documentaries: how does this change the nature of documentation when those traditionally filmed become the ones holding the camera, documenting themselves? What implications does the authenticity characterizing their videos and livestreams hold for documentaries that have always strived to capture reality in a more immediate and unfiltered manner? As this thesis will demonstrate, Chinese independent documentaries perceive this transition not as a threat, but as an opportunity to experiment with new participatory approaches.

1.4 Chapters Overview

Following Lu's periodization of the New Documentary Movement, this thesis will structure its analysis of social media documentaries around two main aspects: their subject matter and

representational approach. Firstly, I suggest that these new documentaries continue the movement's ongoing attention to marginalized communities in contemporary China. However, they also introduce a new layer to these narratives by exploring how these individuals use social media for economic and social advancement. Secondly, this thesis will demonstrate that, in response to the growing inclination towards self-representation, social media documentaries are increasingly adopting participatory production methods. Although this representational approach has long been practiced in previous DV works, social media documentaries distinguish themselves by utilizing materials inspired or directly taken from social media platforms.

Chapter one of this thesis will focus on Li Yifan's 2019 documentary *We Were Smart*, which explores the *shamate* subculture among China's second-generation migrant workers. The chapter will begin with a narrative analysis, focusing on how these alienated youth are using various social media platforms to construct their own digital communities. It will then move to discuss the film's inclusion of self-captured mobile footage, linking its origins to the Kuaishou platform. In doing so, this chapter will demonstrate that social media is crucial not only for understanding the motivation behind the participatory turn in social media documentaries, but also for revealing insights into its function.

Chapter two of this thesis will discuss Zhu Shengze's 2019 documentary *Present.Perfect.*. As one of the few, if not the only, films looking at marginalized live-streaming hosts in China, *Present.Perfect.* is also the first documentary composed entirely of live-streaming footage. This chapter will begin by addressing how live-streaming intersects with broader issues such as surveillance, immaterial labor, and social visibility. Following this, it will then explore the film's participatory approach, drawing connections to the style of compilation documentaries. However, unlike most films in this genre, *Present.Perfect.* sources its material from an ephemeral archive

rather than a stable one. This distinct feature redefines the purposes to the film's participatory approach, effectively turning the documentary itself an archive for this fleeting footage.

Chapter 1

2 Between Shadows and Screen: The *Shamate* Subculture and the Participatory Turn in *We Were Smart*

In the revolutionary history of China, peasants have been esteemed as a driving force in the rural implementation of socialism, often celebrated as the moral and political backbone of the nation. As many have transitioned to urban areas in the post-reform era to become migrant workers, they remain central to China's modern evolution, fueling the country's transformation into a leading industrial powerhouse. Ironically, despite their lasting contributions, these rural migrants are frequently disparaged by the urban elite, commonly perceived as intruders and opportunists whose presumed uncouth disposition is thought to endanger the established social order of the cities. This situation is only exacerbated by their lack of urban registration (*hukou*), which confines them to a continuous cycle of movement across cities, working in temporary, low-paying jobs. Additionally, these unstable positions often expose them to wage arrears and workplace injuries, with some incidents tragically leading to fatalities, further compounding the instability to their precarious existence.

The plight of migrant workers has not only made them a compelling subject in Chinese documentaries, but it has also transformed their cinematic representation into a field of tension and contestation. In her close readings of these films, Wanning Sun identifies three modes of production, each shaped by its particular cultural politics of recognition. In state-sponsored TV documentaries, such as *Flowers* (2008) and *Talking About Rural Migrant Workers* (2009), Sun suggests that they are informed by what she designates as "rhetorical recognition," which can, at times, lapse into intentional elision. (2014:123). This fundamentally amounts to a trope of virtue signaling that affords rural migrants only superficial comfort and symbolic visibility, without

genuinely challenging the existing systematic and structural inequality. By contrast, independent documentaries like *Us Rural Migrants* (2008), while not explicitly advocating for redistributive policies, acknowledge these matters. Such films often draw from the traditions of Direct Cinema and *cinema vérité*, focusing on the everyday experiences of migrant workers. Sun also highlights a growing trend among a handful of migrant-turned-activists who uses DV technology to create their own representational platforms. However, as Sun notes, these non-official films often adopt "an unapologetically didactic stance," which potentially compromises their relatability to other migrants (ibid., 148).

Despite the evident differences in their cultural politics, many of these films tend to depict migrant workers in China as a monolithic population. While I do not intent to deny that certain experiences, such as social and institutional discrimination and labor exploitation, are prevalent among Chinese rural migrants, it is important to recognize that these factors do not encompass the entire scope of their urban existence. Indeed, with China's migrant population reaching a staggering 295.62 million in 2022[5], the diversity and complexity of this community - spanning age, gender, place of origin, employment type, and more - are undeniable. These backgrounds have garnered the attention of scholars in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. For instance, Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin have concentrated on the second-generation of migrant workers, who are less connected to farming and other rural traditions than their parents. These younger migrants are more attuned to urban lifestyles and particularly resonate with urban consumer culture. For them, migration is no longer merely an economic opportunity but represents a transition to a different way of life. However, the enduring biases of the urban elite towards their rural roots pose significant challenges to their full social integration. This situation often results in them being

[5] Data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (available in Chinese): http://www.news.cn/politics/2023-04/30/c_1129581812.htm.

trapped in a liminal space, oscillating between rural and urban identities, a condition that Pun and Lu refer to as "unfinished proletarianization" (2010: 495-496).

This chapter examines the cinematic representation of the *shamate* (杀马特) subculture among China's second-generation migrants, as depicted in the social media documentary *We Were Smart*. Central to my discussion is the crucial role of social media in both nurturing this subcultural community and influencing the film's participatory approach to their representation. I begin by examining how *We Were Smart* counters the common stereotype of *shamate* migrants as mere attention-seekers, uncovering through their testimonies that the subculture's emergence was a response to the factory abuses and societal alienation experienced by many young migrants in urban China. In this context, *shamate* represents not only a symbol of resistance against these tangible challenges, but also as a digital community rooted in their social media practices. In translating these verbal accounts into visual narratives, *We Were Smart* incorporates substantial self-recorded footage from the migrants, a method that situates the film within the tradition of participatory documentaries in Chinese cinema. Drawing from Luke Robinson, I contend that the film's participatory approach is anchored in "the ability of the documentary subject to self-mediate" – an expertise refined through their forays into short-format video platforms, which results in content enriched with profound authenticity (Robinson, 2014: 148). This authenticity mirrors the cinematic language of *xianchang*, and its reflection is skillfully integrated into the mobile footage in *We Were Smart* to achieve a spontaneous realism. However, in its capacity as a social media documentary, *We Were Smart* casts a discerning eye on the transformative promise of social media for *shamate* migrants. I conclude by demonstrating how this skepticism permeates the film, most apparent in its animated intertitles and concluding scenes.

2.1 Who Were Smart?

Shamate emerged around 2008 as arguably the most prominent subculture in China. Its roots, as recounted by its founder Luo Fuxing, trace back to the flamboyant aesthetics of Japanese Visual Kei musician Miyavi, whom Luo stumbled upon online at the age of 11. Enthralled by this striking style, Luo embarked on a radical makeover to incorporate this fashion into his daily look. This transformation saw him adopting eccentric hairstyles, often dyed in bright, fluorescent colors, and complementing them audacious fashion statements such as religious symbols, studded accessories, and death-themed attire. While seeking a name to encapsulate this identity, Luo was attracted to the English word "smart," which evokes notions of both intelligence and a well-dressed appearance. However, with his limited proficiency in English, he eventually settled on the homophonic derivation "*shamate*," purposely selecting the first character "sha" (杀, which translates to "kill") to infuse the name with an edgy flair.

Upon sharing selfies that flaunted his *shamate* style on the internet, Luo quickly amassed a large following. At the peak of its popularity in the late 2000s, the *shamate* community boasted approximately 200,000 active online members, who organized themselves into individual clans, identified by remarkable names like "buried love" and "residual snow." However, as *shamate* began to capture mainstream attention, the dominant culture reacted with aggressive hostility, dismissing its aesthetic as vulgar and ludicrous. By the early 2010s, what began as mere contempt and mockery from vicious internet trolls soon spiraled into blatant cyberbullying. In extreme cases, these virtual confrontations spilled into the real world, resulting in physical altercations and even death threats. Because of this widespread negativity, *shamate* gradually faded from China's cultural landscape, now existing primarily in the memories of millennials as a stereotype of individuals with unconventional looks and hairstyles.

Figure. 1.1. Left: Miyavi / Right: Luo Fuxing.

Challenging the mainstream dismissal of *shamate*, *We Were Smart* promptly offers a contrasting perspective, associating the subculture with China's young migrants. The film opens with animated titles cards that briefly outlines the evolution of *shamate* fashion. This text, rendered in a typewriter effect, burst forth in vibrant neon hues that vividly echo the luminescent hair colors characteristic of the subculture. Yet, as the narrative focus seems to be narrowing on the aesthetic expression of *shamate*, the film takes an unexpected turn. The screen fractures into three segments, each displaying videos of young people lined up with suitcases beside them. The purpose for these gatherings becomes clear when the middle section shifts to a still photo of a recruitment advertisement. This image is quickly followed by a brief interview clip with a young migrant, who notes, "I was 12 when I left. I had just started sixth grade." Over the next four minutes, the film maintains this split-screen format, adding more recruitment videos and interviews with additional migrants. Though their outfits appear conventional, certain hairstyles evoke traces of a possible *shamate* past. In their spoken accounts, they narrate tales of leaving the countryside in their youth, while occasionally making veiled references to *shamate*. This subtle suggestion solidifies in a following animation, where archival photos of *shamate* progressively fill the screen. As this occurs,

name tags indicating China's least developed provinces appear, slowly creating a map of China superimposed over the photos. This montage culminates in a stark contrast: a black screen displaying the white text, "members of the SMART community overwhelmingly came from villages in the central and western part of the country."

Figure 2.1. Split-screen in the opening sequence of *We Were Smart* (Dir. Li Yifan, 2019).

