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Independent Chinese Cinema: Filming in the "Space of the People"

"My Work Constitutes a Form of Participatory Action"

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“My Work Constitutes a Form of Participatory Action”

An Interview with Ai Xiaoming

Ai Xiaoming, born in 1953 in Wuhan, is a retired professor in the literature department of Guangzhou's Sun Yat-Sen University. Following an academic career in comparative literature, she came out as a public intellectual, initially through involvement in defending women's and gays rights. She organised many activities to raise awareness on issues such as discrimination and violence against women, the most famous of which was the translation and staging of *The Vagina Monologues* with her students. While she initially used documentary filmmaking as a tool to record and disseminate these activities for educative purposes, she quickly extended her work on video to the documenting of current cases of public violations of rights. In the past few years, she has produced a corpus of around ten independent documentaries on subjects such as village elections and property rights, AIDS, and the Sichuan earthquake scandal. (JP)

Filmography:

- *White Ribbon, Bai Sidai*, 57 minutes, 2004
- *Paradise Garden, Tiantang huayuan*, 140min, 2005
- *Taishi cun*, 100 minutes, 2005
- *The Epic of Central Plains, Zhongyuan jishi*, 140 minutes, 2006
- *Care and Love, Guan'ai zhi jia*, 108 minutes, 2007
- *The Train to My Hometown, Kaiwang jiaxiang de Lieche*, 62 min, 2008
- *Our Children, Women de wawa*, 73 minutes, 2009
- *An Investigation by Citizens, Gongmin diaocha*, 64 minutes, 2009

Professor Ai, you're a scholar as well as a film director. Could you please talk a little about your dual identity?

I graduated from Beijing Normal University's Department of Chinese, and for a very long time I lived the typical life of a scholar: teaching and writing. In 2004 I began filming documentaries, and at this point I no longer have time for any strictly academic writing. I still carry out my responsibilities in guiding graduating students, but my main form of expression is now documentary film.

How is your role as a director related to your role as a professor? Do you feel your identity as a scholar influences the way you create documentaries, and if so, to what extent? Do you feel you de-

rive any benefit from your daily interaction with students? What do you hope students can learn from your work besides what they learn at the university?

On the relationship between my identity as a director and my identity as a scholar: one important relationship is that I still get no outside funding for my films, so my living expenses and most of the ex-

penses attached to shooting and producing my films are drawn from my retirement pay as a professor. My role as a scholar affects my filmmaking in that I still have to devote a certain amount of time to teaching.

I still very much enjoy my interactions with students, but this past October, I was prevented from lecturing at Fudan, Peking, and two other universities. I previously received honoraria for lectures, which supplemented the costs of my documentaries, but now it looks as if that will no longer be possible.

Some of my documentaries were previously used as reference materials in university gender studies courses. However, the subject matter of some of my more recent films, such as *Taishi Village*, is considered taboo, and the space in China where such works can be adopted for educational purposes is shrinking.

I feel that my work can help students understand some important changes taking place in China right now, such as the rights defence movement, people's living conditions, and the possibility for change. Mainland China's media are strictly controlled, and it's hard for my works to be shown even in privately-organised film festivals. But many overseas university libraries and research institutes collect my works, and I feel their students can use my works in China studies, gender studies, and cultural studies.

As a professor of literature, you haven't limited your focus to academic research, but have branched out into rights defence and activism. Why is that? How is it meaningful to you?

The way I see it is that some scholars have a problematic conception of "learning," and seem to regard it from a purely theoretical standpoint with little practical relevance to society. For a very long time I regarded learning in the same way. When I began making documentaries and became involved in public events, I realised that society's practical issues too seldom make their way into academic research. In other words, academic research is somewhat removed from social issues, and this should change. We should reflect on how learning can change society — there's so much that needs to be done. If you're lecturing to students about social justice while turning a blind eye to so much unfairness in society, isn't that being divorced from reality? Social justice issues in particular need scholarly observation and consideration. If these two trajectories (academia and society) can't be joined somehow, we'll never have justice. In this scenario, scholars fail their social responsibility, because imparting knowledge becomes nothing but a means of livelihood instead of an effort to change society. Such people can be considered "knowledge professionals" but not "citizens," because they use social resources purely for personal gain and to maintain the privileges they enjoy. I watched the documentary *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, and I feel that professors should be like Chomsky, involving themselves in social events, and using their specialised knowledge to promote critical thought.

