

<CN>Chapter 9</CN>

<CT>Three Modes of Independent Creative Documentary Production and the Rise of the Industrial Mode</CT>

<AU>Kiki Tianqi Yu</AU>

The year 2020 marked a decade since an official turning point in the development of China's domestic documentary industry. In 2010 the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) released a new document, titled *Several Opinions on Speeding up the Development of the Documentary Industry*, as a key part of national cultural strategy (Niu 2011; CNTV 2012). China has never lacked great documentaries for the global audience, but whether these independent films disseminate officially approved values is another question. The market for documentary cinema has been very weak. Furthermore, the independent documentary culture of the 1990s and 2000s was one that resisted marketization. In 2011 China Central Television's 9 Documentary Channel (CCTV-9) was launched, marking an expansion of documentary programming by state-owned television. Whereas the state-run documentary channels needed more programmes, the Beijing Independent Film Festival, a key screening venue and community for Chinese independent documentaries, was forced to cancellation in August 2012 when the local authorities cut the power off on the opening day (Kaiman 2014). Later that year, the state-approved Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival (GZDOC) received commercial stimulus when a local private media company helped to manage the operation and market developments. In April 2013 another independent platform for independent filmmakers, the

Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival (or Yunfest) was also forced to cancel (Ran 2015). Then in November 2013, CCTV-9 launched the first ‘China Pitch’, an international pitching forum inviting global filmmakers to tell stories about China (CNTV 2013).¹

The financial, structural, and human resources drawn into documentary production, distribution, and exhibition demonstrate the Chinese authorities’ ambition to reclaim documentary’s power to represent reality from the independents and develop it as an important vehicle of value dissemination. Rather than completely crushing the independent documentary production and exhibition networks, it called for grassroots private resources to join official activities. The *Chinese Documentary Development Research Report 2010* (2011) written by the project team led by Zhang Tongdao and Hu Zhifeng, at Beijing Normal University Documentary Centre, suggested that new policies should be implemented on the operational level and encourage private (*minjian*) investment to create successful Chinese documentaries for both international and domestic audiences.

With the authorities bringing more resources, generating policies, and funding opportunities to develop the local documentary industry, the dynamics of the field have inevitably transformed dramatically. We often hear stories of Chinese independent filmmakers facing ‘the threat of arrests and violence’ (Zhu Rikun, cited by Jacobs, 2013), but in recent years many young filmmakers no longer want to be associated with the former meaning of ‘independence’ as a political gesture. Independence has gradually become a professional mode of production that utilizes multiple resources including those from the state, even though any resource comes with its own restrictions. This fast-changing field therefore deserves re-

¹ I pitched China’s van Goghs at this forum in 2013.

evaluation. This chapter explores the changing production culture of independently produced creative documentary in China between 2010 and 2020, in contexts of increasing governmental intervention, a growing domestic market, and intensified integration with global networks. I argue that three pre-existing modes of independent creative documentary production have emerged more strongly: the personal political mode, the industrial mode, and the experimental mode. Recognizing this taxonomy may simplify the complex dynamics in the field, but the three modes are often intertwined, and I argue that from a Daoist perspective there is no hierarchical order among them, and each is in the process of transforming into another mode. This tripartite taxonomy ultimately aims to provide a way of understanding both the changing field of independent production and so-called creative documentary in a local Chinese context.

In the following sections I first explain this tripartite taxonomy, and how it signifies the changing rhetoric of independence. Then I focus on the industrial mode to explore the mechanism of the pitching forum to facilitate funding and networking, the rise of domestic pitching forums, the support and limitations associated with funding, and the rise of personal documentaries produced through the industrial mode on the domestic market. My own position as an active filmmaker in this field since 2006 means autoethnographic reflections, participant observation, and my personal conversations with industry players are evaluated and analysed. I draw intensively on my experience of producing two award-winning documentaries, *China's van Goghs* (*Zhongguo Fangao*, directed by Haibo Yu and Kiki Tianqi Yu, 2016) and *The Two Lives of Li Ermao* (*Ermao*, directed by Jia Yuchuan, 2019). Both projects were selected for pitching at the development and production stages, involved international co-productions, and entered the global distribution and exhibition networks. These first-hand materials are dissected along with industry reports and interviews with filmmakers.

<H1>The Tripartite Taxonomy of Independent Modes of Creative Documentary

Production</H1>

Independence in all three modes is a relative term, subject to three key factors: political authority, represented by policies, infrastructural support, and limitations through film censorship; the marketized creative economy, through industry funding, distribution, and exhibition networks; and aesthetic experimentation, in the form of innovative cinematic styles and narrative strategies. Both Chris Berry (2007) and Zhang Yingjin (2007) recognize that independence in post-socialist China was enabled by the relaxation of regulation in the market economy. But this market economy had little impact on documentary before it took shape as an industry about a decade ago. Regarding the global context, what Thomas Elsaesser regards as ‘double occupancy’ or ‘serving at least two masters’ (2016, 26), mainly political and economic, could also be used to understand the complex relationship that independently produced Chinese documentaries have with both the political authorities in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and various international funding institutions, and with both domestic and international audiences. Furthermore, the very nature of documentary as a cultural and artistic production means that the ideological messages expressed in a film are creatively constructed through aesthetic forms. In other words, I argue that the aesthetic form of a film indicates its political and economic positions. By paying attention to aesthetics, it is not difficult to realize that all three modes of independent production produce one genre of documentary, ‘creative documentary’.

