Parrhesia in the age of the ultra-unreal
Independent non-fiction filmmaking in 21st century China
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Parrhesia in the Age of the Ultra-Unreal:
Independent Non-Fiction Filmmaking in 21st Century China

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Introduction

Independent Chinese Cinema

As it approached eight o’clock, the small room hidden within a Beijing hutong (胡同) became increasingly crowded. By five past eight the room was completely full. There were people sharing seats and others sitting on the floor. A small group stood outside to watch the film through the window. These fifty people, predominantly in their early twenties, had come to a makeshift cinema’s first ever screening to watch the documentary Cotton (2014), directed by Zhou Hao. The film, eight years in the making, traces the entire chain of the Chinese cotton industry. It moves from cotton farmers in Xinjiang province, female seasonal cotton pickers, cotton spinners, and clothing manufacturers, to an international wholesale trade fair in Guangzhou. After having watched how the people along this production chain spend all day, every day, working to earn an income that barely covers basic living expenses, and how each of them wishes their children will not need to work as hard as they do, three representatives from different NGOs that were hosting the event initiated an open and lively discussion on the plight of rural communities, migrant workers and women in China.

I attended this small event in May 2015 during an exploratory field trip to Beijing for this study on contemporary independent Chinese cinema. It illustrates how, as I witnessed during recurring field trips spread across three years, independent Chinese cinema carves out an alternative space where official discourses are questioned, non-mainstream realities are represented, and a wide range of topics are openly discussed. It is this capacity of independent Chinese cinema to question official and mainstream truths, and present alternatives in its production, content, and distribution that forms the focus of this study.

Contemporary independent Chinese cinema finds its origins in the early 1990s through both the so-called New Documentary Movement and the Sixth Generation of filmmakers. The New Documentary Movement (xin jilu yundong 新纪

1 A hutong is a traditional narrow street, or collection of them, found in the centre of Beijing.
is a term allegedly brought into being at a meeting in filmmaker Zhang Yuan’s home in 1992 to discuss “the independence of documentary at both a practical and conceptual level” (Lü 2010: 16) and was popularized in academic circles through the collection of essays and interviews Documenting China: The New Documentary Movement in Contemporary China (jilu zhongguo: dangdai zhongguo xin jilu yundong 纪录中国：当代中国新纪录运动) by Lü Xinyu (2003). The New Documentary Movement stood for a radical break from the dominant documentary making practices and aesthetics in China at the time, and established a new form of filmic reality.

From the foundation of the PRC until the 1980s most documentaries produced in China were highly didactic, relied primarily on studio based, pre-scripted practices, and principally reinforced state ideology (Chu 2007: 39-95). Starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s Chinese film crews began to travel abroad to shoot documentaries, and foreign filmmakers visited China to co-produce documentary features. This exchange provided an opportunity for Chinese filmmakers to become acquainted with different techniques and styles (Chen and Wang 2012). One of the earliest of these exchanges was the Sino-Japanese production The Silk Road (1980, Hajime Suzuki), a twelve-part documentary, which started production in August 1979 and was in large parts filmed on location. During the 1980s this incremental exchange continued and documentary practices slowly opened up and moved in new directions. This development cannot be seen separately from the economic reforms initiated in this decade and the so-called culture fever, a period of relatively open ideological debate that swept through intellectual circles and art and cultural production in China (Wang 1996). The end of the culture fever came with the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests, in the wake of which the New Documentary Movement took shape.

The 1990 documentary Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers (1990) by Wu Wenguang is considered to be a turning point and was one of the first productions of the New Documentary Movement (e.g. Robinson 2013: 28, Reynaud 2010: 157-158). The film followed a group of struggling artists and broke with conventional styles: it had no voiceover, used hand-held camera work, and featured gritty images and muddy sound. Instead of retelling state-approved histories, New Documentary Movement filmmakers like Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan went out into the street to capture life as it was not being shown on TV. Relying primarily
on diegetic sound, long takes, and tracking shots, the New Documentary Movement captured real events as they unfolded. One of the regularly invoked defining features of the New Documentary Movement (e.g. Berry 2007, Johnson 2006, Lü 2003, Robinson 2010, 2013, Sniadecki 2015) is the idea of xianchang (现场). Xianchang can be translated as “on the scene” or “on the spot” and is about being present as events occur; it is closely associated with the so-called documentary or on the spot realism (jishi zhuyi 纪实主义), which the New Documentary Movement employed in contrast to the socialist realism found in state productions.

The emergence of the New Documentary Movement coincided with the start of independent fiction film making in China and the emergence of Sixth Generation filmmakers like Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke, and Lou Ye. Defining characteristics of the early films by this generation were shooting on location, on the spot realism, as well as tackling stories otherwise left untold. The New Documentary Movement and the Sixth Generation filmmakers, as well as subsequent independent fiction and documentary making, have been heavily intertwined and informed by similar principles. Thus, most of the early independent fiction features employed documentary practices and aesthetics. For example, one of the first independent fiction features, Mama (1990), directed by Zhang Yuan, about a mother and her mentally disabled son, featured documentary excerpts of mothers speaking about their disabled children. Prolific independent filmmakers Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke, and Wang Bing have all made both fiction and documentary feature films. The close connectedness between these two movements led early academic works on independent Chinese film, like From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China (2006), edited by Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, and The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century (2007), edited by Zhen Zhang, to treat the documentary and fictional works of the 1990s and early 2000s as belonging to the same corpus of independent Chinese cinema.

It is with this shared background in mind that this study treats independent cinema in its fictional and non-fictional forms, as well as in the forms that lie in between, as its unit of analysis. My research initially focused on independent documentary filmmaking only, but the shared history of different forms of filmmaking in China, and, as is discussed further on, the blurring of boundaries
between fact and fiction in contemporary independent Chinese cinema, led me to broaden the scope, and to use non-fiction in the title.

So what exactly is independent Chinese film? According to Chris Berry (2006), independent Chinese cinema, both fictional and documentary, can best be understood as “initiated and controlled by the filmmaker and not made within the system ... it is not part of the approved internal annual production schedule of either a state-owned film studio or television station” (Berry 2006: 111). It should be noted that initially most independent filmmakers worked within the state television industry to earn a living, and made use of equipment they could access through their work there. With the introduction of cheaper digital video editing and recording equipment during the late 1990s this dependence on the state-run studio system steadily declined and more possibilities to work truly independently opened up (Wu 2010). In his monograph Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics (2015: 4), Dan Edwards defines independent Chinese films as “produced and distributed outside of official state sanctioned channels.” Here, state sanctioned channels include private corporations that are subject to state control. Independent films, according to Edwards, are those films not required to be submitted to state censors.

However, increased high-speed internet access and the proliferation of recording equipment in recent times have created a plethora of commercially oriented (online) media productions that are also made outside of state-owned film studios or television stations, and not directly bound by state control, like micro-movies (wei dianying 微电影) posted on video-sharing platforms and the live-streaming (zhibo 直播) that happens through various dedicated platforms, such as Douyin (抖音) and Kuaishou (快手). This has opened up an entire new mode of film production and reception, notably studied in China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities (2010) by Paola Voci, who employs the notion of lightness to deal with some of these novel productions. She defines lightness as a marker of the small screen videos’ “small costs, distribution ambitions, economic impact, limited audience, quick and volatile circulation, and resistance to being framed into or validated by either market, art, or political discourses” (Voci 2010: xx).

According to the editors of China’s iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century (Johnson et al. 2014), the emergence of an internet-based screen culture, in combination with the perceived individualisation
in China, has given rise to an iGeneration (with the i standing for both the internet and individualization), requiring a new approach to screen studies, incorporating novel forms of production and consumption. I share their conclusion that the individualization and digitization of everyday life in China have greatly altered the way in which media are produced and consumed. However, grouping all visual media produced at present under the term “iGeneration” effects a homogenization that obscures the specificities of the type of independent filmmaking examined in this study.

Even though the constantly growing field of internet-based visual media could be considered independent and is an integrated part of contemporary media practices in China, this study concerns itself with the independent film stemming from the aforementioned independent traditions, which at present distinguishes itself by being predominantly “independent on a conceptual level” (Lü 2010: 16), as the first independent filmmakers set out to be, or, as Yingjin Zhang (2006: 26) writes, “independent of official ideology.” A term which encapsulates this conceptual independence is “independent spirit” (duli jingshen 独立精神). This is a term I often encountered in conversations with filmmakers in China, yet which hardly returns in existing literature on independent Chinese filmmaking. Even though there is no real consensus on what an independent spirit might be, it can be associated with Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel’s (2010) description of independent documentary culture as being “alternative” in relation to the mainstream in terms of its content, production, and distribution. In a similar vein, Dan Edwards and Marina Svensson (2017: 163-164) write that independent Chinese documentaries “are about fostering critical reflection upon China’s contemporary reality” and about “bearing witness to changes and problems in society.” Thus, in this study, independent Chinese cinema is understood as cinema produced in an independent spirit, which finds its roots in the commitments of the New Documentary Movement and Sixth Generation filmmakers to critically capturing the parts of contemporary Chinese reality not shown by state and commercial media.²

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² In my definition of independent Chinese cinema I adhere to an inclusive understanding of the term as suggested by Jeroen de Kloet (2007), who argues that “the ‘Chineseness’ of Chinese cinema is not just located in the text or its auteur, but also in its cinematic production and reception” (de Kloet 2007: 63). Independent Chinese cinema, as understood in this study, can also involve non-Chinese citizens, or may be filmed outside of China. There are several non-Chinese filmmakers, including Antoine Boutet, J. P.
Independent Cinema as Parrhesia

"My camera doesn’t lie" (wo de sheyingji bu sahuang 我的摄影机不撒谎). This phrase appeared as the title of both a book by Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou (2002) containing a collection of profiles of and interviews with independent filmmakers, and a 2003 documentary about independent film in China by Solveig Klassen and Katharina Schneider-Roos, while also being uttered by the protagonist of the film Suzhou River (2000, Lou Ye). It captures an integral part of the independent spirit of independent Chinese filmmaking (both fiction and documentary) that continues to be felt to this day: a commitment to capturing contemporary reality truthfully (Berry 2007, Zhang 2006, Robinson 2013). It is this claim of independent Chinese cinema to be speaking a truth that drives my analysis of independent cinema in China.

To further explore this, I would like to start with a discussion of the supposed reality and truth of documentary in general. What constitutes reality and what might be considered truth in relation to documentary film is not straightforward. I find the way Michael Renov (1993: 6-7) understands these terms in relation to documentary most useful. He draws on Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, and refers to reality as that which simply is; even though reality is ultimately perceived through our sensory organs, it needs no description and is beyond description, so that any description of reality would per definition be fictive. Truth, on the other hand, is understood as a discursive statement, a speech act, a construction that is held to be true. Thus, a documentary never actually is reality; instead, it is a cinematic form that inscribes a truth claim on its description, narrativisation, and perhaps even fictionalisation of reality.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994: 180) take this idea a step further when they write, in their discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of artistic representation, that “literature, and by extension cinema, do not so much refer to or call up the world as represent its languages and discourses. Rather than directly reflecting the real or even refracting the real, artistic discourse constitutes a

Sniadecki, Edward Burger, Elodie Brosseau, Benny Shaffer, Lance Crayon, and Adam James Smith, who make films in an independent spirit, which critically reflect upon contemporary China, and who often also circulate them through the underground screenings discussed in Chapter 3. For the broader debate on what constitutes Chinese cinema, see also Berry (1998), Lim (2007), Fang (2007), and Zhang (2007).
refraction of a refraction.” If documentary can be considered a narrativisation of reality and as such presents a truth claim, a fictional film can just as well present a truth claim with regard to the filmic reality it displays. As Shohat and Stam note, “films ... even when they do not claim to represent specific historical incidents, still implicitly make factual claims” (1994: 197). Most fiction films, after all, contain a high degree of verisimilitude and refract reality even when not claiming to represent “the truth.” Thus, even if the story in a fiction film has not actually occurred, the filmic world and the type of events portrayed could be claimed and considered to have a relation to reality, and can therefore be as true (or false) as that which is shown in any documentary.

In his analysis of the “my camera doesn’t lie” statement, Yingjin Zhang (2006) suggests that the truth of independent film is not so much about conveying an inherent, universal truth as it is about laying claim to one’s own truths (as opposed to those of the state):

I suggest we take “My camera doesn’t lie” as a statement not so much about certain inherent truth content in Chinese independent film as about strategic positions independent directors have claimed for themselves with regard to truth, subjectivity, and audience. By declaring “My camera doesn’t lie” they intervened in Chinese media and have succeeded in re-establishing the artist’s subjectivity, which authorizes them to proceed in a self-confident manner: my vision, my camera and my truth. (Zhang 2006: 39-40)

Following Zhang, the truth claim of Chinese independent cinema is thus not about professing a singular, inherent truth, but rather a means to strategically position the films as reflecting real lived experiences otherwise not portrayed, and as embodying the personal truth of the filmmaker.

In many ways how Chinese independent documentary is thought to speak truth shows a striking resemblance to the way in which Michel Foucault, in Fearless Speech (2001), understands the ancient Greek notion of parrhesia. During a series of lectures given in 1983 at Berkeley, Foucault delved into the act of parrhesia, which he understands as a specific way of speaking truth to power. The parrhesiastes speaks truth to somebody in power, like a king or ruler. He or she does this because he or she feels a moral obligation to speak out. In speaking truth, the parrhesiastes at the same time puts him- or herself at risk, because the person
to whom truth is spoken might not approve of what is said, and is in a position to punish the parrhesiastes. Thus, the parrhesiastes must somehow be recognised as a truth teller and as such be entitled to tell the truth, a recognition that does not necessarily come from the power to which he or she speaks. In Foucault’s words:

Parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his [sic] own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). (Foucault 2001: 19-20)

Notable in this quote are Foucault’s emphasis on the personal relationship and frankness that the parrhesiastes possesses towards the truth, and on the criticality expressed through this truth. These characteristics recur in the “my camera doesn’t lie” statement, which can be seen as claiming for the director a personal, frank, and critical position.

Jonathan Simon, who conceptualises the personal testimonies given before the 9/11 commission as a form of parrhesia in contemporary American politics, further elaborates on the notion of parrhesia by stressing that

parrhesia does not function by leading listeners to a truth through the performance of reasoned argument or the manipulation of less reflective instincts (as philosophy or rhetoric might). A parrhesiastic speaker produces a truth that comes uniquely from herself and her experience and is directed critically at a listener whose power places the speaker in potential danger. (Simon 2004: 1422)

This quote stresses the personal and subjective nature of the truth spoken through parrhesia, which accords closely with the way in which Chinese independent documentaries emphasise their truth, captured by the filmmaker in a selective and subjective way through the camera or through the personal accounts of people featured in the film.

For Foucault, too, the point of studying the act of parrhesia is not directly related to establishing whether or not a statement is true or false, or to simply identifying something as a form of parrhesia. Rather, he seeks to analyse this
specific type of truth telling as a strategic activity. Questions Foucault poses in relation to this activity that are directly relevant to Chinese independent documentary and that will guide my analysis in the coming chapters are:

Who is able to tell the truth? What are the moral, the ethical, and the spiritual, conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth teller? About what topics is it important to tell the truth? (About the world? About nature? About the city? About behaviour? About man?) What are the consequences of telling the truth? What are its anticipated positive effects...? What is the relation between the activity of truth telling and the exercise of power? Should truth-telling be brought into coincidence with the exercise of power, or should these activities be completely independent and kept separate? (Foucault 2001: 169-170)

Even though Foucault’s understanding of parrhesia matches many of the characteristics of independent documentary production in China—the risk of persecution, feelings of moral obligation on behalf of the filmmakers, a strong belief in presenting one’s own truth, and the credibility instilled in those recognised as independent filmmakers or artists, as opposed to say hobbyists or amateurs—the question arises whether it is productive to use an ancient Greek concept for a contemporary Chinese phenomenon.

The act of parrhesia as it might have occurred in ancient Greece cannot be exactly replicated in contemporary settings. William Walters (2014) asks what parrhesia might look like in the present and sees a strong overlap with whistleblowing as a risky, conscientious truth speaking activity. In the final chapter of her dissertation on the development of parrhesia over the centuries, Renea Carol Frey (2015: 160-184) similarly draws on whistleblower Edward Snowden to place parrhesia in a contemporary context, highlighting the form, risks, message, and means of his act, and drawing out the globalised, digitised, and multimodal aspects of contemporary parrhesia. Besides whistleblowers, Walters (2014) also considers the photojournalism of Noor Behram—a Pakistani photographer who spent years photographing the impact of American drone strikes in Waziristan, Pakistan, to expose the number of casualties—as a form of mediated, visual parrhesia conducted under the specific circumstances of globalised mass media. Walters further suggests that “rather than treat parrhesia as a unity, a name for a thing existing in the world, it is better to see it as an analytic” (2014: 285). He urges users
of the concept “to be sensitive to circumstances ... changing topographies of the public sphere, the expanded reach of technologies of violence and new forms of communications” (Walters 2014: 287).

This study treats independent cinema in China as a form of parrhesia and draws on Foucault’s questions, while following Walters in remaining sensitive to the specific circumstances. Thus, although the parrhesiastes is supposedly speaking truth to power, it is important to note that power cannot be considered as simply embodied by the king, emperor, or, in the contemporary Chinese context, Xi Jinping. Where power lies in contemporary China is a complex, multifaceted question. Informed by Foucault’s understanding of the workings of power, this study presumes that power, language, and knowledge are intertwined and reproduced through all levels of society, from the courts to the media, and from schools to the family unit, in order to create self-governing citizens (Foucault 2007). Exercising power and establishing shared truths is thus neither a static situation, nor a completely top-down process. It is, rather, a dynamic, multidirectional process of negotiation and, in cases of successful governing, mutual reinforcement.

This understanding of power complicates the position of Chinese independent cinema as a form of parrhesia. Its truths are not simply directed towards a central figure in power, in the form of, for example, Xi Jinping, who most likely will never see or hear about any given independent film. Chinese independent cinema, defined as filmmaking with a strong commitment toward critical reflection upon contemporary China, is instead directed towards a complex system of power that permeates society and works to instil its own set of truths. In this context power lies with institutions like The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chinese Central TV (CCTV), as well as the Confucian values and authoritarian capitalism embedded in Chinese society. In this study I explore both how independent cinema operates in its entanglement with specific parts of this system and how it asserts alternative truth claims.

Having introduced the history of Chinese independent film and presented it as a form of parrhesia, the next section outlines the present state of Chinese independent film in relation to what Ning Ken (2016) has termed the age of the ultra-unreal.
Non-Fiction in the Age of the Ultra-Unreal

“There is no such thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques”, Trinh T. Minh-Ha states, “despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition” (1991: 29). In most people’s understanding, documentary cinema refers to a form of non-fiction, true stories, or a film depicting something real. John Grierson, who coined the term “documentary” in the 1930s, refers to it as being “the creative treatment of actuality” (1933: 7) and writes that, in documentary, “we pass from the plain (and fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it” (1976: 20). This early description of what a documentary is supposed to be shows how from its very beginnings documentary has been considered a creative method of capturing an actual event and transforming it into something that can be viewed on a screen. Even in its most stripped-down forms of direct cinema, *kino-pravda* (film truth), or *cinema-vérité* (truthful cinema), documentary filmmaking is a strongly creative practice and per definition not reality as such. More radically, as Georges Franju argued: “There isn’t any *cinéma-vérité*. It’s necessarily a lie, from the moment the director intervenes – or it isn’t cinema at all” (qtd. in Levin 1971: 119).

As mentioned earlier, Chinese independent cinema from the early 1990s heavily insisted on reality and truth as its guiding principles, and initially operated almost exclusively in an on the spot realism (*jishi zhuyi* 纪实主义) style. For the New Documentary Movement this was mainly a reaction to the studio based, pre-scripsted, didactic documentaries that dominated documentary production in China at the time. However, as Bill Nichols writes,

it is worth insisting that the strategies and styles deployed in documentary, like those of narrative film, change; they have a history. And they have changed for much the same reason: the dominant modes of expository discourse change; the arena of ideological contestation shifts. The comfortably accepted realism of one generation seems like artifice to the next. New strategies must constantly be fabricated to represent “things as they are” and still others to contest this very representation. (1983: 17)
In China, after the emergence of the first independent filmmakers, it is in a similar vein that a new generation of independent filmmakers has become increasingly aware of the limitations of on the spot realism. As a result, since the late 2000s, a steady stream of looser approaches to reality has emerged, blending fact with fiction, reality with fantasy, and pushing the boundaries of filmic forms. For example, for the film *Disorder* (2009) Huang Weikuang re-edited footage shot by TV journalists in Guangzhou, drawing out new associations and re-contextualising the original material. *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017, Xu Bing) was created entirely with publicly available security camera footage, used to craft a bizarre tale of love and transformation. Liu Jiayin cast her family to play dramatised versions of themselves in their own home in the films *Oxhide* (2005, Liu Jiayin) and *Oxhide II* (2009, Liu Jiayin). *The Gleaners* (2013, Ye Zuyi), too, consists almost fully of loose re-enactments of very recent conversations between the filmmaker and his parents. A better-known example of this move towards documentary-fiction hybrids can be found in Sixth Generation filmmaker Jia Zhangke’s *24 City* (2008), which blends scripted and actual interviews about the dismantling of a factory in Chengdu.

More recently, there have been many films pushing the documentary genre into different directions, for example through the merging of documentary, improvised acting incorporating unwitting bystanders, performance art, and scripted fiction in *Li Wen at East Lake* (2015, Li Luo). *The Missing* (2015, Han Tao) features film scholar Zhang Xianmin in a semi-fictional role interviewing various artists, activists, and dissidents about what is missing in life, and in Chinese society. The film mainly consists of talking heads, but the pretext for the interviews is fictional and the interviews are intercut with dream-like scenes. Moreover, the film adds a self-reflexive layer by repeatedly showing the camera crew and directly addressing its viewers on several occasions. Closer to the docudrama genre, the film *Mr. Zhang Believes* (2015, Qiu Jiongjiong) is based on the autobiography of Zhang Xianchi, who was labelled a rightist during the anti-rightist campaigns in the late 1950s. The film primarily consists of re-enactments of events leading up to Zhang’s persecution, sporadically interjecting clips from interviews with Zhang himself. The re-enactments combine elements from theatre, circus, and traditional Chinese shadow puppetry, and include dream-like conversations between historical

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3 A docudrama is a completely staged film based on historical events.
figures such as Chairman Mao and Chiang Kai-shek. Director Qiu Jiongjiong identifies Bertolt Brecht as a key influence for the film’s style (Interview with Qiu Jiongjiong 2015), in particular Brecht’s notion of estrangement as a theatrical technique to represent the familiar in an out of the ordinary fashion in order to entice the audience to take a critical stance toward reality and recognise social wrongs. The film was also multi-modal, accompanied by an art exhibition of props used in the film and paintings that had served as storyboards, while a book about the exhibition and film was also published (Qiu 2015).

This wave of looser filmmaking can be viewed as a marked shift from how independent Chinese filmmaking started out in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As noted earlier, the birth of independent Chinese documentary was in several ways a counter movement against films broadcast through the state-controlled media, showing what often remained unseen, giving voice to the voiceless, and using a radically different filmic style. As such, the movement was accompanied by a realist aesthetic, strong adherence to direct cinema principles, long shots, no voiceovers and a commitment to being on the scene (xianchang 现场) (Robinson 2013). At the same time, within independent fiction films there was the so-called documentary impulse, where stylistic elements characteristic of documentary filmmaking was incorporated into fiction films, while fiction film also served as a vehicle to realistically document the rapid changes in China (Braester 2007).

In the conclusion of his book on independent Chinese documentary, Luke Robinson writes that, rather than viewing the recent emergence of increased subjectivity and fictional elements in films like Jia Zhangke’s 24 City (2008) and Still Life (2006) as a radical departure, it can also be viewed as something that has always been present in Chinese independent cinema, albeit in a less pronounced way:

> It points to an alternative genealogy of independent documentary, one in which the subjective and objective, spontaneous and staged, fictional and non-fictional are closely intertwined. Although this trend is more obviously identifiable in contemporary work, it has its roots in the very beginning of the new documentary movement, in the intersection in performance and mediation apparent in Bumming in Beijing (1989) and The Other Shore (1995) which focuses on a theatre production; but also in Zhang Yuan’s debut feature Mama (1990) which cuts actual
interviews with parents of autistic children into its story of a mother struggling to raise her handicapped child. (Robinson 2013: 155)

Even though it is possible to trace the incorporation of subjective, spontaneous, and fictional elements to the early days of the New Documentary Movement, I believe that the decidedly more frequent and explicit use of the subjective, staged, and fictional in many recent documentaries, as well as the privileging of more surreal, mystical, and magical elements over on the spot realism in fiction films, can indeed be seen as an important shift away from the defining aesthetics and production principles of early Chinese independent cinema. Although, as Robinson rightly notes, earlier films also purposefully intertwined fiction with non-fiction, as for example in *Mama* (1990, Zhang Yuan), or in the semi-improvised loosely structured nature of *Beijing Bastards* (1993, Zhang Yuan), I would argue that, in these cases, including documentary styles and practices was designed to position these fiction films closer to reality, and not to embrace the surreal, the magical, or a sense of estrangement, as seems to be the case in contemporary works. The early rejection of the subjective is affirmed in this 1993 quote from Zhang Yuan: “I make films because I am concerned about social issues and realities … I don’t like being subjective, and I want my films to be objective. It’s objectivity that’ll empower me” (qtd. in Reynaud 2007: 267).

In line with this argument, Luke Vulpiani (2014: 101) points to *24 City* (2008, Jia Zhangke) and *Summer Palace* (2006, Lou Ye) as representing the transition from the “grim real” employed by the Sixth Generation filmmakers (to which Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye belong), which “utilizes xianchang, as well as a specular gaze, to create an intense focus on notions of reality and truth”, to the aforementioned iGeneration with its “more carefree configuration.” Eddie Bertozzi also notes how for example *Suzhou River* (2000, Lou Ye) and *Still Life* (2006, Jia Zhangke) “challenge the jishizhuyi style (on-the-spot-realism) of the 1990s, by engaging disorienting tones and unusual visual elements in their films” (2012: 163). For Bertozzi, this signals a turn toward magic realism, which entails the incorporation of the fantastical, magical or physically impossible into a realistic setting in a way that makes them appear completely acceptable. He writes that “magic(al) realism succeeds in overcoming the limits of a strict documentary approach by accounting not only for the material side of reality but especially by revealing its spiritual undertones” (Bertozzi 2012: 168).
Understanding this shift in independent filmmaking in light of ever changing strategies and modes of expository discourse and ideological contestation, as set forth by Nichols (1983: 17) earlier, foregrounds how productions broadcast through mainstream Chinese media have adopted some of the traits of the New Documentary Movement, such as being on the scene and a DV look, leading independent filmmakers to seek out novel forms to present their counter narratives.

However, besides following from the general need for constant changes in form and content, the move towards more experimental forms of documenting China can also be related to a larger tendency within the international documentary world, which Noël Carroll (1996) has described as a postmodernist scepticism towards nonfiction film. An issue haunting the study of documentary film, according to Carroll, is distrust of any claim that a documentary could be inherently different from any other form of filmmaking, as a documentary is also always a narrative construct that has been selected, framed, cut, and edited. Carroll links this scepticism to a “global scepticism about the prospects for knowledge and rationality in general” (1996: 300). Almost fifteen years later, Robert Koehler (2010) finds that this scepticism is no longer limited to documentary scholars, but is now engrained in audiences and filmmakers alike. In discussing the emergence of a range of films across the globe for which the “shattering of the simpler notions of reality is a crucial function”, Koehler states that “this tendency is clearly a by-product of our collective hyperconsciousness regarding cinema and its effects, so that the filmmaker knows that the audience knows the tricks the filmmaker is playing” (Koehler 2010: n. pag.).

As Chinese independent filmmakers have become increasingly more intertwined with international film circuits over the past decades, through visiting international film festivals and digital access to a wide range of films and texts, this tendency has not gone unnoticed. Furthermore, the proliferation of independent Chinese films that embrace and play with this scepticism towards documentary, using it to simultaneously reassert their truth claim and deconstruct the documentary as genre, has made these films an integrated part of the international embrace of this kind of filmmaking.

It is tempting to view the looser approach to documentary filmmaking as part and parcel of the rise of post-truth during 2015-2016 (and perhaps truthiness ten years earlier), as the logical culmination of postmodern scepticism. Lee
McIntyre (2018: 37-38) defines post-truth as “a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not.” Significantly, in the Chinese context, since the founding of the People’s Republic, evidence-based truth has persistently been subordinated to state ideology, with the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) being a prime example of evidence being ignored in favour of ideology. A reminder of this continued subordination was provided by president Xi Jinping during a tour of the three largest Chinese news outlets—People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television (CCTV)—in February 2016, when he reinforced the idea that the media must follow the party in thought, politics, and actions (Wong 2016). In a way, then, China was already characterised by a specific kind of post-truth mode and the original New Documentary Movement’s insistence on truth can be seen as a counter force against it. This makes it less productive to view recent productions in light of the post-truth era.

In addition to viewing contemporary Chinese hybrid independent films as part of an international trend towards hybrid films, I also find it fruitful to explore them in the context of what author Ning Ken calls the age of the ultra-unreal, or chaohuan (超幻), in China. In a short essay published online in 2015 titled “writing in the era of the ultra-unreal (chaohuan shidai de xiezuo 超幻时代的写作)”, and in a talk translated into English and published a year later titled “Writing in the Age of the Ultra-Unreal”, Ning summarises what he sees as the present age of the ultra-unreal and suggests how literature can deal with it. Dissecting the term ultra-unreal, chaohuan (超幻) in Chinese, chao (超) means to surpass, exceed or go beyond, while Ning specifically links huan (幻) to magic (mohuan 魔幻), referencing the magic realism he seeks to transcend. However, the second character of the term could also refer to the imaginary or unreal (xuhuan 虚幻), making it possible to translate chaohuan as “beyond magic”, “surpassing the imagination”, or “super fantasy.” These alternative translations allow a broader understanding of the ultra-unreal as referring to a (real) era that exceeds the imagination.

The reason why, according to Ning (2016), China is currently in the age of the ultra-unreal is that over the past decade the speed and scope of change has made “Chinese reality seem like a hallucination.” In the face of the corrupt official who had so much cash in his house that it weighed multiple tons and required a truck to haul it away, and the large-scale poisoning of baby formula, he argues,
reality is hard to phantom (Ning 2016). The idea that Chinese reality is beyond comprehension was also highlighted by an online poll from qdaily.com asking people to share what magic realism refreshed their perception in 2017 (jinnian naxie mohuan xianshi you shuaxinle ni de renzhi? 今年哪些魔幻现实又刷新了你的认知?). Reactions referred to the use of electroshock therapy to cure computer addicts (computer addiction is classified as a clinical mental disorder in China (Cash et al. 2012)), and to the fact that the feeds from millions of retail security cameras across China can simply be accessed online, enabling the artist Xu Bing to create the film Dragonfly Eyes (2017, Xu Bing). The online contest went viral and was removed from the internet within a day (Huang 2017).

From a literary perspective, Ning argues that traditional magic realism, with its incorporation of fantastical elements in an otherwise realist setting and its use of metafiction and political critique, comes close to addressing the present situation in China, but does not suffice. To truly address the current age of the ultra-unreal, magic realism needs to be adapted to China’s present state, its size, history, and increased internet access, all of which have their own ultra-unreal aspects. Even though the specific shape of a renewed approach to magic realism is not yet clear, Ning suggests developing an ultra-unreal literature that should have four main features: 1) "It engages the present situation... It should engage with the social issues that are the hottest topics of popular debate, and be human centred." On this point Ning also stresses the importance of the environment, concluding that “the state of the environment mirrors the state of our souls”; 2) "It is philosophically speculative", that is to say it creates space to deal with the paradoxes and uncertainties in life; 3) “It has the quality of a fable or an allegory” as a means to create fictive freedom; and 4) It attempts to alter the shape of fiction and takes artistic risks in doing so (Ning 2016: n. pag.). Essentially, Ning’s call for an ultra-unreal literature boils down to a call to experiment by reinterpreting magic realism for the present Chinese context. Even though his call is broad, pressing formal boundaries, speculative traits, and the paradoxical can be considered key elements of the aforementioned shift in Chinese independent filmmaking, where reality as a guiding principle has been exchanged for un-reality.

As to Ning’s assertion that China at present is beyond comprehension, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution could arguably be considered to have been much more hallucinatory, beyond reality, and bizarre. In relation to
China’s recent history, the present is perhaps not so incomprehensible after all. However, the point in introducing the notion of the ultra-unreal here is not so much to argue that the present is more unreal than the past, as to highlight that at present within certain artistic communities there is a shared sense that life in present-day China is out of joint, strange, un-real. Ning discusses this sense in literature, where the recent popularity of science fiction could also be seen as part of this trend, while Josh Feola and Michael Pettis (2016) note a similar feeling in urban youth culture and the underground music scene, and the present study extends it to independent film. In all these communities, a significant amount of creative energy is put into dealing with this strangeness, which, according to both Ning Ken (2015, 2016) and Eddie Bertozzi (2012), shows many parallels with magic realism, is socially engaged, paradoxical, fabulous, and takes formal risks.

In a response to Ning’s talk and his literary work, Adrienne Matei (2016) writes that

Ken’s ultra-unreal style represents a new mode of frankness that surreptitiously allows for closer examination of China’s silenced oppression; a genre of human-focused narratives hiding its candid critique of modern Chinese life in plain view. (Matei 2016: n.pag.)

This quote allows a link to be drawn between the ultra-unreal and Foucault’s notion of parrhesia as characterised by frankness, subjectivity, and criticality. The ultra-unreal, then, can be seen as a parrhesiastic genre in its claim that its content, strange as it might be, is in fact true, and presented in a frank, subjective, risky, and critical manner.

Methods and Data

Following ideas formulated by George E. Marcus (1995) this study uses multi-sited ethnography as its main method. Marcus writes that

multi-sited ethnography is an exercise in mapping terrain ... it claims that any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the system, and cannot be understood only in terms

As this study is concerned with independent Chinese cinema, which could be considered a cultural formation and is formed in a multitude of localities across the globe, multi-sited ethnography is key to its understanding. Independent filmmakers, understood as a loose community, work and live in a variety of places. For example, a filmmaker might shoot a film on one site, edit the film elsewhere, attend screenings in several large Chinese cities and travel to film festivals outside of China, whilst communicating with other filmmakers, backers, producers and the likes via WeChat.4

As part of my multi-sited approach I conducted fieldwork in Beijing, China; Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and the Hague, the Netherlands; Hamburg, Germany; and online through WeChat. Between March 2015 and May 2017, I made four separate field trips to Beijing with a total duration of approximately nine months, of which the longest stretch was during 2016, when I was based at the Beijing Film Academy. During these trips I engaged in participant observation (e.g. Spradley 2016), actively engaging with many aspects of independent film culture. My experience of forty-nine screenings of independent films in fifteen venues across Beijing forms the basis for Chapter 3. Although it would not be hard for someone familiar with Beijing underground cinema culture to find the locations of the venues and names of the people mentioned in this chapter, I anonymised most details as the practices described in this chapter are formally prohibited and I do not wish to incriminate anyone.

I also co-organised several screenings of independent Chinese films in Beijing and Amsterdam. While in Beijing I held countless informal conversations with filmmakers, screening organisers, film students, and independent film enthusiasts. The conversations were held in a wide range of settings, including at people’s homes, in studios, restaurants and at screening events. I was also a participant observer during the production and post-production process of the film Hills and Mountains (2017, Zhao Xu), following the production, partaking in the dedicated WeChat group, offering feedback on rough cuts, and helping out with the

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4 WeChat (weixin 微信) is a popular Chinese multifunctional social media application. WeChat and its significance for independent Chinese films are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.
English subtitles. As a visiting scholar at the Beijing Film Academy I followed a
course on documentary filmmaking and spoke to many students to gain insights
into the education many independent filmmakers went through.

In Europe, I attended multiple film festivals: The International Documentary
Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) from 2015 to 2017; the International Film Festival
Rotterdam (IFFR) 2015, 2017, and 2018; FilmFest Hamburg 2015; CinemAsia 2015
to 2018; and Movies That Matter 2016. At these events I watched most Chinese
films that were screened, attended Q&As and talks, collected promotional material,
held informal conversations with audience members and staff, and conducted
formal recorded interviews with people working for the festivals and with invited
Chinese filmmakers. These experiences as a festival-goer, as well as a discourse
analysis of the materials gathered at the festivals, form the basis for Chapter 4.

As Garcia et al. rightly note in their work on online ethnography, "virtually
all ethnographies of contemporary society should include technologically mediated
communication, behaviour, or artefacts in their definition of the field or setting of
the research" (2009: 57). This study is no exception and WeChat and dedicated
websites are incorporated as important sites of online ethnography. Besides being
able to access many independent Chinese films online, a lot of information came
from four WeChat groups dedicated to independent Chinese cinema, in which I was
a participant observer, and twenty WeChat subscriptions dedicated to independent
cinema that I followed. Posts made and shared by WeChat contacts active in the
independent film scene also provided many insights used in this study. The material
collected through online ethnography is particularly highlighted in Chapter 4.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted multiple formal semi-
structured interviews, which I recorded. A semi-structured interview is a prepared
interview in which the questions are designed to leave enough space for the
interviewee to guide the interview and where the interviewer is sensitive to the
answers and improvises in response to the answers given (Wengraf 2001). The
thirty recorded interviews conducted in Beijing, Hamburg and various cities in the
Netherlands have all been transcribed and are listed in Appendix A. The interview
transcriptions were subjected to a discourse analysis of the interpretive repertoires
used (e.g. Wetherell and Potter 1988), focusing on how filmmakers speak about
making films, which forms the basis for Chapter 2.
Finally, I made an effort to seek out and watch as many independent films as possible and to attend as many screenings as I could. As a result, over the past four years I viewed over 200 independent Chinese films, many of which I collected and archived. A close reading of two of these films is presented in Chapter 3, and examples drawn from the many films I have watched are used throughout this study.

In addition to the methods used and data collected listed here, each chapter includes a discussion of the material explicitly drawn on and how I engaged with it. Whilst not using all the material gathered directly, the broader arguments made in the chapters that follow are based on the broader insights gained through this multifaceted approach and the material it yielded.

Research Questions and Case Studies

By viewing independent Chinese cinema as a specific form of parrhesia geared towards a complex set of power structures in China in an era characterised by the ultra-unreal, this study seeks to shed light on the following main question:

_How does independent cinema in contemporary China operate as a means of speaking truth to power?

To answer this question, a specific set of sub-questions derived from the questions Foucault poses in relation to parrhesia are addressed in the four chapters of this study, focusing, respectively, on the production, content, domestic distribution, and international distribution of Chinese independent film:

*Who are independent filmmakers? Why do they engage in independent filmmaking, and what are its anticipated effects? What are the conditions that entitle filmmakers to present themselves as, and to be considered as, truth tellers?*

*About what topics is it considered important to speak the truth? What kinds of practical, rhetorical, and aesthetic strategies are employed to speak truth through film?*
What are the sites where independent Chinese cinema is shown and discussed? Who is the audience, both intended and unintended? What strategies are employed to deal with the risks involved whilst addressing power?

Based on formal interviews with independent filmmakers and others actively involved with independent Chinese cinema, the first chapter focuses on the discourses surrounding independent film production used by filmmakers. It addresses questions related to what it is supposed to mean to be an independent filmmaker and to make independent films. By letting filmmakers speak about why and how their films are made, the chapter uncovers recurring discursive patterns which inform both the filmmaking process and the understanding of what it means to practice parrhesia through independent cinema.

I argue that the filmmakers employ two distinct discourses to make sense of their work. First, by employing a discourse feeding into auteur theory and artistic creativity, independent Chinese filmmakers align themselves with the international filmmaking community of which they are an integral part. At the same time, the filmmakers also employ a discourse which positions Chinese independent cinema as a form of parrhesia related to and shaped by several specifically Chinese circumstances. I argue that the tension between these two discourses at times softens the parrhesiastic positioning of the filmmakers, but that this is essential to obtain a place in the international filmmaking community and to mitigate some of the risks involved in making independent films in China.

Chapter 2 deals with the content of independent Chinese cinema and offers an in-depth analysis of two films: *Behemoth* (2015, Zhao Liang) and *Li Wen at East Lake* (2015, Li Luo). Both of these films can be considered docufiction, a hybrid genre that has become prominent in independent Chinese filmmaking over the past decade, as I have argued above. In this chapter I explore docufiction as a genre and through the two specific cases seek to understand what happens when films embrace the ultra-unreal in the ongoing search for alternative modes of representation capable of speaking truth to power concerning the social and environmental costs of China’s rapid development.

Amongst several dominant themes in independent Chinese filmmaking I chose to focus on two films that have an environmental theme because it is
recognised by independent filmmakers, the authorities, and the population at large as an important topic to know and speak the truth about. In addition, the environment is seen as a key topic for ultra-unreal literature (Ning 2016). Finally, the debate concerning the environment balances precariously between topics and modes of representation that are encouraged and forcefully prohibited by the Chinese state, making speaking about the environment a risky parrhesiastic game.

The chapter argues that docufiction offers a strategy to subvert scepticism towards truth claims, embrace the ultra-unreal, and find novel ways of representing environmental (and other) issues. The chapter shows how, by “polluting” the documentary genre, the analysed films present the environment as something with which society at large has an impure relation. Essentially, the films, through their narratives and aesthetics, can be seen to make the argument that the present impossibility of a clean environment requires impure forms of representation. In line with this, they refuse to participate in the environmental debate in terms of objectivity, progress, cost-benefit analysis, or logic, instead using the subjective, bizarre, and mystical to re-contextualise environmental woes and to creatively represent the complexity of China’s environmental situation.

Chapter 3 explores the domestic distribution of Chinese independent cinema, with a focus on underground screening spaces in Beijing. High-speed internet, DVDs, and cheap data storage have made the distribution of films potentially easy and fast, allowing, in theory, for a wide dissemination of any film. Yet, in spite of these technological advances and possibilities, domestic online censorship, the great Chinese firewall, and reluctance on the part of many filmmakers to uncontrollably release their films online, have made temporary underground venues an indispensable part of how independent Chinese cinema is watched in China, specifically in its larger cities. In addition, the chapter explores how post-screening Q&A’s contribute to independent film’s aim to speak truth to power.

In order to understand the strategies employed to speak truth through film and the risks involved, to gain insight into the sites where independent Chinese cinema is shown and discussed, and to find out of whom its audiences consist, I conceptualise underground independent film screenings as transient alternative public spaces, and as sites where parrhesia takes place, albeit in a limited, often short-lived manner. Because acting out parrhesia through mainstream channels—
by showing their films on television, in regular cinemas or online—is practically impossible for Chinese independent filmmakers, they must rely on alternative strategies to reach an audience.

Through my analysis, I show that screening organisers and filmmakers often have a clear agenda to create a space for critical, counter-hegemonic debate, but that this agenda is hardly ever realised in a durable manner, mainly due to the Chinese socio-political and economic context. By focusing on the physical sites, film contents and contexts, and the type of publicness through which an alternative public space comes into being, I highlight several obstacles that independent screening culture as a form of parrhesia faces. These include the inability to ground itself in set locations; the active repression that any expansion of activities faces; the complicated relationship with contemporary channels of mass communication and social media; issues concerning reaching, engaging with, and holding on to audiences from outside of the filmmaking community in a manner that breaks the culture as consumption frame; and the hierarchical nature of Q&A sessions, which impede the development of a two-way conversation about the issues raised in the screened films.

Nevertheless, I argue that independent film screenings in Beijing still constitute a temporary alternative public space. In spite of all the drawbacks and complications, as well as their temporary nature, the screenings form a semi-public, small-scale outlet for counter hegemonic views and give audiences an opportunity to actively engage with these views, thus allowing for the films to assert their truths to a select part of society.

Having dealt with the production, content, and domestic distribution of independent Chinese cinema, the final chapter of this study investigates how independent cinema operates outside of China, with a particular focus on the dissemination of Chinese independent cinema through film festivals. Film festivals have provided a consistent space of exhibition and distribution for independent Chinese films; in addition, film festival funds have been a steady source of funding for independent Chinese filmmakers. Film festivals constitute spaces where various conflicting versions of China meet and merge, are re-contextualised and translated outside of China. The influence of being selected and winning prizes at such festivals, moreover, reaches further than the locale where they take place, as festivals are also followed from afar by film enthusiasts online, as well as by the
Chinese authorities, which actively track the films screened, the guests invited, and the press coverage.