How did you come to make documentaries, and how has your life changed since then?

My move into documentaries is related to the popularisation of the technology — it's this popularisation that's made the equipment affordable. At the outset I invited Mr. Hu Jie to

show his films, and I then thought of asking him to film students rehearsing *The Vagina Monologues* for teaching purposes. During the filming and editing process we had a lot of arguments, first of all over whether one camera would be enough. Although Hu Jie thought of many ways, for example, first shooting full screen and then shooting in close-ups (we shot three different versions of *The Vagina Monologues* in performance), when it came to editing I still felt one camera wasn't enough. In short, it's like you start out not knowing how to write, and you just ask someone to write down what you say, but in the process you slowly begin to write letters yourself. You begin to feel there are things you need to express, and you need to find a way to express them, and to express them yourself. I also asked Hu Jie to come and film *Paradise Garden* (*Tiantang huayuan*),⁽¹⁾ and during the film editing process we had a lot of discussions and both put a lot of work into it. But in the end there was no money, and when the Court of First Instance delivered its verdict, I went to film it myself. I also filmed *Taishi Village* myself.

Are there any particular works, incidents, or individuals who have influenced your work?

Mr. Hu Jie had much to do with my starting to shoot documentaries. When I invited him to our school to help us film our production of *The Vagina Monologues* and a documentary called *The Vagina Monologues — Behind the Scenes*, I learned how to operate a camcorder and a film editing machine. During our cooperation I learned many things, so I began planning a selection of documentaries on Chinese women's topics. Because the funding we requested was inadequate, I went out myself to shoot footage and did the subsequent editing and post-production work. Hu Jie is my teacher, and he's also an important collaborator in my documentary productions.

Beginning with the shooting of *Paradise Garden* in 2004, the characters and incidents in my documentaries have had a profound influence on me. They have basically changed my attitude and approach to life. When I wasn't making documentaries, I spent most of my time in my study, and had little contact with these kinds of intense social issues. Once I became involved in these social problems and conflicts, I

1. Translator's note (all subsequent footnotes are by the translator): Directed by Hu Jie and Ai Xiaoming, the film focuses on a Hunan school teacher named Huang Jing who was murdered during an attempted rape by her well-connected boyfriend in 2003. The case highlighted a growing public sensitivity to corruption and violence in Chinese society. See <http://fanhall.com/ifo2034.html>.

Ai Xiaoming filming female villagers airing their grievances in Taishi, Guangdong, in 2005, while shooting *Taishi cun*.
© Huang Haitao



began to feel greater pressure and restrictions, and my own situation became increasingly difficult.

On the other hand, I have to say that the activists in my films, whether they're journalists, lawyers, or local environmental workers, have made infinitely greater sacrifices than I have. My documentaries are a part of China's fledgling rights defence movement; their content and influence belong to that social movement. This kind of pressure is inevitable, and I'm prepared for it.

Where do you see your position among China's modern documentary film makers? What relationships or differences do you have with other Chinese directors?

I haven't been creating documentaries all that long, so I can't claim any kind of status. When a domestic independent documentary film festival invited me to participate, the public security apparatus intervened and prevented them from showing my work. This made me lose an opportunity to become acquainted with colleagues in the documentary film industry.

I feel my difference lies in my continuing to assume a great deal of teaching work — that's one aspect. Another aspect is that my works are seen as choosing politically sensitive topics, and as constituting a form of participatory action. When my collaborators experience the misfortune of imprisonment, I don't remain silent or regard them as nothing more than subjects for filming. I make public appeals for their release, as I'm currently doing for the civil activist Tan Zuoren.⁽²⁾

Since you began making films on the cases of Sun Zhigang, Huang Jing, Taishi Village and so on, have there been any common threads? Is there any particular issue at the root of them, such as poverty or the law?