The so-called creative documentary genre is distinguished from factual entertainment programmes or documentary series broadcast on television or online platforms for mass audiences (De Jong, Knudsen, and Rothwell 2013, 5). Creative documentary in the widest sense

celebrates the creative artistic expression and authorial interpretation of ‘truth’. In a narrow definition, it appears as a single, often feature-length, film, using ‘complex narrative structures’, and often aiming at middle- or high-brow audiences through film festivals, arthouse cinemas, or art centres (De Jong, Knudsen, and Rothwell 2013, 5). As a genre, it is promoted by leading international festivals where independent filmmakers globally aim to premier their films. The International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) website states that ‘[c]reative documentaries are films that are interesting from a stylistic point of view or are particularly innovative, relevant to social issues, and successfully manage to communicate with their audiences. The creative documentary is an art form, which means that the documentary filmmaker is an artist, not a journalist’ (IDFA, n.d.). Deprez and Pernin observe that creative documentary as a notion ‘has proven especially relevant for the industry and practitioners’ (2015, 10). In the production context, I argue that the genre of creative documentary is a more effective term than independence to assess the various relationships a documentary production is situated within without prejudging the political position a filmmaker may have. Creative documentaries may not all be independently run productions, but globally, most independent documentary filmmakers aim to produce creative documentaries. This term also recognizes the creativity involved in a documentary film production, not only reflected through aesthetic and narrative styles, but also in the production itself when filmmakers negotiate various power relations.

Within this tripartite taxonomy, the personal political mode continues the spirit of former Chinese independent cinema. It largely holds the belief that cinema should advocate personal expression, reflect sociopolitical reality, and not conform to the hegemonic ideologies. It is often produced with personal investment through a director-centred small team, and uses handheld camera, and ‘spontaneous documentary techniques’ (Berry 2007:126). This mode emerged at the

beginning of Chinese independent cinema and gave rise to auteur figures such as Wu Wenguang, Wang Bing, Zhao Liang, and Zhou Hao, some of whom also work through industrial and experimental modes. It carried a strong sense of responsibility to document China's transformation. However, this mode existed in a grey zone for a long time. In Mao's era and post-socialist China before 2010, officially approved and produced documentaries released in cinemas were very rare. They were mainly 'expository mode' propaganda films, 'science and education films' (*kejiao pian*), or 'special topic films' (*zhuanti pian*) made for mass education. Documentaries were mainly produced by state-owned broadcasters as television 'special topic programmes' (also *zhuanti pian*), and subject to broadcasters' internal censorship. The rise of independently produced documentaries through the personal political mode in the 1990s and 2000s played a key role in stimulating the production of creative documentary in China. In other words, this mode of independent production prompted the awareness of documentary *as* cinema in mainland China, but also drew the attention of the censors. In 2003 SARFT released 'Interim Provisions on Film Script (Outline) Project Approval and Film Censorship', which applied to documentary as well as to fiction, science and education, animation, and special topic films. It meant that documentaries should also be submitted for script approval and film censorship. However, with a few exceptions, such as Zhao Liang's *Together* (*Zai Yiqi*, 2010), independently produced documentaries were rarely submitted for approval or censorship before 2011.

Outside mainstream cinema, this mode used to exist in a hierarchal and patriarchal independent cinema community, which had its own domestic 'independent film exhibition' system (*duli yingzhan*). It also contributed to the creation of alternative public space (Berry, Lu, and Rofel 2010; Edwards 2015). However, since Xi's leadership in 2012, the much tighter ideological control over media and cultural production means this mode of production and

exhibition have faced more repression. Films must be submitted for censorship. Otherwise, they will be regarded as illegal. And filmmakers must search for alternative ways of distribution. For example, documentary filmmaker Jiang Nengjie decided to send the download link to his ‘one-man band’, the ten-year-long production *Miners, Groom, Pneumoconiosis (Kaungmin, Mafu, Chenfeibing, 2019)*, to whoever wanted to watch it. He also posted the Baidu virtual drive link directly on social media, winning him instant fame and the nickname of the ‘virtual-drive director’ (*wangpan daoyan*). Independent documentaries produced through this mode do not always explicitly challenge authority, as is true for Jiang’s film. But they often use personal and ethnographic approaches to spotlight unheard voices or repressed experiences. On the global stage, these films are welcomed in academia, and usually enter international distribution and exhibition systems through recommendations by curators and scholars.