In relation to the concept of parrhesia, film festivals outside China can be viewed as points in time and space where certain images and narratives are legitimized and presented as truths, and are given an audience and press coverage. A Chinese independent film being screened at festivals can be seen as an instance of parrhesia, as truth is publicly spoken at a site enmeshed within a range of global power structures. The chapter discusses what kinds of discourses, or truths, about and from China are presented at film festivals. Who is given a voice, under what pretexts and conditions, to whom are the truths of the selected films spoken, and to what extent do these truths make it back to China?

In order to address these issues, I analyse three modes of presentation through which Chinese independent cinema tends to be presented at international film festivals. In the first and most common mode, which I call the international mode, the films shown are directly related to the more general (non-China specific) agenda, position, or flavour of the film festival in which they are shown. They are screened as part of a selection of tens to hundreds of films from across the world irrespective of any specific Chinese circumstances they may address; for example, as creative documentaries at IDFA or avant-garde cinema at IFFR. This does not mean that these overarching festival principles create a neutral image of China, but it does raise the question of what kind of China fits within these film festivals’ overarching positions. The anti-state mode is a special selection or entire event devoted to independent Chinese films, usually framed in relation to Chinese political oppression, lack of creative freedom, and societal problems. Here, a specific position and agenda towards Chinese cinema and China is formulated, and films and side events are programmed accordingly. This type of festival or programme is relevant because it usually focuses exclusively on independent cinema, offers these films a politicised platform, and has the specific aim of impacting debates about the state of China (and the Chinese state). Finally, in my analysis of the popular mode I dive into showcases of popular Chinese cinema, as is done at, for example, the Leiden International Film Festival, and the discourses surrounding these events. Even though this last type of event does not tend to screen many, if any, independent Chinese films, it participates in the competition to
lay claim to the truth about China through the screening of films abroad and as such warrants attention in this study.

I argue that the three modes of exhibition, despite stemming from different ideas about how to best show the real China and how to define good cinema, and featuring distinct content, nonetheless exhibit an overlap in the discourses through which they present the screened films. Often, the films in all three modes are labelled as both showing a supposedly real China, which a foreign audience would otherwise not have access to, and as being the best and most representative films of their kind.

Through these four case studies, I reveal the specificities of what it means to speak truth to power through Chinese independent cinema and how it interacts with Foucault's understanding of parrhesia. The chapters show how the entanglement of independent Chinese cinema with international discourses related to creativity and filmmaking, changes in filmmaking styles and strategies, restrictive socio-political circumstances, and globalised media outlets makes this a complex and multifaceted operation. Throughout this study I show that although parrhesia in China is not always as fearless, frank, risky, or personal as conceptualised by Foucault, the spirit of Chinese independent cinema—which purports to offer a frank and critical reflection on contemporary Chinese reality—in spite of all its constraints, strategic manoeuvring, and contradictions does have the capacity to challenge uniformity and subvert power relations in China.
1. From Oppression to Expression: Filmmakers on Creating Independent Chinese Cinema

*It [filmmaking] is a flowing process. Blood flows from your heart through your hands, eyes, ears and becomes a film.*

(Interview with Han Tao 2015)

Introduction

The main aim of this study is to explore independent Chinese filmmaking as a form of parrhesia, understood as speaking truth to power, in contemporary China. It does so by employing a set of questions derived from Foucault’s approach to the study of parrhesia (Foucault 2001). Several of these questions—“Who is able to tell the truth? What are the ... conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth teller? About what topics is it important to tell the truth?” (Foucault 2001: 169-170)—principally focus on aspects that lie outside of the act of parrhesia itself, yet are highly important to understanding how it takes shape. It is on answering these questions, transposed to the setting of contemporary independent Chinese filmmaking, that this chapter focuses.

Based on thirty interviews with independent filmmakers and others actively involved in independent Chinese cinema, recordings and notes made during public post-screening Q&A sessions, as well as published interviews, this chapter examines the discourses surrounding independent filmmaking as used by filmmakers. By letting filmmakers speak about why and how they make their films, the interpretive repertoires that inform the filmmaking process and filmmakers’ understanding of what it means to speak truth to power through independent cinema are revealed.

The analysis of interpretive repertoires is a form of discourse analysis notably used by Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987 and Wetherell and Potter 1988). They write that an interpretive repertoire

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5 这是个流淌的过程。血液从心脏里流淌，然后通过你的手、眼、耳朵，流淌出来，成为一个电影作品。

6 For a full list of the interviews conducted for this study see Appendix A.
consists of “a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events” (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 138). Such a register of terms and metaphors can be exposed by looking for recurring patterns in the way a specific group of people—an interpretative community—speaks about their field. A repertoire need not be internally consistent and can include contradictions. This method of analysis has, for example, been employed by Jan Boesman and Irene Costera Meijer (2018) to examine how journalists in Belgium and the Netherlands speak about the tensions between seeking truth and storytelling. In a similar vein, this chapter seeks to find common threads amongst the repertoires that inform independent Chinese filmmakers’ beliefs and actions, particularly with regard to whether and, if so, how they view their films as speaking truth to power.

A lot of research has incorporated interviews in the analysis of independent Chinese cinema to illustrate certain points or to gain a deeper understanding of a specific film or filmmaker under analysis (e.g. Edwards 2015, Robinson 2013, Yu 2018). However, in spite of the wealth of interviews with independent Chinese filmmakers collected in books (e.g. Qingying Gongzuoshi 2009, 2010, 2011) and available online (e.g. degeneratefilms.com), I have yet to come across an attempt to systematically analyse a larger set of interviews as such, or to do so in the manner of John Thornton Caldwell’s (2008) study of discourses prevalent among Hollywood professionals. A possible explanation for the lack of such a study of Chinese independent filmmakers could be that many researchers in this particular field adhere to an approach stressing the individuality of each filmmaker. An example of this can be found on the back cover of Michael Berry’s Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers (2005), where it is claimed that the book presents “interviews that capture each filmmaker’s unique vision.” The Foucauldian approach used in this chapter, in contrast, seeks to uncover that which discursively binds independent Chinese filmmakers as a group within the particular structures in which they operate.

Most interviews drawn upon in this chapter I conducted myself, frequently together with an interpreter or a colleague from the ChinaCreative research project of which this study is a part.\(^7\) It is also worth noting that most of the interviews

\(^7\) Interpreters and co-interviewers are included in Appendix A.
were conducted during a first-time meeting with the filmmaker, had a relatively formal setting, and usually took place in the Netherlands or Germany whilst the filmmakers were attending a film festival. When not accompanied by an interpreter, the interviews were conducted in English or I relied on my imperfect Chinese.

The filmmakers interviewed for this chapter are diverse in terms of age, gender, educational background, years of experience as a filmmaker, place of residence, and type of films they make. What they all have in common is that they, to varying degrees, have produced work independently, outside of the mainstream commercial channels available in China, and in an independent spirit, which, as discussed in the introduction, refers to independence on a conceptual level, fostering critical reflection upon the conditions of contemporary China. In addition, their work has been recognised both within the local independent filmmaking community, in the form of being screened at the type of underground events discussed in Chapter 3, and within the wider international filmmaking community, with their films screened at international film festivals. The diverse sample of filmmakers drawn upon allows for an understanding of what unites the discourses used by independent Chinese filmmakers as a general category to be distilled from the broad range of experiences and perspectives represented. This avoids a view confined to, for example, independent male filmmakers that rose to international prominence in the 1990s, or emerging talents born during the 1990s.

The analysis of the interviews is conducted in three parts. The first part of the chapter focuses on the filmmakers’ presentation of themselves and the reasons they give for engaging in independent filmmaking. From the personal backstories emerges a recurring set of repertoires used to position independent filmmaking as truth telling. The second part focuses on the topics about which the filmmakers claim it is important to tell the truth. These insights came forth when I asked them how they decided on the topics of their films, and analysed what kind of repertoires related to motivation reoccur. In the third part, finally, I analyse what is said about the risks encountered and strategically dealt with during the production process in order to grasp what, the filmmakers say, played a pivotal role in shaping the final product. From this threefold analysis, it becomes clear that there are two distinct larger discourses at play, which are in turn built up of a set of recurring components. I refer to these discourses as the discourse of authorship and the discourse of parrhesia.
The discourse of authorship evoked by the Chinese independent filmmakers draws on auteur theory and a specific understanding of what it means to be creative that resonates throughout international film festivals and film criticism (Andrews 2010; Petrie 1991). Auteur theory positions the film director as the author of a film and views this author as an artist. It stresses the formal qualities of filmmaking, in particular those qualities that come together as a recognisable style seen as unique to a particular filmmaker, as well as the ability of the director to express a personal worldview through cinema (Hess 1973). As Andrew Sarris writes, “auteur theory may be visualized as three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning” (2004: 563). Many of the ideas from auteur theory have become integrated in international film festivals, art cinema, and film studies, where the formal qualities and ideological expressiveness of films are paramount, and film directors are heralded as great artists (Andrews 2010).

Also central to this discourse are ideas concerning artistic creativity, according to which an individual personally creates something novel, original, and of aesthetic value (Reckwitz 2017). Chapter 4 deals more extensively with film festivals, but for the argument I want to make in this chapter it is helpful to take a brief look at how ideas of artistic creativity are represented in, for example, the mission statement of the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA):

The creative documentary is IDFA’s point of departure. These are documentaries that are visually striking and express the filmmaker’s vision. The filmmaker makes artistic choices in the use of cinematic means (image, sound and editing) to convey his or her vision on the subject matter and tell the story. This artistic demand is the festival’s most crucial selection criterion – originality, expressiveness and cultural and/or historical value play an important role as well. (IDFA n.d.)

In the discourse of authorship used by the interviewed Chinese filmmakers, they align themselves with the specific qualities linked to auteur theory and creativity, which include formal innovation, personal expression/vision, and novelty.

The second main discourse used by Chinese independent filmmakers, the discourse of parrhesia, is related to the truth telling purpose of making independent films, which takes the form of a strategic China-specific reformulation of parrhesia.
through which the filmmakers, on the one hand, position themselves as parrhesiastes revealing otherwise obscured parts of a rapidly changing contemporary China, whilst, on the other hand, emphasising notions of duty, moral obligation, risk, and a personal relation to the topics presented. This discourse deviates from other formulations of parrhesia, such as whistleblowing, by frequently downplaying both parrhesia’s importance and its role in speaking back to power. It also distinguishes itself from other contemporary invocations of parrhesia by regularly de-politicising itself through the use of repertoires involving chance and coincidence, as well as by taking an approach to filmmaking that stresses a close personal relation to the chosen topic, rather than an activist one.

I argue that it is through the first main discourse of authorship that the filmmakers align themselves with the international filmmaking community of which they are an integral part, and through the second main discourse of parrhesia that they bring forth some of the specificities of Chinese independent cinema as a form of parrhesia. Significantly, whereas the specific conditions of contemporary China’s development give rise to an urgent need to speak truth to power, producing many of the characteristics of parrhesia, the second discourse suggests that the risks involved in speaking truth to power in China make it necessary to simultaneously play down the act of parrhesia.

On Being an Independent Filmmaker

*I really like cinema as a means of expression, its visuals can be rich, deep and layered.*

(Interview with Ye Yun 2016)

In this first section I analyse how filmmakers speak about being a filmmaker, about why they make films, and about how they view filmmaking in a general sense. Three aspects of the two main discourses distinguished above frequently reoccur: first, a sense that it is an independent filmmaker’s duty to disclose the otherwise disappearing, untold, and repressed aspects of a rapidly changing China, as part of the discourse of parrhesia; second, the idea of a strong desire to express oneself,
which is part of both the discourse of parrhesia and that of authorship; and third, the quest for newness, as an aspect of the discourse of authorship.

The duty to record the hidden realities of rapidly changing China

That Chinese society has been changing with astonishing speed over the past decades is somewhat of a truism for anybody engaged with contemporary China. A duty or sense of urgency to capture this development is a recurring answer given to the question why Chinese independent filmmakers start making films, often in combination with a sense of obligation to capture specifically otherwise unseen or actively repressed aspects of these changes. The following quote emphasises the sense of duty:

When I graduated in the 1990s, DV cameras started to appear. Because they were easy to operate I felt I should film something. I felt I should record some of the massive changes occurring in society. Beijing had started demolishing houses in the 1990s, and the population seemed a bit agitated. At that time, I made documentaries with a sense of responsibility, but without a proper understanding of film, this didn’t come until later.9 (Interview with Zhao Liang 2015, emphasis added)

Zhao Liang’s story captures the notions of massive societal change, a responsibility to record contemporary society, and another one that will be discussed later in relation to the discourse of authorship: the rejection of earlier methods, in this case, the filmmaker’s own.

The duty to comprehensively capture a changing China is not only expressed by filmmakers themselves, but permeates the entire structure of film production and (international) distribution, as can be seen in the mission statement of CNEX, a non-profit organisation that trains filmmakers, hosts events, and produces and funds films:

9 尤其你要想在剧组里担任摄影或者导演的工作。以前因为在中国的体制下，电影工作者是很难，别人是很难进入这个行业的。我 90 年代的时候刚毕业，刚开始有了 DV 机器，因为它比较易于操作，那时候也觉得应该拍一下，记录一下社会里的一些日新月异的变化很大。因为 90 年代北京刚开始拆迁，人的心理是一种非常受刺激的状态。那时候带着一种社会责任感去拍摄，而对电影不是一种真正的认识，直到我刚才说的这个。
CNEX aims to establish and develop a library of global Chinese non-fiction works to preserve visuals and cultures of Chinese communities, especially in a time of unprecedented and rapid changes happening in this ancient culture. (CNEX n.d., emphasis added)

Both Zhao Liang and the CNEX website stress the need to capture the rapid changes occurring in China; Zhao Liang mentions demolition specifically, and CNEX emphasises that the changes are taking place in China’s ancient culture. The latter can be interpreted in two ways. It could be read as aiming to preserve the ancient culture that preceded the rapid changes, understood, as it usually is in the Chinese context, as comprising Confucianism, traditional arts, or imperial history. Alternatively, it could be read as being concerned with capturing the changes themselves. With CNEX productions centred on themes like money, education, and the digital, it seems to be mostly a case of capturing the unfolding transformation.

Besides mentioning specific themes, many filmmakers expressed that the parts of Chinese society that should be captured are those otherwise not seen or recorded. The following quote from an interview with Zhang Zanbo stresses the urgency of this over simply capturing all changes:

I used to think fictional films were more interesting, but later I realized the drama in life is richer than any fiction, in addition, it was happening all around me, even in my village. So I became really interested in making documentaries. I felt a strong sense of urgency, as there were so many things that needed recording and in China nobody was really doing it, so I really dug into it and never came back. I used to make fiction films within the system, I worked on some commercial productions as an executive director and scriptwriter, to make some money, it was purely for money. But it didn’t make sense to do that when I could be producing my own documentaries, so I thoroughly broke away from that and cut all my ties with it.10 (Interview with Zhang Zanbo 2015, emphasis added)

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10 我以前觉得，剧情片更有意思，后来我觉得，生活本身的戏剧性比剧情片更丰富，另外我就想他们就真实地发生在我的身边，甚至就是我的家乡，所以那个时候我就觉得，一下就对纪录片产生了很大的兴趣了，并且我觉得它有一种紧迫感，还有很多东西需要你去记录，在中国没有人去做，所以我一旦一陷进去，我就回不来了。我就彻底，因为之前我也做过剧情片，当时是一些体制内的工作，一些工业性的一些活儿，就赚一点钱，我可能做执行导演，然后也做编剧，就赚钱，纯粹就是赚钱，我是认为它没有什么意义的，就正好可能因为又做出了我个人的记录的作品来，所以我就彻底在那几年跟剧情片就切割了，就没有关系了。大致是这样的一个因素，然后我就最近的这几年，就一
Where Zhao Liang formulates his filmmaking as prompted by a desire to capture rapid change in general, Zhang Zanbo stresses the need to film what is otherwise not being recorded. In addition, some filmmakers emphasise a desire to record what is not seen or not allowed to be publicly expressed:

In independent filmmaking there is just one goal. That is to consciously record something of our era which is otherwise not seen. In fact, the things which are not seen, we often actually do see, but you are not allowed to express them and your expressions of them are not allowed to find an audience. The more you are pressured in this manner, the more you want to express. Film is a very effective form of expression, so I choose it. (Interview with Qiu Jiongjiong 2015, emphasis added)

For Qiu Jiongjiong, this desire to show what is supposed to remain under the surface resulted in, amongst other films, Madame (2010), which focuses on a cross-dresser speaking about his life, and Mr. Zhang Believes (2015, Qiu Jiongjiong), about the life of a person branded as a “rightist” in the late 1950s. Both these films represent the otherwise muted histories, experiences, and desires of parts of Chinese society. As the filmmaker points out, the drive to tackle these issues stems not merely from a lack of representations, but from the active repression of specific representations by the Chinese state.

Combined, these filmmakers’ positions reveal a recurring element of the discourse of parrhesia used by Chinese independent filmmakers to explain why they make films, namely that of feeling a moral obligation to record aspects of contemporary society that are disappearing, being censored, or otherwise not recorded. This element is usually linked to the specific conditions of contemporary society.

During the so-called anti-rightist campaign, which ran from about 1957 to 1959, approximately half a million people were persecuted – suffering public humiliation, forced hard labour, and in some cases execution – for supposedly being against the Chinese Communist Party and its ideals (Veg 2014).
China, be it its recent social-economic development, carrying in its wake urbanization, inequality, and pollution, or the role of its institutions in regulating the representation of certain issues.

What none of the informants explicitly bring to the fore is a duty to speak truth to power as such. Instead, through their statements runs the sense of an urgency to record or capture that stays close to Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel’s (2010) description of independent Chinese filmmaking culture as constituting an “alternative archive.” What is less emphasised is the urgency of distributing and making public what is being archived. This, however, is something all the filmmakers interviewed do actively engage in by submitting their films to film festivals, organising screenings in China, and in some cases uploading the films online. There are two likely reasons why this may not be emphasised by the filmmakers when asked about their filmmaking practice: the first could be an attempt to strategically depoliticise their work to various extents. Even though the filmmakers do engage in a form of parrhesia by publicly exposing personalised truths out of a sense of moral duty, straightforward posturing as a parrhesiastes carries with it significant risks. The openly parrhesiastic oppositional attitude of Ai Weiwei, who made a number of feature-length independent documentaries, and his attempts to reach as wide as possible an audience for these works, deviates from how many of the filmmakers I spoke to discursively relate to their work. Even though there are those who directly engage with Chinese politics in their work and in how they speak about it—such as Qiu Jiongjiong and Zhu Rikun—in most cases the repertoire they use does not explicitly emphasise speaking truth to power. The second reason why filmmakers do not seem to talk much about directly addressing power structures through their work could be that, in spite of their efforts to reach various audiences, the potential reach of independent Chinese films remains relatively small, both in China and abroad, making claims of addressing power seem aggrandising. As Zhao Qi and Violet Du Feng put it, “I know our impact is severely limited”13 (Interview with Zhao Qing and Violet Du Feng 2016).

In sum, this aspect of the discourse of parrhesia used by Chinese independent filmmakers regarding why they engage in what they do is a strategic one that presents filmmakers as having a moral obligation to use their work not to

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13 虽然我知道我们的力量非常微弱。
speak truth to state power per se, but to bear witness to, record, capture, and archive aspects of a rapidly changing contemporary China that are otherwise obscured for various reasons, including political ones.

**Personal Expression and Personal Style**

As discussed in the introduction to this study the truth spoken through parrhesia and independent Chinese cinema is a personal truth, and the personal or subjective nature of this truth is also emphasised in what the directors say about themselves and their work. In the quote above, Zhang Zanbo speaks of “producing my own documentaries”\(^\text{14}\) (emphasis added), in contrast to making commercial fiction films for money. Qiu Jiongjiong also speaks of his work as a means of expression, which can be understood as an articulation of personal ideas. Some filmmakers say that it was the desire for personal expression that drew them to filmmaking in the first place:

> When I was studying to teach Chinese as a foreign language I became very interested in how people express themselves … As part of this training I also studied German. … this [interest in self-expression, and speaking German] eventually led to studying filmmaking in Hamburg. (Interview with Xie Shuchang 2016)

Xie Shuchang’s interest in languages led him to filmmaking as another means of self-expression. While it makes sense to link these statements on filmmaking as personal expression to the filmmakers’ claims to present a personal truth, the emphasis on personal expression also resonates with broader ideas related to personal or authorial style and creative expression that feed into the discourse of authorship. When speaking about how his film education in Europe influenced him, Guo Xiaodong also emphasised film as an expression of the author:

> It is a feeling of many things combined, but with more emphasis on the author’s subjective expression, no matter the style of filmmaking, there is more emphasis on the author’s attitude, your statement, and then how

\(^\text{14}\)做出了我个人的记录的作品来。
that can be reflected in the image.¹⁵ (Interview with Guo Xiaodong 2015, emphasis added)

In this quote, expressing an attitude or statement is seen to motivate the development of a specific visual style. The idea that such a style is important seeped into the answers of the filmmakers to all sorts of questions. When asked about the importance of creativity in independent filmmaking, for example, film scholar and filmmaker Yang Yishu instead answered that for commercial films creativity is important,¹⁶ while in independent filmmaking the author’s ability to express himself or herself in a particular, recognizable style is paramount:

If it is a commercial film creativity is very important. However, if the author expresses a need for personal integrity, then creativity is not the most important, but authorial style is.¹⁷ (Interview with Yang Yishu 2015, emphasis added)

These quotes emphasise the desirability of personal expression through independent filmmaking, either as a parrhesiastic personalised approach to reality, as in Zhang Zanbo’s “my own documentaries” and Qiu Jiongjiong’s desire to express what is prohibited, or as personal expression leading to an authorial style, in Guo Xiaodong’s terms, “the author’s attitude … reflected in the image.” As mentioned earlier, the development of an authorial style expressing a personal worldview is central to auteur theory, which is strongly represented in international film festivals and film studies. By reiterating its tenets, independent Chinese filmmakers align themselves within these dominant ideas in international filmmaking.

¹⁵ It is a combination of various things, it is more important to emphasise the objective expression, whatever you shoot, your statement, and how can it be reflected in the image.

¹⁶ What was pointed out to me by several of my interviewees is that in the context of filmmaking in China the term “creative” (chuangyi 创意) has come to stand for films capable of being commercially successful. By extension, in the Chinese film world, creative has come to stand for a state propagated form of creativity that is monetizable (like creativity in the creative industries), uncritical, and in line with popular tastes. The rejection of creativity by the independent filmmakers interviewed should then be viewed not as a rejection of the discourse surrounding creativity as exemplified by the IDFA quote discussed earlier in the chapter (where creativity encompasses personal expression and originality in its formal qualities), but of the discourse of creativity prevalent in the Chinese film industry.

¹⁷ If you are a commercial film, then creativity is very important. However, if it is a personal film, the author’s attitude, your expression, and the style are more important.
Additionally, the filmmakers’ reiteration of the need to express oneself through cinema can also be explained in light of China’s increasing individualisation (e.g. Yan 2009) and the “rising expectations for individual freedom, choice and individuality” (Hansen and Svarverud 2010: xi). In relation to individualisation, Kiki Tianqi Yu (2018) explores first-person documentaries, which can be seen as a highly personalised form of self-expression in independent Chinese cinema. In her book ‘My Self on Camera: First-Person Documentary Practice in an Individualising China’, Yu explores how intimate and diverse films that centre on the filmmakers themselves present familial relationships in a changing China in one form, as well as the role of the public individual in another. She finds that both more private and public first-person films explore thorny social issues in contemporary China, and concludes that the practice of making first-person documentaries “can be seen as a form of provocative social participation that stimulates important individual critical thinking and helps to form new kinds of political subjectivities, to reconstruct political values and contribute to the transformation of social ethics” (Yu 2018: 494-493 epub). In Yu’s presentation of first-person documentaries, personal expression and a self-centred approach to filmmaking provide as a fertile ground for social participation and, by extension, speaking truth to power.

What strikes me in the frequent emphasising of the personal aspects of filmmaking by filmmakers commenting on why they make films is that while these aspects are considered to be an integral part of the act of parrhesia and of the discourse of authorship, they can also serve as a way to downplay the critical tone of the work. In a context of the active repression of political critique, emphasising the personal, even in films concerning public issues, could be viewed as a discursive strategy to reduce the risks parrhesia entails in contemporary China.

Newness everywhere

As an integral part of the discourse of authorship, not only do the filmmakers speak of a desire for personal expression and personal style, but they also express a desire for newness on various levels. When speaking about what kind of film he strives to make Zhang Zanbo lists three tenets that, in his view, make up a good film:

A good film should have three qualities. The first is that it should reveal something, this does not need to be factual ... the second is that it should
be innovative (chuangxin 创新), you need to have something new in film language or form of expression. Finally, it should show some individuality. (Interview with Zhang Zanbo 2015, emphasis added)

As stated earlier, in the interviews the filmmakers regularly align themselves with an auteurist discourse prevalent in international filmmaking circles. The quote above highlights several of the core ideals from auteur theory: interior meaning, personal expression, and distinct formal qualities. However, while Zhang mentions film language (formal qualities), instead of putting the emphasis on it being distinct (not like something else), he says that it should be new (not like what preceded it). This idea of newness is closely linked to prevalent ideas about creativity and operates in tandem with the auteur theory. As such, it constitutes an integral part of the discourse of authorship used by the filmmakers interviewed.

The quest for newness on various levels is shared by many independent Chinese filmmakers, as can be seen in the following quote:

I don’t like to repeat myself. Every time when I make a film, I ask myself to create something new … If something has already been made by others, then there is no need for me to do it. If I have done something already myself, then I don’t have any interest to do it again. So I need to do something new to make myself feel excited and happy. This is very important for me. (Interview with Zhao Liang 2015, emphasis added)

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18 As mentioned in an earlier note, creative (chuangyi 创意) is not a preferred term amongst the filmmakers I spoke to. Zhang Zanbo, in fact, explicitly stated he prefers to use the term innovative (chuangxin 创新), rather than creative.

19 我甚至在某次讲座上也说过这样的理念，我认为的优秀的纪录片，它应该具备三个因素，所谓三种属性。第一是揭示性，它要揭示出一种大家不知道的东西。当然这个不一定是那种新闻意义上的揭露，它可能也是一种情感上的状态，揭示性。第二就是创新性，指的是在你的表现形式上，电影的语言上，有没有新的东西，这也是一种很重要的因素，还有一种认为是自我性，为什么是你的作品，里面是有你的影子，体现了一种跟你的关联性。所以我认为一个好的作品应该有创新性。

20 对我说来，我自己创作，我是，我不愿意重复自己。所以我每次要做一个，尤其做一个影像、作品，尤其做一个线性放映在影院大屏幕这种，我是每次我会给自己提要求，就是我有没有新创造什么东西。在视觉语言上，当然功能社会那方面，有没有什么突出的东西。另外，在形式上，你的表现上，是否和内容，真正让你觉得是满意的。如果总是会给自己一些鞭策，别人做过的我不需要做，我以前做过的那肯定没兴趣。所以我需要做一些新的东西，让我本身也满足，去激动，我会很高兴，觉得我有点新的创造，是我满足自己那部分欲望的，一个很重要的状态。当然，那你的创造力是和你的知识，和你的修养，审美趣味，是分不开的，这个是日积月累，逐渐你会去发现一些东西。逐渐这个东西在你的身体里，大脑里会发酵，然后当你需要它的时候，它自动就会出来。
In his book *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New*, Andreas Reckwitz discusses how creative ideals permeate society and writes: “Aesthetic novelty is associated with vitality and the joy of experimentation, and its maker is pictured as a creative self along the lines of the artist” (Reckwitz 2017: 2). The associations of excitement and joy brought forward by Zhao Liang link directly to this observation from Reckwitz, and recur throughout various filmmaking circles. For example, Abe Markus Nornes emphasises the characteristics of constantly recurring film waves in a report on the independent Chinese film scene in 2009: “A truly independent documentary movement has taken that familiar waveform marked by explosive growth, newness everywhere, and exhilaration over innovative moviemaking and ways of viewing” (Nornes 2009: 50).

The final quote below reiterates previously mentioned ideas of recording Chinese society, self-expression, as well as including novel aspects, in this case signalling a departure from traditional documentary forms:

> I might pay attention to Chinese society as usual. But I would also add my own experience, feeling, even including some memories. I might use some method that I never used before. And I want to find a manner of image that can talk with the present better. Documentary in a traditional sense has less and less attraction for me now. I hope I can do something tentative.21 (Interview with Du Haibin 2015)

This section has shown that the filmmakers quoted each express a desire for newness in their filmmaking, predominantly from a formal perspective, but also thematically. This aspect of the discourse of authorship is one way in which these filmmakers align themselves with international filmmaking circles and with holding up creativity as an ideal.

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21 有啊，其实只是一直在考虑，现在还没有一个特别成熟的想法。我可能会一如既往地关注中国社会，但是也会把自己的一些特别亲身的体会、感受甚至包括一些记忆、经验，然后融合到一起。可能会加入一些过去没有用过的一些方法和手段，然后想找到一种与当下更能对话的一种影像的方式吧。传统意义上的纪录片可能现在对我来说吸引力越来越小，我希望能够做一些尝试性的。
On Choosing a Topic

We choose our subject matter. China is developing so rapidly that choosing a topic is the most important thing for a director. Most filmmakers have a sense of social responsibility; they hope that the issues they film will somehow be changed a bit, although we know our impact is severely limited.²² (Interview with Zhao Qing and Violet Du Feng 2016)

What do filmmakers say about how they determine what they want to make films about? As shown in the previous section, the interviewed filmmakers claim to make films out of both a sense of obligation and a desire for self-expression, and to do so in order to document unseen or repressed aspects of contemporary China. In speaking about how a topic was chosen, two recurring themes stand out, the first one relies on coincidence or events explained as random occurrences, and the second emphasises the filmmaker’s close personal connection to the subject matter. Both of these themes can be linked to the two main discourses delineated earlier.

Coincidence

I saw those sheep on the road between the cars and it made me curious, and I was looking to make a film. *I didn’t have a plan or structure*, I just wanted to make a short film about this interesting appearance. (Interview with Zhao Xu 2016, emphasis added)

The film that evolved out of this chance encounter, *Regarding Lambs in the City* (2015, Zhao Xu), can be read as dealing with looming questions regarding urbanisation, forced relocation and public space on the outskirts of Beijing. Zhao Xu, however, presents finding the topic as the result of a chance encounter with an out of the ordinary sight and the making of the film as a process without a plan or structure.

Filmmaker Du Haibin similarly tells of coincidentally bumping into a subject that interested him. He says he randomly came across the peculiar spectacle of a

²² 我觉得纪录片可能不能说创意，只能说题材的选择。因为中国现在是一个发展非常快的国家，所以题材的选择对纪录片导演来说很重要。纪录片导演、制作人，本身很多还是都有社会责任感，希望拍摄的题材本身可以对这个社会，能起到一定推动作用。或者能改变些什么，虽然我们知道我们的力量非常微弱，但是纪录片本身记录的就是真实的社会和真实的人们的生活状态，所以我想它的力量有时候是不可估量的
teenager dressed in a Red Guard uniform waving a Chinese flag and shouting nationalist slogans on the street, and decided to investigate who this person was and what drove him to engage in these street performances:

I was in his town Pingyao to do something and bumped into him on the street, he was in a procession. There were some special things about his procession, he had a banner and was leading about ten fellow students. It was clearly marked on the banner that they were born after the nineties and patriotic. Both of these things aroused my interest, and so I made this film.23 (Interview with Du Haibin 2015)

The outgoing politicised persona of the teenager stands in contrast to how most Chinese people born in the 1990s are perceived. Du Haibin characterises stereotypical youth as “playing video-games or beatboxing” (Interview with Du Haibin 2015). What can be seen in this case is how a supposedly chance encounter with a vocal young person prompted the filmmaker to make a film about being young (and confused), the influences of state propaganda, and some aspects of education in China.

What both cases have in common is that the filmmakers frame the choice of a particular topic as the result of a process in which their agency is limited to an out-of-the-ordinary sight on the street piquing their interest. In their films, this sight is subsequently presented as a specific manifestation of a broader, more complex process in Chinese contemporary society that has a political dimension, about which the filmmakers present narratives that run counter to those presented by the state. The use of the coincidence to explain the genesis of these films can be understood as a tool, on a practical and rhetorical level, to reduce the complexities in question to a personalized, but largely passive narrative in which the filmmaker just happened to come upon a remarkable sight. Thus, the topic choice is depoliticised. If Zhao Xu would have said: “I wanted to make a film on forced relocation and the unruly use of public space and then I found these sheep that exemplify these issues”, or if Du Haibin would have said: “I wanted to make a film about how patriotism is manifested by young people and then I found this teenager”, the process of choosing a topic would be explicitly politicised and would

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23我去他老家平遥办事，在街上碰到他，他正在游行。他的游行中有几个比较特殊的地方。他有一个横幅，然后带了大概 10 个同学，在这个横幅上很明确地标示了他是 90 后，他是爱国的。所以这两方面都激起了我的兴趣，所以才有了这部影片。
align more closely with the repertoire used for explaining the reason for making independent films as wanting to document the suppressed aspects of a rapidly changing China.

In addition to downplaying the political intentions of the filmmaker, the references to coincidence also resonate with the notion of being artistically inspired in a way that bypasses one's intentions. This form of inspiration, which is associated with romantic notions of being creative (Wilf 2011), is actively encouraged by the Chinese state (unlike criticality) and is a key in the international film world, as exemplified by the IDFA quote discussed earlier.

Coincidence appears to be such a deeply ingrained repertoire that not only chance encounters on the street, or coming across something online, are designated coincidental in the interviews, but also situations that are not coincidental at all. When asked why he wanted to use excerpts from the Divine Comedy in his film Behemoth (2015, Zhao Liang), Zhao Liang replied:

*Actually using the Divine Comedy in this film was a coincidence (qiaohé巧合). Because the language Dante used to describe hell 800 years ago felt so similar to the images I film today, it feels like a prediction. He knew what would happen today 800 years ago.*24 (Interview with Zhao Liang 2015, emphasis added)

Here the narrative does not really describe a coincidence; rather, it is about how the filmmaker felt Dante’s description of hell matched closely what he witnessed in contemporary China. Still, the filmmaker brings forward coincidence, creating the impression that the film’s critical portrayal of contemporary China as a hellish realm was both unplanned and non-deliberate, as well as creative and inspired.

*Close Personal Connection*

When Chinese independent filmmakers explain why they chose a specific topic they also often emphasise that they have a close personal connection to it:

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24 对我来说，这个神曲和这个影片是一种巧合。因为但丁在800年前在他想象的地狱，是他用他的文字，诗歌描述出来。当你看到我拍摄出来的影像在当代，它是那么吻合，对我来说这是一种预言一样的。所以我把神曲几乎是预言诗。它把我们当下，他在800年前已经预示到这个。甚至是一个警醒。对我来说，这个是最重要的。而我就很直接地用，或者稍微改动一些，这对我来说是一种观念吧。
We planned to do this film together, mainly, because of our grandparents, we are aware of the problem of elderly care in China, especially for the elderly with Alzheimer's ... Also my grandparents' attitude to life moved me a lot, so I felt that we needed to show their story to people and hope to inspire some nursing institutions to do a better job. (Interview with Zhao Qing and Violet Du Feng 2016)

As mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this section, Zhao Qing and Violet Du Feng believe that as filmmakers they have a responsibility to somehow make a (limited) impact on a rapidly changing China, and choosing a topic is the main decision an independent filmmaker makes. In choosing the topic for the film Please Remember Me (2015, Zhao Qing), they say they were motivated by their grandparents' condition and attitudes, which provided them with an intimate understanding of elderly care in China.

In explaining how he came to the subject for the film Hills and Mountains (2017, Zhao Xu), filmmaker Zhao Xu also stresses his personal experience as being part of the generation born in the 1990s, and his close relationship to the friend who is the main subject of the film:

Qiu Shan has been a friend of mine for a long time. We both belong to the generation of Chinese people born after 1989,26 a generation often labelled as being overly materialistic. I decided to film my friend, because like many young people he is haunted by the spiritual emptiness of China's consumer society and during the past years he has been on a bumpy quest to find spiritual meaning in his life. (Zhao 2016)

Here again a close personal connection is what forms a link between the societal issue addressed—the supposed spiritual emptiness amongst young people—and the focus of the film.

25 我觉得就是因为我们最初打算一起做这个影片，主要是，一个我们意识到在中国养老问题，尤其是对待阿兹海默症这样的老人，怎么去赡养、善待这样的老人。尤其那些养老机构，还存在很多问题。中国人口很多，老龄化也非常厉害。当然还有一方面就是叔叔婶婶他们的生活态度非常打动我，所以我们就觉得要把他们的故事呈现给大家看。然后也希望能给生活周围的一些养老机构一些启发，看看怎么做得更好。

26 The post-90s generation (jiuling hou 九零后), also referred to by Du Haibin in an earlier quote, is a standard designation that can be equated with a term like millennial. In this interview, which was conducted in English, Zhao Xu did not use the literal translation, but said "born after 1989" instead, which, for the informed listener, carries an implicit reference to the Tiananmen massacre, which is not part of popular discourse in China.
Again, I view this idea of choosing a topic the filmmaker has a personal connection to as feeding into the two main discourses I discerned earlier: that of the strategic reformulation of parrhesia and that of authorship. First of all, as mentioned earlier, according to Foucault, the truth spoken through parrhesia is a personal truth. The filmmakers’ emphasis on their personal connection to the topics of the films they make thus brings them close to parrhesia. But, as with the notion of coincidence, claiming to make films about personal issues also moves away from presenting these films as actively designed to criticise the state or society. Even though I do not wish to claim that the filmmakers are intentionally depoliticising their work, it is plausible that in a society where critique is actively repressed critical filmmakers will, consciously or unconsciously, mobilise discourses about their films that downplay their political motivations.

On the Perils of Filmmaking

Because of making this film I was under house arrest for twenty-three days in 2013. I went bankrupt twice. Before screening this film here I sent my wife and child abroad, they are in France now. Because before I came here the national security bureau warned me not to come. They threatened my family, my father. I studied kung fu to protect my family, because they used physical means to deal with me.\(^{27}\) (Recorded Q&A with Han Tao, Hamburg 2015)

Han Tao says he had to endure house arrest, bankruptcy, and threats of violence whilst making his film *The Missing* (2015, Han Tao) and when seeking out an audience. There are several other examples of how engaging in independent filmmaking in China is not free of risk. Shen Yongping was imprisoned for a year after receiving a sentence for conducting illegal business activities, which basically consisted of freely distributing his film *A Hundred Years of Constitutionalism* (2014, Shen Yongping) (Wong 2014). Hao Wu was detained for six months in 2006 whilst

\(^{27}\) 我因为拍这个电影，在2013年被软禁23天。破产两次。我这次来放这部电影，我把我的妻子和孩子已经带出国了。他们现在在法国。因为我在来之前就是安全, 国保就警告我不要来。去威胁我的家人，我的父亲。身在这样的一个国度，这样的一个家园，你会很绝望。我练功夫，目的是保护我的家人，因为他们经常用一些非常的手段来对付我。
making a film on underground churches²⁸ (Fowler 2006), and Ai Weiwei, who made films like *Disturbing the Peace* (2009, Ai Weiwei), and *So Sorry* (2012, Ai Weiwei), was detained and put under house arrest (BBC News 2015, Greenfield 2012).

As discussed before, risk is an integral part of parrhesia, and independent filmmaking in China is undeniably risky. It is not unusual to be harassed whilst making films or after releasing them. On several occasions, hostile interventions in the filmmaking process have become a key part of the film itself. This is the case, for example, in *Welcome* (2016, Zhu Rikun), where the entire film consists of a secretly recorded conversation played over a black screen. The conversation is between the filmmakers and two local officials about them not being allowed to make a film on black lung (pneumoconiosis). *A Filmless Festival* (2015, Wang Wo) consists of a collection of footage, most of it recorded covertly, shot during the 2014 Beijing Independent Film Festival, which was forcefully prevented from taking place by the local authorities. In several cases, intervention and harassment are featured as part of the film, as in *Children are not Afraid of Death, Children are Afraid of Ghosts* (2017, Rong Guangrong), where at a certain point the filmmaker is forced to quit filming and re-enacts the scene with his children’s toys, and *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016, Wang Nanfu), where the act of filming activist Ye Haiyan and being harassed because of it are an integral part of the documentary. Finally, the mockumentary *I am Going to Make a Lesbian Porn* (2014, Dajing) ends with a character playing a police officer shutting down the filming and ending the film.

Even though cases of imprisonment, detention, and harassment should not be taken lightly, they are perhaps not fully representative of the general state of independent filmmaking in China. Over the past decades, hundreds of critical Chinese independent films have been made, screened, and discussed without the filmmakers facing harsh consequences. Eddie Bertozzi (2016) writes how in the early days of independent Chinese cinema the state attempted heavy-handed intervention in independent films being produced and shown abroad, but that this tactic backfired, neither preventing films from being made nor from being shown, whilst generating more attention. After that, Bertozzi writes, the policy seems to have moved to mostly ignoring independent film and filmmakers. However, over the past ten years, repression of independent cinema has returned in a seemingly

²⁸ The film was never realised, but Hao Wu has made two feature films in China since: *The Road to Fame* (2013, Hao Wu) and *People’s Republic of Desire* (2018, Hao Wu).
random fashion that, with the exception of some high-profile cases, such as that of Ai Weiwei, has remained relatively unnoticed outside of the independent Chinese film community. About the present haphazard repression of filmmaking Bertozzi writes that "under the action of the uncertainty principle, non-homogeneous alternating strategic indifference and active repression within a state of menacing suspension, the practice of independent cinema in China is constantly in danger" (Bertozzi 2016: 80).

In light of the risks involved in making independent films in China, the final section of this chapter examines how filmmakers speak about these risks and the dangers involved in making independent films in China, and about how they strategically cope with them. The ways in which the filmmakers speak about risk feed into the discourse of independent filmmaking in China as a strategically reformulated form of parrhesia. I will argue that the main repertoire used when speaking about risk is one that affirms independent filmmaking in general as a risky activity, while simultaneously asserting that the filmmaker's own work is relatively safe because of their strategic approach to making films. Because the risks of filmmaking are a favourite topic amongst people asking questions at Q&As held outside of China, my argument predominantly draws on answers provided at such sessions.29

*Risks exist but can be avoided*

The quote from Han Tao describing how making his films led to house arrest, bankruptcy, and threats made against him and his family is not representative of the more commonly statements made related to the risks of independent filmmaking in China. Han Tao’s emphasis on the dire costs of being a filmmaker makes him an outlier on one end of the spectrum. On the other end are those filmmakers who downplay the risks; for example, at a Q&A in Beijing, filmmaker Qiu Jiongjiong spoke jokingly of the lack of interest from the authorities in his work:

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29 At many post-screening Q&A sessions outside of China (also for films with screening permits) questions would arise about what films can and cannot be made, and whether filmmakers get into trouble for their work.
I hope the SAPPRFT\textsuperscript{30} don’t castrate me. I just made the film and didn’t have any trouble, I don’t think anybody knows or cares about my films; the police have other things on their mind, like corruption. (Notes from Qiu Jiongjiong post-screening Q&A, Beijing 2016)

Whilst jokingly half-acknowledging that filmmaking is indeed not without risk, this quote emphasises that independent filmmaking is largely ignored. Less of an outlier with regard to the dominant repertoire used in response to questions about the risk of making films in China is the response offered by Yang Mingming at a Q&A in Amsterdam:

For some filmmakers, especially documentary makers, it is very hard to make films in China, but for me and my kind of films there is no real problem. (Notes from Yang Mingming post-screening Q&A, Amsterdam 2018)

Here, the filmmaker acknowledges that there could potentially be risks in making independent films in China, specifically documentaries, but that such risk does not apply to her own work. Yang Mingming’s most recent film Girls Always Happy (2018, Yang Mingming), about a bickering mother and daughter living in Beijing, received a screening permit after a couple of minutes of foul language were cut, and could be considered a film which would not open up the filmmaker to repercussions. However, Female Directors (2012, Yang Mingming), an earlier short mockumentary, was a fairly radical feminist\textsuperscript{31} film, full of profanity and sexual references. The film was not submitted to the censorship process, and most probably would not have passed without severe reediting, casting doubts upon Yang’s statement that “there is no real problem” for her films.