Figure 2.2. Final animation in the opening sequence of *We Were Smart* (Dir. Li Yifan, 2019).

What also becomes evident in the opening sequence is the authoritative role of interviews in guiding *We Were Smart*'s narration. In contrast to the rapid and seemingly haphazard rotation of recruitment photos and videos, transitions between interviews within the same split-screen are always thoughtfully orchestrated. They flow smoothly from one participant's concluding words to another's beginning, ensuring each individual has ample time to convey their message fully. This careful arrangement carries over to the soundtrack, where migrant voices consistently overlay the

transient sounds emanating from the recruitment videos. As such, these interviews provide the only intelligible auditory cues in the sequence, informing the viewer's interpretation of the visual content. This deliberate emphasis on the voices of the migrants – voices that compellingly capture the grassroots perspective of China's ordinary folks (*laobaixing*) – is consistent with what Chris Berry has identified as a long-standing tradition in new Chinese documentaries (2007:122). It is also a narrative strategy that Li Yifan strategically employed to clarify the entrenched misconceptions about the *shamate* subculture, as evidenced in his own words: "I just want to let the *shamate* migrants themselves tell us what they are doing, and let themselves tell us what *shamate* is." [6]

Building on this commitment, the film continues to employ interviews as a potent narrative device, delving deeper into the brutal exploitation of young migrants in urban environments. Following the opening sequence, personal accounts reveal that these rural youths, many forced to abandon China's nine-year compulsory education, largely landed in low-wage manufacturing positions in urban factories. Amidst the proliferation of research on this migrant labor, Pun Ngai's ethnographic study, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in Global Workplace*, provides a detailed examination of the detailed workings of these factories. She underscores that, in addition to producing tangible goods, these establishments also strive to cultivate a "docile, disciplined, yet productive" social body (Pun, 2005:20). Beyond the pervasive use of task assignments and assembly line integrations, color-coded uniforms function as another pivotal control mechanism. These uniforms not only instill compliance but also establish a hierarchical organization within the workforce, often entangled with gender politics. This emphasis on uniformity is evident even during the recruitment stage, succinctly encapsulated by a migrant worker in the film who states,

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[6] Mentioned in Li's public talk available on Yixi (the original speech is in Chinese; this is my translation): https://www.yixi.tv/h5/speech/917/

"only standard bodies get in." This sentiment is strikingly corroborated by video clips accompanying the interviews. The footage regularly captures workers in identical uniforms and hairstyles, drawing a disturbing comparison to the standardized electronic components moving methodically down the nearby assembly lines.

It is within this context *We Were Smart* offers an initial interpretation of the *shamate* subculture as a form of symbolic resistance, focusing on the reclamation of individual bodily autonomy. Through a curated selection of archival photos featuring *shamate* migrants, the film demonstrates how this subcultural style, although initially inspired by the dark and gothic aesthetics of Japanese Visual Kei musicians, has since morphed into a diverse fusion of visual signs taken from various preceding global subcultures. For instance, as showcased in the split-screen below, these migrants creatively weave together elements of British punk, Hallyu, and Harajuku Kawaii – such as leather jackets, studded bracelets, hair bows, and tulle skirt pants – into their personal wardrobes. This eclectic blending births a unique postmodern pastiche, where *shamate* claims its visual distinction not from any singular source, but from an ostensibly incongruent combination of elements that surpasses temporal and geographical boundaries. This "semantic disorder" boldly contrasts the mandated homogeneity of factory uniforms, in a similar way to how punks in post-war UK repurposed utilitarian safety pins into symbols of defiance and instability (Hedbidge, 1979:90). When embracing the *shamate* style outside of work, these young migrants transcend their factory-assigned roles, reinventing themselves with a distinctive self-image that refused to be solely defined by a badge number or task title.

Figure 2.3. Selfies Taken by *Shamate* Migrants, *We Were Smart* (Dir. Li Yifan, 2019).

Beyond the factory confines, *We Were Smart* depicts these migrants contending with limited social interactions, leading many to express an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Insights from Chinese anthropologist Fei Hsiao-tung's offer a perspective into the roots of this isolation. From his extensive ethnographic research, Fei writes: "the basic unit of Chinese rural society is the village" (Fei, 1992:41). Such villages, regardless of their size, tend to be solitary communities where social interactions are primarily mediated through principles of familiarity and trust. This constitutes a social fabric markedly different from that of the urban setting, where relationships are largely characterized by anonymity and commodification. As a result, rural migrants, arriving with their own set of customary norms and expectations, often struggle to establish meaningful relationships in the city. In some cases, their escalating desperation for social connection becomes so intense that they latch onto anyone who shows even a hint of warmth or affection. This emotional vulnerability, as highlighted by several migrants in the film, renders them particularly susceptible to various forms of deception and manipulation, often resulting in the depletion of their hard-earned savings.

In this light, the *shamate* subculture surfaces not merely as a visual statement but as an alternative community that offers companionship to displaced young migrants. Initially, *We Were Smart* locates this community in physical spaces like city parks and roller-skating rinks, capturing candid moments when *shamate* migrants relax and socialize after exhaustive work shifts. However, as the narrative unfolds, the digital universe becomes an increasingly crucial locus. One migrant, during her interview, cites QQ - the predominant instant messaging service in China during the 2000s - as the favored platform for the *shamate* community. She recalls that virtually every *shamate* migrant she encountered had one, if not several, QQ accounts, which they utilized to associate with various *shamate*-themed chat groups. These online communities, some with memberships numbering in the thousands, turned into hotbeds of vibrant discussions, ranging from the latest *shamate* fashion trends to employment opportunities and shared urban experiences. Interestingly, the organizational structure of these groups closely resembled that of traditional family units, with veteran members adopting roles akin to parental figures, overseeing the internal affairs of their respective "families." These digital kinships not only provided a substitute to the familial connections many of these left-behind children were missing, but they also crafted a self-defined sense of belonging that circumvents traditional material and institutional validations for urban legitimacy, such as property ownership and urban *hukou*.

Despite the proliferation of these online *shamate* families, gaining membership was not easy due to their rigorous entry criteria. Beyond a recommendation from an existing member, prospective candidates also had to confirm their authentic *shamate* identity. This often meant uploading selfies to Qzone - a social networking platform affiliated with QQ and modeled after Facebook and Myspace - that displayed their distinctive fashion and hair. This connection quickly made Qzone an essential hub for the *shamate* community, leading to a particular selfie culture.

Within this culture, *shamate* migrants regularly organized competitions reminiscent of beauty pageants, meticulously evaluating selfies to highlight standout representations that would subsequently influence future *shamate* styles. Given the deeper significance of these customs, branding selfies merely as shallow expressions of vanity intertwined with consumerist self-obsession, as many journalists and critics often hastily conclude, is reductive. Both the content of these images and the act of capturing and disseminating them are central to defining and validating the *shamate* identity. This establishes a disruptive representational system for migrant workers in China that "challenges the established modes of production, circulation, and consumption" of such portrayals (Lehner, 2022:67). Through these selfies, they both supplement the underrepresented narratives of migrants in mainstream media and challenge the stereotypical depictions of *shamate*.

2.2 Participatory Documentaries in China

While the interviews bring attention to the complex and often obscured experiences of *shamate* migrants, *We Were Smart* encounters a practical issue in converting these layered narratives into visual imagery. As underscored by the interviews, any meaningful understanding of the *shamate* subculture must begin by acknowledging the systemic exploitation that these migrants suffered in urban factories. Li, however, notes that his own age and background acted as barrier to discreetly conducting fieldwork within these establishments. Additionally, he expressed concerns that obtaining footage through assisted access might risk distorting the raw authenticity of these experiences. To address these obstacles, Li joined forces with Luo Fuxing, launching an improvised initiative within the migrant community that promised financial rewards for submissions of their self-recorded videos. This innovative strategy led to a remarkable 915 video

contributions, which Li deftly incorporated into the film, providing concrete visual evidence of the struggles and realities seldom acknowledged in *shamate* history.

Crucially, the active involvement of *shamate* migrants in shaping their own representation distinguishes *We Were Smart* as a participatory documentary. To be clear, the practice of shifting the role of the filmmaker to the subject is not new in the history of cinema, nor is it a novel concept in Chinese documentary filmmaking. A trailblazing example of this participatory approach in China is found in Wu Wenguang's *China Village Self-Governance Film Project* (2005), centered on China's village democracy. In September 2005, Wu issued a public call for documentary proposals, attracting approximately 90 villager candidates from across China, from which 10 were chosen. These selected villagers were subsequently invited to Wu's Caochangdi Studio in Beijing for a sponsored training session where they learnt the basics of DV camera operations. In the following months, each participants was entrusted with a DV camera to bring their documentary visions to life. This project resulted in 10 documentaries, each roughly 10 minutes in length, offering intimate insights into the shifting patterns of rural life and political transformations in their respective villages.

According to Yiman Wang, the technological evolution of China's documentary-making landscape during the late 1990s provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the participatory turn in Wu's project. Interestingly, though often labeled as independent filmmakers, many pioneers of China's New Documentary Movement were, in fact, initially affiliated with state-run television stations. These connections were mainly the result of challenges in acquiring specialized technological equipment and financial backing, which compelled them to seek assistance from state channels. One such example is *No. 16 Barkhor South Street* (1996), where filmmaker Duan Jingchuan secured funding through state-sponsored television (Wang 2010, 78). This situation,

however, saw a marked change with the advent of DV technology. These cameras not only democratized filmmaking by making it more affordable and personal but also gave rise to what Wang characterizes as an "amateur-author documentary culture" (2005:17). Beyond established filmmakers, individuals like fresh college graduates and independent artists began using these devices to explore social matters that, while resonating personally, were frequently neglected by mainstream cinema. Yet, as they immersed themselves further into their subjects, the intimate access to reality afforded by DV technology simultaneously intensified their awareness of their peripheral position and the inherent constraints in effecting meaningful change. Addressing this ethical conundrum, Wang, in a later publication, reinterprets Wu Wenguang's role in *China Village Self-Governance Film Project*. Instead of viewing him as a guilty filmmaker exploiting his subjects, Wang portrays Wu as a conduit extending the grassroots documentary spirit to the villagers and, in doing so, transforming them into new agents in documentary creation (2010:223).

