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**Tango with the Global, National, and Local: New Multi-functional  
Organizations in the Chinese Independent Documentary Ecosystem**

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**Tango with the Global, National, and Local: New Multi-functional  
Organizations in the Chinese Independent Documentary Ecosystem**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

For my parents, Ming Yang and Xiaoyan Yang.

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## **Abstract**

# **Tango with the Global, National, and Local: New Multi-functional Organizations in the Chinese Independent Documentary Ecosystem**

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Compared to the early days of China's New Documentary Movement in the 1990s, Chinese independent documentary in the past decade has become more diverse in topic and style, thanks to technologies such as digital video cameras and the internet. Independent documentaries capture a fast-changing China in progress, and have thus drawn scholarly attention from cultural or social studies perspectives. However, industrial development in the past decade has often been neglected in favor of textual analysis of films. Since the marketization of independent documentaries in the 1990s was mainly through international film festivals, and a domestic industry has been lacking, it is easy to assume that Chinese independent documentarians today still have to follow the same path as their counterparts in the 1990s. However, my research on the Chinese independent documentary scene in Beijing in 2009 showed me a picture of a burgeoning domestic industry for independent documentaries, with a handful of newly emerged multi-functional independent film organizations practicing production, distribution and exhibition. Since a real industry has not yet formed, I use "ecosystem" instead of

“industry” in the context of Chinese independent documentary. This study compares three representative organizations which are different from each other in nature and emphases, from their birth and evolution to their work and strategies. I argue that these organizations have created new possibilities and opportunities for today’s Chinese independent documentaries, through their different strategies in balancing themselves in a three-legged system of the global, national and local forces and resources.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Before 1990, independent film production in China was impossible. All studios were state-owned; internet and digital video (DV) cameras did not exist, making film knowledge exclusive to film schools. Although the “Reform and Opening-Up” policy begun in 1978, whose keywords are modernization, marketization and democracy, has gradually and steadily opened China’s doors to the global economy, its steps on the road to cultural and political reform have been hesitant and difficult, and even went backwards after the June 4th violence in Tiananmen Square in 1989. To maintain a socialist ideological base, the government has been continually cautious about media, which has a history of being the Chinese Communist Party’s mouthpiece, especially during the notorious Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Even with the privatization of the studio system and emergence of independent films in the 1990s, free media expression has been restricted by the State—to mostly effective results—through a censorship system in both publication media such as newspapers<sup>1</sup> and sound and image (*yinxiang*) media such as television shows, radio programs and films. This latter category of media fall under the supervision and legislation of the State Administration of Radio, Television, and Film (SARFT). The relationship between SARFT, the official system it represents and Chinese independent cinema is an important context to understand before studying Chinese independent documentary.

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<sup>1</sup> In his article “Media Control in China,” He Qinglian states, “Media Control in China describes how China’s much-lauded economic modernization has allowed the government to camouflage its pervasive control under the glossy façade of consumerism, with a shift from ham-fisted censorship to an elaborate architecture of Party supervision, amorphous legislation, stringent licensing mechanisms, handpicked personnel and concentrated media ownership.” Qinglian He, “Media Control in China,” China Rights Forum 1 (2004): 11.

## **SARFT, “THE SYSTEM” AND THE DEFINITION OF CHINESE INDEPENDENT FILM**

SARFT evolved from a governmental office founded in 1949, just before the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The office originally only dealt with radio broadcasts, before television and film became popular public media, then gradually incorporated television and film into its area of supervision. By 1986, it had evolved into the State Department of Radio, Television and Film. When SARFT was founded in 1998, quite a few of its main leaders were from this former department. Administratively, it is directly under the State Council, China’s highest administrative authority.<sup>2</sup> The Bureau of Film Administration is one of dozens of offices under SARFT. According to SARFT’s official website, this office “guides and oversees film production, distribution, and exhibition” and “organizes censorship of films and relevant film channel television programs, and extends and revokes film production and exhibition permits,” in addition to other film-related legislative work.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, censorship of Chinese film was implemented before the founding of SARFT. In his study of Chinese cinema from 1949 to 1986, Paul Clark points out that “a system for the licensing of approved films was promulgated in the mid-1950s.”<sup>4</sup> This continued in the 1960s, about which Clark states that “unwanted elements could be weeded out from a written script before money was expended on rendering it into the much more diverse and potentially ambivalent combination of sight and sound on a

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<sup>2</sup> "Guangbo Yingshi Jigou Yangce," The State Administration of Radio Film and Television, accessed August 5, 2011, last modified August 2, 2007, <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2007/08/02/20070904091519930141.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Dianying Guanlijū,” The State Administration of Radio Film and Television, accessed August 5, 2011, last modified August 7, 2008, <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2008/08/07/20070909004206220673.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 34.

screen.”<sup>5</sup> In this censorship context, even after the “Reform and Opening-Up” policy of 1978, free expression in film texts could not open up as much as the economy did.

Censorship is required not only of film scripts, but also after production, prior to exhibition and distribution. One famous example in the 1980s was the banned film *Unrequited Love* (1981), which told a tragic story about a painter couple who were mistreated during various political movements after they returned to the new China from abroad. It has never been publicly exhibited because “censors found the film too strong in its condemnation of past political restriction.”<sup>6</sup>

In the tightly state-controlled cinema of the 1980s, documentaries, whose realistic nature could make them more direct and critical than fictional films, were all state-produced, mostly for propaganda or education purposes, with voice-over narrations operating as a mouthpiece of the CCP. In this background, an independent documentary production that was not made to please the censors was a milestone. In 1990, Wu Wenguang, a television station employee, made the first Chinese independent documentary, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990), with equipment borrowed from the television station. *Bumming in Beijing* followed five independent migrant artists and their struggle in Beijing to maintain their artistic pursuits outside of the state system. The film was shot with a hand-held camera, natural lighting and sound and composed of verité scenes and intermittent interviews. Some of the on-the-spot, emotional scenes of the artists as real individuals had been never seen in state-produced documentaries, such as a scene when a female painter has a nervous breakdown in her studio. Wu Wenguang calmly recorded the entire emotional moment, from the painter’s screaming to her lying on the floor, devastated. These kinds of scenes were groundbreaking in Chinese cinema

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<sup>5</sup> Clark, 94-95.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, 155.

at a time when real individual voices and emotions were commonly muted and buried, both in society and in media. *Bumming in Beijing* toured many international film festivals, including but not exclusively Hong Kong International Film Festival, Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and Berlin International Film Festival, but it is only accessible to its domestic audience through the internet and grassroots film club screenings.

*Bumming in Beijing* has been referred to as China's first independent documentary because of its private production mode, independent aesthetics, and content differentiating itself from state-produced documentaries. However, the definition of independent film in the context of Chinese cinema has been ambiguous since then. Unlike American independent cinema, described by Geoff King as existing "in the overlapping territory between Hollywood and a number of alternatives: the experimental 'avant-garde', the more accessible 'art' or 'quality' cinema, the politically engaged, the low-budget exploitation film and the more generally offbeat or eccentric,"<sup>7</sup> Chinese independent cinema is often defined against "the system" (*tizhi*), which indicates both the mainstream mode of media production, exhibition and distribution largely controlled and censored by SARFT, and the state-favored ideological, artistic and content patterns shared by films made in "the system." Chris Berry describes independent Chinese film from the perspective of mode of production:

To this day, an independent Chinese film is generally understood to be one that was initiated and controlled by the filmmaker her- or himself and not made within 'the system' (*tizhi*). In other words, it is not part of the approved internal annual production schedule of either a state-owned film studio or television station.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Berry, "Independent Chinese: Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, and Chinese Documentary," in *From Underground to Independent : Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, ed. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 111.

The privatization of state-owned studios in the mid-1990s challenged the standard practice of defining Chinese independent cinema solely according to mode of production, or through comparison with state-owned studio productions. “The system” no longer means production by state-owned studios or television stations. What has not changed about “the system” is that all films produced, exhibited and distributed within it have to pass SARFT’s censorship. While “the system” is still commonly used as a backdrop against which to describe independent cinema, films made within the system are also often defined as films made with the intention of submitting them to censorship. It is in this context that the practice of “self-censorship” (*ziwo shencha*) arises. “Self-censorship” refers to a voluntary censoring of film content before submission to SARFT in order to weed out the elements that may not pass SARFT’s censorship. This reduces the risk of a film’s production and distribution being banned or delayed, and prevents time being spent on the procedures involved in submitting revisions for approval. Both official censorship and self-censorship are necessary practices for a film, an organization or a company in the Chinese film industry to survive within the system, but both confine free expression in Chinese cinema, which independent cinema values. Essentially, the censorship system in China determines the differences in content and form of independent films from films made within the system. This is why during my encounters with independent filmmakers, producers, and festival programmers in Beijing in 2009, many used words like “independent spirit” (*duli jingshen*) or “independent thoughts” (*duli sixiang*), rather than mode of production or distribution, to define Chinese independent cinema.

Whether the definition of Chinese independent film takes an industrial or textual approach, films made outside the system and films made with an independent spirit often overlap each other. Rather than defining the terms, Yaxuan Zhang categorizes

independent cinema more appropriately by distinguishing it from other parallel Chinese cinemas: “independent” or “underground” films distinguish themselves from the government-subsidized “Main Melody” films, which are didactic, seeking to strengthen socialism and encourage patriotism. Furthermore, independent films are not commercial, profit-oriented films encouraged by the government to entertain the domestic audience.<sup>9</sup> Independent documentaries discussed in the present thesis fall in Yaxuan Zhang’s category of independent cinema, and the system discussed above will be frequently used to evaluate the level of independence of organizations that produces, exhibits and distributes independent documentaries.

#### **THE NEW DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT AND ITS EVOLUTIONS**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, around the same time that Wu Wenguang made *Bumming in Beijing*, a group of former television station employees who had both filmmaking knowledge and access to equipment like Wu Wenguang became pioneer independent documentary filmmakers. These pioneers, including Duan Jinchuan and Jiang Yue, were joined by others in the 1990s such as Hao Zhiqiang, Hu Jie, and Zhao Liang. This independent documentary boom was referred to as the “New Documentary Movement” by Lu Xinyu.<sup>10</sup> In a recent article, Lu Xinyu admits that the definition of this movement “has not reached a consensus.” Instead, he sees it as an ongoing process, and offers the following description:

One common characteristic of the New Documentary Movement filmmakers is their rebellion against the old, rigid aspects of Maoist utopianism and established

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<sup>9</sup> Yaxuan Zhang, "Wuxian de Yingxiang: 1990 Niandai Mo Yilai de Zhongguo Duli Dianying Zhuangkuang," *Tianya* 2004, no. 2: 152.

<sup>10</sup> Xinyu Lu, *Documenting China: The New Documentary Movement in China (Jilu Zhongguo: Dangdai Zhongguo Xin Jilu Yundong)* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2003).

political ideologies in China. They presented a challenge especially to the hegemonic notion of 'reality' and how it should be represented in film.<sup>11</sup>

Although this is a shared characteristic of independent documentaries made before and after the turn of the century, Chinese independent documentary cinema in the past decade has shown new traits in modes of production, exhibition and distribution, as well as in content and styles.

In the beginning of the New Documentary Movement, most films shared a similar topic with *Bumming in Beijing*: people living on the periphery of society whose lifestyles and states of mind were largely impacted by China's combination of marketization and globalization with barely-changed ideology. Recent independent documentaries, though, have more diverse topics. They often focus on an individual's or a group of individuals' lives and emotions, especially underrepresented individuals; the poor; the neglected or discriminated against, such as Christians, homosexuals, AIDS patients, etc. A large portion of independent documentaries fall under this category, such as Cui Zi'en's *Night Scene* (2004) on male sex workers in Beijing and Huang Ruxiang's *Up the Mountain* (2009) on a Chinese Christian intellectual. Social issues and historical moments are also major topics, such as Du Haibin's *1428* (2009) on the devastating 2008 earthquake in Sichuan and Ou Ning's *Meishi Street* (2006) on forced demolition. There are also a smaller number of independent documentaries that take a retrospective and critical perspective on the CCP's recent history avoided by the mainstream media, such as Hu Jie's *Though I Am Gone* (2006) on the Cultural Revolution and Wang Libo's *Buried* (2009) on the responsibility of the China Earthquake Administration for the large number of deaths during the Great Tangshan Earthquake in 1976. Finally, in addition to these

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<sup>11</sup> Xinyu Lu, ed. Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, trans. Jia Tan and Lisa Rofel "Rethinking China's New Documentary Movement: Engagement with the Social," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Xinyu Lu, and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 15.

somewhat socially or politically critical topics, some independent documentarians are also interested in cultural or environmental topics, such as Gu Tao's *Aoluguya*, *Aoluguya* (2007) on the Ewenti people's traditional rituals in the forest and their new living environment in a government settlement.

Chinese independent documentarians have also shown a tendency to experiment with different styles. *Night Scene* is an experimental piece combining a few poetic, fictional scenes with documentary verité scenes. Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2003) challenges the audience's patience with its nine-hour running time. *Buried* is composed of talking head interviews. Wu Haohao's *Criticizing China* (2009) documents the director's filmmaking process with his intrusive camera and confrontations with his subjects, a group of elderly citizens who gather in a park every day to discuss social events and political issues, while also documenting these subjects from an observer's standpoint. In 2005, Wu Wenguang initiated The China Villager Documentary Project, teaching villagers the basics of using and then giving them DV cameras to document their villages, their lives and those of their neighbors. Many independent documentarians have not had any academic education on filmmaking, which makes the exploration of styles in Chinese independent documentaries innovative and flourishing.

The change of makeup of independent documentarians is another new trait in the past decade. In the 1990s, most of the pioneer directors worked at television stations, which provided experience in filmmaking and equipment resources. This changed with the advent of digital video in China in 1997 and the flourishing coverage of the internet around the same time. These new technologies made it possible for anyone who could afford a digital camera to make videos and learn filmmaking. DVDs, especially numerous pirated DVDs of foreign films that include behind-the-scenes extras, became convenient filmmaking textbooks. Filmmaking was no longer mysterious. While fictional films may

require actors and scripts, documentary filmmaking is relatively less complicated. At the same time, Chinese society and Chinese people had gone through drastic social changes and issues that came with the domestic reforms and globalization, such as corruption, inequalities in distribution, soaring real estate prices, commercialization, polarization in income levels, unemployment, and human rights violations. Living in a fast-changing China with plenty of documentary topics, people naturally turn their lenses to recording the China that they do not see on television. The makeup of independent documentary directors has become so complex that it is difficult to categorize them by former profession or background. Some of them do not have a full-time job and stable income; some have a full-time job not related to filmmaking; and some are university faculty, television station workers or media workers who make independent documentaries outside their work.

In general, Chinese independent documentarians and documentaries have noticeably boomed in the past decade. However, despite the dynamic evolution of Chinese independent documentary, the domestic industrial situation for these films has not progressed much. Strict film censorship continues to keep the door to domestic theaters and television stations closed to independent films with sensitive topics. Many independent directors still try their luck at international film festivals, where they hope their works will garner recognition, and thus overseas funding and personnel support, or have their films distributed through foreign channels, but this often comes with the compromise of giving up domestic distribution. In an announcement made on March 10th, 1998, SARFT required all films to pass a special film festival censorship before being sent to regional or international film festivals. In case of a violation of this policy,

both the production companies and the filmmakers are punished.<sup>12</sup> Although SARFT has loosened restrictions on international film submissions since 2003, when a number of independent filmmakers and their films formerly banned from submission to international film festivals without SARFT's permission received late permission, none of the films were documentaries. The realistic, on-the-spot nature that distinguishes documentary as a cinematic form is more powerful and critical in free expression in the context of today's China, and thus documentaries have more difficulty passing SARFT's censorship and gaining a share of the domestic film industry.

### **MULTI-FUNCTIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CHINESE INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY "ECOSYSTEM"**

The lack of a domestic independent documentary industry has resulted in widespread scholarly neglect of the industrial evolution in the past decade. However, my stay in Beijing From May to July, 2009 and ethnographic research of contemporary Chinese independent documentary during that period opened my eyes to the diverse industrial practices and strategies of contemporary independent documentaries, unimaginable in the 1990s, when independent documentarians could only search for producers, exhibition and distribution opportunities from abroad. The evolution resulting in diverse opportunities for production, exhibition and distribution is largely facilitated by a handful of non-governmental multi-functional organizations and companies that emerged after the turn of the century. The present study examines three such organizations: Fanhall Films, Beijing Channel Zero Media (CZM), and CNEX. The questions this study seeks to answer are: How did these organizations come into being? What are their roles and strategies in the Chinese independent documentary scene? How

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<sup>12</sup> "Guanyu Yinfa Juban, *Canjia Zhongwai Dianyingjie, Zhan Huodong Guanli Guiding de Tongzhi*," in *1998/1999 Zhongguo Dianying Nianjian* (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2000), 12.

do they differ from each other in their practices and strategies in today's globalized China with strict state control over media products? Furthermore, how do the differences influence the independent spirit of these organizations and their selection of films to promote?