\textsuperscript{30} From 2013 to 2018, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television SAPPRFT was a ministry-level executive agency directly under the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. In 2018 the SAPPRFT was dissolved into multiple bodies; theatrical film is currently overseen by the National Film Administration, which falls under the Propaganda Department.

\textsuperscript{31} In another example of the repertoire that works to depoliticize independent filmmaking practices, Yang Mingming told me she does not consider herself a feminist filmmaker (Interview with Yang Mingming 2018).
In an interview with Richard James Havis (2018), filmmaker Wang Bing makes a similar argument to Yang Mingming, but reverses it, saying fiction films\(^{32}\) are problematic, and documentaries are not:

It’s more difficult to make feature films, as there are more people involved, and you need more resources to support the filmmaking process than if you’re making a documentary. The more people you bring in, the more limitations the authorities will impose on you ... There were restrictions and limitations placed on me due to the policy on films when I made my feature film, so I went straight back to documentary filmmaking afterwards. That’s what I’m going to stick with.

(Havis 2018: n. pag.)

Even though Wang Bing faced unspecified restrictions in making his only fiction film, The Ditch (2010, Wang Bing), on the Jabiangou labour camp, he says he is free to make documentaries. What both quotes suggest is that the filmmakers recognise that filmmaking in China is not without obstacles, but that such obstacles can be minimised through strategic means, such as by making or not making documentaries. Where there appears to be some disagreement is with regard to which practices ought to be avoided to limit the risks.

Strategising in the face of risk does not only occur through the choices filmmakers make about the kind of films they make (or about whether to present them as documentaries, fiction films, or art films), but also through employing certain means of production. As the Wang Bing quote shows, working with a larger crew means facing more restrictions. Besides having a small crew, another strategy for mitigating risk is being fast. Zhao Liang, for example, notes that “you just need to be quick, you get the shots and leave before you draw too much attention” (Notes from Zhao Liang post-screening Q&A, Amsterdam 2015). Yet another strategy is being open about the project. The filmmaker Antoine Boutet spent several years filming the construction of the South-to-North Water Transfer Project\(^{33}\) for his film

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\(^{32}\)The article mentions feature films, but I presume fiction films were meant, and the translation was not done properly. Wang Bing himself predominantly makes feature length documentaries.

\(^{33}\)The South-to-North Water Transfer Project is a massive engineering project aimed at transferring water from the Yangtze to more northern parts of the country (Beijing, Tianjin, Weihai) through a series of canals and pumps (Zhang 2009).
South to North (2014, Antoine Boutet) and answered a question from the audience on the practicalities of making this film in China as follows:

We would usually just shoot without asking, if questions were asked we would explain to the people in charge that we were making a film about the South to North project and had been traveling along its entire length. We would show them our footage and they would usually be very interested to see what was going on in other parts of the project, as many of the people working there were located on the same stretch for long periods of time without having a clear picture of what was going on elsewhere. Sometimes we would return to the same site again, and they would be happy to receive us and ask to see our new material of other sites. (Notes from Antoine Boutet post-screening Q&A, Amsterdam 2017)

Mitigating risks by adopting a more collaborative attitude, which results in a greater willingness on the part of local officials to allow films to be shot is another recurring theme when discussing the potential risks of independent filmmaking. Filmmaker Yang Yishu enlisted the help of local officials to make the film One Summer (2014, Yang Yishu), based loosely on what she went through when her husband was detained for a month:

We told the local government we wanted to make a film, and they were very supportive, the police officers acting in the film are actual police officers. (Notes from Yang Yishu post-screening Q&A, Hamburg 2015)

Enlisting local officials in advance of filming is a strategy used by several of the filmmakers I spoke to, and there are several instances in which local officials appear on screen, actively partaking in the action, such as in The Transition Period (2009, Zhou Hao), The Chinese Mayor (2015, Zhou Hao), and The Land of Many Palaces (2015, Song Ting and Adam James Smith).

With regards to the risks involved, the filmmakers assert that there are indeed risks in making independent films. This contributes to the broader discourse describing independent filmmaking in China as an act of parrhesia. However, the filmmakers also often claim to mitigate these risks by acting strategically—avoiding certain film types or employing specific filmmaking tactics, such as working with a small crew, being fast, being open or enticing officials to take part in the filmmaking process. This aspect of the discourse once again makes clear that there are certain specificities to the activity of speaking truth to power through independent cinema.
in China, stemming from a lack of straightforward or stable rules about what is permissible and not, as well as from the decentralised political structure, which allows local officials varying degrees of autonomy that can be strategically navigated by filmmakers.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the self-presentation of independent filmmakers in order to obtain an understanding of how independent Chinese cinema speaks truth to power. By distilling the discourses used by independent filmmakers when questioned about their filmmaking practices, this chapter sought to clarify a series of questions posed by Foucault to further the study of parrhesia: “Who is able to tell the truth? What are the conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth teller? About what topics is it important to tell the truth?” (Foucault 2001: 169-170).

To answer Foucault’s questions, I extracted two main discourses, and their components, from interviews with a wide selection of independent Chinese filmmakers in which they discuss why they make films, how they choose their topics, and the risks involved in filmmaking. The first main discourse combines a view of authorship based on the ideas of auteur theory with an understanding of artistic creativity prevalent in the international filmmaking scene. In line with this discourse, which stresses personal, artistic, and expressive values, the interviewed independent Chinese filmmakers state that they are interested in personal expression and in being formally innovative. The second main discourse presents independent filmmaking in China as a form of parrhesia laced with specificities related to the conditions of contemporary China. Here, moral duty, a close personal connection to the topic, and risk are brought to the fore in what is said to be an attempt to record and document hidden or repressed aspects of China’s rapidly changing society.

To a certain degree, the filmmakers present themselves as parrhesiastes by emphasizing duty, risk, and a close personal connection to the subject matter of their films. However, although they speak of their work in terms that are similar to Foucault’s conceptualization of parrhesia, there are several specifics to the truth
telling discourse used that point to a crucial difference. Thus, on the one hand, the filmmakers acknowledge the risks of engaging in independent filmmaking in a general sense, while, on the other hand, they distance themselves from personally being at risk. In addition, when the filmmakers speak of their reasons for making films in general, they emphasise duty, but when speaking of specific works this story of moral obligation is exchanged for one of having a close personal connection to the subject matter or one of coincidences leading up to the making of a specific film.

As with parrhesia in Foucault’s definition, the truths the filmmakers choose to present are said to be personal ones. The filmmakers consistently stress their personal connection with the topics they choose to make films about. When such a personal connection is absent, they mobilise a repertoire based on coincidence. In both cases, the agency of the filmmaker in choosing the topic is downplayed, as are any public or political motivations for making the film. Framing the topic choice as personal or coincidental does not necessarily move the focus away from the stated impetus to record something otherwise not seen, but can be understood as a necessary strategy to depoliticise their work and reduce the risks involved in making independent films in China. This sheds light on the alternative ways in which parrhesia takes place in Chinese independent filmmaking.

Besides this specific reformulation of engaging in parrhesia, the filmmakers also employ a discourse stressing personal, artistic, and expressive values that is closely aligned with both auteur theory and the understanding of artistic creativity prevalent in the international filmmaking scene. An alignment of these values is part and parcel of wanting to belong to and being accepted by a part of the international filmmaking community. However, the truth spoken via independent Chinese cinema is rarely directed at the power of the international film world. Because at the core of being an independent filmmaker in China, as defined in this study, is a commitment to acting and thinking outside of the Chinese state apparatus, the truths spoken are directed specifically towards Chinese power structures, such as, for example, the Communist Party, CCTV, Confucian family values, and unchecked capitalism.

34 Various aspects of Chinese cinema, including the independent film scene, are occasionally addressed in independent Chinese films, like Fuck Cinema (2005, Wu Wenguang), I Beat Tiger When I was Young (2010, Xue Jianqiang), and Criticizing the Film Academy (2008, Wu Haohao).
The filmmakers’ alignment with international filmmaking circles partially answers Foucault’s questions as to who is able to tell the truth and what the conditions are which entitle someone to present him- or herself as a truth teller and lead him or her to be recognised as such. The use of the discourse of authorship, stressing personal, artistic and expressive values, is essential to being given an international platform as a truth teller, while the discourse of parrhesia is essential to being able to function as an independent filmmaker in China.

Throughout this first chapter, I have sought to come to a deeper understanding of whether and how independent Chinese filmmakers see themselves as engaging in parrhesia. The next chapter offers readings of two specific independent films and specifies the ways in which truth is spoken to power in the age of the ultra-unreal.
2. Monsters and Machines: Re-contextualising environmental upheaval through docufiction in the age of the ultra-unreal

All the important characteristics of allegory reflect and encourage an awareness that we live in a radically deformed universe.
Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey (1976: 54)

Introduction

“I used to live in East Lake. I was a fish,” a soft-spoken voice narrates as images of Wuhan’s East Lake are shown. As the film cuts to archive footage of Chairman Mao swimming, and then to an interview setting with a young man, a short story unfolds of how the young man previously was a fish and ate some of Mao’s skin. As a result, the fish was banished to a corner of the lake by the Dragon King. After humans filled this corner, the fish was forced out of the lake and onto the land. Once out of the lake, the fish tells the interviewer that he set about warning the locals that the Dragon King, enraged by the filling of this lake, would emerge to express his anger.

This scene towards the end of Li Wen at East Lake (2015, Li Luo) is just one example of how the film merges history, actuality, mythology, and fantasy with documentary footage to re-contextualise and critique the filling of East Lake. Part documentary, part improvised performances, and part scripted fiction, Li Wen at East Lake is a pertinent example of the docufiction genre, which purposefully seeks to blur the boundaries between fiction and documentary.

As set forth in the introduction, this study seeks to uncover how independent cinema in contemporary China operates as a means of speaking truth to power. It does so by conceptualising contemporary China as being in the age of the ultra-unreal, understood through Ning Ken’s (2016) call for a speculative, subjective, critical, and experimental literature, and by employing Foucault’s notion of parrhesia as an analytic to understand how truth is spoken to power through cinema.

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35 Between 2010 and 2012, parts of the lake were filled to create space to construct residential buildings and a theme park (e.g. Chen et al. (2015) and Zhou et al. (2015)); this is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
The aim of the present chapter is to closely analyse the content of two independent Chinese environmentally themed docufiction films, namely *Li Wen at East Lake* (2015, Li Luo) and *Behemoth* (2015, Zhao Liang). The latter uses a story loosely inspired by Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to explore the mining industry in Inner Mongolia as a journey through hell and purgatory towards heaven. I consider both of these films to be manifestations of an ultra-unreal independent Chinese cinema. By seeking to understand what happens when cinema embraces the ultra-unreal in the ongoing search for alternative modes of representation capable of speaking truth to power, this chapter specifically addresses two of the sub-questions set out in the introduction: About what topics is it important to speak the truth, and what kinds of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies are employed to speak truth through film?

One way to approach the question of which topics it is considered important to speak truth to power about in China is to simply look at what films are being made (and distributed). Amongst the range of topics covered by the hundreds of recent independent Chinese films, there is a set of dominant themes. They include, but are not limited to, urban renewal, demolition, and forced relocation (e.g. *The Chinese Mayor* (2015, Zhou Hao) and *Meishi Street* (2006, Ou Ning)), migrant workers (e.g. *We the Workers* (2017, Huang Wenhai) and *Last Train Home* (2009, Fan Lixin)), the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (e.g. *1428* (2009, Du Haibin,) and *Fallen City* (2011, Zhao Qi)), LGBTQ issues (e.g. *Fish and Elephant* (2001, Li Yu) and *Queer China, ‘Comrade’ China* (2008, Cui Zi’en)), and the education system (e.g. *China Gate* (2010, Wang Yang) and *We are the … of Communism* (2007, Cui Zi’en)).

Besides these themes, environmental issues in a broad sense are also regularly featured in independent Chinese cinema. For example, illegal landfills are the focus in *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (2011, Wang Jiuliang), deforestation in *Timber Gang* (2006, Yu Guangyi), organic agriculture in *Planting for Life* (2014, Gu Xiaogang), and monoculture in *Ancient Species* (2008, Lin Zhizhan). *The Warriors of Qiugang* (2010, Ruby Yang) deals with people living in the vicinity of a highly polluting chemical plant, and an accident at a chemical plant is featured in *The Other Half* (2006, Ying Liang). *Plastic China* (2016, Wang Jiuliang) tackles the plastic recycling industry, while the plight of the endangered snub-nosed monkey is

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36 For a fairly comprehensive overview and analysis of films on the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, see Svensson (2017).

That the environment is of concern to independent Chinese filmmakers should not come as a surprise. At present, water, soil, and air pollution levels in China are testing the limits of what constitutes a liveable environment. As a result of the highly visible pollution across China, the environment is currently high on the social and political agenda, and is being debated and redefined. In 2014, after decades of political emphasis on economic growth, Chinese premier Li Keqiang publicly declared a war on pollution (Branigan 2014) and in January 2015 the mayor of Beijing stated that air pollution and overpopulation has made “Beijing an unlivable city” (*Beijing dique bushi yi ju zhi du* 北京的确不是宜居之都) (*People’s Daily Online* 2015), elevating the environment to a top policy priority.

Even though environmental issues are matters of concern to the Chinese population at large, the truth concerning the present state of the environment is often obfuscated. State-controlled media and informal channels of communication often lack credibility, and information provided by NGOs and others with activist agendas is often censored and as a result hard to access for the general public (Ma, Webber and Finlayson 2009). Although pollution has been officially recognised as a serious problem, the way in which the environment and pollution can be represented (and, to a much larger extent, the way in which the population is to be mobilised to counter pollution) remains a contentious issue.

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37 The Three Gorges project, or the Three Gorges dam, is a large hydroelectric dam on the Yangtze river in China.
38 Several of these films are analysed in an article on cinema and the Three Gorges project by Jason McGrath (2008).
39 There is a large amount of research on the state of the Chinese environment; see for example the following literature reviews: Yang et al. (2018) on soil pollution, Han et al. (2016) on water pollution, and Song et al. (2017) on air pollution.
The documentary *Under the Dome* (2015, Chai Jing) can be seen to exemplify the broad desire for information, the contentions around representations of the environment, and the implementation of censorship when control over the discourse is at risk of being lost. This documentary, produced and presented by former CCTV investigative journalist Chai Jing, discusses the causes and implications of the heavy air pollution in China’s big cities and industrial areas. In a lecture-style setting, similar to that of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, Davis Guggenheim), Chai Jing uses personal stories, animations, statistical data, and interviews with those directly involved in polluting and countering pollution to represent the gravity of an issue that concerns a large part of the Chinese population. Initially, the video was featured on the homepage of *People’s Daily* and praised by environmental minister Chen Jining, but as the video went viral online and was viewed and discussed by approximately two hundred million people in the space of three days, regulators took it down and cleared the online discussion (Gardner 2015). Not only did *Under the Dome* lay bare the great interest from the general public in this topic and the reach of censorship in China, it also exposed the ambiguous position taken by the state with regards to what is officially deemed necessary or important information.\(^{40}\)

As soon as it was released, the film was also subjected to a flurry of distrust and scepticism, with online commentators claiming that Americans had financed the film with malicious intent and that host Chai Jing was a smoker and therefore a hypocrite.\(^{41}\) In personal conversations with Chinese friends similar statements were quick to be made. These kinds of statements can be viewed as expressions of distrust and scepticism towards anybody or anything making truth claims, as documentaries such as *Under the Dome* are perceived to do.

Scepticism is widespread when it comes to environmental issues in general and in China specifically. Even though the Chinese state is supposedly actively contributing to a cleaner environment and emphasises the gravity of the situation, it also holds a monopoly on facts concerning the environment. Thus, it blocks online

\(^{40}\) The aesthetics and circulation of *Under the Dome* (2015, Chai Jing) have been discussed in detail by Shuqing Cui (2017), Xiujun Deng and Shuang Peng (2018), and Fan Yang (2016).

\(^{41}\) Online hostility towards Chai Jing was already present before the release of the film because she gave birth in the United States, which was considered unpatriotic by online commentators (Nelson 2014).
access to the PM2.5 measurements made by the US embassy and its consular sections, and to any other information which runs counter to official truths. At the same time, online rumours about chemical spills and hazardous accidents have also been misguided on many occasions.

For example, on June 11th, 2012, heavy smog led to rumours about both a chlorine leak at a chemical factory and a boiler explosion in a steel mill near Wuhan; this incident is also captured in Li Wen at East Lake (2015, Li Luo). Whilst the, now largely confirmed, official narrative was that the smog was due to farmers burning straw, the rumour seemed to be more widely believed (Xu 2016: 125). This shows how the lack of trustworthy sources and the inability to verify information has created conditions that enable high levels of scepticism towards any kind of information on China’s environmental conditions, contributing to the already mentioned generalised sceptical sentiments or large parts of the population (Ma, Webber and Finlayson 2009).

The phenomenon of distrust towards documentaries in particular and the implications of this distrust have been widely discussed and debated (e.g. Carroll 1996, Teurlings 2013), and are also examined in the introduction to this study. Crucially, a distrust of truth claims is said to have played a significant part in the rise of the docufiction genre, which the two films analysed in this chapter are part of. Docufiction blends fiction with documentary, playing with audience expectations and genre conventions (Landesman 2015).

Making a clear distinction between documentary and fiction film has always been problematic, and the earliest periods of filmmaking were characterised by “a lot of two-way traffic across a weak ontological frontier”, as David Levy (1982: 249) writes. It is safe to say that this two-way traffic has continued ever since, whether in the staged scenes in Robert J. Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922, Robert J. Flaherty) and Moana (1926, Frances H. Flaherty and Robert J. Flaherty), mockumentaries like This is Spinal Tap (1984, Rob Reiner), or more recently a range of films labelled as hybrid or docufictions like In Vanda’s Room (2000, Pedro Costa), Our Beloved Month of August (2008, Miguel Gomes), and Alamar (2009, Pedro González-Rubio) (Lim 2010, Landesman 2015).

What constitutes a documentary has been characterised in terms of filmmaking practices, like filming real events or retelling true stories; social practices, such as labelling certain films as documentaries and as such creating the
documentary; and modes of reception, for example in Dirk Eitzen’s (1995) definition of a documentary as a film of which it makes sense for a viewer to ask “might it be lying?” (e.g. Eitzen 1995, Nichols 2001, Plantinga 2005). The docufiction, or hybrid documentary incorporates some of these characteristics, yet overtly rejects any pure documentary approach. It might employ documentary practices like observational filming of actual events and people, interviews, or the use of archive footage, whilst also incorporating fictional, staged or scripted scenes, leaving audiences guessing about the status of the images. Many filmmakers engaged in docufiction do not classify their films as documentaries or fictional films, but just as films or art (e.g. Almo 2004, personal interview with Zhao Liang 2015).

Even though the creators of docufictions often do not wish to define their work in terms of any particular genre, festivals like Art of the Real and True/False, film critics (e.g. Lim 2010, Koehler 2010), and academics (e.g. Landesman 2015, Rhodes and Springer 2006) have jointly contributed to the establishment of docufiction as a genre with its own genealogy, starting from the inception of filmmaking (Sullivan 2014). Robert Koehler (2010 n. pag.) writes of a “zone of a cinema free of, or perhaps more precisely in between, hardened fact and invented fiction”, which “permits all manner of wild possibilities.” Ohad Landesman (2015: 11) writes that docufictions “invite the viewer to welcome and embrace their aesthetic hybridity as a formal strategy ... to offer a different tactic that exists along a fact-fictional continuum.”

The docufiction, viewed as opening up new possibilities for parrhesia by employing the space between fact and fiction, can be seen as a particularly suitable form for addressing contentious and continuously evolving issues like the environment. As long as the debate concerning the environment in China balances precariously between topics and modes of representation that are encouraged and forcefully prohibited, speaking about the environment is a particularly risky parrhesiastic game.

As discussed in the introduction to this study, the past decade has seen a strong current of hybrid film forms from independent Chinese filmmakers. Examples include Mr. Zhang Believes (2015, Qiu Jiongjióng) and Dragonfly Eyes (2017, Xu Bing). Despite the considerable number of docufictions in contemporary Chinese independent cinema, almost all scholarly attention (e.g. Austin 2014, Deppman 2014) paid to the hybrid character of recent independent Chinese
documentaries has focussed on 24 City (2008, Jia Zhangke). In this film, interviews with factory workers telling their stories are blended with interviews with actors acting as factory workers telling stories written by the director, who used this technique to capture what he had heard during the many interviews he conducted in preparation of the film. Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, who views 24 City as expanding on the Deleuzian idea of “the power of the false”, concludes:

These stylistic choices model a new form of storytelling that conveys a continuous directorial negotiation with the roles of activist and artist ... [Jia’s] evolution from a postsocialist realist to documentarian to docufictionist manifests a search for new and better cinematic languages, each of which he has needed at different times to meet the demands of his dual position as inside-outsider and creative, responsible witness to China’s changing realities. (Deppman 2014: 206)

What Deppman argues here is that the use of docufiction as a means to record a changing China in 24 City marks the culmination of Jia’s personal development from operating outside of the system to within it and of his aims in filmmaking. Thomas Austin analyses the aesthetics and politics of memory in 24 City from the perspective of indexicality and intertextuality, concluding that:

A more orthodox documentary would, in contesting the terms of institutionally sanctioned histories, assume its own transparency as the grounds from which to speak. But 24 City’s critique of official discourses and its representation of ... marginal accounts takes a form which acknowledges that – like the hegemonic narratives ... that it opposes – it too entails rhetorical acts of selection, exclusion and narrativization. (Austin 2014: 266)

Austin reiterates the idea that 24 City as a docufiction highlights the general constructedness of historic narratives, including the one it itself presents, thus offering not only a critique of the content of official narratives, but also of the way in which any narrative can be presented as a singular truth.

In my approach to the analysis of the films in this chapter, I connect the docufiction as a genre to specific present Chinese circumstances and to a broader feeling amongst artistic communities in China that reality is hard to grasp. As set forth in the introduction to this study, the use of more experimental forms of documenting China can be directly related to the views of Ning Ken (2016) on how
to write literature (and, by extension, to engage in any artistic practice) in the age of the ultra-unreal (*chaohuan 超幻*). He writes that this age requires an ultra-unreal literature that is engaged with the most pressing issues, is speculative and paradoxical, has the quality of a fable or an allegory, and takes risks in terms of its form. Notably, the environment is seen as a key topic for ultra-unreal literature as, according to Ning (2016: n. pag.), “the state of the environment mirrors the state of our souls.”

As mentioned, for Ning (2016: n. pag.), ultra-unreal literature “has the quality of a fable or an allegory”, because “reality itself has the quality of a fable.” A detailed exploration of allegory is beyond the scope of this study, but as both *Behemoth* and *Li Wen at East Lake* contain pronounced allegorical elements in how they merge fact and fiction, it is instructive to take a brief look at the workings of allegory and at how it aligns with an ultra-unreal cinema and complicates the idea of independent Chinese cinema as parrhesia.

Martin Heidegger (2002: 12) has described allegory as a sensory image which “is never intended to stand for itself alone, but indicates that something is to be understood, providing a clue as to what that is.” Steven Mailloux (2010: 254), in turn, writes that “[a]llegory is narrative with a shadow story of corresponding characters, events, or ideas. Allegorical interpretation establishes the meaning of this figurative relation by tracing its correspondences of actions and concepts.” Thus, even though some critics contend that “the nature of allegorical writing is elusive” (Copeland and Struck 2010: 2), it is clear that allegory involves explicitly infusing the text with traceable additional meaning.

Both films analysed in this chapter rely on allegorical devices—in *Behemoth* the overarching narrative structure of a journey through hell, purgatory and heaven is allegorical (standing for China’s potential path in dealing with environmental issues), while *Li Wen at East Lake* uses the short allegorical tale of the fish who ate Mao’s skin as a shadow story to figure the loss of authority of the local political elite.

To understand the close relationship between allegory and docufiction as a form of ultra-unreal cinema, Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey’s (1976) discussion of allegory in her study of Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590) is instructive. She writes:
[Allegory] invites the reader to correlate what it “unfolds” with certain realities concealed in the unrevealing confusion of their own lives and identifiable only through introspection. Such correlation occurs, in fact, when we read any fiction, “realistic” or “unrealistic”; what is peculiar to allegory is the frankness with which the invitation is extended, and a congruence of patterning whereby the correspondence between invented and experienced reality is demonstrated. (MacCaffrey 1976: 59)

What MacCaffrey argues here is that whilst any fiction allows the reader (or viewer) to associate what is represented with “the confusion of their own lives”, allegory explicitly invites the reader to do make this link. Following this idea, the allegorical qualities of Chinese ultra-unreal cinema can be viewed as extending an invitation to draw connections between the strangeness invoked by the film and the strangeness of reality in contemporary China. As MacCaffrey aptly writes, “characteristics of allegory reflect and encourage an awareness that we live in a radically deformed universe” (MacCaffrey 1976: 54). Significantly, Maccaffrey stresses that allegory frankly invites readers to look for ways to connect the text and the meanings it generates to the world outside it, and to see these meanings as linked, more specifically, to “the confusion of their own lives.” This cues me to return to parrhesia, which Foucault writes of as speaking truth in frank manner:

In parrhesia, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. … he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the parrhesiastes uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find. Whereas rhetoric provides the speaker with technical devices to help him prevail upon the minds of his audience … the parrhesiastes acts on other people’s minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes. (Foucault 2001: 14)

Whilst Foucault’s account of frankly speaking truth in the most direct way possible coincides with the early approaches of the New Documentary Movement and Sixth Generation filmmakers, the ultra-unreal Chinese cinema with which this study is concerned complicates this particular way of speaking truth to power. It complicates precisely the notion of frankness, because its use of allegory prompts the viewer to actively assign an additional meaning to what is being shown. The
ambiguity of docufiction’s place on the fact-fiction continuum, moreover, can be confusing and disorienting for the viewer. Yet, I would argue that the ultra-unreal Chinese cinema I am looking at can still be considered frank, since allegory, as MacCaffrey shows, does not “veil” its purpose of indicating something beyond itself. In the two films in question here, the overall intent to use ambiguity and allegory to question the Chinese authorities’ involvement in environmental destruction is quite clear.

As such, independent ultra-unreal cinema can be seen to contain both a high degree of frankness in speaking truth to power and a degree of complexity, ambiguity, and indeterminacy concerning its precise truth claim. From the perspective of the ultra-unreal, the unreal characteristics of contemporary China make it impossible for a speaker/filmmaker to express his thoughts through “a complete and exact account” using the “most direct words and forms of expression”; instead, being frank in this context means highlighting the strangeness of the present by mirroring it. I will now proceed to show how this highlighting of strangeness through allegory and other means takes shape in Behemoth and Li Wen at East Lake, and how it allows these films to speak truth to power about the environment.

**We Are All Minions of the Monster**

Named after a biblical and eschatological monster, *Behemoth* (2015, Zhao Liang) documents various aspects of the coal industry in Inner Mongolia. The film is directed by Zhao Liang, one of the most prolific independent Chinese filmmakers of the past decades. He previously directed a range of feature-length documentary films primarily focusing on marginalized individuals.42 His most well-known film, *Petition* (2009), follows a group of petitioners living in a makeshift village in Beijing over the course of twelve years. Most of his works rely heavily on digital hand-held camera work, and do not use extra-diegetic sound. *Behemoth* departs from this mode of filmmaking both in terms of its theme and aesthetics. Shot in 4K-resolution,

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the film does not carry the grainy documentary look that dominated independent Chinese documentaries up until the late 2000s. Thematically, the film predominantly focuses on natural and industrial landscapes and structures. There is no dialogue, and the details disclosed about the individuals that inhabit this world are shown visually on screen as the viewer watches them working, living, and dying under extreme conditions.

The shift in style and content from the director’s earlier work becomes apparent during the first three minutes of the film, as in the opening scene an extreme close-up of dust and debris from an explosion hurtles towards the viewer in slow motion, accompanied by Tuvan throat singing. Then the title screen appears, followed by an inter-title that reads: “God created the beast Behemoth on the 5th day. It was the largest monster on earth. A thousand mountains yielded food for him.” As images of a smoking open-pit coal mine are shown, the singing stops and the film cuts to a shot of the mine with a naked male figure lying on the ground. A voiceover begins to narrate a first-person account in which the protagonist is led by a guide carrying “a portrait of the dead”, who on the screen is presented as a man carrying a mirror.

In these opening minutes, almost every convention of the New Documentary Movement is broken by the inclusion of music, special effects, references to western religion, poetry, and a voiceover. Even though the voiceover is a fairly standard documentary device that exists in many forms, an anonymous yet authoritative voice that guides the viewer is rarely used in independent Chinese documentaries. One reason for this absence can be found in the origins of independent Chinese documentary, which is often viewed as a reaction against documentaries produced by the state that used what Yingchi Chu (2007: 53-54) calls the dogmatic formula, featuring an authoritative “voice of god” voiceover.

In Behemoth, the voiceover is not a voice of god, but does serve as a form of guidance. Rather than interpreting the images and providing supplementary history, facts, figures or other truths, the narrator unfolds a journey through hell (the mines), purgatory (the steel mills), and heaven (a ghost city), very loosely inspired
by Dante's *Divine Comedy*.\(^3\) The narration starts with the protagonist finding himself in a dream in which he is awoken by heavy explosions. He narrates:

> Midway on our life’s journey I seem to have had a dream. In the dream, I was suddenly awoken by the sound of heavy explosions. I open my eyes onto a boundless smoky haze. The smoldering ground beneath my feet makes me feel I am in some dark, desolate place. Only looking all around me do I discover I have arrived at the pit’s edge of the inferno. This is a place that has been destroyed. Once upon a time it gushed with mountain springs and was lush with vegetation. Now not a blade of grass survives. A land of deathly silence. There I meet a guide burdened with a heavy portrait of the dead.

The narration here frames the film as a dream vision, a popular European medieval literary form in which a first-person narrator presents an allegorical tale as an experience had while dreaming.

As Amber Rose Dunai (2015: 1-2) and W. Bächtold (2014: 4-5) note, the medieval European dream vision literature the film is drawing from was heavily informed by the dream theory set forth by the Roman writer Macrobius (ca. 400), who groups dreams into five categories. Three of these categories are said to have predictive values or to uncover hidden truths: *oraculum*, where an authoritative figure gives advice or predicts the future; *visio*, a vision of future events; and *somnium*, an enigmatic dream that requires interpretation. In dream vision literature, the dreamer who experiences a *somnium* is usually accompanied by a guide. The other two types Macrobius deems either false or sees as simply reiterating things already known or experienced during waking: *visum*, where fantastical figures appear when somebody is in a state between sleep and wake, and the fantastical figures haunt or entertain the person; and *insomnium*, where we dream about the same hardships we face in waking life. The opening narration of *Behemoth*, by introducing the dream and the guide in combination with the visuals of the debris, the naked figure lying in the mine, and the guide carrying a mirror,

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\(^3\) The explicit intertextual relation between Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and *Behemoth* is limited to the voiceover starting with the opening line of *Divine Comedy*: “At one point, midway on our path in life”, and the film being structured as moving from hell through purgatory to heaven, as well as the claim in the end-titles that the film was inspired by Dante’s work. As discussed in more detail below, the narration of the film draws from medieval dream vision literature, which Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is often also considered part of.
strongly suggests that the film is a *somnium*, an enigmatic dream that will reveal its truth through interpretation.

I read the dream vision as an overarching allegorical structure that directly connects the film to the official discourse of the Chinese Dream. The Chinese Dream is a slogan that has been heavily pushed by the Chinese government from 2013 onwards. Whilst the idea of the Chinese Dream has been interpreted in a number of ways, in the CCP’s leading theoretical journal *Qiushi* (求是)⁴⁴ Shi Yuzhi describes the Chinese Dream as being a dream for the "prosperity of the country" and "national rejuvenation", and that it is grounded in the "harmonious well-being of the collective" and "relies on collective consciousness, collective power, and collective wisdom. The Chinese Dream must be realized by the powerful joint efforts of the entire nation" (Shi 2013, n. pag.). Whilst officially the Chinese Dream is to be understood as a national project, in its promulgation it has been to a large extent about aligning individual aspirations for a better life with those of the state. For example, Gil Hizi (2018) shows how the Chinese Dream has been represented on a set of television shows and argues that:

> while the language of dreams alludes to individualistic values ... state-promoted practices meticulously foster associations between the self-realization of individuals and their nationalistic sentiments. ... These shows both enhance and mitigate tensions between self-realization and nationalism that have extended through the China Dream campaign. These shows exemplify a discursive apparatus that reconfigures self-centred values through a vision of social stability and citizens' affiliation to the Chinese Communist Party. (Hizi 2018: 37)

With the Chinese Dream campaign in full swing at the time of production and release of *Behemoth*, the fact that the protagonist finds himself in a dream that is set "in some dark, desolate place ... a place that has been destroyed" can be read as a direct invitation to read the film as an allegory seeking to comment on and to critique the Chinese Dream as a nation building project.

Throughout the film, the shots accompanied by voiceover narration usually feature an anonymous naked figure. These are mostly extreme long shots showing the naked figure lying curled up on the ground, suggesting that the figure is the

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⁴⁴ *Qiushi* translates as ‘Seeking Truth’.
sleeping narrator, and that the images shown are the visions of his Chinese Dream. The shots with the naked figure have two lines running across it that fracture the image like a prism and place it in slight disjunction (see Figures 2.1-2.3). This implies that the image is refracted to reveal otherwise unseen ultra-unreal qualities, like a prism refracts light to reveal the concealed colourful pallet contained within white light.

Figure 2.1: Coal mine. Screen capture from Behemoth.

In each case, the juxtaposition of the naked figure and its surroundings seems to emphasise specific aspects through contrast and association. A shot in the coal mining pit, for example, draws out the darkness and scale of the pit through the contrast between it and the small figure with his light skin colour. In shots of the grasslands, the naked figure is positioned on the border between the grass and the pit, remaining immobile although it is literally caught in the middle of the dark mine’s encroachment on the pristine-looking grass. When the figure arrives in a cemetery, the presence of the small naked body draws out an association with the many bodies buried there, whilst the mining activities visible in the distant background of the same shot are drawn into relation with the corpses in the cemetery. It is through this use of contrast and association that the film reinforces its central message about the destructiveness of the coal industry and its critique of the Chinese Dream.

The image of the naked dreaming figure also physically situates the narrator in the landscapes captured by the film, which are seemingly devoid of human life, though not of man-made structures and machines (mines, graves, buildings, trucks).
Contrasting starkly with its immediate surroundings, the naked human body appears to be fragile and out of place. However, through the narrative of the dream journey, it still makes sense that the narrator can show sights that appear to have no direct relation to him and would otherwise remain unseen.

Throughout the narrator's journey, which passes through coal mines, steel mills, workers homes and hospitals, the voiceover adds a layer of narrative to the original documentary footage. The voiceover is poetic and requires interpretation—it does not straightforwardly assign meaning to the scenes, but opens up the images to allegorical interpretation. For example, as a panning long shot shows trucks driving through a mine, the voiceover states: "Ridge after ridge,
descending with my guide. I see the monster’s playthings, carrying out invisible orders.” The shot is followed by a number of extreme long shots showing the expansive mine, machines digging, and trucks driving. In these shots, the machines and trucks appear to be tiny and thus become associated with the “monster’s playthings” mentioned by the voiceover (see Figure 2.4). The narration also suggests that the invisible workers operating the machines and trucks have no real agency or control over what they are doing, but are subject to an invisible and indeterminate force that is described as a monster and that can be seen to refer to the Chinese state.

In a later scene the people working in the mines are described as “creatures that sort between carbon and rock wearing ink as makeup.” (see Figure 2.5) Here, the narrator frames the workers covered in coal dust as creatures, signalling their dehumanisation. According to David Livingstone Smith (2011), dehumanisation occurs when people are regarded as lacking that which makes them human and “because of this deficit, they don’t command the respect that we, the truly human beings, are obliged to grant one another. They can be enslaved, tortured, or even exterminated—treated in ways in which we could not bring ourselves to treat those whom we regard as members of our own kind” (Smith 2011: 2). The combination of voiceover and visuals makes clear that these “creatures” are denied their individual Chinese Dream yet forced to labour for its collective goals. The thick layers of coal dust hide the dehumanised workers’ faces while they are engaged in heavy labour, and, as the film shows later on, will lead to black lung (pneumoconiosis) and the
painful, premature death associated with that condition. Yet the film also shows how the workers arrive home and wash themselves. Through extreme close-ups their previously hidden faces are revealed, visually affirming that they are in fact humans.

Figure 2.5: Dust as make-up. Screen capture from Behemoth.

Unsure whether he is still dreaming or has arrived in heaven, in the final scenes of the film the protagonist arrives in Kangbashi District. Kangbashi is a new part of the city of Ordos. Construction on this district started around 2003 with the aim to both accommodate a move of the population out of the old part of Ordos, and house a projected influx of new residents from other parts of China. The move from the old city was necessary because of water shortages due to high water consumption by adjacent industry and poor planning of the water infrastructure. Even though Kangbashi was built to accommodate over a million people, the process of populating the city is taking shape slowly and large parts of it remain vacant, with high-rise buildings standing empty (Shepard 2015, Woodworth 2018).45 The scenes set in Kangbashi consist of tracking shots showing rows and rows of vacant high-rises and a solitary cleaner walking down a big road. The images are accompanied by the following narration:

Through the dusty haze, the raging flames, the graves, and through the shattered homeland. All the sacrifices transmuted into steel, are carried

45 The people living in Ordos were the subject of the 2014 documentary The Land of Many Palaces (2015, Song Ting and Adam James Smith).
off to build the paradise of our desires. Could it be that I’m still dreaming? Could it be that I’m already in paradise? This brand new place is the destination of all my chaotic dreams. Like a mirage after one has endured an ocean tempest. In paradise everything is clean. In paradise work is relaxing, even a little boring. In paradise no inhabitants are to be seen. This is what they call a ghost city. And yet this no dream, this is who we are. We are that monster, the monster minions.

The closing act of the film thus shows the final stage of the Chinese Dream, and what has been created at the expense of disappearing grasslands, inhuman working conditions, and pneumoconiosis. In Kangbashi, which the allegorical narrative of the film designates as “paradise” or heaven, the sky is blue and the streets are clean, but also almost deserted. There are, the film suggests, very few people who get to emerge from hell and purgatory to enjoy heaven. The collective dream of a relaxed urbanised life, for which the dehumanised people working in the mines and steel mills abandoned their individual dreams, proves elusive: “Yet this is no dream, this is who we are.” In the last shot featuring the naked figure he is no longer lying down, but standing up straight as if awoken from his sleep, yet still in the same world he dreamt of (see Figure 2.6). Where the film was introduced as having the characteristics of a somnium, inviting the viewer to read meaning into the surreal images and to see a hidden truth, the narrator himself has awoken in the same place, showing that for many in China, this dream is in fact an insomnium reflecting and reiterating the harsh reality in which they live every day.

Figure 2.6: Arrival in Ordos. Screen capture from Behemoth.
The closing act of _Behemoth_ can be read as exposing the hollowness of economic progress in China, where very few can enjoy the results of the endless toil of the many. In addition, it presents the empty high-rise buildings in ghost cities like Kangbashi as emblematic of the shiny façade of the Chinese Dream that conceals the suffering and environmental destruction underpinning it. The narrator's final line, “We are that monster, the monster minions”, coincides with the guide reappearing on the screen, still holding the mirror. This quite explicitly indicates that everyone is responsible for what is happening to the environment and humanity, as we are all both the monster and its minions, pursuing a false dream, a _visum_ of our own creation.

To return to _Behemoth_ as a form of parrhesia, the film can clearly be viewed as speaking truth to power through its allegorical critique of the Chinese Dream and of the way it is being pursued by the authorities and the population alike. However, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Foucault writes of parrhesia that it should involve speaking truth in a frank manner: “the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account … so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks … he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks” (Foucault 2001: 14). With the dream vision narration in _Behemoth_ explicitly inviting the viewer to read the narration as an allegory and to look beyond what is being said and shown, _Behemoth_ constitutes an instance of parrhesia that complicates what it means to speak truth frankly. Despite its allegorical structure, the film is extremely frank in its position, as the poetic narration of the film does not hide or de-emphasise its critique of the human and environmental damage caused by coal mining. This critique is explicitly brought to the fore in the images of the destruction of pastoral landscapes, deep mines, and black lung patients, accompanied by a voiceover narration that includes phrases like “once we sang in the sunshine and blithe sweet air, but now I grieve upon the shattered earth”, and frames the driving force behind the displayed destruction as a “monster.” At the same time, through its ultra-unreal and allegorical characteristics the film also contains a critique of the government discourse surrounding the Chinese Dream and raises questions concerning the agency that is causing these problems, the direction of human progress, the nature of reality, and power. From this perspective the film also contains a high degree of frankness, albeit a different form of frankness than the non-rhetorical one Foucault points to.
As docufiction, *Behemoth* combines fact and fiction, juxtaposing images of real life with images of a dreaming protagonist. Creative narrative elements are mixed into the documentary footage, but the separation between the two is quite clear. From the beginning of the film, the poetic voiceover narration can be decoupled from the documentary images, and the staged aspects of certain scenes, such as those containing the naked figure and the guide with the mirror, are easily distinguishable from non-staged aspects, which are shot in a purely observational documentary style. Rather than attempting to confuse the viewer with respect to what is “real” or “fake”, or highlighting the tension between the two, the fictional element of *Behemoth* serves to reinforce and to highlight the critical message conveyed by the visuals, underscoring that the critique the film articulates is frank and can thus be seen as parrhesia. In accordance with the aims of ultra-unreal cinema, moreover, the naked figure, the guide, and the allegorical dream narrative offer a transparent interpretive window that, crucially, highlights the strangeness of what is displayed and subjects it (in its very strangeness) to a powerful critique. In the next section I turn to *Li Wen at East Lake*, which in a slightly different way recontextualises what it means to speak truth to power frankly.

**We Are All Part of this Machine**

*Li Wen at East Lake*[^1] is a film directed by Li Luo. Li’s previous works include *Emperor Visits The Hell* (2012), a modern-day adaptation of three chapters from *Journey to the West*, a sixteenth century novel attributed to Wu Cheng’en, as well as *Rivers and my Father* (2010), a film loosely based on excerpts from Li Luo’s father’s memoirs. *Li Wen at East Lake* is set on the banks of East Lake (*dong hu* 东湖), a thirty-three square kilometre lake in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province. Parts of the lake banks are publicly accessible protected nature reserves. As mentioned earlier, over the past decades parts of the East Lake (as well as other lakes in Wuhan) have been incrementally filled and a broad participatory art project entitled Everybody’s East Lake has been critically questioning the filling of the lake through various

[^1]: The Chinese title is 李文漫游东湖 (*Li Wen manyou donghu*), which would literally translate as “Li Wen roams round East Lake.”
pieces, performances, and installations (Chen 2016). It is in the context of the filling of the lake and the art project that the film unfolds.

*Li Wen at East Lake* starts out as a fairly conventional documentary with some activist undertones. The first half hour of the film shows interviews with people living around East Lake, who are asked about their relation to the lake and in particular how they feel about the filling of approximately two square kilometres of the lake in order to construct the theme park Happy Valley, as well as high-rise apartments (see Figure 2.7). The interviewees express their disappointment with the ways in which commercial interests have managed to have parts of the lake filled, bring up other lakes in Wuhan, like Shahu Lake, that have also been shrinking, and express a sense of resignation that this is the way these things go in China.

The interviews are intercut with images from Google Earth showing how the shape of the lake has changed over the years, and with shots of the final stages of the construction and the opening of Happy Valley. The shots of Happy Valley include rehearsals for a stunt show and people buying entrance tickets. The viewer is also introduced to the Everybody's East Lake art project as the camera follows an artist marking the former banks of the lake with spray paint. The first part of the film also includes a performance piece in which a hearing is enacted to discuss the prospect of building a second airport in Wuhan. At this staged hearing, a government representative proposes to fill East Lake in order to build the second airport there due to its convenient location. Experts discuss the technical feasibility
and pros and (predominantly) cons of this idea, after which the supposed government representative concludes that it is a great plan: “the lake will disappear, but from it a new symbol, Wuhan Airport, will emerge.” By seriously discussing this quite ludicrous proposition, which extrapolates from the current business logic to doing away with the lake all together, the performance critiques how little the authorities value East Lake.

