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Schizoid creators

Creative work and subjectivity in the Chinese cultural economies

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Chapter 3 From independent to art film and back again: Independent film, precarity and creative labour

Introduction

On the 16th of July 2016, a documentary named *The Big Screen of Nobody* was aired on CCTV. It tells the story of a young director named Jian Haodong from rural Shanxi, a province located in northern China famous for its rich coal resources and the devastating environmental impact of the mining industry. What intrigues me about Haodong's story is how he managed to gather money to make his film *Eyes Cheat* (2015). In 2014, after receiving a diploma in coal mining from the local college, like many of his classmates, Haodong got a job in a coal mine near his hometown. However, already on the very first day, he struck the other miners as different, after telling them that he wanted to be a film director. After fifteen months of hard work, he had successfully earned 50,000 RMB, money he devoted to making *Eyes Cheat*. The film, however, does not resemble today's mainstream Chinese movies. Lacking martial arts, romantic plots, or any other commercial clichés, it was about a blind old man who lost his job in the city and ended up feeling alienated again after going back to his countryside home. Based on Haodong's own experiences and observations in his hometown, the film tackles serious social problems: corrupt local officials, cowardly villagers, and the fast-changing Chinese rural society. The low-budget production, the rough filmic quality and the critical topics addressed together characterise *Eyes Cheat* as a 'Chinese independent film'. In 2015, it was included in the main competition of several film festivals, including the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BiFF), the Taiwan South Film Festival and the Chinese Independent Film Festival (CIFF). After this, Haodong moved to Beijing, rented a small, cheap apartment on the outskirts and started his filmmaking career. From being a coal-miner to becoming a Chinese independent filmmaker, he achieved an astonishing transformation in terms of his

work, identity and life. This story leads me to some basic questions concerning Chinese independent filmmaking as a special form of creative labour: why do people like Haodong choose to make independent films? What does the adjective ‘independent’ mean for filmmaking and filmmakers in China? What insights can Chinese independent filmmaking offer into creative labour and the subjectivities it produces?

Guided by these questions, this chapter studies Chinese independent filmmaking as a form of creative labour. Among current studies on the Chinese film industries and independent Chinese cinema, from the perspective of film and media studies, most focus on the aesthetic and political dimensions. Case studies are mostly limited to influential films made by established filmmakers, including earlier documentary directors like Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan, as well as Sixth Generation auteurs like Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye (Dai 2000; Lu 2003; Berry and Farquhar 2006; Jiang 2012; Robinson 2013; Wang 2014). In the few valuable production studies of Chinese independent filmmaking, scholars have investigated issues such as the political economy of Chinese indie film production, the implication of globalisation, the micro power relations within the indie filmmaking community, as well as domestic and overseas distribution (Pickowicz 2006; Zhang 2007; Sniadecki 2013; Nakajima 2016). These studies have revealed that Chinese independent filmmaking, compared with ‘main melody’ and ‘commercial’ film production,¹ is supposed to be low-budget, politically sensitive, artistically avant-garde and seeking relative autonomy and critical thinking (Berry and Rofel 2010). Thus, it scores high in terms of cultural capital in the field of Chinese film

¹ According to Zhang Yingjin (2004) and Nakajima (2016), the function of cinema as defined by the Chinese nation-state has undergone a transformation from the Maoist era, when ‘political propaganda and education’ were its principal and only missions to the time after the ‘Reform and Opening Up’ policy, when entertainment and commercial success gained importance. The ‘main-melody film’, which upholds the political propaganda and education missions, and the commercial film, which aims at achieving a high box office, now constitute the mainstream in Chinese film production.

production (Nakajima 2016). Exemplified by the early experiences of the so-called ‘Sixth Generation’ directors, Chinese independent films, facilitated by digital technology, often deal with social issues in contemporary China (Zhang 2007). Claiming to speak ‘truth’ through the use of either documentary or fiction² (Zhang 2007), these films sometimes violate the ‘propaganda and education’ function assigned to film by the Chinese authorities and can thus have difficulty passing the censorship system. Such political uncertainty on the one hand makes these films difficult to get financed domestically, while on the other bringing Chinese independent filmmakers cultural capital and ‘cultural prestige’ (Nakajima 2016:97) among both international and Chinese audiences.

This clear-cut image of Chinese independent filmmaking, however, has been blurred by the rapid commercialisation and globalisation of Chinese cinema during the past two decades. The surging box office has made China the world’s second largest film market, after the US, paralleling its status as the world’s second largest economy (Yin and Sun 2017). The thriving film industry has on the one hand pandered to the Party State’s thirst for a powerful and wealthy cultural industry. On the other hand, it has also required the authorities to deploy a more effective governing strategy, so as to orchestrate Chinese cinema towards the state’s needs for ideological propaganda and the accumulation of soft power (Rosen 2012). An ideal cinema for the post-socialist Chinese state should be, according to the newly enforced Chinese Film Industry Promotion Law, ‘prosperous and healthy with a normative and orderly market that upholds socialist core values and meets the spiritual needs of the Chinese people’ (NPC 2016). For Chinese independent film workers, this landscape connotes both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the expanding film market engenders more space for independent films. As I will show in this chapter, domestic commercial film companies have also started to invest in and support independent filmmaking, usually under the umbrella of the ‘art film’, which refers to artistic, less politically sensitive films. On the other hand,

² Independent cinema in China includes both fiction films and documentaries (see Zhang 2006).

those who used to be ‘independents’ now have a more conciliatory relationship with the state and the commercial film industry (Nakajima 2016). Some established independents (for example Sixth Generation directors like Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye) now make films with the ‘dragon mark’ (龙标 *long biao*)³, an official screening permission (公映许可证 *gongying xuke zheng*) issued by Chinese Film Bureau, as well as with large budgets provided by international and domestic film companies.

