

The Gaze of “Chaos”: Temporal-Spatial Migration and
Power Dynamics in a Globalizing Post-Socialist China

by

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The thesis approaches the positionality of visibility within third-world cinema by examining the case of transnational documentary filmmaking. In past decades, China's post-socialist transformation has altered not only its local conditions but also transcended the national and cultural borders. Such shift can be significantly captured by the perspective of Chinese documentary since the 1990s. Produced outside of the state-owned studios and exhibited on international film festivals and online platforms, Chinese documentary is a transnational cinematic production from the very beginning. Current research illustrates its positionality of "minor cinema" as resistance to China's mainstream cinema, but this binary term oversimplifies the uneven tensions of the state power, transnational forces, and the shifting aesthetic paradigms that constitute the spectrum of documentary in a globalizing post-socialist China.

This research undertakes a critical reading of Zhou Hao's documentary practice. Unlike many of his counterparts' "on-the-spot" realism, Zhou proposes the conception of "hundun"(混沌), literally meaning chaos and disorder, to represent the ambiguous reality of China in his transnational documentary. As hundun replaces the "real" as the aesthetic paradigm of filmmaking, one might further ask about how the conception of hundun appeared and functioned in Zhou's film, its political and historical implications in both domestic and transnational contexts, as well as its potential of theoretical and practical intervention.

Through discussing Zhou's three representative works "Houjie Township"(2002), "The Cop Shop"(2010), and "The Chinese Mayor"(2015) , I will argue that Zhou's documentary practice opens up a space of *hundun* in terms of ambiguity, heterogeneity, and dynamism, where the dialectics between migration in a temporal sense and power dynamics in a spatial sense reflect both the local circumstance and China's post-socialist transformation as a whole. Furthermore, regarding the exhibition, distribution, and circulation of documentary as a connective and global media, the representation of *hundun* prompts us to reflect on Félix Guattari's conception of "Chaosmosis", which is "at the junction of the finite and infinite, at this point of negotiation between complexity and chaos." By engaging theories of visuality, cultural anthropology, and migration studies, I will further ask about how the gaze of chaos(*hundun*) within visuality is productive in challenging the totalizing understandings of China, thus envisioning an alternative approach to reframing locality within globally mediated networks and power order.

Key Words: migration; visuality; documentary; Post-Socialist China; social transformation

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Introduction

The only acceptable finality of human activity is the production of a subjectivity that is auto-enriching its relation to the world in a continuous fashion.

The machine, every species of machine, is always at the junction of the finite and infinite, at this point of negotiation between complexity and chaos.

Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*

“I wonder what is your identity and who you work for.” A local man questioned the filmmaker, Zhou Hao, as he held the camera to shoot the controversial demolition project in Datong city. Zhou did not answer him while another local man replied to Zhou instead: “He is just like the Italian journalist and director, Antonioni who came to China during the Cultural Revolution (and documented the history and truth).” The asker quickly smiled and said: “I believe your documentary work may have historical value in the future.”

This is one of the most intriguing scenes in Zhou Hao (周浩)’s the documentary *Chinese Mayor* (2015). The documentary gained much attention in China and abroad for its explicit representation of the communist mayor, Geng’s controversial city demolition project and reflection on Chinese post-socialist transformation. It was widely awarded by many important international film festivals such as the Taiwan Golden Horse Awards and the Sundance Film Festival in 2015. This scene, as an “excess” section of this film, caught my eyes when I first watched this film. The question raised by the local man cannot be read

personally, but rather brings the issue of the positionality of filmmaking to the fore. This issue, central to Chinese independent documentary specifically and third-world cinema generally, involves but does not limit to the following questions: how to situate the positionality of filmmaker and the identity of visuality in the broad sense within distinctive realms of temporality, spatiality, locality, and globality; how does the identity of visuality construct, modify, and enrich the significance of filmmaking in a globalizing China and the world; how to approach the entanglement of visuality, intellectual politics, and power order in postcolonial/modern period.

Although Zhou himself does not answer the question in this film, such lack can be read symbolically as an impulse to resist the unitary answer and diversify interpretations and explorations, constituting the starting point of my thesis writing. It is noteworthy that the film provides one possible answer from another local man: “he is like Antonioni.” The juxtaposition of Zhou and Antonioni, eschews the question on the one hand and proposes a refreshing historical and transnational dimension on the other hand. Here Antonioni refers to Michelangelo Antonioni, a famous Italian film director. He came to China in 1972 and made a transnational documentary “Chung Kuo-Cino”(1972) , which is believed as a pioneering work of visualizing the Socialist China. However, “Chung Kuo” was banned for its so-called “anti-communism” by the Chinese authority since the 1970s. It was not released until 2004 and is now widely received in China. The changing fate of “Chung Kuo”, as some research points out, “mirrored the social transformation of the socialist and the post-socialist China.”¹ The work of Antonioni, epitomizing the western gaze of Chinese

¹ Liu, Xin. "China's Reception of Michelangelo Antonioni's Chung Kuo." *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 2.1 (2014): 23-40.

transformation, nevertheless inspired a series of Chinese multi-media artworks. Here I am less interested in comparing the aesthetic influence between both filmmakers from an essentialist sense than probing deeper into the historical implications of the parallel between the western gaze and Zhou, a local filmmaker's gaze within the post-colonial globalizing world.

Despite the assumption that an ethnic subject owns or equals the essential authenticity or truth, here it is the western gaze that legitimizes Zhou's gaze towards the locality. Moreover, the asker's reply "I believe your work will have historical value." implies that either the western or quasi-western gaze is acknowledged precisely when it represents history and truth. These two points presses us to ask what truth is and how truth within different layers of gaze cross national and cultural borders.

The acknowledgement of the western gaze, highlighting the desire of being-gazed-by-other and its assumed value of truth-telling, is much more intensified when the local gaze translates itself into a quasi-western gaze. The self-translation for acknowledgement, however, cannot be read as simple as self-colonialization but rather challenges third-world cinema's politics of identity. As Rey Chow points out, "the bulk of work done on Chinese cinema is still largely trapped in a dichotomy between China and the West as distinct entities. While it serves to give "third world cinema" the acknowledgement it deserves, the politics of identity formation is ultimately limiting if not reductionist." (Chow 81-82) In this regard, Zhou, representing the quasi-western gaze, can be read as an attempt to break the consistency of visualizing the locality by the local. Zhou's attempt also echoes the hybridity of cultural productions in a globalizing world in which the positionality of the filmmaker is much ambiguous and porous.

Such positionality is not specific to Zhou, but also structural to contemporary Chinese cinema to a larger extent. The landscape of film culture in Mainland China has been radically reshaped since the 1980s. While the state-owned studios still ideologically dominated the cinematic production, there emerged a couple of films produced within or outside of the studios. Chinese independent documentary, known as “New Documentary” (新纪录片), also distinguishes itself from the official account of documentary (专题片) for its witness of social transformation and everyday life. Featuring the aesthetics of “on-the-spot realism”, Chinese documentary usually concerned about the “other” of China hidden in the mainstream discourse, such as migrant workers, prostitutes, and activists depicted as the filmmakers’ humanitarian pursuit and social critique unfold. In this sense, Chinese independent documentary can be viewed as an alternative cinema or “minor cinema” by many scholars (Zhang Zhen 1). Due to the sensitive content of the state, most of documentaries cannot be officially released in China while are primarily circulated on international film festivals and online platforms.

However, Chinese independent documentary is less necessarily opposite to the state censorship than in negotiation with the former in the sense that “the tacit approval and indirect participation of the state.” (Pickowicz 7). Thus, the positionality of documentary filmmaker cannot be grasped without noting the uneven tensions of the state power, transnational forces, and its own artistic explorations. The abovementioned review of Chinese independent documentary thus prompts me to place the case of Zhou Hao in a critical dialogue with current research:

First, the genre of “Chinese independent documentary” may homogenize the dynamics of documentary to some extent. Historically speaking, these filmmakers are in fact less a monolithic group or community than a constellation of diverse filmmakers across time and space. I intend to critically examine the specificity of Zhou Hao and envision a more nuanced and dynamic reflection on this realm.

