

Facing ‘the Elephant in the Room’—When Chinese Independent Cinema Encounters Harsh Ideological Censorship

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As a form of visual art deliberately or unintentionally detached from the power of censorship, Chinese independent cinema cannot be comprehensively discussed without addressing the film censorship mechanism that underlies it. It is a key element in defining the unique category of ‘Chinese independent cinema’, an important external factor in its birth and existence, and one of the main reasons for the historical challenges this cinema is facing today. However, due to policies, circumstances, and practical difficulties, apart from sporadic discussions of specific cases and individual experiences occasionally seen in publications and online platforms, there seems to be no systematic analysis or overview of the censorship faced by Chinese independent cinema. Most of the time, especially within official or mainstream contexts, the topic of ‘film censorship’ is absent, but in reality, it is like an elephant that has already entered the room. In light of this, we have chosen ‘Censorship and Chinese Independent Cinema’ as the theme for this journal issue, aiming to make an effort to fill this gap and directly confront this ‘elephant in the room’.

An Overview of the History of Chinese Film Censorship

The elephant didn’t just enter the room today. It is well-known that China’s history of film censorship dates back a long way and is an inevitable product of the Party’s literary and artistic policies. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always viewed literature and art as tools for propaganda and education, carrying the Party’s ideology. As early as the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in the 1940s, Mao Zedong set the tone for the Party’s literary and artistic policy: ‘Literature and art must serve politics’ and ‘Literature and art are the gears and screws of the Party’s revolutionary cause’. Subsequently, artistic creation under the CCP’s rule was completely subservient to political power, and serving the Party became the ‘unwavering mission’ of literary and art workers.

Film, of course, was no exception and even held a prominent position. ‘Of all the arts, the most important for us is cinema!’¹ Lenin said in the 1920s. The great leader understood the advantages of this emerging art form: its populism, vividness, visual impact, and its potential to effectively educate a population with generally low cultural literacy at the time, making it a powerful propaganda and educational tool in the hands of the proletariat. Like many other lessons from Soviet Russia, Lenin’s words also pointed the way for the CCP’s film policy rooted in Marxism-Leninism. Looking back at the history of film development since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, to a large extent, it is also a history of censorship; a history of the Party’s strong control and disciplining of filmmakers.

If we consider the ‘Kuomintang-controlled area’ in the places like Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, left-wing filmmakers of the CCP were a significant progressive force. They resisted pressure and created a series of outstanding films that criticized social reality and reflected the sentiments of the time. Films like *Little Toys* 小玩意 (dir. Sun Yu 孙瑜, 1933), *Goddess* 神女 (dir. Wu Yonggang 吴永刚, 1934), *The Big Road* 大路 (dir. Sun Yu 孙瑜, 1934), *Song of the Fishermen* 渔光曲 (dir. Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生, 1934), *Street Angel* 马路天使 (dir. Yuan Mu-zhi 袁牧之, 1937), and *Crossroads* 十字街头 (dir. Shen Xilin 沈西苓, 1937) spread progressive ideas such as anti-Japanese patriotism and democratic freedom. However, once the Party established its rule, the situation underwent a dramatic transformation. Portraying contemporary social issues in films was no longer encouraged, and sometimes not even allowed. Gradually, the path for once forward-looking left-wing filmmakers seemed to be limited to praising the Party’s achievements. They became what the Party desired—gears and screws in the machinery. Notably, well-known left-wing filmmaker Situ Huimin 司徒慧敏,² a member of ‘the Party’s Film Group’ in the 1930s, was sent by Zhou Enlai to the United States in 1946 to study film technology and management knowledge. After returning to China in 1952, he could only direct mainstream films like *The Sport Game of August First* 八一运动大会 (1952). This film, touted as the CCP’s first large-scale colour documentary, was essentially a propaganda piece showcasing the grandeur of the army’s sports game held on the 25th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army. Comparing this documentary to the famous German documentary filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Olympia* (1938), created for the Berlin Olympics, might seem far-fetched and premature. However, by 1965, when Situ was involved in directing the epic musical dance drama *The East is Red* 东方红—a hagiographic work tailor-made for Mao that heralded the imminent arrival of the Cultural