In showing the interviews, the art project, and the Google Earth images, the first part of the film presents a relatively straightforward documentary-style critique of how pieces of lakes in Wuhan have been claimed for commercial gain. However, thirty-two minutes into the film, the title character Li Wen (played by actor and painter Li Wen) appears. In what seems to be yet another interview with a local person who happens to be by the lake, Li Wen responds very differently from the previous interviewees. He frankly states his positive view on how Chinese society is run and criticises the interviewer, who is (or is acting as) a sociology student, for not being pragmatic enough:

Li Wen: About this, you university students think too much. Our society is managed in a unified manner. It’s not like what you said. First, open discussion about those matters doesn’t interest us ordinary folks. It has nothing to do with us. Applying whatever policy is about how different departments coordinate. In this large context, you can’t solve these problems. You only discuss them like an armchair strategist. There is no point. You can’t solve these problems. You are just putting on a show. You just do a good job with your dissertation, hand it in, that’s good enough. Everyone gets his own job done. Do you need to care about those remote matters? Are your ideals that lofty? Because government is a machine, a machine of power and force.

Interviewer: Should this machine of force be constrained?

Li Wen: Do you want to constrain the machine of force? The machine is constantly operating, exerting its power. We are all part of this machine … In our society, decisions are made by the leaders. We just need to act according to their arrangements.

Where the narrator in Behemoth states that everything is decreed by the monster, which we are all part of, Li Wen places the responsibility for what happens in China, and in East Lake, with “the machine”, which, again, everybody is inescapably part of.
While both films use metaphors to characterise the way power works as a force of which we are all part, yet have limited to no control over, the positions the two protagonists take in relation to this force are very different. In *Behemoth* the protagonist positions himself on the edges of where the monster’s force is at its most destructive and offers a critique of what he observes. In contrast, Li Wen is positioned as part of the machine, someone who “gets his job done” and “acts according to [the Chinese leaders’] arrangements” whilst dismissing people who, like the university student interviewing him, are trying to question the workings of the machine.

After highlighting Li Wen’s direct critique of the interviewer’s questions as demonstrating a lack of pragmatism and lofty ideals, the film starts to focus on Li Wen himself. Without any significant stylistic rupture, it introduces a fictional backstory for him, and begins to incorporate staged scenes and semi-improvised conversations, whilst regularly relying on unwitting bystanders for input. On my first viewing of the film, without any background information, I was, until close to its end, unaware that I was not watching a “regular” documentary. Li Wen is introduced as a police officer tasked with finding the person who has been telling people that a dragon living in the lake will appear soon to wreak havoc. Li Wen must find this person and make sure he is unable to disturb a forthcoming visit to the lake by high-ranking officials. As the film progresses, it shows Li Wen at work with his younger colleague Zuo Yan. They wander around the lush lake area and speak to locals about the dragon in an attempt to locate the mysterious troublemaker, as well as meeting with friends and acquaintances.

It is with the introduction of this fictional narrative that the film moves beyond a relatively straightforward critique of the appropriation of the lake to include a subtext commenting on the operation of power and the role of art in contemporary Chinese society. Within this subtext, a subtle reflexive metanarrative comes through that explores what it means to speak truth to power, which the film and the art projects shown all seek to do.

After Li Wen has berated the sociology student (accompanied by filmmaker) for questioning the filling of East Lake, the next instance where the issue of speaking truth to power explicitly comes to the fore is at a lunch meeting Li Wen and Zuo Yan have with a friend of Zuo Yan. The friend is a youthful female university researcher or student who explains some things and answers some
questions about her work on a project collecting oral histories of gays and lesbians who have come out of the closet in Wuhan. Several minutes into the conversation, the following dialogue unfolds:

Li Wen: Do you do this research secretly at school?
Researcher: Why should I do this secretly?
Li Wen: Who’s going to tolerate this at school?
Researcher: It’s fine. I’m not afraid. My roommates are supportive of me. Only some male students think I’m weird.
Li Wen: My goodness. Xiao Zuo, are you okay with all this?
Zuo Yan: Yes. It’s fine with me.
Li Wen: Did she give you lessons before? Have you secretly learned a lot of this type of knowledge?
Zuo Yan: Maybe I’m younger. I’m fine with it.
Researcher: Probably the education your generation received is different from ours.
Li Wen: I’m surprised how accustomed you are to these topics. I talk about them too. I could be even more intense. But not so matter-of-fact like the way you talk.

Li Wen is confronted with a young woman who speaks frankly and without fear to an older male police officer, whom she can reasonably suspect will not agree with her work. Somewhat surprisingly, the conversation plays out relatively amicably, focusing more on how the controversial topic of homosexuality in China should be discussed than on what position should be chosen towards it. During this part of the lunch, the camera cuts from the researcher to Li Wen, who are sitting across from each other, whilst Zuo Yan, seated between them, remains visible in each shot, figuratively bridging the gap between the policeman and his friend (see Figures 2.8-2.9).

Figures 2.8 and 2.9: Zuo Yan bridges the gap. Screen captures from Li Wen at East Lake.
As the discussion draws to a polite end it appears that the researcher, with the implied help of Zuo Yan occupying the middle ground, is able to make herself heard, and that, by extension, in the broader context of her university and Chinese society at large, her research might be tolerated. At this point, the camera cuts to a medium close-up with Li Wen in the centre of the frame and Zuo Yan no longer visible. Li Wen attempts to move on to the lighter topic of knowing one’s own body odour, but the conversation spirals out of control as the researcher provokes him by questioning his understanding of what a custom is. The two proceed to shout at each other about social constructivism, sincerity, and intolerance. As the argument quiets down, the researcher says, seemingly referring to the earlier part of their conversation: “It’s all right. At least you could tolerate a bit more than other people.” To this, Li Wen replies: “No, I can’t really tolerate.” As Li Wen tries to close the conversation, the researcher brings up Freudian castration anxiety, which results in more shouting back and forth, until the three are shown sitting in uncomfortable silence around the table.

The act of the researcher frankly speaking out about her research and views on society to Li Wen, who, as a middle-aged male police officer, represents the establishment, culminates in a fight. The way the scene develops shows that whilst the researcher’s initial frankness, disregard of risk, and sense of a moral duty to speak out was met with curious surprise, continuing this parrhesiastic mode of engagement for too long or with too much insistence can cross a line with the listener, pushing him away from any understanding of or sympathy for her critical perspective.

In a later scene, Li Wen again meets with a person who has taken it upon himself to speak truth to power. This time he meets the artist from the Everybody’s East Lake project, who led the performative hearing on building an airport on East Lake. The context for their meeting is not clarified in the film, but they behave like acquaintances. The artist comes to Li Wen’s apartment as the latter is inspecting a qilin47 statue. Li Wen shows the artist the statue and the artist is very quick to question its authenticity, revealing a lack of restraint in speaking his mind. Whilst they are inspecting Li Wen’s collection of old photographs, Li Wen brings up Everybody’s East Lake:

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47 A qilin is a mythical creature known across Asia.
Li Wen: Just enjoy life now, don’t try leading things like that.
Artist: I’m not leading it. We just try to have some fun ourselves.
Li Wen: Have fun? But if it becomes big, they will stop you. Then it’ll become troublesome.
Artist: Troublesome? How? We are just making art.
Li Wen: Making art, then don’t get involved in social issues.
Artist: Are you lecturing me?
Li Wen: I’m not lecturing you. I’m not part of anything myself. It’s just that doing this might get you in trouble. I still work in the system, I can’t do anything.
Artist: We are actually very mild. We’re the weak ones, just trying to speak out a little.
Li Wen: I actually envy you guys. You guys are really free. That is very good. I just collect antiques for fun.

After this conversation they discuss a pot of which the artist again questions the authenticity. During the meeting it remains unclear whether the artist is meeting with Li Wen in character as a police officer, or with Li Wen himself — a painter, collector of old photography, and amateur actor. What is clear though is that this scene is not a case of an official warning an artist about his practices, as sometimes happens in China when dissenting voices are invited to “drink tea.”

During the conversation the artist occupies a position in the frame that is well lit, and takes a relaxed posture, whilst Li Wen remains partially off screen and in the shade (see Figure 2.10). Midway through the conversation the film cuts to a close-up of Li Wen’s hands whilst he is nervously fidgeting with a magnifying glass. What the scene, read as part of the film’s subtextual meta-narrative, stages is a conversation between two artists, with one, Li Wen, producing art in the system, slightly nervously presenting his take on the risks of socially engaged art to the other artist, who comes across as confident in speaking out (as indicated by his repeated questioning of the authenticity of the objects they discuss), whilst nevertheless downplaying the act of critique as being about having fun, being mild, and only speaking out “a little.” The scene illustrates how, in any kind of parrhesiastic undertaking in China, a soft pressure is exerted from various sides to

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48 In China, an invitation from the police or public security bureau officials to drink tea is understood as an informal meeting either in a public space or at the police station designed to function as a means to coerce someone into conformity (e.g. Wu (2013) and Sorace (2014)).
be careful when speaking out, as the next chapter about underground film screenings in Beijing will also show.

The socially engaged art produced by Everybody’s East Lake stands in stark contrast to the artwork Li Wen is shown to be making in the film. His boss asks him to paint a picture for the new apartment of his own superior and after visiting the apartment Li Wen decides that a landscape would be most fitting. He sets to work on painting an idyllic landscape with a blue sky, green trees, and a small lake (see Figure 2.11). When the painting is done, Zuo Yan comes to his studio to help him frame it. As they look at the painting, the first thing Li Wen asks is if it will make him lose face. Zuo Yan says it will give him face, to which Li Wen responds happily. He proceeds to say that he knows the taste of these people and that they do not like the “artistic stuff” he normally does: “They want something colourful and bright. Everything in it has to be clear. I’ll tell them that this represents a family, a sunny day symbolizes a bright career.”

In this scene a critique is presented of high-ranking officials who do not like “artistic stuff” and for whom everything depicted has to be clearly identifiable. Although Li Wen has no trouble making the painting to please his boss and considers himself a regular person—he refers to “us ordinary folks” in his introduction and notes that he is “not part of anything myself” in the conversation with the artist—even he expresses a slight disdain for “the taste of these people.” In
addition, the preference of officials for clear-cut meanings also contrasts sharply with the film itself, which is full of ambiguity.

In their quest to find the person speaking of the dragon, who has, not surprisingly, displeased the officials, Li Wen and his colleague collect stories about the dragon from the people they meet, accentuating the folklore attached to the lake. When, towards the end of the film, the person speaking about the re-emergence of the dragon is found, he tells the story mentioned in the introduction of this chapter about previously having been a fish. This story has ultra-unreal qualities and, in its excessive use of metaphors, invites the viewer to draw out alternative associations with life in contemporary China.

In reading this specific story, it is worth noting that the fish specifically says that he ate Mao’s skin when Mao visited East Lake in 1967. This visit came at a point in time when the Cultural Revolution was escalating into a civil war and two factions in Wuhan were vying for power. These were the Million Heroes (baiwan xiongshi 百万雄师), backed by those who were in power before the cultural revolution broke out and the local military, and the Workers’ Headquarters (gongren zongbu 工人总部), composed of Red Guards. Mao (backed by a strong military presence) came to Wuhan to endorse the Workers’ Headquarters after escalating violence and after the Million Heroes refused to obey central party decrees (Meisner 1999: 336-337). In the act of eating Mao’s skin, the fish is seen to unsuccessfully challenge the authority of the Dragon King, and I read the inclusion
of this precise period in time—when the central authority was also unsuccessfully challenged above the water—as drawing a parallel between the authority of the Dragon King and that of the Chinese political leadership, personified by Mao.

When looking at the story from this perspective, it should be noted that there is a distinction between the Chinese mythological dragon (*long* 龙) as a symbol of imperial power rooted in Confucian and Taoist worldviews, and the Buddhist inspired Dragon King (*longwang* 龙王) in folk religion and local legends, who lives in water bodies, which he is an embodiment of and to which the natural phenomena around the water, like floods and storms, are attributed (Zhao 1989). By angering the Dragon King the people have shown themselves to be disrespectful of the natural order, which in this story is equated to the mandated leadership of China. The storyteller’s suggestion that the Dragon King will wreak havoc implies that he could create a flooding of some kind as a manifestation of his displeasure with the Chinese leadership, which could be read as symbolising a weakening of the state’s heavenly mandate.

Beyond warning about the withdrawal of the government’s mandate, the story also uses Mao as the meta-symbol he has become in China, playing with the deification of Mao that has continued even after his death (e.g. Barmé 1996, Dai 1996, Landsberger 2002).⁴⁹ Daniel Miller (1998) understands a meta-symbol as a symbol whose status “allows it to be filled with almost anything those who wish to either embody or critique a form of symbolic domination might ascribe to it” and, consequently, as “a symbol that stands for a debate” (Miller 1998: 245). By ascribing magical qualities to Mao’s skin, the story turns Mao, an atheist whom the state draws legitimacy from, into a demigod in order to criticise the state of contemporary China. In using Mao as a meta-symbol, the story does not necessarily imply that Mao would condemn the filling of the lake, but rather takes Mao’s undisputed authority and uses it to ascribe authority to the Dragon King.

Whilst the story, with its ambiguous prophecy and fantastical characters, might not seem to be an act of parrhesia, the storyteller is speaking a personal truth based on his experience as a fish, takes risks in doing so, and is, in the vein of ultra-unreal cinema, both frank in expressing his main message—that filling the lake is bad—and ambiguous in terms of presenting this message as the (only) truth.

⁴⁹ The independent documentary *Religion* (2006, Cong Feng) captures the opening of a temple dedicated to Mao.
The story shows how verbal traditions can be reinvented and that folklore is neither static, nor easily contained, as the man-fish’s tale builds upon the old story that there is a dragon living in the lake, first by incorporating Mao and then by situating the story in the present and relating it to the filling of the lake. Through this tale, which uses local folklore, ancient traditions, and modern history to criticise developments in the present, *Li Wen at East Lake* is not only documenting, but also creating alternative understandings of what is happening at East Lake.

Towards the end of the film Li Wen reports his findings to his superior. Many locals have heard tales about a dragon living in the lake, but nobody seems to know or be concerned with this particular person telling the new dragon story. Li Wen says that the person who has been spreading the new story about the dragon in the lake poses no threat. However, his boss tells him that this is of no concern to Li Wen or himself, for that matter; the orders come from higher up, and therefore Li Wen should stick to his assigned task of keeping the man away from the lake during the officials’ visit.

The reasons for Li Wen concluding that the man poses no threat can be found in many places in the film. That a dragon lives in the lake is not a contentious issue, as the locals speak of it freely and Li Wen is shown watching a documentary about the legend on CCTV. In addition, he shows sympathy towards the artists working around the lake. Yet the main motivation for his statement is probably the sense of empathy he feels towards the storyteller, which is highlighted in the rich final sequence of the film.

This sequence starts with a scene where the storyteller is walking around chatting with people around the lake. There is an extended close-up of his flip-flops and messy hair, emphasising his laid-back attitude. The scene is accompanied by light strumming on an unamplified electric guitar, which the closing shot shows the storyteller playing while sitting on the sofa with his cat. Thus, the costume, camerawork and soundtrack work together to display the softness of the storyteller, which makes him come across as innocuous.

After this scene the film cuts to Li Wen saying “prime criminal”, with the montage linking this label to the storyteller, who was just shown playing the guitar. In fact, Li Wen speaks the words “prime criminal” as he is looking at a set of two Cultural Revolution photographs, which are shown in close-up. He continues by explaining how to read from the photo who will be executed. As more pictures are
shown, Li Wen says: “Look at these guys’ fates. Actually we don’t really care about others. I care about myself when I look at him. I see myself in everything here. He is a human being just like me. But he had such bad luck. Completely ill-fated.” It is at this point that, through discussing the Cultural Revolution, which is mentioned multiple times in the film, Li Wen expresses empathy towards those who suffered. This could have been what drives him to tell his boss that the storyteller does not pose a threat, so he will not be arrested. In addition, this links the persecution of the storyteller and, by extension, that of all those who find themselves in similar positions, to the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution.

After being informed over the phone of a supposed leak at a chemical plant Li Wen closes his windows and reads out names from the Cultural Revolution photos, whilst the camera slowly pans across the thick yellow smog outside. The scene ends with Li Wen singing a patriotic song about giving his best for the motherland whilst looking at the photos laid out on the floor. From an ultra-unreal perspective, the combination of the toxic haze, the Cultural Revolution pictures, and the nationalistic song give an additional meaning to giving your best for the motherland by highlighting the potential destruction of nature and humanity that uncritically “getting your job done” can lead to.

The final scene of the film, however, consists of a long shot through heavy smog accompanied by guitar music showing the storyteller being forced into a minivan and driven away (see Figure 2.12). This scene counters the film’s critical impulses and its emphasis on the changing perspective of Li Wen by showing that, in the contemporary Chinese context, the parrhesiastic storyteller, who places the recent developments on the East Lake in an alternative light and counters official narratives, will be repressed.

In *Li Wen at East Lake*, the notion of frankness in parrhesia is complicated in a similar way as it is in *Behemoth*. In *Li Wen at East Lake* the documentary opening of the film provides a factual context for the film and posits a straightforward critique—it shows where and how the filling of the lake happened, points to its illegality, and gives a voice to the people who live in the vicinity of the lake and are unhappy with its development. Yet, moving into the second section of the film, it shifts gears by introducing fictional elements, so that what started out as frankness in speaking truth to power taking the form of directness and singular meaning
transforms into frankness in speaking truth to power taking the form of a subtext and multiple meanings.

As I have shown, *Li Wen at East Lake* cannot only be read as speaking truth to power, but also as reflecting on the possibility and risk of parrhesia in China. Moving between artists, researchers, and, implicitly, filmmakers, the film shows the various ways in which power responds to these challenges from below. Whilst the film consistently supports the messages brought forth by the parrhesiastic characters, it also shows that the suppression of these alternative voices is undertaken by potentially like-minded, or at least open-minded, people like Li Wen—who makes an attempt to engage with the researcher, is an artist himself, and expresses empathy with the fate of the storyteller.

When it comes to the parrhesistates that the authorities, described by Li Wen as a machine of power and force, deem it necessary to forcefully suppress, *Li Wen at East Lake* singles out a story that has ultra-unreal characteristics and that, much like the film itself, speaks both frankly and enigmatically. For the authorities, it is ultimately irrelevant whether or not the story of the dragon is true or not. What matters from their perspective is the danger of any force—dragon, human or otherwise—that could serve to express public anger about the filling of the lake and thus undermine the way in which power is structured in contemporary China. However, as a film reflecting on parrhesia, *Li Wen at East Lake* shows that, even when the truth teller is repressed, the truth that is told, especially when it does not

Figure 2.12 Storyteller is thrown in van. Screen capture Li Wen at East Lake.
rely on an absolute distinction between fact and fiction, can continue to have a critical impulse (the arrest of the storyteller does not necessarily indicate the end of the dragon story's circulation, which has also received an impulse from Li Wen's investigation into the storyteller, in the course of which the story was repeatedly articulated, thus gaining force). In the end, it is precisely through its blending of documentary and fiction that *Li Wen at East Lake* moves beyond its initial frank environmental and social critique to speak, in a different mode of frankness and criticality, about the broad and complex ways in which power operates in China, forms that also generate resistance.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has offered an analysis of *Behemoth* and *Li Wen at East Lake*, two environmentally themed independent Chinese docufiction films. It operated under the assumption that the docufiction genre allows an opening for a new mode of parrhesia by utilizing the space between fact and fiction. It further argued that docufiction can be understood as a form of ultra-unreal cinema, and that it can be viewed as particularly suitable for addressing dynamic and contentious issues like the environment. Both films rely on allegorical devices—in *Behemoth* the narrative structure is allegorical, whilst *Li Wen at East Lake* revolves around a short allegorical tale of a fish eating Mao's skin. To understand the relationship between allegory and docufiction as a form of ultra-unreal cinema, I used MacCaffrey's work on allegory, which argues that it is a form that explicitly prompts readers or viewers to look for ways to connect the story told to the real world (in this context between the fictional strangeness imposed by the filmmaker and the strangeness of reality in contemporary China), and that can thus be seen as critical not in a veiled but a frank manner. This complicates the notion of frankness that Foucault associates with parrhesia by showing that frankness can accommodate ambiguity. Thus, whilst the overall critical message and intent of the films are clear, they do not eschew the complexity and strangeness of the reality to which they refer.

Through my analysis of the two films, I have shown what happens when cinema embraces the ultra-unreal in the ongoing search for alternative modes of representation capable of speaking truth to power. Both *Behemoth* and *Li Wen at East Lake*
*East Lake* can be considered manifestations of an ultra-unreal independent Chinese cinema, overlaying documentary with fiction, and pushing the boundaries of genre conventions and audience expectations to create a space to deal with the paradoxes and uncertainties characterising contemporary China. Ultra-unreal cinema, I have contended, is a mode of speaking truth to power that is very suitable to the present conditions in China.

Whilst they both fit into the genre of the ultra-unreal, *Behemoth* and *Li Wen at East Lake* differ in their style and approach. Whereas *Behemoth* is a highly stylized poetic tragedy about the destructive nature of coal mining and the downsides of the Chinese Dream, *Li Wen at East Lake* is a participatory satire with a documentary aesthetic that critiques development in a nature reserve and contains a meta-reflection on the ways in which parrhesia can be enacted in China. This lack of uniformity is characteristic of the examples of ultra-unreal cinema I came across during my research, as filmmakers experiment with different modes and styles capable of articulating the strangeness of Chinese reality in a way that also allows truth to be spoken to power.

The juxtaposition of documentary footage and fictionalized elements creates a rupture from both documentary expectations and dominant discourses on environmental issues, moving into a kind of discourse that can be understood as what John S. Dryzek (2013) calls green radicalism. Dryzek distinguishes four overarching discourses used in environmental debates, with the three dominant ones being: problem solving, “defined by taking the political-economic status quo as given but in need of adjustment to cope with environmental problems ... in the form of ... pragmatic problem-solving capacities of governments”; limits and survival, of which “the basic idea is that unchecked economic expansion and population growth will exceed the Earth’s natural resources and the capacity to support human activity”; and sustainability, “defined by imaginative attempts to dissolve the conflicts between environmental and economic values that energize the discourses of problem solving and limits” (Dryzek 2013: 15-16). The fourth, less dominant discourse is that of green radicalism, which comprises a wide range of fringe discourses that “reject the basic structure of industrial society and the way the environment is conceptualized therein in favour of a variety of quite different alternative interpretations of humans, their society, and their place in the world.”
More specifically, *Behemoth* and *Li Wen at East Lake* can be seen as belonging to the strand of green radicalism that focuses on "green consciousness" and that considers "the way people experience and regard the world in which they live, and each other, [to be] the key to green change" (Dryzek 2013: 185).

Both films attempt to move away from relying on rational discourses related to problem solving and sustainability. In many ways, these dominant discourses could be seen as overused and as having been co-opted by governments and industries to the point where they have lost most of their critical effectiveness. The fantastical narratives presented by the voiceover in *Behemoth* and the storyteller in *Li Wen at East Lake*, in contrast, can be read as countering the scepticism and disbelief that has emerged in relation to mainstream environmental discourses by avoiding pretences of rationality or objectivism, whilst still portraying actual environmental problems.

In closing this chapter, I want to suggest that by “polluting” the documentary genre, the two films present the environment, and the oppressive and destructive ways in which power operates, in China and elsewhere, as something to which everybody has an impure relation, as people just doing their job in service of a machine of power and force, or as minions to the monster. Essentially, the films, through their narratives and aesthetics, can be seen to make the argument that the problem of imminent environmental disaster, and the problem of the inequalities and dehumanisations produced by capitalism in its different forms, in their very irrationality, require impure forms of representation and critique.

The ending of *Li Wen at East Lake* powerfully displays the attempts to exclude alternative stories, which the Chinese authorities deem harmful, from public life. At the same time, the film actively (and, as I have argued, in a certain sense also frankly) propagates these alternative perspectives. As such, it opens itself up to suppression. Independent films like *Li Wen at East Lake* and *Behemoth* are marginalised in China; not able to be viewed on the internet, in cinemas, or at

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50 Dryzek explicitly states that green radicalism is an extremely broad categorisation. He writes: "Found here are green parties and their factions, bioregionalists, ecofeminists, deep ecologists, social ecologists, eco-Marxists, eco-socialists, eco-anarchists, ecological Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, pagans, environmental and climate justice advocates, green economists, new materialists, critical theorists, postmodernists, and many others" (Dryzek 2013: 185).
official domestic film festivals, however one way to encounter them and the truth they seek to speak to power in China is through screenings in obscure underground venues, as will be discussed in the next chapter.
3. Transient Alternative Public Spaces: Independent film screenings in Beijing

We thus discovered a new facet of cinema: the participation of people who, until then, were considered spectators ... we realised that the distribution of that kind of film had little meaning if it was not complemented by the participation of the comrades, if a debate was not opened on the themes suggested by the films.
Solanas and Getino (1970: 9)

Introduction

As my friend and I descended into the basement of a nightclub near the Beijing Workers’ Stadium on a sunny day in spring 2015, I was making my first steps into the world of underground cinema in Beijing. The smell of stale beer hung in the air as we walked through a deserted maze lit by dim coloured lighting. Once we were in the back room of the club, the owner welcomed us and introduced himself. Besides my friend and me, the audience in this makeshift cinema included another six people: a professional TV documentary maker, a recent university graduate aspiring to become a filmmaker, a film critic and professor of the Beijing Film Academy, the director of the film, and two organisers. The film screened was To Relive (2012) by Gui Shuzhong, an observational ethnographic documentary that follows an old Hakka Feng Shui master in Fujian province as he performs various rituals and recalls his past experiences. When the film was over, the audience and filmmaker discussed the filmmaking process, the ideas behind the film and the state of Hakka culture in contemporary China.

This event was the third instalment of a five-part series of independent documentaries on Hakka culture, and just one of several underground film screenings taking place across Beijing every weekend, where locally produced independent films are watched and discussed with the filmmakers. This particular kind of event hardly ever happens in an official cinema. Mainstream cinemas in China are bound not only by considerations of what films might be commercially

51 Other films programmed as part of this series included From Border to Border (2013, Chung Shefong), The River of Life (2014, Yang Pingdao), Under the Split Light (2011, Deng Bochao) and The Gleaners (2013, Ye Zuyi).
viable to screen, but they must also adhere to regulations overseen by the National Film Administration (guojia dianying ju, 国家电影局), a division of the Propaganda Department (Zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuan bu, 中共中央宣传部). Non-Chinese content is limited by a quota system to thirty-four approved titles per year (State Department 2012). For a Chinese film to be screened legally it must first receive a public screening licence (dianyingpian gongying xukezheng 电影片公映许可证), colloquially known as a dragon seal (longbiao 龙标), because a golden dragon logo is shown at the beginning of each approved film. The licence is received after passing the NRTA censorship process. However, receiving a screening licence is no guarantee that a movie will actually be shown in Chinese cinemas or on television. It is also not an indication that the movie cannot be considered independent. It simply means that censors at the NRTA approved its content and that it can legally be screened.

Many independent Chinese filmmakers do not apply for a screening licence for a combination of reasons: they insist on retaining control over the content of the film, they are principally opposed to censorship, or they do not aspire to, or deem it unrealistic to have their films officially released or broadcast. Yet, in spite of official regulations, a projector can turn any room into an unregulated screening venue. Consequently, throughout China, university classrooms, cafés, bookshops, cultural centres, art galleries, and unofficial cinemas with dedicated screening rooms show all kinds of films, from Hollywood classics and experimental shorts to independent Chinese documentaries.

The practice of screening non-mainstream material in unconventional locations is not exclusive to Beijing, but occurs across the globe. The term commonly used to describe this phenomenon is microcinema. Rebecca Barten and David Sherman, founders of the San Francisco based Total Mobile Home microCINEMA, coined the term in 1993. At present, microcinema can denote any kind of small scale, out of the ordinary film projection space. Donna de Ville conceptualises the term as a way to describe a mode of film exhibition that

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52 The agreement between the US and China on which this quota is based expired in 2017 (State Department 2012). At the time of writing, no new agreement has been made concerning the import of films into China. For a discussion on this topic, see Dresden (2018a) and Dresden (2018b).
53 For details on the history and philosophy of the Total Mobile Home microCINEMA, see Total Mobile Home MicroCINEMA (n. d.).
positions itself as “an alternative to mainstream exhibition practices”, characterised by elements like its small scale, minimal budget, dedicated and passionate organisers, sense of community, and informal environment (de Ville 2015: 105-106). In recent years, a small body of academic literature has emerged on microcinema. Kyle Conway (2008), for example, discusses it in the context of the open and participatory nature of the Kino movement, which screens amateur films and encourages people to make their own no-budget short films, which they then screen. The Kino movement originated in Montreal and has spread to many parts of the world. In the South American context, Miriam Ross (2008) focuses on the microcines organised by the Peruvian Grupo Chaski in the 2000s. Loosely inspired by third cinema, Grupo Chaski organises community screenings of socially engaged films followed by discussions.

In the Chinese context, the literal translation of the term microcinema (wei dianying 微电影) does not refer to underground screening practices, but to a plethora of online short films, made by professionals and amateurs alike. Instead, the screenings are usually labelled as independent film screenings (duli dianying fangying 独立电影放映), or occasionally as xiaozhong dianying fangying (小众电影放映), where xiaozhong dianying (小众电影) is literally a small audience film, but could also be translated as minor cinema or cult film. In order to avoid confusion, in this chapter I refer to the phenomena under study as underground screenings of independent Chinese films.

I conceptualise these underground screening practices in Beijing as creating a transient alternative public space and tie this idea to parrhesia, speaking truth to power, and several of the questions posed in the introduction to this study, namely: About what topics is it important to speak the truth? What kinds of practical strategies are employed to speak truth through film? What are the sites where independent Chinese cinema is shown and discussed? Who is the audience? What strategies are employed to deal with the risks involved in addressing power?

By using the term “public space” in my conceptualisation, I seek to emphasise the spatial dimensions of the screenings. I add the term “alternative” in light of Negt and Kluge’s (1972) alternative public sphere (detailed below) and to emphasise the alternaiveness, outside-ness, and counter cultural aspects of the screenings. In addition, alternative public space can be read both as a space for alternative publics, but also as a public space that is used alternatively, which is
what happens when cafés, bookstores, or nightclubs become temporary cinemas. Through unpacking the phenomenon of independent film screenings in Beijing as creating alternative public spaces and relating it to parrhesia, I further explore how independent cinema in contemporary China operates as a means of speaking truth to power.

This chapter begins by providing an introduction to the notion of the alternative public space, briefly reviewing how it stems from the notion of the public sphere and how it can be employed in the context of China and film screenings. The rest of the chapter analyses underground screenings in Beijing by focusing on three elements: space, content and context, and publicness. First, space: by closely examining the locations and screening venues, where they are, why they are there, and what they look like, I show how they impact the audience and the ability of a filmmaker to find a public. I argue that the set-up of the venues themselves creates a unique viewing experience, different from that at home or in a regular cinema. Second, I deal with the content and context of the screening events. What happens at the screenings? What films are shown, who attends them, and how do the Q&As take shape? In addressing these questions I show what kind of alternative media is presented, what processes and obstacles are involved in shaping the events, and what discourses surround them. Third, I tackle the publicness of the events. How are screenings made public, who attends them, and how does this relate to the idea of parrhesia? Through this three-fold structure I provide a comprehensive picture of underground screenings in Beijing as creating an alternative public space.

I argue that screening organisers and filmmakers often have a clear agenda to create a space for critical, counter-hegemonic debate through films and screenings, but that this agenda is hardly ever realised in a durable manner, mainly due to the socio-political and economic context in which these events take place. By focusing on locations, content and context, and publicness, I highlight several problems that independent screening culture as an alternative public space faces. These include the inability for this culture to ground itself in set locations, the active political repression that any growth of activities faces, the complicated relationship with contemporary channels of mass communication (in the form of the internet and WeChat), issues concerning reaching, engaging with, and holding on to audiences from outside of the filmmaking community in a manner that breaks the
culture as consumption frame, and the hierarchical nature of Q&A sessions, which impedes the development of a two-way conversation about the issues raised in the screened films. Nevertheless, I argue that independent film screenings in Beijing still constitute a temporary alternative public space. In spite of the noted circumstances and complications, as well as their temporary nature, the screenings form a public outlet for counter hegemonic views, actively seek to impact public discourses (albeit through an initially limited audience), and allow the public to engage with the views presented. As such, they can be seen as moments where parrhesia takes place, albeit in a very restricted form.

Independent film screenings in China, and Beijing specifically, have been discussed in previous research (e.g. Beretta 2016, Berry 2010, Edwards 2015, Ma 2010, Nakajima 2010, Sniadecki 2013 and Viviani 2012). These works are discussed in detail below, and throughout this chapter I build on this body of literature to contribute to the ongoing exploration of screening culture in Beijing within ever-changing contexts, taking into account the emergence of WeChat, growing disillusionment with the internet, increased acceptance of independent art films in mainstream cinemas, and waves of repression against dissenting voices. In addition, I offer recent empirical data related to new screening sites and, by drawing on the notion of parrhesia, present an alternative theoretical perspective on the topic.

An Alternative Public Space

In academic literature the phenomenon of people coming together to watch films and discuss them has often been framed in terms of the creation of a public sphere. This has been done, for example, by Seio Nakajima (2010), who, in the context of screenings in Beijing, seeks to analyse "to what extent film clubs approximate the Habermasian ideal type of ‘public sphere’” (Nakajima 2010: 118), and by Lars Gustaf Andersson and John Sundholm, who argue that Swedish film workshop cultures in the 1970s “often constituted true public spheres in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s sense” (Andersson and Sundholm 2010: 66).

As these two quotes indicate, the term “public sphere” is not a uniform notion, but exists in various senses and ideal forms. Most discussions of the public sphere start from the work of Jürgen Habermas, who in his book *The Structural
Transformation of the Public Sphere chronicles the rise of a specific bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe as a space where, through open rational debate, public opinion was formed. He relates this public sphere to the emergence of liberal democracy and charts the eventual decline of the public sphere due to a commodification of the public sphere through which "rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption" (Habermas 1962: 161). For Habermas, the public sphere is not only this particular historic category with all its specificities; the term can also be used in a more general sense to indicate "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (Habermas 1991: 399). The public sphere, both as a specific historic category and a more general ideal, can be applied to various contexts, even though this also has its problems. For example, the specific context in which Habermas contextualised it, namely the upper-class male dominated circles of eighteenth-century Europe, and the supposed connection to the emergence of western liberal democracy, often haunt its application to other times and places.\(^{54}\)

In the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests and the translation of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere into English, both in 1989, a debate on the public sphere (and civil society) in China took off. As Guobin Yang (2002: 2-3) notes, the flurry of research after Tiananmen on the public sphere in China eventually led to a special issue of Modern China in 1993. The issue featured discussions on historic public spheres in China. Mary Rankin argues that even though the conditions were very different from those in Europe, in China "some institutions and practices characteristic of civil society appeared in the late nineteenth century and expanded during the first three decades of the twentieth century" (1993: 158). On the other hand, William Rowe questions the search for a public sphere and civil society in China’s past, writing that "the concept is at once too value laden and too under-defined to be of effective use, and consequently the outcome of any search to discover (or invent) it in China can amount to little more than passing a blanket value judgement on the Chinese past, based on expectations generated from our own local experience" (1993: 154). Philip Huang builds on this conception and adds that the binary between state and society abstracted through western experience is not suitable for analysing China’s past or present. He

\(^{54}\)For a detailed discussion on the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, see the edited volume by Craig Calhoun (1992).
suggests to “employ instead a trinary conception, with a third space in between state and society, in which both participated” (Huang 1993: 216). What this initial discussion shows is that the introduction of the public sphere immediately raised questions of whether it could or should be applied to the Chinese context. As a result, most of the subsequent research using the notion of the public sphere to illuminate Chinese cases carefully explores the notion of publicness and places a strong emphasis on the specific Chinese conditions.

In spite of its drawbacks, the public sphere remains an attractive way for many to conceptualise the formation of both public opinion and spaces of open debate. In recent years the public sphere has regularly been employed as a means to conceptualise the roles of the internet (Lagerkvist 2006), environmental movements (Yang and Calhoun 2007), and media (Liu and McCormick 2011) in China. For example, Johan Lagerkvist (2006) examines the paradoxical relationship between control and freedom in relation to the internet in China. He argues that while the internet opens up a public sphere, at the same time efforts are made to negate these newly found freedoms, and the internet is used by the state as a means of propaganda and control. More than a decade after Lagerkvist’s observations, this dual trend has continued with the rise and subsequent decline of Weibo (weibo 微博),55 the emergence of WeChat (weixin 微信), and recently unveiled plans to use data from online behaviour to monitor and rank all Chinese citizens on their trustworthiness through a social credit system (The Economist 2016). Jinrong Tong (2015) writes that the internet in China has created a democratising space for public participation and has given voice to the public. However, he argues that this space is not a Habermasian public sphere, characterised by rational debate, but instead an agonistic public sphere driven by emotion.

In the context of environmentalism and the public sphere, Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun (2007) argue that the case of the opposition to the proposed construction of dams on the Nu River attests to the emergence of a green public sphere in China. The proposed dams were heavily contested by NGOs, activists and international organisations, who utilised mass media, the internet, and alternative

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55 Weibo (weibo 微博) is a social media platform, resembling Twitter and Facebook, which allows users to publicly post content. It was very popular in the late 2000s, but its popularity has declined in favour of WeChat, as censorship became stricter and users had to verify their accounts. For an introduction to Weibo, see Koetse (2015).
media to get the project put on hold. For Yang and Calhoun this entailed the creation of a green public sphere characterised by “an environmental discourse or greenspeak; publics that produce or consume greenspeak and media used for producing and circulating greenspeak” (Yang and Calhoun 2007: 212). They argue that this multifaceted case is an example of new forms of issue-specific transnational public engagement in China.

In the field of film screenings in China the public sphere has also been a recurring theme. For example, in 1992, Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (1994) visited multiple screening groups that had emerged during the 1980s in Xi’an and Shanghai. In these groups people would gather to watch and discuss films passed down by the China Film Distribution and Release Corporation (CFDRC). In her article Yang explores “the possibilities for a public sphere developing in the context of state dominated production of mass media” (1994: 112). She finds that even though the screened films were supposed to reinforce state ideology, some members of the audience read the films in ways that went beyond the official messages, and as such the screening groups enabled various forms of social critique. However, she does “not believe that there is yet a public sphere in China” (Yang 1994: 122). From a Habermasian perspective, even though there was a limited space for verbal expression at the screenings, it was not a public sphere through which public opinion was discussed, shaped, or formed.

In light of the emergence of independent films and their screenings Seio Nakajima analyses film clubs according to five points which characterise the ideal Habermasian public sphere: disregard of status, problematization of the status quo, inclusiveness, being outside the sphere of the state and economy, and creating consensus and agreement though debate (2010: 118-119). He finds that the film clubs have a fairly complex relation to all these five points, and concludes that “although the film clubs deviate substantially from the Habermasian ideal type of public sphere, they contribute to an important social critique” (Nakajima 2010: 134).

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56 In 2011 the project was slowly picked up again and preparatory work began. In 2016, however, the project was again put on hold for five years, due to an energy surplus in eastern China and the complexity and high costs involved in transporting the generated electricity out of the region. At present there are plans to turn the Nu River canyon into a protected national park (Xiaogang et al. 2019).
Even though both Yang and Nakajima do not find a Habermasian public sphere in screening groups/film clubs in China, by referring to this concept they are able to provide certain insights into the relatively open, participatory, and critical practices of viewing and discussing films. Their analyses, however, also give rise to many questions: what is the role of the temporal and spatial aspect of voicing your opinion in a film club or a screening group? What is the significance of the fact that such events revolve around the medium of film? How do these groups contribute to practices of broader social critique, outside of the confines of the film club space/scene? And what is the significance of these film clubs in the context of the complex power structures in present-day China? When drawing on a Habermasian notion of the public sphere, these questions usually remain under-analysed.

There are several other fundamental problems that occur when directly drawing on the idea of a Habermasian public sphere, which have been reasserted by many scholars. For example, applying it to a non-European setting implies that such settings should conform to a European historic developmental trajectory, are somehow lagging behind, and are moving towards liberal democracy (Berry 2010). On a more fundamental level Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that the public sphere described by Habermas was historically rooted in the exclusion of women and the lower classes, that Habermas offers no real alternative conceptualisation of a present-day public sphere, and that the public sphere is eternally anachronistic. In light of these problems Yang Guobin finds that alternative terms are often invoked to discuss public sphere related phenomena in China:

Researchers are now careful to avoid the explicit use of the concept of public sphere, reflecting an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the concept. Instead, more value-neutral terms such as “social space” and “public space” are frequently used. Even where the “public sphere” is used explicitly, its definition is loosened and freed from its Habermasian origins. (Yang 2002: 6)

Thus, Chris Berry (2010) employs a public space approach to analyse public television and independent documentary in China. Whereas in the Habermasian public sphere power is theorised to be “solely oppressive and exclusively possessed by the state” (Berry 2010: 107), a conception of public space conceives of power in a Foucauldian manner:
If public space is theorized ... as produced by power relationships among multiple social actors and multiple in its variations, then we may have a more precise way of describing different types of public space and public activity than the either/or impossible standard of the public sphere. (2010: 108-109)

Through this approach Berry sets forth how public television and independent documentary screenings differ as public spaces: commercially and politically constrained versus relatively free, high threshold versus low threshold, big audience versus tiny audience, passive viewers versus active viewers. Even though pointing out these differences is important, Berry's analysis does not include issues related to the specific active agency and agendas of various actors and institutions, as I do in this chapter.

Dan Edwards (2015: 15-26) views independent documentary as an alternative public sphere, which departs from Habermas's original conception of the public sphere. Instead, Edwards builds on the work by Negt and Kluge (1972) mentioned earlier. In their book *Public Sphere and Experience* they attempt to theorise the constitution of a proletarian public sphere in Germany at the time of writing. They argue that in contemporary society the public sphere is manifested in mass media and primarily functions in a manner that reinforces commercial and political hegemony. At the same time, Negt and Kluge present the idea of a proletarian public sphere or counter public sphere, through which people reclaim certain means of media production and distribution, and as such express their own lived experiences. This may run counter to whatever is being reinforced by the mass media, which often co-opt the lived experiences of minorities to promote their own commercial or political agendas. Similarly, Edwards (2015) opts for the term “alternative public sphere” and positions independent documentary as an alternative form of media production that counters the hegemonic public sphere of mass media in China through its production modes and content. From this position Edwards goes on to describe various modes of participatory documentary production and the content of specific films.

I find that both Berry's (2010) approach to public space, and Edwards's (2015) use of the alternative public sphere offer valuable tools to analyse underground film screenings in Beijing in light of the overarching research questions of this study. Here, I combine Berry's and Edwards's work to conceptualise the screenings as creating an alternative public space where
parrhesia takes place. By using the term “public space” I seek to emphasise the spatial dimensions of the screenings, and to distance myself from a Habermasian public sphere. I add the term “alternative” both in light of Negt and Kluge’s media focussed alternative public sphere, and to emphasise the alternativeness, outside-ness, and counter cultural aspects of the screenings. An alternative public space is thus understood as a public, participatory outlet for views and representations of society that counter the mass media and their tendency to reinforce the present hegemony. It is a site of resistance, but the alternative public space and mass media are not in binary opposition to each other; their positions are both fluid and produced by dynamic power relations internally and externally.

Space

I start my analysis of underground screening venues by taking a look at their location and set up, simply because getting to a venue and finding a seat is always the first step. As Mark Jancovich et al. (2003: 10) argue, “the location and the physical sites of exhibition are essential to an understanding of the meanings of cinema.” In the case of independent Chinese film exhibition as an alternative public space this is even more the case, because the film screenings are rooted in a very concrete space, as opposed to a digital realm or a sphere of thought. However, finding out what the locations and physical sites of independent film exhibition in Beijing are is not completely straightforward, as screening activities are of a relatively fluid nature. Some venues might screen a single film for a certain occasion, and there have also been a multitude of short-lived venues that offered semi-regular programmes. In this section I analyse the geographical distribution and material and spatial characteristics of venues that screen independent films in Beijing in order to understand how the spatial characteristics of this alternative public space contribute to its formation.