Second, the perspectives of “alternative” or “minor cinema” pinpoint the positionality of visuality between the state and transnational forces to some extent. However, these perspectives also risk reductionism, as Chow observes: “visuality is part of the speed technology that is rapidly homogenizing the world toward a state of transparency.”(13) Without examining the ongoing, uneven, and dynamic process of cinematic production, circulation, and exhibition, these words of “alternative” or “minor” may be reduced as dogma, thus “othering” or victimizing Chinese documentary in the first place.

Therefore, taking Zhou as a case study, I will explore the “minor” potentials of Chinese cinema by measuring the tensions between “deterritorialization” by the state or the capitalized mainstream (both domestically and transnationally) and the “reterritorialization” by the same forces that have marginalized it. My thesis seeks not to construct a linear and totalizing understanding of “minor visuality”, suffice it here to state that a critical juxtaposition and differentiation of the tension between the signifier of conceptions and the signified cinematic practice. It will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of visuality within the historical context of a globalizing post-socialist China.

Bearing these concerns in mind, my encounter with Zhou Hao is an inspiring case. Working as a former photography journalist in “Southern Weekly”, arguably the most influential liberalist media in China, Zhou gained rich experience of investigating social issues from a critical and humanist perspective. Such experience also nurtured his further exploration of documentary filmmaking since 2000, which cover a wide range of social topics that constitute the multi-layered reality of contemporary China. As he won the Taiwan Golden Horse Awards twice and closely cooperated with overseas media like BBC since 2010, Zhou is renowned as a transnational documentary filmmaker, who builds an intimate relationship between the state and overseas production. I am drawn by Zhou’s shifting experience from the state-governed television, liberalist media system to the international market, which provides a window into the extent and condition of visibility across national and cultural boundaries since 2000.

Furthermore, Zhou consciously distinguishes himself from other independent documentary filmmakers by reflecting on his distinctive aesthetical paradigm in relation to the issue of positionality. When stating his motivation of documentary representation, a scene of cross-cultural meeting is frequently revisited by Zhou himself. Zhou once met Michael Kahn-Ackermann, a German Sinologist who designed an art exhibition of China’s post-socialist transformation. After the exhibition, Zhou asked Ackermann: “what do you want to convey to the European audiences through this exhibition?” Ackermann said “hundun”(混沌) in Chinese. This scene becomes Zhou’s inspiring “aha-time” of documentary filmmaking, as he claimed: “From that moment, I got to know that the

documentary filmmaking should represent the reality of hundun rather than giving a black-or-white answer.”²

Hundun, literally meaning chaos and disorder, is a complex concept in Chinese historical and philosophic context. Hundun marks the prehistory of the world in which everything is chaotic and disordered in traditional idioms like “hundun chukai, qiankun shidian” (“混沌初開，乾坤始奠”), which directly means “once the chaos clears, the heaven and earth take their own positions.” Hundun suggests the dialectics between order and disorder, ambiguity and truth. The positionality of visuality situated by “representing the reality of hundun” deserves a second look here. First, hundun in Zhou’s context challenges the traditional paradigm of the “on-the-spot realism” of Chinese independent documentary since the 1990s while suggesting a distinctive aesthetics resonating with China’s power change after 2000. As power increases in relation to visuality and visibility in the era of globalization, it is also necessary to measure how visual representation of non-western culture could empower itself through thought and images, and how thought is visualized and renewed within the shifting aesthetic paradigms, as well as how it interacts with the local and global power dynamics. In short, hundun, along with the quasi-western gaze of Zhou discussed at the beginning, cannot be examined without considering the postcolonial and postmodern context, which develops a dialectic space of visuality, representation, and power.

In the thesis, I will ask about how the conception of hundun appeared and functioned in Zhou’s film and its political and historical implications in both domestic and

² Jian, yongda. 简永达. “The Disappeared ‘Chinese Mayor’ on Douban represents Chaotic China” 从豆瓣消失的大同，代表了中国的混沌. *Sohu.com 搜狐*. n.p. 2018. Web. 4 May 2019.

transnational contexts, as well as its potential of theoretical and practical intervention. First, I will measure how the conception of *hundun* that works as the condition of visibility interacts with power and order in a transcultural context. In “Primitive Passions”, Rey Chow observes how visibility implies the dialectic of seeing and power for western and non-western culture. If seeing is established as a form of power and the being-seen as a form of powerlessness within the western tradition, then the power of visibility is noticeable “when entire nations, histories, and peoples are to be exposed, revealed, captured on the screen, made visible as images; When visibility is to become the law of knowledge and the universal form of epistemological coercion.”(13) Thus, to reconsider the status quo above, the aesthetics of “*hundun*” and Zhou’s practice, highlighting its potential of disorder/reorder, may provide a sobering perspective to measure how visibility operates in the postcolonial politics of non-western cultures in terms of current knowledge production and power order.

Second, to further illuminate *hundun* requires a critical dialogue with critical theories. I find Félix Guattari’s conception of “Chaosmosis” is critical for dealing with the binary structure in dialogue with *hundun*. Guattari identifies two preoccupations of Chaosmosis: “the identification of capitalist or ‘universal’ time that flattens and reduces local and singular durations; and the emphasis on new technologies that produce an ever increasing alienation and atomisation, but that also have the potentiality to produce new forms of life – and subjectivity – that go beyond the latter.” (O’Sullivan 90)

“It is by a continuous coming-and-going at an infinite speed that the multiplicities of entities differentiate into ontologically heterogeneous complexions and become chaoticised in abolishing their figural diversity and by homogenising themselves within the

same being-non-being. In a way they never stop diving into an umbilical chaotic zone where they lose their extrinsic references and coordinates, but from where they can re-emerge invested with new charges of complexity. It is during this chaotic folding that an interface is installed – an interface between the sensible finitude of existential territories and the trans-sensible infinitude of the Universes of reference bound to them.” (Guattari 110–111)

Thus, *Chaosmosis*, featuring the post-capitalized cultural production, can be understood as a machine “at the junction of the finite and infinite, at this point of negotiation between complexity and chaos.” (Guattari 13) Dialoging with Rey Chow’s dialectics of seeing and power/powerlessness, *Chaosmosis* provides a sobering perspective to mediate the gaze and power in the sense that the gaze is neither one-way nor hierarchized. Thus, the possibility of mutual gaze and chaos(*hundun*) are anticipated in my further exploration of Zhou.

The negotiations, referring to aesthetic practice, can be instructive in approaching the documentary production which formulates the multifaceted social experience in the era of Chinese transformation. The Chaotic reality of China’s specificity and Zhou’s aesthetic of *hundun* are parallel to the preoccupation of *Chaosmosis* and the subjectivity mediated by global culture. In this regard, *hundun* does not only suggest the contradictory temporalities of a transformative China, but also reflects the competing discourses and aesthetic practices in the transnational arena.

The dialogue between *hundun* and *Chaosmosis* is not simply a theoretical comparison but should be examined within the aesthetic practices in relation to the historical specificity of Chinese transformation. In past decades, Chinese social

transformation has altered not only its economic condition but also the socio-cultural landscape, turning a large part of its population into the “others” who are marginalized or underprivileged. Despite the differentiations, the “others”, such as migrant workers, peasants, and sex-workers, characterize the shared feature of migration, which physically and symbolically, temporally and spatially, microcosmically and macrocosmically, resonate with China’s overall transformation. Although these migrants fundamentally ground the rise of China, their bodies and voices are underrepresented in mainstream discourses. Hence, to fully understand the dynamics of contemporary Chinese transformations requires a critical examination of the “Other” of China. Zhou’s documentaries of migration offer a thought-provoking case.

Migration is a persistent theme within Zhou’s documentary filmmaking from his first documentary, “Hou Jie Township” (2002), to the most-renowned one, “The Chinese Mayor”(2015). Rather than reading migration as a distinct phenomenon and migrants as the other group, the dynamics of migration are represented within the tension between the microcosmic everydayness and the macrocosmic social transformation. Through discussing Zhou’s three representative works “Houjie Township”(2002), “The Cop Shop”(2010), and “The Chinese Mayor”(2015) , I will argue that Zhou’s documentaries reframe the conception of migration through visibility in three senses: as the materiality of temporal-spatial movement, as an embodiment of the human condition and state power, and as the self-reflexivity of the filmmaker’s positionality. Hence, “migration” is not only an empirical content or phenomena captured by cinema apparatus but also is constitutive to the formation of visual languages, the dialectics between visibility and power, and a subjective position of documentary filmmaking.