My focus is on social issues and civil society incidents, which have subsequently come to be referred to as China's rights defence movement. The incidents and characters in my films can all be considered major constituents of that movement. The core concept is how people can recognise their civil rights, and how they can become active in fighting for these rights. The rights defence process often involves intense conflict, and for that reason people have had to pay a high price. When you ask what direction these issues point to, in fact all of the issues are very concrete. For example, *Taishi Village*

touches on villagers' electoral rights and the transfer of land resources; *Paradise Garden* touches on and targets violence against women. But these are just some concepts; we could sum up documentary films as a concept, but even more important is for documentary films to grasp, record, and communicate a person's situation as it's experienced. I feel this is a special function of documentary film.

Take for example the Taishi Village incident; you can gain an understanding of its contributing factors through a great deal of written material and news reportage, but what's important is to see — to see the images of the villagers, their emotional state. Directly facing the range of human emotions stimulates our own emotions; it compels us to try to understand the inner life of the people behind the incident, to understand their experience and feelings.

I like to watch documentaries from other countries; they provide me with a lot of stimulation. If not for visual, specifically image-driven memories, our understanding of history and society would be limited to concepts, because it's all too easy to forget what has happened in the past.

I feel that our society has too many incidents and issues that are hidden from view, or perhaps I should say deflected. This includes the important function of the media. The mainstream media's manufactured images demonstrate the enormous power of ideology, and the purpose that artifice serves in this society. I hope to let people see what lies behind the artifice: calamity, pain, problems, conflict, the appeals of the people. I feel that modern Chinese society is too lacking in its memory of disaster and problems. In the past, ordinary people had no tools for expressing their visual memory, but the situation has changed now — the Internet, camcorders, cellular telephones, digital recorders, and other tools provide people with this ability. They're providing a new means of mobilising society and the media. They also provide the means for us to use technology and artistic methods to achieve democracy.

2. Following this interview, on 9 Feb 2010, Tan Zuoren was sentenced to nine years in prison on charges of inciting subversion of state power through emailed comments about the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. See Lucy Hornby, "China quake activist jailed for inciting subversion," Reuters, 9 February 2010.

Ai Xiaoming in 2006 on the shot of *Care and Love*, in Xingtai (southern Hebei), a town strongly hit by the AIDS epidemic.

© Ai Xiaoming



When did you start focusing on the problem of Henan's AIDS villages?

Around 2006. Before I went there, I'd just heard about it and didn't understand the situation that well, and only after arriving did I see how dire the epidemic was. My first impression upon arriving in Henan was one of visual assault; the fields undulated with one burial plot after another, and for a moment I was dumbstruck: "Why are there so many graves?" We went in the spring, when the fields were full of fresh green wheat seedlings, and there was this mesmerising view of one grave after another.

In *The Epic of Central Plains* (*Zhongyuan jishi*), there's a scene I particularly like where we leave a peasant's home just as night is falling, and I sit on a motorcycle and shoot the twilight. The sky is blue, and we're on a village road.... At that time, after we finished our interviews at the first village, we left our luggage there and went to the next village, and after we were finished there we didn't go back to the first village (cadres were squatting in the home of our first interviewee), we just had to go on to the third. I was on the motorcycle shooting that scene, and the motorcycle was bumping along, dusk was falling and the sky was blue, and on both sides of the road, burial mounds rose and fell in the fields.

If you ask me what I was thinking then, in fact at the time I wasn't thinking anything, I was just concentrating on observing and recording. When you're shooting, you have to decide what to shoot and why, how you'll use it in the future; that's what I was thinking about then. For example, while I'm interviewing someone, I have to think about what kind of person he is, what he's experienced, whether I've asked the most important things about his experience, or whether he's still in the middle of that situation at the time I interview him. Sometimes when a person is relating something, she's in a state of really wanting to pour out her heart, but at other times the person kind of drifts off, as if he's thinking about something else. Shooting documentaries has been a real learning experience. I've been a teacher, but I've never studied media creation, or been trained as a journalist, and I've had to learn all these things on the job (while shooting documentaries).

The documentaries you originally shot were like "direct cinema." Now your work method has changed somewhat: your films include footage from a lot of different sources, for example, media images, photographs, amateur videos. Especially

the film you're making now, *Our Children* (*Women de wawa*). What's the purpose of adding these images to your film? What benefit is there in allowing other people to participate in making a documentary?