Clusters of Independent Film Consumption

During my visits to Beijing I attended forty-nine screenings at fifteen different venues scattered across the city. In order to get a grip on the geographical
distribution of the venues, I added all the venues I visited, but also all the venues I know existed in the past or exist in the present on a map (see Figure 3.1). This makes visible that the venues are clustered round certain areas: first of all, the northwest of Beijing, which is the university district; secondly, the north-western part of the ancient city centre—a bustling diverse area populated by tourists, old local residents and cosmopolitan middle- and upper-class people enjoying cappuccinos in cafés in the quaint traditional Beijing streets (hutongs); thirdly, the embassy district of Sanlitun; fourthly, the 798 art district and the area nearby Central Academy of Fine Arts in the northeast; and, finally, the far eastern Songzhuang village, which has attracted many artists to set up studios and galleries there.

The reasons why the screening venues are clustered in these areas are often related to external circumstances, rather than clear intent. As one organiser said: “The reason we have the events in M studio, is because I know the owner and they don’t want to make any money out of it. They don’t charge me anything and they also don’t need to sell drinks” (conversation with RGR, 2017). In addition, most venues primarily serve a different function for which their locations have been specifically chosen, like a foreign cultural centre near the embassy, a nightclub in the nightlife district, or a large university campus on the edge of town. However, the

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57 On this map I excluded one venue that I visited—a monastery several hours’ drive from Beijing. The reason why I chose to do so is that they only screened one film and it was about the monastery itself.
organisers’ limited agency in selecting host venues does not imply that the locations do not influence the screenings.

The fact that screening venues are clustered in these particular locations reveals that the geographical contexts of the screenings are those of higher education, contemporary art in its commercial, institutionalized and activist forms, the international, and the consumption of experiences. The ways in which these contexts influence the screenings vary from place to place. From my own experience, the further a venue is removed from centre of Beijing, the bigger the impact of its geographical location on the event. For example, the screenings in the university area and on university campuses seemed to be almost exclusively attended by students and university staff, screening events appeared to be a part of a specific student lifestyle and could be viewed as a means to expand students’ horizons and an opportunity for them to learn more about issues they would otherwise not hear much about. Meanwhile, the screenings around the 798 art district were also impacted by their geographical context. Surrounded by symbols of institutionalized and commercialized art, films screened in this area became part of the global art world with all its intricacies. Finally, the screenings in the relatively far out Songzhuang village were also influenced by the geographical context to a great extent. For visitors from outside the Songzhuang community, a trip out there can feel like going to a different place altogether, a place outside of the city with some kind of bohemian spirit, a refuge, an artist commune; while for the residents of Songzhuang screenings are part of the local art practices, as many filmmakers actually reside there. In all these contexts, then, the location of the venue shapes the experience of the event.

On the contrary, screenings in the centre of Beijing appeared to me to be less influenced by their geographical locations. Since this central area is so mixed in all senses and is easily accessible from all parts of the city, the screenings downtown simply blend into a wide range of entertainment options—shops, restaurants, scenic spots and the like. What is noticeable is that the locations in the centre were a lot less fixed, always moving to new little cafés, studios, and art spaces, exemplifying the constant changes in the city in general. Finally, one of the locations in the expat district specifically catered to foreigners and was largely attended by them; here, the organisers also provided interpreters at the Q&As (if they were not held in English).
This mixture of locations can be seen to represent the many different spheres independent cinema can be associated with: students, intellectuals, outsiders, art, entertainment, the international. In relation to the alternative public space that the screenings as a whole create, it reinforces the idea that an alternative or counter public does not equal a homogenous group or community, but is capable of incorporating different identities. At the same time, it also reveals what independent cinema is not part of, namely everyday life: the distribution of underground screening venues does not match those of shopping centres, restaurants, cinemas, karaoke bars and the like; attending screenings is a fringe activity that is predominantly engaged with by specific publics in certain locales and its experience is sporadic and temporary.

Locations on the Move

As much as locations of independent film screenings in Beijing are fixed and clearly defined for the duration of a film, beyond the individual screenings the locations are always on the move. When it comes to shifting locations, it is important to note that most venues I visited only offered sporadic screenings, sometimes limited to a single event, or, for example, to one screening every two months. Some venues might screen independent Chinese films for a while, then abruptly stop, and start again many months later. There were only a handful of locations I visited in 2015-2016 with a relatively regular independent Chinese film programme (between one to four screenings per month), of which two had been in operation for under a year. However, at the time of writing these two venues also relocated their activities.58 I also came across a screening group, whose permanent venue had been demolished in spring 2015, after which it switched to organising touring style screening activities, moving between various locations in the city.

That underground screening venues in other contexts are often also short-lived is shown in the work of Donna de Ville, who has done research into microcinemas in the US and Canada, which screen underground films.59 She lists

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58 One venue moved to a cheaper location, the other was forced by the public security bureau to move its activities elsewhere.
59 The term “underground film”, in the American and Canadian context, usually refers to cult films, low-budget horror films, b-movies, obscure older films, and art films. Even
“poor organization, inconsistent audience interest, lack of financial resources, inability to navigate political economic issues, and organiser burnout” (2015: 150) as the main reasons for the temporary nature of microcinemas in the US and Canada. These issues were also present in many Beijing venues, as is seen in this snippet from a WeChat conversation: “We are moving to another venue soon. The rent is too high here. ... BTW Anna quit” (WeChat conversation with SY, 2016). An additional issue related to Beijing’s large-scale city redevelopment was that certain venues were demolished to make way for urban development. Most of the newly sprouted organisations relied heavily on the efforts and finances of the organisers, and my conversations with them made me believe that organiser burnout could easily occur. I noticed that the few venues that had managed to survive did so because they had steady funding, usually from wealthy individuals, and multiple employees and/or volunteers, while being able to successfully navigate political circumstances and attract a steady audience. However, de Ville writes, “when one space shuts down, another idealistic programmer is inspired to start a similar project ... engendering a persistent transience” (2015: 131). In Beijing a similar logic applies and dry spells usually do not last too long.

While there is no detailed record of the history of screening venues in Beijing, from the works of Nakajima (2006, 2010), Viviani (2012), Edwards (2015), Ma (2010: 209-238) and several online sources (e.g. Creative Asia 2013 and Leeman 2008) it is clear that many venues and groups discussed there are no longer in existence. For example, an early screening group, active from 2000 to 2003, was forced to disband (Ma 2010: 215). The Fanhall production and distribution organization with attached cinema and website ceased to exist in 2011 due to political difficulties and internal divisions (Sniadecki 2013). Online sources also point to screening groups like Electric Shadows (Creative Asia 2013) and a venue called the Cherry Lane Cinema (Leeman 2008), which both seem to have quietly disappeared without any record chronicling their demise. It should be noted here that the chances of any written record existing of a screening venue that did not make it past its first year are very slim. First of all, because initial screenings usually only attract a handful of viewers, and it takes time for a venue to build a following and become visible, but also because online content becomes un-findable

though the context of underground screenings in the west is different from that in China, the venues and ideologies have a lot in common.
and is often removed from websites after a certain amount of time. Besides, it is
very likely that few people are interested in retaining flyers or other materials
related to screenings.

At present there seems to be no comprehensive history of independent film
screenings in Beijing, which underscores the drifting and marginal nature of
underground screenings. The fact that many available narratives of disappearing
venues (e.g. Ma 2010 and Sniadecki 2013) involve political repression, when most
likely financial, organisational, and audience issues played just as important a role
in shutting down venues, helps to shape an impression that screening films is an
undertaking for which one can get into trouble and which is actively repressed, or
which, according to many people, does not even take place, when in practice it is
not so straightforward and there are many issues at play, as this chapter shows.

The Screening Venue

Besides the presence of projection equipment and seats, there is no single
denominator that characterises the spaces in which films are screened, as the
images below illustrate. The venues are best described as privately owned, semi-
public spaces temporarily repurposed as cinemas, yet they are open to anyone who
wants to come and often do not require an entrance fee; in this sense, they are
public. The size of the space, the set-up, projection and sound quality, ambiance etc.
vary from venue to venue, and it is hard to generalise about how these aspects
influence the viewing experience. However, a single main experience that I can
distil from the many screenings I attended was a regular feeling of discomfort
caused by uncomfortable seats, a shortage of seats, extremely cold temperatures or
overwhelming heat, a poor view of the screen, or bad smells.

To illustrate this I would like to provide a couple of examples. The first is a
screening of a series of documentaries I attended in Songzhuang in the winter. The
entire programme lasted close to seven hours (including breaks) and was hosted in
a poorly insulated room with a single electric heater. Already being somewhat
experienced in searching for the best seats in these venues I sat in the very front
corner as close to the heater as possible. Although I was wearing multiple layers of

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60 In conversations with students at the Beijing Film Academy, I was often told that they
think independent films are not screened publicly in China at all.
clothes, a hat and a pair of gloves, the cold soon began to creep up from my feet. In this freezing cold I, and a handful of other audience members, endured the entire programme. Another example of the discomfort experienced at screenings occurred at a venue with insufficient seats, where people who arrived late had to stand throughout the entire film. I also watched countless films with a section of the screen out of sight, or having to position myself so that my neck would be stiff and sore at the end of the screening.

What I hope to demonstrate through these examples is that the venues generally provide a far from comfortable viewing experience. For me this added to

![Figure 3.2: Night club becomes screening venue. Photograph by author, 2015.](image)

the feeling that I was working whilst watching films, not merely as a researcher engaging in some kind of intellectual activity, but also physically. It takes effort to find out about screenings, it is often difficult to reach the screening locations, and the film content is often challenging. The cold rooms, hard seats and impractical set-up of the screen make the experience something that must be endured, rather than enjoyed. Even though this is not deliberate, the venues prevent the screenings from being a form of light entertainment or relaxation, like you might find in one of the many cinemas across Beijing, where one can sit comfortably in a big soft chair and be mildly entertained or even doze off. In every sense, these underground
screenings constitute an active engagement with the film and audience. In terms of place and mode of reception they clearly differentiate themselves from other forms of film consumption.

Content

Most venues I visited and organisers I spoke to were dedicated to screening relatively recent (usually no more than six years old) non-mainstream Chinese content. In this particular context non-mainstream content includes practically anything not screened in regular Chinese cinemas. This could be a short documentary like Regarding Lambs in the City (2015, Zhao Xu), a no-budget debut fiction film like Eyes Cheat (2015, Jian Haodong), critically acclaimed documentaries like Behemoth (2015, Zhao Liang), analysed in the previous chapter, but also more polished Chinese works with slightly bigger budgets, which have toured festivals abroad, like Mr. Zhang Believes (2015, Qiu Jiongjiong) and A Young Patriot (2015, Du Haibin). In many ways the screenings provide a cross section of independent
Chinese cinema. In this section I look closer into the kind of films screened at the events I attended and the mechanisms through which the films are selected.

“Can they actually show this kind of film in China?”

“Can they actually show this kind of film in China?” This question popped up time and time again when I told people that I was spending a lot of time in China visiting screenings of independent films. I usually replied that screening films is generally not too much of an issue. Even though all sorts of films are screened, and things are not as strictly regulated as is sometimes assumed or suggested, screening independent films is also not an activity free of risk, control and regulation. For example, during my fieldwork I never came across overtly anti-establishment films like *The Missing* (2015, Han Tao), briefly discussed in the introduction, *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016, Wang Nanfu), a documentary about a women’s rights activist, or *The Dossier* (2014, Zhu Rikun), with a Tibetan activist reading the personal file the Chinese state keeps on her, as it does on all its citizens (*dang’an* 档案). In this subsection I attempt to clarify how a complex interplay between defiance, self-censorship and active interference by various parties shapes what is (and what is not) screened at underground venues in Beijing.

When I first went to China for this fieldwork, I was not sure what to expect with regard to restrictions on film screenings. During the first week of my first field trip to Beijing I encountered the first instance of censorship. At a small documentary film festival hosted in a well-known art centre in cooperation with the documentary section of the officially sanctioned Beijing International Film Festival (BIFF) that was to feature thirteen documentaries from all over the world, five films were cancelled. The cancelled films included all the mainland Chinese films which had been programmed: *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* (2013, Gu Tao) about a displaced alcoholic hunter, *1428* (2009, Du Haibin) on the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, and *Dragon Boat* (2010, Cao Dan) about challenges faced by local culture in a Chinese town. Additionally, the American film *Somewhere Between* (2011, Linda Goldstein Knowlton) about two teenage girls in the US adopted from China, and the Taiwanese film *Money and Honey* (2011, Jasmine Ching-Hui Lee) about Filipino maids in Taiwan were also pulled. All these films
were cancelled just one day before the event, and the programs had the times of the events crossed out with a black marker (see Figure 3.4).

In trying to find out why the screenings had been cancelled all I heard from people involved in the organization was: “Well, you know, that’s China...” Yet, as my fieldwork progressed, *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* was screened in at least four different locations with no problems whatsoever, leaving me confused as to what “well, you know, that’s China...” actually means and how it shapes film exhibition in Beijing.

Even though I never found out the exact reasons for the alteration of the programme in this particular case, I discovered that in relation to film screenings a fair amount of censorship occurs in various forms, not only directly through the heavy hand of the government, but also through an invisible hand gently dissuading people, like venue owners, administrative staff at universities, or organisers themselves, from engaging in these activities. To further illustrate this point I would like to highlight an observation made by Nakanjima at an event in 2003:

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61 In several cases national, city and local governments have been involved in obstructing, in various ways, screenings at festivals. See the dissertation by J. P. Sniadecki (2013: 159-189) for a detailed insider account of the political (and, consequentially, internal) troubles faced by the Li Xianting Film Fund and Fanhall Films.
The documentary film exchange week was planned to run for seven days, but it was ‘stopped by the government’ on the third day … A couple of days later the main organiser and I found out that it was more a case of self-censorship on the part of the venue rather than any explicit political action by the government. After the first day of screenings, when the curator and her boss found larger audiences than they had anticipated, as well as a great variety of films shown, they became afraid of trouble with the government. (Nakajima 2010: 132)

During my own fieldwork I came across similar situations. One of the screening groups organizing events without a permanent location of their own had arranged with the film society of a large Beijing university to organise screenings on campus. The events were only advertised on WeChat and the initial screenings only attracted a handful of viewers. However, after just three screenings, the student who ran the film society decided to end the cooperation with the screening group. She did so not because she was instructed by anyone in particular, but because she herself found the content of the films too sensitive (mingan 敏感) and feared that this might not be beneficial to her (conversation with BY, 2016). This type of fear is not only induced by reports of people getting into trouble, but is also reinforced by friends. As one organiser told me, “all my friends told me I shouldn’t do it, and that I would get into trouble. But after a year of screening these films I've had no trouble whatsoever” (conversation with GXD, 2016).

Most organisers who do go ahead and host screenings have mixed feelings about potential problems. To illustrate this, none of the organisers I spoke to seemed particularly worried about these issues; they believed that they would not face any problems as long as they would not cross some kind of vague line. To me this indicated that in spite of their cool exterior they had actually actively considered the potential consequences of screening independent films. This would usually lead to their actively avoiding overtly political or activist films like the ones mentioned earlier. “I do not screen political films” (interview with SY 2016), one organiser told me. Another one was more specific and said “I avoid anything related to human rights … We also always discuss some technical matters during the Q&A to show that we are mainly interested in making films [rather than politics]” (conversation with GXD, 2016). Another organiser said: “I did screen that film
[Children are not afraid of Death, Children are afraid of Ghosts (2017, Rong Guangrong]), but I only invited my friends’ (conversation with RGR, 2017).

However, for these organisers, what constitutes a political or human rights related film depends primarily on their personal judgement of what they consider to be the limit up to which they would be allowed to continue their work. For the first organiser the intention to not screen anything political did not prevent him from screening Behemoth (2015, Zhao Liang) and A Young Patriot (2015, Du Haibin), a film that follows a patriotic teenager who over the course of four years becomes disillusioned with China. This organiser felt like he could screen these films because “those films are not too bad” (interview with SY 2016), which indicates that the personal judgements of the organisers and their relatively loose modes of self-censorship are key to what is and is not shown during these screenings.

Similarly, the organiser who had told me that he would avoid human rights related movies still dedicated a month of screenings to LGBTQ films and invited activist filmmakers for Q&A sessions. It is worth mentioning that these screenings were exceptionally well attended. After the last screening in this series the organiser was approached by public security bureau officials who requested him to stop hosting screening events. After several weeks, however, he started organising events in alternative locations. What the exact reasons were for the public security bureau to put an end to his activities in the initial location remains unclear; I can only guess that it had to do with the steadily increasing audiences, the selection of films and the string of invited activists. In relation to the idea that when engaging in parrhesisia risk is always involved, which is also understood by the person speaking truth to power, in screening these films the organisers clearly feel that the duty to show the films outweighs the risks. Every organiser I spoke to emphasised that screening the films is very important and that if there is a risk involved, so be it.

Even though I did not directly experience the forceful closure of a screening, the case of the forced closure of the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2014 is well-documented and was widely reported on, with footage of the closure turned into the documentary A Filmless Festival (2015, Wang Wo). The film captures men blocking the entry to the festival venue and beating people who film them or ignore their commands, as well as the police scaling the wall of the venue and confiscating the film library housed inside, and finally the arrest and subsequent release of the organisers. Even though this was a relatively rare case in the sense that force was
used to directly prevent a screening from taking place, and because it was a festival with a large (expected) audience rather than a single screening, it does suggest that if softer forms of dissuasion, interruption, and coercion (which had been employed during previous editions of the festival) are ignored, force might be used.

What becomes clear from these examples is that as much as the underground screenings embody a relatively open and critical moment, there is a mild form of self-policing by programmers and those involved in the practical side of the screenings at work when determining the programme. This self-censorship is informed by a fear of having the screenings shut down, being harassed, or harming one’s future career prospects, and leads to caution with regard to not crossing some kind of ill-defined boundary when screening films. In relation to the idea of the alternative public space this issue shows that the practice of underground screenings does not exist as a phenomenon detached from China’s social and political circumstances, but must navigate them appropriately. As a result the intensity of the parrhesia expressed through the films is occasionally muted. However, the screenings are still an outlet for disseminating views and experiences that are counter-hegemonic, since what is shown deviates strongly from what is screened elsewhere. Independent Chinese cinema is critical in its core and many of the films shown at the screenings would never pass the official censorship procedure since they show officially unacceptable approaches to historic truth as in, for example, *Mr. Zhang Believes* (2015, Qiu Jiongjiong), corruption as in *The Road* (2015, Zhang Zanbo), or explicit sexual scenes as in *I am Going to Make a Lesbian Porn* (2014, Daji). At the same time, indirect and direct censorship results in certain titles with overt political agendas being avoided, and occasionally in planned events being cancelled.

*“That film has a dragon seal; I would rather screen something else”*

Another kind of film that is not usually shown in underground venues are Chinese films, often labelled as art-films, which are often produced with limited budgets but have managed to receive a general release and are receiving a fair amount of

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62 Activist filmmakers tend to employ different methods to reach their audiences than underground film screenings, such as, for example, handing out DVDs or disseminating the films online.
attention as a result. Even though these films might be considered independent films in spirit, form, or production method, any discourse of independence surrounding these films is often absent. Examples of such films include *Kaili Blues* (2015, Bi Gan) and *Crosscurrent* (2016, Yang Chao). That these films are intentionally avoided came to the fore when in the WeChat group of a screening venue somebody suggested that they screen *Kaili Blues*. The organiser responded that “this film has a dragon seal and is screened widely; I would rather give films that have no other means of distribution a chance to reach an audience.” This shows that the purpose of hosting events is to screen material that would otherwise not see the light of day (or, rather, the darkness of the cinema). Not showing content that is available through mainstream channels, even if it has certain independent characteristics, reinforces the outsider nature of the venues and the commitment to resisting the mainstream through their programming.

“Do you still know any good movies?”

Having discussed what kind of films are, and are not, screened, here I discuss how films are selected. This selection, I found, is based on availability, social relations, and word of mouth. As many recent films of (semi-) established independent filmmakers are hard to obtain without directly asking the filmmaker for a copy or creating an open call for films, most people programming films for underground venues have only a limited opportunity to view the films beforehand without being in direct contact with the filmmaker. Previously, programmers would, for example, be able to select films based on what they had seen at the festivals, as until about

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63 The film *Kaili Blues* is a film that was screened at over twenty film festivals and received a general release in China. As a marketing stunt it was only screened in cinemas for a period of ten days, creating a lot of media attention (Wei 2016). *Crosscurrent* won an award for best cinematography at the Berlin Film Festival. Both films play into a broader discourse that China should produce so-called quality films, as can be seen in this review: “[*Kaili Blues*] is exactly the kind of independent film which it’d be great to see more in Chinese cinemas to compliment the country’s explosion in blockbuster commercial productions” (Mudge 2016). In spite of its close relation to independent Chinese film a discussion of the recent rise of Chinese art-cinema is beyond the scope of this study.

64 During my research I encountered copies of films being disseminated through various methods: through emailed links to streaming websites like Vimeo, YouTube and Youku, which are usually password protected, through sharing digital download links through websites like Baidu Yun Pan, and also through USB sticks, hard drives or DVDs containing digital files.
2015 various independent Chinese film festivals offered regular opportunities to watch many of the latest independent films. However, since the forced closure of the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2015, these events have become less frequent and less public, making it harder for programmers to view films before selecting them for their own venues.

Even though most programmers are necessarily connected to filmmakers, who will often provide them with their film without being asked, actually requesting to view a film and then not screening it would not be good for the relationship. The same applies if the organisers did not personally know the filmmaker and got in touch through friends. This creates a situation that basically makes it impossible to ask filmmakers to see their films before deciding whether or not to screen them. As a result, the programming is often done based on a combination of what the programmer saw at festivals (either abroad, or as much as it is still possible domestically), what comes from filmmakers he or she personally knows, or what other people who have seen a particular movie had to say about it. For example, the person who ran a certain venue would occasionally ask me what films I had recently seen and what might be worth screening. Besides wanting to find out about new films, he would also ask me about specific titles he was interested in to decide whether or not to invite the filmmakers. Thus, he selected films based on other people’s opinions, rather than his personal judgement. On several occasions I would ask another organiser if the coming film would be any good and he would reply: “I haven’t seen it yet.”

This method, which I would like to summarise with my own term as blind networked participatory programming,65 as the programming often happens without having seen the film, is based initially on the organisers network and is done in participation with others who have some interest in independent cinema, like myself,66 runs counter to how, for example, Peter Bosma (2015) finds programming, or curation, to work in other contexts, where careful personal, artistic and/or financial considerations are weighed and balanced to select films.

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65 I chose to use my own terminology here as I could not find any literature describing this particular phenomenon in programming or curation practices.
66 There are also venues where the programming is more traditionally organised, but I came across several variations of the methods discussed here and found it to be characteristic of the independent Chinese film scene. Hence, I will focus on this programming style here.
Whereas in such contexts a programmer functions as a gatekeeper, the people who organise screenings in Beijing are more accurately viewed as promoters. In a regular cinema or film festival setting, the programmer or curator is a gatekeeper who has control over a desirable screen and audience, and is keeping out a large number of films vying for the opportunity to be shown, and in the programmers selection of films he or she is displaying their own taste and networking power. The independent film promoter in Beijing, on the contrary, is constantly looking for something to share, as well as for people to share it with. He does not have the luxury of an abundance of applicants, nor does he have much to offer: no financial rewards, prestige, or even much of an audience. Rather, the organiser of independent film screenings cooperates with the filmmaker to create and promote a platform. In sum, the programming style of Beijing underground venues screening independent films is participatory, personal and curious, sharing many of the characteristics of independent Chinese film.

Questions and Answers

Many screenings I attended were followed by extended Q&A sessions with the filmmaker, and sometimes also with other crew members or the subjects of the films. Screenings that included Q&As were usually better attended and when presented with two overlapping screenings, I would always opt for the one with a Q&A. For most organisers these post-screening discussions were very important. Echoing the ideas of Solans and Getino (1970) quoted at the start of this chapter, one organiser even said: “If there is no discussion [jiadiliu 交流] there is no point.” After a group of audience members left directly after the movie was over, he complained: “What do they think? That this is a regular cinema? Can’t they read in the notice that the director will be there for a discussion?” (conversation with GXD, 2016). In this section I delve into the content and set-up of Q&A sessions to examine how the intended participatory nature of an alternative public space takes shape and whether or not parrhesia is practiced outside of the content of the films.
First of all, it is important to note that Q&A is an inappropriate translation of the Chinese term invariably used in this context,\(^{67}\) *jiaoliu* (交流). The word *jiaoliu* used as a verb means to communicate or exchange and is often used in the context of exchanging ideas and thoughts. Where the set combination of Q&A, question and answer, entails somebody asking a question and somebody else providing an answer, *jiaoliu* implies more of a dialogue, a conversation, a communication of thoughts in both directions. The reason why I nevertheless insist on using the term Q&A to describe the post-screening *jiaoliu* is that, in practice, the structure is almost entirely that of a question and answer session, with audience members asking questions and the filmmaker answering.

Generally, the set-up of each Q&A was fairly consistent. With documentaries the director would first introduce the project, expand on how he or she came upon the subject and what kind of process was followed to make the film. If this introduction would not be given, questions regarding these aspects would inevitably come up. In addition, the audience would primarily be interested in backstories not present in the film: “What happened after the filming ended?” and “What about this person’s role in that event?” These particular questions are common not only during Q&A sessions at underground screenings, but are also in line with what I experienced at screenings of more mainstream films in China and at screenings I attended in the Netherlands and Germany. A difference in the set-up is that at Q&As at film festivals in Europe a schedule usually dictates that there will be fifteen minutes for questions (half of which is usually taken up by the moderator), whereas at the underground screenings in Beijing a Q&A lasts as long as it takes for everybody to have had the chance to ask something, and can take as long as an hour.

The Q&A is usually performed in a set-up in which the audience wants to know certain things from the filmmaker, and there is usually a clear hierarchy between the filmmaker and the audience, with audience members sometimes even being addressed as students (*xuesheng* 学生) by the moderator. Questions would usually start with formalities: “Thank you, director, for coming, what I would like to ask is...” The moderators of a Q&A and certain audience members, such as

\(^{67}\) I also observed how Chinese filmmakers visiting film festivals in Europe (Hamburg, Amsterdam and Rotterdam) refer to the post-screening Q&As at these events as *jiaoliu*. The literal Chinese translation of Q&A would be *wenda* (问答).
academics, other filmmakers, and the organisers would regularly be given a special place within the Q&A hierarchy; they would be asked to express their opinion on some matters or would refrain from asking the filmmaker questions, instead providing an analysis of what they saw in the film. In my capacity as a foreigner and regular attendant I would occasionally be invited to give my opinion on the film as well. On one such occasion, where I was requested to speak up, I used this opportunity to ask the members of the audience how the particular film related to their understanding of the historic events portrayed. This attempt to open things up was met with slight unease from the audience members, who were now being asked a question, and after one person finally shyly spoke up, the Q&A returned to its usual form.

Even though this is the most common way for a Q&A to unfold, I came across two exceptions. First of all, at screenings where attendance, including the filmmaker and organisers, would be under eight people, the atmosphere would be a lot more intimate, open and participatory. Another exception were screenings where there were no special guests (filmmakers, producers, actors or experts), but which included a post screening discussion. These discussions were very different from the regular Q&As. I only visited one venue where such discussions would be held; after the movie, a small audience, of ten people at most, would sit around a table, drink tea and talk about the film and all kinds of other things that would not really be related to the film, such as the legacy of Chairman Mao or the position of Islam in China. In both of these set-ups the feeling of a strict hierarchy would be significantly reduced and free flowing discussions would take place.

To return to the questions asked at typical Q&As, another inquiry that was often made was whether the main characters had seen the film and, if so, what their opinions about the film were. Though a usual answer to this question could be: “Yes, I showed them the film, and they thought it was funny to see themselves on television” (Notes from Ye Zuyi post-screening Q&A, Beijing 2015), on multiple occasions a conversation like this would unfold:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience member:</th>
<th>Did you show the film to your aunt?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Filmmaker:</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience member:</td>
<td>Are you planning to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmmaker:</td>
<td>No, I’m not planning to visit her for the time being.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Notes taken at a screening in April 2015)
This specific filmmaker was not particularly talkative and a bit blunt (which is not uncommon); he also did not show any particular regard for the subject who had shared many intimate details about her life with him. Even though this particular instance was relatively harsh, at several other screenings I witnessed similar responses. Even though consent, privacy, and exploitation are thorny issues in documentary filmmaking (e.g. Pryluck 1976), I did not witness any heated debates unfold on this particular issue, and generally audience members would politely accept the answers from the filmmakers.

During a Q&A one filmmaker said that she had shown the film to one of the main characters, who in turn had asked her not to screen the film publicly, to which the filmmaker had agreed. After the Q&A, an audience member told me he thought screening the film whilst having promised not to do so was fundamentally wrong. Although he was probably not the only person to hold this opinion, nobody spoke out during the Q&A and the issue was only discussed privately afterwards. That it was not unusual for disapproval of what a filmmaker said during a Q&A to only be vented later on or for the most active debates to take place amongst friends after the screening undermines the supposed open and participatory nature of an alternative public space, and places the audience in a position of receiving

Figure 3.5: Jiaoliu with filmmaker. Photograph by author, 2016.
information (albeit in a critical manner) rather than of participating. In these cases it seems that parrhesia is practiced through the content of the film and through the way the audience relates this content to broader structures outside the screening venue, more than through the Q&A sessions.

However, my personal observations do not completely match what Ying Qian (2012) observed in other situations. In her article on ethical debates in the Chinese independent film scene she notes how for several years a debate on documentary ethics took place. For example, in 2009 there were audience protests at the Yunfest film festival because of the screening of the film Wheat Harvest (2008, Xu Tong), a film that follows sex-workers. Some people were concerned that the film could cause harm to the main subjects and that subjects had no way of protecting themselves against the filmmaker. Wheat Harvest sparked a discussion that, according to Ying Qian, culminated in a five-hour long debate on documentary ethics in a panel at the Chinese Independent Film Festival in Nanjing in 2011. Following that panel debate, sixteen filmmakers issued a response in the form of a manifesto titled Shamans · Animals, in which they set forth their understanding of the relationship between film criticism and documentary practice.

Even though there is not sufficient space to discuss this particular debate in detail, what has been chronicled of this discussion seems to have taken place at film festivals and in written form. I did not come across instances where the type of single film screenings analysed in this chapter sparked intense discussion. However, the fact that there were no major debates at the screenings I visited does not mean that the audience was never critical. For example, at a screening of Planting for Life (2014, Gu Xiaogang) an audience member took issue with the film: “Your film started off with organic farming, which is a very important topic. But you almost immediately abandon this topic and focus on a boring love story, such a pity.” After both the director and the producer had defended the value of their film, the audience refrained from delving further into the topic and the discussion of this issue was over.

Also, at the screening of a mainstream fiction film called 12 Citizens (2014, Xu Ang) a young girl stood up and spoke: “This film is called 12 Citizens (shì’ěr gōngmin 十二公民), but why is there not a single woman in this film? Are women

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For an overview of the discussion and an English translation of the manifesto, see Kracier (2011).
not citizens?” At this screening only the leading actor was present and he answered: “As far as I know, this is done because in the original 12 Angry Men, there are only men. But this is something you would need to ask the director of the film. I am only an actor.” The audience member replied that she thought it was ridiculous, after which the moderator moved on to the next question. Finally, at a screening of the documentary The Gleaners (2013, Ye Zuyi) an audience member stood up and questioned the presumed truthfulness of the film with a list of scenes that were very unlikely to have spontaneously unfolded in reality as they did in the film:

There are several moments in the film that are problematic, first, how can it be that when you and your mother are in the hospital you don’t know what has happened to your father? Second, how come you just happen to be filming yourself in your room when your mother comes in to ask you what you plan to do with your life? Third… (Notes from Ye Zuyi post-screening Q&A, Beijing 2015)

The director answered that the audience member was right and that many of the scenes, including the specific ones mentioned, were either staged or re-enactments. The criticism voiced during the screenings of Planting for Life (2014, Gu Xiaogang) and 12 Citizens (2014, Xu Ang) can easily be recognised as part of broader social criticisms regarding ecology or women’s rights. These moments, rare as they were, where films and social structures would be openly criticised, can be seen as a moment of parrhesia within the space of the screening when the viewer speaks out from a relatively inferior position. In a limited sense these moments add to the creation of an alternative public space in which the films shown not only counter the hegemony of the mass media, but in which the audience also criticises the content or production process of the films.

The latter adds an extra dimension to the screenings in that critical material is viewed by an active critically engaged audience, ready to call out any problems they perceive such as, for example, films reinforcing male dominance, filmmakers focusing on the less important aspects of the story, or supposed untruths in a documentary. These moments, however, do not tend to produce much of a dialogue; they mostly just involve the positing of critical statements. The criticisms that
audience members express of a film or a filmmaker at screenings, moreover, hardly ever result in films being re-edited.69

So what exactly is the purpose of a post screening Q&A? Different actors seem to have different motivations for participating in these events. For organisers Q&As are worthwhile because they attract a larger audience and create an engaged viewing experience, differentiating their activities from those of regular cinemas. As one organiser put it: “Anybody can sit and watch a film at home, at these screenings we engage with the material and discuss what we have seen” (conversation with GXD, 2016). Film directors have different reasons for partaking in Q&As. They would usually say that it is a chance to meet the audience and witness the response to a film they might have spent many years working on. From my own observations, it also became clear that Q&A sessions also sometimes serve to allow filmmakers to clarify or defend their position. Finally, by attending the screening and participating in the subsequent Q&A the filmmaker and the host of the screening show their appreciation for each other.

Audience members have different reasons for partaking in Q&As. In the audience there would usually be young people aspiring to become filmmakers; for them the Q&A serves as an opportunity to learn more about filmmaking processes and to satisfy their curiosity about the filmmakers. As a regular audience member told me: “it’s usually interesting to see the filmmakers and hear them talk about their work” (conversation with an audience member, 2015). These various purposes and approaches to the Q&A create different affordances with regard to the direction it might take, yet the trajectory usually remains relatively fixed.

In this section I have shown how the selection process in underground film screenings is shaped by the organisers’ networks and that screening organisers are more promoters of independent cinema than curators. I have also shown the dynamics of the various forms of censorship at play in determining what can and cannot be shown, and highlighted how organisers balance screening films without fear with making pragmatic choices to mitigate some of the risks involved. Finally, I have taken a closer look at how the Q&A after the screenings takes shape, arguing that this places constraints on truly open audience participation. In the next section

An exception to this would be a test screening, where a film that is not yet finished is screened and where the audience, which, in the case of independent Chinese cinema, usually consists of personally invited friends, is asked to provide feedback on the film, which is then taken into account while finishing the film.
I discuss the public aspect of the screenings, analysing both the degree of publicness of the events and the types of audience members present.

**Public**

**Promotion**

Films are generally meant to be seen by an audience; as one filmmaker put it, "I did not make this film for the wall" (conversation with Zhang Laodong, 2016). Thus, in one way or another, a potential audience needs to be informed of a screening event, especially when the times and venues are constantly changing. Advertising an event of dubious legal status is tricky. However, it is important to look at how screening events are publicised to understand them as potential moments of parrhesia, and to analyse how they foster the temporary formation of an alternative public space.

When I first arrived in Beijing in spring 2015, I had no connections to the independent film scene. In order to find a way in and to find out about screenings, I initially relied on events listings on websites such as douban.com and timeoutbeijing.com. It was on the Time Out Beijing website that I found a write up for the Hakka film series mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The piece about the event, written by the film editor of the magazine, started like this:

> There are plenty of things you could reasonably expect to find at [this venue] foreign electronic acts, plenty of liquor, scantily clad ladies, men with too much cologne trying to hit on said scantily clad ladies. Observational, low-budget Chinese documentaries are probably not on that list. (Fox-Lerner 2015)

As I later found out, this write up, which initially appears to advertise the club nights at the venue more than it does the film screenings, was the only public announcement made for this event. Throughout the first months of the screenings at this specific club the audience hovered between four and ten people, a number I later found out to be fairly standard for a screening group just starting up. I myself was the only person there who had come after reading about it on Time Out Beijing. The person who wrote the announcement also joined one of the screenings at a
later stage; the rest of the audience had a personal connection to the filmmakers or organisers.

Having set-up WeChat on my phone before leaving to China, the first WeChat group I joined was dedicated to the screenings at the club and at that time had just a handful of members. Soon, I began to realise that only a fraction of the screenings was listed on public websites and very quickly WeChat became my main channel to receive screening information. WeChat is a smartphone application launched in 2011; by 2018 it had over a billion active monthly users (Sina 2018). Close to 93% of the Beijing population uses the app (Beaver 2016). WeChat is used for pretty much anything you could possibly do with a smartphone like chatting, sharing locations, making payments, booking taxis or restaurants, and charging the credit on your phone. The app also allows people to share so-called moments with their contacts; these could be photos, texts, news articles, or event information. As I continued to attend screenings, I joined more WeChat group chats related to specific screening venues, followed accounts set up by screening groups and could see events shared by my contacts in their moments. As my WeChat contact list grew and I added more subscriptions, my phone became flooded with an endless stream of information. Scrolling through all of it to pick out screening events became a daily activity. Soon, the main issue was not where to find films, but to decide which of the many screenings to visit, especially during weekends when there could be up to six events on a single day.

In essence, almost all events I visited used WeChat as the main form of promotion. Most events were shared in groups, through moments, and via subscriptions. The organisers also often urged interested people to forward this information to other potentially interested people. In many ways, using WeChat as a promotion channel can be seen as a contemporary form of word of mouth advertising, confined to certain circles of people, friends of friends. Even though anybody can follow WeChat subscriptions there is no way to easily find subscriptions related to independent film screenings; you would need to be informed of their existence first.

Of course, WeChat has a much larger potential reach and is much faster than word of mouth; thousands of people can be reached in a matter of minutes. Yet, the excessive amount of information being sent and received through WeChat can make it easy to overlook information or to simply forget about it as soon as the next
message pops up. Unless you are especially on the lookout for screenings, information about them becomes just one more drop in an endless stream of messages, photos, news, and events.\textsuperscript{70}

As I was getting more information about screenings across town, the specific club’s WeChat group grew gradually with each screening, with every filmmaker or previous guest bringing some new friends and these friends then advertising the event to their friends. After about a year of hosting regular events, the chat group had over three hundred members and screenings attracted close to sixty people, which was far more than the available number of seats and led to some of the discomfort discussed earlier in this chapter.

For most venues, using WeChat is the only way to attract an audience for the screenings, yet several places also used the event listings on douban.com. Practically nowhere did I encounter posters or flyers advertising screenings.\textsuperscript{71} Many events would require people to register in advance to be sure that everybody would be able to get a seat, and to simultaneously keep track of the people attending. One of the clubs also advertised on the events listing app Someet, which is contained within WeChat.\textsuperscript{72} The organisers and group members would use the event notice from this list and forward it to friends. The details would say that registration was required, even though in fact no check was conducted at the door, and the number of slots open for registration was capped at twenty-five, with usually only about twelve people showing up. People who had attended an event previously and were part of the WeChat group were not required to register through this system. In this way, the organisers kept an eye on the new people attending the events, hoping to avoid or at least notice “uninvited guests”, as Ma (2010) calls public security bureau officials attending screening events. In addition, the organisers also controlled access to the main chat group. After the screening

\textsuperscript{70}Margaret Roberts (2018: 190-222) shows how information flooding is a strategy regularly employed by the Chinese government to bury news it does not want to receive too much attention, as it is less conspicuous than directly removing content.

\textsuperscript{71}The only exception to this was a venue with daily screenings of all kinds of films, which would print posters of the films they were showing that week and hang them in the windows of the venue.

\textsuperscript{72}WeChat is built in such a way that a user never needs to leave the app; it opens web pages within the programme and contains apps inside the app.
new guests would be invited to approach one of the organisers and scan the group QR code, giving the organisation a chance to personally meet all group members.\textsuperscript{73}

This fairly elaborate system was unique amongst the events I attended; in other places there was either a required registration or the event was open for all. One of the screening groups in the university area had been hosting about one or two screenings per month in a hotel just outside the campus for ten years and would usually have over 150 people in attendance. It had a very open character and did not require registration or payment of any kind. However, after a fight at one of the screenings the police advised the organisers to move the screenings onto the university campus and to require all visitors to register in advance to avoid future trouble, which they did.

The ways in which underground screening events are promoted show several things. First of all, they are not promoted widely and many public outlets available both online (e.g. douban, weibo, huodongxing) and offline (e.g. flyers and posters at other events) are barely utilised. In many respects this is understandable, because drawing too much attention to an event could lead to it being taken note of and shut down. As one organiser said: “I don’t advertise the screenings on douban because it is too risky” (conversation with RGR, 2017). In addition, promoting an event is a time-consuming activity. At the same time, the limited advertising undermines my conceptualization of the screenings as an alternative public space, because of its limited public-ness. However, someone who is interested in this kind of activity, like myself, can find out about these events without much trouble, in spite of their relative obscurity. Only people unaware that this scene even exists are very unlikely to find out about it. The open and participatory nature of this alternative public space is thus deliberately limited.

The scene’s reliance on WeChat encapsulates a lot of the general debate about the role of the internet. Across the world the role of the internet has been understood as both a free, utopian, democratising technology, and as a means of surveillance, repression, and disinformation (e.g. Morozov 2011). Many of these ideas have also been applied to the internet within the context of China. For example, Jack Qiu (2016) shows how various types of social media have been used in mobilizing resistance. Johan Lagerkvist characterizes the internet as a means of

\textsuperscript{73} In spite of this elaborate system, the public security bureau still visited the venue after about one and a half years of screenings and put an end to the screenings.
creating a space for both openness and control (Lagerkvist 2006: 215). WeChat has similar issues. On the one hand, the use of WeChat potentially enables millions of people to learn about events, yet this does not happen, because only a limited number of people share the announcement of an event, or inform their friends, making it a semi-private, word of mouth type of communication. This is something Eric Harwit also observes in a general sense. He writes: "Many users seemed to focus their electronic communication on a limited, targeted audience", and WeChat "exemplifies the move toward targeted communication among intimate groups." (Harwit 2016: 8). At the same time, in China, all activities that take place on WeChat are most likely stored, the conversations of persons of interest are monitored, and various types of censorship based on keywords are employed. What exactly happens with the information gathered through WeChat is not clear (Amnesty International 2016: 43-46), but it does make it seem as though its closed circle type of communication offers only a false sense of security. In a way, even though promotion through WeChat is only available to a closed, chosen circle of people, it is still within sight of the authorities, if they decide to take an interest. One could therefore deem it to be the least desirable form of communication of all, but it seems that an alternative means of promotion for independent cinema that is both secure and public does not exist in China.

By employing a snowballing effect in the personal and digital realm, with various levels of control exerted by the organisers, the screening events obtain a semi-public character that should enable most people who are interested in this type of event to find out and attend them. In the next section I examine the public that finds their way to the events.

**Audiences**

Having examined the spaces and types of content that constitute independent film screenings in Beijing as alternative public spaces, and having explored the ways of promoting these spaces, in this final section the public is the main focus. I clarify

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74 WeChat’s parent company Tencent denies storing any user chat histories; however, a municipal anti-corruption agency has publicly declared it uses deleted WeChat conversations in its anti-corruption efforts (Liao 2018).
who attends film screenings, why they do so, and what this means for underground screenings as an alternative public space.

Before getting into the question of who attends the screenings, it is worthwhile to take another look at the audience numbers. As discussed earlier, it takes time for a screening group or venue to garner audience interest and even when there is a steady audience attending a certain locale, particular events might draw almost no audience at all. During my fieldwork I attended multiple screenings where the audience and organisers together totalled around five people, but also events with over 150 audience members. Given that the population of Beijing is over eleven million, it is safe to say that attending this kind of screening is a fringe activity. There are several factors that contribute to the relative popularity of certain events over others. First of all, when well-known filmmakers like Zhao Liang, Du Haibin, or Zhou Hao, all of whom have won awards at big film festivals like Cannes, Venice, and the Golden Horse Festival, attended screenings of their films, the venues would usually be at maximum capacity. Second, as one might expect, screenings on weekdays of obscure titles without a post screening discussion would have very low attendance rates. For example, at a screening of the film *The Young Play Game, The Old Play Tai Chi* (2012, Lei Yong) five people showed up; two of these left halfway through, and my friend and I left about thirty minutes before the end, leaving a single audience member in the venue. Also, venues that had been active for longer periods of time tended to draw larger crowds. This can be directly related to the word of mouth type spreading of screening information, and to the fact that it takes time to build an audience base.