Wang's argument, though deeply insightful and discerning, is observed by Luke Robinson to be "still largely posited on the agency of the professional filmmaker" (2013: 147). What this suggests is a recurring narrative that perceives marginalized subjects as inherently devoid of agency, thus depending on the benevolence of filmmakers to attain a semblance of empowerment. On this matter, Pooja Rangan's 2017 monograph, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, offers perhaps one of the most persuasive counterpoints to this humanitarian trap. Rangan argues that well-intentioned filmmakers, while aiming to elevate marginalized voices, can paradoxically reinforce the very disenfranchised identities they seek to redeem. Citing examples from acclaimed participatory works, such as the Academy Award-winning *Born into Brothels* (2004) and Afonso Cuarón's *I am Autism* (2009), Rangan observes that such documentaries tend to frame individual suffering as emblematic of a more expansive human crisis, leveraging their

apparent immediacy to call for external interventions. She introduces the term “immediations” to describe the ritualized methods by which this urgency is presented and interpreted in these films (2017:6). Emphasizing this, Rangan argues that these representational patterns are deeply entrenched in the dominant vocabulary of legitimization, determining both the selection of subjects and the manner in which their experiences are addressed. Thus, what appears to be a noble gesture of inclusion can slyly transform into an act of exclusion, subtly reinforcing the existing structures of power relations.

Although Wang and Rangan approach participatory documentaries from different vantage points, their discussions meet at the critical juncture of documentary ethics. This mutual interest, as evidenced by their respective works, serves as an invaluable lens, bridging documentary filmmaking with the liberal conception of inclusivity. What I want to suggest, however, is that Li’s methodology in *We Were Smart* is a departure from the ethical motivations typically attributed to participatory documentaries. Rather than merely being as a means to voice the unheard, for Li, the participatory approach becomes a method of collaboration, tapping into the existing digital literacies of the *shamate* migrants. This perspective resonates with Luke Robinson’s reading of Chinese participatory documentaries, such as *Our Children* (2009) and *University City Savages* (2009) (Robinson, 2014: 148). However, I wish to push this discourse further by looking at the specificities of these self-mediated expressions, and more importantly, their translation into and influence on the participatory documentaries that absorb them. In the subsequent section, I will explore the inspirations behind the self-recorded footage in *We Were Smart*, drawing connections to short-format video platforms like Kuaishou.

2.3 Kuaishou and Authenticity

In his examination of the evolving landscape of communication technology in urban China, Jack Qiu emphasizes how the expansion of affordable ICTs (information and communication technology) is rapidly eroding the conventional dichotomy of technological access – a distinction drawn between the haves and have-nots. Instead, Qiu locates a burgeoning middle ground where economically disadvantaged individuals capitalize on communal resources and budget-friendly devices, carving out their digital existence as "information have-less" (2009:4). Building on this narrative, Cara Wallis explores the entangled practices between mobile phones and Chinese migrant workers, stressing the significant reliance, particularly among rural women, on these devices. Wallis contends that the pervasive adoption of mobile phones among the migrant population in China is motivated by what she terms a "necessary convergence" (2013:7). Here, financial limitations push migrants to consolidate multiple functions on their mobile devices, functions that, in more affluent settings, would be distributed across a range of devices such as phones, desktops, TVs and even cinema screens.

This recalibration in our understanding of technological ownership in China draws attention to a multitude of sophisticated media practices by these marginalized individuals. Joshua Neves' notion of "floating media" provides a convincing example, capturing the often-ignored routines and behaviors that define the migrant community's interactions with media, especially in the context of video culture (Neves, 2019:163). Neves suggests that "floating media" stands as a crucial space where migrants utilize various technologies to broadcast and magnify their dreams and desires. In doing so, they ultimately assert their place in the larger social fabric. Through his analysis of Cao Fei's video project, *Whose Utopia* (2006), Neves elaborates on how factory workers ingeniously repurpose the material consciousness and social performativity of their work

environment, converting them into a video performance that champions their political agency. Importantly, these media engagements contest the dominant narrative that pigeonholes marginalized groups in China – ironically those often involved in the production of technology products – as technologically inferior. Contrarily, they paint a different image, one that positions these individuals as highly proficient and knowledgeable with the varied facets of technology.

Among the various media practices, Li Yifan himself has explicitly acknowledged drawing inspiration for using self-captured footage from the content uploaded by migrants to Kuaishou. This acknowledgment, however, brings up a pertinent question: why did Li privilege Kuaishou over Qzone, especially when the latter, as previously noted, was closely associated with the selfie culture, a mode of self-representation that predated Kuaishou videos? The distinction is not merely a matter of format– photos versus videos – but, from my perspective, lies in the intended audience and the underlying purpose of each medium. As tools for identity construction and affirmation, early selfies taken by *shamate* migrants functioned as an insular form of expression, meant mainly for circulation within their immediate circle. This aspect of exclusivity is emphasized by Qzone's access protocols, which necessitate knowing the specific QQ number – a sequence of 5 to 11 randomized digits, detached from any direct personal information. In contrast, Kuaishou videos, indicative of the newer wave of self-media, operate within the attention economy, aiming for broad visibility and optimal engagement. By skillfully using platform features like sharing, commenting, hashtags, and likes, these videos shift from mere self-representation to actively prompting their narratives to potentially the entire user base of the platform. This ability of the *shamate* migrants to project themselves to the mainstream aligns seamlessly with Li's vision of connecting the *shamate* community to the wider public through his documentary.

The basic contour of these self-representations can be discerned from the series of Kuaishou videos featured in the later sections of *We Were Smart*. Although the *shamate* subculture had previously been in decline due to mainstream criticisms, the documentary reveals how numerous former *shamate* migrants have found renewed passion Kuaishou, turning to their smartphones to create content inspired by the *shamate* aesthetics. Filmed mostly in rural settings, these videos showcase migrant youths sporting signature *shamate* outfits and hairstyles. They immerse themselves in activities such as dance performances, lively skits, and communal gatherings, all infused with an unmistakable touch of playfulness. Take, for instance, one clip where a male migrant with yellow and red streaks in his hair rides a motorcycle along a seemingly rural concrete path. With one hand, he confidently steers, and with the other, he holds up what appears to be a mobile phone, documenting the journey in real-time. Throughout the ride, he continually turns his gaze to the camera, proudly showing his wind-tousled hair.

Digital videos of this nature in China are characterized by Paola Voci as reflecting a "light" cultural practice. Drawing inspiration from Milan Kundera's novel, *the Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Voci conceptualizes the analytical framework of "lightness" in her book, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities*. This concept encapsulates the ontology, aesthetics, and politics of the smaller-screen films that are becoming increasingly prevalent in China's contemporary cultural landscape. Voci argues that conventionally defined cultural practices – be they mainstream, countercultural, conventional and experimental – are all legitimate cultural expressions, each bearing its particular cultural weight from various authoritative sources (Voci, 2010: 12). Conversely, smaller-screen movies navigate outside these established boundaries and, as a result, do not necessarily subscribe to the dominant system of endorsement. Importantly, it is precisely this "lightness" or perceived "insignificance" of these videos that endows them with the flexibility

to travel between and transcend existing ideological and political parameters. And as Voci eloquently concludes in her work, such lightness "provides the opportunity for an open society to survive, offering a meaningful alternative to the stipulations of political dictatorship, global capitalism, and intellectual dissent" (2010: 202).

Shamate videos on Kuaishou represent exactly such an alternative perspective on the world, particularly when set against the mainstream content on the platform. In the Chinese context of self-media, online short videos have increasingly focused on enhancing their production values as a market strategy to stand out in the relentless competition for viewer attention. A prime example of this trend is celebrity content creator Li Ziqi, a video blogger renewed for her detailed demonstrations of food preparation and handicrafts. With the assistance of professional production teams, her videos exude a cinematic elegance, seamlessly weaving in filmic techniques like precise close-ups and depth-of-filed, complemented by calming, melodious background scores. This approach has not only garnered her an enormous global following, but she has also received commendation from reputable official channels like the *People's Daily* for her contribution in showcasing and promoting Chinese culture to the international audience. Within Voci's framework of lightness, these productions can certainly be interpreted as a *heavy* and *legitimate* cultural practice. By contrast, *shamate* videos, exemplified by the likes of the motorcycle adventure, exhibit a distinctly raw audiovisual aesthetic and, more importantly, portray events that many would consider as the most mundane and unremarkable. However, these very attributes have led to the popularization of a unique genre known as "tuwei," translating to "earthiness" (Zhou and Liu, 2021:8). Unlike the polished allure of mainstream content, their broad appeal is predominantly rooted in the discourse of "jiediqi" (down to earth), highlighting a sense of transparency and

authenticity that resonates deeply with the everyday realities of its viewers (Lin and Kloet, 2019:10).

Therefore, we can observe a parallel between the authenticity embedded in these *tuwei* videos and Li's aspiration of offering an unfiltered depiction of life within urban factories. But how is this sense of authenticity translated into the self-recorded footage in *We Were Smart*? To understand this, I suggest returning to the documentary-making practice of *xianchang*, a long-standing tradition in Chinese independent documentaries that is instrumental in capturing their hallmark *on-the-spot* realism. How does this social media-inspired footage conform to the traditional implementation of *xianchang* in earlier documentaries? And in what ways might it suggest new approaches to achieve this realism? These inquires will frame the discussion of the upcoming section.