Our Children uses a lot of scenes that local Sichuan people shot at the time the schools collapsed [during the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008]. This is meaningful in a number of ways: first of all, from the standpoint of footage, we weren't there at the time, so it fills this gap. Second, and more important, is that it brings out the importance of citizen documentation. After the Sichuan earthquake school disasters occurred, the photographs and videos shot by local citizens preserved the most important visual memories of this disaster. Third, in the rights defence process, parents have used camcorders to collect evidence and record the process, and the consciousness of this kind of record reveals people's awareness of using media technology; it's become a new feature of citizen participation in social movements, and I want the audience to see this feature.

In a recent article I also talk about the mainstream media and the interaction between citizens and journalists, and there's one part where I say: "When we talk of news value, we've always only talked of the journalist's contribution, just as before with anthropology, there was only the anthropologist's contribution, and those ethnic minorities were merely the subjects of research. Their participation in the discovery of knowledge was forgotten, because they couldn't claim any kind of statutory subjective position."

The subjective position of creating knowledge has to be striven for, and citizen journalists played a very important role in the process of reporting on the Sichuan earthquake. When the local mainstream media withdrew from reporting on the school disasters, the citizen journalists held their ground and persisted with their investigations, questions, and reports. When the outside media contacted citizen journalists and volunteers, they withstood enormous pressure to receive and protect [professional] journalists and help them reach their destinations for face-to-face interviews with key people and complete their reports. From

Tan Zuoren to Ai Weiwei, their viewpoints and articles made up the key content, subject matter, and news value of outside media reports, and in the process of reporting the facts, the price they paid through state violence was greater than that of countless mainstream journalists.

I feel that Tan Zuoren's importance in increasing the transparency of Chinese society, his role in promoting citizen participation, and the hardship he's endured for it, is an important topic for studying the interaction between the media and Chinese civil society. What's really regrettable is that the contribution of people like him is scarcely acknowledged. Hong Kong journalists who reported on the earthquake have won a lot of awards: the RTHK program *Hong Kong Connection* won the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) 2009 Prize in the Television News Category for its episode on the Sichuan Earthquake, and it was recently reported that Now Television reporter Lee Yee-chong beat out more than 1,000 competitors to win Europe's Lorenzo Natali Grand Prize for his report "Sichuan Earthquake, One Year On." But Tan Zuoren, who helped many local and outside journalists arrange interviews, and who himself was interviewed on camera as an important expert witness, environmentalist, and NGO volunteer — he has been awarded ten months in custody, and may be facing an even longer term in prison, an award with no gratuity attached. Of course, this award has been presented to him by what are (laughingly) referred to as the "People's" public security, procuratorate, and judicial organs.

Your films discuss public social issues: land confiscation, migrant labour, and so on. How do you choose the topics for your documentaries?

The topics I select are usually related to women's rights, because I can apply my professional knowledge to these topics, and I can also use them as teaching materials. That's also true for *Our Children* — most of the stories in it are told by women. These subjects are important and affect many people, so they attract me. Some personal issues have already been filmed by a lot of people, so I should go and do something more challenging. I have many years of academic training behind me, which helps me understand just how important these issues really are. But since filming *Our Children* last year, I've begun to feel that my choices are very limited. One important issue is funding. If there's no subsidy whatsoever, completing a documentary uses up everything I have. There's no way I can continue by relying on my retirement salary alone.

There's a relatively strong political and social element in your documentaries. Why is that? Is this a conscious choice?

You could say it's conscious. I feel these issues are important, but there aren't many people making these kinds of documentaries. Many independent documentary makers feel it's too hard to control the risk, so they choose to record personal stories and less controversial social issues. But the situation is changing. Since 2009, it's become especially apparent that people are using cell phones and so on to record many public incidents. Now there are special audiovisual workshops for members of the public, who report on social incidents everyone is concerned about and publish through the Internet. I believe the social and political nature of China's independent documentaries will gradually increase. This is due to greater access to technology, and even more to the intensification of social conflict. As civic consciousness grows, people are increasingly unwilling to tolerate limitations on speech and expression. Everyone's become aware that silence results in even more human rights disasters.