In terms of who attends the screenings, events in different areas of Beijing attract different audiences, but aspiring filmmakers seem to be present at almost every screening. Nakajima (2014) and Edwards (2015) have both pointed to the fact that a substantial part of the audience in these venues is somehow involved in filmmaking. Edwards calls this “a public of viewer-producers” and Nakajima sees it as a form of “prosumption.” The people organising the screenings are also often involved in filmmaking. In this sense the events are participatory to a high degree, as most people there are producers and more often than not have the opportunity to get their work screened at the venue.
Edwards (2015), in his analysis of a public of viewer-producers, discusses the now defunct U-thèque group organised by artist Ou Ning, who had a clear agenda for the screening group as also being a site for developing films:

My original idea was for the U-thèque to be like a training centre ... I thought we could train filmmakers, film critics and film event organisers. I wanted the U-thèque to be a platform that could develop different people. (Ou Ning qtd. in Edwards 2015: 46)

Through the U-thèque group, several films were eventually produced, including San Yuan Li (2003, Ou Ning and Cao Fei); the filmmaker Huang Weikai, who directed the films Floating (2005) and Disorder (2009), was also a member of this group. Edwards’s observations come close to what Nakajima calls prosumption, which he understands as “close linkages, interactions and fusion between the processes of consumption and production” (Nakajima 2014: 53). As examples, he names the film Pirated Copy (2004, He Jianjun), which was funded and produced by members of a film club in Beijing. Nakajima also points to the fact that “a significant proportion of the audience I encountered ... were involved in filmmaking in some capacity or other” (2014: 61).

Even though neither Edwards nor Nakajima views it in this way, if the majority of the audience consists of film workers, this could lead to the screenings becoming a self-referential circle, making the entire exercise, participatory as it may be, lose many of the characteristics of an alternative public sphere. In my experience, there were indeed often people involved in filmmaking present at the screenings, but their numbers varied from venue to venue. In Songzhuang, where a significant amount of the residents are artists, there were always attendants who were involved full-time in filmmaking—directors, camera people, actors etc. In the other venues, their numbers would be significantly smaller, but the number of attendants in their early twenties, either students or recent graduates, aspiring to become filmmakers, would be higher. In these cases, the screenings function as places to meet people, discuss projects and learn from more experienced filmmakers, for example during Q&As.

(Potential) filmmakers aside, I found that the rest of the audience can be best understood in terms of what Jeroen de Kloet and Anthony Fung call “slightly divergent youth.” They describe this group of people as:
The larger and less outspoken cohort of youngsters who are busy producing distributing, negotiating, switching back and forth, locating and dislocating the dominant culture in specific cultural realms, occasionally acquiring cultural resources, and creating a new sense of space at certain historical points of time. (de Kloet and Fung 2017: 55)

For many of the slightly divergent youth I spoke with at underground film screenings, the events were indeed linked to searching for what is available outside of dominant culture and acquiring cultural resources by engaging in face to face interaction with filmmakers who had won prizes at prestigious festivals. As de Kloet and Fung also point out, these youths are not particularly concerned with engaging in a new revolution or rebellion. Margherita Viviani (2012: 137-138) similarly finds that the main driver for people to go through the trouble of attending independent film screenings is a strong drive to gain more knowledge of the world, but stresses that after watching the films the audience is often moved to take further steps to find out more about the topics raised in the films, or to speak about it with their family and friends.

Over the course of my research I witnessed how for screening venues of independent films in Beijing building an audience was hard, and holding on to the audience was even harder, especially in the face of the need to constantly be changing screening locations. The audience at underground film screenings in Beijing go through the trouble of locating the event often without it being widely publicly announced, endure challenging screening circumstances, and engage during the Q&A. One organiser would always say before the screenings, “You don’t need your phone to watch the movie.” I believe that by saying so he intended to encourage the audience to focus and be actively involved in the screening process. At the same time, for those attendants who are not active in independent filmmaking themselves, the event is often just something to do. For many of the audience members I spoke with, it was their first time attending such an event, and more often than not I would not see them at a screening again.

In sum, I found that the audience attending underground screenings in Beijing is relatively small, and consists primarily of students, aspiring filmmakers, and members of the independent film scene. Whilst over time a venue could increase in popularity growing and holding on to an audience is extremely hard, limiting the reach that these events have.
Conclusion

This chapter has conceptualised underground screening practices in Beijing as creating transient alternative public spaces in order to answer several of the questions posed in the introduction to this study with regard to understanding independent Chinese cinema as a form of parrhesia. These questions were: *What kinds of practical strategies are employed to speak truth through film? What are the sites where independent Chinese cinema is shown and discussed? Who is the audience? What strategies are employed to deal with the risks involved in addressing power?*

In this chapter I have offered a detailed account of screening practices in Beijing and shown that screening organisers and filmmakers often have an agenda to create a space for critical, counter-hegemonic debate through screening unapproved films. I argued that creating this space is an integral part of understanding independent Chinese film as a form of parrhesia. However, this agenda is hardly ever realised in a durable manner, mainly due to the socio-political and economic context.

By focusing on the physical sites, contents and contexts, and publicness through which this alternative public space comes into being, I have highlighted several problems that Beijing independent screening culture as an alternative public space faces. These include the inability for the phenomenon to ground itself in set locations; the active political repression that any growth of activities risks; the complicated relationship with contemporary channels of mass communication (in the form of the internet and WeChat); issues concerning reaching, engaging with, and holding on to audiences from outside of the filmmaking community; and the hierarchical nature of the Q&A sessions, which impedes the development of a two-way conversation about the films.

Nevertheless, I maintain that independent film screenings in Beijing constitute a temporary alternative public space. In spite of all the drawbacks and complications, as well as their temporary nature, the screenings do form a public outlet for counter hegemonic views and create an opportunity to actively engage with these views. As such, they can be viewed as constituting a unique space where parrhesia is practiced, albeit in a limited manner.

Whilst screening independent cinema in China is a marginal activity with very specific limitations and restrictions, outside of China it finds a larger audience
and is screened in a very different context. It is the dissemination of independent Chinese cinema through film festivals outside of China that the next chapter focuses on.
4. A Glimpse into the Real China: Competing Visions of China at Film Festivals

See the world through Chinese eyes!
(8e Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France programme booklet 2018)

Introduction

In light of the broader aim of this study, which views independent cinema as a form of parrhesia, understood as speaking truth to power (Foucault 2001), this final chapter turns to the presentation of Chinese cinema outside of China. It will do so with an emphasis on the dissemination of Chinese independent cinema through film festivals. The chapter focuses on film festivals, because an independent Chinese film being screened at a festival can be seen as an instance of parrhesia, through which a particular discourse is validated, publicly spoken, and given an audience. Film festivals outside China constitute spaces where conflicting versions of China meet and merge, and are re-contextualized and translated. In addition, such film festivals have provided consistent spaces of exhibition and distribution for independent Chinese films. International festival funds are a steady source of funding for independent Chinese filmmakers, making film festivals an integral part of independent Chinese cinema as a cultural formation.

The effect of being selected for and winning prizes at film festivals reaches further than the locales where the festivals take place, as festivals are also followed from afar by Chinese audiences, through the sharing of reports from specialised WeChat accounts, as well as the Chinese authorities. An award-winning independent filmmaker gains credibility amongst peers. As a result, the films of these filmmakers find larger audiences at domestic informal screenings. The sensitivities of the Chinese authorities towards foreign film exposition are highlighted in the 2016 Chinese Film Industry Promotion Law, which states that Chinese films screened abroad must also pass through the state censorship system and obtain a screening permit. If they fail to comply, filmmakers and producers face a five-year working ban and a 5,000 RMB fine (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China 2016).
Bans on filmmakers dating from before this law are equally telling. The practice of preventing filmmakers from working after they had their films screened abroad dates back to the banning of the work of a group of filmmakers including Ning Dai, Wu Wenguang, Zhang Yuan, Tian Zhuangzhuang, He Jianjun, and Wang Xiaoshuai in 1994 (Cheshire 1994). Later, filmmaker Lou Ye faced a two-year ban in 2000 and a five-year ban in 2006. More recently, the forced withdrawal of the film *Have A Nice Day* (2017, Liu Jian) from the 2017 Annecy International Animated Film Festival in France underlines the continuing sensitivity of the Chinese state to unsanctioned Chinese films being screened abroad.\(^75\)

Although these examples show the sensitivities of the authorities to films screened abroad, direct intervention is rare. As also discussed in Chapter 1, Eddie Bertozzi (2016) writes how in the early days of independent Chinese cinema the state actively attempted to stop independent films being produced and shown abroad with bans on filmmakers. This tactic, however, backfired, neither preventing films from being made, nor from being shown, whilst only generating more attention for the banned filmmakers. Later, Bertozzi (2016) writes, the policy seems to have moved towards ignoring independent films and filmmakers. In the past ten years, active intervention seems to have returned, but in a seemingly random and limited fashion; with the exception of some isolated cases, like those at the Annecy International Animated Film Festival and the Melbourne International Film Festival,\(^76\) direct interference is not very common.\(^77\)

\(^{75}\) It should be noted that the last-minute withdrawal of films from international film festivals is rare; *Have A Nice Day* (2017, Liu Jian) was screened extensively abroad both prior to and after being withdrawn from Annecy. The film also received cinematic distribution in the Netherlands.

\(^{76}\) In 2009, Jia Zhangke, Zhao Liang, and Tang Xiaobai withdrew their entries to the Melbourne International Film Festival because Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer was partaking. A video of Ai Weiwei questioning Zhao Liang about the incident was published on the *New York Times* (2010) website. In both the Melbourne and the Annecy case, the festival organisation stated that before the films were withdrawn upon request from the filmmakers/producers, they had been asked by official parties to take the films off the programme, which they refused to do (Child 2009). It is not possible to find out how often this kind of pressure is exerted and how successful it is, given that these two cases led to more publicity for the films than had initially been the case. For a short interview about this with the Melbourne festival director see Metherell (2009), and for details on the Annecy incident see Dreyfus (2017).

\(^{77}\) Another type of intervention about which I was told in several personal conversations with filmmakers, is that filmmakers traveling to high profile events occasionally receive phone calls or visits from officials kindly requesting them to watch their words whilst abroad, but again, this seems to be an exception, rather than the rule.
In the context of this study of independent Chinese films as instances of parrhesia, the visibility of the films, being publicly advertised on the film festival programme, and being recognised by the international film world, as well as by extension being taken note of by a Chinese government concerned with its image, are as important as festival attendants actually seeing the film. From personal observations at a wide range of events, the attendants at such events mostly include locals curious about China, students, and, as with the underground Beijing screenings, slightly divergent Chinese youth\(^78\) (de Kloet and Fung 2017: 55), who are often studying abroad.

With this in mind, the present chapter asks what kinds of discourses about and from China are presented at film festivals outside of China, and assesses the extent to which these discourses are validated as truthful representations. The main questions guiding this chapter are: *Who is given a voice, under what pretexts and conditions, and who are the truths that are being spoken directed towards? About what topics is it important to speak the truth? What strategies are employed to speak truth through film? What are the sites where independent Chinese cinema is shown and discussed?*

In order to address these questions this chapter analyses three modes through which Chinese films are presented outside China: an anti-state mode, where the films screened are presented as uncovering a truth that counters official Chinese state narratives; a popular mode, where popular cinema is presented as offering insights into China; and finally an international mode, where Chinese cinema is presented in conjunction with films from across the globe as presenting a reality that is universal as well as culturally specific and inherently complex.

For each of these modes I analyse how the films shown are framed, their content, and the manner in which they speak truth to power. In discussing these three modes of screening Chinese films abroad, I move beyond the independent cinema that has been the focus of this study so far. This broadening of my scope is necessary in order to understand the discursive structures in which independent cinema is shown and discussed.

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\(^{78}\) As discussed in the previous chapter, slightly divergent Chinese youth is understood as “the larger and less outspoken cohort of youngsters who are busy producing, distributing, negotiating, switching back and forth, locating and dislocating the dominant culture in specific cultural realms, occasionally acquiring cultural resources, and creating a new sense of space at certain historical points of time” (de Kloet and Fung 2017: 55).
films operate in conjunction with commercial films and art films to create supposedly truthful representations of China.

There is a significant body of academic writing available on the study of film festivals, within which Marijke de Valck’s *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (2007) can be seen as a pathbreaker. In this monograph de Valck examines the mechanisms, like programming and prizes, and the role of various audiences, as well as the dogmas, like auteur theory, that underlie film festivals as media events. She also shows how these events are intertwined with national agendas and city marketing. In *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*, Cindy Wong (2011) builds on de Valck’s research by broadening the scope of inquiry to include sites outside of Europe, like the Hong Kong Film Festival, as well as linking the film festival to the notion of the public sphere.

Within film festival research the study of China is a rapidly expanding subfield, with a large amount of scholarship collected in the edited volume *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation* (Berry and Robinson 2017). Most work in this particular field has focused on film festivals within China. For example, Sabrina Qiong Yu and Lydia Dan Wu (2017) discuss how independent film festivals in China operate as cultural institutions “that facilitate the discovery of new film talents as well as fostering a critical environment for contemporary Chinese cinema” (Yu and Wu 2017: 171). Other research focuses on specific independent festivals; for example, in discussing the Beijing Independent Film Festival, Flora Lichaa (2017) traces how the festival started out adopting non-profit film festival model, and how along with changes in its organisation and in the authorities’ attitude towards the event it shifted into its own unique festival form. Other studies focus on state approved film festivals like the Shanghai International Film Festival (Berry 2017, Ma 2011), the Beijing International Film Festival (Pollachi 2017), and the Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival (Yu 2014).

Besides this research on festivals in China, a limited amount of scholarship has focussed on Chinese cinema outside of China. Luke Robinson (2017a) writes on the stakeholders and background of the Chinese Visual Festival and the London Taiwan Cinefest, and on how these festivals take shape through the work of so-called sole traders, individuals who act as programmers/gatekeepers. In another article Robinson (2017b) shows how Chinese soft power is exerted through non-state actors; in particular, he analyses the Chinese Visual Festival and Filming East
Festival in London. The soft power exerted through these events is shaped as the objectives of the organisers lead to the programming of Chinese blockbusters.

In order to understand the breadth of the Chinese films shown at international film festivals, Nikki J. Y. Lee and Julian Stringer (2012) list all Chinese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong films that were in competition at the Cannes, Berlin, Tokyo, Rotterdam, Venice and Pusan film festivals between 1985 and 2010. They conclude that the list is diverse and long, and that Chinese cinema is therefore a full-fledged participant in the film festival circuit. What Lee and Stringer do not discuss, however, is that in order to partake in the competition of all the festivals listed, which is usually limited to a dozen or so films, the films must be premiers. This ensures that competition line-ups are de facto diverse, because the same movie cannot be in the competition at two different festivals. Even though their methodology is suitable for showing the breadth of films screened, Lee and Stringer’s research does not show if particular movies were extremely popular out of competition on the festival circuit, which is where most films at festivals are screened. Their methodology also excludes films that premiered somewhere without being in competition, and subsequently never were in competition at a major festival, yet still could have had a relatively successful subsequent festival run.

Whereas the work of Robinson (2017a, 2017b) and Lee and Stringer (2012) offers valuable insights into how Chinese cinema operates abroad, they leave aside the question of the various ways in which China is presented. Dina Iordanova (2017), however, takes a similar approach to the one I will take in this chapter. In addition to analysing who the stakeholders in the events are, she also exposes the discourses presented around three types of festivals, two of which are similar to the anti-state mode (she calls this the corrective festival) and the popular mode (which shows overlap with her cultural diplomacy mode) that will be discussed in detail in this chapter. The third type she distinguishes, the business card exchange festival, a predominantly industry driven event where commercial production companies and Chinese officials network, is not discussed here. At present such business centred events are concentrated in China with the Beijing and Shanghai film festivals, which do not partake in projecting an image of China through cinematic works abroad. Outside China the most prominent festival of this type is the Chinese American Film.
Festival in Los Angeles, which for practical purposes could not be included within the scope of this study.

An additional mode of presentation that is included in my analysis, and is relatively understudied in the context of representations of China, is that of general international film festivals. These are festivals that programme a wide range of films from across the globe, like the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale), the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), etc. That they have not been studied much in relation to the image of China they project is surprising, because these festivals draw the biggest crowds, garner the most press coverage, are crucial for securing funding and distribution of films, and hand out prestigious awards.

A reason for the lack of study could be that these festivals do not often formulate an explicit agenda with regard to representing China. Instead, the films shown are related to a general position, usually with progressive liberal cosmopolitan leanings, and related to the specific flavour of the film festivals in which they are shown. They are presented as belonging to the same field as hundreds of other films from across the world, such as creative documentary at the IDFA or avant-garde cinema at the IFFR. This does not mean, however, that these festivals create a neutral image of China, prompting the question of what kind of China fits within their overarching agendas.

In several other regional contexts representation at international film festivals has been analysed in detail. The conclusions of these studies slightly differ. For example, Lindiwe Dovey (2015) scrutinises how the African continent was naively presented by a special programme at the 2010 edition of IFFR. Although she writes that the films being screened, in a positive way, addressed a general underrepresentation of African film culture in the film festival circuit, she also points out many problematic issues with regard to how introductions and Q&A’s reinforced harmful stereotyping about the continent.

Through an in-depth analysis of two Paraguayan films that were successful on the film festival circuit, Constanza Burucúa (2018) seeks to understand what kind of Paraguay resonates with the international film world. She concludes that “the images coming out of Paraguay and that circulate so effectively in the film festival circuit are far from uniform or standardized” (Burucúa 2018: 260). In her
work on Latin American cinema and the IFFR’s Hubert Bals Fund, Miriam Ross writes that:

more often than not, the national framework that is made available on screen adheres to what international film festival audiences have come to expect of developing-world modes of being: conditions of poverty are assumed and social structures built upon limited resources are anticipated.” (Ross 2011: 263)

Finally, Bill Nichols relates his introduction to Iranian cinema through the film festival circuit to a more general desire on the part of the film festival goer for “an encounter with the unfamiliar, the experience of something strange, the discovery of new voices and visions”, but one that proceeds in a familiar way. Nichols writes that:

Recovering the strange as familiar takes two forms: first, acknowledgment of an international film style (formal innovation; psychologically complex, ambiguous, poetic, allegorical, or restrained characterizations; rejection of Hollywood norms for the representation of time and space; lack of clear resolution or narrative closure; and so on), and second, the retrieval of insights or lessons about a different culture (often recuperated yet further by the simultaneous discovery of an underlying, cross cultural humanity). (Nichols 1994: 18)

The four studies cited here highlight the lack of a uniform mode of representing, and interpreting, non-western regions at film festivals. For Dovey (2015) the films themselves represented African film culture well but the surrounding information reinforces stereotypes, Ross (2011) sees the films reinforcing stereotypes, Nichols (1994) writes that the content opens up new horizons whilst the films are stylistically recognisable, and Burucúa (2018) sees broad diversity.

My analysis shows that all these variations also exist in the presentation of Chinese cinema at international film festivals. I argue that this is possible because the presentation of China is often framed and programmed from a perspective that emphasizes complexity, which creates space for both stereotypical and unexpected encounters with other cultures. Besides emphasising complexity, the festivals I looked at are characterised by a cosmopolitan outlook, which can be understood as an attempt to unite universality and difference into a globe spanning morality (e.g.
Appiah 2006, Parry 2014). It is this positioning that allows for seemingly contradictory understandings of how the other should be represented to coexist.

This chapter is organised as follows: first, I analyse, in-depth, the anti-state mode of presentation, which finds expression in a special selection within a more general film festival, or in an entire event devoted to predominantly independent Chinese films. The anti-state mode is usually framed as critically addressing Chinese political oppression, lack of creative freedom and other injustices in Chinese society. In this mode, a specific position and agenda towards Chinese cinema and China is formulated, and films and side events are programmed according to this agenda. Second, I discuss presentations of popular Chinese films as providing insight into the “real” China. I investigate two events organised to showcase Chinese popular cinema. The events studied are organised by a Confucius Institute and a Chinese Cultural Centre operating on the basis of promoting state sanctioned Chinese culture globally. Film events, ranging from single screenings to week-long festivals, are a frequently used tool for promoting this agenda. Finally, I analyse the presentation of the Chinese selection at more general international film festivals.

I argue that although these three different modes of exhibition have their own specific way of representing China, as well as a preference for particular filmic content, there is nevertheless a certain overlap in the discourses through which they present Chinese films. Across the three modes, for example, the films are often labelled as showing the “real” China, which a foreign audience would otherwise not have access to, and the programme claims to comprise the best and most representative films of their kind. At the same time, the three modes exhibit different understandings of how this “real” China is best represented, variously promoting popular approaches, artistic endeavours, or grassroots political filmmaking.

Methodologically this analysis predominantly relies on a discourse analysis of film festival promotional materials and films screened at the events discussed. In addition to these materials it is also informed by my own experiences as a researcher attending films and side events at IDFA 2015-2017, IFFR 2015, 2017, 2018, FilmFest Hamburg 2015, CinemAsia 2015-2018, World Cinema Amsterdam 2018, and five one-off special screenings of Chinese films in Amsterdam, Leiden and
Finally, my analysis is informed by formal interviews and informal conversations with festival visitors, filmmakers, producers, and festival staff at the aforementioned events.

The Anti-State Mode

[We] are showing the newest works from Chinese filmmakers who shoot their films undeterred by party rules, a “cinema from below” made with simple means: raw, cheeky and sometimes highly artistic.\(^79\)


In August 2014 the eleventh Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) held in Songzhuang was forcefully shut down. Whilst men claiming to be local villagers prevented visitors from accessing the venue, uniformed police raided the venue, arrested the organisers, and confiscated the film library held at the location.\(^81\) The closure of the BIFF was widely covered in American and European news outlets (e.g. BBC News 2014, Kaiman 2014, Holcomb-Holland 2014) and spawned a special festival, Cinema on the Edge, in New York followed by a tour through twelve cities in the US, Canada and Europe. The festival screened some of the films planned for the 2014 BIFF, as well as films from previous editions. Independently from Cinema on the Edge, FilmFest Hamburg also organised a special BIFF section titled Independent Cinema from China (Unabhängiges Kino aus China), screening films that had been selected for the 2014 BIFF as part of their 2015 festival.

\(^79\) The five screenings included that of Electrifying China (2016, Ward Lennaerts) at the Amsterdam Dance Event 2016, with an introduction from the filmmakers; South to North (2014, Antoine Boutet), followed by a panel discussion with the filmmaker and academics at Let’s Talk About Water Amsterdam 2017; I am Not Madame Bovary (2016, Feng Xiaogang), and Someone to Talk To (2016, Liu Yulin), organised by the Leiden International Film Festival and Confucius Institute Leiden as part of the Leiden Asia Year, followed by a Q&A with author Liu Zhenyun and filmmaker Liu Yulin; and China's van Goghs (2016, Yu Haibo and Kiki Tianqi Yu) as part of We <3 Film in cinema “T” Hooft in Utrecht, with an introduction by myself.

\(^80\) ... zeigen neueste Werke von chinesischen Filmemacherinnen und -machern, die unbeirrt von den Vorschriften der Partei ihre Filme drehen: ein mit einfachen Mitteln gemachtes, rohes, freches und zum Teil mit hohem künstlerischem Anspruch realisiertes «Kino von unten».

\(^81\) Footage of the closure was used by Wang Wo to make the film A Filmless Festival (2015, Wang Wo).
These events spawned by the closing of the BIFF are part of recurring festivals and special programme sections within festivals featuring independent Chinese films. With titles like *Hidden Histories, Reel China*, and *Independent Visions* they are usually devoted specifically to independent Chinese cinema, often with an emphasis on documentary, and they are framed in terms of presenting otherwise censored aspects of China. Iordanova (2017) has termed this type of film presentation the *corrective festival* because it seeks to correct the supposedly skewed discourses related to China’s economic miracle. She writes:

> The narrative that underwrites this type of festival is that China is a duplicitous force that only appears to be opening up but in fact clings to severe censorship and human rights violations. As a result, the ‘hidden story’ must be brought to light through showcasing corrective narratives found in the respective films. (Iordanova 2017: 221-222)

Iordanova discusses three festivals of the corrective type: *Reel China* 2014 held at New York University, *Chinese Realities/Documentary Visions* at the MoMA in 2013 also in New York, and *Forbidden No More: The New Ethnographic Film Festival* at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, in 2012. For these festivals she describes the key stakeholders as “intellectuals from academia, indie filmmaking, critics, and the liberal professions” (ibid.: 221). She also discusses the dominant discourses used in relation to the featured films as being truthful, real, complex, unveiled, and uncensored personal expression, and further names some of the main directors on which these events rely: Wang Bing, Wu Wenguang, Pema Tseden, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Cui Zi’en. Finally, she lists the themes most often featured, including corruption, painful histories, the deconstruction of the communist project, and abandoned parts of China (Iordanova 2017: 226-229).

Iordanova’s corrective festival is very similar to what I call the anti-state mode of presenting Chinese films. I prefer the term ‘anti-state’ because, as is discussed in this chapter, all three modes of screening Chinese films distinguished in this chapter rely on the notion that there is a skewed image of China that needs correcting. To avoid confusion, I call this mode of presenting Chinese films anti-state because what sets it apart is that it is framed as actively opposing aspects of the Chinese state.

There are various types of events that could be included in the anti-state mode of representation. First, there is the standalone festival/event, organised
either through universities, like Reel China at NYU and Forbidden No More at Haverford College; by arts institutes, for example Chinese Realities at MoMA and Turn it On China at the Guggenheim; or by film institutes like FilmPodium Zurich, which organised China Independent in 2013 and 2017. Besides characterising standalone events, the anti-state mode is also sometimes incorporated into general festivals, as was the case with Hidden Histories at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2012, and Independent Cinema from China at FilmFest Hamburg 2015. In the following I build upon and offer alternatives to Iordanova’s (2017) analysis by taking a more detailed look at the discourses and content of three of these events: Turn it On: China on Film, Independent Cinema from China, and Hidden Histories.

**Difficult to accept, hard to watch - Turn it On: China on Film 2000-2017**

A very pronounced example of the anti-state mode can be found in Turn it On: China on Film 2000-2017 held at the Guggenheim, New York, from October to December 2017 and rerun at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in January 2019. The text introducing the event series on the Guggenheim’s website states:

> The works in this series offer urgent and often raw insight into issues of personal struggle and social justice existing in China today. Selected from hundreds of documentaries made in China over the past two decades, many of the films in “Turn It On” are made by writers and artists with little to no cinematography training, who have been able to take advantage of the proliferation of digital video technology to tell stories about contemporary China even as they face severe challenges in producing and distributing their work. Despite the dramatic economic and societal changes in recent years, the state maintains control over all media, including films, and recent documentaries reflecting social conditions in China are often censored. “The selection of documentary films reflects this harsh reality, which at times is difficult to accept, and even harder to watch,” [co-curator] Ai Weiwei remarks. (Guggenheim 2017)

This quote from the introductory text to the film series presents the image of censored amateur filmmakers bravely combating the image projected by Chinese state media by presenting “urgent and raw insights.” There is an emphasis on the idea that the filmmakers featured are untrained, and even though many of the filmmakers featured on the programme have actually gone through formal training
– Zhang Zanbo, Huang Wenhai, and Ai Weiwei, for example, all attended the prestigious Beijing Film Academy – emphasising the amateur aspect adds to the supposed rawness of the films and implies that their filmic language is sincere, rather than the result of training. The text presents a binary opposition between the authentic filmmakers featured on the programme and inauthentic professional filmmakers making films for the state controlled Chinese media. Furthermore, the text creates an image of China as riddled with social injustice. This is presented as a reality which is difficult to accept and watch, as well as being prevented from being revealed by the state, which controls the media, suppresses independent filmmakers and shows the country’s economic development in a singularly positive light.

In *Turn it On* the independent films screened are thus explicitly framed as speaking truth to power. The programme description of its rerun at SFMOMA builds on the Guggenheim description and explicitly brings to the fore the risks involved in this activity:

China has experienced dramatic change in recent years due to the state capitalist system, which has allowed for rapid socioeconomic improvements. However, the long history of the repression of personal freedoms and freedom of expression in China under authoritarian rule has remained largely unchanged. Today the country is still a tightly managed society that retains old communist ideologies ... Many documentary filmmakers in China face severe challenges – even life-threatening dangers – while producing their work. Recent documentaries reflecting the true conditions in China face censorship, and many filmmakers are accused of subverting state power. (SFMOMA 2019)

In several ways the programme reflects the ideas voiced in the introductory texts. It exclusively features documentaries, investing the narratives and images presented with a truth claim. The films screened were some of the most contentious produced in China over the preceding years and featured all the themes listed by Iordanova (2017): systemic corruption appeared in, for example, *Petition* (2009, Zhao Liang), which follows a group of petitioners living in a makeshift village in Beijing, while painful histories were featured in *Karamay* (2010, Xu Xin), which chronicles a tragic fire in which 323 people, mostly children, died, as well as in *In Search of Lin Zhao’s Soul* (2004, Hu Jie), which is about a student who wrote poems from her cell after
being imprisoned during Mao Zedong’s Anti-Rightist Movement, until she was executed in 1968.

The relatively long running time of some of the films programmed for *Turn it On* accords with another observation of Iordanova’s (2017) about the category of corrective festivals. Seven of the twenty films are over three hours long, with *Jiabiangou Elegy: Life and Death of the Rightists* (2017, Ai Xiaoming) topping the list, clocking in at almost seven hours. The long duration of the films reinforces the notion that the films have not been censored and that the director took complete freedom to show whatever he or she wanted to without being inhibited in any way. Many of the films also have a low budget DV aesthetic, including handheld camera work, and suboptimal picture and sound quality, which, combined with the length, adds to the “hard to watch and difficult to accept” aspect of the programme.

When it comes to the specific directors featured at the festival, it is noticeable that none of the regularly featured directors identified by Iordanova (Wang Bing, Wu Wenguang, Pema Tseden, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Cui Zi’en) are present in this specific programme. As a matter of fact, they do not appear in any of the anti-state events studied in this chapter. As noted by Iordanova (2017), these types of festivals can serve as a springboard for a career in established art film circles; consequently, Wang Bing, Pema Tseden, and Wang Xiaoshuai are at present far more dominant within large international film festivals than in anti-state events. Filmmakers who do recur in the events studied include Ai Weiwei, Zhang Zanbo, Huang Wenhai, and Ji Dan, many of which embrace a more activist mode of filmmaking in comparison to the directors listed by Iordanova.

Looking closely at the programme for *Turn it On*, there is one film that deviates from the discourse used to present the events. *Plastic China* (2016, Wang Jiuliang) focuses on a small-scale plastic recycling business that mainly recycles imported plastic waste, and on the families that work there. The problems of the plastic recycling industry in China are recognised by the government and led to a ban on importing plastic for recycling in early 2018. *Plastic China* can thus be said to align with the state’s agenda and to offer an explanation to foreign audiences as to why the ban was necessary. Whilst *Plastic China* is an independent film, made outside of state and commercial channels, and reflects critically on several aspects of Chinese society, such as class differences and the plight of children in poor families, the strong anti-state framing of the event does not apply to *Plastic China*’s
main theme, showing that the discourse used to present a particular film festival does not have to completely align with all of its content.

In conclusion, Turn it On is explicitly framed as featuring parrhesia, claiming to present, in the films it screens, a frank truth captured through the risky undertakings of untrained filmmakers. In its content it predominantly relies on films with critical themes and raw aesthetics. However, it is worth noting that the framing of the event is not always fully in line with what is presented, which includes the work of trained filmmakers and not-so-contentious films that did not involve great risks for the filmmakers. This slight discord shows that the parrhesia this anti-state mode engages in is possibly overstated and derives more from the way the event as whole is presented than from the actual films shown.

Cracks in the Façade: Independent Cinema from China - FilmFest Hamburg 2015

As mentioned earlier, the closing of the Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) in 2014 generated international attention for independent Chinese cinema and spawned several events in its wake.\textsuperscript{82} One of these events, entitled Independent Cinema from China (Unabhängiges Kino aus China), took place at the 2015 edition of FilmFest Hamburg.

Filmfest Hamburg is a local audience-centred festival that does not garner much publicity outside of Germany; especially when compared to a renowned institute like the Guggenheim, its reach is limited. Compared to festivals like IDFA and IFFR the number of professionals (press, producers, filmmakers, and others) visiting the festival is also small. Yet within Hamburg it is one of the biggest cultural events of the year and many of the screenings I attended were sold out. The audience for the Chinese films included a large number of Chinese students studying abroad and local China Studies students,\textsuperscript{83} who are a returning group at all types of screenings of Chinese films, but seemed to be especially well represented at the screenings in Hamburg. Even though FilmFest Hamburg does not have an

\textsuperscript{82} Even though an analysis of the BIFF is not within the scope of this study, it is worth noting that it does not have an anti-state framing.

\textsuperscript{83} The University of Hamburg has a China Studies department, of which several students were helping interpreting the Q&As; many of their fellow students also attended parts of the Independent Cinema from China programme.
equally large reach as screenings at well-known institutes and festivals, it does on a localised scale contribute to discourses about China, also in relation to audiences who engage with the Chinese state beyond watching the films at the festival: educated Chinese citizens and foreigners who might move into a China-related career. In this manner FilmFest Hamburg predominantly engages in shaping local discourses about China.

In spite of its seemingly limited reach, the 2015 side programme did garner the attention of the Chinese authorities. In the run up to the festival the programming team was put in touch with the BIFF organisation and selected some films from the planned BIFF programme for their festival as a special section (in the anti-state mode) within the general festival. Initially this side programme was advertised as being a selection co-organised by and including films from the shut-down Beijing Independent Film Festival. However, several weeks before FilmFest Hamburg began, all mention of the Beijing Independent Film Festival was dropped from its communications and its Chinese organisers said they would not be coming. This disassociation between the two events happened relatively quietly\(^8\) at the request of the Beijing Independent Film Festival organisers, with the explanation that this way the participating Chinese filmmakers would not have trouble attending the festival (Interview with Jens Geiger 2015).

In spite of the moderate direct impact of the Independent Cinema from China programme at FilmFest Hamburg, it appears that the strong parrhesiastic discourses used in it and its association with the BIFF did draw attention from the Chinese authorities and prompted them to pressure the organisers of the BIFF to pull out of the event. This pressure caused the programme’s anti-state message to be disconnected from a recent, well-publicised case of heavy-handed censorship that was not looked upon favourably in the foreign public eye. The alteration of the programme implies pressure from the Chinese state on the Chinese side of the organisation, highlighting that even a German film festival with a relatively limited reach is a podium of which the Chinese authorities take note, and that independent Chinese cinema as parrhesia is not bound by localities.

In an essay in the programme booklet entitled “Cracks in the Façade” (Risse in der Fassade) the programme is framed as follows:

\(^8\)The change in the programme was published on the Variety website (Meza 2015), but did not attract further attention, as the pulling of the films would have probably done.
Filmfest Hamburg provides a view of the Middle Kingdom which has no place in the official image and image commonly presented abroad of the successful progressive and radiant community ... The works are characterized by a keen eye for the realities of life in China which cannot be reconciled with the image of a harmoniously progressing nation ... These young film auteurs look behind the smooth facades and they push forth truer feelings than those found in glossy state productions, and seek to banish their pain and sorrow artistically.\textsuperscript{85} (Geiger 2015: 27)

The text clearly voices the idea that there is a superficial image of China produced by the state that needs correcting and that this image is countered by the “young film auteurs” featured. In several ways it is similar to other texts announcing anti-state events, with references to China’s economic development, the singularly positive presentation of China in mainstream Chinese media, state censorship, and enterprising individual filmmakers who show the reality behind the “smooth façades.” This text deviates from, for example, the \textit{Turn it On} introduction, in that, rather than presenting the filmmakers as amateurs, they are called “film auteurs”, who, later in the essay, are referred to as “critical and creative voices” (emphasis added). This difference is interesting and can be explained by the fact that FilmFest Hamburg, of which the \textit{Independent Cinema from China} programme was part, is a more general film festival. Some of its overarching principles appear to have been combined with the anti-state mode of presenting Chinese film; while employing the overarching narrative of the anti-state mode, the framing of the programme also features references to dominant international film festival discourses of auteurship and the discovery of young talent, mixing the two modes.\textsuperscript{86}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{85} "Eröffnung Filmfest Hamburg einen Blick auf Welten im Reich der Mitte, die im offiziellen und auch im Ausland gängigen Bild von der aufstrebenden und strahlenden Erfolgsgemeinschaft keinen Platz haben ... Arbeiten sind gekennzeichnet durch einen scharfen Blick auf chinesischen Lebenswirklichkeiten, die nicht so recht mit dem Bild der harmonisch voranschreitende Nation in Einklang zu bringen sind. Diese jungen chinesischen Autorenfilmer ... blicken hinter die glatten Fassaden des schönen Scheins, sie dringen vor zu wahrhaftigen Gefühlen als denjenigen, die sich in staatlich geförderten Hochglanzproduktionen finden, sie bilden eine rau Welt ab und versuchen deren Schmerz und Tristesse künstlerisch zu bannen.
\item\textsuperscript{86} Discovering new talent is an integral part of international film festival discourses; see for example de Valck (2014: 55) and Wong (2011: 7-8).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
A closer examination of the eleven Chinese films on the *Independent Cinema from China* programme at FilmFest Hamburg reveals that they differ from what is usually on display at anti-state events. Where many anti-state events have a heavy documentary emphasis, the FilmFest programme balanced documentaries with experimental films, docufiction, and narrative features, all with mixed aesthetic approaches. To the best of my knowledge, for eight of these eleven films, the screening at Hamburg has been the only public screening outside of China. The programme featured only one of the more routinely shown films at anti-state events, *Yumen* (2013, various directors). It also included several other films with a strong anti-state discourse, like *The Missing* (2015, Han Tao), which, as the programme put it, features “a kaleidoscope of dissidents” (FilmFest Hamburg Programmheft 2015: 67). And yet in many ways the programme was diverse, moving beyond the usual themes with films such as *From Border to Border* (2013, Chung Shefong) about “Chinese diaspora in India” (ibid.: 65), *A Moment in Love* (2014, Guo Xiaodong)—“a study of social conventions, individual expectations and love itself” (ibid.: 68), *Bike and Old Electric Piano* (2013, Shao Pan) about “loneliness and friendship” (ibid.: 65), and finally *The Eight Trigrams (Gossip)* (2015, Huang Xiang) about “the relationship between illusion and reality” (ibid.: 65). With many of the films presented as addressing themes pertaining to the human condition in a very general sense, these are also themes through which dominant discourses can be challenged and parrhesia can be enacted. Many of the screened films do move outside mainstream Chinese discourses in their representations of these themes.

This presentation, where some general film festival discourses and themes blend with the anti-state mode of presentation and vice versa, complicates the understanding of how independent Chinese cinema operates within different discourses and of which themes it is considered to be important to speak truth to power about. It shows that cause for direct intervention by the Chinese state, at the BIFF as well as at FilmFest Hamburg, is not always limited to a set of predefined topics, like human rights and repressed histories, but can include universal issues, like the quest to understand love and identity. It also shows that the general film festival discourse about authorship and creativity can be combined with the anti-state mode, and that subtle differences in framing exist within the anti-state mode. The choice to screen films otherwise not shown at other events, moreover, exemplifies how the status of a parrhesiastes can be provided to filmmakers and
films that are outside of an often seemingly fixed anti-state repertoire of filmmakers and films, and that the tendency to rely on a handful of artists to speak the truth about China is perhaps not as strong as it might appear at first glance.

*Exposing Perverse Cogs in the Power Machine: Hidden Histories - IFFR 2012*

The final anti-state event analysed in this section is also a subsection within a larger film festival. The *Hidden Histories* section, part of the 2012 International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), was a so-called *Signals* section dedicated to independent Chinese documentary and the documentary works of Ai Weiwei in particular. *Hidden Histories* featured thirteen feature length films, of which one was fictional and twelve documentary, five films by Ai Weiwei, as well as three short films, and a Chinese style informal screening room called the Ai Weiwei Café. This café was set up to mirror the circumstances of underground film screenings described in the previous chapter. Expositions of video art by Ai Weiwei were also included in the programme. Taking a closer look at the programme of *Hidden Histories*, it is rather similar to that of *Turn it On China* in including the previously mentioned filmmakers Ai Weiwei, Zhang Zanbo and Ji Dan. As with *Turn it On China*, moreover, the films feature similar topics and are characterised by their raw aesthetic and long duration.

The IFFR programme catalogue contains a four-page essay introducing *Hidden Histories* written by the two IFFR programmers organizing the section. The length of the essay allows it to address many issues and below I focus on one part where the discourses used by independent filmmakers as discussed in the first chapter are reiterated, where some strong anti-state discourses are employed, and where the text becomes slightly tangled up as it combines the anti-state discourse with a more detailed picture of independent cinema in China.

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87 The *Signals* programme returns each year and focuses on specific themes.
88 It is worth noting that the films *Old Dog* (2012, Pema Tseden) and *11 Flowers* (2012, Wang Xiaoshuai) were featured at the IFFR 2012, but outside of the *Hidden Histories* programme, exemplifying my earlier statement that Pema Tseden and Wang Xiaoshuai are at present far more dominant in large international film festivals than in anti-state events. Here, they were specifically not part of the anti-state section, but of the general recurring *Spectrum* section.
The filmmakers in this programme feel a commitment to the lot of the common man, and the poorest of the poor – people who are usually overlooked, or who don’t want to be seen ... Zhang [Zanbo] happened to meet a former classmate of his, who was prepared to tell his story in front of the camera, allowing Zhang to expose one of the perverse cogs in the power machine. ... Another aspect of these filmmakers’ methods is the length of time they take to record their subjects. Time that proves an effective judge, jury and executioner: the lies inherent in the propaganda of progress are remorselessly exposed by its passing ... These films provide irrefutable proof that the economic growth of today’s China by no means benefits all ... The arrest of Ai Weiwei made a big impression in China, in particular on independent documentary makers, whose work exposes them to similar risks ... Not all independent filmmakers in China have undergone professional film training. Many of the filmmakers included in the Hidden Histories programme are autodidacts. ... Only a few people realise that Ai Weiwei did receive professional film training, at the film academy in Beijing. Nevertheless, his films display few academic trademarks. ... It is remarkable for an artist-filmmaker of his status that his works have hardly been available to the public until now. Opportunities for exhibition in China were minimal, and are now completely non-existent ... The films in this programme cannot be seen in the cinemas in China. This is not always the fault of the censors. Some of the films can be shown without problems in museums and at festivals. Sometimes, these festivals encounter difficulties, and may even have to go underground. But not always. Whatever the case, these films are shown in China – often in small, at times almost living-room settings. (Tamsma and Zuilhof 2012: 264-267)

At first glance the text displays all the characteristics of the anti-state framing, with phrases like “the lies inherent in the propaganda of progress are remorselessly exposed” as well as references to the questionable results of China’s economic progress, to risk, and to censorship. Through this anti-state discourse in a general sense the event is framed as an instance of parrhesia.

However, in several ways the text moves beyond the main characteristics of the anti-state framing. To start with, the essay strongly resonates with the repertoires used by the filmmakers as discussed in the first chapter of this study, in referring to exposing what is otherwise unseen, “people who are usually overlooked”, as well as coincidence: “Zhang happened to meet ...” Through reiterating these repertoires, the essay displays a closeness to how the filmmakers speak about their own work, which is not predominantly as being anti-state. In
addition, the text exhibits a more detailed knowledge of the circumstances of independent filmmaking in China, mentioning that, as discussed in the previous chapter, independent cinema is actually screened in China, and Ai Weiwei was trained at the film academy.

Combining the anti-state mode with the expression of a closer relationship to and more detailed understanding of independent Chinese cinema creates some tensions and contradictory passages in the text, like the one about the censors. The essay moves from the fairly common discourses of the anti-state mode, referring, for example, to the inability to screen these films in China—“Opportunities for exhibition [of Ai Weiwei’s works] in China were minimal, and are now completely non-existent”—to nuancing this position and stating that at the end of the day the films can find a limited audience in China, and censorship is not always at play.89 What this particular text suggests is that the recurring motif related to the censored and forbidden nature of independent Chinese cinema is almost a prerequisite for texts accompanying the anti-state event, to the extent that it is used even when the organisers seem to understand the subtleties of independent filmmaking in China.

What the essay makes clear once again is that independent Chinese cinema’s status as a form of parrhesia is an integral part of its presentation, and also that independent Chinese cinema is a form of parrhesia in part because of its presentation, while its complexities, as discussed throughout this study, show that there is a lot more to independent Chinese cinema than is captured in this parrhesiastic discourse.