To answer these questions, this study will examine the above three organizations from their origins to their practice today. These organizations share the same motivation of promoting Chinese independent documentary, yet differ in their origins and nature. Since the beginning of the century, during the same time that Chinese independent documentaries have gained more of a presence in international film festivals, grassroots film clubs have also emerged in Chinese cities, providing independent films domestic screening venues in university classrooms, cafes, bars and bookstores. Fanhall Films is an example of a multi-functional organization that evolved from such a film club. As such, the grassroots nature of the predecessor film club was inherited by Fanhall Films. Such organizations resist state control by practicing as a non-governmental organization outside "the system," and strategically use their connections with the local government, local community and global funding, film and personnel resources to promote independent documentaries with sensitive topics that would never pass SARFT's censorship. In contrast to Fanhall Films, some organizations began their existence in direct response to a flourishing of independent documentary works and seek to incorporate independent documentary either within the system, such as CZM, or with one foot in and one foot outside the system, such as CNEX. The more an organization is involved with the system, the more self-censorship they have to practice on their selection of documentaries, and their independent spirit is reduced accordingly. With these three example organizations, even their physical locations are indicative of their level of independence: Fanhall Films is located on the edge of suburban Beijing, CZM is

in downtown Beijing and CNEX is in between the other two. Organizations like CZM and CNEX value industrial survival and long-term improvement as most urgent for Chinese independent documentaries, while organizations like Fanhall Films believe it is most important to maintain an independent spirit and promote the cultural and social impact of domestic documentary filmmaking.

Despite the nature of the organizations, in today's globalized China, they all have to place themselves in a triangle with whose points are forces and resources from the global, national and local, although they do not often balance themselves in the center of the triangle with equal forces from all three points. The more independent an organization is, the closer they rely on local support, and vice versa. Furthermore, these three forces are not immutable. These organizations survive and develop by flexibly changing their strategies according to the changes of the three forces. For example, when the state control of their activities was loose, Fanhall Films chose to screen films at their annual China Documentary Film Festival with politically sensitive topics that had never been exhibited domestically, as a means of testing their boundaries. One such film is Zhao Liang's *Petition* (2009), a film following petitioners who are persecuted by their local government and neglected by the governmental office in Beijing responsible for dealing with their petitions. When the government pressured Fanhall Films to take down any writing about *Petition* on their website FANHALL.com, they followed the order immediately in order to protect the whole website. When the website had to close down earlier this year, they immediately created a Google group and transferred the data over.

This strategic flexibility forms a tango-like relationship among the organizations and the global, national and local forces, especially the national force. The state may lead the tango, but the organizations do not always have to closely follow its steps. Their next move is unpredictable, yet they are almost always aware to take a step back while being

pushed to keep their balance. These organizations have established multifunctional roles in the Chinese independent documentary scene. They function as producers, distributors, film festival programmers, training camps, forum organizers, and film library archives. While the filmmakers explore film styles and content, these organizations are pioneers in building up an industrial framework in China for independent documentary cinema. This thesis will examine these organizations, their strategies and industrial functions in the context of the “ecosystem” of Chinese independent documentary.

“Ecosystem” (*shengtai*) is a concept to describe today’s Chinese independent documentary scene inspired by a comment made by Zhu Rikun, the founder and head of Fanhall Films, when I interviewed him in 2009. Zhu used this word out of his personal preference of discussing independent documentary in a cultural instead of industrial context, and also because China does not yet have a mature independent documentary industry.<sup>13</sup> In the context of today’s China, I expand the concept of “ecosystem” and argue that “ecosystem” better describes the situation in China when a burgeoning industrial embryo is beginning to form around a group of multi-functional organizations. As such, this concept will form the part of the basis of the thesis of this study (*too many ofs?*) with its three indications.

First, “ecosystem” implies a living, growing and evolving environment, which is what is happening with the content, form, mode of production and distribution of today’s Chinese independent documentaries. Second, the inhabitants of an ecosystem interact with and are related to each other, just like the complicated relationships between domestic organizations, documentarians and their films, and global, national and local forces. Finally, the interactions in a living ecosystem result in a flourishing variety of

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<sup>13</sup> Rikun Zhu, interview by author, Beijing, China, June 19, 2009.

surviving forms and strategies with limitless possibilities—a perfect analogy to the explorations brought about by these domestic multi-functional organizations.

In studying the three major organizations in today's Chinese independent documentary ecosystem listed above, CZM, CNEX and Fanhall Films, I will argue that the distinctions between these organizations are mainly initiated by their founders' and leaders' personal beliefs and pursuits in working with independent documentaries, and are exemplified through the different lengths they take in their relationships with the global, national and local forces among which Chinese independent documentary production, exhibition and distribution balance themselves. By revealing the nature, activities and strategies of these organizations, I also hope to show how they are pioneering a burgeoning industry by taking roles as producers, distributors, and cultural agents that promote and improve independent documentary filmmaking and help maintain its independent spirit in both content and form.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

No studies of Chinese independent documentary exist that examine recent evolution in both film texts and ecosystem. Lu Xinyu's influential book, *Documenting China: The New Documentary Movement in China (Jilu Zhongguo: Dangdai Zhongguo Xin Jilu Yundong)* consists of interviews with pioneer independent documentarians and analysis of the characteristics of the New Documentary Movement. When the book was published in 2003, many multi-functional organizations were being formed, and the independent documentary ecosystem was going through an evolution that caused it to differ from the 1990s ecosystem in everything from content and form to production, exhibition and distribution. Two compilations on Chinese independent cinema published after Lu Xinyu's book cover more recent studies. They are *From Underground to*

*Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, edited by Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang and published in 2006, and *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, edited by Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel and published in 2009. In both compilations, most articles on Chinese independent documentaries are far more interested in their content and form than the evolving context for their production, screening, marketing and distribution. Cultural and sociological studies along with textual studies of films are more common than industrial studies of Chinese independent documentaries. Among all twelve articles in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*, which was published after the birth of all the organizations this study will introduce and examine, none of them took an industrial approach, or paid more than a modicum attention to the new traits of the industrial evolution in the independent documentary ecosystem.

*From Underground to Independent* compiles eight articles studying different aspects of Chinese independent cinema, including its social and political dynamics, characteristics and problems of film texts and the New Chinese Documentary Movement, but only one out of eight articles studies organizations in the independent documentary ecosystem. This article is Seio Nakajima's ethnographic study from 2003 to 2004 on independent film screening clubs in Beijing.<sup>14</sup> Nakajima divides these film clubs into four categories: politically-oriented, commercially-oriented, "art for art's sake" and lastly, both artistic and commercial.

In a later article selected in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*, Nakajima studies the public sphere and discourse established in these film clubs, especially through the discussions during post-screening Q&A sessions with independent

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<sup>14</sup> Seio Nakajima, "Film Clubs in Beijing: The Cultural Consumption of Chinese Independent Films," in *From Underground to Independent : Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 161-187.

documentary filmmakers, and argues that the film clubs and their activities function as “two different orders of counter-discourse” to “the dominant discourse presented by the government”, which are “(1) documentary films, as discourse, shown and viewed, and (2) discourses on documentary films.”<sup>15</sup> Although Nakajima alertly pays attention to the new environment around the independent documentary films and filmmakers and touches the discourse-counter discourse relationship between the government and independent documentary, his study does not address the industrial functions of the film clubs in the development of independent documentaries, much less discuss the multi-functional organizations that emerged after the film clubs, and which have more cultural, social and industrial significance in the Chinese independent documentary ecosystem.

The existence of these organizations and the functions they serve make Chris Berry’s depiction of Chinese documentarians’ position in relation to the powers influencing their filmmaking, exhibition and distribution questionable:

Chinese documentarians define themselves in relation to a three-legged system, composed of the party-state apparatus, the marketized economy, and the foreign media and art organizations that have built up a presence in China today.<sup>16</sup>

The system Chinese documentarians find themselves in today has been complicated by the emergence and development of domestic multi-functional independent media organizations with a special focus on independent documentary. It is worth noting that many of the major organizations are based in Beijing, the political and cultural capital of China. All of the case studies of representational organizations in this study are Beijing-based.

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<sup>15</sup> Seio Nakajima, "Watching Documentary: Critical Public Discourses and Contemporary Urban Chinese Film Clubs," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement : For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry et al. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 117-134.

<sup>16</sup> Berry, 109.

Nakajima's study on film clubs in Beijing is not the only scholarly attention on independent cinema in Beijing. Since Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers*, Beijing has been a main location for independent documentary production. Paola Voci studies Beijing as both a background and a protagonist in the texts of independent documentaries. Voci views the city as a "twilight zone" where "unexpected things happen in a space between reality and unreality."<sup>17</sup> Although Voci is discussing Beijing as it is portrayed in film texts, this metaphor also applies to the evolution and environment of independent documentary production and distribution in Beijing, as, in the city that is the seat of state power and SARFT—and thus most easily overseen by them—the number of independent documentary productions, paradoxically, continues to rise. Screenings of these films are accessible in dispersed non-official venues throughout the city. Multi-functional independent media organizations promote independent documentary filmmaking, exhibition and distribution, and thus have added vitality and new possibilities to the Chinese independent documentary ecosystem.

The expanding cultural and industrial influence of these organizations on Chinese independent documentary cannot be ignored. It is a scholarly oversight that an industrial perspective of the news traits and changes of Chinese independent documentary in the past decade is lacking in current studies. The present study hopes to shed new light on this subject matter and add a stroke on the blank page of scholarly study of Chinese independent documentary from an industrial studies approach.

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<sup>17</sup> Paola Voci, "Blowup Beijing: The City as a Twilight Zone," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement : For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Xinyu Lu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 100.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The main methodology of this study is a combination of ethnographic participant observation, media industry analysis and case studies. I conducted an ethnographic study of multi-functional organizations in Beijing from May to July, 2009. I visited the physical locations of these organizations, participated in and observed their activities, including film festivals, social parties, and forums. I interviewed face-to-face three leaders and founders of multiple organizations, five international film festival directors and curators who attended the film festivals, four staff members of these organizations and four independent documentary filmmakers. I have also conducted follow-up interviews with several interviewees through emails since I left Beijing. The empirical data collected from these interviews and my encounter with many other independent documentary professionals in Beijing are my primary sources of this study. In order to comply with human subject requirements and to protect my interviewees' privacy, this thesis only uses the real names of those interviewees who specifically agreed to this. For all other interviewees, I either use pseudonyms or avoid mention of their names. Because scholarly writing on this study's subject matter has yet to be seen during the writing of this thesis, secondary sources come from these organizations' internal documents, their websites, e-magazines that I receive by email, and interviews conducted by others.

This thesis is composed of three chapters. Chapter I is a general introduction to the multi-functional organizations and the Chinese independent documentary context. Chapter II and Chapter III present the case studies from an industrial perspective of the three organizations chosen for this thesis. Chapter II analyzes CZM and CNEX, Chapter III examines the major subject of this study, Fanhall Films, which emphasizes exhibition via its annual China Documentary Film Festival.

## Chapter II: Multi-functional Organizations Inside “the System”

### BEIJING CHANNEL ZERO MEDIA

Beijing Channel Zero Media (CZM) was founded in 2001. It was one of the earliest media companies in China specializing in documentary production and distribution, and the only early company that was still running when I visited them in 2009. Their downtown location was also secluded, located in an apartment-cum-office on the seventh floor of an apartment building without any conspicuous signs. The apartment complex was full of tall, densely-packed buildings, similar to apartment complexes all over Beijing. They moved to an office building in March, 2011.

During my interview with Zheng Qiong, the CEO of CZM, in her office in one of the apartment’s bedrooms, we were constantly interrupted by the noise of renovation from another apartment in the same building. The situation interestingly resembles the circumstance Chinese independent documentary is currently in. In the same way that the constraints and interference from the State do not stop the increasing productions, the difficult-to-ignore noise from the renovation nearby did not prevent us from a productive conversation. We spent the first fifteen minutes arguing whether I should use the word “independent” in our interview and my thesis. Then in the next several minutes, Zheng Qiong explained to me why she strongly despises the word:

Especially within discourse in China, I think you will end up killing yourself if you keep talking about “independence.” Sometimes I also hope people [scholars] inside and outside China can contribute to this culture, but it should be constructive contributions instead of simply stressing the word “independent.” Otherwise things like the movement [China’s New Documentary Movement] will come out. What is the point of having a movement? When the movement is over, SARFT will release regulations that will strangle everyone. Isn’t this just destroying yourself? ... Once the state regulates you, you can’t live on. If you keep mentioning “independent,” you will die faster. Let’s just say Chinese documentary. I think documentary is a relatively safe and objective concept. This way I can mention all the documentaries I’d like to mention ... otherwise, I feel

nervous while mentioning the word “independent” ... The situation in China is very tense. We all feel nervous and scared.<sup>18</sup>

Zheng Qiong clarified more than once during our interview that CZM is a commercial company that has nothing to do with the words “independent” or “sensitive,” so they do not mind having me using their real names in my thesis. The extreme caution they take to the point of preventing using certain words is exactly a sign of the tense constraints that the state puts on independent documentary production and distribution. However, CZM is indeed a pioneer in independent documentary distribution. Despite this, though, they do not work with documentaries that deal with sensitive topics that could potentially cause trouble for their business. Nor do they work with documentaries that do not meet the technical standards of television stations, although both of these types of documentaries are a considerable part of independent documentaries made in China. Besides distribution, CZM also works on a bigger scale. Their work can be divided into five parts: distribution, documentary screening salon, documentary workshop, production services, and an e-magazine titled *Documentary Film Bulletin*.<sup>19</sup>

According to Zheng Qiong, CZM’s production services are only available to overseas documentaries shot in China. They mainly help with research in China before shooting. This part of their work does not have a direct impact on Chinese independent documentary. Although the documentary screening salon only shows foreign documentaries, it, unlike CZM’s production services, has a cultural impact through its influence on the audience, including documentary filmmakers and documentary filmgoers, who are also the potential audience of Chinese independent documentaries. Zheng Qiong and her colleagues believe that the screening of well-received foreign documentaries will increase appreciation of the beauty of documentary, and for this

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<sup>18</sup> Qiong Zheng, interview by author, Beijing, China, July 1, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Zheng, interview.

reason have been holding the screening salon weekly since 2005. All screenings are free. The screening room is either in CZM's office, a small bookstore or a cafe, so the scale has been kept small. However, over the years, the documentary screening salon has shown films to over 10,000 attendees.<sup>20</sup>

There are two factors that hinder the documentary audience in China from having access to foreign documentaries. First, SARFT has an annual quota of only 20 foreign films that can gain theatrical distribution in China, the majority of which are fictional films. Second, while China's widespread pirate DVD market provides the audience access to almost all award-winning foreign films, including documentaries with box office success in other countries, selections are typically inconsistent and unorganized, making it nearly impossible for a particular documentary to stand out from the countless other DVDs piled in the same basket in the store. CZM's screening salon solves both problems. They have a library of over 2,000 foreign documentary DVDs. Most of the DVDs were originally acquired because CZM thought they had the potential for distribution within China. However, by 2009, they had only distributed five films out of the thousands in their library. The rest are high quality documentaries in both form and content acquired for use at their free weekly screenings.<sup>21</sup> Zheng Qiong herself has been to international film festivals such as HotDocs in Toronto, Sunny Side of the Doc in La Rochelle, and CPH: DOX Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival. Her colleagues also keep abreast of the latest information about the international documentary market. The information of the films to be screened, including titles, directors, synopsis, awards and so on, is announced ahead of time on CZM's website and via email to subscribers of CZM's e-magazine, *Documentary Film Bulletin*. Through the format of the

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<sup>20</sup> Zheng, interview.

<sup>21</sup> Zheng, interview.

screening salon, CZM provides a Chinese audience with access to select foreign documentaries. By watching these films, filmgoers in the audience learn to appreciate documentary as a form, while filmmakers are inspired by the content and techniques that they can use to improve their own filmmaking.