This chapter investigates the subjectivity of the Chinese independent filmmaker from the perspective of creative labour studies: it views Chinese independent filmmaking as a form of creative work and studies indie filmmakers’ aspirations, forms of self-governance and possible moments of ‘becoming schizoid’. Often following the conceptual framework of Bourdieu, most current research views Chinese independent filmmaking as a special field of cultural production and tries to generalise the political economy of Chinese indie filmmaking and the ‘habitus’ of ‘Chinese indie directors’. In doing so, these studies often attribute these filmmakers to general categories or identities, at the price of neglecting their distinctiveness. This explains the current terminological ambiguities surrounding the terms ‘independence’, ‘independent film’ and ‘Chinese independents’, since any given definition runs the risk of overlooking the differences among the subjects indicated (Tzioumakis, 2006; Berry and Rofel 2011; Jiang 2012; Sniadecki 2013). Without getting mired in these terminological debates, this chapter takes up the notion of ‘independence’ as a discourse that is frequently claimed and practiced by creative workers within the sphere of Chinese filmmaking. At the same time, it aims to highlight the differences between those who claim to be ‘independents’, insisting that these subjects have distinctive aspirations and experiences.

Unlike those working at state-owned cultural enterprises, as explored in the previous chapter, Chinese ‘independent filmmakers’ lack protection from the system (体制 *tizhi*) and are emblematic of the ‘precariat’, characterised by

³ For example, Jia Zhangke’s *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), and Lou Ye’s *The Shadow Play* (2018).

‘insecure’, ‘flexible’ and ‘uncertain’ labour in the post-Fordist economy (Standing 2011). Inspired by Isabel Lorey’s analysis of precarity and precarisation (2015), which I will explain in the following section, this chapter sheds light upon three questions: 1) Why do people aspire to ‘independence’ and ‘independent filmmaking’?; 2) How is ‘independent filmmaking’ governed in practice and what is the impact on the filmmakers’ subjectivity?; 3) Under this governing system, where can we locate the individual agency of these ‘independents’ and what does this agency entail and make possible in terms of ‘being creative’?

After a brief summary of current theoretic debates on precarity and precarisation, followed by an introduction of my methodology, the chapter will first probe into the aspirations that drive the choice to work in independent film. Based on an analysis of the stories I collected from three research informants, I suggest that it is the discontent with living conditions and institutions (such as education, the political culture and commercial modes of production) that motivates them to choose independent filmmaking. Subsequently, the chapter illustrates how Chinese independent filmmaking is precarised in practice, through forms of governmentality, and the impact this has on filmmakers’ subjectivity. Finally, based on my fieldwork data, I suggest that the current process of precarisation also helps to establish an informal mutual-caring community based on difference, which provides possibilities to combat the precarity of Chinese independent cinema. Animated by the shared aspiration to ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’, such a community not only helps alleviate living and work pressures by offering opportunities for screenings, skills learning and emotional sharing and caring, but also triggers a more open understanding of ‘independence’ and ‘independent filmmaking’, which makes resisting the creative subjectivity promoted by the existing power relations possible. From ‘discontent independents’ to ‘art filmmakers’ who embrace a ‘spiritual independence’, Chinese independent filmmakers this chapter studies have become schizoid creators.

Precarity, precarisation and Chinese independent filmmaking

Looking back over the last three decades of socio-economic transformation, an ostensible similarity between the west and China is that increasing numbers of workers are employed on a precarious basis: with deregulation and the decline of unions, employment is becoming ‘uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker’ (Kalleberg 2009:2). In China, as documented in Chapter 2, the transition from state socialism to the market-driven economy system has gradually changed the permanent employment system. This is often referred to by media and researchers as the ‘smashing of the iron rice bowls’ (Benson and Zhu 1999). From rural migrant workers (Lee 2016) to creative practitioners (Keane 2016; Matthews 2017), an increasing part of the Chinese workforce is confronting a more fragile and insecure labour system with various risks and uncertainties.

This insecure state of work (and, consequently, life) first of all signifies a governmental precarisation. According to Isabell Lorey, ‘domination in post-Fordist societies is no longer legitimated through (social) security, and we instead experience governing through insecurity’ (2015, 11). With the proliferation of neo-liberal governmentality since the 1970s, ‘precarious living and working conditions are currently being normalised at a structural level and have thus become a fundamental governmental instrument of governing’ (Lorey 2015, 63). As Ching Kwan Lee (2016) illustrates in her study of precarious migrant workers in southern China, rural migrant workers have been precarised through ‘authoritarian precarisation’ and land dispossession. The implementation of labour law in China is heavily contingent upon the changing priorities of the Party-State, while political limitations on workers’ collective organisation and activism circumscribe the effectiveness of labour law (Lee 2016). In the meantime, rural migrant workers are made even more precarious by the urban residence registration policy, which leads to an unequal welfare distribution.

In the process of precarisation, as Lorey accentuates, a new form of governmentality is entangled with an ‘extreme degree of exploitation’ and ‘a

liberation from [the] traditional condition' of Fordism exploitation and social activism based on unions and representation (Lorey 2015, 10). Inspired by the political practice of *Precarias a la deriva*, a group of feminist activists from Madrid, Lorey argues for the establishment of a care community, a form of political resistance that is based on 'the relational difference, and the resultant possibility of what is common in differentness' (2015, 100). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's 'lines of flight'⁴ and Virno's conception of 'exodus'⁵, and also highly influenced by Foucault's thoughts on power and subjectivity, Lorey underscores that the reversal of and flight from power as control is always possible, but never leads to an outside of power (2015, 102). As she states (2015, 103):

The economisation of the social, the coincidence of work and life, the demand for the whole person to be involved in performative-cognitive, affective labour, in other words, the capitalisation of modes of subjectivation - these processes are not at all total, all-encompassing or wholly determined.... In uncertain, flexibilised and discontinuous working and living conditions, subjectivations arise that do not entirely correspond to the neoliberal logic of valorisation, and which may resist and refuse it.

For Lorey, precarisation thus implies not only subjugation but is also 'incalculable and potentially empowering' (Lorey 2015, 111).