The industrial mode is a relatively new mode in the Chinese independent cinema. Access to international funding, distribution, and exhibition networks has increased, primarily through pitching forums. ‘Independence’ in this context does not simply indicate a political stand, but more an economic position, meaning that filmmakers work privately for themselves or for a private company. In fact, many filmmakers who work in this mode would not necessarily regard themselves as making ‘independent film’ (*duli dianying*), because *duli* in this sense has long been reduced to a simplified political and ideological gesture just like the previous term ‘underground’ (*dixia*). But these filmmakers would say that their films are ‘independently produced’ (*duli zhizuo*). Whereas the personal political mode prefers a director-centred small team, this mode is often made through a producer–director duo with other industrial crew members. Filmmakers such as Zhao Liang, Du Haibin, Zhou Hao, and Fan Jian have moved to work in this mode with Western and transnational Chinese producers. This mode is facilitating

and facilitated by the rise of Chinese documentary producers who can co-ordinate international funds and Chinese directors. It has also encouraged the development of related professional services in documentary cinema such as cinematography, sound, editing, and post-production. To work in this mode, the producer and the director receive payment through commission fees, presales (from broadcasters), film funds, and sometimes 'minimum guarantees' from distributors to complete the production.² Eventually, if a film has successfully raised enough money to cover the production, the producer and the director could also receive revenue from the sales that come to them as a split. Other roles receive recognized and budgeted salaries. The rise of this mode means that Chinese independent documentary filmmakers are in sync with the international network of creative documentary through co-productions, professional services, and distribution and exhibition channels.

One major difference between the personal political and the industrial mode is whether to conform to China's film censorship. The industrial mode usually aims for both international film festivals and domestic theatrical release. With the film policy demanding that all films to be submitted to international film festivals receive the Dragon Seal first, this mode has to operate within film censorship regulations. Producers not only need an impactful story for their international funders, but also a narrative that does not directly confront the Chinese authorities. Increasing numbers of industrial mode projects are being incubated at domestic pitching forums

² A 'minimum guarantee' means a flat fee that the distributor agrees to pay a producer for the right to distribute the completed film, whether the film turns out to be successful or not, and it will be deducted from the sale once the film makes profit.

approved by the authorities. Even Western filmmakers who work in this mode as co-producers tend to play within the political boundary.

Those with no intention to enter the documentary film industry can choose the experimental mode and work across the film and art worlds. This mode often overlaps with artist moving images and film installations and these filmmakers often identify themselves as artists. The funding sources are mainly personal funds, art funds, or artist residencies at art centres. Similar to the personal political mode, this mode tends to work through an artist/director-centred team. Filmmakers who made their names through working with the personal political mode, such as Wang Bing and Qiu Jiongjiong, have moved to work with art funds or personal funds, to innovate aesthetic forms of non-fiction moving-image making. Confronting political hegemony is not the only priority of this mode, yet operating within the art world exhibition system means an escape from film censorship. In other words, this mode creates a protected space for personal artistic expression that might otherwise be politically problematic for the authorities. Filmmakers such as Mao Chenyu and Cong Feng, who were active participants in the personal political mode, have started experimenting with the essayistic form (Yu 2019b). Many younger artist-filmmakers who graduated from art colleges enter directly into this mode. As I have written elsewhere, this mode prioritizes aesthetic innovation and seeks critical artistic acknowledgement (Yu 2019b). Operating outside the film world, it conforms to art world values for awards and collection. Films made in this mode can sometimes also enter the international film distribution and exhibition system. For example, many of Wang Bing's recent documentaries, such as *Mrs Fang* (*Fang Xiuying*, 2017), *Bitter Money* (*Kuqian*, 2016), *15 Hours* (*15ge Xiaoshi*, 2017), and *Dead Souls* (*Si Linghun*, 2018), are funded by the Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation. These films premiered at major festivals such as Cannes and Venice, or at art exhibitions (*15 Hours*

premiered at Documenta 14), and then screened at art centres in Wang's solo exhibitions or in biennales.

These three modes can overlap. For example, Zhou Hao's *Chinese Mayor* (*Zhongguo Shizhang*, 2015) started in the personal political mode and entered the industrial mode following commitment from producer Zhao Qi, who is experienced with both the international market and the domestic authorities. It is also an example where explicit political content was toned down. Though the director and the producer understood it would not pass censorship in any case, cutting out explicit political advocacy left aesthetic space for imagination and emotional resonances, and politically prepared the way for a softer landing (director Zhou Hao, interview with the author, April 2016). Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* (*Beixi Moshou*, 2015) combines all three modes. While he enjoyed creative freedom during production, this film had a French producer and funding from INA (Institut national de l'audiovisuel) and Arte (Association relative à la télévision européenne) television companies. It was also edited into two versions, with a multiscreen installation at galleries and available for collection. Ma Li's *Inmates* (*Qiu*, 2016) also started in the personal political mode, with many years' dedication from Ma. Then a well-connected local producer joined in at the completion of the film and helped to launch it at the Berlin International Film Festival. The film also demonstrates Ma's experimentation with open narrative and the slow aesthetic.