CZM's documentary workshop and their e-magazine also nurture and educate independent documentary filmmakers, producers and moviegoers. The e-magazine *Documentary Film Bulletin* has released 110 issues since 2007. There are usually four to five articles in each issue, covering documentary news and knowledge, documentary film reviews and recommendations, director interviews, and articles on current social issues that are potential documentary subjects, etc. *Documentary Film Bulletin* started as a weekly periodical. In 2011, it changed to a monthly publishing schedule. The frequent issues keep the e-magazine's readers updated with the newest documentary news and knowledge.

The workshop, begun in 2006, is held three times a year. CZM invites well-known documentary filmmakers and producers from all over the world to lecture the participants. The week-long workshop consists of film screenings, case studies, lectures and in-class practice of useful skills such as pitching a film. It is open to anyone for the price of 3000 RMB.<sup>22</sup> Most of the participants are documentary film producer or filmmaker wannabes from all over the country, but there are also participants from other countries and regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and America. All of the workshops are small in scale. The smallest workshop had only four participants, and the largest one had sixteen. One of the causes for the small scale is the price of the workshop. While digital video (DV) cameras are commonly used by independent documentary filmmakers,

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<sup>22</sup> Zheng, interview.

and more and more DV works have become award winners, many people believe that as long as they have material and a DV camera, they can make a documentary. With 3000 RMB, a consumer DV camera or a professional microphone can be purchased. Most Chinese independent documentary filmmakers, who do not make any profit on their documentary works, would rather spend the money on production than on lectures. Also, in an independent documentary world where a mature industry has not been built, most people have not realized the significance and function of producers. However, this situation makes CZM's pioneering effort more significant and valuable.

The workshop participants gain knowledge ranging from all the aspects of documentary filmmaking to distribution, from international documentary film festivals to domestic and worldwide documentary markets. Most of the lecturers during the first few years were Chinese independent documentary directors, as they were easier for the workshop organizers to schedule. They invite Chinese directors whose films have gained international recognition in film festivals and documentary theaters, and have fame in the Chinese independent documentary world. This group of lecturers includes Jiang Yue, who was an active director during the New Documentary Movement in the early 1990s; Jia Zhangke, the most famous Chinese independent director since the late 1990s, whose films get most of their profit from overseas theaters and DVD market, and directors whose names and works became well-known in Chinese independent film after 2000. These include Feng Yan, whose recent documentary on the relocation of people out of the Three Gorges Dam area, *Bing Ai* (2007), has been well received in multiple international film festivals, and Chen Weijun, whose works like *To Live is Better Than to Die* (2003) on an AIDS family and *Please Vote for Me* (2007) on a democratic election in an elementary class have gained successful reception in both international film festivals and theatrical and DVD release. These directors share their successful experience in

documentary filmmaking and the international market through case studies of their own or others' films, as well as their thoughts and knowledge about documentary filmmaking in China and marketing within and outside China.

In recent CZM workshops, more and more overseas producers and filmmakers have been invited to be lecturers, such as famous Taiwanese sound recordist Yang Li-chou, Taiwanese documentary filmmakers Tseng Wen-chen and Chen Shuo-yi, CBC's cinematographer and journalist Patrick Brown, and Canadian independent documentary producer Melanie Ansley. They teach the participants documentary filmmaking conditions and marketing in countries and regions outside China. In recent workshops, a lawyer specializing in intellectual properties also has been invited to give lectures on laws that are related to Chinese independent documentary production and distribution. Zheng Qiong herself also lectures for the workshop on the Chinese and international documentary market. For a country without an established independent documentary market, these workshops are very valuable for documentary filmmakers wannabes. Workshops like this give them access to professional knowledge on documentary production, marketing and distribution outside film schools.<sup>23</sup>

The majority of CZM's work and the part that makes most of their profit is distribution. Although CZM is not able to sell most of the foreign documentaries they have acquired, they are considerably successful with Chinese documentary distribution. They distribute independent documentaries without politically or culturally sensitive topics to television stations, as well as documentaries produced by a local television station to other local television stations. CZM has built partnerships with more than 200

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<sup>23</sup> Channel Zero Media, "Zhuanye Jilupian Zhizuo & Zhizuopianren Xunlian Ying: Yingyuan Shouce," Beijing.

Chinese television broadcasters and distributed more than 2000 hours of documentary films and series.<sup>24</sup>

The company started selling talk shows to television networks in its early years. Then in January 2004, a weekly documentary program called *The Orient*, produced and distributed by CZM, premiered on Dragon TV, Shanghai's satellite television station. *The Orient* had 52 episodes from 2004 to 2006. All the documentaries were filmed in China by over 30 Chinese documentary filmmakers, many of whom are also active in independent documentary filmmaking. These documentaries, mainly uncontroversial human interest and nature documentaries, were well-received. Example documentaries are *Piano Boy* (2006), on a young boy from a poor family whose parents send him to an expensive school for piano lessons, and *Days in Search of the Yunnan Snub-nosed Monkey* (2005), about a group who follows the Yunnan snub-nosed monkey through its natural habitat for years. According to *The Orient's* page on sina.com, one of the most widely used portal websites in the Chinese online community, the program was sold for between 3000 RMB and 30,000 RMB an episode and screened through over 20 domestic media outlets, including regional television channels, airlines and media websites, covering over 90% of provinces, totally 450 million television viewers.<sup>25</sup>

In 2005, CZM distributed a documentary television show called *Sisters* (2005), directed by independent documentarian Li Jinghong. It has over 20 episodes and was broadcasted during primetime on over 30 regional channels, covering 595 million audience, with a distribution income of nearly two million, creating the highest record of

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<sup>24</sup> Zheng, interview.

<sup>25</sup> "'Dongfang Quan Jilu' Jingying Danwei," Sina, accessed August 2, 2011, last modified January 11, 2004, <http://video.sina.com.cn/2004-01-11/0910338.html>.

documentary distribution income in China at the moment.<sup>26</sup> Upon this success, CZM invested 100,000 RMB on the DVD distribution of *Sisters*, which ended up a failure.<sup>27</sup> Since then, CZM has never tried DVD distribution again. Zheng Qiong recalled this mishap in frustration: “The entire video/DVD system in China has lost its credibility. I’m not able to do DVD business in this system.”<sup>28</sup>

The problem CZM faces is more than a corrupt video/DVD system. During my interview with Zheng Qiong, she kept using words like “die” or “live” to describe CZM’s situation:

All private businesses are very difficult to maintain in China. All you can do is to improve your professional services. I don’t sell sensitive stuff. I want to live. I have to keep living ... I don’t feel that our distribution work is part of an industrial line ... I don’t think about tomorrow. You need to work hard to run a company in China, but you also need to prepare for it to shut down anytime. This has nothing to do with sensitive materials or the market. It’s because of the whole environment. All private businesses in China are small-scaled. The government can get you when they want to, they can also leave you alone when they don’t want to. It all depends on the policies. This is a monopolized industry.<sup>29</sup>

Not too surprisingly, Zheng Qiong announced that CZM was shutting down in an email to CZM’s e-magazine subscribers in March, 2011, soon after it was moved into an office building. Surprisingly, CZM’s shutting down was brought on by a labor contract dispute with a former employee and someone trying to steal the name “Channel Zero Media” by registering it with the State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC). This was the straw that broke the camel’s back, and the only private documentary distribution company in China was shut down on March 12, 2011, after years of a struggling and stranded situation.

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<sup>26</sup> "Beijing Lingpindao Guanggao Youxian Gongsi," alljobsearch, accessed August 2, 2011, [http://www.alljobsearch.cn/comp\\_12/c126212/](http://www.alljobsearch.cn/comp_12/c126212/).

<sup>27</sup> Zheng, interview.

<sup>28</sup> Zheng, interview.

<sup>29</sup> Zheng, interview.

However, I received the 103rd issue of *Documentary Film Bulletin* on March 16, 2011. Then on March 26, 2011, after the screening of two documentaries from Taiwan and Holland, respectively, in a regular CZM screening salon held in a small café, Zheng Qiong announced to the audience, a mix of documentary filmgoers, media workers, documentary filmmakers and investors, that it was CZM's farewell party. However, she explained, only the title "Channel Zero Media" had died. Their documentary-related work would not stop. Zheng Qiong realized that it was not easy to sustain a private profit-making company specializing in documentary promotion in China. They have been losing money every year recently. According to a journalist who attended CZM's farewell party, Zheng Qiong and her coworkers have been considering establishing a non-commercial platform for their work, where they can raise money openly and legally. All of CZM's former activities are still going on, such as workshops, the e-magazine, the documentary salon, and a documentary forum called iDOCS that combines workshops and screenings that CZM has been hosting since 2009.<sup>30</sup>

CZM is the pioneer in nurturing Chinese documentarians and the Chinese documentary audience and seeking an industrial path for independent documentarian's collaboration with the system. However, its failure in business as the only private documentary distribution company proves that even with the sacrifice of not working with sensitive films, the time for independent documentaries to survive exclusively within the system in China has not come yet. Interestingly enough, when SARFT still holds strict restrictions and pressure over independent documentary filmmaking and promotion, positioning oneself as an NGO drifting outside of the system or in limbo,

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<sup>30</sup> Channel Zero Media, "Zhuanye Jilupian Zhizuo & Zhizuopianren Xunlian Ying: Yingyuan Shouce," Beijing.

neither within nor without the system, gives independent documentaries more freedom and more opportunities to explore various ways of promotion.

## **CNEX**

### **Introduction and History**

When I mentioned CZM to CNEX's CEO, Ben Tsiang, in 2009, he praised CZM for being a pioneer in promoting Chinese independent documentaries and modestly admitted that CZM is a model that they have learned from. Two years later, as CZM has had to close down and reconstruct, CNEX has been steadily expanding their Chinese independent documentary programs by walking between government and non-government, mainstream and independent venues. CNEX's website introduces itself as:

CNEX is the short form of "Chinese Next". CNEX is a non-profit organization founded by a group of professionals, from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, who are passionate about Chinese culture. It is devoted to the production and promotion of documentaries related to the Chinese people ... CNEX facilitates cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world, and strives to spread the spirit and ideas of new Chinese culture ... CNEX provides a platform of supports for and exchanges among Chinese documentary filmmakers by organizing and coordinating international cultural activities, both of independent initiatives or securing supports from governments. It aims to help more professionals in the effort of preserving cultures of Chinese communities, in the forms of visual and audio documents. CNEX hopes to establish and develop a library of global Chinese nonfiction work, and to enhance a sustainable strategy for the contemporary Chinese documentary making.<sup>31</sup>

This description distinguishes CNEX from CZM in three respects. First, CNEX functions more like a producer whereas CZM is more like a distributor. Second, films produced by CNEX have a focused theme and, as seen in the above quote, are made with a more cultural goal than CZM's commercial goals. Finally, CNEX is neither a business

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<sup>31</sup> "Guanyu CNEX," CNEX, accessed July 27, 2011, [http://www.cnex.org.cn/cnex\\_all.php/5.html](http://www.cnex.org.cn/cnex_all.php/5.html).

nor a completely non-governmental organization. Their strategy is to live and thrive in the space between the government and the non-government.

Ben Tsiang is also one of CNEX's founders. He was born to a rich family in Taiwan and received a Master's degree from Stanford University. In the 1990s, when he was still a graduate student at Stanford University, Ben Tsiang co-founded SINANET.com, the largest Chinese website in North America and the precursor of SINA.com, which is now one of the largest Chinese online portals with departments in North America, Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei. Before founding CNEX in 2007, Ben Tsiang was a high up in SINA.com, experienced in managing and networking, with connections in the cultural field, business and government. His multi-cultural life experience opened up his eyes to the drastic cultural, social and economic changes occurring in China and Chinese communities outside China. He persuaded a few friends of his, with backgrounds from media to banking, to found CNEX with him, out of an urge to record and preserve the current Chinese culture with the production of ten documentaries each year for ten years.<sup>32</sup>

Ben Tsiang's experience and network largely contributed to the founding of CNEX as a non-profit organization in China, founded by Taiwanese people, with its registration in Hong Kong and headquarters in Beijing.

In Mainland China, you can't start a foundation just with money. It has a political threshold. Taiwan has a large capital threshold. You need an endowment of millions or tens of millions of TWD's. Of course, Mainland China also has a capital threshold. Hong Kong requires the least, because they use the British corporation law.<sup>33</sup>

Thus CNEX was founded in Hong Kong, but Mainland China is where the drastic changes happen and where independent documentaries are thriving. On one hand, in

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<sup>32</sup> Ben Tsiang, interview by author, Beijing, China, June 13, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Tsiang, interview.

order to establish the headquarters in Beijing, the political and cultural center of China, CNEX has built connections with Beijing International Exchange Association (BIEA), a governmental association, and became a subsidized NPO of it. However, BIEA only serves CNEX as a title that grants CNEX to officially run in China. To keep this patronage, CNEX pays BIEA an annual fee, and invites officials from BIEA to important events so that these events have an official, governmental profile, which immunizes them from trouble with the government.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, to stay away from Beijing's political atmosphere, CNEX is located in a discreet location in northeast Beijing. The headquarters has two floors, with the first floor a café and a small theater, and the second floor office rooms. Although Ben Tsiang relates CNEX to CZM much more than Fanhall Films, CNEX differs themselves from CZM by learning from CZM's successes and seeking to improve on them.

### **Structure and Functions**

Like CZM, CNEX has an e-magazine and frequent film screenings, which operate in addition to their main operation of film production. The e-magazine mainly serves as a newspaper that updates subscribers with news on CNEX's work and on films that CNEX produces. The screenings take two forms, a screening salon that takes place in the headquarters' theater three nights a week, and a concentrated, annual, film festival-like screening event called CNEX Documenta for all the films that CNEX produced the year before and other films with a theme similar to that of CNEX's films from that year. The film salon does not show mainly foreign documentaries like CZM's screening salon does. Documentaries made in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong are screened with documentaries made all over the world. Their film selection is more artistic than CZM's.

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<sup>34</sup> Tsiang, interview.

Occasionally, films other than documentaries are also screened, such as experimental shorts and comedies. Some screenings are free, while others require a 30 RMB entry fee, which is less than half of the regular price to see a film in theaters and includes a glass of wine.

I attended CNEX Documenta in 2009. It was cohosted by CNEX and an art gallery in the 798 Art District in Beijing, which is more renowned than CNEX's small theater. It was a smart choice of location. With its dense collection of art stores, art galleries, and studios, 798 Art District attracts visitors with an interest in contemporary independent art. Thus, they are more likely to pay to watch an independent documentary. Almost all the screenings were full to capacity, despite the fact that the audience had to pay a small entry fee.

In 2010, CNEX expanded Documenta to a yearly campus tour. With financial support from AOC, a China-based technology company, CNEX's films have toured twenty-six university campuses in China. Although the company's advertisements on CNEX's website do not fit with the rest of the site, the screenings and Q&A sessions with directors in universities have given CNEX the kind of wide exposure that a relatively new organization needs.<sup>35</sup> The tour also meets CNEX's initial cultural purpose of addressing the drastic changes of Chinese life with documentaries on current Chinese society and communicating with the next generation through them.

Funding from companies is not CNEX's main financial resource. CNEX's funding is mainly from entrepreneurs; the Professor Jean May Tsiang Foundation, a foundation for Ben Tsiang's belated mother; and other financial support from Ben Tsiang's family members and friends. The first year, CNEX received \$400,000 from the

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<sup>35</sup> "Tour Map," Cnex.org, accessed July 27, 2011, last modified December 29, 2010, <http://www.cnex.org.cn/campus.php?id=21>.

above resources, and another \$100,000 from Ben Tsiang himself. CNEX's yearly expense is about \$300,000. When money is tight, Ben Tsiang donates generously himself. However, he is aware that making up the shortage with his personal funds is not a sustainable solution.<sup>36</sup>

We've been looking for a mode that connects our cultural work with commercial development, so that others will trust us and come find us.<sup>37</sup>

What CNEX has been seeking is a production mode for Chinese independent documentaries that fits China's specific situation. Unfortunately, there have not been many successful examples in the past for CNEX to follow.

Successful cases are very rare, and they are not replicable. The main problem is that a producer system has not been established. We are actually practicing a producer's role. Most [independent documentary] directors do everything themselves. They don't know how to work with a producer.<sup>38</sup>

While admitting their role as a producer, Ben Tsiang purposely avoids commercially-related terms such as "production company," as such terms conflict with their status as a non-profit organization. In order to connect cultural work with commercial development as a non-profit organization in China, CNEX has formed a unique way to produce a certain number of selected Chinese independent documentaries sharing a specific theme.