However, such a claim of empowering precarisation also has problems. First, if Lorey's argument about precarisation correctly characterises today's neoliberal governmentality, it is still generalised from the perspective of western

⁴ According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), lines of flight are 'not themselves constituted/imprisoned in specific identities' (Todd 2005: 137), but 'provid[e] the resources (material) for erasing and redrawing boundaries, for fleeing a particular territory for another one, and, under certain conditions, for imploding the territory itself' (2005: 139).

⁵ In his political theory of 'exodus', Paolo Virno (1996, 191) conceives it as a massive defection from the state in order to institute 'a non-state run public sphere' and to achieve a 'radically new form of democracy'.

developed world. What can it say to the workers in the global South, ‘for whom precariousness has always been a seemingly natural condition’ (Munck 2013, 747)? Especially in the case of Chinese independent filmmaking, although it is clear that these filmmakers are precarious in terms of their insecure working conditions, the question of how and to what extent such precarity is constitutive of a state governmentality that can orchestrate Chinese indie film production and the subjectivity of indie filmmakers still needs to be answered. Second, Lorey’s claims about a care community based on differentness and the possibility of exodus from within the precarisation need empirical scrutiny. Without it, her generalisation of precarity and precarisation runs the risk of eliding the nuances of precarity in different socio-political contexts. What precise forms does precarisation take in the context of Chinese cultural production and what possibilities of exodus can their precarious life and work offer Chinese indie directors? As Ching Kwan Lee contends, ‘Chinese workers are confronting the global tendency of precarisation, but with Chinese characteristics, just as Indian workers, Japanese workers, and South African workers confront theirs in specific institutional and political-economic contexts’ (2016, 319).

‘Independent filmmakers’ in China can be viewed as a form of precarious labour characterised by ‘insecure’, ‘flexible’ and ‘uncertain’ labour. Besides these general characteristics, the filmmakers’ claim to ‘independence’ further aggravates their precarity by complicating their relationships with the state and capital. On the one hand, it adds a political dimension as the claimed ‘independence’ of their cultural production contradicts the Chinese party state’s policy of censorship and ideological control. On the other hand, the claim to ‘independence’ also implies a struggle between filmmakers and the precarious production system; they are precarised by capital and state control, while still aspiring to independence in their filmmaking. To rephrase the questions I raised earlier, this chapter aims to investigate: 1) why independent filmmaking, despite its precarity, is chosen as a career; 2) what kind of precarity is experienced by the filmmakers; and 3) how they

respond to the precarity and governance of their life and work, and whether their precarious experiences are also empowering, as Lorey suggests is possible.

This chapter is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with Chinese independent film workers and my ethnographic observations of a film production group named ‘New Wave Experimental Film Group’ (新潮电影实验小组 *xinchao dianying shiyan xiaozu*). The group consists of 10 young film workers who converged in Beijing to realise their independent cinema aspirations. My interviewees include both established film directors like Wang Bing, Zhao Liang and Zhu Rikun and young newcomers who just started their filmmaking careers. I also interviewed several independent film producers. The ethnographic observation was conducted during my fieldwork in Beijing from July to October in 2016, during which I also participated in several screenings and social events organised by independent film workers in Beijing.

Independent cinema as a way to counter personal and social discontent

I wasn’t very good at my subject and I was treated as a freak. So I felt at odds with the whole environment in university. But after encountering film, ah... suddenly I found a way of expressing myself. I knew then I must do it.
(Jian Haodong, filmmaker)

One of the main questions, usually the first one, I asked the filmmakers during my fieldwork was ‘why and how did you choose to go into independent filmmaking?’ Although the answers varied according to the filmmakers’ backgrounds, education and circumstances, two common elements emerged: expressions of discontent with their previous lives and Chinese society, and a perception of filmmaking as a way to counter this discontent.

Haodong and Chang Biao are both from Shanxi Province. Born in the late 1980s, they received bachelor’s degrees from Datong University, a second to third tier Chinese higher education institution. Haodong majored in coal mining, while Chang Biao studied computer science. Haodong comes from a mining family; his

father and grandfather are both miners and they helped him choose his major. At the time, coal mining was still considered a profession in which high risk was rewarded by a decent income. But Haodong was not interested in mining. At university, he liked literature and photography, and won prizes in writing competitions. Later, inspired by the story of the renowned filmmaker Jia Zhangke, also from Shanxi Province, he decided to make a film, *Youth without Regret*, adapted from a novel he wrote about student life. During the last year of his studies, Haodong began to work in a coal mine in his hometown to earn money to make *Eyes Cheat*. After earning 50,000 RMB (ca. 6,600 euros), he made the film and moved to Beijing.

Chang Biao was advised to study computer science by his parents, who were convinced that it promised a lucrative career. Similar to Haodong, however, Chang Biao had no interest in computers and programming. Since a very young age, he had loved watching films, renting Hong Kong action movies from DVD stores. After entering university, facilitated by the internet, he encountered art films by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-liang and Jia Zhangke. It was during this period that he met Haodong and that they decided to make a film together – *Lao Shan* (老山) – about a retired coalminer living in a rural village. However, the pressures of graduation and job-hunting interrupted Chang Biao's dream of becoming filmmaker. He felt forced to prepare for the postgraduate entrance exam, as his parents believed a higher degree from a famous Chinese university might enhance his career prospects. As he told me:

At the time I was struggling with pressure from my family. My parents worked so hard to support my studies, while I kept screwing around with my camera. Teachers and my classmates also blamed me for skipping too many classes. Being frustrated, I started to wake up at 6 o'clock every day, motivated myself and went to the library, reading programming and English.
(Chang Biao, filmmaker)

Soon, Chang Biao started to smoke and became depressed. After struggling for three months, he gave up on the postgraduate entrance exam, went to Beijing and became an independent filmmaker like Haodong.