By engaging theories of visibility, cultural anthropology, and migration studies, I attempt to argue that Zhou's documentary practice opens up a space of *hundun* in terms of ambiguity, heterogeneity, and dynamism, where the dialectics between migration in a temporal sense and power dynamics in a spatial sense reflect both the local circumstance and China's post-socialist transformation as a whole. The following two chapters, discussing the entanglement of *hundun* and migration, aim to problematize the totalizing understandings of post-socialist China in terms of visual representation and production, thus proposing an alternative approach to reframing locality within globally mediated networks and current power order.

Chapter 1:

Hundun Space of Migration: Subjectivity and (Dis)Order

Human migration, by definition, refers to the movement of people from one place to another with certain intentions, permanently or temporarily at a new location. This common definition confines migration to a phenomena or behavior carried out by an identifiable individual at a certain intersecting point of time and space. However, the conception of migration today is less a descriptive phrase than a modern construction due to the force of modern demography and entrenchment of national borders. As the anthropology scholar Biao Xiang observes, “Modern states, for the purposes of exercising political control, monitoring labor market, and protecting migrants’ rights, strive to turn migration from amorphous, constantly changing, unstable flows into a measurable statistical artifact. Following Foucault’s argument that the ‘discovery of population’ was crucial for modern states, it seems only natural for the states to attempt to project migration as such an aggregate phenomenon. Only by doing so does ‘managing’ migration becomes possible.” (Xiang) Hence, migration is intellectually and epistemologically reduced by the demographic and national discourse.

The conception of migration has distinctive meanings in Chinese context. The phrases of “yimin” and “qianyi”, directly translated as migrants and migration, suggest the organized behavior of resettling the population for certain purposes in ancient times. Regarding the Chinese economic reform and social transformation from the 1980s, Chinese migration primarily refers to the rural-urban migrants who migrate from the rural to the urban for a living. Although they mainly constitute the labor forces of China social

reproduction, the migrants are greatly excluded from equal opportunities like education and social welfare due to their lack of local household registration status (“Hukou”).

Extensive research concerns about the status quo of Chinese migration and migrants and its close relations with Chinese post-socialist transition. As Lisa Rofel points out: “The ideological commitments to egalitarianism were entangled with the production of new inequalities... To point to the immanent logics of capitalism or the overwhelming power of the state to understand this transition is insufficient. Rather, we need to highlight how people from heterogeneous life experiences embrace and produce new modes of being in historically contingent, sometimes surprising ways.” (167-168) On the other hand, the intersectionality between visibility and Chinese migration is not uncommon. The condition of migrants, either marginalized or oppressed, are extensively visualized by Chinese cinema and particularly Chinese independent documentaries. These visual practices, resonating with the desire of visualizing “other”, provide a counter-narrative of the official ideology and mainstream discourses of Chinese migration.

The abovementioned theoretical and practical background bring us to examine Zhou Hao’s documentaries from a more critical perspective. It is highlighted that migration is either approached by virtue of social behavior and phenomena in the mainstream discourse or represented as “the other” within the minor discourse. These recognitions are effective within its own realms yet inevitably indicate the binary thinking pattern, thus excessively reducing the image of migration to a large extent. Borrowed from Rey Chow’s notion of “the native” in the post-colonial context, the real image of native has gone “between the defiled image and the indifferent gaze. The native is not the defiled image and not not the defiled image.” (Writing Diaspora 54)

In particular, Chow figures out two problematic gazes at the native: pornographic and restorative: the former is driven by the imperialist impulse of visualizing the native as naked bodies through which the native can be reproduced as silent objects. While in parallel with the former, the restorative, originating from an anti-imperialist desire to “save” the native dismissed in the former, dramatically exploits the native again by the third-world intellectuals themselves. As Chow points out: “what results is neither a dismantling of the pornographic apparatus of the imperialist domination or a restoration of the native to her” authentic” history but a perfect symmetry between the imperialist and anti-imperialist gazes, which cross over the images of native women as silent objects.”(Writing Diaspora 41)Hence, neither the pornographic nor restorative gaze are able to decipher the “real” image of the native but rather reinforce the unequal power relations between the gaze and the being-gazed in the first place. Chow’s critique of the gazes at the native can be instructive in understanding the visuality of migration in terms of its problematic representations in both mainstream and minor discourses.

The gap between mainstream and minor representation, however, should be furthered for a dialectic examination of the dynamics of migration. I find Zhou’s documentary intervention a thought-provoking one as it reflects on the conception of migration within the dialectic power of *hundun*. *Hundun*, literally meaning Chaos, is considered as a primeval state of the universe by ancient Chinese. It marks the prehistory of the world in which everything is chaotic and disordered in traditional idioms like “*hundun chukai, qiankun shidian*” (“*混沌初開，乾坤始奠*”), which directly means “once the chaos clears, the heaven and earth take their own positions.” It indicates the dialectic nature of *hundun* since the order of the world is embedded in the disorder of chaos.

For Deleuze, the cinema is considered as an "artificial intelligence," a Cartesian diver, or a machine for the fabrication of concepts. (Rodowick 7) The cinema does not only reflect the conception or reality per se, but also leads us to consider how the possibilities of thought are renewed and enriched in aesthetic practices. As Zhou states that he wants to represent a hundun China, suggesting the status "before" the power order is fixed. Thus, the gaze of hundun features the tension between order and disorder within cinematic apparatus.

For the following part, through a comparative analysis of two documentaries, "Houjie Township" (2002) and "The Cops Shop"(2010), I will demonstrate how the dynamics of migration is produced within the dialectics between order and disorder. Shifting from what the image of migration is represented in certain cinema, I will measure how the image of migration, along with the camera and the positionality of documentary, work as an intervention of established conception, discourse, and production of migration. Moreover, these two documentaries speak distinctively in the sense that they construct a hundun space wherein the heterogeneity of migration are reproduced through cinematic techniques such as off screen and intermediality. Hence, the space of migration envisions an approach to breaking the dichotomy of mainstream and minor representation of migration.

I. Disordering Migration: “Houjie Township” as a Minority Space

“Houjie Township” (2002) is Zhou Hao’s first attempt of documentary filmmaking (figure 1). The sensitivity to social news gained from his previous career at “South Weekly” and local experience in Guangdong Province, arguably the biggest gathering place of Chinese migration, helps Zhou to choose the geographic space of Houjie(厚街) to capture the lives of migrants microcosmically and register it into a large historical context.

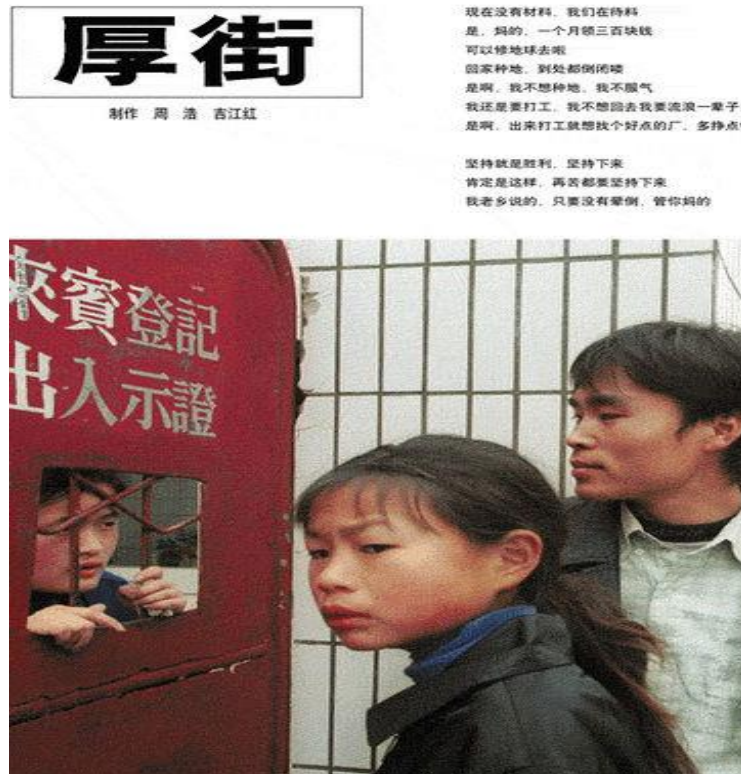


Figure 1: The Poster of “Houjie Township” (2002)

Houjie is a carefully chosen site for the filmmaking. It is a town located in Dongguan, one of the earliest districts of import investment in Guangdong Province. Since the 1980s, Houjie has been transformed from a rural village into an industrialized township

following the massive influx of Taiwanese and Hong Kong capital. Thus, Houjie quickly became a new destination of rural laborers from all over China looking for jobs. As a turning point of rural and urban space, farmers and migrant workers, Houjie can be a perfect window into the temporal residence and the spatialized everydayness of migration at the forefront.