Each year, CNEX's editorial team proposes options for the theme that year, based on recent hot topics in Chinese society. Then Ben Tsiang and the editorial team narrow the options down to two or three topics, and consult advisors to decide on the year's theme.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Tsiang, interview.

<sup>37</sup> Tsiang, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Tsiang, interview.

<sup>39</sup> Tsiang, interview.

When the theme is determined, CNEX publicizes it on their website and calls for film pitches that fall under the theme. When CNEX publicized their first theme of “Money” in 2007, Ben Tsiang had to tour seven cities in China to promote CNEX and persuade directors to send in their projects.<sup>40</sup> Within a couple of years, CNEX became well-known in the Chinese independent documentary scene and received over 100 project entries each year from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinese directors living in other countries and regions. The themes from 2007 to 2012 are “Money,” “Dreams and Hopes,” “The Next Generation’s Homeland,” “Crisis and Opportunity,” “Youth and Citizen,” and “Education? Education!” None of the themes are so specific as to overly restrict entries, and CNEX purposely interprets the themes loosely, allowing any documentary that is slightly related to the theme to apply. Such a broad interpretation means that directors can often manipulate their submissions to relate their films to the themes. Plus, the jurors do not only choose projects to sponsor based on how much the content falls within the confines of the theme. Finally, it is important to note that the themes themselves do not sound controversial or political, but they can be interpreted so as to allow submission of such films. All of the above make CNEX’s production program open to almost all Chinese independent documentaries.

Directors of selected projects are invited to Beijing for couple of days for a pitching panel. Each director pitches his/her own project. The jurors select the finalists, judging not only the content of each film and how well it fits the theme, but also each film’s marketing potential and budget. Each year, CNEX sponsors three to eight feature-length documentaries with about 80,000 RMB each, and three to five short documentaries with 10,000 to 30,000 RMB each. In China, this is the most generous non-governmental

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<sup>40</sup> Tsiang, interview.

funding opportunity for documentarians. Accordingly, it has become more competitive each year.

After the jury selects the projects to sponsor, CNEX signs a contract with the directors. The director still maintains authorship of the film, but CNEX is the producer and is put in charge of the film's entire marketing and promotion. CNEX can reedit the film to fit different platforms such as film festivals or television stations.<sup>41</sup> On one hand, CNEX has significant control over the final films' management; on the other hand, CNEX is open to management adjustments as the films require. They are open to this because their goal, in the end, is more cultural than commercial. For CNEX, the commercial path is necessary in order to survive and achieve their cultural goals. CNEX's open attitude toward external funding does not change the fact that directors have few options for such funding available to them. Ben Tsiang described their experience with one documentarian to demonstrate that there simply are not many other resources for Chinese independent documentarians.

Once a director complained that the funding wasn't enough. He wanted to get funds from other resources and asked us to discuss changes regarding co-sharing and management rights. We were fine with it, but he didn't end up getting money from other places and came back to stick with our original contract.<sup>42</sup>

For many independent directors who are familiar with low-budget or even no-budget production, the funding from CNEX is generous and crucial for them to improve their filmmaking conditions. CNEX has a detailed written agenda and rules for the pitching and selection process every year, similar to CZM's documentation. Both of them look for ways to blend independent documentaries into the official media system. Since they must follow the rules of official media, their documentation leaves nothing to hide.

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<sup>41</sup> Tsiang, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Tsiang, interview.

Because CNEX assesses both the cultural value and commercial potential of a film before producing it, their sponsored films are more open and independent than CZM's distributed films. They cover social issues like immigrant workers, the education system, and the leftover social and governmental issues after 2008 Sichuan earthquake. This does not mean that CNEX does not self-censor films during selection. In China, as long as a film is intended to be marketed, self-censorship is inevitable. However, unlike Zheng Qiong's determined statement that nothing about their work is sensitive, Ben Tsiang's tone is more moderate.

We also have films with sensitive topics, but they don't cross the line no matter what ... Because I used to be in an industry, I can't just say let's close our doors and make whatever films we want. Industrial accumulation is not easy. It's built on concepts, management, techniques, network and mutual trusts. This requires skills. Songzhuang<sup>43</sup> is more artistic, but just like cleaning a gun, if you're not careful, it will go off ... We have to take more into consideration, otherwise it won't be easy to last for ten years. The question (of how to promote independent documentaries) in China is where you want to stand to make a difference. Songzhuang doesn't mind being underground, but we hope to somehow connect with the system to make a difference. At the same time, we can't stay completely within the system, otherwise we won't have our own products.<sup>44</sup>

Connecting with the system yet staying relatively independent is CNEX's aim with their films. Ben Tsiang and his coworkers have been exploring possibilities for cooperation with governments, foundations, film festivals, and distributors outside China. Since 2010, CNEX has started another program in Taipei, CNEX Chinese Doc Forum (CCDF), cohosted with a governmental cultural association in Taiwan.<sup>45</sup> This program is

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<sup>43</sup> Here Ben Tsiang refers to Fanhall Films based in Songzhuang, Beijing.

<sup>44</sup> Tsiang, interview.

<sup>45</sup> Information on CCDF comes from the CNEX e-magazine, specifically the February 22 and July 5 issues.

CNEX, "CNEX 2010 Niandu Huigu Yu Ganen!," e-mail message to the author, February 22, 2011.

CNEX, "Shengdansi 2011 Nian Jilupian Zizhu Mingdan Gongbu CNEX San Ti'an Huoxuan," e-mail message to the author, July 5, 2011.

similar to CNEX's other program except that the participating directors pitch their projects to international documentary organizations such as Sundance Institute, Sunny Side of the Doc, BBC, Arte, NHK, Discovery Asia, National Geography channel, and renowned television channels in Hong Kong and Taiwan. CCDF-1 in 2010 selected eighteen documentary projects, some of which have already been sold to international channels. CDF-2 will be held for three days in October, 2011. Twenty projects will be selected for the forum, and the directors have a chance to pitch to international documentary buyers, answer their questions, hear their suggestions and discuss possible international production opportunities. International professionals will vote for the projects, and the three projects with the most votes have the opportunity to choose to either have CNEX act as their producer or have CNEX help in pitching their projects to other international documentary funds or producers.

Hosted in Taipei instead of Beijing, CCDF is open for any documentary program that is related to Chinese society inside and outside China, so it is virtually accessible to every Chinese independent documentarian. At the same time, though, CCDF requires the entries to have international marketing potential as well as meet certain technical requirements. Entries must be filmed with an HDV or better, with sound recorded by an external microphone. Because the pitching aims at international buyers, directors or producers are encouraged to use English during the forum. With CCDF, many Chinese independent documentarians for the first time have a chance to sell their projects to international buyers directly without going through international film festivals. Such an event in Mainland China would be bound to be censored, whereas Taipei provides a free environment for documentaries with sensitive topics in the Chinese government's eye to access the kind of marketing opportunities that they cannot get within the system in Mainland China.

CNEX continues to explore industrial possibilities by coordinating their resources and connections with Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the rest of the world. In 2011, when the whole Chinese independent film world came under tight restriction of the government,<sup>46</sup> as an NPO patronized by a governmental association, CNEX hosted yet another significant event for Chinese independent documentaries. In April, 2011, CNEX and the Documentary Film Program of Sundance Institute cohosted the CNEX-Sundance Documentary Workshop in Beijing. On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the Sundance Institute announced twenty-nine projects to sponsor out of 650 entries from eighty countries; three out of the twenty-nine, Du Haibin's *Patriotism, 90*, Wang Yang's *Weaving*, and Ha Lefu's *Clear Sky*, were projects from the CNEX-Sundance Documentary Workshop. All three films' directors are independent documentarians from Mainland China, two of which were also selected projects for CCDF.<sup>47</sup>

Since it is hard to distribute independent documentaries in Mainland China, especially those with sensitive topics, CNEX targets international marketing and distribution for their films, which are mostly made in Mainland China by Chinese directors. The rule announced by SARFT on March 10th, 1998, requiring all films to pass a special film festival censorship before being sent to regional or international film festivals, was directed at 16 mm or 8 mm films, and does not apply to DV works, the form most of CNEX's productions take. Technically CNEX does not need to seek SARFT's permission, but as they seek work within the rules of the system, CNEX still tried to follow the official routine of international film festival submissions. However,

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<sup>46</sup> The Chinese government began a large crack down on dissidents in 2011, including on independent cinema that does not depict the government in a positive light. A few independent film websites were closed down and in May, 2011, and one of the largest independent documentary film festivals, DOChina, had to cancel its agenda. The exact motivations behind the government's crackdown are uncertain, but it is safe to assume that images of Egypt and Tunisia loom large.

<sup>47</sup> CNEX, "Shengdansi..."

Ben Tsiang could not help laughing while talking about their experience with SARFT on this matter:

You have to get permission from the government before submitting films to international festivals. We don't know how to do it. We are still exploring and watching the government's attitude. We have approached SARFT to let them know that we were submitting our films to Venice Film Festival and asked them to take a look at our films. They said they are not responsible for films that are not shot with 16 mm or 8 mm film and that we should contact the Publicity Bureau, so we did. The Publicity Bureau told us since we were sending stuff for overseas screening, we should contact the Bureau of Foreign Affairs. Then the Bureau of Foreign Affairs said, oh, films. You should go to SARFT. Nobody wanted to supervise us, so we went to the film festival ourselves. It's not that we didn't ask for your (government's) permission, but you all (governmental departments) need to have a fight first to decide who will supervise us.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, CNEX's self-censorship prevents productions with politically sensitive topics that could potentially upset the Chinese government, so they have not caused any trouble for themselves by promoting their films internationally. At the same time, CNEX has staff who are familiar with all sorts of film festivals around the world and in charge of sending different films to festivals. Their films have had a presence or won awards in film festivals from Venice Film Festival to Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival, one of the most prestigious film festivals in the Chinese community.

Some of CNEX's productions had a theatrical release in Taiwan and Hong Kong, including *KJ* (2008), a documentary directed by Cheung King Wai that follows a musical genius, which had a theatrical release in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, and broke the Hong Kong box office record for documentaries with 1 million HKD. Its theatrical run in Hong Kong lasted for eight months. CNEX also distributes DVDs of their films, with a few distributed by distributors specializing in documentaries or Chinese independent films in Taiwan or North America, such as dGenerate Films and First Run/Icarus Films.

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<sup>48</sup> Tsiang, interview.

In Mainland China, CNEX's DVDs are sold in film clubs, art stores and galleries in six first-tier cities, as well as online stores.

### **“One RMB Can Do the Work of Ten”**

Not all of CNEX's productions are independent documentaries with sensitive topics, but CNEX's cultural orientation and goals mean that they do not exclude any good films with sensitive topics the way that CZM does. CNEX's cooperation with a Beijing government association protects their independent documentary production and events. At the same time, in order to keep this patronage, CNEX seek overseas marketing and distribution outlets for films whose content precludes them from having a mass audience in China. CNEX has accumulated successful experience promoting Chinese independent documentaries to the international market, and their goal is more ambitious than simply recording the current changes in Chinese society for the next generation. Ben Tsiang shares the same feeling of social responsibility that many other independent documentary professionals in China have:

People are all busy and don't have time to care about many social issues that sound abstract. Documentaries contextualize these issues ... I'm a documentary fan myself. The Chinese society is at a turning point, with many emerging social issues. We hope to help the mentally handicapped open their mind. We've had great economic growth already, and we believe a cultural leap will happen in the Chinese world in the next ten years.<sup>49</sup>

This former successful entrepreneur understands well how to do business in China:

Strong passion is not enough. It is important to have an execution model. In fact, our society is full of places where you need leverage. If you leverage well, one RMB can do the work of ten.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Tsiang, interview.

<sup>50</sup> Tsiang, interview.

This gives a golden rule for how things are done in China. Connections and networking sometimes work better than money, and can bend rules. The survival and development of Fanhall Films, possibly the most independent film organization that holds one of the most prestigious Chinese independent documentary film festivals, China Documentary Film Festival (CDDFF/DOChina), is an outstanding example of the practice of this rule. If it were not for its tango-like relationships with artists, the local and national governments and international resources, Fanhall Films and CDDFF would have died in their early years when they were still a guerilla operation.

## Chapter III: Fanhall Films: Operating Outside “the System”

### HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

Fanhall Films was founded by three film fans in December, 2001. It is a multi-functional, non-profit organization that aims at promoting Chinese independent film. It works on every aspect of Chinese independent film, from training filmmakers to distributing DVDs. It runs a café; owns an underground theater; has published two interview compilations with Chinese independent documentary filmmakers and independent fictional filmmakers respectively: *Independent Record* and *The Image is Excited*; produces independent films; and distributes independent film DVDs both with and without a publication number. Fanhall Films also has the most popular website for independent filmmakers and film fans: FANHALL.com. However, they are most well-known for hosting two major independent film festivals in China, Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) and China Documentary Film Festival (CDFF), later called DOChina. The prominent and diversified work that Fanhall Films has contributed to Chinese independent film, especially its original culturally-oriented independent film festivals, has established their leading role in the grass-roots independent film world, as well as the independent documentary ecosystem.

Unlike CZM’s strict self-censorship, most of the films Fanhall Films selects into their festival competition and screenings, as well as the ones Fanhall Films distributes, are politically sensitive works that would be almost guaranteed to not pass censorship. Zhu Rikun, Fanhall Films’ art director, suggested that I use the word “ecosystem” (*shengtai*) instead of industry to describe the independent documentary situation in China, because “industry” sounds too commercial.<sup>51</sup> He also believes that “independent”

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<sup>51</sup> Rikun Zhu, interview by author, Beijing, China, June 19, 2009.

(*duli*) in the context of China means mainly independent spirit and expression. Whether the film is made within or without the system, or however it is funded does not matter. The reality is, Zhu Rikun and Fanhall Films feel that documentaries made within the system and shown on mainstream media such as television stations lack the independent spirit. Assumably, Fanhall Films and their activities face more pressure than a company like CZM. The fact is that in being as detached from the official system as possible, Fanhall Films has more space to practice their strategies with more flexible ways to survive and develop.

The history of Fanhall Films is strongly connected with Zhu Rikun, whose ideas and beliefs have shaped and still largely influence Fanhall Films' independent spirit. Zhu Rikun is the key to the world of Chinese independent cinema. He is one of the pioneers devoted to the promotion of Chinese independent film, and one of the most influential figures in today's independent film world in China.

Zhu Rikun was born in an ordinary family in southern China. He was accepted to Peking University, one of China's top universities, in 1996, where he majored in currency and banking. In college, Zhu Rikun spent 1200 RMB to register a website, which he used to start a small business with two classmates by renting out comic books and film VCDs to the website's registered members, who were also his classmates. The hundreds of VCDs Zhu Rikun and his classmates rented out were mostly Hollywood films.<sup>52</sup> As a film fan, Zhu Rikun gradually realized that there were certain films that Chinese audiences did not have convenient access to, such as some banned films made by independent directors. He rejected the job interview request from Bank of China that university graduates in his major would dream for. In December 2001, Zhu Rikun and

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<sup>52</sup> Rikun Zhu, "Fanhall Films," conversation with Jing Zuo and Bingfeng Dong, *Contemporary Art & Investment*, April 2009, 10.

two friends started Fanhall Films, along with the creation of FANHALL.com, one of the earliest online forums about independent film. FANHALL.com remained active until the website was closed as a result of a government crackdown in 2011, when the number of its registered members had reached 28,381. In 2002, Fanhall Films' major activity was film screenings that soon evolved into a weekly screening cine-club. Around the same time, Zhu Rikun started a distribution business. Fanhall Films distributes DVDs of representational independent fictional and documentary films every year. Some of the DVDs are sold in bookstores or art galleries. Others, without a registration number, are displayed in Fanhall Films' headquarters in Songzhuang and posted online for sale, as well as in some independent film-friendly art galleries in 798 Art District.<sup>53</sup>

Largely involved in the independent film scene, Zhu Rikun began to notice the expansion of documentary production in China. From March 29 to April 1, 2003, the first CDFP was hosted by Fanhall Films and the Beijing Normal University College of Art and Communication. It took place in the National Library of China, Beijing Normal University and Wangfujing Bookstore. All three locations are in downtown Beijing. The first CDFP screened 50 Chinese documentary films, making it the largest screening event of Chinese documentaries at the time. Both the first and second CDFP screened documentaries made both inside and outside the system. An episode from the television-broadcasted documentary show *The Oriental* produced by CZM, was selected for screening in the second CDFP. However, since the third CDFP, documentaries made for television stations have no longer been considered for screening or competition. CDFP's offices have also been moved to different cities until eventually settling in Songzhuang,

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<sup>53</sup> Zhu, interview.

the easternmost suburb of Beijing, now the base of Fanhall Films where it has initiated a friendship between Chinese independent documentary and contemporary art.