It is clear that Haodong and Chang Biao chose filmmaking primarily because of their discontent with the paths their families wanted them to take. Meanwhile, cinema, especially the independent low-budget kind exemplified by Jia Zhangke's early work, seemed to provide them with a way of turning self-expression into a future career. During the interview, Haodong quoted a statement by Jia Zhangke: 'filmmaking is the way to freedom' (Jian Haodong, filmmaker).

In Chinese independent cinema, there are also some directors who were already experienced commercial or mainstream filmmakers before attempting independent filmmaking. Some of them used to be employed by state-owned media agencies. For example, Wu Wenguang was a journalist at Kunming Television; Duan Jinchuan graduated from the Beijing Broadcast Institute and went to Lhasa Television in Tibet; and Jiang Yue worked at the Beijing Film Studio. During my fieldwork, Zhao Liang and Fan Jian also mentioned that they had previously worked for state-owned media. Such experiences of working within the system were very common among earlier independent directors who started their careers in the 1990s (Johnson 2006; Berry 2006). In the past decade, with the expansion of the Chinese film industries and the rise of private production companies, there have been many cases of commercial film workers making independent films.

Jin Dixiang is the director of *Hua Shan Cross* (2015), which was selected for the documentary competition of the 12th Chinese Independent Film Festival and the documentary competition of the 2016 Xining FIRST film festival. Before making this film, Jin worked in the film industry for over 10 years. He was employed by a video advertising company, making commercial advertisements and internet short films. Frustrated by the stylised commercial photography the company favoured, Jin decided to make an independent documentary about the social and familial issues he had observed in his hometown:

I was introduced to that video company after I graduated from the film academy. It was a good opportunity at the time for young graduates. But such commercial photography is very stylised, which means you might feel good at an early stage, while later on, after years of working, you would get bored and frustrated. (Jin Dixiang, filmmaker)

Speaking of why he chose independent documentary, Jin gave me three reasons: first, in terms of financing, making documentaries costs less than making fiction films and documentaries are also easier to shoot; second, through self-funding he can remain free of pressure from investors as well as time pressure; finally, making independent documentaries contrasts positively with his previous tedious experience of commercial production, in the sense that he can now use a more ‘free’ and ‘profound’ way of filming. *Hua Shan Cross* was made over 7 years, during which Jin struggled to leave behind his previous commercial way of filming. For him, it was a process of ‘learning a new cinematic language’ (Jin Dixiang, filmmaker). To some extent, we could see this transition as a form of resistance to the alienation fostered by commercial filmmaking.

This sense of alienation sometimes also relates to the larger socio-political environment. Rong Guangrong, an independent film curator and director of some renown in Beijing's independent cinema circle, won the best Asian film award in 2017 Rotterdam Film Festival. His film, *Children Are Not Afraid of Death, Children Are Afraid of Ghosts*, is based on the 2015 suicide of a group of left-behind children in Bijie, Guizhou province.⁶ The topic, very sensitive to the Chinese authorities, relates to a plethora of social, economic, as well as political

⁶ In China, the term ‘left-behind children’ refers to children whose parents work as migrant workers in the cities while their children stay in their rural hometowns with their grandparents or other relatives. In this case, four ‘left-behind’ children were reportedly found dead of drinking pesticide after being abandoned by their parents. No sufficient food or other help had been offered by the local authorities before the suicide happened (Lin 2015).

issues haunting Chinese rural society, and it is therefore not surprising that the shooting process faced obstruction from the local government. After the award ceremony, Rong Guangrong and I, together with his wife and my colleague Rowan, talked about his work. In response to the question of why he chose to make independent films, especially on such sensitive topics, Rong told me about his early experiences. When he was a child, Rong's father liked to have affairs and, as a result, had a bad relationship with his mother. They quarrelled a lot and sometimes ended up in physical fights. In Rong's mind, his father was irresponsible and made no contribution to the family. His miserable childhood memories deeply affected Rong's character: he became irritable, righteous, and intolerant of unfairness. Living in Beijing now, Rong also feels depressed and uncomfortable about the political and media atmosphere. On the other hand, he likes children. Maybe due to the absence of his father during his childhood, Rong especially hopes to be a responsible father to his own children. After reading the news about the suicide of the left-behind children, Rong felt suspicious about the official reports and decided to visit the village and make a documentary. In another interview conducted by local Chinese media, he also related his motivation for the film to his own childhood:

The reason for my probing into the 'kids' suicide case' has a lot to do with my childhood. Very often I don't consider myself a father, though I have three children. Since the birth of them (his children), plus my own childhood memories, I think I can understand children better, be on their side, be as unreasonable, naughty, wild and angry as they are. Children can directly express emotions, while adults only control and disguise themselves. I feel desperate about the world of adults. (Xie 2017)

From the stories of these filmmakers' early life experiences, we can conclude that their motivation for undertaking independent filmmaking largely derives from experiences of discontent, whether with the educational system, the tedium of commercial film production, or the patriarchal culture. Such a list, for different filmmakers, could be extended to themes such as the 'heterosexual culture',

‘gender inequality’ and the ‘existing political order’. Independent filmmaking is desirable because it is seen as an ideal way of self-expression and of countering the various forms of discontent experienced.

In addition, as scholars like Paul G. Pickowicz have pointed out, some independent filmmakers are also ‘busy chasing global fame (and in some cases global money)’ (2006, 18). The chance to receive validation from overseas film festivals and, as a result, global fame and funds, is clearly a factor in these young people’s decision-making. Moreover, the cultural capital that can be accumulated through showing one’s films at international film festivals also offers Chinese independent directors the possibility of working with the domestic film industries so as to gain local recognition and economic returns. This possibility is exemplified by the case of Jia Zhangke.⁷ Aspirations to fame and career success through indie filmmaking are quite common among the informants I interviewed, especially for young ‘independents’ like the members of the *New Wave Group*. However, I want to suggest that it is most often the sense of discontent that constitutes the primary motivation for working in independent cinema. Attached to this discontent is a sense of using independent filmmaking to make the world better. As Zhao Liang explained to me at his studio in Beijing, ‘of course you always have a sense of heroism, a sense of justice. You have your justifications and you think you’re doing the right thing’ (Zhao Liang, filmmaker). In their own perception, therefore, independent filmmakers see their creative work as a way to express their sense of justice, while also potentially enabling a ‘successful career’.