2.3 *Xianchang* and mobile phones

The Chinese term *xianchang,* which can be translated as "being on the scene," generally refers both to the specific location of an occurrence and the conditions characterizing that place. Its initial appearance in film studies is attributed to Chinese cultural critic Dai Jinghua in her 1999 work, *Invisible Writing: Chinese Cultural Studies in the 1990s*. In this text, Dai perceives *xianchang* as an affective dimension, marking the quasi-postmodern cultural production of China during the 1990s (1999: 224). Luke Robinson's 2013 publication, *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street*, however, offers a more systematic exploration of *xianchang* as a filmmaking practice, particularly within Chinese documentaries. In his analysis, Robinson underscores the New Documentary Movement's notable transition from state-sponsored television studios to on-location filming, a progression he aptly summarizes as "from the studio to

the street" (2013:5). This new environment is distinguished by its inherent contingency, immune to any external attempts to anticipate or even control it. In this context, Robinson identifies *xianchang* as a representational strategy, often expressed through audiovisual, temporal, and narratives cues, which coverts "the visceral experience of shooting live" into a mediated format and communicates it to its audience (2013:6). More importantly, it is through the on-screen reconstruction of real-life spontaneity that these *xianchang* techniques assert their privileged immediacy to the pro-filmic reality.

In this *xianchang* framework, perhaps the most conspicuous expression of spontaneity can be found in the depicted events themselves. In the self-captured footage from *We Were Smart*, the majority of these videos were taken at workstations, highlighting the routine production activities carried out within these manufacturing facilities. Across different workshop sections, workers are consistently seen expertly handling machines and assembling components of technological products. The precision demanded by their duties lends a robotic cadence to their movements, rendering their organic limbs seemingly as mere mechanical extensions of the devices they operate. Yet, in this meticulously orchestrated setting, even the slightest aberrations can stand out glaringly. This is powerfully exemplified in a sequence centered on the physical repercussions of extended work hours. In what seems to be a textile factory, the camera captures a young female worker, her face obscured by a mask, clearly overcome by her weariness. She uses her arm as a makeshift cushion, placing her head on it, with a swath of white fabric beneath. As she momentarily succumbs to her exhaustion, the fabric disturbingly continues its path under the sewing machine's needle, unaffected by the full weight of her resting body pressing down. In such strenuous work settings, while fatigue is generally anticipated, its exact timing of manifestation is unpredictable.

Neither the migrant recording the scene nor the worker herself can accurately forecast or dictate the precise moment when her tiredness will force her to pause.

The spontaneity intrinsic to these scenes is accentuated by the aesthetic style of the footage, which imparts a distinctively embodied quality to the imagery. From the beginning, these recordings are discernably shaky and pixelated, regularly punctuated by the raw cacophony of machinery and the ambient sounds of the factory. These unpolished audiovisual features, although contrasting sharply with the refined nature of the accompanying interviews, animate the particular challenges of capturing these moments in the confined spaces of manufacturing sites. As these episodes spring up without notice, migrants can only seize them in their transient immediacy, leaving them no time to contemplate the image's technical details. More importantly, the very rawness of this footage draws an instinctive, visceral reaction from the audience, conjuring up the tactile sensations of a hand trembling as it hurriedly operates the camera. This intimate proximity to the profilmic reality transforms our experience from simple observation to what Laura U. Marks describes as "haptic visuality" (2000:162). This mode of engagement lends the footage a tangible, almost palpable presence, as though we are vicariously present at the site of filming through the lens of the migrant.

If similar mediations of spontaneity have already been noted in early Chinese documentaries, what truly sets the self-captured footage in *We Were Smart* apart is the recording apparatus itself. While many Chinese documentaries, including the participatory ones, predominantly utilized DV cameras, all self-recorded segments in *We Were Smart* were sourced directly from the migrants' own smartphones. This preference is subtly indicated by the inconsistencies in resolution and color gradients, and becomes more pronounced when the footage appears in a rectangular format, boarded by prominent black-out areas on either side. Beyond

addressing the logistical and financial obstacles of providing each migrant participant with a DV camera, this transition to mobile phones also fundamentally alters the documentarian-subject dynamics on screen. In situations where a DV camera might be obtrusive, often pushing individuals towards a more theatrical rendition of their lives, mobile phones, given their ubiquity among migrants and associations with their social media habits, naturally blends into the environment. This sense of familiarity and comfort is palpably felt in sequences shot within their private spaces. For instance, one clip showcases a cluster of workers, engrossed in their smartphones, sprawled on the beds of their dormitory. Their casual demeanor suggests a complete oblivion of being filmed by a fellow worker. Thus, footage captured with mobile devices, by preserving the natural order of the profilmic space, facilitates a filming experience that is both more intimate and discreet than what typically achieved in earlier DV documentaries.

Drawing upon the evidence presented, it becomes clear that social media has been instrumental in forging new channels of hope for the *shamate* migrants, profoundly shaping their representation in *We Were Smart*. Nonetheless, it would be a reductionist approach to perceive the film as solely championing social media without recognizing its potential limitations across diverse contexts. The inquiry, then, is: what factors inform this discerning stance within the film, and through which avenues is it articulated? The following section seeks to explore these dimensions, further contextualizing the film within the paradigm of social media documentary.

2.4 The Future of *Shamate*

In line with *We Were Smart*'s intention of returning voice to the *shamate* migrants, the film consistently exhibits restrained directorial intervention. This subtle touch is evident not only in the film's loose narrative structure, which feels similar to an unscripted dialogue among the migrants,

but becomes especially prominent during the talking head interviews. In these moments, Li painstakingly removes any trace of his own voice and presence, ensuring the focus remains squarely on the subjects. However, within this representational space of minimal direction, Li's sporadic yet distinct directorial decisions surface in the form of animated intertitles, which are crafted without the direct involvement of the migrants. Rather than simply serving as decorative additions, these intertitles, loaded with insightful text, function as pivotal narrative markers, presaging the thematic trajectory of each chapters in the film.

Among the instances where animated intertitles appear (aside from the introductory sequence already mentioned), the subsequent two clearly emphasize Li's recognition of the adverse implications of social media on the *shamate* subculture. Approximately 80 minutes in, following an interview with a formally dressed migrant, the visual shifts to a stark black screen. To the left, a graphic mimics a mobile device, encapsulating a quick succession of *shamate* parody clips and archival images from their QQ groups. To the right, text, reminiscent of a typewriter's imprint, details the spread of these parodies on online platforms like Baidu Tieba, This narrative underscores how the proliferation of such videos, combined with the infiltration and dissolution of their QQ chat spaces, initiated the virtual displacement and eventual decline of the subculture. Roughly 20 minutes thereafter, a similarly conceptualized intertitles makes an appearance. Here, the left portion retains the mobile design, showcasing additional parody videos. The adjacent text speaks of a revival of the subculture, only to be overshadowed by the market-driven logics of social media once again. The narrative sheds light on how the burgeoning visibility of *shamate* content on Kuaishou drew a fresh wave of imitations. Adorned in wigs, these impersonators recreated shamate videos, driven not by genuine sincere appreciation for the subculture, but by the temptation of attention and potential earnings. The inundation of this content transformed the

revitalized *shamate* presence on Kuaishou into a commodified online spectacle, straying from its original ethos.

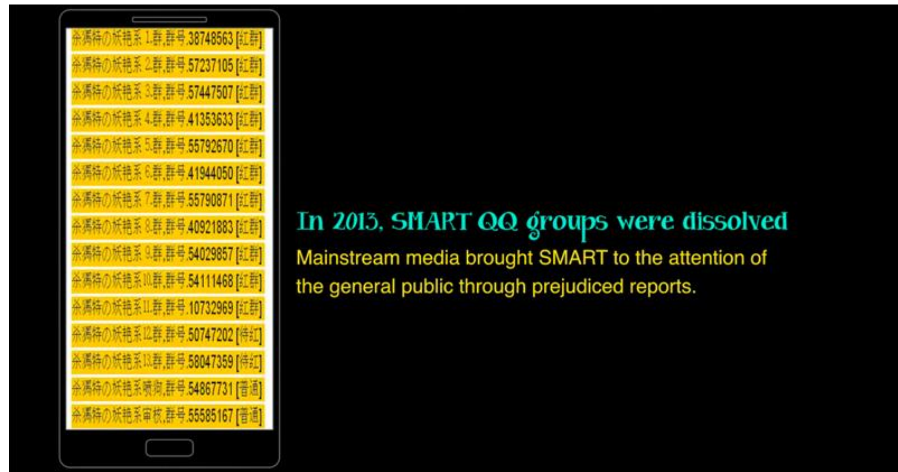

Figure 1.3. The Second Animated Intertitle in *We Were Smart* (Dir. Li Yifan, 2019).

This grim reality culminates in what may be considered the most poignant scene in the entire film. After highlighting the role of Kuaishou, the imagery leads viewers through an urban area, with superimposed text pinpointing it as the “North Gate of Foxconn, Longhua, Shenzhen” - the world’s largest electronics manufacturer that commands an astounding army of approximately 1.2 million. As the first-person camera casually strolls through the bustling streets at night, it captures countless young faces, likely weary from long working hours. Over this visual tapestry, a familiar male voice begins to narrate, articulating the struggles and unfulfilled dreams of rural migrants like himself. They find themselves entrapped in the gears of the modern industrial complex; their hopes overshadowed by startling disparities. Soon, the source of this disembodied voice is revealed to be Luo Fuxing, who comes into view as he walks through the area with a few peers. Even as he now physically occupies the frame, his off-screen reflections continue to dominate the soundscape of the profilmic environment, climaxing in a monologue that is as eloquent as it is somber. Luo confesses, “I realized everyone thinks like I do, we leave our villages,

get a job in the factory, you wonder, is there anything else? and there isn't, this is your only choice. I realized this was your only choice." In a simultaneous masterstroke, the camera gradually tilts upward, executing a methodical pan, revealing a 360-degree view of the towering factory dormitories. These structures stand tall, reminiscent of a contemporary industrial panopticon, signaling a world where escape seems a distant dream, both metaphorically and literally.