The location of filmmaking is carefully selected to naturalize the camera gaze towards migrants. As Zhou said in an interview: “This apartment is an open space without ceilings. Based on my journalistic intuition, I think this place is good for filmmaking.” (“这个公寓一个没有顶的开放空间。以我做新闻的直觉，觉得这个地方可能是会出片子的地方。”) Based on a low-rent apartment in Houjie, Zhou uses his camera to film distinctive stories in terms of desire, love, and death happened in the space for migrant workers. The human relations are visualized within the semi-public and semi-private space of the apartment, in which the camera is acknowledged to enter the private and public lives of migrants.



Figure2: The long take of multiple living spaces

The long take in the opening scene (figure 2) invites us to enter a heterogeneous space of migration via the gaze of *hundun*. It intentionally exposes the existence of the camera, which moves between different spaces. The spatial movement of the camera suggests the underlying power of the gaze towards the filmed objects, during which the boundary between private and public are blurred. Here the camera across multiple spaces also problematizes the legitimacy of the gaze itself in the first place. Rather than viewing documentary as a mere representation of reality, Bill Nichols indicates the ideological implication of documentary: “it occupies a position within the arena of ideology” (Nichols 140) because the mechanism of documentary lies in its expression of an argument about the world which meanwhile invites audiences’ “consent” of its argument by means of rhetoric and so forth. In “Houjie Township”, the problematic gaze of the filmmaker and the suspended consent of the audiences are not hidden but disclosed by this long take as it simultaneously deconstructs the gaze’s legitimacy.

Also, the long take of the migrant space breaks the boundary between distinctive spaces and lives, eschewing a protagonist narrative while creating the possibility of the parallel narrative at the same time. The multiple spaces represented by the movement of camera constitute the uneven temporality shared by different migrant workers as an individual. Such gaze gives rise to an examination of migrant workers as less a homogenized group than a heterogenized constellations of individuals.

On the other hand, the problematic gaze can be instructive in reflecting on the mechanism between gaze and power when representing the Other, particularly migrant workers here. In the essay titled “Pornography, ethnography, and the discourses of power”,

Bill Nichols reflects on the mechanism of knowledge and pleasure with a focus on two specific genres: ethnography and pornography, which are juxtaposed in terms of examining “other” respectively (knowledge, sexuality). In this regard, they are two sides of one coin in representing others. For Nichols, to address the problematic of pornography and ethnography should call for alternative representations of “distanciation from the ethnographic effect of hierarchy and control” (227), which is expected to be the burden of documentary. In this long take, one might notice that the multiplicity of cinematic space via the moving camera can be effective in challenging the uncritical gazes of ethnography and pornography. Thus, the migrants are no longer a homogenous group of Other to be gazed but are constructed by the gaze that doubts itself as a critical tool for the audiences to make their own judgments.

Although the spaces of *Houjie* is fragmented in general, at the same time, the images of migrants are not observed as a group of labor force or visual codes. The gaze of *hundun* is explicit in approaching individuals’ lives because it suspends value judgment and attempts to give them dignity. In *Houjie*, thousands of people come and leave with different purposes, which are embodied by their temporal-spatial movements. The visualization of migrants’ inner part as humans extends from the demographic sense of migrants. Here the migrants are visualized as humans who also face challenges of multiple worldviews and values in an unstable environment. One of the intriguing stories in this film is that one 16-year girl confesses to the camera about her romantic affair with a middle-aged married man, whose wife beat her several times while she refused to leave the man (figure 3).



Figure 3: The girl's confession in front of the camera

In this five-minute interview, Zhou asks how the girl feels about the whole event. She cannot help crying and expressing her sentiment: “I can’t tell you very clearly. I don’t know, I just feel I am happy with him. I cannot tell you what it is.” Although Zhou Hao does not give any comments on this relationship, it is not difficult to understand that a migrant girl in such condition could only resort to this relationship, through which she could sustain her agency and emotions. Thus, it should be noted that the subjectivity of a migrant is no longer repressed but can be produced within the sentimental expression via the gaze of *hundun*. In other scenes, the sentimentality and sensibility of migrants are released by the gaze where the migrants’ most private and nuanced part as human can be examined. Hence, the gaze of *hundun* is an attempt to suspend the moral or value judgment in a temporalized humanity and space. Also, it invites us to contemplate on the precarious condition of diverse values and identities in the migrant’s time and space.

In short, “Houjie Township” presents the distinctive image of migration as an intervention in established knowledges of migration. Migrants are neither demographic populations nor a homogenized minority group as the mainstream/minority discourse implies. In other words, it disorders migration through the gaze of *hundun* in terms of how we think about migration intellectually and epistemically. Moreover, as Zhou’s first documentary, “Houjie Township” suggests the transitional feature from a journalist perspective towards a documentary filmmaker’s view. It is interesting that this documentary is not directed but produced by Zhou. The waiver of authorship, however, suggests the relatively far distance between Zhou and the filmed objects, as Zhou mentioned in an interview: “I always refused the name of director because a good documentary is automatically developed. What I can do is only to wait for the good story.” (我经常拒绝导演的署名, 因为好的纪录片是自己生发出来的。我所能做的只是等待一个好故事的发生。)

The transitional feature of “Houjie Township” is also embodied by its exhibition and circulation on screen. Different from other underground documentaries, “Houjie Township” is not produced and circulated out of the state studios, but works as an essential part of the TV program named Sun TV (阳光卫视) about the issue of people’s lives (民生问题). One of the widely circulated versions also includes the interview of the filmmaker and the reading of the host. (figure 4)



Figure 4: The exhibition and circulation on screen

The exhibition of the documentary on the public media is well worth noting here. It not only challenges the minor positionality of documentary itself but also suggests the blurred boundaries between mainstream and minority. The intermediality of the pieces of documentary, filmmaker's interview, and the host's reading do not aim to totalize our understandings of migration. On the contrary, it contributes to a dialectical dialogue space of visualizing the minority migrants within the mainstream media.

As Deleuze illustrates the first characteristics of minor literature/cinema: "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language." (Deleuze 16) The media platform of TV program, if viewed as an institutionalized mainstream representation, may traditionally visualize the generality of migration and erase the specificity of migration. Zhou's interview is also problematic in terms of its authority as he gives up the authorship of his documentary. Thus, the juxtaposition of the three readings of the documentary can be read a self-avowed deconstructionist exhibition of the documentary. The process of exhibiting this documentary is not a passive sign but reveals an interactive space in which audiences can synchronically receive diverse competing readings from different sides. In this regard, Zhou further disorders the space of migration from a transmedia scale, through which the dialectic power of minority discourse can be imagined within the mainstream media. The inter-mediality thus helps us to observe the nature of performativity of documentary practice in both mainstream and minority discourses.

II. Ordering Migration: “The Cop Shop” and Spatialized State Power

As we discussed above, the dialectic power of *hundun* is effective in constructing the subjectivity of migration within the mainstream discourse in which the dynamic and ambiguous nature of migration can be captured. However, the gaze of *hundun* is not fixed but dynamic in Zhou’s further exploration of migration. Moving from the migrant workers, Zhou turns his eyes to a broader sense of migration: the migrating people.

In the documentary “The Cop Shop” (figure 5, 2010), Zhou focuses on a particular time and space to intervene the significance of migration: the everyday operations of the police station in the square of Guangzhou train station during the Spring festival travel rush. Chinese migrant workers, no matter how far they work from their hometowns, would go back to their families to celebrate the Spring festival. The train station, which burdens the responsibility of transporting migrants, becomes the busiest place wherein the human flow peaks during the Spring festival.