As I will show in the following section, in reality this imagined balance between self-expression and success often translates into quite precarious politico-

⁷ As reported by various scholars and media, Jia Zhangke’s recent films, including *The World* (2004), *24 City* (2008), *A Touch of Sin* (2013) and *Mountains May Depart* (2015), were all approved by the state Film Bureau and received substantial financial support from both international and domestic film companies (Callahan 2014; Nakajima 2016).

economic circumstances, leading some Chinese indie filmmakers to be governed into taking on the subjectivity of a depoliticised ‘Chinese art-film worker’.

Precarising Chinese independent cinema

On the outskirts of southeast Beijing, just beyond the fourth ring, a group of people in their early 20s live together in a small village called South Bridge (南桥 *nan qiao*), all with hopes of becoming a Chinese global film auteur like Jia Zhangke. Coming from Shanxi, Anhui and northeast China, they do not have wealthy families; their parents are mostly farmers or migrant workers. Around 2015, after graduating from university they gathered in Beijing and founded the New Wave Experimental Cinema Group (新潮电影实验小组 *xinchao dianying shiyan xiaozu*). The name was chosen, as one of the members explained to me, to indicate their aim of making experimental and artistic films different from mainstream Chinese films. The group comprises 10 formal members, living together in shabby, tiny apartments. The monthly rent is cheap, around 800 to 1,500 RMB (100-200 euros), because of the poor construction and inconvenient location. From my personal experience, I know that it takes two hours to get there from the city centre. Even so, for young independent filmmakers like the members of the New Wave Group, it is an ideal area with very low living costs and a dynamic community. The area is inhabited mostly by migrant workers from all over the nation and has various cheap grocery stores, barbershops, and restaurants. Most importantly, the experience of group living and working offers the young filmmakers a way of combating precarity.

Unlike earlier independent filmmakers like Duan Jinchuan, Wu Wenguang and Zhao Liang, who mostly had experiences of working at state-owned television or film studios, the New Wave group members have little professional experience or knowledge and lacked a social network before they started making films. To alleviate financial pressure, the members developed their skills mostly through self-teaching, enabled by the internet, and reduced production costs. In effect, most members have developed a particular expertise. For example, Chang Biao is a photographer, Haodong is an audio recorder, Mu Jing an art director and Wang Fa

an executive director; what they have in common is that they are also directors and scriptwriters of their own works, and all aspire to be global Asian directors like Jia Zhangke or Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Their expertise allows them to make a living by working as crew members for commercial production teams. At the same time, they work together and help each other when someone is making their own independent film. For example, all the members volunteered to make both Haodong's film *Eyes Cheat* and Chang Biao's *Faded Time*.

Apart from financial precariousness, there is also a creative and affective precarity attached to independent filmmaking in contemporary Chinese cinema. As summarised by Chris Berry, since the 1990s, under the influence of marketisation and globalisation, Chinese independent filmmakers have been governed under a 'three-legged system', which is composed of 'the Party-State apparatus, the domestic market economy, and overseas connections' (2006, 115). State censorship demands Chinese filmmakers to conform politically and bars politically critical or dissenting films from entering Chinese cinemas. Domestic capital and commercial corporations, often in complicity with the state (Zhang 2007, 72), provide financial opportunities for Chinese filmmakers, but only if they accept co-optation and engage in commercial filmmaking. The overseas film festivals and media, however, encourage film workers to identify themselves as 'dissenting/artistic independents', by offering opportunities of funding and screening.

This 'three-legged system' on the one hand makes politically sensitive productions increasingly difficult and marginal in the domestic market. The recently enacted Promotion Law on the Film Industry (NPC 2016) stipulates that any film must be censored and licensed before participating in overseas film festivals, and that those violating the law will be fined and banned from filmmaking in China for a period of five years (NPC 2016). Although it is not yet known whether this law will be strictly enforced, the space for Chinese dissent filmmakers is arguably narrowing. As a result, critical realist filmmaking is becoming increasingly precarious, not least for independent documentary filmmakers. For example, most of Zhao Liang's works, including *Petition* (2009), *Crime and Punishment* (2007)

and *Return to the Border* (2005), are banned on the Chinese Mainland. Despite his ostensible cooperation with the government in 2009,⁸ which was later deemed ‘co-optation’ by some other Chinese independent filmmakers, Zhao Liang’s new documentary *Behemoth* (2015) has not been screened on the Chinese Mainland. The film focuses on the environmental issues and workers’ miserable living conditions in the mining areas of north China and captures the dehumanising effects of economic development. Except for *Together*, Zhao Liang’s films were all financed by overseas film festivals and cultural institutions. Moreover, although he is an established director, Zhao Liang still has financial problems given the high costs of housing and living in Beijing:

Compared with the 1990s, the pressure of surviving still exists. Now everything is expensive. In the 1990s, the rent might just be 300 (RMB) per month, while now it could be over 10,000. Funding is usually gone when I have finished one project. If the new project doesn’t come soon, it will be very difficult during the interim. (Zhao Liang, filmmaker)

On the other hand, however, the expanding domestic film market also provides more opportunities for independent cinema that is less ‘political’ or ‘critical realist’. This type of cinema, under the banner of the ‘art film’ (艺术电影 *yishu dianying*), is reported to be gaining audiences in Chinese cinemas and to be winning support from both capital and the state. These so-called art films are to some extent depoliticised and tend to focus on personal emotions through poetic visual symbols rather than clear storylines, in contrast to the art films produced by fifth and sixth generation directors, such as *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1988), *The Pickpocket* (Jia Zhangke, 1997), and *Devils on the Doorstep* (Jiang Wen, 2000), which focused on grand topics such as the individual, China and society in a specific socio-spatial context. Examples of the new art films include the acclaimed

⁸ In 2009 Zhao Liang was commissioned by the Ministry of Health to make the documentary *Together* (2010), which is about the social discrimination of people with HIV and AIDS in Chinese society.