Much like Luo Fuxing, countless migrant workers throughout China are keenly aware of a suffocating system deliberately sculpted to confine them to this current predicament. Following the evocative night scene, the film smoothly transitions into its denouement, presenting a final series of interviews. These testimonials recount the harrowing experiences of these migrants as left-behind children, a sentiment made all the more resonant by the juxtaposition of digitized, time-worn childhood photographs. These narratives emerge from families that, over multiple generations, found themselves relegated to the socio-economic periphery, ensnared in a ceaseless spiral of impoverishment with barely a glimmer of emancipation. And as Luo Fuxing's concluding interview affirms, they are also the tragic tales of children who were brutally taken from the nurturing embrace of their parents. All these sufferings, however, seem to find a purported justification in a snapshot, abruptly inserted to interrupt Luo' presence on screen. Beneath a weathered outdoor community bulletin, a bold proclamation in red stands out: "today's migrant work is tomorrow's economy" (*jintian de waichu dagong jiushi mingtian de jingji*). The crisp and structured lettering of this statement contrasts sharply with the adjacent, nearly indecipherable scrawl advertising air guns. Such neatly executed slogans, undoubtedly the handiwork of official propaganda machines, are a common sight across rural China. The unresolved mystery, though, is: whose economy does this slogan truly advocate for? Evidently, not that of the migrant workers. The biting hypocrisy of this statement is eerily reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping's infamous assurance:

“let some people get rich first,” an empty pledge that paved the way for China’s swing towards the so-called socialist market economy.

Chapter 2

3 Balancing Visibility and Vulnerability: The Allure of Live-Streaming and the Compilation Approach in *Present.Perfect.*

Born to a rural peasant family in Changsha, Wu Yongning was among the countless young migrants in China who, compelled by financial needs, left school early to pursue manual labor jobs in urban centers. His journey, however, took an expected turn when he entered the world of stunt acting in Hengdian, a town in Zhejiang Province knwon for hosting one of the largest film studios in the world. While the glitter of the silver screen was enticing, Wu's financial pressures still loomed large. By chance, he discovered the lucrative world of live-streaming and decided to dive in. While his initial attempts received minimal attention, he later carved out a niche in extreme sports, drawing on his background in stunt acting. This transition quickly launched him into digital stardom, appealing to an audience who was always searching for exhilarating, adrenaline-filled content. Responding to this growing interest, Wu began to perform increasingly daring climbs and breathtaking stunts, captivating his followers with each new accomplishment.

In November 2017, Wu sent shockwaves across the nation when he accidentally plummeted to death from a 62-story building in Chongqing.[7] This horrific incident, eerily documented on his phone, showed him attempting two pull-ups on the edge of the building before vanishing from the frame, leading to his fall onto an adjacent rooftop. Forensic findings later chillingly suggested that Wu, despite suffering severe traumas, might not have died immediately. It is widely believed that he experienced excruciating pain and desperately sought help, tragically without success, before ultimately succumbing to his injuries.

[7] For more information about Wu's life and his incident, refer to this news article (written in Chinese): https://www.lifeweek.com.cn/article/8887

Wu's death also caught the attention of Chinese female documentary filmmaker Zhu Shenzhe. Deeply affected by the gravity of the accident, Zhu became determined to explore the motivations of these live-streaming hosts, or "anchors" as they are colloquially known in China, who seemed to prioritize live-streaming over their own safety and well-being. This curiosity prompted her to spend months immersed in the world of live-streaming across multiple platforms. At first, she was fascinated by the more audacious spectacles, watching anchors participate in eyebrow-raising acts, from consuming insects to submerging their hands in scalding sand. However, Zhu's focus quickly shifted when she encountered a group of lesser-known anchors who were equally committed to broadcasting their lives online. Using simple digital devices like home webcams and smartphones, these individuals established intimate and candid connections with their online audience, openly sharing their daily routines, aspirations, and struggles.

These overlooked voices in the vibrant world of live-streaming are brought to the forefront in Zhu's 2019 documentary, *Present.Perfect.*. While the attention on these underrepresented anchors is noteworthy, the truly groundbreaking aspect of Zhu's work lies in its unprecedented production approach. *Present.Perfect.*, which won the prestigious Tiger Award at 2019 International Film Festival Rotterdam, stands out as the first and only feature-length documentary created entirely from live-streaming footage. Over 10 months, Zhu accumulated an astonishing 800 hours of content by tirelessly screen-recording various live-streaming sites. This extensive collection was meticulously condensed into the 2-hour narrative of *Present.Perfect.*. In drawing parallels, this production method can be said to continue the participatory tradition seen in *We Were Smart*, pushing the conventional boundaries between filmmaker and subjects. However, Zhu's documentary evidently takes this dynamic a step further, effectively relegating her role to that resembling an editor. This shift, focusing on the art of selection rather than direct creation, echoes

the essence of compilation films, where pre-existing material is reassembled and recontextualized to form new stories.

This chapter explores *Present.Perfect.* as another case study of social media documentary, focusing on its representation of Chinese live-streaming anchors. Expanding on the foundation laid in chapter 1, it aims to investigate the complex impacts of live-streaming on marginalized individuals in China, while also examining its relations to the film's compilation methodology. Situated in the discourse of surveillance studies and digital labor studies, this discussion emphasizes how live-streaming can be perceived as a form of self-exposure, potentially making vulnerable individuals susceptible to exploitation and precarity. This is, however, not to suggest an intellectually elitist viewpoint that paints these anchors merely as uninformed victims, oblivious to the possible manipulation and deceptions intrinsic to live-streaming. Rather, I suggest that these individuals consciously and deliberately exchange their privacy online for an increased social visibility. This form of self-representation, reminiscent of what is seen in *We Were Smart*, motivates Zhu to relinquish directorial control to her subjects, evidently in a more generous manner. However, viewing live-streaming footage as an ephemeral medium, this chapter adopts a different approach to understanding the purpose of the film's participatory method compared to the previous chapter. Drawing on Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel's concept of alternative film culture, it frames *Present.Perfect.* as an alternative archive that extends the existence of live-streaming footage and preserves the marginalized voices it encapsulates.

3.1 Privacy, Immaterial Labor, and Social visibility

Present.Perfect. is organized into four distinct sections, each marked by a numerical title superimposed over the visuals. The film begins with three introductory title cards set against a

black background, displaying white text that offers foundational information about the state of live-streaming in China, including its definition, significant milestones, and excerpts from relevant government publications. Following this introduction, the film unfolds a montage of live-streaming clips captured by different individuals, showcasing a range of activities across different locations. In the remaining segments, *Present.Perfect.* transitions towards a more structured narrative, guiding viewers through the virtual showrooms of 12 recurring anchors. These characters include a passionate street dancer, a severely scarred burn survivor, a resilient female migrant worker, a man grappling with growth-hormone deficiency, and many others with equally compelling stories. Although certain physical traits of these anchors could easily lend them to exoticization, the film steers clear of any sensationalist exploitation, instead portraying them as complex individuals with their own agency. Initially, *Present.Perfect.* appears to only skim the surface of the anchors' live-streaming activities, capturing mundane events such as working, chatting, eating, and walking. But as the film progresses, it goes more deeply into the personal struggles of each anchor, mainly revealed through their interactions with their audience. For instance, in one segment, the anchor with dwarfism conducts a live-stream from his backyard, where he patiently explains to his viewers about the impending demolition of his parents' house and discusses the family's favoritism towards his brother due to his medical condition.

While these intimate revelations are indeed captivating, they often cross into the territory of excessive disclosure. This practice becomes particularly concerning when considering that the audience for these live-streams mainly consists of casual browsers and anonymous internet users, some of whom might exploit such sensitive information for harmful purposes (Vivienne and Burgess 2013, 282). Even more alarming, from my perspective, is the anchors' nonchalant attitude in revealing personal details, a behavior that is amplified by an audience that not only accepts but

also consistently encourages such disclosures. Recalling the previous example, the anchor shared more than just basic information about his family's situation; he provided elaborated details about the demolition, including the precise compensation plan offered by the government and its intended distribution among his family members. All this was conveyed in a noticeably relaxed manner, characterized by frequent smiles and a light-hearted tone, creating the impression of a conversation with a close confidant, rather than a broadcast to a vast, faceless audience. Moreover, his interactions with viewers initiated a continuous stream of follow-up questions, further prompting him to divulge more private information that was not necessary for others to know.

The widespread normalization of self-exposure epitomizes the transformative impact of live-streaming on traditional ideas of personal privacy, erasing boundaries to such an extent that "the private is public" (Bauman and Lyon 2013, 19). In this digital environment, privacy, once considered a fundamental human right safeguarding dignity and individual autonomy, has become a dematerialized virtual commodity within the global "weightless economy" (Huws 1999, 32). In contrast to most commodities of this nature, such as software and online services, which are traded directly for currency, the value of privacy in live-streaming primarily stems from the audience engagement it attracts. In the current "attention economy," where user attention is scarce, anchors are increasingly compelled to capture as much of this dwindling resource as possible, often by any means necessary (Goldhaber 1997). This approach frequently entails pandering to the voyeuristic inclinations of viewers, as illustrated by the relentless and intrusive questions posed to the anchor with dwarfism about his infertility. Yet, such demands can sometimes surpass mere insensitivity and grossly violate ethical and legal norms. An example is a live-stream by a young, stylish female cattle farm worker, who, while broadcasting via her mobile phone, needed a restroom break and chose to leave her phone outside. The ensuing interactions with her followers revealed their

salacious desire for her to bring the phone inside. Despite the sheer impropriety of such a request, her reliance on audience engagement forced her to respond both tactfully and humorously, making it clear that complying would result in the suspension of her showroom.

In confronting these challenges, the manner in which anchors maintain composure is emblematic of what Jamie Woodcock and Mark R. Johnson describe as "streaming-in-character" (2019, 819). As observed by these scholars, live-streaming has evolved into a common strategy for self-branding within the commodified landscape of contemporary digital spaces. This environment fosters the creation of diverse online personas. Whether anchors present themselves as overtly theatrical characters or choose to project their authentic selves, the outcome remains a constructed virtual identity, always mediated through the lens of the streaming device. As such, the commitment to persona development can be likened to a form of labor - not necessarily in the conventional, tangible sense, but rather in an emotional dimension. Arlie Hochschild conceptualizes this as "emotional labor," defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (2012, 7). Similar to traditional service sectors, where emotional labor often manifests in a congenial smile or a positive attitude, anchors in *Present.Perfect.* consistently display cordiality and graciousness towards their audience. They warmly greet anyone, whether new or returning, who joins their showroom, expressing gratitude for their presence and support.