Contrary to the “Houjie Township”, “The Cop Shop” examines migration from a different side--- the police station, which embodies the institutionalized force of state power. Regarding that the police station is believed to regulate the large scale of human migration, it functions as the front line of regulation towards people face to face, thereby providing a chance to observe the operations of state power explicitly.



Figure 5: The poser of “The Cop Shop”(2010)

Although the police station usually represents state power, this documentary reveals its ambiguous aspect of power. As the title implies, “The Cop Shop”, rather than the official name of police station, subtly deconstructs the authority of police as embodiment of the state apparatus. As the face of state power is spatially recoded within the place of police station macaronically, one might problematize the boundary between the power apparatus and the assumed powerless people. In particular, the encounter between migrants and policemen is embodied in the space of the front desk (figure 6), where the interesting dialogues take places.

The front desk provides more multi facets of power dynamics. In the scene (figure 6), the camera places itself parallel to the front desk, the left side of which is a policeman who is serving the person standing on the right. The encounter between the policeman and the man are visualized within the temporal space as if their status of power is relatively equal. However, such temporality of equality is complicated by the tension of the dialogues featuring humor and irony.



Figure 6: A homeless man talks with the policeman

For instance, a homeless man asks for money and uses his identity of “minority ethnic” to push the policeman: “because I am the minority ethnic, you should give me some money.” Rather than giving a concrete answer, the policeman refused in a funny way: “Your clothes are better than mine. You said you have no money?” The humorous dialogue indicates the mechanics of the police station: instead of dealing with the problems raised by people, the policeman carefully negotiates with them by using rhetoric strategy.

Rather than adopting the discipline and punishment, the front desk witnesses the subtle relation between the people’s life and state power. The everydayness of the front desk echoes the condition of power in the Foucauldian notion of the life of infamous men: “After all, is it not one of the fundamental traits of our society that destiny takes the form of the relation to power, of the struggle along with or against it? The most intense point of lives, the one where their energy is concentrated, is precisely there where’re they clash with power, struggle with it, endeavor to utilize its forces or to escape its traps.” (Foucault 80) Foucault’s argument mainly lies in documents such as archives of confinement, police, and

petitions to the king during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. These collections vividly demonstrate how people speak to the power, during which the language reflects, mediates, and complicates the relation.

From Foucault's perspective, the process of speaking does not necessarily suggest negotiation and resistance of power. On the contrary, such process is already implied within the mechanism of power, either in the form of the religious to the administrative arrangement. "The Christian West invented this astonishing constraint, which it imposed on everyone, to say everything in order to efface everything, to formulate even the least faults in an uninterrupted, desperate, exhaustive murmuring, from which nothing must escape, by which must no itself survive its own action for one moment...The bringing of everyday life into discourse, the surveying of the infinitesimal universe of unimportant irregularities and disturbances...And everything thus said is registered in writing, accumulates and constitutes dossiers and archives."(84) Foucault emphasizes the two-folded feature of discourse: the process of speaking to the power can be registered in and institutionalized within the everyday operation of power apparatus in the western world.

To further analyze Foucault's notion of power, "The Cop Shop" provides a much more ambiguous examination of power through the lens of visibility. The camera shoots very ambiguous moments of how different people use their bodies, voices, and actions to speak to the power, and therefore, the binary structure of people and power are challenged to a varying extent. For example, a self-recognized talented man who passionately recommends his discovery of dealing with illegal transactions of train tickets (figure 7). In this scene, the camera moves back and forth on the man while his words seem extremely powerful compared with the policeman who listens to him. This man's inflammatory words,

accompanied by the moving camera, dramatically overflow the policeman as an individual and the power he represents.



Figure 7: Self-recommendation of a talented man

There is also a guy who wants to grumble to the policeman since he speaks bad words to his colleague. The policeman must work as a psychological therapist in addressing his emotional concern although it is not his duty. (figure 8)



Figure 8: psychological therapy

Despite the porous and ambiguous aspects represented in these scenes, the moving camera does not intent to reverse the fixed relation between people and power but constitutes a dialectic space for power dynamics. During the process of dialogues, it is difficult to distinguish the boundary between the power and powerless.

But it does not mean that the policeman is often powerless in the face of the people. Although the function of the police includes guaranteeing the security of people, it is not uncommon that people's request is dismissed. When the trash collector reports his loss of bottles, the issue is heard but not treated seriously. On the contrary, the policeman educates the man to fetch other collectors' trash next time for compensation. The camera's slow movement from the policeman's face to the trash collector's back reflects their unequal power relation in this scene.



Figure 9: The policeman educates the trash collector

The ambiguous space of the police station can also help to examine the issue of the subaltern and subalternity. In the 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak due to their limited access to the communication system that makes their voices intelligible and meaningful under the mainstream representation.

However, Spivak does not approach the subaltern in the essentialist sense of economically or politically marginalized people, but examines the subalternity, as she recourse Ranajit Guha's definition in the revised essay, "which is 'identity-in-differential rather than identitarian essence' as a general rule of identifying the subaltern." (Morris 38) She further concludes that "the subaltern cannot speak" because western representations of the subaltern historically and ideologically confine the possibility of speaking of(for) the subaltern.

Hence, the issue of the subaltern lies in the reflection on the subalternity, which entails an examination of to what extent a person is silenced, in what condition one's voice is limited, and through what mechanism the subaltern's subjectivity is erased. Furthermore, the communication system, which conditions whether the subaltern can be heard or not, becomes one of the central issues of subaltern studies. Many researches investigate how to restore or translate the subaltern's voices into the mainstream representation, although taking the risk of the "effacement in disclosure" of representing the subjects of the subaltern.

The mediated space of documentary may engage the politics of "Being heard" and the communication system in subaltern studies in a dialectic way. If the subalternity is not an essentialist concept, then the people in this documentary cannot be directly understood as the subaltern. Also, the image of the police power, either individually or collectively, does not correspond to the opposite of the subaltern. The subalternity within the camera is less examined from the individual's identity than from the condition of subalternity as a whole.



Figure 10: The close-up of the policeman's face

In particular, the police are also given a chance to express their personal voices in terms of their values, obligations, and limitations. For instance, the close-up of the policeman's face (figure 10) captures in miniature the precarity of beings in the transitional period. Although dealing with migrants' troubles is their daily work, they also doubt the value of their work, feeling effortless and vulnerable as individuals. The contradiction between their discourses and positionality, their value and actions, their sentimentality and judgement, can be read as a precarious sense of migration experience penetrating all filmed objects in a mediated dialectic space. This means that nobody is not migrants regarding their relationship with the system, institution, and discourse that involve them.

Regarding the diverse dialogues of ordering the condition of migration and migrants, it is ironic that the police are all lost in the tension between the speaker and the listener, the order and the disorder, the power and the powerless, which shows the impasse of subalternity shared by all the subjects. In short, the ironic representation of migration deconstructs the binary structure of people and the state apparatus and replaces it with the

dialectic space amidst the order and disorder, which, in Zhou's perspective, suggests a dialectic sense of hundun in a transitional China.

Chapter 2

Order out of Chaos: Temporal-Spatial Migration and Power Dynamics

“Hurry up!” A male voice accompanies the black screen. It belongs to an elderly man speaking on the phone: “I’ve got a meeting. Open all the gates.” The shaky camera follows his quick steps on the winding way of the ancient wall. He keeps running behind the gate until no one can catch up with him.

This is the opening scene of “The Chinese Mayor³” (figure 11), which is believed as Zhou’s most well-known documentaries at home and abroad. The running man shot by the shaky camera is the protagonist, Geng Yanbo, a communist mayor of Datong city in northern China from 2008 to 2013. The gate that Geng runs through partly belongs to his ambitious project of reconstructing the ancient wall, which is regarded as a golden chance to transform Datong into a cultural attraction for long-term public interest. But the project has resulted in considerable residents’ being forced to move and their confrontation with threats, including financial loss, environmental deterioration, and even homelessness to various degrees. Following Geng’s path for nearly two years, “The Chinese Mayor” explicitly depicts the very temporality in which residents’ diverse claims for compensation and justice and Geng’s personal negotiations between the bureaucracy, state-party power, and public pressure, revealing multiple dramatic and ironical conflicts. Hence, the pivot of this documentary lies in the tension among the general public interest, justice for individuals, and Geng’s problematic intervention.