Kaili Blues (Bi Gan, 2016) and *Crosscurrent* (Yang Chao, 2016),⁹ which both won awards at international film festivals and were also licensed for public release in Mainland China. These art films are mostly characterised by loose storylines, a poetic and rather obscure cinematic language and depoliticised (or less political) context. Politically sensitive issues are deliberately avoided. As Shan Zuolong, the producer of *Kaili Blues*, told me, ‘simply speaking, we are depoliticising. This should not be viewed as bowing to censorship but is actually our intentional aesthetic choice’ (Shan Zuolong, film producer). Depoliticisation may not mean that filmmakers and their productions now have nothing at all to do with politics, or that their cinematic aesthetics has no political connotations at all. Rather, these new art films are looking for more abstract, aesthetical forms of creativity that will not directly challenge the existing political and social order. As Shan explained:

Independent film is a transitional concept... Now we have passed that era. Filmmakers of the previous generation had a heavy burden, like ‘the Cultural Revolution’ and ‘society under transformation’, all of which could be their source of creativity. Bi Gan (the director) is not interested in these topics. What he wants to explore is the language of film. Politics is not important for him; thus, his films will not offend the censors. (Shan Zuolong, producer)

In the minds of these filmmakers, such an approach of ‘art for art’s sake’ seems an ‘ideal’ way to be creative under the three-legged system. The growing segmentation of the Chinese domestic film market and audience has produced a certain space for

⁹ *Kaili Blues* (*Lu Bian Ye Can*) tells the story of Chen’s dream-like experiences on a journey searching for his nephew. Chen is a physician in Kaili, a small county of Guizhou. In the film, the director Bi Gan uses various symbolic and visual elements to build up a surreal time-space continuum in which Chen encounters his past memories and lost love in a very emotional and poetic way. *Crosscurrent* (*Chang Jiang Tu*) depicts the magical love story of a couple on a trip along the Yangzi River in a non-linear way. Similar to Bi Gan, its director, Yang Chao, seems more interested in conveying emotions through poetic visual symbols rather than in presenting clear storylines with a political message.

these art films, while a less political focus also lowers the risk of censorship. At the same time, the exploration of cinematic language and film as ‘pure art’ also ensures that the possibility of success at overseas film festivals is retained.

From my observations of these filmmakers, it can be concluded that an ‘ideal’ scenario for success is now envisioned by them: one pinches and scrapes to make one’s debut film, which should portend one’s emerging film genius, and which should win one or two prizes at international film festivals. After gaining such fame, one is able to find more funding and to continue chasing the dream of becoming a global auteur. Bi Gan’s experience exemplifies this trajectory. He borrowed money from his teachers and friends for the production of his first film. After winning the title of Best New Director at the Taiwan Golden Horse Film Festival in 2015, he quickly obtained fame as well as fortune. The film passed the censorship and received a public release in Mainland China. Bi Gan was acclaimed by Chinese media and audiences as an emerging Chinese film master (Shao 2016). Afterwards, he and his producer Shan Zuolong founded Dangmai Film (*Dang Mai Yingye* 荡麦影业), a film production company, raising 30 million RMB from a Chinese media corporation named Huace Film (*Hua Ce Yingye* 华策影视) in series A financing (Shan Zuolong, film producer).

In effect, however, such success is hard to imitate. According to Yang Cheng, an experienced art film producer in Beijing, funding for Chinese art films comprises three sources: self/crowd-funding, domestic film companies, and overseas funding agencies (Yang Cheng, film producer). Apart from self-funding, access to these sources is highly dependent on the filmmaker’s previous experience and social network. For young filmmakers like those of the New Wave group, funding is elusive. After all, not every debut film can win big prizes at international film festivals. At the same time, not every art film can achieve financial success in Chinese cinemas and attract financial investment from domestic capital. Given that China has not yet established professional art-film houses, the rate of art-film screenings in Chinese cinemas is still very low, compared to that for commercial

blockbusters (Xingjue 2017). For art films with high investment, such as *Crosscurrent* (Yang Chao 2016), even a box office of several million RMB could not cover its production costs.

To seize the limited opportunities for future success, the young independent filmmakers of the New Wave group also have to learn ‘self-emotional management’, to keep an optimistic and positive mentality in confronting career uncertainties and precarious conditions. They need first of all to persuade themselves that their current position is the most rational choice. As Haodong announces:

These problems are real. But for me, I don’t have any other choices now. I don’t have a rich family. But I like cinema and I feel delighted with my work. Most importantly, after several years of experience, I think I have the talent for being a film director. I’m learning very fast and I feel good at it. I don’t know anything else that I can do. So even now if someone offered me a decent job that has no connection to film, I wouldn’t accept. (Jian Haodong)

New Wave group members also share a sense of optimism about their uncertain future. They like to talk about the success of other independent directors: ‘A got a new car’ and ‘B bought an apartment’. They do not conceal their aspiration to fame and fortune, and the thriving Chinese film industry instils confidence in them:

The Chinese film market is so active and getting more open. Art film can enter the cinema and the audience is also promoting their aesthetic tastes. This is an opportunity. ... We all have a strong mind. It just takes a little while to get through those highly depressing moments, which after all are very few as well. (Wang Fa, filmmaker)

Chinese independent filmmakers are confronted, on the one hand, with scarce and highly competitive financial opportunities offered by overseas film festivals and, on the other, with the ostensible ‘golden era’ of the Chinese film industry, from which independent films, however, are largely excluded. This three-legged system

corroborates Isabel Lorey's suggestion in her book *The State of Insecurity* that 'precarious living and working conditions are currently being normalised at a structural level and have thus become a fundamental governmental instrument of governing' (2015, 63). In an ontological sense, all human beings are born with a certain precariousness, following Judith Butler, for their survival always depends on a 'social network of hands' and one's life is always lived in relation to others (Butler, 2009, 14). Such a shared ontological precariousness, because of its demand for care and protection, and because 'all protection and all care maintain vulnerability' (Lorey 2015, 20), finally relates to the social and political dimension of precarity, which engages in 'hierarchising precarity' (Lorey 2015, 21). This term refers to the socio-political classification and differentiation of bodies, as well as decisions about which are to be protected and which can be left insecure, without care.