Expanding the understanding of emotional labor, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have introduced the term "affective labor." Drawing on feminist critiques of women's domestic work, they describe affective labor as a kind of "labor in the bodily mode," which not only produces but also manipulates affect (2000, 292). Crucially, whereas emotional labor is primarily concerned with the worker's self-regulation of their own emotions, affective labor shifts focus to how these

emotions influence consumers, a process facilitated through human contact and interactions. This distinction should not be seen as creating a sharp division between these two forms of immaterial labor; instead, it highlights their interconnected nature. In the context of *Present.Perfect.*, the primary motivation for anchors to carefully manage their emotions is to create an engaging viewing experience for their audience. This experience, tailored to the digital personas each anchor has established, is aimed at evoking corresponding sensations in the viewers, spanning a range from comfort and passion to satisfaction and excitement. In this scenario, emotional labor is effectively a subset within the broader construct of affective labor, with both working collaboratively to captivate audience attention.

Just as physical labor has historically been subject to capitalist exploitation, digital labor face similar, if not more severe, challenges due to its inherent precarity. In the recent explosion of research on digital labor, numerous scholars have pointed out that this immaterial labor, particularly when performed by female workers, is frequently not recognized as legitimate work and, therefore, tends to be undercompensated (Coté and Pybus 2007, Jarrett 2016, Duffy 2016). This form of exploitation is often conveniently concealed within the discourse of "playbour," where the emphasis on the playful aspects of these online activities obscures the economic value they generate for platforms (Fuchs and Trottier 2013, 44). While this perspective is evident among the anchors in *Present.Perfect.*, it is the emotional damage that results from their performance of this digital labor that I find particularly alarming. The platform's structure, by granting anonymity to viewers but not to the anchors, creates an imbalanced power dynamic. This imbalance often emboldens viewers to overstep boundaries, doing so without fear of repercussions. Regrettably, many anchors in the film have grown accustomed to such adversities on a daily basis, but the accumulated humiliation can sometimes trigger emotional outbursts. A particularly distressing

incident occurred in a live-stream featuring a *shamate*, where a viewer brazenly asked the anchor to strip and dance, tempting him with virtual gifts. Despite initial resisting, the anchor found himself dealing with ongoing coercion, struggling to maintain his composure. The situation escalated until the anchor, after enduring this degrading exchange, expressed his anger, forcefully condemning the viewer's inappropriate behavior.

Nevertheless, the explicit exploitation observed in live-streaming should not obscure the complex negotiation involved in self-exposure, where the anchor's individual subjectivity plays a crucial role. Kirstie Ball has noted that much of the discourse in surveillance studies tends to undervalue the agency of those affected, frequently framing them as subjects of "oppression, coercion, ambivalence, or ignorance" (2009, 640). This perspective is central to the critiques of "surveillance capitalism," in which tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Amazon are scrutinized for their unregulated collection, analysis, and sale of personal data, usually without transparent user consent (Zuboff 2018, 48). But valid as this point is, it runs the risk of portraying users as merely passive and docile victims, a depiction that could inadvertently legitimize these invasive practices by suggesting tacit compliance. In contrast, many individuals, rather than being solely unaware, actively evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of live-streaming, making well-informed decisions regarding their online behaviors. This layered understanding is evident in the anchors of *Present.Perfect.,* especially seen in the case of the street artist. During an outdoor live-stream, this young anchor vulnerably revealed to his audience the insulting comments he received from internet trolls, who mockingly called him a "madman" and "psycho." Despite having the option to turn off his camera and walk away, he chose to stay and explain to his audience the reasoning behind his perseverance. In a deeply emotional monologue, he conveyed the intense euphoria he experiences

from live-streaming, a joy that, in his view, far surpasses any potential future risks and inconveniences.

In the general consensus, the joy referenced by the male anchor is closely associated with the entrepreneurial opportunities offered by live-streaming platforms. Globally, live-streaming is undergoing a meteoric rise, anticipated to reach a market value of US$ 4.26 billion by 2028 (Meticulous 2018). Perhaps nowhere is this trend more pronounced than in China, where live-streaming has integrated seamlessly with the country's robust e-commerce environment. This integration has enabled diverse monetization mechanisms, ranging from product endorsements to ad placements and commission-based sales. Although access to the live-streaming industry necessitates nothing more than a camera-enabled device and a reliable internet connection, achieving success largely depends on an individual's personal appeal and charisma. Often, these traits align with mainstream aesthetic norms, leading many young female anchors to accentuate their femininity to cater to a predominantly heterosexual male audience. However, beyond physical appearance, an anchor's demeanor and talent are equally crucial in determining their popularity. In response to this demand, numerous online courses and training institutions have emerged across China, aiming to coach aspiring anchors in the nuanced craft of becoming *wanghong*. The 2018 documentary *People's Republic of Desire* (Dir. Hao Wu, 2018) offers a revealing look at this trend. By uncovering the inner workings of lives-streaming platforms and exploitation by talent agencies, the film exposes the ambitions and vulnerabilities of fledging anchors, all chasing the elusive allure of fame and wealth.

Although *wanghong* dominate China's live-streaming scene with their glamorous and appealing image, the characters in *Present.Perfect.* offer a starkly contrasting depiction. Arguably, each male anchor in the film not only strays from traditional standards of youth and beauty but

also lacks any specific talents. Moreover, some are further distinguished by notable physical disabilities, such as dwarfism, limb differences, or severe facial scarring - conditions frequently stigmatized as “abnormalities.” On the other hand, several female anchors, despite possessing qualities conductive to *wanghong* status, confront socio-economic predicaments that significantly impede their progress in the industry. Take, for instance, a seamstress-turned-anchor who, set against the backdrop of a bustling garment factory, chronicles the arduous contours of her life. Her journey begins in Guizhou, once among China’s most impoverished provinces, and leads to her present efforts in the coastal region of Fujian. The streaming footage vividly captures her taxing working conditions, characterized by conspicuous overcrowding and an unrelenting operational tempo. These visual testimonies are complemented by her comments on the factory’s extended work schedules and its questionable employment of underage workers. The moment she addresses a viewer’s question about her marital status, the full breadth of her challenges becomes strikingly clear. In addition to the obligations of being a migrant worker, the anchor also has to take on the responsibilities of single motherhood, all while subsisting on a modest income. This paints an image of a resilient individual battling a multi-layered battle that goes well beyond the boundaries of her career.

One direct consequence of such predicaments is the noticeable constriction of the anchors’ social spaces. Stemming from either the limitations of their physical disabilities, or the constraints of their specific occupations, all the anchors in *Present.Perfect.* struggle with barriers that curtail their ability to interact freely and engage fully with the wider social milieu. This deep sense of alienation, far from being an abstract concept, is candidly acknowledged by many of the anchors themselves. It not only remains a recurring theme but also critically shapes the nature of their live streams, infusing them with a distinct monotony. Among various aspects, this monotony is most

striking in their choice of streaming locations, as they repeatedly broadcast from static and bleak settings. Ranging from dimly lit rooms to factory workstations and secluded corners of their homes, these settings, while reflecting their physical surroundings, symbolically represent their limited social realities. Within these confines, they regularly partake in everyday activities like preparing simple meals, leisurely sipping beers, or taking walks - routines normally associated with social interaction. However, in their situation, these very activities are always performed alone, paradoxically accentuating a poignant sense of solitude.

In this context, the anonymity and diversity of their audience pose less of a threat and more of an opportunity for these marginalized anchors to connect with those they may not encounter otherwise. Through interactive features like real-time chat and virtual gifting on live-streaming platforms, these anchors have successfully established a broad spectrum of relationship with viewers. This interaction cultivates a virtual community that transcends geographic boundaries, fostering a sense of unity and heighted social visibility that mitigates the feelings of isolation they experienced in real life. For many, this leads to immediate emotional gratification, as captured in the euphoria felt by the street dancer mentioned earlier. For a select few, it signifies a potent form of subjectivity and self-empowerment capable of imbuing life with new meaning and catalyzing monumental personal transformations (Zhang 2020, 70). An outstanding example is the anchor with dwarfism, who, during an emotionally charged live-stream, courageously shared his traumatic childhood experiences of bullying and harassment. These experiences had led to years of self-loathing and self-imposed isolation. However, through the encouragement of a fellow anchor and the support of his followers, he eventually summoned the courage to turn his life around, securing a job in a factory and reintegrating into society.

3.2 From Participatory to Compilation

Beyond offering valuable insights into the complexities of live-streaming in China, *Present.Perfect.* also prompts questions about the boundaries of participatory filmmaking in a world inundated with user-generated digital images. As a documentary composed entirely of live-streaming footage, the unique production approach of *Present.Perfect* has been a central focus in much of its media coverage, with numerous reports particularly emphasizing its novelty. Among these, a notable few have explicitly described Zhu, in her role within this film, as a curator, invoking the image of someone who researches, organizes, and exhibits works of art or other collections in a museum or gallery setting[8]. However, Zhu herself has rejected this comparison on multiple occasions, noting the fundamental differences in material handling. As she argues, a curator, while certainly influences the interpretation of art by overseeing its display, does not make any substantial alterations to the art itself. In contrast, Zhu must apply her own subjective point of view to the live-streaming footage, using various editing techniques to craft it into a documentary narrative that she deems meaningful and coherent.