³ This documentary is originally titled “Datong” in Chinese while “The Chinese Mayor” is officially used for global circulation. I use the title “The Chinese Mayor” for convenience here.

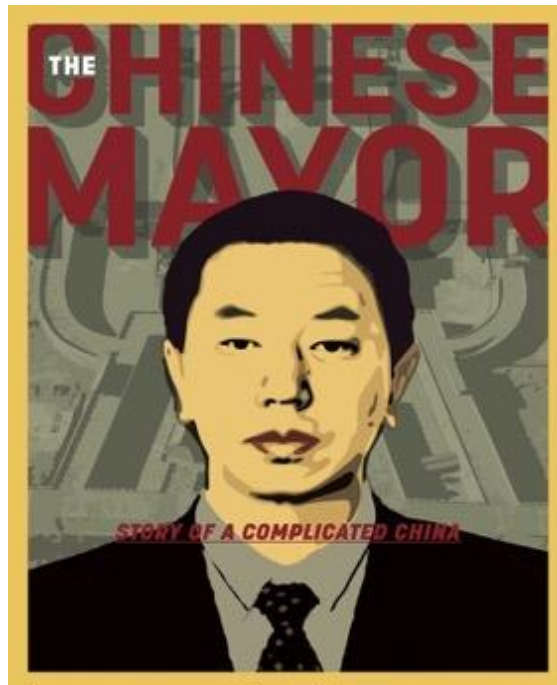


Figure 11: Poster of “The Chinese Mayor”(2015): Story of A Complicated China

As Bill Nichols states, documentary is “less a story and its imaginary world than an argument about the historical world.” (111) In the case of “The Chinese Mayor”, what is intriguing is its ambiguous and even contradictory argument and the reflexive relation with the historical referents. Although watching this documentary several times, I still find my knowledge and perception, sense and sensibility, judgement and value contradict and challenged to some extent. For instance, the camera juxtaposes many contradictory scenes that the powerful mayor Geng can be powerless while the powerless are empowered during their dialogues. Also, people’s attitudes towards Geng vary in different time and space--- when the controversial Mayor Geng suddenly stepped down, many citizens deliberately parade to ask Geng come back and even kneel to express their acknowledgement for what he did previously.

Geng's project is not the only case. In past decades, Chinese social transformation is significantly embodied by local practice of forced eviction--- referring to involuntary land requisitions from the citizenry--- which has long been controversial for its illegality and inhumanity in the relation between state-party power and impacted people. "The Chinese Mayor" provides a microcosmic dimension to approach such historical specificity through visual intervention thereby eschewing a black-or-white binary response. As the official poster shows, "The Chinese Mayor" features "a story of a complicated China", precisely capturing the multidimensionality and complexity of China's post-socialist transformation.

Furthermore, considering documentary as a cinematic space that visualizes power dialectics, this paper is particularly concerned with two aspects of the documentary: first, how is the entanglement of the state-party power, Geng's negotiation, and impacted people crystalized, mediated, and complicated by the temporal-spatial configuration of Datong? Second, rather than giving an either-or argument, what historical and political implications does the ambiguous representation reflect inside and outside the film?

In this chapter, I will illustrate that the ambiguity of documentary carves out a space of the dialectics between temporalizing migration and spatialized power dynamics embedded in the historically specific demolition and transformation. discussing the intertextuality between the filmmaker Zhou Hao's aesthetic reflection and the documentary practice itself, I will examine how such ambiguous representation could work as a refreshing framework in contextualizing and conceptualizing the temporal-spatial complexity of Datong and Chinese transformation as a whole.

I. Reframing Power and the Powerless

The documentary's original title is Datong(大同), referring to the name of the city where Geng's project of city transformation and the documentary filmmaking takes place. Aside from that, Datong, as an essential concept of Chinese Confucianism, means "great unity", which envisions a utopian vision of an ordered society where all humans and things exist in peace. However, Datong in this documentary presents an inverse of "great unity" as people are divided into contradictory sides by Geng's ambitious project.

The mapping of the abovementioned tension among the state-party power, Geng, and impacted people lies in the temporal-spatial configuration of "migration". The term migration here is not used in an essentialist sense, since this documentary does not deal with the behavior or phenomena of migration but about the narrative, a practice, and a reflectivity of migration. In a realistic sense, migration in the documentary refers to the project of demolition and its impact on people, which renders them a group of migrants. We can see numerous conflicts and struggles arise from this basic logic structure in this documentary. But such established recognition of migration may lead to an essentialist understanding of the filmed objects, historical referents, and documentary filmmaking, as well as their mutual interactions. As Edward Soja argues: "Thirdspace too can be described as a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the 'real' material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through 'imagined' representations of spatiality...journeys to a multiplicity of real-and-imagined places." (6) If we consider documentary as a "third space" --- especially in terms of its openness and heterogeneity of meanings, then documentary as a cinematic

apparatus and a mode of knowledge production may be able to complicate and challenge the oversimplified connotation of migration.

To theorize the heterogeneity of migration can also avoid essentializing the filmed objects as the homogeneous momentum, but rather opens the possibility of mapping the polyamorous structure and power dynamics touched by the documentary intervention. In the following part, I will analyze how the heterogeneity of migration is recoded and enriched by documentary techniques such as the shaking camera, montages, close-ups, and the juxtaposition of visual image and written text. Now I will briefly introduce the notion of migration mediated by this documentary in three senses:

- 1) Migration as a materiality of movement, ranging from the city spatial transformation, human flows, and resource mobilization, all of which foreground the historical specificity and link distinctive temporalities and spaces;
- 2) Migration as a human condition unevenly attributed to different filmed subjects, actions, and spaces, undercutting their distinctive boundaries and dissolving their power hierarchy;
- 3) Migration as self-referentiality of the filmmaking's positionality, namely, the "migration" of camera that renders the fluidity of (under)representation problematizes itself simultaneously.

Noticeable is that the three senses above are not mutually exclusive but implicitly overlap, working together in a continuous media reflecting on power dynamics. Now we turn to how the documentary displays the dynamics of migration through multiple visual techniques.

Back to the opening scene of the documentary, after Geng runs through the gate, the black screen appears along with the voice-over noise of demolition from the construction site. What follows the black screen is the everyday scene of students after school, who gaze at the camera and the implicit audience like us. Shot by the shaking camera, a group of students usher in an unstable sense of human flow across the boundary between the school space and the demolition site. Instead of being stuck into the ongoing scenes of the present, the camera follows the gaze of a schoolgirl (Figure 12) and quickly shifts the focus to the gigantic machine and the ongoing demolition project. The transition of scenes reveals the unstable relations among different spaces, ranging from the peaceful scene of everydayness and the demolition spectacle.

However, the close-up of the machine is linked with a line of words appearing on the screen, “Datong was the capital of Imperial China 1600 years ago”, which carries a historical and cultural impulse to make sense of the spatialized present (figure 13). Next appears more montages in which verbal texts are juxtaposed with the ongoing process of demolition. Through the usage of multiple techniques, we can see how the mobile gaze of camera travels back and forth between human and space, present and past, specificity and history, visual images and verbal texts, thus creating a synchronic mediated space that breaks the continuity of visual space but transforms into the temporal-spatiality of heterogeneity.