In the field of Chinese film production, to make governable those independent filmmakers who used to be labelled 'underground', 'dissenting' or 'rebellious', a crucial strategy of governance is thus to differentiate and classify them. 'Dissenting' filmmakers are stigmatised as threatening the stability and security of the nation, for their critical views toward the government and society. Their life should remain precarious and even be made 'unliveable'. For those 'art-film' producers who are still tameable and willing to accept the tactic of 'depoliticisation', their vulnerable lives are protected by the opportunities created by the complicity between the state, the market, and to some extent overseas film festivals. But such protection is far from sufficient, because opportunities are limited and highly competitive. A contingency of precarity must remain to make sure that 'degradation' into subversive dissent – 'insurrection' – will never happen. Managing this 'threshold of precarity', following Lorey (2015, 2), is 'what makes up the art of governing' in today's Chinese independent cinema.

To sum up, Chinese independent filmmakers are governed in the current three-legged system through three forms of precarity: financial, creative, and affective. The resulting precarisation orchestrates Chinese independent cinema

towards a depoliticised ‘art cinema’, while filmmakers have to deploy a self-governance through multi-tasking, networking and self-emotional management in order to maintain a sense of optimism about their future.

In the terms of the conceptual framework outlined in the introduction, this precarisation and depoliticisation of Chinese indie cinema constitutes an active process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation of independent filmmakers. Motivated by their shared discontent with life and society, the cultural value of independent film attracts them and prompts them to escape from the cultural, social and political codes they feel are entrapping them. The critical and rebellious spirit and aesthetics of their early films are meant to directly challenge the established ideological order. In response, however, the three-legged system constantly attempts to re-territorialise these ‘independents’ into the ‘depoliticised art cinema’ by precarising their life and working experiences while also offering limited career opportunities. If Chinese independent cinema is made governable through a re-territorialising precarisation, then how do filmmakers from diverse backgrounds respond to this precarity and governance? And can it be said, on the basis of the experiences of independent filmmakers, that these creative subjects are becoming what I have termed schizoid creators?

A community based on difference

In early February 2017, the Chinese independent film director Cong Feng was diagnosed with acute severe pancreatitis and sent to hospital. After the news spread, independent filmmakers in Beijing quickly lined up to offer assistance. Famous figures like Li Xianting and Liu Bing helped arrange the hospital and treatment. The news also drew attention from fans and supporters of Chinese independent film. For example, in one of the Wechat groups I joined named *Lantern Cine-Club*, an independent film-screening club in Beijing, the organiser Guo Xiaodong successfully raised over 5,000 RMB for Cong Feng within three days.¹⁰

¹⁰ Thanks to timely treatment and the financial support of his filmmaking friends, the

Besides offering mutual assistance in emergency circumstances, in their everyday work and life independent filmmakers in Beijing have formed a mutual-caring community. An informal union has formed, providing everything from technical assistance during filming to promotion activities after production. For young newcomers like the members of the New Wave group, this community provides various opportunities for learning, for screenings and for interacting with the audience. For instance, from August to the end September of 2016, during my fieldwork, the Lantern Cine-Club organised 10 events screening experimental films made by young graduates and filmmakers. Held in small cafés and cinemas, these events created stages for newly graduated film workers to share their works with audiences. These screening events and film clubs function not just as part of the consumption field of Chinese independent film, but also as part of the production field – encouraging the pro-sumption of Chinese independent cinema as suggested by Nakajima (2012). The events help promote Chinese independent film among domestic audiences, while also providing occasions for networking among investors, producers and indie directors. This informal community even has its own film festivals, such as the Beijing Independent film festival (BIFF, Beijing) and the China Independent film festival (CIFF, Nanjing). These festivals, although also precarious in terms of financing and their relationship with the government, provide a good opportunity for Chinese independent/art filmmakers to build their career.

In the case of the New Wave film group, for instance, both Haodong and Chao Biao have experienced sharing their films at screening events as well as domestic film festivals. Through these experiences, they met many other indie directors and producers, who later became their friends and brought opportunities of multi-tasking and funding. During the making of his film *Faded Time*, Chang Biao was also working as a photographer for other film crews he met in Beijing, to earn money for filming as well as his basic livelihood. Three years later, after finishing the production, he was provided with screening opportunities by several film clubs. With the help of some established directors and indie film workers such as Hao Jie

operation was successful and Cong Feng eventually returned all donations from fans.

and Guo Xiaodong, moreover, he got a contract from Blackfin, a leading Chinese art film production company that, since 2015, has successfully produced several Chinese indie films, including *Kaili Blues* (2016) and *Free and Easy* (2016). In a recent conversation (2018) through Wechat, Chang Biao told me that *Faded Time* will be submitted to the Locarno Festival and that he had just started a new art film project entitled *Unknown Time*, financed by Blackfin and several other production companies.

The informal mutual-caring community outlined above can be viewed as a spontaneous response, first of all, to the precarious circumstances of Chinese indie film production, especially with regard to securing financing and good career prospects. A more complex question, however, is the following: if the creative and affective precarity I illustrated earlier also serves precarisation as a form of re-territorialising, are there also possibilities for resistance generated from the forming of this community? And do these possibilities lead to the formation of what in my introduction I have called ‘schizoid creators’, who work both for and against the governing system?