Songzhuang used to be a countryside village. Since 1995, many contemporary artists, especially painters from “painters’ village,” aka “artists’ village” near the Summer Palace, moved to Songzhuang.<sup>54</sup> In a decade, Songzhuang evolved into a famous art village with a large population of artist residents, numerous art galleries, and art buyers and collectors from all over the world. The villagers have started local businesses, including restaurants, house renting, hotels, grocery stores, and services for the art industry such as copying or printing. Li Xianting, the so-called Godfather of Chinese contemporary art, was one of the earliest to move to Songzhuang.

Li Xianting is a famous art critic whose work in the 1980s and 1990s introduced and promoted Chinese modernist artist and art trends, giving institutional credibility and cultural capital to Chinese artists that are now popular in the international art market. Li Xianting graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1978. From 1985 to 1989, as an editor for *China Art Weekly*, Li Xianting started a column called *Up and Coming Artists*, where he largely reported bold artistic explorations of young artists all over China. After the Tiananmen incident in 1989, *China Art Weekly* was shut down. Li Xianting has become an independent art critic and art exhibition planner since 1990. He never stopped his support and promotion of contemporary art in China.<sup>55</sup> He used to live in “painters’ village” near the Summer Palace and was friends with many artists living there, some of whom became independent documentary filmmakers in the mid 1990s,

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<sup>54</sup> From 1990 to 1994, many poor painters lived in a neighborhood near Beijing’s Summer Palace. Some of them later on became the most influential Chinese contemporary artists. In 1995, the “painters’ village” was demolished in anticipation of the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Shiyang Hu, "Li Xianting: Yishu Quan shi ge Ming Lichang," ionly, accessed July 31, 2011, last modified October 15, 2010, <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/5/51/20061121/015746.html>.

and many of whose works were banned for politically sensitive content, such as Hu Jie<sup>56</sup> and Zhao Liang.<sup>57</sup> Li Xianting appreciated the realism in independent documentarians' works, as he felt disappointed with the lack of it in contemporary art at that time, when contemporary art in China was getting commercialized. At the same time, Li Xianting sympathized with the difficult situation independent documentarians faced. The stress they bore that there were no venue or market for their films in China, and that they had barely any support during their filmmaking was similar to what modernist artists in the 1980s went through. Li Xianting started to get involved in the Chinese independent documentary scene for every reason he could find.

The local government of Songzhuang witnessed the dramatic economic and cultural changes in Songzhuang since the artists began to move in, and so they unconventionally have supported the local art scene to the greatest extent possible. Li Xianting has built a good rapport with the local government. On September 6, 2005, the Songzhuang Art Promotion Organization was founded with the support of the local government and artists. It was founded to serve the artists, their artistic productions, and artistic events. Li Xianting became the vice president. The president is a person who simultaneously holds titles in the government and companies.<sup>58</sup> The local government needs Li Xianting's fame and influence among the artists to coordinate with the artists, and to promote the government-hosted cultural and artistic events. Li Xianting's revered status in the contemporary art world and his rapport with the local government greatly contributed to Fanhall Films' settlement in Songzhuang, as well as the maintenance and

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<sup>56</sup> Director of *In Search of The Soul of Lin Zhao* (2004)

<sup>57</sup> Director of *Petition* (2009)

<sup>58</sup> He is both the president of the Songzhuang Art Promotion Organization and the general manager of Songzhuang Cultural Creativity Development Company, while at the same time also serving as the vice chairman of the Songzhuang Cultural Zone Committee and the vice general manager of the Cultural Zone Investment and Development Company.

development of Fanhall Films' regular activities such as the annual CDFE, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Li Xianting further supports Chinese independent documentary through Li Xianting's Film Fund, a non-profit organization founded during the first BIFF on October 16, 2006. It aims "to support Chinese independent films for production, promotion, distribution and academic purpose," as well as facilitate communication between the Chinese and international film communities.<sup>59</sup> It has been receiving donations every year, mainly from artists and art collectors who are also Li Xianting's friends, and a few entrepreneurs who support independent film. Two projects under this foundation, Li Xianting Film School and Li Xianting Film Archive, are devoted to the sustainable development of Chinese independent documentary. Li Xianting Film Archive collects and preserves Chinese independent documentaries. Li Xianting Film School, which was founded in 2009, is a private school where independent filmmakers teach students how to make innovative independent films. As one might expect from the school's motto, "free spirit, independent thinking, practical ability," and in contrast to CZM's workshops, most of the courses focus on the art of filmmaking instead of industrial knowledge. Li Xianting's Film Fund also financially supports the production of low-budget independent documentaries. The funding is usually 5000 to 10,000 RMB per film, to no more than ten films every year. It has a bi-monthly, professional film magazine called *Cine Notes*, consisting of two main sections, "film knowledge" and "film critic," both on independent film. Li Xianting and Zhu Rikun are the chief editor and executive chief editor, respectively.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Beijing Independent Film Festival, *The 2nd Beijing Independent Film Festival* (Beijing, 2007), 6.

<sup>60</sup> China Documentary Film Festival, *The 4th China Documentary Film Festival*. (Beijing, 2007).

Li Xianting's Film Fund was founded after Fanhall Film's settlement in Songzhuang and during one of Fanhall Film's film festivals. With Zhu Rikun serving as art director of both Fanhall Films and Li Xianting's Film Fund, the fund is more like a subsidiary of Fanhall Films than an independent organization. The cooperation between these two has the greatest impact on the most influential and well-known part of Fanhall Film's work with independent documentary—CDFF, known as DOChina since 2010.

## **CHINESE DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL/DOCHINA**

### **History and Structure**

After the turn of the century, café- and university-based film screening clubs emerged in Beijing. Zhu Rikun's film club was one of the earliest among them. In Seio Nakajima's article, Zhu Rikun's film club is a case study as the representational club in the artistic and commercial category.<sup>61</sup> The film club screened "the largest variety of films" and had "the highest frequency of screenings among all film clubs."<sup>62</sup> It also had a strict membership system. A 200 RMB annual membership fee guaranteed all weekly screenings, free DVDs that Fanhall Films distributed and their club magazines. Although Nakajima categorized this club as artistic and commercial, Zhu Rikun did not profit from it financially. There were a number of costs associated with the club, including renting screening venues, inviting directors to the screenings for Q&A sessions, and even treating the directors to meals. At one point, the club became difficult to carry on for financial reasons.

Both Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) and Chinese Documentary Film Festival (CDFF) originated from this film club. The film club's tight financial situation

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<sup>61</sup> Nakajima, "Film Clubs in Beijing".

<sup>62</sup> Nakajima, "Film Clubs in Beijing", p.177.

had made Zhu Rikun believe that it is impossible for independent film screening activities to be financially self-sufficient, and this influenced how he created CDFFF. All CDFFF screenings are free. Almost all the money comes from outside the film festival itself, with Li Xianting's Film Fund its biggest sponsor since the fourth CDFFF in 2007, the year of CDFFF's first competition section.

CDFFF also inherited the film club's nature and structure. Zhu Rikun does not make a big distinction between his film club and film festivals.

There is no distinction in nature. Both are for screening films. One is more dispersed, whereas film festivals have more concentrated screenings. Film festivals are a very good opportunity for people who like films. Everyone watches and discusses the films together. It's a lot of fun. [Film festivals] have a stronger influence on the circulation of films and the audience.<sup>63</sup>

This explains the unique nature and structure of CDFFF, which has placed emphasis on its cultural rather than industrial or commercial influence since the first CDFFF in 2003. The first three CDFFFs were generated partly within the official system because Fanhall Films either cohosted it with university institutions or state organizations like The China Millennium Monument. The first two CDFFFs screened Chinese documentaries made both within and without the system. Many television documentaries were also selected for screening because CDFFF was the first documentary film festival in China that collected a large number of Chinese documentaries for screening, and Zhu Rikun felt obligated to show the audience all Chinese documentaries made in the past couple of decades, hoping the audience could compare independent documentaries with ones made within the official media system.<sup>64</sup> However, CDFFF soon became an

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<sup>63</sup> Zhu, interview.

<sup>64</sup> In a forum in 2009, Zhu Rikun commented that he was too naïve to have made that effort, saying "Actually, that is rather pointless." Zhu, "Fanhall Films", 10.

exclusively independent documentary film festival after Fanhall Films ran into conflicts with its state-run co-organizer.

The second CDFFF was initially cohosted by Fanhall Films and The China Millennium Monument. However, the latter state-run organization received a secret phone call from the state department and ceased the cooperation in the middle of the festival.<sup>65</sup> The assumption is that the officials found the topics of some independent documentaries offensive, especially seven independent documentaries on AIDS patients and homosexuality screened in a section titled “Love for culture and society.” Fanhall Films immediately sought venues in Shanghai to continue the screenings. The second CDFFF became the last CDFFF that had a screening location in downtown Beijing. Starting with the second CDFFF, documentaries from other countries and regions were introduced to the audience. Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF), one of the most prestigious documentary film festivals in the Asia-Pacific area, worked with Fanhall Films to present a Japanese Documentary Unit in this festival. The partnership between these two film festivals has continued in the years since.

In 2006, the third CDFFF took place in Hefei, a city far from Beijing. Fanhall Films co-organized it with two colleges of two separate universities in Hefei. More academic elements were added to this festival with participation by some of the most well-known Chinese documentary scholars. International film festival programmers and curators also came for CDFFF’s growing fame, including those from Marseille International Documentary Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival and YIDFF. All Chinese documentaries screened that year were independent works, and this tradition has been kept since, making CDFFF a real independent documentary film festival. The

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<sup>65</sup> Zhu, interview.

participation of documentary directors, scholars, experts and festival personnel from inside and outside China made discussion and communication on all levels possible in this festival. Although the film screening club's tradition of discussion about a film after its screening was naturally kept in former years, it was the third CDFFF when Q&A sessions, discussions and lectures were officially put on the agenda.

The third CDFFF established the festival's general structure and nature as the most independent documentary film festival in China. It has been more of a forum, a communication platform for Chinese independent directors and audience than a place for marketing and distribution opportunities. The structure of CDFFF has become more and more complex each year. However, despite all the changes, CDFFF has always kept its highly independent nature, valuing cultural and artistic function highly over industrial or commercial function. In fact, Zhu Rikun, as CDFFF's art director, almost holds a spiteful attitude toward the industrial or commercial aspects of film festivals.

I've never considered the festival's influence in the industrial chain. Right now I'm cautious about the deterioration of the film festival that can be caused by trying to become part of the industrial process. I'm worried this may form another stubborn system, in which everyone may believe that a film festival is about fame and benefits, instead of its communication and discussion function. Many film festivals today are like that. People go to big festivals for the fame ... Film festivals should be all about communication and screenings. Many foreign film festivals are involved with the market. I don't think that's what a film festival should do. They should be more pure.<sup>66</sup>

In order to achieve the goal of staying "pure," Zhu Rikun knew that the festival had to stay as far away from the official system as possible. Any cooperation with governmental organizations and institutions would restrict their film selection. Any location in downtown Beijing was under the closest governmental supervision and thus unsafe to screen CDFFF's bold, critical documentaries. CDFFF was in need of a non-

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<sup>66</sup> Zhu, interview.

governmental sponsor and a location that's far enough from the central government's attempts to end its guerilla way of operation yet where they could still survive and develop. Li Xianting contacted Zhu Rikun at the most needed moment.<sup>67</sup>

In October, 2006, construction on Songzhuang Art Center, built to host contemporary art exhibitions and performances, was completed. It was built with the local government's support and Li Xianting as the first curator. This modern, 2-story building has exhibition halls, a screening and lecture hall, offices and a café. The local government was preparing an art festival as the Songzhuang Art Center's opening exhibition, and Li Xianting was the first person the government officials—who are not art experts—consulted. Li Xianting saw this a good opportunity to show independent films, so he contacted Zhu Rikun to organize an “exhibition” of independent films as part of the festival. With about 100,000 RMB granted by the local government, the first BIFF was held under the cover of the art festival from October 6<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006. During the first BIFF, Li Xianting's Film Fund was founded. With Li Xianting's leverage, artists and entrepreneurs donated to the foundation. The next year, the fourth CDFP was held in Songzhuang. Of course, after the government saw the bold, politically and socially provoking films that Zhu Rikun screened the year before, they refused to incorporate with either BIFF or CDFP as part of their art festivals, and withdrew all financial support.<sup>68</sup>

However, Songzhuang government's laissez-faire attitude is already relatively generous for independent film workers like Zhu Rikun. Songzhuang is at the periphery of Beijing, but it is becoming the center of contemporary art. It seemed to be a perfect place for the base of Fanhall Films. With social funding and the money invested by one of Zhu Rikun's Peking University classmates and business partner, as well as the former

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<sup>67</sup> Zhu, interview.

<sup>68</sup> Zhu, interview.

webmaster of FANHALL.com, Fanhall Films built a compound just fifteen minutes' walk from Songzhuang Art Center. The main three-story building in the compound, which people refer to as Fanhall Studio, has a discreet, underground theater that is accessed through a narrow, spiral staircase; a spacious café on the second floor, where DVDs and books are exhibited for sale; and a big, shared office where Fanhall Films' workers and volunteers work. There is also plenty of outdoor space in the building and the compound for parties and concerts during film festivals.

Since Fanhall Films settled down in Songzhuang, every CDFE has been held at both Songzhuang Art Center and Fanhall Studios. The sixth CDFE, which I attended in 2009, lasted for an entire week. It consisted of Chinese independent documentary film competition and non-competition units, special programming for films with unique or controversial topics or forms, workshops with independent documentary directors, retrospective programs of the late Japanese documentary director Tsuchimoto Noriaki and the late Belgian documentary director Henri Storck, which had both screenings and forums where experts from Japan and Belgium discussed these two directors and their films. Almost all the directors attended the screening of their films and the Q&A session immediately after each screening. There was also a music evening when a director of one of the selected films and his band played a free show in the Fanhall Films compound. There were also several late night parties that were not announced on the agenda in order to avoid the government's sensitive nerves, but none of the parties were specifically held for film marketing or promotion.

CDFE has successfully kept itself as far away as possible in China from the system and any film market to keep its "purity" in its cultural and artistic function. This is practiced in every aspect of CDFE, and helps maintain the independent thoughts and

spirit of Chinese independent documentary with CDFFF's impact. I will mainly study the sixth CDFFF to show how it exercises this "purity."

### **In Pursuit of "Purity"**

During my interview with Zhu Rikun, he used "pure" and "independent spirit" multiple times. These words best describe the nature of CDFFF. Only by staying "pure" from the Chinese film market and industry can CDFFF keep its independent spirit in its programming and film selection. Without any film promotion or marketing panels, one would assume that the night parties during the sixth CDFFF announced by mouth among directors, festival organizers, scholars and guests from both inside and outside China served as a marketing platform for directors. However, that was not the case from my observation. All the parties were very casual, where film directors did not seem eager to sell their films. They seemed to enjoy talking about films – not necessarily their own – and drinking with fellow directors or other documentary-related professionals.

There are both objective and subjective reasons why the directors did not seek every opportunity to promote their films. On the objective side, CDFFF did not try to create an industrial platform. One example is the sixth CDFFF's opening ceremony, which took place in Songzhuang Art Center's screening hall. All the seats were taken. Those without seats sat on the floor or stood by the walls not to miss this event. In the very front two rows sat the jurors and guests, including international film festival programmers and curators, and scholars. It would have been a suitable situation for them to meet the directors when all the directors whose works were selected were called onto the stage, only if an English interpreter translated the hosts' brief introduction of each director. Surprisingly enough, language was the biggest obstacle of communication between those directors and people from all over the world who could potentially help them find a

bigger audience—or even a buyer—for their films. A few days later, Jean Perret, the director of Nyon Festival – Visions du Reel in Switzerland, as well as one of the jurors for the fifth CDFP and guest of the sixth CDFP, was interested in a director’s debut film that was screened in the competition unit. He wanted to screen this film in the next year’s Visions du Reel, but was unable to talk to the director during the Q&A session because he did not have an interpreter. The director left Songzhuang for downtown Beijing, where he lived, right after the screening of the film. Jean Perret also had to leave the day after. Incidentally, I had spoken with both Jean Perret and the director, who had given me his cell phone number, so I called him to hurry back to Songzhuang and interpreted for both of them during their meeting about the film’s plausible screening in the competition section in an international documentary film festival.