Moreover, these three modes are all fluid and dynamic, in the process of changing into one another. The personal political mode can be developed into the industrial mode if the filmmakers are willing to commit to industry requirements and, sometimes, related political limitations. Likewise, the industrial mode can also be turned into the personal political mode if the filmmakers are not willing to compromise their political message to meet the domestic

industrial requirement (to receive the Dragon Seal) or to fulfil the international audience's expectations (usually through familiar narrative structures). The personal political mode can turn into the experimental mode with funding from the art world, or if the filmmaker is willing to conform to the art world exhibition system. The industrial mode can also turn into the experimental mode if a filmmaker is not willing to compromise their aesthetics to meet industrial preferences. In the next sections I explore the mechanism of the pitching forum that facilitates funding and networking for the industrial mode, the rise of domestic pitching forums, and how funding bodies both support and constrain.

<H1>International Pitching Forums: Access to the Global Creative Documentary Network and the Rise of the Chinese Documentary Producer</H1>

Internationally, the pitching forum, usually attached to a film festival, is widely accepted as the major platform for documentaries to access industry funding. Filmmakers submit their projects to forum organizers, who make selections according to their criteria. The competitive nature of pitching forums means that to be selected draws the attention of decision makers, who finance, distribute, and exhibit films. 'Public pitching' in documentary was invented in 1984 by the highly respected Canadian independent filmmaker William Paterson Ferns. This market simulation format was soon adapted by industry events around the world, first at the IDFA (founded in 1988) and the Hot Docs festival in Toronto, then at other regional or local documentary festivals that have mushroomed across the globe since the 1990s (see Ferns Productions, n.d.; GZDOC, n.d.).

The pitching format is that the pitchers—usually the producer and the director team, sometimes with a confirmed financier—present their project to a jury of 'decision makers',

including commissioning editors from traditional public service broadcasters, public film or cultural funds, non-government organization (NGO) funds, and online platforms. A standard pitch usually lasts fifteen minutes, split into a seven-minute presentation including a trailer and eight minutes of questions and answers. A successful pitch usually requires a clear log line (one sentence that tells the story), distinctive characters, and a well-researched underlying theme. If the pitchers go over time, the moderator rings a bell, which adds a game show feel to the proceedings. To be selected for prestigious pitching forums, filmmakers must have dedicated a good amount of time and budget on research and development. Sometimes, a pitching forum also requires a project to have a certain percentage of funding confirmed. After a pitch, the decision makers around the table ask the filmmakers questions and weigh in with constructive and occasionally critical comments. In most pitching forums, there are also dedicated sessions for one-to-one meetings with decision makers. Either filmmakers sit at their tables and decision makers come with more specific questions, or decision makers have their own tables and filmmakers compete for more time to sell their projects. At Sheffield Docfest, MeetMarket hosts one-to-one meetings without a performative pitching forum.

Pitching is not just to attract funding but also an essential promotion of a project and an efficient networking opportunity. Even if a film does not secure presale or co-production deals at a pitching forum, it is already on the radar of potential buyers. And if a film is selected for pitching, it is much more likely to be selected for screening once completed. Prestige festivals like IDFA are excellent world premiere opportunities. Thus, participating at pitching forums provides early access to the festival circuit. Filmmakers are also more likely to be invited to pitch again, and to other industry training or networking events. Like A-list festivals, documentary festivals also produce their own auteurs. The prestigious pitching forums at festivals such as

IDFA and Hot Docs, together with their high-status competition sections, top selection of world premieres, training programmes, and other industry events make these festivals highly desirable venues for networking, and fostering or enhancing collaborations, in addition to traditional film screenings. Through her long-term participant observation, Aida Vallejo (2020: 24) argues for IDFA's leading position among international documentary film festivals on the basis of its role in developing new film productions, new filmmakers, and industry sections, making it a model for other festivals.

While festivals need good projects and films to sustain their position, filmmakers also need top festival platforms to develop a career as a documentary film auteur. This mutual dependence challenges the very notion of independence. In Western countries, transitions from broadcaster-led to independently-run documentary productions mean filmmakers have to become what De Jong, Knudsen, and Rothwell define as 'the total filmmaker', 'who is likely to be centrally involved in conceiving, researching, producing, shooting, editing and distributing their film, who may in that process collaborate with other skilled professionals but whose engagement with all aspects of the production process is perhaps more all-encompassing than that of documentary makers in the broadcast past, working with larger budgets, crews and institutions' (2013, 3). Without attachment to a broadcaster, filmmakers turn independent, meaning they must seek support and collaboration elsewhere, including attending training programmes, pitching forums, and negotiating with funders, production and post-production professionals, and distributors. In other words, when filmmakers independently produce documentary outside broadcast institutions, they are also taking full responsibility for the whole production and distribution process. Many of these organizations that independent filmmakers work with

promote and aim to protect artistic expression associated with creative documentary. Yet they also have their own political and aesthetic positions. Politically, these funds usually promote democratic values, reflected in aesthetic forms that favour personal stories, strong characters, and individual visions.