Among existing documentary paradigms, the approach employed by Zhu in the production of *Present.Perfect.* closely aligns the film with the genre of compilation documentaries. The concept of compilation documentaries can be traced back to the insights of Jay Leyda, a prominent American film historian and avant-garde filmmaker. In his seminal work *Films Beget Films*, Leyda defines this mode of filmmaking as the practice of taking pre-existing film shots, often referred to as found footage, and rearranging them into new configurations to create fresh meanings (1964, 9). While the earliest example of compilation documentaries originates from the work of Francis Doublier, an original cameraman for the Lumière brothers, it was the groundbreaking efforts of Soviet filmmakers, such as Sergei Eisenstein and Esfir Shub, that fully realized the potential of

[8] For example, refer to this interview of Zhu Shenze by Cathy Brenna available on Mubi, https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/livestreaming-china-shengze-zhu-discusses-present-perfect

this experimental genre. Their films, notably *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1917), *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and *The Great Road* (1927), masterfully collected and recycled materials from a myriad of sources, including newsreels, home movies, and archival records. These elements were then intricately woven together to not only highlight the dialectical tensions within the original frames but also, and more crucially, to provide class-based interpretations of their historical contexts.

In his review of Leyda's influential writing, documentary theorist Bill Nichols began by offering reflections on the cultural status of compilation documentaries in the Western cinematic landscape of the early 1960s. Nichols observed that the technological advancements of the period, namely the introduction of the Super8 format and battery-operated film cameras, facilitated a preference for documenting reality in its immediacy (2014, 146). During this time, regardless of its chosen mode of representation, the merit of a documentary was primarily judged by its capacity to capture the filmmaker's encounter with their surroundings in the moment it occurred. Against this background, compilations documentaries, which depend on pre-existing footage inherently lacking this sense of immediacy, stood at a conspicuous, if not the most pronounced, distance from this prevailing trend. Such a defining characteristic, as Nichols contends, was largely responsible for relegating compilations documentaries to the peripheries of documentary filmmaking, with their artistic value finding recognition mainly within the avant-garde community throughout film history (ibid.). Although filmmakers like Bruce Conner and Arthur Lipsett indeed advanced a notable subgenre of compilation documentaries in North American experimental cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, this body of work remained relatively small and not widely known to the general public (Kim 2020, 237).

Regardless of their historical marginality, compilation documentaries still possess their own conceptual value, as further articulated by Nichols in his article. He interprets these documentaries through Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory, arguing that they propose an alternative understanding of film's basic unit. Rather than treating individual images as fragments of a continuous narrative – the core principle of classical Hollywood continuity editing – compilation filmmakers perceive them as malleable components with multifaceted storytelling potentials. By combining these components of varied types, backgrounds, and emotional tones, these filmmakers disrupt the conventional associations viewers have established with the original materials. This intricate layering invites viewers to look beyond the immediate signification of the visuals, challenging them to engage with the content from a more critical lens. This process of defamiliarization, or what the Russian formalists have termed "*ostranenie*," derives its strength from the emotional reactions it provokes in the audience, whether it is the bewilderment resulting from broken norms or a nostalgic melancholy acknowledging the passage of time. In other words, what mainstream documentary filmmaking might see as detrimental shortcomings in compilation documentaries are precisely where their unique value resides.

Following this perspective, Catherine Russell has also explored the potential of compilation documentaries, adopting a more ambitious approach by situating them within the cultural theory of Walter Benjamin. As Russell suggests, the creation of compilation documentaries, alongside other archival film practices such as video essays, homages, supercuts, and remixes – collectively termed by her as *archiveology* - echoes the concept of collection that fascinated Benjamin in his projected magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*. This act of collecting, for Benjamin, is more than just rediscovering materials that were previously neglected or discarded; it is about enabling them to "speak a new kind of language" in a different time (2018, 44). In this process,

the temporal encounter between past and present transforms the material into what Benjamin refers to as "dialectical images," which foster a new mode of seeing that allows and encourages the interpretation of the historical object in "the now of its recognizability" (Benjamin 1999, 462). At their core, the significance of these dialectical images, and by extension compilation documentaries, can be understood within the broader discourse of what Benjamin conceptualizes as "materialist historiography" (ibid., 474). This approach introduces an alternative methodology to historiography, grounded in a constructive principle and challenging the universal notion of history as a linear progression of time.

Despite the diverse theoretical frameworks underpinning these analyses of compilation documentaries, they are all predicated on the shared assumption that a stable archive already exists. Though most of these archives were historically difficult to access and usually necessitated discovery and considerable work to make them usable, new technologies have fundamentally transformed their status, shifting from "closed institutions to open access" (Russell 2018, 11). Additionally, numerous video sharing platforms, such as YouTube and Vimeo, have come to be considered as archives in their own right, readily available for anyone with an internet-enabled device. For instance, Canadian filmmaker Dominic Gagnon has been creating non-narrative experimental documentaries using footage from various streaming sites. His 2015 documentary, *Of the North*, is composed entirely of amateur videos found on YouTube, presenting a controversial depiction of life in the North Pole. However, as the following section will indicate, this situation does not extend to live-streaming content, especially that produced by marginalized anchors who have limited followers and influence. In the case of *Present.Perfect.*, it can be suggested that Zhu is not only drawing from an existing archive, but is also actively creating one during the film's production.

3.3 Ephemeral Content and the Documentary Impulse

In an interview discussing the creation of *Present.Perfect.*, Zhu noted that the sudden disappearance of anchors was a frequent occurrence.[9] She cited platform regulations as one reason, explaining that, in compliance with government mandates, platforms could abruptly ban an anchor for behaviors potentially perceived as prompting unhealthy activities. These actions typically encompass legally and ethically questionable conduct like explicit nudity or weapon handling, but recent regulations have grown more ambiguous and, at times, seemingly arbitrary. For instance, in August 2020, the Cyberspace Administration of China initiated a crackdown on what was described as "internet chaos" (*wangluo luanxiang*) in self-media and live-streaming. This move, coinciding with Xi Jinping's campaign against food waste, particularly targeted eating shows, popularly known as "mukbangs." Following this directive, over 13,600 mukbang accounts were reportedly shut down within a month.[10] This sweeping measure left many anchors, regardless of their usual content, exceedingly cautious about consuming any food during their live-streams.

Apart from platform regulations, a more common reason for marginalized anchors to quit live-streaming is the boredom and frustration arising from their inability to maintain the level of audience engagement they achieved at their peak. These anchors, despite initially attracting attention through skilled self-exposure, often lack a distinct and lasting appeal that differentiates them from others who are equally willing to compromise their privacy. This deficiency renders them susceptible to being replaced, especially with the continuous influx of new grassroots anchors, each contributing their own compelling narratives to the already saturated platform. An example of such a disappearance is seen in the case of the anchor with dwarfism. As Zhu was trying to

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[9] For more information, refer to this interview of Zhu with Becca Voelcker available on Film Comment: https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-shengze-zhu/

[10] Fore additional information about the outcomes of this campaign, refer to this report available on the Chinese government website (written in Chinese): https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-09/03/content_5539778.htm

obtain his consent for inclusion in *Present.Perfect.*, she unexpectedly discovered that he had already deleted his live-streaming account. This resulted in no information about his whereabouts or future plans, and even the anchor who had previously offered him life-altering encouragement was left without any clues.

The vanishing of these anchors draws attention to the transient nature not only of their digital presence, but more importantly, of their live-streaming footage as a form of digital content. Traditionally, social media content is perceived as having a permanent online existence, controlled exclusively by the original account holder and the platform. However, the introduction of the "Stories" feature by Snapchat in the early 2010s had led to an increasing recognition of what is known as "ephemeral content" – materials specifically designed to disappear after a set period (Bainotti et al. 2020, 3656). In line with this trend, both Instagram and Facebook incorporated similar functions into their platforms, which have since gained immense popularity among their users. The shift towards ephemeral content significantly alters the landscape of social media consumption, moving from a retrospective and accumulative approach to one that "rewards an audience who consume and follow content in 'real time' and serially, over time" (Cardell et al. 2017, 158). Within this framework, live-streaming, as the prototype of ephemeral content that exists solely during its live event, takes this trend to its ultimate extent. It accentuates the transition by turning real-time engagement from a valued reward into a practical necessity. Although some celebrity anchors might benefit from their performances being saved, reuploaded, and replayed by adoring fans, marginalized anchors are certainly not afforded the same luxury. Their live-streams, often viewed as less entertaining and commercially viable, evaporate into the digital void as soon as they are aired.

Considering the ephemerality of live-streaming content, *Present.Perfect.* goes beyond the conventional scope of compilation documentaries, also serving as an archive that prolongs the lifespan of these fleeting moments. This practice of archiving, however, is not exclusive to *Present.Perfect.*; in fact, it can trace its origins to the Urban Generation cinema that emerged in the 1990s. These urban films, covering both fictional and documentary genres, actively bore witness to the extensive urbanization during China's post-socialist transition (Zhang 2007, 1). In his analysis of this cinema, Yomi Braester focuses on a select group of works that employ sites of demolition and construction as central narrative and aesthetic motifs. He contends that these films display what he labels the "documentary impulse" – a pressing desire to visually document the city before it undergoes irreversible change (2010, 226). Admittedly, this impulse is markedly different from that in *Present.Perfect.* in terms of the subjects they preserve. Yet both powerfully demonstrate digital cinema as a privileged cultural and technical format, whose longevity enables it to become a vessel for storing buildings and experiences on the brink of disappearance. The documentary's title, *Present.Perfect.*, neatly encapsulates this function: "present" indicates the immediacy of the live-streaming content, while "perfect" suggests a past, completed action, symbolizing the film's crucial role in immortalizing this transient footage.

However, as Michel Foucault insightfully pointed out, an archive is never merely an accumulation of historical records and materials, but is also emblematic of the entanglements between political power and knowledge. In his own words, Foucault defines the archive as a "system of enunciability," a structure that dictates which materials can be expressed and "governs the appearance of statements as unique events" (1972, 129). Following this perspective, Jacques Derrida argues that "there is no political power without control of the archive," emphasizing that true and effective democratization is always determined by "the participation in and the access to

the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation" (1996. 4). Bearing these insights in mind, how can we understand the significance of *Present.Perfect.* as an archive within the authoritarian political climate of contemporary China? Is this archive a direct challenge to the hegemonic writing of history as propagated by the party state? The next section will address these questions by situating *Present.Perfect.* within the context of the alternative culture of Chinese independent documentaries.