Revolution—the parallels between the two in terms of state control and authoritarian aesthetics might not be far off. Situ later held positions such as Deputy Director of the Film Bureau, Deputy Chairman of the Film Artists Association 电影家协会, and Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture. On the PRC's tenth anniversary, he was actively in charge of planning and making films to mark the occasion, hence pioneering a new film genre with distinct Chinese characteristics that has continued to this day: the 'tribute film' 献礼片.

In an era of tribute films, the existence of another type of film is inevitable: banned films. This bipolarity is a product of the film ecology shaped by censorship.

In 1951, a film set in the late Qing Dynasty, originally intended to critique traditional culture, titled *The Life of Wu Xun* 武训传, enjoyed widespread popularity and acclaim nationwide. However, it fell victim to a massive campaign led by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 and his wife Jiang Qing 江青, becoming a 'dangerous weed'. Director Sun Yu and lead actor Zhao Dan 赵丹 faced prolonged and intense criticism, and more than forty other individuals were implicated. This film became the first banned film in the PRC. It was only over fifty years later that it was shown again, as an 'internal screening' at the 'Zhao Dan Film Retrospective in Memory of His Ninetieth Birthday'. The critique of *The Life of Wu Xun* is both a typical example of film censorship and the beginning of what is regarded as the first nationwide political movement in New China. Perhaps, exactly due to this painful experience, Zhao left behind a thought-provoking oral statement about the censorship system on his deathbed, titled 'No Hope for Literature and Art Under Too Much Control' 管得太具体, 文艺没希望, clearly stating, 'No vibrant and good literary and art work has ever emerged from the process of censorship.'³

However, the Party clearly did not see it this way. After the criticism of *The Life of Wu Xun*, cultural authoritarianism became the norm, and many films followed in its footsteps and became 'dangerous weeds' and banned films, including *The Lin Family Shop* 林家铺子 (dir. Shuihua 水华, 1959), *Southern Lands in the North* 北国江南 (dir. Shen Fu 沈复, 1963), *Early Spring* 早春二月 (dir. Xie Tieli 谢铁骊, 1963), and so on. Mao and Jiang Qing continued to pay unusually high attention to the literary and artistic front, initiating a series of major criticisms. In 1963 and 1964, Mao issued the famous 'Two Instructions Concerning Literature and Art' 两个文艺批示,⁴ which became fuel for the raging fire of political criticism that swept across the country.

During ten years of the Cultural Revolution, cultural authoritarianism reached its zenith, and its destructive power also reached its peak. Jiang Qing held significant power and was in charge of the Party's literature and art, promoting 'model operas' and dismantled the Chinese film industry. For seven years, from 1966 to 1972, there were no new fiction films produced apart from model operas. In September 1967, the Red Guards' Congress 红卫兵代表大会 at the Beijing Film Academy's Jinggangshan Art Corps 北京电影学院井冈山文艺兵团 compiled a booklet titled *400 Cases of Poisonous Weeds/Films with Serious Mistakes* 毒草及有严重错误影片四百例, which lists and criticises 400 films from China and abroad, including some classics in film history. After more than fifty years, we managed to obtain a copy from an online second-hand bookstore, and it was truly astonishing to read. The critique of these films is meticulous and comprehensive, addressing not only their ideology, but also their narrative structure, character development, as well as film aesthetics such as lighting, makeup, art designing, and cinematography. It appears highly professional, yet beneath its professional exterior, it is imbued with the ideological core of class struggle. By the way, shortly after we purchased this book, it was completely removed from online bookstores, becoming a new banned book or a new poisonous weed in the new era—this sounds like a fable, or an intriguing echo from the old era.