However, subjectively, most Chinese independent documentarians are yet to learn the function and importance of a producer’s work. Without a domestic independent documentary film market, most directors still follow the international film festival leading to international market or domestic cultural capital routine that earlier independent filmmakers like Jia Zhangke<sup>69</sup> successfully pursued. For most Chinese independent documentaries which are low or even zero budget productions, their directors would rather research the international film festival scene and submit their films themselves than hire a producer to do the work. In fact, although all the selected films were required to have English subtitles, many subtitles were either too fast to read or poorly translated. One of the most controversial films during the sixth CDFP was about

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<sup>69</sup> Jia Zhangke’s films have gained cultural capital since 1997 and have been screened and given awards at renowned international film festivals such as Berlin International Film Festival, Venice Film Festival and Cannes Film Festival. Example films include *Still Life* (2006), which won the Venice Film Festival Golden Lion in 1995, and *Xiao Wu* (1997), which won the Wolfgang Staudte Award. His early film productions were supported by international funding and personnel, but he is now a director who negotiates with both the system and the global, all the while keeping his lens focused on the local.

free speech in China. For one of the overseas guest's question about the subtitles with poor English that were too fast to read, the director answered:

I didn't have money to pay for translation, so I just pasted an entry on douban.com<sup>70</sup> for help. A person replied to my post and translated the film for free. That of course may have caused some subtitle problems.<sup>71</sup>

Although some directors seemed indifferent about their films' English subtitles for CDFE, almost everyone of them I talked to who planned to further submit their films to international film festivals told me that they would rewrite the subtitles. Many of them see CDFE as a festival where directors get together to communicate and cheer for each other, which aligns with Zhu Rikun's concept of discussion and communication as the festival's main functions. None of the international guests were announced ahead of time to the directors, so the majority of directors came to the festival unprepared for any marketing opportunities. However, the main reason for not introducing international guests and directors to each other publicly ahead of time was not because of the fear of turning CDFE into a commercial, industrial festival. It is a strategy that CDFE applies every year to avoid the government's sanction. This will be further discussed later on in this chapter.

It is not hard to understand why CDFE still receives a growing number of film submissions every year despite its indifferent attitude toward films' industrial promotion. Focusing on the cultural function of CDFE, Zhu Rikun and his coworkers have kept CDFE the most independent festival for documentaries, and its highest jury award, the Independent Spirit Award, is one of the most prestigious domestic awards for Chinese independent documentaries. The Independent Spirit Award only grants the director a

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<sup>70</sup> A popular Chinese online forum where members discuss films, books and arts in different online communities divided by individual interests.

<sup>71</sup> As recorded in author's personal notes from a Q&A session after a film screening during the sixth CDFE.

5000 RMB cash award, but the cultural capital it brings is inestimable. Although CDFFF does not put any effort in film promotion, its high cultural status in the Chinese independent documentary world has attracted international attention from all over the world and thus automatically gives CDFFF's selected films marketing opportunities.

In this sense, CDFFF practices a marketing and promotional platform for Chinese independent documentaries, especially low-budget ones, despite its intention to avoid such efforts. With China's opening up and fast economic growth, the whole world is interested to see what is going on in this country. Independent documentaries are windows into a vivid China in progress. International festival directors and curators come to CDFFF to discover new talent and works that they hope to include in their festivals. Overseas academic institutions invite CDFFF's films to screen in their Chinese documentary programs. Although CDFFF does not have any premiere requirements for the submitted films, Zhu Rikun does admit that they prefer films that are made in the past year.<sup>72</sup> Because of this, a number of successful Chinese independent documentaries in the international market or festival circuit started their journeys at CDFFF, such as Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2003), Feng Yan's *Bing Ai* (2007), Chen Weijun's *Please Vote for Me* (2007) and Zhao Liang's *Petition* (2009).

Many of these directors participate further in CDFFF after they achieve success internationally. Wang Bing and Feng Yan joined the jury in the fourth and fifth CDFFFs, respectively. Feng Yan also organized the retrospective program of Tsuchimoto Noriaki. What is worth noting is that the jurors work for free. In fact, most of the workers during a busy CDFFF week are young volunteers. They are university students, artists living in Songzhuang, independent filmmakers, and simply independent filmgoers. Fanhall Films'

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<sup>72</sup> Zhu, interview.

compound is always busy with these volunteers. When CDFE is over, the compound returns to its usual quiet state. The volunteers know each other and talk about films and filmmakers like they know them personally. Many of the volunteers come to Songzhuang for CDFE every year. CDFE's coherent independent spirit keeps these people's enthusiasm.

### **An “Independent Spirit” in Films**

The independent spirit is first demonstrated in CDFE's film selection. In response to my question about how CDFE decides what films enter the competition unit, Zhu Rikun answered:

First, we encourage new works; second, they should be powerful works; also, we think the competition unit should have works with various styles. At last, the authors of the work should agree. That's it.<sup>73</sup>

Here the terms “powerful” and “styles” refer to two essential elements of a film that CDFE values with more courage and openness than other film festivals in China: content and form. First, CDFE is very open with artistic and formal experiments. Various styles were presented in the competition documentaries in the sixth CDFE. Some of the films violate common editing rules, or have rough or no sound editing to the extent that the background noise buries dialogue. Some run excessively long and make copious use of long takes. One film was a single take of an interview that runs 184 minutes. That year's Jury's Prize was granted to *Classmates* (2009), a 203-minute film shot with a handheld camera. The director, Lin Xin, who is also a painter, made the entire film all by himself. Lin Xin was born in 1960. *Classmates* follows over a dozen of Lin Xin's former high school classmates, who are now an entrepreneur, milk tea vender owners, a banker, a driver, a vendor who sells toilet paper from a pedicab in residential areas, a mover, a

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<sup>73</sup> Zhu, interview.

government worker, and so on—people from every social and economic stage of the contemporary Chinese society. The film depicts all sorts of heavy, difficult lives for ordinary Chinese people from the director's generation. It was indeed a powerful film in which any classmate's life could have been an intriguing documentary itself. However, due to its length and rough editing, quite a few members of the audience fell asleep during the screening. When the length was questioned by an audience member during the after-screening Q&A session, Lin Xin answered with sincerity:

I can't make it shorter. I don't have the ability to do that ... I doubt if this is a work of art. Sometimes my editing is simply condensing.

However, Zhu Rikun has another perspective on films that challenge the audience's familiar cinematic experience. His perspective was built on a grand picture. The strict film censorship in China expands to every media production and distribution within the system, making it impossible for independent films making a different individual voice from the state's values and ideology to meet the audience in theaters or on television. Independent filmmakers have to make a hard choice of keeping the independent spirit in their filmmaking but risking their works' marketing or submitting to the official media system and making a living off it. In this environment, Zhu Rikun and his coworkers value any effort to stay independent from the system, including styles that challenge the audience's viewing expectations.

I think this [long length] is a positive thing. It's as important as not censoring your films. At least you have the freedom to decide the length of your film, no matter it's five, six or ten hours. It's very important not to restrict yourself. This importance also applies to editing techniques and film styles, because this kind of censorship is too much in China, either tangible or invisible. It's a good phenomenon that at least people have gone far in this aspect [film style and length experiments] ... Also, I believe that every person has the ability to gradually know themselves. Maybe right now a person's film is indeed too long, but he will gradually realize it and work on that ... In fact, I'm not worried about a film's excessive length or how boring and difficult it is to watch. What I'm concerned

with is that people subconsciously make their films like those made in the system, in order to sell them to television stations in China or to show them at more festivals. I'd rather you make a very long film that no one wants to screen. That's still better than making changes for the film's marketization.<sup>74</sup>

Zhu Rikun has been in charge of film selection since CDFE's first year. In recent years, there are often two or three people participating in selecting Chinese films and dividing them into different CDFE screening units, but Zhu Rikun is always one of these people. He also invites the other one or two festival programmers and jurors, so in a way he decides who the festival programmers and jurors are. As CDFE's leader, Zhu Rikun's personal perspectives and preferences on independent documentaries play a prominent part in CDFE.

Along with CDFE's tolerance of documentary styles and lengths, CDFE claim that they do not censor any submitted films. This is a very brave statement for a film festival in the Chinese market, where self-censorship is a common strategy to survive under the supervision and strict censorship from SARFT. During my encounters with Chinese independent film professionals, almost everyone knows about CDFE and many of them describe it as brave or radical. It is true that a documentary with a socially or politically sensitive topic may be banned or self-censored in many venues, but can most likely be seen at CDFE. However, it is not necessarily because Zhu Rikun or CDFE are more politically radical.

Self-censorship is very common all over China, especially for companies and organizations. They think that's a way of living, like ostriches. We're not radical, but others filter too much. We don't filter. When we screen a film, we firstly consider if it's a good film, not if it radically confronts the society. We don't give up a good film for its relatively radical content, such as *Petition*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Wood Lin, "Zhuanfang Zhongguo Jilupian Jiaoliu Zhou Cezhanren Zhu Rikun," *Dianying, Rensheng, Meng* (blog), June 4, 2011, accessed June 27, 2011, <http://woodlindoc.blogspot.com/2011/06/blog-post.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Zhu, interview.

*Petition* (2009) was the Independent Spirit Award winner of the sixth CDFP. The film followed a group of petitioners with various backgrounds for twelve years until the petitioners' village was torn down to make way for a new railway station for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The State Bureau for Letters and Calls (SBLC) in Beijing is supposed to coordinate confrontations between the people and the government, and to solve problems that local governments have created for their people with their wrongdoings. So everyone has the right to petition to SBLC. However, they have to personally go to Beijing and petition in paper form and wait an indefinite length of time for the result. Many of the petitioners lived near a worn-out railway station, and were in constant fear of persecution from their local governments.

*Petition* was a powerful film that showed the audience what petitioning the government really means in China. While petition and SBLC are familiar words for ordinary Chinese people, it is rare to see how SBLC works and what a petitioner's life is like. The film completely takes the petitioners' perspective. On one hand, it is hard to get the officials' side and their voices on camera. SBLC is heavily guarded and a scene in the SBLC was shot with a hidden camera of a petitioner. On the other hand, obviously taking side on the petitioners' is an independent attitude itself against the misleading and disguised information about petitioning and SBLC that ordinary Chinese people receive from mainstream media in China. While failing to provide SBLC's or local governments' voice, *Petition* ambitiously touches some of the most controversial social issues in China by revealing the petitioners' cases and lives, including the rural crop tax, dealing with laid-off workers, forced demolitions, wrongful convictions, corruption in the army, citizen-managed teachers, etc.<sup>76</sup> Petitioners in the film are from various kinds of social

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<sup>76</sup> "Unofficial" teachers who are not paid the same by the government as official teachers.

status with different professions, have different accents or even speak different dialects. This diversity resembles the audience during the screening. CDFF's Chinese audience also comes from different parts of the country and diverse backgrounds. It is not difficult to imagine the petitioners reminding various people in the audience of friends or relatives. The film had two cuts, one running 122 minutes and the other 318 minutes, screened on two different days during the sixth CDFF. Although neither was particularly short, the audience was noticeably quiet during both screenings. They sobbed when an old petitioner couple were found run over by a train while frantically running from people sent by the local government. If caught, they would have been beaten up, or abducted and taken back where they came from, where they may even have been sent to an asylum for schizophrenia. The audience also laughed when the petitioners sang a song they wrote to mock the government and the Chinese Communist Party. Although Zhao Liang, the director, was at Cannes during CDFF, his absence did not stop the long applause at the end of the screenings, after which the audience quietly left the compound.

Although *Petition* has obvious political elements, it was neither chosen nor awarded for being political. A large number of independent documentarians turn their lenses to social and political issues because these issues represent the most interesting stories in contemporary China—made more interesting by official media's attempts to cover many of them up. Sampling from this pool with no self-censorship is bound to result in a selection in which a large portion of the films have socially and politically sensitive topics. In essence, CDFF's programmers value its cultural function over political advocacy or industrial significance. Zhu Rikun himself has a strong sense of social responsibility, which is shared with many Chinese independent documentarians. He has expressed his expectations of CDFF's cultural and social impact on different occasions:

Regarding our film festival's film selection, content is still considered before form in my opinion. Although form is also important, [a film] can't indulge in form. For Chinese independent films, I think the most important thing is to reflect reality ... What I hope for our festival is that we can help improve filmmaking art ... It seems that there are many productions with good content, but it's because there are too many problems in reality. The quality of the films forms an indirect ratio with the quality of society. I'd rather we have a better reality without this kind of good films.<sup>77</sup>

It is obvious that as a documentary film festival organizer with a strong sense of social responsibility, Zhu Rikun faces a dilemma: he desires a society with fewer social issues, yet appreciates the many powerful documentaries produced as a result of China's social problems. He leaves the dilemma to the participants of CDFFF by making it a festival where discussion and debate take almost as important a role as film screenings.

### **An “Independent Spirit” in Discussion and Communication**

Official Chinese film festivals such as the Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival and Shanghai International Film Festival usually screen their selected mainstream films in multiple theaters. Audience needs to buy tickets to the screenings, and they do not often have a chance to meet the filmmakers or participate in Q&A sessions. CDFFF, evolved from a film club with a post-screening Q&A tradition, functions almost like a documentary conference with screenings. Almost every CDFFF screening is immediately followed by a Q&A session with the director. Given the diverse backgrounds of the Q&A participants, these sessions provoke discussions and debates on topics surrounding each film. With the audience a mixture of filmmakers, university students, artists, scholars, film festival organizers and interested citizens, the discussions and debates cover topics from a single documentary's filmmaking process, artistic choices, and marketing prospective, to the grand picture of Chinese independent filmmaking or documentary filmmaking, as well as the issues the film presents. All the

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<sup>77</sup> Zhu, interview.

screenings are free, and the seating is first come, first served. Thus with the exception of the director and host on stage during a Q&A session, the audience members do not usually even know the background of the people sitting next to them. Even the film festival's guests find their own seats and sit amongst the audience. This setting in a way prevents ordinary audience members from hesitating to express themselves because they are intimidated by the film experts and professionals in attendance. Everyone is equal in the discussions and encouraged to speak freely, whatever their backgrounds.

During one Q&A session, a director of an international film festival and CDFP's guest, pointed out that the English subtitles went by too quickly to read and thus hindered his understanding of the film. Right after the director explained this problem was caused by a tight budget, a young audience member stood up and defended the director:

We feel the same with Hollywood movies. We can't always follow the dialogue, but it does not stop us from watching the films. This is a documentary. There's nothing the director can do with the fast dialogue. It's simply a problem with language.<sup>78</sup>

Putting aside this statement's justification, this exchange shows the free, equal environment CDFP provides. This example is in line with what Zhu Rikun hopes for CDFP:

Don't think that a film festival only functions in gathering us in a warm, happy environment. That is useless. The only benefits are that it leaves you with a good impression and all the films like a big party. When you recall the experience, you may feel warm, but fundamentally, I think this is a very low level. I hope our communication can be escalated to exchanges of thoughts and heated discussion.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> As recorded in author's personal notes of audience comments during a Q&A at the 6<sup>th</sup> CDFP.

<sup>79</sup> Lin, *Dianying, Rensheng, Meng*.

## Other Indications of CDFP's "Pure, Independent Spirit"

Since CDFP's second year in 2004, the festival has continued screening programs for documentary films from other countries and regions. Their foreign film screening has a very different intention from CZM's film salon, which screens famous or successful, relatively new foreign documentaries. CZM as a commercial company hoped to distribute foreign documentaries in China, so the films they select are audience-friendly. Films that have won awards internationally or have had successful box office in other countries are safer for CZM's commercial purpose. However, Fanhall Films and CDFP are more culturally-oriented than commercially-oriented. At first, CDFP showcased classic foreign documentaries such as Barbara Kopple's *American Dream* (1990), Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia Part One: Festival of the Nations* (1938), and Dziga Vertov's *Man with A Movie Camera* (1929). Since the fifth CDFP, one or two late foreign directors are featured every year. CDFP showcases their films and invites their coworkers, family members, and scholars who specialize in the study of these directors for forums and Q&A sessions with the Chinese audience. Documentary directors outside China whom CDFP has featured include Ogawa Shinsuke and Tsuchimoto Noriaki from Japan and Henri Storck from Belgium. Zhu Rikun has his unique rationale for these retrospective programs:

Ogawa Shinsuke and Tsuchimoto Noriaki, as well as Frederick Wiseman from America that we're preparing to feature next year, are not only introduced for their films. These people have either influenced Chinese documentary history or been discussed a lot in China. However, not many people have seen their films. They don't know what they are like and under what kind of historical circumstances they were made. I hope to show the real films, so that people don't have to only try to understand them from written characters like in the past ... On one hand, we host these retrospective showcases in the hope that we can improve communication; on the other hand, we also hope we can slowly get to know what people in other countries are doing and enhance mutual understanding.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Lin, *Dianying, Rensheng, Meng*.