3.4 Alternative Archive

The concept of alternative film culture, as developed by Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, provides a valuable framework for analyzing Chinese independent documentaries within the paradoxical conditions of post-socialist China. During this period, the process of marketization and its subsequent pluralization have fostered hopes among many for a transition towards what is often theorized as the "civil society" or "the public sphere" in the context of Western liberal democracy. However, Berry and Rofel highlight that the practical implementation of these concepts is greatly limited and challenged by the reality of unrelenting state control, with the market itself being one of many arenas affected. In this environment, any form of direct and public oppositional culture is perceived by the Chinese government as a threat to the construction of a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*), leading to its effective prohibition. Responding to these constraints, Berry and Rofel propose alternativeness as a strategy to circumvent the restrictive parameters established by the state-corporate alliance. They find particular inspiration in Ou Ning's research and activism project, Alternative Archive, where the Chinese term Bie Guan not only translates to "side building" but also plays as a homophonic pun for "leave me alone." In a similar vein, Berry and Rofel suggest that alternative film culture is a form of resistance that

operates parallel to the official culture, producing significant change "but not through the route of direct opposition" (2010, 137).

Among the various aspects in which Berry and Rofel identify the manifestation of alternativeness, the thematic focus of *Present.Perfect.* most conspicuously embodies this quality. As previously noted, the documentary not only centers on the online performances of marginalized anchors but also explores their personal experiences, which are closely intertwined with their identities outside the digital realm of live-streaming. These narratives bring to light a broad spectrum of social issues pertinent to contemporary China, including ableism, gender discrimination, social stratification, and rural-urban migration. Despite their importance, such topics and the communities affected by them are rarely emphasized in mainstream cinema and other forms of visual culture. When these issues are depicted, the portrayals often conform to prevailing ideological views, frequently oversimplifying the complex realities involved. A case in point is *Ocean Heaven* (Dir. Xue Xiaolu, 2010), distinguished as one of the few mainstream Chinese films about autism, and honored with official recognition at the state-backed Shanghai International Film Festival. The film touchingly tells the story of a father (played by Jet Li), who, after being diagnosed with terminal liver cancer, prepares his autistic son for a future without him. He teaches him daily tasks such as cooking and taking the bus, and secures him a job at an aquarium. Although the narrative is moving and emotionally resonant, it adheres to the established trope of "personal tragedy," where disabled people are expected to "overcome their impairments to join and make a contribution to mainstream society" (Dauncey 2020, 31). In contrast, *Present.Perfect.* offers a complementary perspective, showing these individuals not as victims, but as hopeful figures forging alternative identities in the digital world.

At the same time, the element of alternativeness in *Present.Perfect.* can also be discerned through its formal properties. Berry and Rofel note in their analysis that alternative documentaries, unlike traditional socialist *zhuantipian* or ratings-driven TV documentaries, often intentionally maintain a certain ambivalence in conveying their message (Berry and Rofel 2010, 143). This strategy, aimed at avoiding direct criticism of the state, especially on sensitive topics, is realized through various filmmaking techniques, including the film's narration, editing style, and mode of representation. In *Present.Perfect.* these techniques are not merely visible but seem to be taken to an extreme. The documentary's reliance on live-streaming footage, theoretically filmed by the anchors themselves, serves as a strategic move by Zhu to distance herself from direct ownership of the material and its expressed viewpoints. Additionally, Zhu adopts a notably restrained approach to narration, limiting her tools to minimal title cards. These consist of either numerical markers delineating different segments or introductory cards featuring direct quotations from official sources. As a result, the arrangement of the footage mostly appears random, with the consistent presence of the recurring anchors providing the sole narrative thread.

Arguably, the only and most politically charged moment in *Present.Perfect.* is the live-stream featured at its conclusion, yet Zhu's editing skillfully mitigates any direct oppositional sentiment that might arise from it. In this sequence, the camera maintains a fixed angle on a group of ants consuming the body of a dead cockroach. The broadcasting anchor, whose face remains unseen, passionately narrates the resilience of cockroaches, explaining how they lower their metabolism in times of food and water scarcity, or in extreme cases, resort to cannibalism for survival. As the narration progresses, the anchor subtly draws a parallel to a similar event in Chinese history, hinting at a willingness to explore further. For those in the know, this alludes to the cannibalism that occurred during the Great Chinese Famine, a major anthropogenic disaster

resulting from the Chinese Communist Party's mismanagement in the Great Leap Forward Movement. However, since records of human cannibalism from this period exist only in oral reports and have never been officially acknowledged, the film quickly shifts to another live-stream, deftly diverting attention from this contentious narrative. This next scene forms a stark contrast, featuring a street dancer energetically performing to "Gangnam Style" on a bustling street. He is surrounded by a diverse crowd, from infants to the elderly, all curiously observing not the dancer, but the recording device, whose perspective intriguingly matches that of the film's audience (Figure 3.1). This ending, with its ambiguity, leaves the viewers pondering the digital future, inviting them to contemplate the potential implications and outcomes of lives increasingly mediated by new technologies, both in personal and social realms.

Figure 3.1 Final scene of *Present.Perfect.* (Dir. Zhu Shengze, 2019).

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the ways in which Chinese independent documentaries have responded to and engaged with the growing influence of social media. It has argued that this interaction has spawned a new documentary paradigm, termed here as the social media documentary. To contextualize this shift, the introductory chapter has first examined the history of independent documentaries in China, focusing on Lu Xinyu's concept of the New Documentary Movement. This analysis has suggested that social media documentaries signal a new phase in this movement, stemming from the rapid commercialization of China's social media landscape beginning around 2015. Since then, a wide variety of new users have been drawn to these digital platforms by their purported economic potential, particularly those from rural regions and lower socio-economic backgrounds. These people have started to actively record and share the ordinary parts of their lives online with the use of their mobile phones. The inundation of these user-generated images and videos has triggered a fundamental re-evaluation of the responsibilities and methodologies of traditional documentary filmmaking in China.

The first chapter of this thesis discussed *We Were Smart* as a means to illustrate the workings of social media documentaries and to establish the analytical framework for each case study. It began by conducting a narrative analysis, showing how the documentary portrays social media as a dual force that both facilitated the formation and contributed to the decline of the largest working-class subculture in China. It then progressed to examining the documentary's participatory mode of production, where it incorporated a significant amount of mobile phone footage shot by the migrants themselves. Instead of analyzing this method through the commonly debated liberal logic of inclusion, this chapter introduced a different perspective, emphasizing the migrants' ability at self-representation. It drew a parallel between the aesthetic style of this footage

and that of the short videos posted on Kuaishou, suggesting that this resemblance contributed to the documentary's spontaneous realism.

The second chapter of this thesis focused on *Present.Perfect.* as another example of social media documentaries. Following the analytical framework set in the first chapter, it began by discussing how the practice of live-streaming, especially for marginalized anchors, represents a conscious decision to sacrifice personal privacy and invest affective labor in exchange for virtual companionship and enhanced social visibility. This similar ability for self-representation also inspired *Present.Perfect.* to adopt a participatory method of production. However, the film notably takes this approach to its extreme by using exclusively live-streaming footage to construct its narrative, thereby evolving into a compilation documentary. Considering the ephemeral nature of live-streaming footage as a unique type of social media content, this chapter suggested that *Present.Perfect.* can be viewed as an archive in itself for such footage. This distinction effectively sets it apart from most compilation documentaries, which typically rely on more enduring sources for their material.

In these case studies, this thesis has demonstrated that, at the surface level, social media documentaries are films that center their narratives on examining and questioning the impact of social media in China. Echoing the ethos of the New Documentary Movement, these documentaries particularly emphasize the effects of these platforms on marginalized populations, such as migrant workers, people with disabilities, and single mothers. They depict how social media act as a virtual sanctuary, offering these individuals an escape from their real-life difficulties. These digital spaces consistently provide them with companionship and emotional connections, fostering ties both within their communities and with outsiders. However, these documentaries do more than just celebrate social media as a universal panacea. They are acutely conscious of the

potential downsides and the inevitable sacrifices that accompany these technological conveniences. Ultimately, their viewpoint culminates in a pronounced ambivalence, which can be largely explained by the uncertainty resulting from the challenges in predicting the digital future.

At the same time, the "social media" element of these documentaries is also manifested in their participatory production approach. As it has been emphasized throughout this thesis, participatory documentaries have a long-standing presence in the history of Chinese independent documentaries. What distinguishes social media documentaries, however, is their incorporation of content from social media or footage inspired by these platforms. Rather than being a homogenous entity, like DV footage, this material exhibits considerable internal diversity, with characteristics that are closely related to their contexts of production and intended purposes. For example, the first chapter has shown that Kuaishou videos are distinct from Qzone selfies. They differ not only in medium but, more importantly, in their targeted audience and ways of engaging with reality. Additionally, the second chapter has demonstrated how live-streaming footage, in contrast to other forms of social media content, typically has a particularly short lifespan. These distinct features have played a crucial role in comprehending the motivations and goals of the participatory approach in each case study.

However, in the practical application of these insights, this thesis has encountered a recurring dilemma where the analysis itself seemed to contradict the initial claim it was intended to prove. While aiming to explore the unique purpose behind this participatory turn, the analysis repeatedly found itself reverting to concepts originally formulated for understanding films predating social media documentaries. In the first chapter, this involved applying Luke Robinson's framework of *xianchang* as a criterion to assess the realism of the mobile-phone footage in *We Were Smart*. Similarly, in the second chapter, Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel's notion of alternative

film culture was employed to interpret the role of *Present.Perfect.* as an alternative archive. Rather than perceiving this apparent contradiction as a critical flaw that undermines its argument, this thesis proposes here that the applicability of these concepts in both scenarios actually speaks volumes about the evolution of the New Documentary Movement. It suggests that the various phases of the movement are not in stark opposition to each other, but are linked by certain overarching goals that continue to influence its development. As the two chapters have sought to demonstrate, spontaneous realism and the archiving impulse are two of such enduring elements. Meanwhile, there are likely other aspects waiting to be further explored, and additional research would be instrumental in fully drawing out their connections and implications.

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