In the late 1970s, shortly after Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 came to power and began to implement Reform and Opening-up, leading to rapid changes in the socio-political landscape. Influenced by marketisation and globalisation, various fields such as literature, fine arts, music, and film witnessed new waves of free innovation that challenged mainstream ideology and official discourse. However, the Party's policy of artistic censorship persisted, and the dichotomy between 'tribute films' and banned films still existed.

Among the early and well-known banned films after the Cultural Revolution is *Bitter Love* 苦恋 (also known as *Sun and Man*) (1980), directed by Peng Ning 彭宁 and adapted from a play of the same time by Bai Hua 白桦. It depicts the life of the painter Ling Chenguang 凌晨光, especially his tragic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. A line of dialogue in the film, 'You love this country, but does this country love you?' condensed the sharp criticism and profound reflection in the film, causing a significant uproar. Criticism from the authorities and Party media poured in—a situation reminiscent of the past criticisms of *The Life of Wu Xun*, *The Lin Family Shop*, or the theatre play *Hai Rui*

Dismissed from Office 海瑞罢官 (Wu Han 吴晗, 1961). In 1981, Deng Xiaoping watched *Bitter Love* and provided a very harsh critique: 'Regardless of the author's intentions, after watching it, one can only come to this impression: the Communist Party is not good, and the socialist system is not good. By denigrating the socialist system like this, where has the author's party spirit gone? Some people say that the artistic level of this film is relatively high, but precisely because of this, it is more harmful. Works like this actually played a similar role to those so-called democratic voices.'⁵ This speech inevitably brings to mind Mao's tone during the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art. Although the times may seem different, in certain aspects, the so-called reformers and the reformed are connected.

Bitter Love is not an isolated case. Similar reflective films have repeatedly encountered varying degrees of control and prohibition: lengthy examinations and revisions, withdrawal shortly after release, or never seeing the light of day. This includes *In A Twinkling* 瞬间 (1979), directed by Peng Ning and based on the Lin Biao 林彪 incident; *Maple* 枫 (1980), a love ballad reflecting the violence of the Cultural Revolution directed by Zhang Yi 张一; *The Pigeon Tree* 鸽子树 (1985) by Wu Ziniu 吴子牛, centred on the Sino-Vietnamese War; and *Hibiscus Town* 芙蓉镇 (1986) by Xie Jin 谢晋, which reflects on the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution from a human perspective. The vigilance and suppression of reflective films began in the late 1970s and peaked in the 1990s. Three leading figures of the Fifth Generation of directors—Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, and Chen Kaige 陈凯歌—each released a film related to the Cultural Revolution in the same year (1993): *The Blue Kite* 蓝风筝, *To Live* 活着, and *Farewell My Concubine* 霸王别姬. From both artistic quality or ideological connotation, they can be considered the pinnacle of Chinese cinema, garnering significant international attention and winning numerous awards. However, they all suffered the fate of being banned, with Tian Zhuangzhuang even being banned from filmmaking for a decade. The experience of these three films directly led to the commercial transformation of the Fifth Generation directors and the collective withdrawal of avant-garde filmmakers.