In 2011, before the opening of the 6th Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF), Zhu Rikun, the former CEO and artistic director of BIFF, resigned, left Beijing and later moved to the United States. One of the reasons for his departure, as Sniadecki’s ethnography shows, was his aggressive¹¹ and oppositional approach to operating the BIFF. According to Li Xianting, the founder and a major benefactor of the BiFF, Zhu’s stance exacerbated tensions between the festival and the state, thus transforming the indie filmmaking community into a ‘small clique’ (2013, 170). Instead, Li Xianting preferred a more conciliatory way of dealing with the state so as to make the BIFF and Chinese independent cinema more open and inclusive. Years later, when I asked Zhu for his current attitude toward Chinese indie film festivals and his own previous work, he replied:

¹¹ According to Zhu, his aggressive approach consisted of selecting films critical of the Chinese government, bringing political risks for the festival (Sniadecki 2013, 172).

Doing these things (curating indie film festivals) will bring as much harm as good. It's hard to explain. Metaphorically, one was very into poetry when one was in university, and tried to help classmates who had the same interest. But now these classmates have become bureaucrats, party members. And the experience of writing poetry becomes something for them to boast about: 'I like writing poetry, and I'm a literate official'. (Zhu Rikun, filmmaker)

It could be argued that, as Zhu implies, the field of Chinese independent film production has allowed many film workers, especially young directors like the members of the New Wave Group, to gather cultural capital that may benefit their future careers. As long as they treat independent filmmaking as a job through which they also have to make a livelihood, these filmmakers have to adopt a practical approach to the larger social-economic-political circumstances and be willing to negotiate with the state, the market and society. However, being practical does not equate to a complete surrender to the state or capital; depoliticisation also cannot simply be denounced as 'co-optation' or a complete escape from being political. In the preface to the 13th Chinese Independent Film Festival (CIFF), Yang Cheng, the artistic director, writes:

The 'independence' of 'independent film' is an absolute parameter worth pursuing. It points to 'freedom'... But 'independent film' as a term, a form of specific existence, cannot live without relativity. It needs some references to test, to determine its connotation and extension. Any simplistic either-or definition is unreliable; it's too easy to camouflage. In this sense, Chinese independent cinema still confronts a complicated situation, both inside and outside, but it is far from being tougher than ever. For true filmmakers, words like 'hardship' and 'perseverance' should be superfluous. ... 'Survival first' is still our motto... The so-called new choice does not mean choosing whether to continue being independent or not, but considering what 'the new independence' is within independent film. ... 'Post-independence' does not exist. The perception of the world,

the questioning of the self, and the exploration of film should be without bounds; therefore, each era is the 'era before independence'. (Yang Cheng, film producer)

For Yang Cheng, a relative understanding of independence does not call for absolute independence from the influence of capital and the state, but for an independence that seeks 'critical thought and independent spirit expressed in a work' (Cheung 2007). It is a spiritual independence that points to 'freedom' in a relative sense. For reasons of survival in a precarious environment, independent filmmakers have to compromise and adapt their artistic as well as political initiatives. It is in this sense that absolute independence (what Yang Cheng terms 'post-independence') does not exist. The significance of Chinese independent filmmaking, however, compared with mainstream filmmaking, is embodied in its aim of seeking 'freedom', the freedom of choosing how to perceive the world, of questioning the self, and of exploring the medium of film. Following Yang Cheng, it is the pursuit of relative 'independence' and 'freedom' that characterises Chinese independent film, rather than its relationship with the state or capital.

In Chinese independent cinema, precarisation as governmentality largely limits filmmakers from pursuing independence and freedom in their everyday production practice. But, even under conditions of precarisation, the 'spiritual independence' asserted by Yang Cheng is, or should be, valued and adhered to by those who identify themselves as 'indie directors'. They are becoming what I have termed 'schizoid creators' in the sense that their creative labour on the one hand is integrated into the larger governing system of cultural production in China. On the other hand, in the pursuit and identification of 'spiritual' independence, Chinese independent filmmaking also opens up the possibility of 'exodus and constituting', of 'leaving and starting something new' (Lorey 2015, 104). In line with this, it can be said that the practical understanding of independence and independent film signifies an agentic refusal of simplistic, fixed identifications as 'dissenting artist', 'underground filmmaker', or 'co-opted' state/commercial director.

Conclusion

As this chapter has illustrated, independent filmmaking was mostly chosen as a way to balance aspirations to career success with a desire to address the discontent experienced in relation to one's own previous living conditions or certain aspects of Chinese society. In effect, however, it is precarised by the existing 'three-legged' system: the complicity between the state and capital on the one hand seduces independent filmmakers into accepting co-optation and depoliticisation, while, on the other hand, foreign film festivals encourage them to identify themselves as 'dissenting/artistic independents' by offering (limited and highly competitive) funding and screening opportunities. This precarisation orchestrates and re-territorialises Chinese independent cinema towards a depoliticised 'art cinema', while filmmakers also have to deploy a self-governance through multi-tasking, networking and self-emotional management to maintain a sense of optimism about the future.

In response to the precarisation of Chinese independent cinema, meanwhile, an informal mutual-caring community has emerged. Animated by the common aspiration to 'independence' and 'freedom', this community not only helps alleviate living and work pressures by offering opportunities for screenings, skills learning and emotional sharing and caring, but also triggers a more open understanding of 'independence' and 'independent filmmaking'. Such a more inclusive and fluid conception of independence allows for the differentness of its members to be preserved and for them to no longer be circumscribed by rigid identities such as that of 'political dissenter' or 'non-commercial' filmmaker. Thus, the precarious life and working conditions of independent filmmakers not only captures their labour and creativity, but also produces a condition that allows individual difference and that challenges the existing production system. This combination of the oppressive and productive aspect of precarity and precarisation gives rise to the formation of schizoid subjectivities among Chinese independent filmmakers. As I will show in the next chapter, productive precarity and schizoid subjectivity are not only evident

among Chinese independent filmmakers, but also among other commercial creators in China's cultural economies.