Figure 12: A schoolgirl stares at the machine

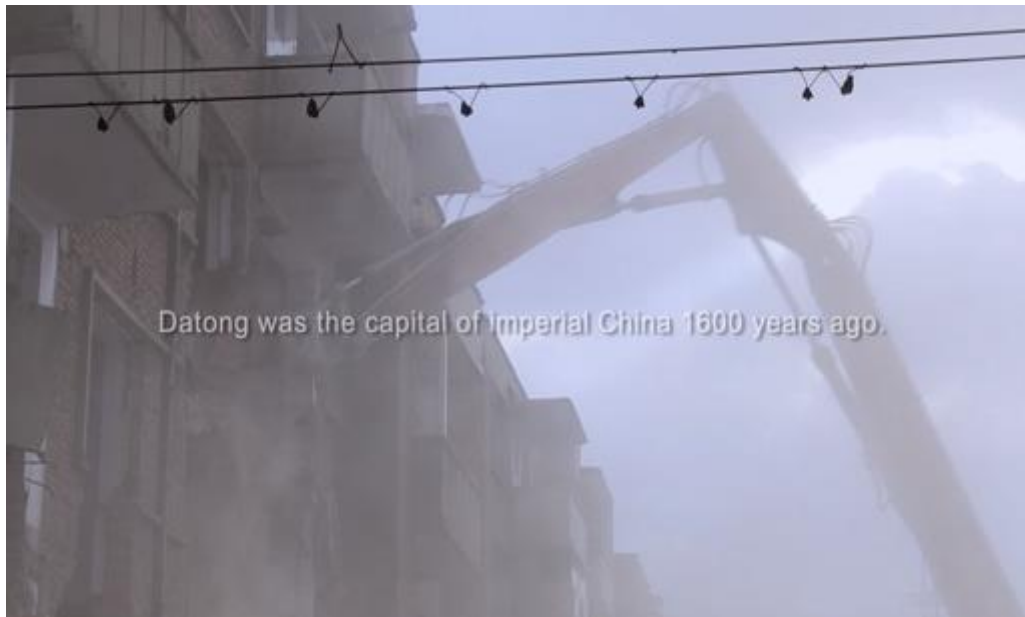


Figure 13: the montage of images and words

Then a series of montages of images and words emerge on the screen: “Because of coalmining, it is now the most polluted city in China. Communist Mayor, Geng Yanbo, wants to transform this city. He wants to relocate 500,000 people, 30% of the city. He

wants to restore the ancient city wall and recreate Datong as a cultural city.” These words aim at registering the images into a broader historical context. But the way that the documentary recodes the words deserves a second thought. Rather than giving a linear self-evident narrative, which implies an uncritical hegemonic position of the narrator, this documentary exhibits words as a portion of visual space, inviting us to problematize the process of narration and power. For instance, who narrates here? Shall we trust the narrative? Does this narrative reveal all the truth of this event? What is the relationship between the narrative and the images? In this montage, both the languages and images are de-privileged and de-centered as mere mediums rather than dominating narratives, forming the “third space” of heterogeneity within the documentary. Hence, the camera’s “migration” resembles the interaction among various subjects coexisting in what we can call a ‘temporal-spatial fusion’, in which sound, place, machine, human flow, and languages are intertwined.

Furthermore, the temporal-spatial migration is unevenly distributed within the dynamics of human condition and their relations with power, which can be examined closely within a critical dialogue between power and the powerless. In general, there are multiple parallels in mapping the migrating conditions of Geng and the impacted people. For the impacted people, the documentary illustrates multiple facets rather than generalizing into a homogeneous group of “migrants”, who are assumed to be the powerless. On the contrary, their voices, bodies, and faces are represented distinctively, constituting an ambivalent landscape of power and the powerless.

For instance, Geng once prioritizes an elderly disabled woman’s request of housing considering the disability. She later comes again and complains that she cannot climb up

to the high-floor apartment occupied by her son's family. (figure 14) Geng asks her many questions and then ultimately figures out: "Both higher and lower floor can be arranged. The real problem is that she dislikes one flat is not enough." ("房子高低可以调。问题是她嫌一套太少了。")



Figure 14: An old woman bargain with the mayor Geng

The elderly woman's behavior of quasi-bargaining, if not regarded as a testimony to the powerless, deserves a second look here. First, it is difficult to decide what the truth of the argument is due to the ambiguity and uncertainty of the presented and the underrepresented mediated by the documentary. In other words, the truth of this debate is irretrievable given the limited media space. But if we consider it from another perspective, the unrepresented truth reveals another layer of truth: the ubiquitous grey zone of truth where people struggle for power.

Furthermore, there are also many other dramatic and ambiguous scenes that require further reconsideration of the powerless embodied by different individuals in dialogue with

the power. For instance, one injured man shows Geng he was beaten by the police. Geng negates his accusation of police violence while promising him the request of compensation. The man nods and smiles afterwards. The camera suddenly moves far away from their faces, dialogues, and conflicts, rendering a detached spectatorship (figure 15). As Foucault questions the complexity of power embodied in individuals: “How simple and easy it would be, no doubt, to dismantle power, if it only worked to supervise, to spy upon, to sneak up on, to prohibit and to punish; But it incites, instigates, produces; it isn’t simply eye and ear; it brings about speech and action.” (89) After many scenes of negotiations, the camera keeps a distance to presents the gap between speech and action, visible and invisible, as well as the powerless and the power.



Figure 15: A detached spectatorship of the conflict

Moreover, reframing the power and the powerless within the “migration” of spectatorship complicates the binary relation between both, which theoretically echoes Rey Chow’s concern on representing the native in post-colonial studies: “To imagine the coexistence of defilement and indifference in the native, the object is not to neutralize the

massive destructions committed under such orders as imperialism and capitalism. Rather, it is to invent a dimension beyond the deadlock between native and colonizer in which the native can only be the colonizer's defiled image and the anti-imperialist critic can only be psychotic. My argument is: yes, "natives" are represented as defiled images—that is the fact of our history. But must we represent them a second time by turning history "upside down," this time giving them the sanctified status of the "non-duped"? Defilement and sanctification belong to the same symbolic order. (54)

Considering the similarity between “the native” and the powerless in terms of their otherness, the documentary intervention attempts to move beyond the established dichotomy representation of the powerless. Hence, the gaze of the camera neither naturally empowers nor not empowers the powerless, but rather keeps a detached distance from both approaches. In this documentary, reframing powerless and the power is not to negate the existence of powerless featuring human condition as a whole, but rather to question the assumptions and conditions that constitutes the power relations in the first place, as well as to question the gaze of the powerless itself. In other words, the dynamics of the powerless can be captured by the double negation of “the powerless is not powerless” and “the powerless is pure or primitive” awaiting to be retrieved at the same time. Therefore, the impacted people are neither “powerless” nor “not powerless” through the ambiguous illustration of the camera.

However, Geng, the seemingly most powerful person in the documentary can also be powerless. The sharp contrast between the residents' forced migration and Geng's idealistic struggle of development constitutes the very ambiguous moment: on the one hand, Geng concerns about the long-term public interest but has to sacrifice some migrants'

temporary benefits, which leads to protest towards his dominating power, on the other hand, Geng is powerless about the low-efficiency of bureaucratic system and lost the chance of completing the project ultimately. When he was transferred to Taiyuan City, he makes a confession to the camera (figure 16): “Datong is in the past. That’s life. Officials come and go. Who would stay in a place forever?” (“大同已经过去了。人生就是这样，铁打的衙门流水的官。谁能在一个地方长久？”) In this scene, it is ironic that Geng’s unstable position in the party system metaphorically echoes the uncertain fate of the impacted people dominated by him and the system’s power. The fate of migration is now shared by all the individuals, who, although registered in the multi-layered power system, simultaneously coexist in the “third-space” of the documentary intervention.



Figure 16: Geng’s confession: Officials come and go

In short, this documentary configures a temporal-spatial migration in the assembling of media, time, spaces, and humans, highlighting the uncertainty and ephemerality, power and powerless, as well as the entangled vis-à-vis disjunctive connections.

II. Intertextuality and Reflexivity: “Hundun” as an Approach

We have discussed how the documentary representation reframes the power and the powerless in temporal-spatial migration of complexity and ambiguity. However, as a self-aware intellectual filmmaker, Zhou’s reflexivity provides another trajectory to approach the power dynamics in this documentary as well as the aesthetic and political shifts within the documentary medium.

In addition to the penetrating observation, there is an intriguing scene questioning the ethic of documentary. The filmmaker Zhou encounters the filmed objects but later becomes an object of the former. Although we cannot see Zhou’s face on the screen, Zhou’s presence is perceivable when many people doubt Zhou’s purpose of filming. This temporality brings the naturalized relation between Zhou and his camera at the fore specifically and symbolically. A dialectical temporal space arises from the flow of dialogues between the filmed people and the filmmaker.