Like other non-Western filmmakers, Chinese independent documentary filmmakers have taken to the global stage, especially since the 2000s, actively participating in and helping to shape this international transition from broadcaster-led to independently run productions. Although Western broadcasters rarely offer full commissions, they still support and shape global documentary production through offering presales and co-production agreements. Some Chinese independent documentaries, such as *Please Vote for Me* (*Qing Tou Wo Yipiao*, directed by Chen Weijun, 2007), *Crime and Punishment* (*Zui yu Fa*, directed by Zhao Liang, 2007), and *The Last Train Home* (*Gui Tu Lieche*, directed by Fan Lixin, 2009), were produced through international collaborations and went on to be aired on multiple channels. In this way, international, primarily Western, broadcasters receive international content from local filmmakers, and Chinese filmmakers develop their careers by learning the rules of the international market and the related strategies and tactics of transnational collaborations.

Therefore, it is fair to argue that Chinese independent filmmakers who have worked in the industrial mode are already participants in the international creative documentary network. Their increasing access to this network, including through pitching forums, stimulates the professionalization of China's own documentary industry. Much the same could be said about the Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers and their access to the international network of arthouse cinema. Winning the Grand Jury prize at IDFA 2016 for his *Still Tomorrow* (*Yaoyao Huanghuang de Renjian*, 2016), Fan Jian became a celebrity auteur documentary filmmaker back

home with an increasing amount of media exposure and participation in print and audiovisual interviews, although he had started making documentaries more than a decade before. Fan says of his experience with IDFA, ‘since 2008, more and more Chinese filmmakers attend [the] “IDFA Forum” [pitching forum]. Chinese directors should expand their international vision, as only through this can they have a thorough understanding of the [industrial] system and rules’ (Daoyanbang 2016).³

The rise of the industrial mode also indicates a shift from a director-centred approach to director–producer collaboration. In this process, more Chinese producers have emerged who are not just financial mediators but also cultural negotiators between China and the world, constructing an appropriate image for both the creative team and the decision makers, and for both Chinese and international audiences. In the past, only a few Chinese independent producers with their own private companies were players on the international documentary network. For example, Zhao Qi emerged as the producer for *Last Train Home* (2009) and also produced Zhou Hao’s *Chinese Mayor* (2015). Liang Weichao teamed up as producer with director Fan Jian for many years. This duo’s early productions paved the way for Fan’s career on the international documentary scene. While Liang remains less known, he also produced Zhang Zanbo’s controversial political documentary *The Road (Dalu Chaotian, 2015)* as a combination of the personal political and industrial modes. One of the problems of the previous Chinese independent cinema scene was internal patriarchy and authoritarianism, with power centred around a few male filmmakers or artists who acted as gatekeepers. With the rise of the local documentary industry which tries to mirror the international rules, except playing safe with the

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from sources are my own.

authorities, more women filmmakers have been able to enter this field as producers. These include Han Yi, Zhao Jia, Feng Du, Han Meng, and myself, and many have transnational connections and work between China and the West.

The international pitching forum as a central playing field also reveals the role of Western decision makers, especially those from public service broadcasters, as the major force shaping the global creative documentary industry. This demonstrates the global influence of Western cultural, political, and artistic values. Even if broadcasters or online platforms from non-Western countries like China participated in these forums, they might find the selected pitching projects do not match their domestic ideologies or cultural sentiments. Such an imbalance between the West and the non-West also reveals the essential role of the industry in facilitating, enhancing, and disseminating such values through the global neoliberal economy.

In the recent years, pitching forums in non-Western countries have been set up to diversify the North American and Western European-based decision makers. They include pitching forums at the GZDOC (China), Tokyo Docs, CNEX Chinese Documentary Forum (CCDF) (Taiwan), Asian Side of the Doc (ASD), Crossing Borders, Docs by the Sea (Indonesia), FreshPitch (China), and West Lake International Documentary Festival (IDF) (China). These Asia-based pitching forums invite more local broadcasters and online platforms to attend, yet Western decision makers' opinions are still much valued.

<H1>Domestic Pitching Forums: A China-Centred Cultural Discourse, an Incubator, and a Censoring Engine</H1>

The rise of Chinese pitching forums demonstrates China's ambition to create a discourse that would favour China's political positions on both domestic and international issues. Officially

authorized, they inevitably act as a censoring engine at the development stage. If a project is selected, it has already been judged on its political sensitivity. Introduced as a market force, international decision makers evaluate the capacity of a project to attract non-Chinese viewers at these local pitching forums. Domestic decision makers can also evaluate the cultural relevance, the market, and political sensitivity for non-Chinese stories.

GZDOC, founded in 2003 and run by Guangdong provincial and Guangzhou city governments until 2011, was the first Chinese festival dedicated to documentary to have a pitching session where Chinese filmmakers could meet international decision makers within China. When I pitched my first documentary *Photographing Shenzhen (Meng Xun Shenzhen, 2006)* at the Discovery Channel pitching session attached to GZDOC in 2005, I met many Chinese filmmakers, working independently or for broadcasters, who were eagerly looking for international funding and distribution opportunities. Understanding pitching and being good at it became desirable skills. When the central government started to develop documentary as an industry, a Guangzhou-based cultural and communication company was brought in to run the festival after 2012.