Through focusing on the festival's cultural and social function, selecting and awarding films only on the basis of their formal achievement and powerful content with no self-censorship, encouraging communication and discussion with plenty of Q&A sessions, workshops and forums, and avoiding any marketing and industrial panels to the extent that it may be difficult for an international distributor to directly get in touch with a director, CDFF is indeed a unique documentary festival with a "pure, independent spirit." It is this spirit that drives the audience to spend four or five hours everyday just to commute to see films at CDFF. After a screening, it is very common to hear the audience thank the director for expanding and deepening their knowledge of their society. CDFF is possibly the documentary film festival in China most likely to go against the system. This is difficult in a country where "political" is an ambiguous yet ever-present word.

I don't think anything in China can get rid of its political nature, because we live in a centralized political system. How can you stay away from that? Artists always talk about staying away from politics. I hope I can intentionally say that I don't want to be involved in anything political either. However, from a different perspective, you can't completely get rid of this relationship. In fact, rejecting anything political is also political itself, although it may actually be unintentional.<sup>81</sup>

The use of the word "unintentional" may be a true representation of reality. It is also a strategic means of expression that I commonly heard in my conversations with independent documentary professionals. In China, and maybe in any other country, a "pure" independent spirit is impossible to keep. To keep CDFF relatively speaking one of the most independent film festivals in China, Fanhall Films has to practice many strategies and relationships in order to survive and develop.

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<sup>81</sup> Zhu, interview.

## **CDFFF and the Local**

Staying away from central Beijing and building a base in Songzhuang ended CDFFF's guerilla days, when Fanhall Films had to look for different, and sometimes unreliable, screening locations and sponsors every year. Funded by a non-governmental foundation as a non-governmental festival, CDFFF has acquired the most freedom of any film festival in China by carefully testing limits from SARFT and the government. "They know everything" is a common saying when independent filmmakers and festival programmers talk about the government. As an independent documentary film festival emphasizing its cultural and social functions, CDFFF balances itself through tangoing with the global, national and local.

CDFFF's relationship with the local is the most amiable of the three-legged system. CDFFF's unlucky experience in downtown Beijing in the early years proves that rooting in the political center to survive is still difficult for an independent film festival existing completely outside the system. Settling in a geographically remote but artistically centered village is a strategic decision. The decent rapport between the local government and contemporary artists has indirectly built a preferred environment for an independent documentary film festival, which also has a close kinship with contemporary artists, bonded by Li Xianting's Film Fund. At the same time, Fanhall Films' work brings both cultural and financial capital to Songzhuang, and nurtures the local cultural life. In return, the local community supports Fanhall Films with donations and personnel. Compared to this win-win relationship, CDFFF has much more complex interactions with global and national forces.

## **CDFFF and the Global**

As the globe pays its attention to fast-developing China undergoing drastic social and economic changes, independent Chinese documentaries also attract attention in

international film festival circuits and the international market, and from scholars outside China. Independent Chinese documentaries are part of the global media system. This gives CDFFF many opportunities to work with these international resources. They have already established relationships with international film festivals such as Yamagata International Film Festival, Marseille International Documentary Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival and the Nyon Festival – Visions du Reel, as well as overseas organizations and foundations such as Fonds Henri Storck, Swiss Films and Japan Foundation. These relationships provide CDFFF economic and cultural support.

All these international resources create cultural partnerships that usually take two forms: films and personnel. On the one hand, CDFFF's retrospective programs of belated overseas documentarians would not have happened without films rented for free or cheap from these resources. On the other hand, foundations like the Japan Foundation and Fonds Henri Storck also see documentary films from their countries being screened in CDFFF as a good chance to promote their own culture. Kenji Ishizaka, a programming director for the Tokyo International Film Festival, admitted that if the sixth CDFFF were not going to have a retrospective program for a Japanese director, Japan Foundation would have not financially helped the program or CDFFF.<sup>82</sup>

International personnel's participation in CDFFF also gives the Chinese audience an opportunity for direct cinematic and cultural exchange, and a first-hand narrative on the overseas films they see in CDFFF through discussions, debates, and Q&A sessions. In recent years, international film festival directors, filmmakers and scholars have also been invited to be jurors, which increased the global perspective of the judging for the competition units.

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<sup>82</sup> Kenji Ishizaka, interview by author, Beijing, China, May 25, 2009.

I had the opportunity to translate for the jury of the sixth CDFF. The jury that year was made up of Cui Zi'en, a Chinese independent filmmaker, Naito Masayuki, a Japanese documentary cinematographer, and Shelly Kraicer, a Canadian film critic. After the three winning films were decided in a debate and discussion among the jurors, each juror wrote a brief review of each film. A comparison of these comments shows different perspectives between the Chinese juror and international jurors in reviewing the films.

We congratulate Zhao Liang's *Petition*: a moving, provocative, and brave film. It provides a searching and compassionate record of the details of its subjects, these petitioners' devastated lives, and links that to a broader political context that makes the urgency of their situation clear. – Shelly Kraicer

A very interesting film, sure to elicit tears. This film depicts the nature of life. While similar subjects can be found in European cinema, those films cannot surpass the convincing power of *Classmates*. – Naito Masayuki

The Chinese people's most painful wound has its origin in something very simple: political rule is valued over people's lives. *Buried* goes straight for China's jugular by precisely, powerfully and concretely taking aim at this problem. I believe that films like this will eventually change society. – Cui Zi'en

Cui Zi'en, as a Chinese individual living in the society that the film reveals, has more of an involved view of the film and values its social function, whereas the two jurors from outside China take a more objective perspective, assessing the films in the context of world documentary cinema and looking for their globally shared values and comparing them with similar cinema in other parts of the world.

Compared with the abundant cultural impact that global resources have made on CDFF, economic support is still relatively small, although it has already improved since the film club and the first few years of CDFF, when Fanhall Films did not know where to apply for economic support. Usually international funding can only cover the plane tickets for international guests and the renting of overseas films, and most funding is earmarked for a specific use related to the organizations or foundations that provide the

funding. Take the sixth CDFFF as an example, the Japan Foundation only supported the retrospective program of Tsuchimoto Noriaki, and Fonds Henri Storck only supported the retrospective program of Henri Storck. Zhu Rikun thinks this situation is due to little funding availability for film festivals and a lack of communication:

First, as a film festival, funding is in general difficult to locate and apply for ...  
Second, the outside world still doesn't know China well enough, so they don't always feel comfortable supporting a program like ours.<sup>83</sup>

Insufficient international funding is not the only problem that CDFFF has with its global elements. Zhu Rikun and his coworkers welcome overseas documentary filmmakers, curators, festival programmers, critics and scholars in the belief that their participation and film viewing experience not only enhances the festival's cultural function, but also helps with the circulation of some selected films through these international personnel's interest in them subsequent effort to screen them in other countries. For example, Jean Perry's CDFFF trip in 2009 was mainly for Chinese documentaries that will potentially be screened in a Chinese documentary program in the next year's Visions du Reel. However, although foreigners in China enjoy amnesty from the government, their attendance at CDFFF does not protect the festival. In fact, their presence attracts more attention from the government. Non-Chinese citizens are required to register at local police stations when they arrive in China in order to avoid a violation of official rules and regulations when they stay in a local hotel. Yet just like many other laws and regulations in China that are not strictly enforced by government officials, many foreigners who go to China for a short stay do not bother to register, and meet no problems. The problem for CDFFF is that this is not the case when foreigners are involved in events and activities that the government does not favor. Knowing that their

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<sup>83</sup> Zhu, interview.

international guests' registry may simply be denied by the local police station, the sixth CDFFF trickily arranged with a local hotel and checked in all the international guests using Chinese names. Those guests attended the festival without governmental interference, but the hotel was fined 5000 RMB when a number of foreigners' appearance at the hotel caught the local government's attention.<sup>84</sup>

Global resources and CDFFF share a mutual cultural interest through exchange in films and personnel. CDFFF has also received international funds, although they are not enough to cover all the costs for CDFFF's international programs. CDFFF also needs to deal with the government's sensitive nerves with foreigners participating in CDFFF. However, despite all the trouble, CDFFF still makes efforts to keep and expand their connections on a global scale, while strategically avoiding official interference at the same time.

### **CDFFF and the National**

Holding a non-governmental film festival can be tricky in China. There are many rules and regulations on film festivals and DV works—the major form that CDFFF's submissions take—yet not all the restrictions are strictly enforced under the government's supervision. Also, a rule may be strictly enforced during one specific period of time, and ignored at other times. In this environment, Fanhall Films and CDFFF have been dancing a tango with the official rules. They keep testing the limits, because no one knows what the real limits are, and they change over time. When the pressure from the government is lightened, they become a bit more aggressive in their activities; when the atmosphere is tense, they take a step back to just within the official's tolerance.

According to a SARFT regulation entitled "Notice on Strengthening the Management of the Broadcast of Digital Video Films in Film-TV Broadcasting

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<sup>84</sup> Zhu, interview.

Organizations and on Information Networks Such as the Internet” (“*Guanyu jiaqiang yingshi bofang jigou he hulianwang deng xinxi wangluo bofang DV pian guanli de tongzhi*”),

... All DV works that deal with issues related to religion, nationalities, and sensitive social problems should seek the opinions of the relevant authorities. Of those films, the ones that do not capture the issues precisely, or that may induce negative social influences, should not be broadcast.

This regulation bans most of the films screened at CDFE. It is also impossible to make a list of all the sensitive topics when the word “sensitive” itself is so ambiguous. In order to avoid censorship like this and unnecessary interference, CDFE has never tried to get an official festival title from the government. They have never had any relationship with SARFT.

Technically, the name “film festival” (*dianyingjie*) itself in China implies that it is held by the government or organizations under the government’s jurisdiction. In order to avoid trouble in that matter, CDFE is literally called “Chinese Documentary Exchange Week” (*zhongguo jilupian jiaoliuzhou*), so its organizers can claim CDFE is not a film festival (*dianyingjie*) when confronted with government officials. The title itself also does not indicate that it is an independent film festival. However, CDFE’s official English translation still keeps “film festival” in it, because the English title is for the audience and international documentary personnel who are interested in CDFE.

We avoid using *dianyingjie* because *dianyingjie* can only be held under the government’s jurisdiction. However, “film festival” is a common term that nobody makes a fuss about.<sup>85</sup>

The festival’s catalogue is printed only in English and traditional Chinese characters, commonly used in Taiwan and Hongkong, instead of simplified Chinese, the

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<sup>85</sup> Zhu, interview.

official written language used in Mainland China. Zhu Rikun, a Mainlander, always uses traditional Chinese characters in his emails. This implies CDFF's attitude. Catalogues are often only used by festival attendees and scholars. However, the omnipotent censorship and self-censorship in China prevents scholars in Mainland China from publishing works on CDFF. CDFF is aware of its position in China and does not try to please the Mainland officials by using their familiar written language.

In addition to playing on words, CDFF also avoids sanction by announcing everything at the last minute. CDFF usually lasts for a week, but the exact dates for each year are announced very late. The festival agenda is only available at the opening ceremony, in the form of handouts to festival attendees. Also, because the government is sensitive and cautious about gatherings, almost all the parties during that week, which are also gatherings of filmmakers, scholars, critics, curators, and festival programmers, are announced on the same day or the day before through word of mouth.

The festival has also been kept to a small scale after the ambitious screening coverage of Chinese documentaries with a less independent spirit. Usually, for Chinese documentaries, ten films are selected for competition, and another ten or so only for screening.

Whoever tries to make a big-scale [independent] film festival is due to fail ... a moderate scale ensures the festival gets held every year, which also helps improve film quality, because people can keep communicating every year ... strategically, we realize our ideas in reality. Excessively pursuing a big scale may end up sacrificing other things, so small scale is our strategy.<sup>86</sup>

A similar strategy to SARFT's use of ambiguous words like "sensitive," and unlike CNEX's articulated written agenda and requirements for project submissions, CDFF also creates an ambiguity in their film selection standards by not having a written standard to

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<sup>86</sup> Zhu, interview.

use as a reference. The theme poster each year, which is also the cover design of each year's catalogue, is designed by designer and documentarian Liu Ying.<sup>87</sup> Most of the posters are a simple object with ambiguous implications and symbolism. When the government did not interfere with the posters in the early years, Liu Ying's designs became more and more critical and provocative. The fourth CDFP's catalogue cover is a piece of film resembling four stairs; the fifth's is several pieces of wrinkled scratch paper; the sixth's is a camera made of a skeleton; the seventh's is a picture of surveillance cameras in front of Tiananmen Square; and the eighth's poster is a knife, with the back of the knife's blade the top of a clapperboard.<sup>88</sup> However, the most explicitly critical poster of the eighth DOChina was never used because the festival had to cancel in 2011 when the Chinese government had the most intensive crackdown on dissidents since 1989. The government was cautious about the encouraging impact the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia made on Chinese dissidents, who had started riots and revolution calls in different parts of China and over the internet. This incident proves what Zhu Rikun said to me in 2009:

I don't think the government's attitude has changed or become more tolerant. They haven't been tolerating us because they like us these years. Whether they crack down on us or not all depends on their considerations. We just don't get to know why.<sup>89</sup>

In this sense, CDFP/DOChina is dancing a tango with the government with its eyes blindfolded. Yet this does not stop Zhu Rikun and his coworkers' exercising their wisdom and courage in practicing the independent spirit in every way they can. In order to maintain and develop their work, including but not exclusive to CDFP/DOChina, Fanhall Films have never stopped exploring new sustainable strategies.

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<sup>87</sup> The name used here is a pseudonym.

<sup>88</sup> See appendix.

<sup>89</sup> Zhu, interview.

## **Ever-morphing Survival Strategies**

The internet makes it impossible to block certain information from those who make an effort to look for it. Fanhall Films understands this well. FANHALL.com was an informative website with updates on Chinese independent film and Fanhall Films' work, as well as news and information on international film festivals and independent films. It was both a great online resource for filmmakers and a popular forum where people discussed and debated any independent film related topics equally under their cybernames. Before it was closed in 2011, FANHALL.com had encountered censorship from China's web police more than once, but it always survived each confrontation through compromise. For example, the web police emailed FANHALL.com to delete all information and discussion about *Petition*, which became a hot topic on the website after winning the Independent Spirit Award in the sixth CDFP in 2009. The webmaster immediately followed the command in order to keep the website up. Fanhall Films continually tested the government's ever-changing restrictions, and thus generally had a good sense as to what they were. So they knew that it was serious when they were told to delete the information about *Petition* or have the website be shut down.

Considering Fanhall Films' skill at avoiding government crackdowns, it was surprising to hear the news that FANHALL.com had been shut down and the eighth DOChina cancelled. This is a sign of the unstable environment for independent documentary activities that exist outside of the system in China. However, it is not a sign of the end of the game between Fanhall Films and the government.

Arriving with the bad news from Fanhall Films in an email was information about a new Google group set up as a substitute for FANHALL.com. Also, the data from the website was saved, and the website may reopen in the future when the atmosphere is less intense. Meanwhile, while the eighth DOChina was officially cancelled, film festival-

type activities were still organized and held, albeit in a form unlike any previous DOChina festivals. One of the attendees, Shelly Kraicer wrote:

An opening banquet, attended by the festival staff, filmmakers associated with past editions of the festival and foreign guests. In a strange twist, graciously footing the bill were jovial representatives of the local government (including a table of heavysset guys in the corner, whose serious mien didn't exactly fit the profile of a Songzhuang artist type). Our host officials had a slightly less charming follow-up act. Starting the next day, some foreign guests staying in the Songzhuang guesthouse had a none-too-discreet escort in the form of plainclothes cops following them through the town. Impressively (from the point of view of the manpower available for a trivial surveillance duty like this one), one of the cops spoke English well enough to have a brief chat with one of my colleagues who was out for a stroll.