Is this because the traditional media are unable to produce results?

In fact, it's not a matter of media being traditional or not, and it's not to say that the print media can't contribute to increasing social transparency. Rather, it's because China is still tightly controlled and lacks press freedom. In this respect, whether it's traditional media or online media, all face this control. But the problem is in the changing concept of the media, and the varying difficulty or ease of controlling them. It's very easy to control the mainstream media, but when every netizen becomes a news reporter and commentator, every individual can become a "news medium," and every twitter message can serve to disseminate information. When the individual as media worker communicates through private access to the Internet, he has an absolute advantage in terms of timing.

How do you see yourself as different from a news reporter?

First, they have an organisation defraying their travel expenses and other costs, and I don't. I have to decide how to reach my destination and how long to stay there based on my own financial resources.

Second, they have media credentials that give them access to government organs. I don't have media credentials, so I'm greatly limited in the reporting and interviews I can do.

Third, they have publication channels and I don't.

Of course, I have my own workstyle and advantages:

First, I have always shot my films on a volunteer basis, and this leads many people to assist me willingly and without compensation. All of my collaborators are volunteers. Our goal is not to make money, but to recognise and solve problems.

Second, I've interviewed a lot of people who would be very reluctant to express their views through the mainstream media. They're willing to tell me their stories, and they believe I have the ability to tell their stories. They endorse my work and my independence.

Third, even though I don't have publication channels, in the Internet age no creative work can be completely stifled. Anyone who wants to view my work can gain access to it by duplicating a friend's copy or downloading it from the Internet.

Why did you choose documentary film as your means of expression and practice?

I feel that documentary film is a very good cognitive form. Ever since I began learning to shoot and edit, I've felt that I can do this, and that I can put some of my ideas into practice. My past academic training can be assimilated into this method, for example in research, observation, personal interaction, and so on, in addition to my creative impulse.... I've also taught film studies courses, and my experience with film analysis can also be applied here.

Regarding my choice of topics, I believe this is related to my way of viewing society as a scholar. There are important issues relating to changes in Chinese society, but the choice of topics depends on "access" — for example, do you have the ability to make contact with the group of people involved in this topic? Our documentary films are always to some extent a collaborative effort. They can't be made by one person alone, and they depend on the hard effort of local groups right from the outset. In my experience, if you want to shoot a documentary film, you need to very quickly identify the core issue and make contact with the core individuals in order for this film to actually be made. For me, this process is much faster, because I'm a researcher, and a scholar who supports rights defence, so I've already established the right personal networks. Some-

times it's not a matter of what I want to do, but that someone looks me up and says, this is very important, you should consider doing this film. It's like if you're a chief reporter at a newspaper, people will provide you with information, and then someone will take you to see so-and-so.... Because I've built up a reputation in my work, people trust me and are willing to provide me with leads and help me complete the project.

Speaking concretely, when you shoot a documentary, it's when these conditions are all met that you're able to complete the film. Without these conditions, you can't accomplish anything. What are they? There must be a problem in this society that has not been resolved, and people trying to find a way to solve it. In this case the media worker is actually the role they're seeking; they need to utilise this role, utilise this medium. It's a kind of integration and mutual engagement in that we share the same goal, but the roles we play are different. For example, as a media worker, I haven't personally confronted issues like rape or relocation, but the nature of this work requires me to disseminate information, so what kind of information should I choose to disseminate? Because I still have to teach regularly, I can't just go out every day and shoot whatever is going on, but I will think about selecting one topic in a given year, and what this topic should be. I regularly keep an eye out, say for instance with the blizzard,⁽³⁾ I suddenly found the aftermath of the blizzard all around me; all of the trains had stopped running, and millions of migrant workers were waiting for a chance to go home for the Lunar New Year. How to deal with it? I began to be concerned about this issue, and it happened to correspond with my winter school break, so I went to the train station and began filming....