CCTV-9 launched the first Chinese International Documentary Pitching Forum, the 'China Pitch', in 2013, with the theme of 'China Stories', limiting the scope to stories in and about China from domestic and international filmmakers. For the *China's van Goghs* project, this pitching forum was the first I submitted an application to, because I was working in China then. Among 405 submitted international projects, ten made the shortlist and were pitched at the forum as part of the Sichuan International TV Festival in November 2013. I pitched the film to influential decision makers, including international film funders and broadcasters from France, Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, and Austria. *China's van Goghs* received the Best Pitch

award and was perceived as ‘an epitome of China’s transition in the contemporary era’, according to Shi Yan, the festival Jury and the deputy director of CCTV9 Documentary Channel (qtd. in Xinhuanet.com 2013). It is a film that incorporates the ‘China stories, international expression, and shared human emotions’, which is seen as ‘the future of Chinese documentary’, as stated by Sun Jianying, the Chairman of the Jury (qtd. in Xinhuanet.com 2013). This pitching forum did not continue after its first edition for unknown reasons. Nevertheless, two creative documentary projects were developed from there, *China’s van Goghs* (2016) and *Ladders to Paradise (Ximalaya Tianti)*, directed by Xiao Han and Liang Junjian, (2015), which received domestic theatrical releases.

The theme of ‘China Stories’ has nevertheless continued and been integrated into GZDOC’s International Pitching Session since 2016. It is stated on GZDOC’s official website that this pitching forum is not just for financing, but also a ‘touchstone’ for a project before entering the market, and an ‘actual combat’ in which Chinese filmmakers can learn ‘international storytelling’ (GZDOC, n.d.). It also states that ‘GZDOC’s documentary project pitching and financing forum has been so successful in developing “China stories” for the international market and stimulating cultural exports that it was authorized by the State Council in 2018 as the only cultural trading project to be replicated across China’ (GZDOC, n.d.). In 2021, in addition to the ‘China Stories’ International Pitching Session, a general International Pitching Session was set up for wider topics from international pitchers on non-Chinese stories.

Like GZDOC, FreshPitch was also set up by industry players in collaboration with provincial and city governments. Since 2016, it has grown to be another major pitching forum in China. The ancient town of Lili, where FreshPitch mainly takes place, has developed into a ‘documentary town’ that combines documentary industry development with cultural tourism and

creative industry. With the main event the pitching forum, it selects both Chinese and international projects for a group of invited local and global decision makers. It also includes discussion panels, industry events, and workshops that facilitate communications between filmmakers and decision makers, and negotiation between storytelling and market demands. I was invited by the organizer to submit a project to pitch at its first edition. I took the chance and submitted *The Two Lives of Li Ermao*, which tells the story of a transgender migrant worker. For obvious political reasons, this project was not selected. (The project was also submitted to West Lake IDF without success.) Given its emphasis on ‘fresh’, indicating both fresh perspectives and fresh young filmmakers, the organizers invite experienced Chinese documentary filmmakers as mentors. This feature attracts growing numbers of young filmmakers, including many Chinese overseas students, stated Zhang Yanli, Secretary-General of Documentary China (*Jilu Zhongguo*) Council (cited in Niu Mengdi, 2020). FreshPitch has also developed its own young documentary auteurs who have started their careers here and continue to pitch more projects.

These local pitching forums are platforms where Chinese projects are incubated for international exposure, as many of them continue on to enter other pitching forums outside China. FreshPitch particularly values its role as an incubator, stating that it has helped twenty-four projects enter pitching forums, including at IDFA, Sundance, Sunny Side of the Doc France, and CNEX, and also helped seventeen films find distributors. They are also networking places for non-Chinese filmmakers and distribution platforms seeking to enter the Chinese market.

International decision makers mainly include commissioning editors of traditional broadcasters, new media platforms (such as Guardian Short Films), NGOs, and film funds. In contrast, Chinese local decision makers are not dominated by the broadcasters. One of the initiators of FreshPitch told me that since international broadcasts are no longer the major

investors, they invite many online platforms that are upcoming investors, such as Tencent, Youku, and international ones, such as Netflix and GuideDoc (in conversation with the author, May 2017). In the West, the changing pattern in audiovisual reception from traditional broadcasters to online video-on-demand platforms has not fundamentally shaken the vital role of broadcasters, especially public service broadcasters. Once a broadcaster decides to fund a film, which means a direct exhibition channel for the mass audience, other institutions, including online platforms, NGOs, and public film funds, follow to help complete the budget, usually for different versions, such as longer theatrical versions or shorter formats. Broadcasters have also been actively catching up with the change by setting up their own online platforms. In China, state-owned broadcasters are not the key buyers of independently produced creative documentaries. Most documentary channels, such as CCTV-9, Shanghai Jishi channel, and Guangzhou TV, still tend to produce their own documentary programmes in-house or commission filmmakers to independently make a series or different episodes of a factual documentary programme, with the broadcasters holding full or major ownership. They rarely have a slot for the feature-length creative documentary genre, preferring documentary series that showcase China's national strength and local cultural heritage, such as *China's Mega Projects* (*Chaoji Gongcheng*, 2014), *Hexi Corridor: China's Wild West* (*Hexi Zoulang*, 2015), *Aerial China* (*Hangpai Zhongguo*, 2017–2020), and various food programmes.