Concluding Remarks on the Anti-State Mode

In this section I have analysed the anti-state mode of presenting Chinese cinema, looking closely at the framing discourses and programmes of three events held between 2012 and 2017. The first event, Turn it On: China on Film 2000-201, clearly displayed the key elements that constitute the anti-state mode of presentation, both in the accompanying texts and in the content of the films programmed. The other

89 As noted in the introduction to this study, many independent filmmakers do not try to obtain a screening permit for their films, and are therefore not directly censored. In addition, as Chapter 3 has also shown, other forms of restraint, like self-censorship, are often also at play in determining what is and what is not screened in China.
two events also each included the main characteristics of the anti-state mode, whilst mixing them with other discourses, in the case of FilmFest Hamburg with a film festival discourse and in the case of Hidden Histories with a discourse resembling that of the Chinese independent filmmakers discussed in Chapter 1 and showing awareness of the complexities of independent Chinese cinema. Both events showed a thematically more diverse programme than Turn it On, in accordance with their less restrictive framing.

In this section I have argued that these deviations within the shared anti-state framework, of which many characteristics were also identified by Iordanaova (2017), reveal that the framing strongly adds to these anti-state screenings as an instance of parrhesia, but also that in this context certain tropes within this framing are predefined and are hard to deviate from. This can lead to contradictory introductory texts and filmic content, and occasionally the anti-state framing restricts parrhesia in a way that actually does not accord with the content of many Chinese independent films, which speak truth but not necessarily or not primarily directly to or about the state.

In the next two sections I explain in more detail on how the two other modes of presenting Chinese cinema abroad, the popular and the international one, directly engage with the key parrhesiastic theme of speaking truth to power and reframe the discourses characterising the anti-state mode.

**The Popular Mode**

> we programmed a selection of the best and highest grossing films from China. (LIFF 2015)

Every year countless events devoted to screening popular Chinese cinema are organised. Regularly these events are co-sponsored by government-backed institutions like Confucius Institutes, Chinese Cultural Centres, or the China Film Administration, and they often operate on the basis of promoting Chinese culture.

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90 Whilst sharing a similar agenda of promoting Chinese culture globally, the main difference between these institutes lies in the fact that Confucius Institutes are attached to and run in cooperation with educational institutes (e.g. universities and colleges), while Chinese Cultural Centres generally do not have any particular local attachment.
globally. In addition, events screening Chinese popular cinema are also sometimes organised independently from any Chinese state organizations, as Luke Robinson (2017b) found to be the case with the Filming East Festival in London; another example is the New York Asian Film Festival, described by Cindy Wong (2017: 323) as a “a fan-based film festival of popular Asian cinema, with a heavy emphasis on kung-fu and action films.”

There are several drivers for screening popular Chinese cinema outside of China, with the cultural diplomacy agenda of state backed institutions discussed by Dina Iordanova (2017). She also discusses the screening of popular Chinese cinema as a pretext for networking and arranging co-production in business card exchange events. Beyond state and business interests, local fans as well as diaspora Chinese are also engaged in screening popular Chinese cinema.

In keeping with the overall aim of this study to uncover how independent Chinese cinema speaks truth to power, this section analyses specific events where the screening of popular Chinese cinema is presented as offering a truthful representation of China. This specific mode of presenting Chinese popular cinema can be found across events organised by different actors and for different purposes. Although it often occurs in events that are organised as a form of cultural diplomacy, I have not found this mode to be particularly characteristic of or exclusive to it. Even though events focusing on popular Chinese cinema do not tend to screen many, if any, independent Chinese films, they compete with independent films in claiming to tell the truth about China and as such warrant attention in this chapter. These events, then, are significant in order to understand the context in which Chinese independent cinema speaks truth to power abroad, interacting with various other types of Chinese cinema employing a similar rhetoric.

**Reel China: Leiden International Film Festival**

Since 2004 Confucius Institutes have been set up across the globe by the Hanban and in cooperation with local educational institutes to promote Chinese language and culture abroad. As part of this agenda Confucius Institutes organise Chinese

91 The *Hanban* is formally known as the Office of Chinese Language Council International (国家汉语国际推广领导小组办公室, *guojia hanyu guoji tuiguang lingdao xiaozu bangongshi*) and is a branch of the Chinese Ministry of Education.
language classes as well as cultural events, which often include film events. The film events organised by Confucius Institutes can be anything from single screenings on a university campus to multi-day festivals across several cinemas and cities featuring dozens of films. These Confucius Institute backed Chinese film events are held regularly across the world, for example, in Lincoln, Nebraska in October 2017; at the University of Queensland, Australia, in September 2018; in Pisa, Italy, annually since 2010; and in Munich since 2013. Usually these events are dedicated to screening popular Chinese cinema and are framed as a form of cultural exchange, as well as an opportunity to learn more about China.

Confucius Institutes also sometimes sponsor screenings of Chinese films at broader film festivals, like the Miami International Film Festival and the Edinburgh International Film Festival. Since 2011 the Confucius Institute in Leiden, The Netherlands, has been sponsoring a selection of three to four films at the Leiden International Film Festival (LIFF) under the title *Reel China*.

Using the same title as the biennial screening of independent Chinese films at New York University that started in 2001, *Reel China* can be viewed as a reaction to the anti-state mode of presentation. As the title suggests, the event is explicitly engaged in a discursive contestation regarding the truth about China. This also becomes clear from the short introductory texts used to announce the programme; for example, the website states: “Huge blockbusters in home country China, but unknown in Europe. Unjustly. LIFF is bringing them to Leiden!” (LIFF n.d.). This snippet evokes the invisibility discourse presented in the anti-state mode by claiming that the films LIFF screens are unknown in Europe, which is subsequently stated to be a form of injustice, adding a twist to the injustices presented in the anti-state mode.

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92 This is not always the case, as is shown for example by the China Onscreen Biennale held in Los Angeles since 2012, which screens a significant amount of independent films dealing with several of the anti-state themes identified in the previous section.

93 The framing related to cultural exchange ranges from loose to very formalized, as for example in this case: “Film, as a tool for dream building, is the best way to promote cross-cultural understanding. On the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Irish diplomatic relations, the first China Ireland International Film Festival (CIIFF) will be held in Dublin, Ireland. This film festival, with films as the carrier, driven by ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, aims to facilitate cultural communication between China and Ireland and open a new chapter of Sino-Irish cultural exchange” (CIIFF n.d.).

94 Grote blockbusters in thuisland China, maar in Europa kent niemand ze. Onterecht natuurlijk. LIFF brengt ze naar Leiden!
The more elaborate quote below directly addresses other types of events screening Chinese cinema and expresses the view that the image the European public have of Chinese cinema should be corrected:

Chinese films which reach the Netherlands are often not the films which Chinese people like to watch. Even more so, the films which do well internationally are often specifically tailored to the international market. In Reel China we programmed a selection of the best and highest grossing films from China in cooperation with the Confucius Institute.\(^{95}\) (LIFF 2015)

Where the anti-state mode stresses the fact that the films they screen are censored in China, this quote in response states that the titles screened at other events in the anti-state and international modes are “not the films which Chinese people like to watch.” The claim that films usually shown outside of China are “tailored to the international market” can be read as a response to both the anti-state mode of presentation and the international mode discussed in the next section. In this response the real truth about China is implied to be present in both the best Chinese films, a quality argument that implicitly returns in all three modes of presentation, and the most popular ones, a claim that is distinct to this mode of presentation.

The explicit framing of the event as showing the real China aligns with the way that Falk Hartig (2015) views the work of Confucius Institutes as exercising a specific form of public diplomacy. He writes:

Public diplomacy is seen as a means for introducing the ‘real China’ to the world, thus it is about telling China’s story to the world. This guiding principle which seemingly does focus less on the more idealistic notions of exchange, encounter and engagement put forward in the Western debates on public diplomacy, can be explained by China’s view of a rather sceptical global public opinion. In order to counter those sceptical opinions, China employs a number of instruments and initiatives similar to other countries, including media outlets, exchange

\(^{95}\) REEL China: Films die Nederland bereiken vanuit China zijn lang niet altijd films die Chinezen zelf ook graag zien. Sterker nog: de films die het internationaal goed doen worden meestal ook speciaal voor de internationale markt gemaakt. In Reel China programmeerden wij, in samenwerking met het Confucius Instituut, een selectie van de beste en meest bezochte films van China.
programmes and the globe-spanning Confucius Institutes. (Hartig 2015: 171-172)

It should be noted that the effort to show this version of the real China does not necessarily translate to a programme filled with Chinese state propaganda,96 and is not directly pro-state. Rather, the programme consists of films that do well commercially. As the introductory texts claim, the programme in Leiden indeed generally screens several of the highest grossing films from China of a particular year: Operation Red Sea (2018, Dante Lam), Monster Hunt 2 (2018, Ramen Hui), The Mermaid (2016, Stephen Chow), Monster Hunt (2015, Raman Hui) and So Young (2013, Zhao Wei) all drew large crowds in China. As far as “the best films from China” is concerned, Reel China usually also programmes Chinese Oscar submissions like Hidden Man (2018, Jiang Wen), Go Away Mr. Tumour (2015, Han Yan), Back to 1942 (2013, Feng Xiaogang), and Caught in the Web (2012, Chen Kaige).

Thematically the programme is diverse, including historic films like Back to 1942 (2013, Feng Xiaogang) about the Second World War, and Go Away Mr. Tumour (2015, Han Yan), of which film critic Maggie Lee writes that it is an “exuberantly styled, fantasy-filled dramedy ... satisfying local demand for glossy escapism” (Lee 2015). The action films Operation Red Sea (2018, Dante Lam) and Operation Mekong (2016, Dante Lam), which both carry some nationalist overtones, have also been featured on the programme.

This selection of popular cinema does not mean that none of the films address contentious issues, and indeed some films can be read as critiques on the state of contemporary China. For example, Fiona Yuk-wa Law argues that "Monster Hunt and The Mermaid are not only fictitious tales of imaginary creatures but allegories of animal rights and environmentalist movements in China" (Law 2017: 69).

Given the framing and programme selection of Reel China, one film has been curiously absent from the programme. The film Wolf Warrior 2 (2017, Wu Jing) is at

96 I have, for example, not come across any instances where the overtly propagandistic, and not particularly popular government commissioned Founding of A New China trilogy, consisting of The Founding of a Republic (2009, Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping), The Founding of a Party (2011, Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping), and The Founding of an Army (2017, Andrew Lau), was screened.
present the highest grossing Chinese film of all time and was the Chinese submission for the Oscars in 2017. *Wolf Warrior 2* is an action film about a former Chinese soldier rescuing Chinese doctors from mercenaries in an unspecified African nation. Outside China the film received predominantly negative reviews. For example, film critic Simon Abrahams (2017) writes:

[I]t’s characters’ sense of patriotism is built on the back of racist assumptions that would, in a European or American narrative, be rightfully criticized for being part of an ugly “white savior” power fantasy ... *Wolf Warrior 2* isn’t just intellectually repugnant—it’s also dramatically inert. (Abrahams 2017)

The absence of *Wolf Warrior 2* from *Reel China* suggests that besides certain films being “especially made for the international market,” as LIFF puts it, there also seem to be films especially made for the Chinese domestic market, which, in spite of being extremely popular, are not considered suitable for this particular event. Indeed, *Wolf Warrior 2*’s presentation of China as an assertive expansive military power in combination with the racist overtones constitutes perhaps not the preferable internationally projected image of China at this point in time. From the perspectives of the Confucius Institute, the affiliated University, as well as the Leiden Film Festival screening the film, this film is probably not in line with their respective ambitions. Whatever the process behind not selecting this film might have been, its exclusion shows that the real China supposedly on display at LIFF is as much tailored to an international audience as the events it is said to be countering, and that the framing of the event and the actual content do not always align, as was also observed in several of the anti-state events.

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97 The submission for the Academy Award signals that, outside of the Leiden event, this film has been considered suitable for foreign audiences. It was also on the programme of multiple other state sponsored events outside of China, like 2018 Chinese Film Festival in Nebraska, the 2017 Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France and the 2017 Chinese Film Festival in Durban. Whilst this shows that the work of engaging in public diplomacy is far from uniform, *Wolf Warrior 2*’s exclusion from many events still supports my argument in this chapter that the three modes of representation have been combined, in terms of certain elements of their framing and content, in several instances.

98 The art director of a different festival that screens popular Asian cinema, when asked why they did not screen the film, said: “We do have standards!” (Interview with Maggie Lee 2018).
Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France

Besides events co-organised by Confucius Institutes, there is a range of festivals sponsored by the China Film Administration,\(^99\) like the China-Britain Film Festival (previously titled China Image Festival and China International Film Festival London) in London\(^100\) and the Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France, held in Paris followed by a tour across other cities. As with Reel China the Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France is presented as showing the real China:

> China is much closer than you think. In fact, the best way to get to know a country, and to understand its people, is to watch its films. That’s even more true for a civilisation that’s several thousand millennia old [sic] – a civilisation with a rich and complex history, and which is now changing at a rapid pace. Today Chinese cinema is coming to you … every genre is featured … revealing it in all its depth and diversity. See the world through Chinese eyes! (8e Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France 2018)

Whilst this introduction is less explicit in its framing about wanting to display the real China, it does purport that the “best way to get to know a country … is to watch its films.” The festival also claims to reveal the depth and diversity of Chinese cinema, as well as to “see the world through Chinese eyes”, implying that the perspective it will offer is one that is not usually available to an outsider. It is also worth noting that this quote partakes of the rapidly changing China repertoire that is reiterated across the three modes of presentation.

Each year the programme at the Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France screens about ten titles and shows a strong overlap with the films screened at LIFF and other events in the popular mode I came across during my research. In comparison to the LIFF, the programme has included several very popular films that Leiden did not screen, like The Monkey King (2014, Cheang Pou-soi) and Wolf

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\(^99\) Until recently this was done through the SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television), which from 2013 to 2018 was a ministry-level executive agency directly under the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. In 2018 the SAPPRFT was dissolved into multiple bodies, and theatrical film is currently overseen by the National Film Administration, which is under the Propaganda Department.

\(^100\) The China Image Festival ran five times from 2009 to 2013. It was replaced by the China International Film Festival London and in 2016 was renamed the China-Britain Film Festival, which seems to have had its last edition in December 2017, although I cannot exclude the possibility that it still exists under yet another name.
Warrior 2 (2017, Wu Jing), as well as art films (with screening permits) that have won prizes at international film festivals, such as Kaili Blues (2015, Bi Gan) and Crosscurrent (2016, Yang Chao). The additional space in the programme allows for the Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France to be representative of the breadth encountered across these events in the popular mode of presenting China.

Based on its programme across the years, whilst being thematically diverse, the selected films usually have a more polished aesthetic compared to many of the films screened in events characterised by the anti-state and international modes and are generally also produced on a significantly higher budget. The films are often directed by established filmmakers, like Feng Xiaogang and Chen Kaige, and generally adhere to popular filmmaking conventions.

**Concluding Remarks on the Popular Mode**

At several levels the popular mode employs similar discourses to the anti-state mode, claiming to present a truthful, otherwise unseen representation of China. Even though the events are regularly sponsored by state funded institutions, they are neither framed as pro-state events, nor are the films programmed specifically pro-state. Rather, they predominantly present popular commercial Chinese cinema as representative of what resonates in contemporary China. The case of LIFF’s exclusion of Wolf Warrior 2 shows that the outward presentation that the event shows the most popular Chinese films should not be taken at face value and may not be factually correct; on the other hand, by incorporating films like The Monkey King (2014, Cheang Pou-soi) and Wolf Warrior 2 (2017, Wu Jing), the Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France shows that some of these events do simply screen popular Chinese cinema without being particularly attuned to or concerned about how certain films could possibly be received negatively by foreign audiences. This regard or disregard for how the films might be received show differences in the how fearless or frank these events operate both in the face of foreign audiences as well as the official (state) sponsors.
The International Mode

The final mode of presentation discussed in this chapter is what I term the international mode. What characterises this mode of presentation is that its presentation of China often remains implicit, as films from China are submerged into a larger international framework. When Chinese films are specifically brought forward, in for example jury reports, special sections or events, the international mode of presentation distinguishes itself through an emphasis on complexity, as well as on universality infused with cultural specificity. The weight of Chinese films programmed in these events often lies with what could broadly be considered art cinema, but the programmes usually also include some more popular films, as well as films with a strong anti-state message. In this section I closely analyse the presentation of China and Chinese cinema at the IDFA 2015-2017, the IFFR 2015-2018, as well as a special section devoted to Chinese cinema at the Göteborg Film Festival 2018 entitled Electric Shadows.

International Documentary Festival Amsterdam: Capturing Humanity

Each year hundreds of documentary professionals descend upon Amsterdam for the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), a festival focussed on what the organisation calls the creative documentary. The website states that:

The creative documentary is IDFA’s point of departure. These are documentaries that are visually striking and express the filmmaker’s vision. The filmmaker makes artistic choices in the use of cinematic means (image, sound and editing) to convey his or her vision on the subject matter and tell the story. This artistic demand is the festival’s most crucial selection criterion – originality, expressiveness and cultural and/or historical value play an important role as well. ... Creative documentaries also offer new insights into society – they open our eyes and stimulate our critical thinking power. IDFA strives to screen films with urgent social themes that reflect the spirit of the time in which they are made. They do not reiterate the reality of yesterday or today, as this is the job of the news. News can break us down, but background stories do the opposite. They offer nuance and provide insight, making reflection on current events possible. (IDFA n.d.)
Where this chapter is built on the premise that the three modes of presentation under scrutiny are all engaged in staking a claim to be presenting the truth about China, and, to some extent, to be doing so in a parrhesiastic form, the IDFA writes that the films screened do not “reiterate the reality of yesterday or today.” Rather, “they offer nuance and provide insight”, implying that IDFA allows the viewer a deeper understanding of reality that goes beyond what is in plain sight. As discussed in the introduction to this study, the documentary as a genre contains a truth claim; this text adds that it should not just be a reiteration of reality, but a means to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of it.

From the starting point of the creative documentary the festival screens over 300 films. In addition, there are pitching events, a film market, industry talks, and side events. Since its founding in 1988, the festival has screened over a hundred documentaries from and about China. In this section I take a closer look at the editions of 2015, 2016 and 2017. I attended these three editions, watched almost all of the Chinese and China-related entries, and collected a range of promotional materials.

Generally, there is no explicit China agenda formulated in the IDFA programme, and the programme is presented as being shaped by more general principles about the creative documentary. However, socially engaged filmmaking, as well as potential commercial success or broad appeal, are also presented as shaping the event, through, for example, the human rights award and the film market. When applied to the Chinese selection of films, this blend of positions brings forth a diverse selection in both form and content.

A closer inspection of the thirty-one China-related films screened at IDFA 2015, 2016 and 2017 reveals a diverse mixture of topics and themes. Some of the titles are heavily politicised films that would fit easily with an anti-state presentation. For example, Zhu Rikun’s Welcome (2016) features the audio recording of the interrogation of the filmmaker as he is forced to remove the

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101 The Dutch version of this text on the website reads: “Ze weerspiegelen niet de werkelijkheid van vandaag of gisteren”, which literally translates as, “they do not reflect the reality of today or yesterday.”

102 In 2006 IDFA featured a special on China, titled China in Transit, which featured a mix of independent documentaries (e.g. Senior Year (2005, Zhou Hao), Stone Mountain (2006, Du Haibin), documentaries produced for Chinese television (e.g. Grandpa Jing and His Old Customers (2003, Shi Runjiu) and I Want a New Home (2005, Wang Dafei)) and was framed as showing films documenting the rapid changes in contemporary China without employing a specific anti-state discourse.
material he had been collecting about people suffering from black lung, played over a black screen. *Fallen Flowers Thick Leaves* (2016, Laetitia Schoofs) explores the position of women in Beijing and the description in the programme states: “Beijing may look modern, but the traditional mores affecting women of all ages and classes are very old-fashioned” (IDFA 2016: 81). Besides these critical titles, the programme also includes films that do not display any attempt to critique the Chinese state or society. For example, *The Crow is Beautiful* (2017, Frank Scheffer and Jia Zhao) centres on the painter He Duolin and his rather pedestrian musings, such as: “nature is the best artist because it is always in balance”, or *Awaken* (2017, Ning Jiawei), which features a man and his boat filmed with a GoPro camera for an hour.

Through the festival’s diverse programming China is presented as being a place of political struggle and personal hardship, but also as a place with a valuable artistic tradition, as well as cutting edge artistic experimentation. The themes that the broad programme touches upon, the arts, freedom of expression, environmental issues, human rights, gender equality, and interpersonal relationships, generally display social liberal values, even if this is not always made explicit. Whilst the films can be critical of contemporary China, they are mostly not presented as being anti-state. Overall, there is an optimistic subtext throughout the festival that progress and social change are possible. This idea was captured explicitly in the slogan the Dutch broadcaster VPRO, of one of the main partners, — “sponsor of progress”— which was shown before each screening in the years I attended the festival. The presentation of China is generally in line with the way other localities are featured in the festival—political, personal and artistic struggles from across the globe are shown, be it with their own localised specificities, as societies and politics differ across the globe.

In order to get a more detailed understanding of the discourse of presenting China at the festival, it is instructive to look at specific instances when Chinese films are put in the spotlight, as for example when winning an award. In 2017 the film *Last Days in Shibati* (2017, Hendrick Dusollier), in which a French filmmaker films the last weeks before the Chongqing neighbourhood Shibati is demolished, won an award at IDFA. The jury’s comments, as written in the press release, were as follows:

The Jury decided to give the IDFA Special Jury Award for Mid-Length Documentary to a beautiful documentary that offers us the possibility to
see how the director builds his poetical and cinematic gaze as he films this decaying neighbourhood and its inhabitants. We loved his bravery and persistence as he becomes part of the environment he managed to get close to. We would like to command his choice not to fall for the efficiency of storytelling but rather to remain on the subtle level of the humanity he captures. The film lands as a metaphor for how modernity is eating at all of us, everywhere, as we become the eyes of the young child at the end of the film. (IDFA 2017)

First of all, this jury report does not explicitly mention China, or anything culturally specific about the film. What can be observed instead is an emphasis on its universal qualities. By using the sentence: “The film lands as a metaphor for how modernity is eating at all of us, everywhere,” the report praises how the film captures something we can all relate to, even if I am inclined to argue that most visitors at the IDFA do not experience modernity in the same way as the citizens of Chongqing, and modernity does not eat away at the IDFA audience as it does at the people whose homes are to be demolished. The jury further praises the filmmaker’s poetic gaze, immersive methodology, and subtlety in capturing humanity. Whilst these universal qualifications might be slightly exaggerated, they show that universality is considered important in the context of IDFA, and that this local (Chinese) story is rewarded for capturing an emotion that extends beyond borders.

As the jury notes the filmmaker’s bravery and persistence, this could well be read as containing a parrhesiastic subtext. However, in this context, I understand these qualifications as referring to the supposed persistence required for a French filmmaker, who did not speak a word of Chinese, to engage with the locals in Shibati. This suggests that whilst it is not without difficulties, it is possible to connect on a human level across nationalities and languages.

In sum, IDFA, as a documentary festival, is inevitably engaged in presenting a truth claim, but rather than simply present reality it claims the films it selects “offer nuance and provide insight, making reflection on current events possible.” The Chinese films selected show many facets of China and filmmaking in China, but are praised for their universal qualities. This is in line with an optimistic subtext running through the festival about the possibility for change and a belief in universal social liberal values.
International Film Festival Rotterdam: Expanding Film Citizenship

Like the IDFA, the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) is also a relatively large festival. The IFFR screens hundreds of films and attracts many professionals and a significant audience. The focus of the IFFR is on avant-garde cinema and, like the IDFA, it usually does not present a specific agenda in relation to China. Rather, the Chinese titles are part of a programme that mixes the festival's interests as simultaneously being an artistically inclined festival, a business festival, and an audience festival (de Valck 2014). On the website the IFFR presents itself as follows:

The festival’s focus is on recent work by talented new filmmakers ... We encourage and stimulate both emerging and established filmmakers from all backgrounds in their artistic endeavours ... We collectively expand the creative space for film citizenship and celebrate the diverse forms of cinema. Hotly debated and challenging, our programming tackles issues and tensions of contemporary social relevance. At International Film Festival Rotterdam, we represent the strength and impact of independent film, filmmakers and film-related art. (IFFR n.d.: n. pag.)

In accordance with this framing the programme of Chinese films is generally broad and includes Chinese art-cinema, which based on my personal observations is a term regularly used to present films made outside of mainstream channels, but without the politicised connotations that independent Chinese film carries, enabling more room, both practically and conceptually, for obtaining funding and distribution.\textsuperscript{103} Examples of this type of film screened at IFFR are \textit{Kaili Blues} (2015, Bi Gan), \textit{The Summer is Gone} (2016, Zhang Dalei), \textit{Knife in the Clear Water} (2016, Wang Xuebo), and \textit{Long Day’s Journey Into Night} (2018, Bi Gan). Besides art-cinema, there are a significant number of films that can be viewed as independent films, as understood in this thesis, like \textit{Children Are Not Afraid of Death, They are Afraid of Ghost} (2017, Rong Guangrong) and \textit{We The Workers} (2017, Huang Wenhai). In

\textsuperscript{103} I do not wish to imply that contemporary Chinese art cinema does not enable critical reflection on Chinese society, which it often does. However, what I do want to point out is that there is a distinction in the purported intent of the films, removing the more critical, and indeed parrhesiastic, associations of what is understood as independent Chinese cinema and making films in an independent spirit, as set forth in the introduction to this study.
addition to art and independent cinema, in the years under scrutiny the programme also consistently featured several mainstream popular films, like *Shadow* (2018, Zhang Yimou) and *Youth* (2017, Feng Xiaogang), of which the programmer said that he "very much also wanted to include a few films that strive to reach a large audience" (Tsui 2018). As with the IDFA, overall the themes and content of the programme are diverse, and can be understood in the context of the multi-threaded nature of the festival.

According to festival director Bero Beyer, "the strong winners represent the bold spirit of the entire festival’s programming." (IFFR 2018B: n. pag.) Therefore, a look at the framing of Chinese prize winners is instructive to understand how several specific Chinese films are framed as representing the IFFR’s spirit. In 2018, the Chinese film *The Widowed Witch* (2018, Cai Chengjie), about a thrice-widowed woman turned shaman who travels around in a minivan, won a Hivos Tiger Award. The Tiger Award is IFFR's main prize and exists “with the aim of discovering, raising the profile of and rewarding up-and-coming international film talent.” (IFFR 2018A: n. pag.) The released jury report sets out the following:

This year's Hivos Tiger Award winner is a film of epic dimensions with a narrative that is greater than one person or moment. It takes a feminist viewpoint with a strong central character, who refuses to be a victim. The struggle of her journey is framed in an emotional way that depicts her complexity, while never becoming sentimental, and the film even contains a laconic sense of humour. Its bold vision, created by a lyrical layering of cinematographic elements, makes this film stand out. (IFFR 2018B: n. pag.)

First of all, as in the IDFA jury report about *Last Days in Shibati* (2017, Hendrick Dusollier), there is not a single mention of China or cultural specificity here, nor is there much of a critical subtext. The narrative of the film is praised as being “greater than one person or moment”, implying that it transcends its specific spatial and temporal situation. This goes against the other two modes of representing China, where capturing China’s rapid and specific transformations at this particular point in time is key. The state-agnostic representation of the film is key to the international mode of presentation, as this jury report moves beyond nationally typed characterisations. In addition, the film is praised for depicting the protagonist's complexity. Complexity is one of the recurring themes in the
international mode of presentation, which seeks to avoid any form of essentialism. Finally, some aspects of auteur theory, e.g. the reference to a “bold vision” and the emphasis on formal aspects of filmmaking, are brought forward as creating a “lyrical layering of cinematographic elements.”

In sum, the IFFR is characteristic of the international mode of presentation I have encountered across events in that it presents a very broad programme touching upon a wide range of themes and includes Chinese popular cinema alongside art and independent films. In texts related to the Chinese films, there is an emphasis on universal qualities and complexity. To complete my consideration of the international mode, I investigate a special section of Chinese film presented in this mode.

Electric Shadows: Göteborg International Film Festival

Occasionally, Chinese films shown at big international film festivals are not submerged into the overall programme, but highlighted as a separate section, as at FilmFest Hamburg and IFFR, which I discussed as operating in an explicitly anti-state mode. During my research I have come across several instances when the framing of such Chinese film sections within larger festivals aligns not with the anti-state but with the international mode. A recent, very clear example of a special section employing the main traits of the latter mode can be found at the 2017 Göteborg International Film Festival. This edition of the festival included a special section titled Electric Shadows, for which the festival’s art director, Jonas Holmberg, wrote an essay that contained the following passage:

... there is another kind of Chinese film that mirrors and explores one of the world’s most culturally complex countries. The swift and unpredictable social changes that China is experiencing creates a rich and nuanced film culture full of young filmmakers who explore new cinematic paths beyond the standardized commercial film culture. It’s these movies that we focus on in Göteborg Film Festival’s Electric Shadows of China. Up until a few years ago, there was a relatively clear division in China between official films that are produced within the system (“tizhinei”) and independent films outside of the system.

104 As briefly touched upon in footnote 102 on China in Transit at IDFA 2006.
(“tizhiwai”). ... This division was enhanced in the foreign view of Chinese cinema, since it corresponds to a classical Western narrative about film cultures in dictatorships, where there is a dichotomy between brave dissidents who make subversive films and devious puppets who make films that pamper to the system. Working with Electric Shadows of China has made it obvious that reality is often not just black and white, and these filmmakers use different methods and strategies to navigate a specific system as best they can. The last few years, the situation has been complicated further by the fact Chinese authorities have, on the one hand, hit hard against the independent film culture ... and on the other hand made it slightly easier for smaller film producers to get accepted by the system. ... for us who are interested in Chinese film culture, it’s clear that Chinese cinema of today is an electrifying place that reflects and challenges a superpower that is currently going through political, economic and cultural changes that will have an impact on the entire world. (Holmberg n.d.)

Where the texts for the special sections at FilmFest Hamburg 2015 and IFFR 2012 are principally framed in the anti-state mode, with some international mode discourses leaking through, this text explicitly distances itself from the anti-state mode, proposing that the distinction between different modes of filmmaking was simplified to “brave dissidents” versus “devious puppets” as a result of a “classical Western narrative”, and thus implying that the perspective offered by the festival is not just western, but sensitive to the entire world, global perhaps.

While the text distances itself from the anti-state mode, it also, as all three modes do, claims to reveal the truth about China through a “Chinese film that mirrors” and, further in the text, “reflects” contemporary China. The essay also purports that this insight has until now only been available to “us who are interested in Chinese film culture.” Another element it shares with the other modes of representation is that here again China’s rapid changes are used to set the stage. Beyond this, the text notes that China is “one of the world’s most culturally complex countries”, moving China into the idea of complexity, which is central to the international mode of presentation. Complexity is further touched upon with words like “nuanced” and “complicated”, as well as with the statement that “reality is not just black and white.”

Throughout, the text highlights two of the defining tenets of the international mode of presentation: universality, here distinctly interlaced with cultural specificity, and complexity. Looking at the programme, the films included
are not very different from those shown at other international film festivals that year, including for example Dragonfly Eyes (2017, Xu Bing), Mrs. Fang (2017, Wang Bing), and Angels Wear White (2017, Vivian Qu).

One way in which the programme deviates is by including some older titles like Spring in a Small Town (1948, Mu Fei), The Road Home (2001, Zhang Yimou), and I Wish I Knew (2010, Jia Zhangke) in a retrospective section. What is striking about this retrospective selection is that all these films reflect changing attitudes to the politics of cinema in China. Spring in A Small Town was long dismissed as a “passive film”, meaning it was not revolutionary enough, in accounts of Chinese film history (Zhang 1999: 8), only to later be hailed as the best Chinese film ever made by the Hong Kong Film Awards Association and British Film Institute. The Road Home won director Zhang Yimou awards and acclaim both inside and outside of China five years after his film To Live (1994, Zhang Yimou) was banned in China. Not only does The Road Home reflect the changing approach and reception of Zhang’s work within China, but it also generated a small controversy. After having the film rejected for the Cannes festival, supposedly on political grounds, Zhang wrote an open letter publicly withdrawing his entry for the festival:

What I can’t accept is that for a long time the West seems to only have a “politicized” way of reading Chinese cinema. If it is not “anti-government” then it is “pro-government.” Judging a movie with such a simple conception is naïve and one-sided.105 (Shao 1999)

Significantly, this passage in the letter reiterates the position articulated by the art director in the essay introducing the special section. Finally, I Wish I Knew is a documentary about Shanghai, commissioned for the Shanghai Expo 2010, yet the film features histories often ignored in official discourses, and director Jia Zhangke, now an established filmmaker working within the mainland system, has not given up his claim to being an independent filmmaker (Jia Zhangke IFFR Masterclass 2019). Whilst the retrospective is not discussed as such in any of the promotional materials of the event, the at first seemingly disparate selection reinforces the positions set forth in the introductory essay that “reality is often not just black and

105 我不能接受的是，对于中国电影，西方长期以来似乎只有一种“政治化”的读解方式：不列入“反政府”一类，就列入“替政府宣传”一类。以这种简单的概念去判断一部电影，其幼稚和片面是显而易见的。
white, and these filmmakers use different methods and strategies to navigate a specific system as best they can."

Concluding Remarks on the International Mode

In sum, the truth that the international mode claims to present is not a straightforward one, as the IDFA “not just reflecting reality” and Electric Shadows “not just black and white” examples show. Rather than stating straightforward truths, the events detail the larger complexities surrounding the issues tackled in the films, as well as their universal qualities, to such an extent that sometimes local specificities are completely lost.

Given the preceding chapters in this study, it is tempting to go along with the claim that reality in China is complex. However, the narrative used in the international mode is also not free of preconceptions and simplifications in its truth claims. An example is the way it is purported that universal truths can be easily distilled from Chinese experiences, as in the jury report about Last Days in Shibati (2017, Hendrick Dusollier). In relation to independent Chinese cinema as parrhesia the international mode is interesting because it regularly screens independent films. However, this mode rarely taps into the parrhesiastic discourse through which the films are presented by the filmmakers themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed three different modes of presenting Chinese cinema. Across these three modes of presentation there is a strong tendency to claim that they are presenting an otherwise unseen China. Whilst each mode lays claim to presenting the “real” China, they do so by emphasising different modes of access to it, through independent and anti-state films suppressed by the Chinese state, through popular cinema which cannot find an outlet outside of China, or through a broad selection of creative filmmaking that exposes the complexity of contemporary China, if not humanity as a whole. By studying these three modes, it becomes apparent that the discourse of Chinese cinema as expository seems to be so commonplace that it loses much of the edge it has within the local Chinese
context, where it is used in relation to independent cinema. And whilst the anti-state mode uses the most parrhesiastic discourse of the three modes, drawing on risk, duty, and frankness, it faces competition from alternate truth claims attempting to impact the international view of China.

Looking beyond the discourses used to present the film selections, I found the content of programmes to occasionally stray from what was claimed in the framing. This moved me to attempt to find an image of China that was seen to match all three of the modes in order to illustrate the importance of the discourses used to present the films outside of the content actually on display. I found that Piano in A Factory (2010, Zhang Meng) was screened at the internationally inclined IFFR and FilmFest Hamburg, but also at the anti-state Reel China New York, as well as the popular Reel China in Leiden.

Piano in a Factory is set in a dreary city marked by remnants of heavy industry, and the main protagonist is a musician trying to make ends meet. When his wife wants to divorce him, their daughter says she will go to live with whoever provides her with a piano. There are many ways to connect the film to each of the modes of presentation. The abandoned city, poor musician, unemployed characters, and materialist mother allow plenty of space to read the film as an anti-state critique of developments in contemporary China. At the same time, the diverse score and songs featured, including soviet-style music, traditional Chinese music and western popular music, as well as its more general musical theme, can be seen to showcase the universal qualities of music that play a crucial role in giving meaning to life across the globe. Finally, its overall upbeat tone and high production values, in combination with the dedication with which the main protagonist takes care of his deteriorating father, and the conclusion in which the daughter chooses to live with her well off mother, can be seen to feed into a narrative that is in sync with mainstream and politically accepted values in China.

The broad inclusion of Piano in A Factory (2010, Zhang Meng) amongst different modes of presentation shows that whether a film is seen to speak truth to power is not only about the contents of a film or its production, but also about how a film is positioned and framed, both domestically and internationally, as this chapter has shown.
Conclusion

A single act of successful public insubordination pierces the smooth surface of apparent consent, which itself is a visible reminder of underlying power relations. (Scott 1990: 205)

I decided to start the conclusion to this study with this quote from James C. Scott’s Domination and the Arts of Resistance because throughout my encounters with independent Chinese cinema I very much hoped to find an instance of “successful public insubordination [that] pierces the smooth surface of apparent consent.” I held out this hope despite knowing in advance that it would be unlikely to be fulfilled, given the fact that independent cinema is extremely marginal and operates in a media landscape that is both oversaturated and heavily regulated.

Even though Under the Dome (2015, Chai Jing), discussed briefly in Chapter 2, might make it seem as though independent film has a good chance to publicly reveal a discourse that is commonplace yet subversive, finds resonance amongst the general population, and sparks fear in those in power, such effects are rare. Rather than attempting to seek out these rare examples, in this study I have sought to analyse independent Chinese cinema as expressing a form of parrhesia, which through its own specific discourses and practices draws on an independent spirit to critically engage with contemporary society.

Drawing on parrhesia as conceptualised by Foucault in the lectures collected in Fearless Speech (2001) has allowed this study to analyse speaking truth to power as an activity, to scrutinise the conditions under which parrhesia takes place, and to coalesce this with a Foucauldian understanding of power. Accordingly, I have operated under the assumption that, when approaching parrhesia as speaking truth to power, power should not be understood in a narrow sense as only wielded by political, financial, or other elites in China, but as running through all levels of society and as constantly renegotiated.

Throughout my analysis of how independent Chinese cinema operates as a form of parrhesia in China I have shown that it is not always as fearless, frank, risky, or personal as conceptualised by Foucault, and that independent cinema’s entanglement with international discourses related to creativity and filmmaking, changes in filmmaking styles and strategies, restrictive socio-political
circumstances, and globalised media platforms make it necessary to expand the Foucauldian idea of what forms parrhesia can take.

In order to address the main questions of this study, it was divided into four chapters which each highlight different aspects of Chinese independent cinema. The first chapter focussed on the discourses surrounding independent film production used by filmmakers. In this chapter I argued that the filmmakers employ two distinct discourses to speak about their work. First, by employing a discourse feeding into auteur theory and artistic creativity, independent Chinese filmmakers align themselves with the international filmmaking community of which they are an integral part. At the same time, the filmmakers also employ a discourse which positions Chinese independent cinema as a form of parrhesia related to and shaped by several specifically Chinese circumstances. In combination, these discourses answer Foucault's questions as to who is able to tell the truth, under what conditions filmmakers present themselves as truth tellers, and what leads them to be recognised as such. At the same time the two discourses mixed by the filmmakers also display incongruences and strategic efforts to decrease the risk of speaking truth to power, highlighting the difficulty of doing so completely freely and without fear.

Chapter 2 dealt with the content of independent Chinese cinema and offered an in-depth analysis of two environmentally themed docufiction films: Behemoth (2015, Zhao Liang) and Li Wen at East Lake (2015, Li Luo). I selected these two films under the premise that for independent cinema as parrhesia, the environment is considered an important topic to speak truth about. The choice to single out docufiction was informed by the desire to analyse a rhetorical and aesthetic strategy that speaks to the present, conceptualised as the age of the ultra-unreal. Additionally, through the close analysis of these two films the chapter sought to understand what happens when films embrace the ultra-unreal in the ongoing search for alternative modes of representation capable of speaking truth to power. The chapter argued that docufiction offers a strategy to subvert scepticism towards truth claims, embrace the ultra-unreal, and in doing so find novel ways of speaking frankly about concrete environmental issues and indirectly also leveraging a broader critique on official narratives like the Chinese Dream and on the ways in which power operates in contemporary China. By showing how the films merged
frankness with ambiguity, this chapter contended that docufiction complicates the notion of speaking truth to power in a frank manner.

The last two chapters focussed on distribution in order to reveal the locations and audiences of independent Chinese cinema, and the roles they play in shaping the context, content, strategies, and risks of independent Chinese cinema as parrhesia. To this end Chapter 3 explored the domestic distribution of Chinese independent cinema, with a focus on underground screenings in Beijing. To guide the analysis, I conceptualised underground independent film screenings as transient alternative public spaces and as sites where parrhesia takes place, albeit in a limited, often short-lived manner. Even though Foucault does not claim that parrhesia should be durable in any way, and the Scott quote above shows that a single act can be enough to have an impact, the chapter shows that reaching and engaging with even a small audience is a long-term process for underground screenings, and that simply screening a film is limited in its effectiveness when it comes to speaking truth to power.

Throughout the analysis I showed that screening organisers and filmmakers often have a clear agenda to create a space for critical, counter-hegemonic debate, but that this agenda is hardly ever realised in a durable manner, mainly due to the Chinese socio-political and economic contexts. By focusing on the physical sites, film contents and contexts, and the type of publicness through which an alternative public space comes into being, I highlighted several obstacles that independent screening culture as a form of parrhesia faces. Nevertheless, I maintained that independent film screenings in Beijing constitute a temporary alternative public space. In spite of all the drawbacks and complications, as well as their temporary nature, the screenings do form a public outlet for counter hegemonic views and create an opportunity to actively engage with these views.

The final chapter of this study investigated how independent cinema operates outside of China through film festivals. Film festivals constitute spaces where various conflicting versions of China meet and merge, are re-contextualised and translated outside of China. In relation to the concept of parrhesia, the film festival can be viewed as a space where narratives are legitimised and presented as truths, and are given an audience. In this chapter I analysed three competing modes of presentation through which Chinese cinema is positioned: an anti-state mode, a popular mode, and an international mode. I argue that these three different modes,
despite stemming from different ideas about how to represent China, as well as featuring distinct content, nonetheless exhibit an overlap in the discourses through which they present the films. Often, the films are labelled as both showing a supposedly real China, which a foreign audience would otherwise not have access to, and as being the best and most representative films of their kind. In this international context independent cinema, along with big budget state sanctioned films and art house cinema, is framed to show non-Chinese spectators an otherwise unseen side of China. The discursive interplay between the three modes of presentation and the fact that the films are screened outside of China reshapes the relatively unique parrhesiastic qualities independent Chinese cinema has inside China, compared to popular or art cinema. In the foreign context independent cinema becomes one of several forms of filmic truth vying for an audience and legitimacy.