I don't always start out right away wanting to film something. For example, I didn't understand much about the AIDS issue at first, and I could only decide whether or not to make the documentary, whether there was any need to, after immersing myself in the topic. Shooting a documentary is a process of understanding an issue. I feel that at the outset I'm more like a member of the audience, not knowing anything, but concerned about the issue. So my initial approach to the issue is as a spectator, and after that, as a writer, I construct the path through which the audience can approach the issue.

3. In January 2008, Southern China was hit by severe snowstorms in the days before the Lunar New Year, blocking thousands of migrant workers on their way home. These events inspired Ai Xiaoming's film *The Train to My Hometown* (*Kai wang jiaxiang de lieche*), which was shot in part at the Guangzhou railway station.

For me, shooting the documentary is often not too difficult, even if it's not my own idea to make the film, but someone wants to do it and I'm just helping them out. For example, they'll take me to do the interviewing and filming, otherwise I wouldn't even know whom I was interviewing. But during this process I'll still ask, what are the factors contributing to this situation, where did it happen, when, where, who, what, cause, effect, and gradually develop the origin and development of the story.

What means do you use to distribute your films? What spaces release or show them? What is your opinion of these spaces? What kinds of people make up your audience?

My works, as in previous cases where I've applied for funding from the Chinese University of Hong Kong's University Service Centre for Chinese Studies, always require applying for a portion of the production expenses, and for that reason, I provide the films free of charge for school teachers and civil society groups to use. The University Service Centre has collected all of my documentaries up to now. When they recommend my works to overseas libraries and research organs, and pay archiving fees, this serves as one distribution channel. In addition, the Hong Kong company Visible Record helped us extend our documentaries to overseas libraries from last year until the end of this year, and this helped us recover a portion of our costs. Generally speaking, however, I have no distribution channels within China, and those outside of China are also very limited. For example, out of last year's receipts from the University Service Centre, the workshop was only able to retain less than 10,000 yuan (part was donated to a welfare group), which didn't even come close to covering expenses.

My works have also been uploaded by friends onto Youtube and some other websites, and people can download them free of charge. My audience is mainly made up of people who are concerned about China's social movements. In addition, Hong Kong's Chinese Documentary Festival has selected my films two years running, and Hong Kong's Social Movement Film Festival is currently showing my films. These festivals don't pay royalties for showing the films. The year before last, the Shadows Festival for Chinese independent films in Paris also selected my works. From what I can see, the main audience is scholars, researchers, and journalists who care about Chinese society.

Whenever I complete a film, I make lots of copies to give to friends. They're mainly teachers, journalists, rights defence

lawyers, and citizen volunteers — basically, ordinary citizens who are concerned about society, have humanitarian ideals, and hope to promote the transformation of Chinese society.

Chinese documentary films like yours raise very important public social issues, but even though these topics are relevant to many people, your audience is quite small. How do you view this contradiction? Can we say there's a lack of distribution space for Chinese documentary films? What judgments and hopes do you hold out on the distribution issue for Chinese documentary films?

I don't feel the audience is small. If my works could be distributed inside China, or if they were broadcasted on television, I believe I could earn enough to continue making documentaries. The problem is that these works are banned, I have no way of exercising my right to free expression, and I don't enjoy the rights and protections of a media worker. The kind of independent documentary films that I produce have extremely limited distribution space, but the problem isn't the commercial environment — it's the political environment.

I feel that in the long term, many independent Chinese documentary films will be allowed some flexibility and will be able to enter the distribution market. Because the topics that Chinese documentary films cover are very wide-ranging, those that don't touch on sensitive social issues should have had publication opportunities early on.

For the time being, I can't harbour any hopes that my own documentaries will be able to enter the Chinese distribution market. But I know for a fact that the Chinese audience needs this kind of documentary, and sooner or later, all of China's universities and libraries will collect my documentaries. China's state leaders will someday, because of watching my documentaries, improve their ability to govern our country. I think it's for this reason that many ordinary citizens are also circulating the films to the best of their ability. They gather with their friends to watch my films, and they make copies of my works and give them to whoever needs them, because they feel this kind of film records social problems that this society needs to confront and resolve.

This text was drawn from interviews carried out by Peng Yurong (Tianxia magazine) and Judith Pernin on 20 July 2008 and 8 November 2009. •

• Translated by Stacy Mosher