<H1>Funding: Support and Restrictions</H1>

Examining the pitching stages of *China's van Goghs* (2016) and *Still Tomorrow* (2016), it is noticeable that both projects were pitched at regional and international pitching forums. Having pitched with Liang Weichao on their other projects at international documentary forums, Fan

Jian has accumulated rich experience with international decision makers. He decided to bring *Still Tomorrow* and the domestic investor Youku to the pitching forums for international funding and exposure. Before its completion, this project was already pitched at regional forums, such as Tokyo Docs where it received Best Asian Projects, the sixth CCDF, and ASD. *China's van Goghs* had similar experiences of pitching at various platforms. At 'China Pitch' 2013 where it won Best Pitch, the then director of the Dutch Film Fund expressed publicly during the pitch his willingness to provide funding and to introduce a Netherlands-based filmmaker for collaboration. In the same year, it was selected to pitch at GZDOC where it received Best Pitch again. There, I also secured the first presale deal with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's documentary channel, and its then creative director Bruce Corley was the first executive producer attached to this film. Later, it was invited to pitch at ASD 2014 where it received Best China Project and a second presale deal, as a co-production with the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's DR TV by the then commissioning editor Mette Hoffman Meyer, a highly influential decision maker who has a long list of award-winning international creative documentaries attached to her name. Eventually, I pitched the project with the co-director and cinematographer Yu Haibo, Mette Hoffman Meyer, and the Dutch co-producer at the IDFA Pitching Forum, where it secured more deals and distributor interests. Thus, both films were already known to the industry through pitching, and many buyers and fellow filmmakers were waiting to see them before their completion.

It is worth pointing out that although both projects received deals from broadcasters before their completion, it was non-traditional grants that substantially financed both productions, which took a number of years of intensive filming. These included Chinese

government cultural funds, investment from online platforms, and other sources such as academic research grants.

With new policies encouraging the development of Chinese online platforms to stimulate the domestic market, these new outlets require huge amounts of programming and hence have become key investors for non-fiction programme productions, including creative documentary and factual entertainment. Youku in particular invests in documentary films. *Still Tomorrow* was initially a commissioned short documentary by Youku. During the early production stage, Fan saw the potential of the story and convinced Youku to produce a feature-length version. In return, with *Still Tomorrow* receiving various awards at international film festivals, Youku promotes itself as a platform that invests and helps to develop domestic documentary filmmakers. Youku has also co-produced some signature documentary series in recent years, as well as *Our Time Machine (Baba de Shiguangji)*, directed by Maleonn, (2019). The latter documents a collaboration between Maleonn (Ma Liang), an influential Chinese artist, and his father Ma Ke, an accomplished Peking Opera director who is suffering from Alzheimer's, on a haunting, magical, and autobiographical stage performance called *Papa's Time Machine* and featuring life-size mechanical puppets.

The development of cultural and creative industries in China means more investment from governmental institutions. Municipal and city level cultural funds are also open to documentary projects from private companies, although they rarely attend pitching forums. If a project gains recognition at domestic pitching forums, it is much likely to receive governmental cultural funds, which usually do not interfere in the production but rely on pitching forums, and the national film censorship and good track records of filmmakers. *China's van Goghs* received cultural funding from Shenzhen city government after successfully pitches at China Pitch,

GZDOC, and ASD. Both the Netherlands Film Fund and the Denmark International Media Support restricted expenditure to the funding's country of origin or citizens of that country. In recent years, some local NGO funding has become available. For example, the only officially recognized women's film festival, Shan Yi, runs a support programme for female directors with funding from the British Council and ARRI film equipment company.

Looking back, the main filming period of *China's van Goghs* between 2011 to 2016 was when rules and regulations in Chinese documentary industry were still in the process of revision. A film should first be registered (*li xiang*) at the provincial level, then submitted for censorship centrally. Winning pitching awards at official pitching forums was like being greenlit for production, but we did not register the film until much later. The legal process of documentary film production was not clear to many independent filmmakers, who usually did not even consider sending their films to be censored for theatrical release. When the film won Best Feature Documentary at the Beijing International Film Festival in 2016, some of the jury members were also consultants to the censors. But because it had not yet received the Dragon Seal, the film was awarded without even being publicly screened. When we eventually submitted the film for censorship at the end of 2017, we received the Seal immediately.