Through these four chapters, I have revealed the specificities of the act of speak truth to power through Chinese independent cinema and how this specific form interacts with Foucault’s conceptualisation of parrhesia. I have shown that although parrhesia in China is sometimes less fearless, frank, or risky than conceptualised by Foucault, the spirit of Chinese independent cinema—which purports to offer a frank and critical reflection on contemporary Chinese reality—in spite of all its constraints, strategic manoeuvring, and contradictions, does have the capacity to challenge uniformity and subvert power relations in China. To return to Scott, whilst the insubordinate act of speaking truth to power through independent Chinese cinema is not always smooth, piercing, or successful, this study has shown that it does indeed serve as a visible reminder, and fierce critic, of underlying power relations in contemporary China.
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Filmography

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Awaken (jingzhe, 惊蛰). Directed by Ning Jiawei. 2017.
Back to 1942 (Yi jiu si er, 一九四二). Directed by Feng Xiaogang. 2013.
Before the Flood (Yan mo, 淹没). Directed by Li Yifan and Yan Yu. 2005.
Before the Flood II—Gong Tan (Yan mo II—Gongtan, 淹没 II—龚滩). Directed by Yan Yu. 2009.
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Bing Ai (Bing ai, 秉爱). Directed by Feng Yan. 2007.
Caught in the Web (Sousuo, 搜索) Directed by Chen Kaige. 2012.
Children are not Afraid of Death, Children are Afraid of Ghosts (Haizimen bu jupa siwang, danshi haipa mogui, 孩子们不惧怕死亡，但是害怕魔鬼). Directed by Rong Guangrong. 2017.
Cotton (Mian hua, 棉花). Directed by Zhou Hao. 2014.
Criticizing the Film Academy (Pipan dianying xueyuan, 批判电影学院). Directed by Wu Haohao. 2008.
Crosscurrent (Changjiang tu, 长江图). Directed by Yang Chao. 2016.
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The Ditch (Jia bian gou, 夹边沟). Directed by Wang Bing. 2010.
Dragonfly Eyes (Qingting zhi yan, 蜻蜓之眼). Directed by Xu Bing. 2017.
Dong (Dong, 东). Directed by Jia Zhangke. 2006.
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The Eight Trigrams (Gossip) (Ba gua, 八卦). Directed by Huang Xiang. 2015.
Eyes Cheat (Guang mang, 光盲). Directed by Jian Haodong. 2015.
Emperor Visits the Hell (Tang huang you difu, 唐皇游地府). Directed by Li Luo. 2012.
Fallen City (Shang cheng, 殇城). Directed by Zhao Qi. 2011.
Farewell to Yuanmingyuan (Gaobie Yuanmingyuan, 告别圆明园). Directed by Zhao Liang. 2006.
Filmless Festival, A (Meiyou dianying de dianying jie, 没有电影的电影节). Directed by Wang Wo. 2015.
Fish and Elephant (Jinnian xiatian, 今年夏天). Directed by Li Yu. 2001.
Founding of a Republic, The (Jian guo daye, 建国大业). Directed by Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping. 2009.
From Border to Border (Bianjie yidong liang bainian, 边界移动两百年). Directed by Chung Shefong. 2013.
Grandpa Jing and His Old Customers (Jing daye he ta de lao zhugemen, 靖大爷和他的老主顾们), Directed by Shi Runjiu. 2003.
Go Away Mr. Tumour (Gundan ba! zhongliu jun, 滚蛋吧！肿瘤君). Directed by Han Yan. 2015.
Hundred Years of Constitutionalism, A (Bainian xianzheng, 百年宪政). Shen Yongping. 2014.
I am Going to Make a Lesbian Porn (Wo yao pai nü nü seqing pian, 我要拍女女色情片). Directed by Dajing. 2014.
I am Not Madame Bovary (Wo bushi Pan Jinlian, 我不是潘金莲). Directed by Feng Xiaogang. 2016.
I Beat Tiger When I was Young (Wo nianqing shi ye da laohu, 我年轻时也打老虎).
Directed by Xue Jianqiang. 2016.
In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul (Xunzhao Lin Zhao de linghun, 寻找林昭的灵魂).
Jiabiangou Elegy: Life and Death of the Rightists (Jiabiangou jishi, 夹边沟祭事).
Kaili Blues (Lu bian yecan, 路边野餐). Directed by Bi Gan. 2015.
Karamay (Kelamayi, 克拉玛依). Directed by Xu Xin. 2010.
Land of Many Palaces, The (Gongdian zhi cheng, 宫殿之城). Directed by Song Ting and Adam James Smith. 2015.
Last Train Home (Guitu lieche, 归途列車). Directed by Fan Lixin. 2009.
Li Wen at East Lake (Li Wen man you Donghu, 李文漫游东湖). Directed by Li Luo. 2015.
Long Day's Journey Into the Night (Diqiu zuihou de yewan, 地球最后的夜晚).
Mama (Mama, 妈妈). Directed by Zhang Yuan. 1990.
Madame (Gunainai, 姑奶奶). Directed by Qiu Jiongjiong. 2010.
Meishi Street (Meishi jie, 煤市街). Directed by Ou Ning. 2006.
Missing, The (Queshi, 缺失). Directed by Han Tao. 2015.
Moana. Directed by Frances H. Flaherty, Robert J. Flaherty. 1926.
Monster Hunt (Zhuo yao ji, 捉妖记). Directed by Raman Hui. 2015.
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Mystery of the Yunnan Snub-nosed Monkey (*Shenmi de dian jinsihou, 神秘的滇金丝猴*). Directed by Shi Lihong. 2002.

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One Summer (*Yige xiatian, 一个夏天*). Directed by Yang Yishu. 2014.

Operation Mekong (*Meigong he xindong, 湄公河行動*). Directed by Dante Lam. 2016.


Other Bank, The (a.k.a. The Other Shore) (*Bi’an, 彼岸*). Directed by Jiang Yue. 1995.

Other Half, The (*Ling yi ban, 另一半*). Directed by Ying Liang. 2006.


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Rainclouds over Wushan (*Wushan yun yu, 巫山云雨*). Directed by Zhang Ming. 1996.

Regarding Lambs in the City (*Guanyu cheng li de yang, 关于城里的羊*). Directed by Zhao Xu. 2015.

Religion (*Xinyang, 信仰*). Directed by Cong Feng. 2006.

Return to the Border (*Zai jiang bian, 在江边*). Directed by Zhao Liang. 2004.

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Rivers and my Father (*Heliu he wo de fuqin, 河流和我的父亲*). Directed by Li Luo. 2010.

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So Young (Zhi women zhongjiang shiqu de qingchun, 致我们终将逝去的青春). Directed by Zhao Wei. 2013
Someone to Talk To (Yi ju ding yi wan ju, 一句顶一万句). Directed by Liu Yulin. 2016.
Spring in a Small Town (Xiaocheng zhi chun, 小城之春). Directed by Mu Fei. 1948.
Stone Mountain (Shishan, 石山) Directed by Du Haibin. 2006.
Still Life (Sanxia hao ren, 三峡好人). Directed by Jia Zhangke. 2006.
Summer is Gone, The (Ba yue, 八月). Directed by Zhang Dalei. 2016.
Summer Palace (Yiheyuan, 颐和园). Directed by Lou Ye. 2006.
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Up the Yangtze (Yanjiang er shang, 沿江而上). Directed by Yung Chang. 2007.
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Young Patriot, A (Shaonian Xiao Zhao, 少年小赵). Directed by Du Haibin. 2015.
Youth (Fanghua, 芳华). Directed by Feng Xiaogang. 2017.
Zone of Initial Dilution. Directed by Antoine Boutet. 2006.
### Appendices

#### Appendix A: List of recorded interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Co-interviewer</th>
<th>Interpreter</th>
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<tr>
<td>Han Tao</td>
<td>Filmmaker</td>
<td>04.10.2015</td>
<td>Hamburg</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anna Parshina</td>
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<td>Yang Yishu</td>
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<td>07.10.2015</td>
<td>Hamburg</td>
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<td>Anna Parshina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jens Geiger</td>
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<td>08.10.2015</td>
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<td>Guo Xiaodong</td>
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<td>Richard Liang</td>
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<td>23.11.2015</td>
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<td>Yang Mingming</td>
<td>Filmmaker, editor</td>
<td>24.08.2018</td>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>Zoenie Deng</td>
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Appendix B: Chinese films screened at events discussed in Chapter 4

The Anti-State Mode:

*Turn it On: China on Video*

Apuda (He Yuan, 2010)
Disturbing the Peace (Ai Weiwei, 2009)
Dream Walking (Huang Wenhai, 2005)
Fairytale (Ai Weiwei, 2007)
Falling from the Sky (Zhang Zanbo, 2009)
Garden in Heaven (Ai Xiaoming and Hu Jie, 2005)
In Search of Lin Zhao’s Soul (Hu Jie, 2004)
Jiabiangou Elegy: Life and Death of the Rightists (Ai Xiaoming, 2017)
Karamay (Xu Xin, 2010)
Nightingale, Not the Only Voice (Tan Danhong, 2000)
Petition (Zhao Liang, 2009)
Plastic China (Wang Jiuliang, 2016)
Prisoners in Freedom City (Hu Jia and Zeng Jinyan, 2007)
Readymade (Zhang Bingjian, 2009)
The Road (Zhang Zanbo, 2015)
Sanlidong (Lin Xin, 2006)
Silver City (Li Peifeng, 2009)
Storm under the Sun (Peng Xiaolian and S. Louisa Wei, 2009)
We The Workers (Huang Wenhai, 2017)
When the Bough Breaks (Ji Dan, 2013)

*FilmFest Hamburg 2015*

*As part of the Independent China section:*
Bike and Old Electric Piano (Shao Pan, 2014)
The Eight Trigrams (Gossip) (Huang Xiang, 2014)
From Border to Border (Chung Shefong, 2013)
The Gleaners (Ye Zuyi, 2013)
The Gracefully Dancing Girl (Zhu Hang, 2014)
A Memory of Summer (Tao Huaqiao, 2015)
The Missing (Han Tao, 2015)
A Moment in Love, (Guo Xiaodong, 2014)
The River of Life (Yang Pingda, 2014)
This Worldly Life (Zhai Yixiang, 2014)
Yumen (Xu Ruotao, J. P. Sniadecki, Huang Xiang, 2013)
Screened as part of the Asia Express section:
Mr. Zhang Believes (Qiu Jiongjiong, 2015)

Screened as part the Veto! Political Cinema section:
One Summer (Yang Yishu, 2014)

Hidden Histories:

Apuda (He Yuan, 2010)
Bachelor Mountain (Yu Guangyi, 2011)
Beijing 2003 (Ai Weiwei, 2003)
Beijing: The Second Ring (Ai Weiwei, 2005)
Beijing: The Third Ring (Ai Weiwei, 2005)
Born in Beijing (Ma Li, 2011)
Chang’an Boulevard (Ai Weiwei, 2004)
Disturbing the Peace (Ai Weiwei, 2009)
Fairytale (Ai Weiwei, 2008)
The Interceptor from My Hometown (Zhang Zanbo, 2011)
Lost in the Mountain (GaoZipen, 2011)
One Recluse (Ai Weiwei, 2010)
Ordos 100 (Ai Weiwei, 2012)
Shattered (Xu Tong, 2011)
So Sorry (Ai Weiwei, 2012)
The Unfinished History of Life (Cong Feng, 2011)
When the Bough Breaks (Ji Dan, 2011)

Screened outside of the Hidden Histories section at IFFR 2012:
Egg and Stone (Huang Ji, 2012)
Shadow Life (Cao Fei, 2011)
Hello, Mr. Tree! (Han Jie, 2011)
Sentimental Animal (Wu Quan, 2011)
Old Dog (Pema Tseden, 2011)
11 Flowers (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2011)

China Independent 2017

Another Year (Zhu Shengze, 2016)
A Filmless Festival (2015, Wang Wo)
Big Characters (Ju Anqi, 2015)
China Concerto (Wang Bo, 2012)
Dragon Boat (Cao Dan, 2010)
The Dossier (Zhu Rikun, 2014)
Female Directors (Yang Mingming, 2012)
The Iron Ministry (J.P. Sniadecki, 2014)
Out of Focus (Zhu Shengze, 2014)
Per Song (Xie Shuchang, 2016)
Poet on a Business Trip (Ju Anqi, 2015)
Ta’ang (Wang Bing, 2016)
There's A Strong Wind in Beijing (Ju Anqi, 2000)
Three sisters (Wang Bing, 2012)
‘Til Madness do us Part (Wang Bing, 2013)
Yumen (Xu Ruotao, J. P. Sniadecki, Huang Xiang, 2013)
Welcome (Zhu Rikun, 2016)

Popular Mode

Reel China selection at the LIFF

2018:
Hidden Man (Jiang Wen, 2018)
Monster Hunt 2 (Raman Hui, 2018)
Operation Red Sea (Dante Lam, 2018)

2017:
Big Fish and Begonia (Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun, 2016)
Duckweed (Han Han, 2016)
Operation Mekong (Dante Lam, 2016)
Our Time Will Come (Ann Hui, 2017)

2016:
Chongqing Hot Pot (Yang Qing, 2016)
The Mermaid (Stephen Chow, 2016)
Mr. Six (Guan Hu, 2015)

2015:
Monster Hunt (Raman Hui, 2015)
Go Away Mr. Tumour (Han Yan, 2015)
Red Amnesia (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2014)

2013:
Back to 1942 (Feng Xiaogang, 2012)
Beijing Blues (Gao Qunshu, 2012)
Caught in the Web (Chen Kaige, 2012)
So Young (Zhao Wei, 2013)

2012:
Love is not Blind (Hua-Tao Teng, 2011)
The Sword Identity (Xu Haofeng, 2011)
Under the Hawthorn Tree (Zhang Yimou, 2010)

2011:
Aftershock (Feng Xiaogang, 2010)
Let the Bullets Fly (Jiang Wen, 2010)
Piano in a Factory (Meng Zhang, 2010)

Festival du Cinéma Chinois en France

2018:
Battle of Memories (Leste Chen, 2017)
Chasing the Dragon (Wong Jing and Jason Kwan, 2017)
The Ex-File 3: The Return of the Exes (Tian Yusheng, 2017)
Forever Young (Li Fangfang, 2018)
Legend of the Demon Cat (Chen Kaige, 2017)
Our Time Will Come (Ann Hui, 2017)
Our Shining Days (Wang Ran, 2017)
Seventy Seven Days (Zhao Hantang, 2017)
Wolf Warrior 2 (Wu Jing, 2017)

2017:
Big Fish and Begonia (Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun, 2016)
Book of Love (Xue Xiaolu, 2016)
Call of Heroes (Benny Chan, 2016)
Chongqing Hot Pot (Yang Qing, 2016)
Crosscurrent (Yang Chao, 2016)
I am Not Madame Bovary (Feng Xiaogang, 2016)
Journey to the West: Demons Strike Back (Tsui Hark, 2017)
Mountain Cry (Larry Yang, 2015)
Mr. No Problem (Mei Feng, 2016)
Operation Mekong (Dante Lam, 2016)
The Wasted Times (Er Cheng, 2016)

2016:
12 Citizens (Ang Xu, 2015)
Chinese Wine (Song Jiangbo, 2016)
The Dead End (Cao Baoping, 2015)
Go Away Mr. Tumour (Han Yan, 2015)
I am Somebody (Derek Yee, 2015)
The Master (Xu Haofeng, 2015)
Mojin – The Lost Legend (Wuershan, 2015)
Monster Hunt (Raman Hui, 2015)
Monkey King: Hero is Back (Tian Xiao Peng, 2015)
Tiger and Dragon 2 (Yuen Woon-ping, 2016)
The Witness (Ahn Sang-hoon, 2015)

2015:
20 Once Again (Leste Chen, 2015)
As the Light Goes Out (Derek Kwok, 2014)
Blind Massage (Lou Ye, 2014)
Brotherhood of Blades (Lu Yang, 2014)
The Ferry (Shi Wei, 2012)
Fleet of Time (Zhang Yibai, 2014)
The Great Hypnotist (Leste Chen, 2014)
Police Story 2013 (Ding Sheng, 2013)
Somewhere Only We Know (Xu Jinglei, 2015)
Taking Tiger Mountain (Tsui Hark, 2014)

2014:
American Dreams in China (Peter Chan, 2013)
Beijing Love Story (Chen Sicheng, 2014)
Einstein and Einstein (Cao Baoping, 2013)
Fly With the Crane (Li Ruijun, 2012)
The Monkey King (Cheang Pou-soi, 2014)
My Lucky Star (Dennie Gordon, 2013)
The Nightingale (Philippe Muyl, 2013)
Police Diary/To Live and Die in Ordos (Ning Ying, 2013)
My Running Shadow (Fang Gangliang, 2013)
Silent Witness (Fei Xing, 2013)
The White Storm (Benny Chan, 2013)
Young Style (Jie Liu, 2013)

The International Mode

IDFA

2017:
24th Street (Pan Zhiqi, 2017)
Awaken (Ning Jiawei, 2017)
The Crow is Beautiful (Frank Scheffer and Jia Zhao, 2017)
I Am Another You (Wang Nanfu, 2017)
In the Intense Now (João Moreira Salles, 2017)
My Father’s Choice (Yan Ting Yuen, 2017)
Lady of the Harbour (Sean Wang, 2017)
Last Days in Shibati (Hendrick Dusollier, 2017)
Turtle Rock (Lin Lin and Xiao Xiao, 2017)

2016:
China's van Goghs (Yu Haibo and Kiki Tianqi Yu, 2016)
Dream Empire (David Borenstein, 2016)
Fallen Flowers Thick Leaves (Laetitia Schoofs, 2016)
My Father and My Mother (Jiao Bo, 2016)
On the Bridge of Life and Death (Lola Jia Liu, 2016)
Per Song (Xie Shuchang, 2016)
Plastic China (Wang Jiuliang, 2016)
Still Tomorrow (Fan Jian, 2016)
South to North (Antoine Boutet, 2014)
Welcome (Zhu Rikun, 2016)

2015:
Behemoth (Zhoa Liang, 2015)
The Chinese Mayor (Zhou Hao, 2015)
Inside the Chinese Closet (Sophia Lurva, 2015)
Look Love (Ye Yun, 2015)
Mr. Hu and the Temple (Yan Ting Yuen, 2015)
Please Remember Me (Zhao Qing, 2015)
The Road (Zhang Zanbo, 2015)
The Verse of Us (Qin XiaoYu and Wu Feiyue, 2015)
A Young Patriot (Du Haibin, 2015)

2014:
Cotton (Zhou Hao, 2014)
I Am Here (Fan Lixin, 2014)
Uyghurs, Prisoners of the Absurd (Patricio Henriquez, 2014)
West of the Tracks (Wang Bing, 2003)

IFFR

2018:
AAA Cargo (Solveig Suess, 2018)
Dragonfly Eyes (Xu Bing, 2017)
Impermanence (Zeng Zeng, 2018)
Mrs. Fang (Wang Bing, 2017)
Stammering Ballad (Nan Zhang, 2018)
Silent Mist (Zhang Miaoyan, 2017)
The Widowed Witch (Cai Chengjie, 2017)
Youth (Feng Xiaogang, 2017)

2017:
Children are not Afraid of Death Children are Afraid of Ghosts (Rong Guangrong, 2017)
The Donor (Zhang Qiwu, 2016)
Knife in the Clear Water (Wang Xuebo, 2016)

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My Father’s Choice (Yan Ting Yuen, 2017)
Summer is Gone (Zhang Dalei, 2016)
We the Workers (Huang Wenhai, 2017)

2016:
The Assassin (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 2015)
Kaili Blues (Bi Gan, 2015)
Mountains May Depart (Jia Zhangke, 2015)
Nothing Stranger (Pedro Collantes, 2015)
Of Shadows (Yi Cui, 2016)
Paths of the Soul (Zhang Yang, 2015)
Where Are You Going (Yang Zhengfan, 2016)

2015:
Bailu Dream (Nicolas Boone, 2015)
Conquering China (Johan Jonason, 2014)
A Corner of Heaven (Zhang Miaoyan, 2014)
Erdos Rider (Wang Haolin, 2015)
Father and Sons (Wang Bing, 2015)
The Golden Era (Ann Hui, 2014)
Goodbye Utopia (Ding Shiwei, 2014)
The Iron Ministry (J.P. Sniadecki, 2014)
Li Wen at East Lake (Li Luo, 2015)
Poet on a Business Trip (Ju Anqi, 2015)

*Electric Shadows: Göteborg 2018*

Angels Wear White (Vivian Qu, 2017)
Ash (Li Xiaofeng, 2017)
Children are Not Afraid of Death, Children are Afraid of Ghosts (Rong Guangrong, 2017)
Dragonfly Eyes (Xu Bing, 2017)
From Where We Have Fallen (Wang Feifei, 2017)
The Foolish Bird (Huang Ji, 2017)
I Wish I Knew (Jia Zhangke, 2010)
In Character (Tracy Dong, 2018)
Mrs. Fang (Wang Bing, 2017)
The Road Home (Zhang Yimou, 2001)
Silent Mist (Zhang Miaoyan, 2017)
Spring in a Small Town (Mu Fei, 1948)
The Taste of Rice Flower (Song Pengfei, 2017)
Summary

Parrhesia in the Age of the Ultra-Unreal: Independent Non-Fiction Filmmaking in 21st Century China

Twenty-five years since the emergence of independent cinema in China, the film culture it initiated still exists. Independent Chinese Cinema carves out an alternative space where official discourses are questioned, non-mainstream realities are represented, and a wide range of topics are openly discussed. It is this capacity of independent Chinese cinema to question official and mainstream truths, and to present alternatives in its production, content, and distribution that forms the focus of this study. Through an exploration of the production, content, and distribution of independent Chinese films this study asks how independent filmmakers creatively and critically position themselves in contemporary China and what it means to speak truth to power (or, in Michel Foucault’s terms, to engage in parrhesia) in the age of the ultra-unreal.

I understand contemporary Chinese independent cinema as cinema made in China of an “independent spirit”, which entails predominantly working outside of state and commercial channels, as well as a commitment to critically reflecting on the conditions of contemporary China. I further propose to view independent Chinese cinema in relation to Ning Ken’s call for an ultra-unreal literature, an experimental artistic form capable of addressing the strangeness of contemporary China (Ning 2016).

By viewing independent Chinese cinema as a specific form of parrhesia geared towards a complex set of power structures in China in an era characterised by the ultra-unreal, this study seeks to shed light on the following main question:

"How does independent cinema in contemporary China operate as a means of speaking truth to power?"

The four chapters address a set of sub-questions derived from Foucault’s account of parrhesia. These sub-questions are related, respectively, to the production, content, domestic distribution, and international distribution of Chinese independent film:
Who are independent filmmakers? Why do they engage in independent filmmaking, and what are its anticipated effects? What are the conditions that entitle filmmakers to present themselves as, and to be considered as, truth tellers?

About what topics is it considered important to speak the truth? What kinds of practical, rhetorical, and aesthetic strategies are employed to speak truth through film?

What are the sites where independent Chinese cinema is shown and discussed? Who is the audience, both intended and unintended? What strategies are employed to deal with the risks involved whilst addressing power?

Based on formal interviews with independent filmmakers and others actively involved with independent Chinese cinema, the first chapter focuses on the discourses surrounding independent film production used by filmmakers. It addresses questions related to what it is thought to mean to be an independent filmmaker and to make independent films. By letting filmmakers speak about why and how their films are made, the chapter uncovers recurring discourses which shape both the filmmaking process and the understanding of what it means to engage in parrhesia through independent cinema.

I argue that the filmmakers employ two distinct discourses to make sense of their work. First, by employing a discourse feeding into auteur theory and artistic creativity, independent Chinese filmmakers align themselves with the international filmmaking community of which they are an integral part. At the same time, they also employ a discourse that positions Chinese independent cinema as a form of parrhesia related to and shaped by several specifically Chinese circumstances. I argue that the tension between these two discourses at times softens the parrhesiastic positioning of the filmmakers, but that this is essential to obtain a place in the international filmmaking community and to mitigate some of the risks involved in making independent films in China.

Chapter 2 deals with the content of independent Chinese cinema and offers an in-depth analysis of two films: *Behemoth* (2015, Zhao Liang) and *Li Wen at East Lake* (2015, Li Luo). Both of these films can be considered docufiction, a hybrid
genre that has become prominent in independent Chinese filmmaking over the past decade. In Chapter 2 I explore docufiction as a genre and, through the two specific cases, seek to understand what happens when films embrace the ultra-unreal in the ongoing search for alternative modes of representation capable of speaking truth to power concerning the social and environmental costs of China’s rapid development.

Amongst several dominant themes in independent Chinese filmmaking I chose to focus on two films with an environmental theme because the environment is recognized by independent filmmakers, the authorities, and the population at large as an important topic to know and speak the truth about. In addition, it is seen as a key topic for ultra-unreal literature (Ning 2016). Finally, the debate concerning the environment balances precariously between topics and modes of representation that are encouraged and forcefully prohibited by the Chinese state, making speaking about the environment a risky parrhesiastic game.

Through my analysis of the films, I argue that docufiction offers a strategy to subvert scepticism towards truth claims, embrace the ultra-unreal, and find novel ways of representing environmental (and other) issues. I show how, by “polluting” the documentary genre, the films present the environment as something with which society at large has an impure relation. Essentially, the films, through their narratives and aesthetics, can be seen to make the argument that the present impossibility of a clean environment requires impure forms of representation. In line with this, they refuse to participate in the environmental debate in terms of objectivity, progress, cost-benefit analysis, or logic, instead using the subjective, bizarre, and mystical to re-contextualise environmental woes and to creatively represent the complexity of China’s environmental situation.

Chapter 3 explores the domestic distribution of Chinese independent cinema, with a focus on underground screening spaces in Beijing. High-speed internet, DVDs, and cheap data storage have made the distribution of films potentially easy and fast, allowing, in theory, for a wide dissemination of any film. Yet, in spite of these technological advances and possibilities, domestic online censorship, the great Chinese firewall, and reluctance on the part of many filmmakers to uncontrollably release their films online, have made temporary underground venues an indispensable part of how independent Chinese cinema is watched in China, specifically in its larger cities. In addition, the chapter explores
how post-screening Q&A’s contribute to independent film’s aim to speak truth to power.

In order to understand the strategies employed to speak truth through film and the risks involved, to gain insight into the sites where independent Chinese cinema is shown and discussed, and to find out of whom its audiences consist, I conceptualise underground independent film screenings as transient alternative public spaces, and as sites where parrhesia takes place, albeit in a limited, often short-lived manner. Because acting out parrhesia through mainstream channels—by showing their films on television, in regular cinemas or online—is practically impossible for Chinese independent filmmakers, they must rely on alternative strategies to reach an audience.

On the basis of my fieldwork, I show that screening organisers and filmmakers often have a clear agenda to create a space for critical, counter-hegemonic debate, but that this agenda is hardly ever realised in a durable manner, mainly due to the Chinese socio-political and economic context. By focusing on the physical sites, film contents and contexts, and the type of publicness through which an alternative public space comes into being, I highlight several obstacles that independent screening culture as a form of parrhesia faces. These include the inability to ground itself in set locations; the active repression that any expansion of activities faces; the complicated relationship with contemporary channels of mass communication and social media; issues concerning reaching, engaging with, and holding on to audiences from outside of the filmmaking community in a manner that breaks the culture as consumption frame; and the hierarchical nature of Q&A sessions, which impede the development of a two-way conversation about the issues raised in the screened films.

Nevertheless, I argue that independent film screenings in Beijing still constitute a temporary alternative public space. In spite of all the drawbacks and complications, as well as their temporary nature, the screenings form a semi-public, small-scale outlet for counter hegemonic views and give audiences an opportunity to actively engage with these views, thus allowing for the films to assert their truths to a select part of society.

Having dealt with the production, content, and domestic distribution of independent Chinese cinema, the final chapter of this study investigates how independent cinema operates outside of China, with a particular focus on the
dissemination of Chinese independent cinema through film festivals. Film festivals have provided a consistent space of exhibition and distribution for independent Chinese films; in addition, film festival funds have been a steady source of funding for independent Chinese filmmakers. Film festivals constitute spaces where various conflicting versions of China meet and merge, are re-contextualised and translated outside of China. The influence of being selected and winning prizes at such festivals, moreover, reaches further than the locale where they take place, as festivals are also followed from afar by film enthusiasts online, as well as by the Chinese authorities, which actively track the films screened, the guests invited, and the press coverage.

In relation to the concept of parrhesia, film festivals outside China can be viewed as points in time and space where certain images and narratives are legitimized and presented as truths, and are given an audience and press coverage. A Chinese independent film being screened at festivals can be seen as an instance of parrhesia, as truth is publicly spoken at a site enmeshed within a range of global power structures. The chapter discusses what kinds of discourses, or truths, about and from China are presented at film festivals. Who is given a voice, under what pretexts and conditions, to whom are the truths of the selected films spoken, and to what extent do these truths make it back to China?

In order to address these issues, I analyse three modes of presentation through which Chinese independent cinema tends to be presented at international film festivals. In the first and most common mode, which I call the international mode, the films shown are directly related to the more general (non-China specific) agenda, position, or flavour of the film festival in which they are shown. They are screened as part of a selection of tens to hundreds of films from across the world irrespective of any specific Chinese circumstances they may address; for example, as creative documentaries at IDFA or avant-garde cinema at IFFR. This does not mean that these overarching festival principles create a neutral image of China, but it does raise the question of what kind of China fits within these film festivals’ overarching positions. The anti-state mode is a special selection or entire event devoted to independent Chinese films, usually framed in relation to Chinese political oppression, lack of creative freedom, and societal problems. Here, a specific position and agenda towards Chinese cinema and China is formulated, and films and side events are programmed accordingly. This type of festival or
programme is relevant because it usually focuses exclusively on independent cinema, offers these films a politicized platform, and has the specific aim of impacting debates about the state of China (and the Chinese state). Finally, in my analysis of the popular mode I dive into showcases of popular Chinese cinema, as is done at, for example, the Leiden International Film Festival, and the discourses surrounding these events. Even though this last type of event does not tend to screen many, if any, independent Chinese films, it participates in the competition to lay claim to the truth about China through the screening of films abroad and as such warrants attention in this study.

I argue that the three modes of exhibition, despite stemming from different ideas about how to best show the real China and how to define good cinema, and featuring distinct content, nonetheless exhibit an overlap in the discourses through which they present the screened films. Often, the films in all three modes are labelled as both showing a supposedly real China, which a foreign audience would otherwise not have access to, and as being the best and most representative films of their kind.

Through these four case studies, I reveal the specificities of what it means to speak truth to power through Chinese independent cinema and how it interacts with Foucault’s understanding of parrhesia. The chapters show how the entanglement of independent Chinese cinema with international discourses related to creativity and filmmaking, changes in filmmaking styles and strategies, restrictive socio-political circumstances, and globalised media outlets makes this a complex and multifaceted operation. Throughout this study I emphasise that although parrhesia in China is not always as fearless, frank, risky, or personal as conceptualised by Foucault, the spirit of Chinese independent cinema—which purports to offer a frank and critical reflection on contemporary Chinese reality—in spite of all its constraints, strategic manoeuvring, and contradictions does have the capacity to challenge uniformity and subvert power relations in China.
Samenvatting


Vijfentwintig jaar na de opkomst van onafhankelijke cinema in China is de filmcultuur die het voortbracht nog springlevens. Onafhankelijke Chinese cinema schept een alternatieve ruimte waar het officieel discours kritisch wordt beschouwd, gemarginaliseerde realiteiten worden vertegenwoordigd en een breed scala aan onderwerpen worden besproken. Het vermogen van onafhankelijke Chinese cinema om officiële waarheden ter discussie te stellen, en om in zijn productie, inhoud en distributie van mainstream normen af te wijken, vormt de kern van deze studie. Door een diepgaand onderzoek naar de productie, de inhoud en de distributie van onafhankelijke Chinese cinema, bevraagt deze studie hoe filmmakers zich op creatieve en kritische wijze positioneren in hedendaags China, en wat het betekent om een onwelgevallige waarheid te spreken (of in de termen van Michel Foucault- parrhesia) in het tijdperk van het ultra-onwerkelijke.

Ik definiëer hedendaagse onafhankelijke Chinese cinema als cinema gemaakt in China met een onafhankelijke geest. Praktisch betekent dit: films die buiten commerciële- of staatskanalen om worden gemaakt, terwijl zij de toewijding tonen om kritisch te reflecteren op de toestand van hedendaags China. Verder benader ik onafhankelijke Chinese cinema, in het licht van Ning Kens oproep om China via ultra-onwerkelijke literatuur te benaderen, als een experimentele artistieke kunstvorm, die de vreemdheid van China tracht te benaderen (Ning 2016).

Door onafhankelijke Chinese cinema te beschouwen als een specifieke vorm van parrhesia die zich richt op de complexe machtsstructuren in China in een tijdperk dat zich laat karakteriseren als ultra-onwerkelijk, tracht ik in dit onderzoek de volgende vraag te beantwoorden:

*Hoe functioneert onafhankelijke Chinese cinema als een middel om waarheid tegen de macht te spreken?*
In vier hoofdstukken wordt deze vraag behandeld via een reeks deelvragen, die zijn afgeleid van Foucaults benadering van parrhesia. Deze deelvragen hebben betrekking op de productie, inhoud, binnenlandse distributie en internationale distributie van Chinese onafhankelijke film, en luiden als volgt:

Wie zijn de onafhankelijke filmmakers? Waarom houden zij zich hiermee bezig en wat zijn de verwachte effecten? Waaraan onthelen filmmakers het recht om zichzelf te presenteren als waarheidsvertellers?

Over welke onderwerpen wordt het belangrijk geacht om de waarheid te spreken? Welke praktische, retorische en esthetische strategieën worden gebruikt om via film de waarheid te spreken?

Op welke locaties wordt onafhankelijke Chinese cinema vertoond en besproken? Wie zijn het publiek, zowel bedoeld als onbedoeld? Welke strategieën worden gebruikt om met de risico's van deze filmvertoningen om te gaan?

Op basis van interviews met onafhankelijke filmmakers en anderen die actief betrokken zijn bij onafhankelijke Chinese cinema, richt het eerste hoofdstuk zich op het discours rond onafhankelijke filmproductie. Het behandelt vragen over wat het betekent om een onafhankelijke filmmaker te zijn en om onafhankelijke films te maken. Door filmmakers te laten spreken over waarom en hoe hun films worden gemaakt, onthult het hoofdstuk terugkerende verhandelingen die zowel het filmproces, als het begrip van wat het betekent om deel te nemen aan parrhesia via onafhankelijke cinema, vormen.

Ik betoog dat de filmmakers twee verschillende discoursen gebruiken om hun werk te contextualiseren. Ten eerste, door een discours te gebruiken dat de auteurstheorie en artistieke creativiteit voedt, sluiten onafhankelijke Chinese filmmakers zich aan bij de internationale filmgemeenschap waarvan ze een integraal onderdeel zijn. Tegelijkertijd gebruiken ze ook een discours dat Chinese onafhankelijke cinema positioneert als een bijzondere vorm van parrhesia die verband houdt met, en wordt gevormd door verschillende specifiek Chinese omstandigheden. Ik stel dat de spanning tussen deze twee verhandelingen soms de parrhesiastische positionering van de filmmakers verzacht, maar dat dit essentieel
is om een plaats te verwerven binnen de internationale filmgemeenschap en om sommige risico’s te verminderen die gepaard gaan met het maken van onafhankelijke films in China.

Hoofdstuk 2 behandelt de inhoud van onafhankelijke Chinese cinema en biedt een diepgaande analyse van twee films: Behemoth (2015, Zhao Liang) en Li Wen at East Lake (2015, Li Luo). Beide films kunnen worden beschouwd als docufictie, een hybride genre dat het afgelopen decennium een prominente plaats heeft gekregen binnen de onafhankelijke Chinese filmwereld. In hoofdstuk 2 verken ik docufictie als een genre en probeer ik via deze twee specifieke films te begrijpen wat er gebeurt als cinema het ultra-onwerkelijke omarmt in de voortdurende zoektocht naar alternatieve manieren van representatie die in staat zijn waarheid te spreken over de sociale en milieukosten van de snelle economische ontwikkeling van China.

Tussen verschillende dominante thema’s binnen onafhankelijke Chinese cinema kiest deze studie ervoor zich te richten op twee films met een milieuthematiek omdat het milieu door onafhankelijke filmmakers, de autoriteiten en de bevolking wordt onderschreven als een belangrijk onderwerp om de waarheid van te kennen en om over te spreken. Daarnaast wordt het gezien als een belangrijk onderwerp voor ultra-onwerkelijke literatuur (Ning 2016). Ten slotte balanceert het debat over het milieu precair tussen onderwerpen en vormen van representatie die aan de ene kant door de Chinese staat worden aangemoedigd en aan de andere kant hardhandig worden onderdrukt, waardoor spreken over het milieu in China een riskant parrhesiastisch spel is.

Door mijn analyse van de films stel ik dat docufictie een strategie biedt om wantrouwen ten aanzien van waarheidsclaims te ondermijnen; het ultra-onwerkelijke te omarmen en nieuwe manieren te vinden om milieu (en andere) kwesties af te beelden. Ik laat zien hoe de films, door het documentaire genre te 'vervuilen', de natuurlijke omgeving presenteren als iets waarmee de samenleving als geheel een onzuivere relatie heeft. In de films kan worden gelezen hoe de huidige onmogelijkheid van een schone leefomgeving onzuivere vormen van representatie vereist. In lijn hiermee weigeren ze deel te nemen aan het milieudebat in termen van objectiviteit, vooruitgang, kosten-batenanalyse of logica, en spelen in plaats daarvan met het subjectieve, bizarre en mystieke om
milieuproblemen te her-contextualiseren binnen de complexiteit van China's milieusituatie.

Hoofdstuk 3 verkent de binnenlandse distributie van onafhankelijke Chinese cinema, met de nadruk op ondergrondse filmvertoning in Beijing. Snel internet, dvd's en goedkope dataopslag hebben de distributie van films potentieler gemakkelijk en snel gemaakt, wat in theorie een brede verspreiding van films mogelijk maakt. Ondanks deze technologische mogelijkheden hebben online censuur alsmede de onwil van veel filmmakers om hun films oncontroleerbaar online uit te brengen, tijdelijke underground-locaties tot een onmisbaar onderdeel gemaakt van hoe onafhankelijke Chinese cinema wordt bekeken in China, met name in de grotere steden.

Om de strategieën te begrijpen die worden gebruikt om de waarheid te spreken door middel van film; de risico's die ermee gepaard gaan te doorgronden; inzicht te krijgen in de plaatsen waar onafhankelijke Chinese cinema wordt vertoond en besproken, en om erachter te komen uit wie het publiek bestaat, beschouw ik ondergrondse onafhankelijke filmvertoningen als vluchtige alternatieve openbare ruimtes, en als locaties waar parrhesia plaatsvindt - zij het op een beperkte, vaak kortstondige manier. Omdat het praktiseren van parrhesia via reguliere kanalen - door hun films op televisie, in reguliere bioscopen of online te vertonen - praktisch onmogelijk is voor Chinese onafhankelijke filmmakers, moeten ze vertrouwen op alternatieve strategieën om een publiek te bereiken.

Op basis van veldwerk laat ik zien dat screeningorganisatoren en filmmakers vaak een duidelijke agenda hebben om ruimte te creëren voor een kritisch, contra-hegemonisch debat, maar dat deze agenda vrijwel nooit op een duurzame manier wordt gerealiseerd, vooral door de Chinese sociaal-politieke- en economische context. Door me te richten op de fysieke locaties, filminhoud en -contexten en het soort openbaarheid waardoor een alternatieve openbare ruimte ontstaat, belicht ik verschillende obstakels die onafhankelijke screeningcultuur als een vorm van parrhesia tegenkomt. Deze omvatten het onvermogen om op vaste locaties te aarden; de actieve repressie waarmee elke uitbreiding van activiteiten wordt geconfronteerd; de gecompliceerde relatie met hedendaagse kanalen van massamediacommunicatie en sociale media; kwesties met betrekking tot het bereiken van, contact houden met en vasthouden aan het publiek van buiten de filmgemeenschap op een manier die het kader van cultuur als consumptiegoed
doorbreekt; en het hiërarchische karakter van vraag-en-antwoordsessies, die de ontwikkeling belemmeren van een tweerichtingsgesprek over de kwesties die in de vertoonde films aan de orde komen.

Desalniettemin ben ik van mening dat onafhankelijke filmvertoningen in Peking nog steeds een tijdelijke alternatieve openbare ruimte vormen. Ondanks alle nadelen en complicaties, evenals hun tijdelijke aard, vormen de vertoningen een semi-publiekelijk en kleinschalige uitaakklep voor tegengestelde hegemoniale opvattingen, en geven ze het publiek de kans om actief met deze opvattingen om te gaan, waardoor de films hun waarheden aan een select deel van de samenleving kunnen vertonen.

Na de productie, inhoud en binnenlandse distributie van onafhankelijke Chinese cinema te hebben behandeld, onderzoekt het laatste hoofdstuk van deze studie hoe onafhankelijke cinema buiten China opereert, met bijzondere aandacht voor de verspreiding van Chinese onafhankelijke cinema via filmfestivals. Filmfestivals hebben gezorgd voor een consistente ruimte voor tentoonstelling en distributie voor onafhankelijke Chinese films; daarnaast zijn filmfestivalfondsen een vaste financieringsbron voor onafhankelijke Chinese filmmakers. Filmfestivals zijn ruimtes waar verschillende tegenstrijdige versies van China elkaar ontmoeten, en samensmelten, opnieuw worden gecontextualiseerd en vertaald buiten China. De invloed van het worden geselecteerd en het winnen van prijzen op dergelijke festivals reikt bovendien verder dan de locatie waar ze plaatsvinden, aangezien festivals ook van ver worden gevolgd door filmfiehebbers online, evenals door de Chinese autoriteiten, die de vertoonde films actief volgen.

Met betrekking tot het concept van parrhesia kunnen filmfestivals buiten China worden gezien als plaatsen in tijd en ruimte waar bepaalde beelden en verhalen worden gelegitimeerd en gepresenteerd als waarheden, en verkrijgen ze een publiek en persaandacht. Een Chinese onafhankelijke film die op festivals wordt vertoond, kan worden gezien als een voorbeeld van parrhesia, aangezien de waarheid publiekelijk wordt uitgesproken op een locatie die gevestigd is in een reeks wereldwijde machtsstructuren. Het hoofdstuk bespreekt welke soorten verhandelingen of waarheden over en uit China worden gepresenteerd op filmfestivals. Wie krijgt een stem, onder welke voorwaarden, tot wie worden de waarheden van de geselecteerde films gesproken en in hoeverre vinden deze waarheden hun weg terug naar China?
Om deze vragen te beantwoorden, analyseer ik drie presentatiewijzen die vaak gebruikt worden om Chinese cinema op internationale filmfestivals mee te vertonen. In de eerste en meest voorkomende modus, die ik de internationale modus noem, houden de vertoonde films rechtstreeks verband met een de algemene (niet-China-specifieke) agenda, positie of smaak van het filmfestival waarin ze worden vertoond. Ze worden vertoond als onderdeel van een selectie van tentallen tot honderden films van over de hele wereld, ongeacht de specifieke Chinese omstandigheden van de films; bijvoorbeeld als creatieve documentaires bij IDFA of avant-garde cinema bij IFFR. Dit betekent niet dat deze overkoepelende festivalprincipes een neutraal beeld van China creëren, maar het roept wel de vraag op wat voor soort China past binnen de overkoepelende posities van deze filmfestivals. De tweede modus noem ik de "antistaatsmodus", dit is een speciale selectie of een volledig evenement dat is gewijd aan onafhankelijke Chinese films, meestal ingelijst in verband met Chinese politieke onderdrukking, het gebrek aan creatieve vrijheid en maatschappelijke problemen. Hier wordt een specifieke positie en agenda richting Chinese cinema en China geformuleerd en worden films en side events daarop geprogrammeerd. Dit type festival of programma is relevant omdat het meestal uitsluitend gericht is op onafhankelijke cinema die dit soort films een gepolitiseerd platform biedt, en het specifieke doel heeft om debatten over China te beïnvloeden. Ten slotte behandel ik de populaire modus, in showcases van populaire Chinese cinema, zoals bijvoorbeeld wordt gedaan op het Leiden International Film Festival, en de discours rondom deze evenementen. Hoewel dit laatste type evenement weinig tot geen onafhankelijke Chinese films vertoont, neemt het deel aan de concurrentiestrijd om de waarheid over China te claimen door films uit het buitenland te vertonen en verdient daarom aandacht binnen dit onderzoek.

Ik beargumenteer dat de drie tentoonstellingsmodi, ondanks dat ze voortkomen uit verschillende ideeën hoe het echte China het beste kan worden laten zien en hoe goede cinema wordt gedefinieerd, en met verschillende inhoud, toch overlap vertonen in de discours waarmee ze de vertoonde films presenteren. Vaak worden de films in alle drie de modi bestempeld als "het echte China", waar een buitenlands publiek anders geen toegang tot zou hebben - en als de beste en meest representatieve films in hun soort.
Door middel van deze vier overkoepelende casestudy’s onthult deze studie een aantal specifieke kenmerken van wat het betekent om een onwelgevallige waarheid tegen de macht te spreken via Chinese onafhankelijke cinema en hoe dit samenwerkt met Foucaults begrip van parrhesia. De hoofdstukken laten zien hoe de verstrekking van onafhankelijke Chinese cinema met hun focus op een internationaal discours over creativiteit en cinema; veranderingen in stijlen en strategieën; restrictieve sociaal-politieke omstandigheden en geglobaliseerde mediakanalen, een complexe en veelzijdige operatie zijn. Tijdens deze studie benadruk ik dat hoewel parrhesia in China niet altijd zo onbevreesd, openhartig, riskant of persoonlijk is als geconceptualiseerd wordt door Foucault, de geest van de Chinese onafhankelijke cinema - die streeft een openhartige en kritische reflectie te bieden op de hedendaagse Chinese realiteit - ondanks al zijn beperkingen, strategisch manoeuvreren en tegenstrijdigheden het vermogen heeft om de schijnbare uniformiteit in China uit te dagen en de machtsverhoudingen in China te ondermijnen.