Over the next few days, we could meet several of the filmmakers whose films had been scheduled, and we could watch a few of their films on DVDs on a TV set. (The screening rooms were strictly off limits.) There were opportunities to talk with the director afterwards, usually around meals. So on a makeshift scale, something like the standard festival "screening + Q&A" format materialized. These small gatherings were good for the directors to receive feedback and for visitors to learn more about the directors' work. But this was not a film festival by any means."<sup>90</sup>

At the same time, in an interview after the cancellation of the eighth DOChina, Zhu Rikun mentioned that he was considering holding the next DOChina in the countryside in an attempt to increase its impact on countryside villagers.<sup>91</sup> Also, although the website for Li Xianting's Film Fund was also closed at the same time as FANHALL.com, the organization's activities, such as Li Xianting's Film School, are still carrying on. Over the internet, on both douban.com and weibo.com (the Chinese version of twitter.com), news about Fanhall Films and Li Xianting's Film Fund has been non-stop. While it is not easy to maintain an independent film organization completely outside

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<sup>90</sup> Shelly Kraicer, "Shelly on Film: The Film Festival That Wasn't," *dGenerate Films* (blog), May 12, 2011, <http://dgeneratefilms.com/film-festivals/shelly-on-film-the-film-festival-that-wasnt/#more-605>.

<sup>91</sup> Lin, *Dianying, Rensheng, Meng*.

of the system in China, Fanhall Films demonstrates the ongoing struggle to survive and evolve through sacrifices and compromises that do not hurt, but instead protect, its independent nature.

## Conclusion

The multi-functional organizations discussed in this study were born in response to the growing diversity in the Chinese independent documentary ecosystem over the last decade. Their existence has added diversity of production, distribution, and exhibition to the whole ecosystem. These organizations, as exploring pioneers, are innovative and flexible in their methods of survival. Because there were not former models for them to follow, their founders' and leaders' personal motivation has been crucial to the nature of their organizations. Whether such an organization is a business, an NPO with a governmental title, or a grass-roots organization that operates completely outside of the system, determines the number and extent of independent documentaries that they can work with. In other words, the further an organization stays away from the system, the larger the range of independent films they can work with, and vice versa.

Despite the different levels of independence these organizations practice, in an era of globalization with limitless sharing of information through the internet, all of these organizations need to respond to global, national and local forces to achieve sustainable development. Their goals and levels of involvement with the system largely impact how they balance relationships with these three forces. A business such as CZM, which seeks industrial prosperity within the system, is in a surprisingly passive, powerless position in relation to national forces such as rules and regulations from SARFT and SAIC, whereas a grass-roots, cultural- and art-oriented organization like Fanhall Films has more space for leverage among the global, national and local. The youngest organization among the three I studied, CNEX, founded in 2006 as an NPO, stands between CZM's and Fanhall Films' models. It strategically balances itself between the system and the independent

documentary scene, the government and the non-government, a commercial model and an ultimate cultural goal, international outlets and domestic productions.

Some of these organizations were founded with an ambition to create an industrial mode for Chinese independent documentaries. Some were not. No matter what their intentions, with the domestically and internationally growing reputation and impact of these representational organizations, their functions demonstrate a burgeoning industrial embryo where domestic production, distribution and exhibition of Chinese independent documentaries are for the first time all plausible. Moreover, because the current Chinese independent documentary scene is still young and lacks marketization experience, each of the three organizations that I studied has developed its own way to nurture this ecosystem. Through screenings, discussions, workshops and schools, they either educate the audience and filmmakers on production and marketization, or improve the art of independent filmmaking by training filmmakers to think independently and creatively. All of these unprecedented endeavors provide today's Chinese independent documentarians and their productions with more options and opportunities at home than ever before.

More than one Chinese independent documentarian has benefited from these organizations, especially those who started their documentary filmmaking careers after the these organizations were founded. Spending one's personal savings on production, trying one's luck in international film festivals and doing research on them all by oneself is no longer the only path for an independent documentarian to get his or her work seen and marketed. They have access to the resources these domestic organizations provide. Although collaboration between organizations that operate inside the system such CZM and CNEX and those that operate outside the system like Fanhall Films is very rare, the documentarians can choose and combine their resources for professional achievement.

The career of Yang Yifei, a new independent documentarian who entered this ecosystem in 2009 with his debut film, which has political elements and is banned in China, is an example of how the combined resources of different organizations can provide documentary directors with more opportunities, operating as a kind of industrial chain.<sup>92</sup> Yang Yifei's first film was produced with his personal investment exclusively. He produced it alone, and his production experience was difficult. When the film won a prestigious CDF award, it garnered both domestic and international attention. CNEX soon contacted Yang Yifei to seek collaboration with him. In 2010, Yang Yifei started doing research for his second project, which also deals with a sensitive topic. The project was selected for the first CCDF that CNEX hosted. Before the project was finished, CNEX helped Yang Yifei pitch it at a prestigious European film festival, where it was awarded funding. The project is currently in postproduction. Both Fanhall Films and CNEX have taken a significant role in Yang Yifei's career achievement as a new independent documentary director.

There are still many obstacles to these organizations' further growth. CZM's and Fanhall Films' mishaps in 2011 are examples of the obstacles they face at home. Although CNEX seems as yet unshaken by the government's crackdown, it is too early to say that their model is the most sustainable. In a country like China, with so many unstable elements and an ever-changing independent documentary ecosystem, cultural productions and new creations such as these organizations still have a lot of exploring left to do to identify sustainable strategies of evolution. However, their existence and active involvement in this ecosystem shines much hope on the future of Chinese independent documentary.

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<sup>92</sup> The name used here is a pseudonym.

## Appendix: CDFF Theme Posters

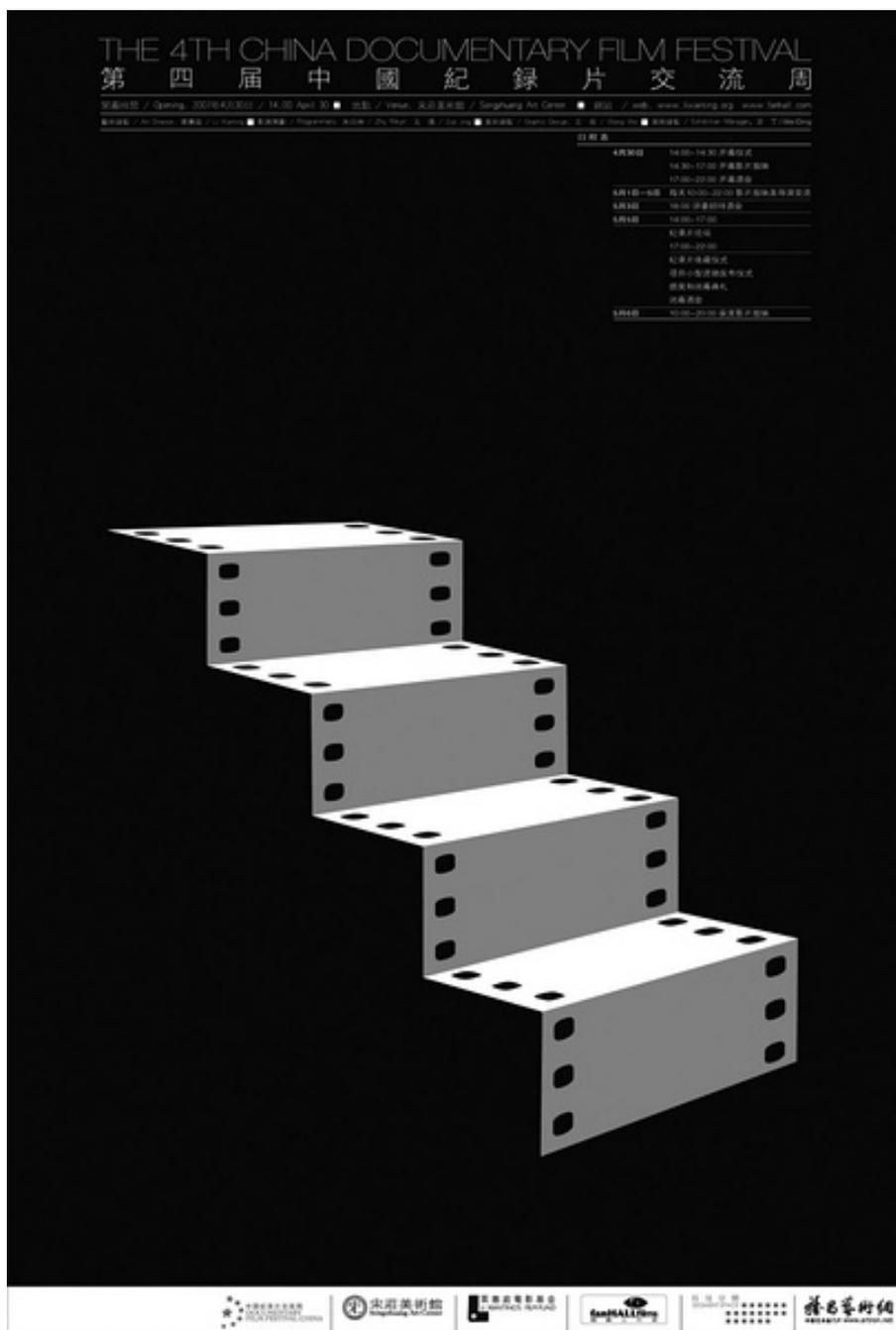


Figure 1: Poster for 4<sup>th</sup> CDFF<sup>93</sup>

<sup>93</sup> All posters come from “Li Xianting Dianying Jijin: Xiangce,” douban, accessed July 1, 2011. <http://site.douban.com/lxtff/room/488508/>.



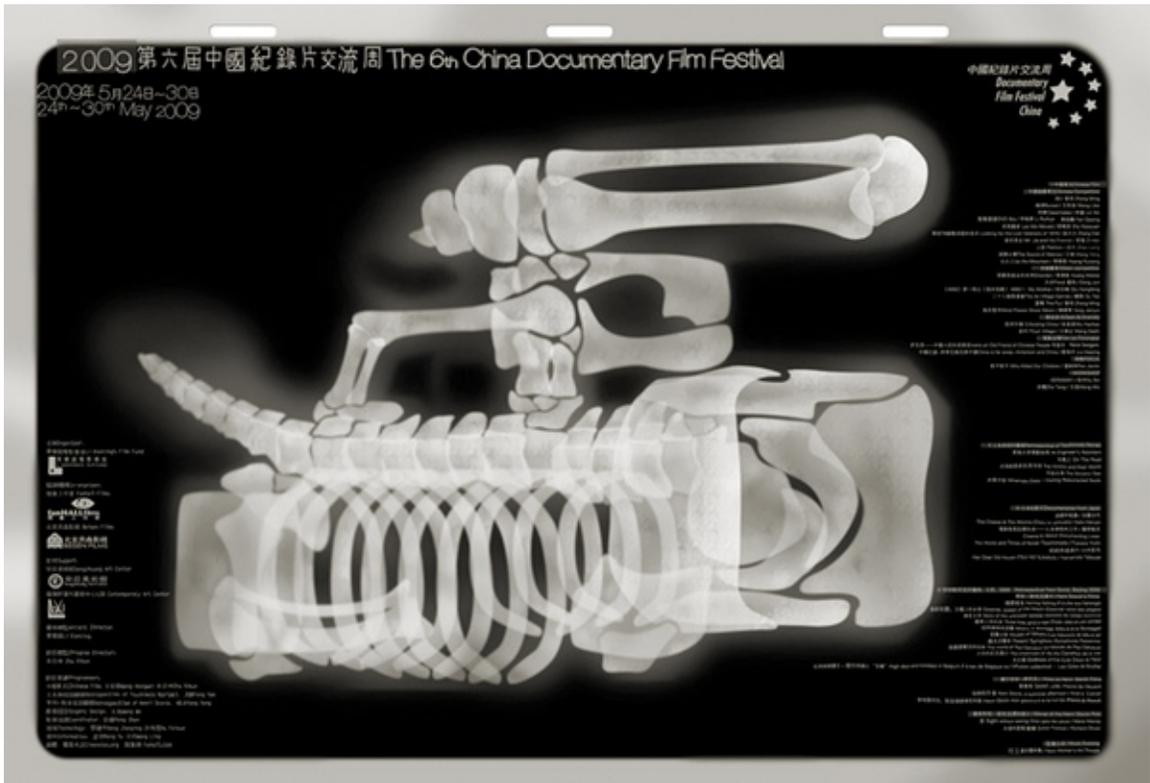


Figure 3: Poster for 6<sup>th</sup> CDFFF

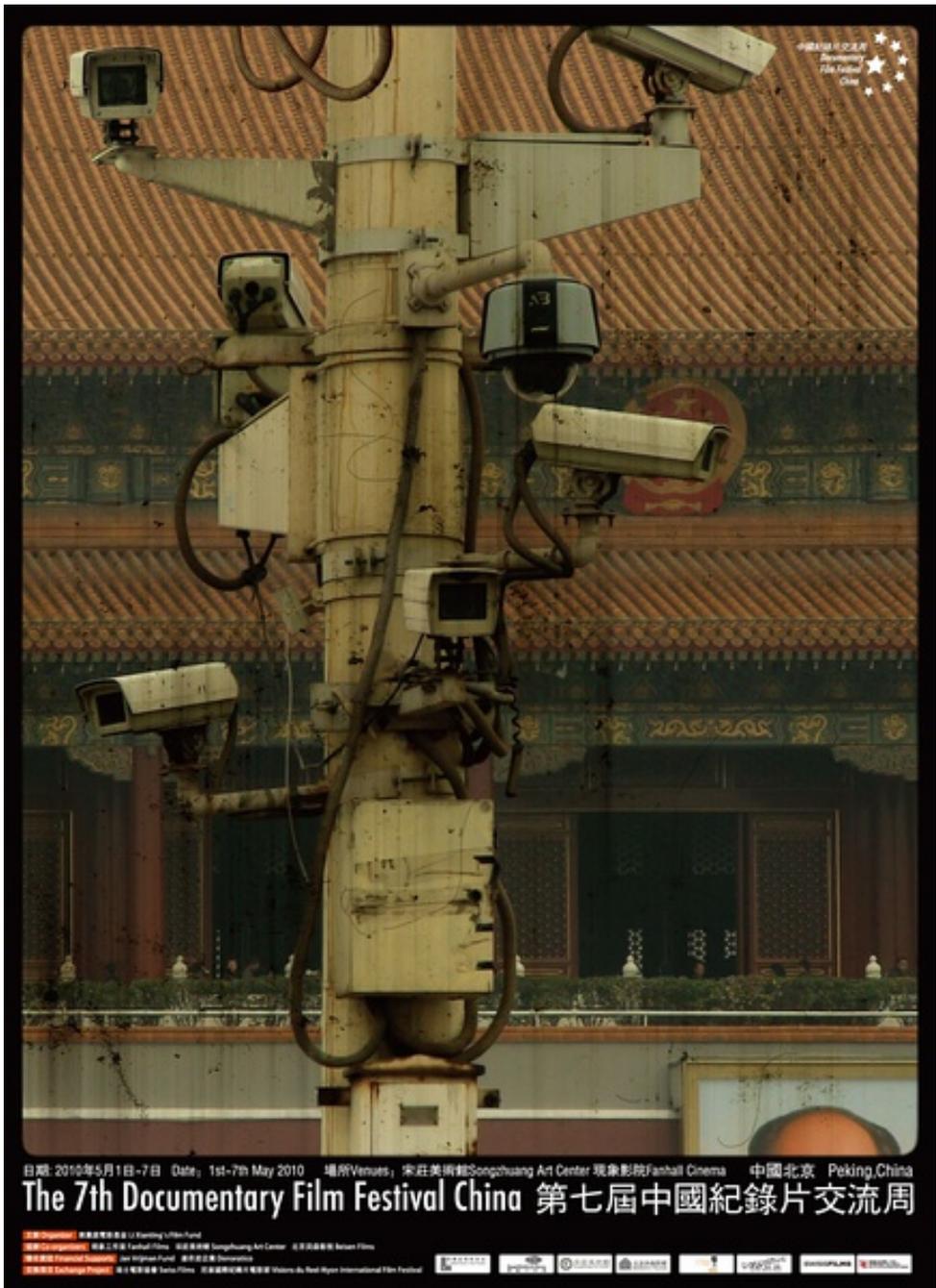
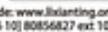


Figure 4: Poster for 7<sup>th</sup> CDFS



The 8th DOChina-Documentary Film Festival China  
第8屆中國紀錄片交流周

日期：2011年5月1日~7 Date:1st ~7th May 2011  
場地：現象藝術中心 Venue：Fanhall Center for Arts  
開幕時間 5月1日下午2點 Opening Time：14:00 1st May  
所有的放映免費 All screenings are free



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Figure 5: Poster for 8<sup>th</sup> CDFE, now known as DOChina

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