For instance, when an angry man complains that he does not dare to oppose Geng only because he lacks such power: “Give me the power. you will see.” Zhou replies to him: “Power isn’t given to you. You fight for it.” (“权力不是别人给的，是自己争取的。”) During this process, the traditional unidirectional gaze is deconstructed and further enhances the openness of the cinematic space. If mutual gaze can be viewed as a form of value exchange, then the boundaries between the viewer and the being-viewed, the powerful and the powerless, the reality in the film and the reality of the film are blurred. Moreover, the temporality that Zhou expresses his personal opinions invites the audience

to problematize the ethics of filmmaking and the audience's gazes primarily based on the former. By speaking back and forth in the media of documentary, Zhou forms a pattern of the self-avowing or self-exposing filmmaking, which does not only merely problematize the objectivity of documentary but also unfolds Zhou's self-reflexivity of the positionality and value in visualizing the historical specificity in a broader context.



Figure 17: Doubting the filmmaker's identity

Zhou furthers his self-reflexivity of the ethic of filmmaking in the following scene when the local people doubt Zhou's purpose of filmmaking (figure 17). An old man asks Zhou: "I just wonder who you work for and your identities." Lao Ma, a local friend of Zhou, answers this question for him: "He is like the Italian journalist, Antonioni who came to China during the Cultural Revolution." Then the old man nods and says: "I believe your work will have historical value." The linkage between Zhou and Michelangelo Antonioni, an Italian director and his masterpiece documentary "Chung Kuo-Cino"(1972), proposes a

refreshing historical dimension to examine the filmmaking across the boundary of time, space, media, and geographic scales. Multiple reflections can generate from the juxtaposition of the filmmakers, Zhou and Antonioni, the documentaries, “The Chinese Mayor” and “Chung Kuo-Cino”, and their separate historical referents, Datong in post-socialist China and cultural revolution in socialist China. As Bill Nichols recognizes the notion of “excess” that makes documentary less a closure but an openness: “Gaps and fissures suggest that something exceeds the grasps of the texts and its ability to secure agreement.” (141) This scene creates a fissure within the documentary space, extending the filmmaking’s manipulation. Nichols believes that history as the excess of documentary frequently lies in its explorations of “exotic, local, sacramental, and complex.” (148)

One possible reading of such excess lies in Zhou’s reflexivity of his positionality in a cross-cultural imagination. Antonioni, as an outsider from the West, is problematic for his orientalist gaze towards China in “Chung Kuo-Cino”. It is banned by the official government of mainland China from the 1970s while receiving much praise in recent years. The fate of “Chung Kuo-Cino” in terms of its contradictory evaluation in different time and space poses the question of the “value” of documentary. When the old man in the documentary says Zhou’s work will have historical value, one might reflect on the following questions: What is the historical value of documentary filmmaking? Who has the authority to decide whether it is valuable or valueless? What is the relationship between the value of documentary and the hierarchized reality and its evaluation system?

Although Zhou does not give a concrete answer in the documentary, the excessive gesture that Zhou situates himself in contrast with Antonioni’s fate echoes his concern of the dialectic relation between the filmmaking and the audience conventions.

In an interview, Zhou points out the problem of film conventions: “Most people only need a definition as it seems that we feel relaxed when acquiring a definition of the world. This is precisely what most Euro-American films do; The audiences in America are too lazy and only need you give him a conclusion about the world. Don’t you think such phenomena is ridiculous?”⁴ (“多数人需要别人下一个定义，这样定义下来以后好像我们就轻松了，就放松了，就像很多欧美的片子；美国的观众是很懒的，他就需要你给他一个结论，你不觉得这很荒诞？”) Here Zhou identifies that audience are passively given the unitarian recognition and knowledge by film production. “The definition and conclusion” here are cognitively problematic since they not only oversimplify the signified object but also forbid further exploration of the complicate reality. In other words, there is no space for the audience to contemplate and draw their own conclusions independently.

Facing such problem of documentary and cinema, Zhou proposes the concept of “hundun”(“混沌”) as a possible approach to question such conventions and complicate the “reality”. Hundun, suggesting that the order of the world is embedded in the disorder of chaos, is productive in dialectics of aesthetic practice. Hundun also implies a situation of ambiguity and fluidity where the order and boundary have not been established and fixed. More importantly, compared with the notion of Datong (great unity), which anticipates an ideal order of society, the meaning of hundun is more resilient for it embodies a dialectic

⁴ Jian, yongda. 简永达. “The Disappeared “Chinese Mayor” on Douban represents Chaos of Chinese”从豆瓣消失的大同，代表了中国的混沌 *Sohu 搜狐*. n.p. 2018. Web. 4th May 2019.

tension between order and disorder, old order and new order, deconstruction and reconstruction.

Apart from the dynamic meanings of *hundun* in Chinese context, Zhou further develops the approach of *hundun* through an inspiring cross-cultural encounter. In Zhou's statements, he had a meeting with a German Sinologist, Michael Kahn-Ackermann, who designed a contemporary exhibition for representation Chinese social changes. When Zhou asked Ackermann what he wanted to convey to the European audience through this exhibition, Ackermann replied him: *hundun*. Ackermann believed that European audiences have some fixed opinions on China. Through this exhibition, he hoped the audience could acquire an ambiguous sense of China, refuse the image of China proffered by established narratives, and try to use their own method to imagine a different China. This encounter with Ackermann inspires Zhou to further develop the aesthetics of *hundun* in his documentary practice of the ambiguous China.

The significance of *hundun* can be construed from different directions. First, Zhou uses *hundun* as a principal approach of documenting the ambiguity and complicity of reality. "Documentary also makes a representation, or a case, an argument, about the world explicitly or implicitly." (Nichols Bill 111-112) For Zhou, *hundun* does not suggest an unclear expression or rhetoric but attempts to avoid an oversimplified argument. As we see from the documentary, the relationships among state-party power, Geng, and impacted people are complicated by the competing versions and layers of temporal-spatial reality in front of the camera. Hence, Zhou could generate a dialectical argument about the reality instead of presenting the reality of totality or homogeneity.

⁵ Ibid.

Second, *hundun* can be a reflexive framework to mediate the positionality of filmmaker and his filmed objects. Rather than giving a voice or speaking for certain agencies, Zhou does not seek to distance himself in an objective and detached position from the reality. “After filmmaking, I refuse to name myself as the director, which I think is a negative term. The reality develops by its own instead of me.” As a self-aware part of the *hundun*, Zhou puts himself and the camera into question as if he is open to the gaze of himself, the filmed objects, audiences, and someone else. Such self-exposure underlies the possibility of self-reflexivity in dialogue with an open, mediated space extending from the traditional cinematic space.

Third, *hundun* can be a counter-narrative that challenges the dominating knowledge production and the audience’s reception. In the aforementioned interview, Zhou expects his audience to feel a sense of *hundun* after watching the film, which means “acquir[ing] an ambiguous sense of China, refus[ing] to believe the image of China in established narratives, as well as tr[ying] to use their own method to imagine a different China.” In addition to negating mainstream narratives and dominating ideologies, *hundun* also marks Zhou’s distinctive choice within the historical context of contemporary Chinese independent documentary. Chinese independent documentary is long associated with the modalities of truth and the aesthetics of the “on-the-spot realism” (Zhang 109-113).

Zhou shifts the focus of documentary from truth-telling to a more phenomenological direction that suspends truth temporally. In a post-truth period, considering that truth is structured by certain narrative, discourse, and visual production, *hundun* is inspiring in challenging the established modes of truth-telling and fostering new visual production. What’s more, *hundun* serves as a strategy towards the state censorship

system. Zhou mentions another Chinese independent documentary filmmaker, Zhang Zhanbo, who is banned by China and can no longer direct films in the future due to the sensitive contents of his documentaries. “No need to sacrifice lives for a photo.” Zhou said. Unlike Zhang, Zhou makes an alternative: to negotiate with the existing censorship system and ideology so that he can continue to document the transitional China.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these documentaries bring the issue of migration penetrating in Chinese post-socialist transformation at the fore by reframing the dialectic landscape of the order and disorder, power and the powerless. By examining the intertextuality and intermediality of the cinematic space, this paper concludes that the temporal-spatial configuration of migration renders Chinese transformation as an entity an ongoing and uneven specificity. Additionally, Zhou and the approach of *hundun* mark an aesthetic and political shifting medium for Chinese documentary as it constructs a cinematic space to destabilize the established power and knowledge at present and enhance the possibility of re-ordering the future. However, this paper does not intend to explain all the aspects of this realm. Further research should discuss the processes of exhibition, distribution, and circulation of transnational documentary production in which the dialectics between *hundun* and power in a transnational and transmedia context can be anticipated.

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