With the increasing amount of domestic funding from private and governmental institutions to support productions, and with the shrinking availability of such funding from the West, external funding is not usually what Chinese filmmakers aim for at pitching forums. International exposure, learning aesthetic and narrative styles that would suit international audiences, and developing an international career as a film auteur mean much more for contemporary Chinese filmmakers at these events. When I was invited for a panel discussion at GZDOC in December 2017, I had public conversations and private chats with many filmmakers

on the development of their projects and their view on the documentary industry. While the younger or first-time filmmakers might still need both international financial and industrial support to get their films made, the established figures revealed to me that it was not money they searched for from abroad, because they could get investment locally. Instead, they were keener to be part of the global documentary network and have more international exposure and influence. For example, a co-production deal from Arte would mean huge recognition of a filmmaker's aesthetic and storytelling skills, yet Arte's funds could easily be matched by a local investor.

The process of pitching and the subsequent long process of negotiating with international investors and distributors, which can take two years, not only shapes a production but also the story a documentary film tells. Whose story, what perspective, and how the film ends are not just determined by the director and the real-life subjects, but also the producers and investors. Commissioning editors prefer to get in earlier, to exert leverage over the story development. At my pitch at ASD, Nick Fraser, then commissioning editor of the BBC's Storyville documentary series, publicly praised the film at the forum, an extremely rare event, but also raised the question, 'How would you end your film?' Many decision makers ask this when they are interested in a project. Even before the shooting is completed, funders often ask filmmakers to think about how to end a non-fiction story: a satisfying answer sells a film well. Different channels have different preferences depending on the channel's agenda, the country's needs, and the commissioning editor's personal taste. But commissioning editors are interested in each other's opinions and see what each other 'takes back home'. Fraser's public praise definitely put a spotlight on the film. Larger-than-life characters with compelling personal stories are usually what decision makers look for. But broadcaster funding can not only influence film narrative but

also limit aesthetic style. Therefore, character-driven documentary has become a conventional, safe format. Safeguarding a space for aesthetics and narrative experimentation is extremely important as global market forces become increasingly overwhelming. In 2020 IDFA created its ‘Filmmaker Support Department’, which aims to create a space ‘where filmmakers can explore the potential of what documentary cinema can be—a space to explore form, experiment with film language, play with genre, to be ambitious, to take risks with regard to what you think audiences can handle’ (Merrell 2020). How effective this support can be in the face of pressure from the pitching forums remains to be seen.

<H1>More Personal Stories on the Domestic Government-Approved Big Screen</H1>

With more filmmakers entering this field, more creative documentaries are being produced on diverse subject matters. Many are contemporary social issues that are not politically sensitive, such as the theatrically released *This is Life* (*Shengmen*, directed by Chen Weijun, 2016), which is about four pregnant women and the life-and-death decisions they face on delivery in a provincial hospital. Though this observational documentary indicates the problems behind China’s state medical insurance system, the narrative emphasizes the warmth and strength of humanity. The personal, especially the first-person point of view, long associated with the personal political mode in earlier independent cinema (Yu 2019a), has become the new favourite of the industrial mode, with the involvement of a producer who helps gain industry funding and brings the films into the industry exhibition network. When there is a possibility, many filmmakers are willing to get their film shown on the big screen in China. In many cases, the industrial mode of personal documentary production still advocates personal expression, and, in fact, a personal and intimate story is one of the selling points for the mass audience. Long

embraced by the international documentary industry, character-driven narrative structure is now also supported by the Chinese authorities, who advocate using documentary to celebrate grassroots individual stories of ‘little people’ that reflect the warmth and spirit of the current era (Niu and Wang 2019). For example, the theatrically released first-person documentary *Four Springs* (*Sige Chuntian*, directed by Lu Qingyi, 2018) took a personal approach in production, with the director-cinematographer filming his ageing parents in a small town in south-west China, as though making home videos. Although providing an intimate ‘inwards gaze at home’ and associated with a sense of ‘amateurism’ (Yu 2019, 61) in its aesthetic style, it had a producer who helped to bring the film onto the domestic big screen. Winning awards at the FIRST International Film Festival and GZDOC, it received great praise from international juries and also attracted more domestic co-producers whose investment boosted publicity and brought the film up to an industrially accepted technical standard for cinema release.

<H1>Conclusion</H1>

In this chapter I have argued that three modes of independent creative documentary production have emerged in the PRC since the early 2010s. While this tripartite taxonomy reflects the changing rhetoric of independence, it also draws attention to the aesthetic form of the ‘creative documentary’, a notion that not only indicates the economic and political stances of a production but highlights the creativity involved in negotiating the artistic and production choices of constructing a reality on-screen. By focusing on the industrial mode, I have explored the pitching forum as an apparatus and an industry-facing platform that provides funding and network opportunities. I have also detailed the rise of government-approved domestic pitching forums which intend to shape a China-centred discourse on Chinese and non-Chinese stories. By

analysing the support and limitations associated with funding, I have drawn attention to the creative negotiations that filmmakers enter into at almost every step. With more personal stories of contemporary Chinese lives shown on the domestic big screen, it seems that making aesthetically sophisticated and socially meaningful documentary is possible. Nevertheless, while international festivals such as IDFA try to safeguard a space for aesthetic experimentation, it is not clear whether China's rising market power will place more limitations on the creative documentary form.

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