In 2002, Zhang Yimou released martial arts epic *Hero* 英雄, portraying Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇, who represented authoritarianism and totalitarianism, as a heroic figure who endures humiliation and carries burdens. This film defended and even sang the praises of tyranny and despotism, conveying the mainstream value of sacrificing individual lives for collective goals. In 2014, Zhang Yimou once again released a film related to the Cultural Revolution, titled *Coming Home* 归来, in which he deliberately blurred and even neutered the Cultural Revolution background in the original novel, focusing instead on crafting a moving love story. His approach towards suffering appeared superficial and opportunistic. Zhang's transformation not only reflects the continued existence or even exacerbation of taboos and censorship, but also proves that for the Fifth Generation directors who have integrated into the mainstream, films no longer play the role of critiquing reality and reflecting on history; instead, they become media dancing in tandem with political power and capital. In the new millennium, Zhang Yimou directed the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics and the cultural performance at the sixtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China, earning him the title of 'National Master' 国师. Huang Jianxin 黄建新 directed *The Founding of a Republic* 建国大业 (2009) to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the Founding of the PRC, *Beginning of the Great Revival* 建党伟业 (2011) for the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of the CCP, and *1921* (2021) as a grand gift for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the CCP. Chen Kaige served as the overall director for *My People, My Motherland* 我和我的祖国 (2019), to celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the PRC. These 'tribute films' were further developed and magnified at the hands of the Fifth Generation directors. To some extent, they are clearly echoing the significant changes of the past leftist filmmakers, making the experience of making banned films increasingly like a historical misunderstanding.

However, history always repeats itself. The Sixth Generation filmmakers who emerged as underground directors in the 1990s, although different from the Fifth Generation in terms of focus, film style, and aesthetic features, more or less continued the development path of the Fifth Generation. Just as the state power repeatedly struck the Fifth Generation directors with heavy blows, national authority once again delivered ruthless punishment to these unregulated cinematic forces: in 1994, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television 广电部 issued a notice prohibiting support or assistance to Zhang Yuan 张元 and others in filming and post-production; in 1998, Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 was informed by the Film Bureau to 'suspend the right to shoot films and TV dramas' due to his film *Xiao Wu* 小武 (1998); and later, Lou Ye 娄烨 faced a five-year ban on filmmaking due to his *Summer Palace* 颐和园 (2006) involving the background of the June Fourth. The punishment not only resulted from these filmmakers' continuous challenges to mainstream discourse, but also because they deviated from the state-owned film studio system to engage in independent filmmaking—there is nothing more repugnant and unsettling to an authoritarian system than 'freedom'.

Although many Sixth Generation directors emerged as underground filmmakers, it is probably more accurate to say that this was a product of their era rather than a conscious act of independence and resistance. After 1989, state-owned film studios declined, and they could hardly provide opportunities for these young graduates from the Film Academy to make films. Their creative desires and career aspirations went unfulfilled, so they had to seek alternative paths, leading to the emergence of these underground films. Once they had the opportunity to enter cinemas, gain mainstream recognition, and receive official approval, the Sixth Generation directors followed in the footsteps of their Fifth-Generation predecessors and went aboveground one by one. Faced with the iron fist of censorship and the temptations of the market, their initial avant-garde and rebellion gradually disappeared.

Jia Zhangke, a former independent filmmaker with humanistic concern and critical awareness, who made avant-garde films such as *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* 站台 (2000), has transformed himself into a mainstream cultural celebrity. Apart from transitioning to make ‘dragon seal’ films⁶ since the turn of the century, he also has collaborated with local authorities pursuing cultural achievements and established the Pingyao International Film Festival 平遥国际电影节. Independent films without the ‘dragon seal’ found it increasingly difficult to participate openly in this festival led by the (former) leading figure of Chinese independent cinema—how ironic this sounds. Later, in 2018, Jia became a ‘National People’s Congress delegate’ 全国人大代表 and participated in the ‘constitutional amendment’ vote to abolish term limits for national leaders at the National People’s Congress that year. During the ‘Two Sessions’ 两会 in 2021, Jia, as a delegate of the National People’s Congress, accepted an interview with China Central Television, giving full affirmation to China’s epidemic prevention and control measures, singing praises for China’s political system.⁷ While Jia has not yet become a ‘National Master’ like Zhang Yimou, his words and actions have taken on a distinct main melody. His latest work, the documentary *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue* 一直游到海水变蓝 (2020), which deals with Chinese literature after 1949, is noticeably aligned with the tone of the Party’s main melody literature, and its artistic expression is also relatively mediocre. Like his Fifth Generation and even leftist filmmaker predecessors, he ultimately couldn’t escape the significant decline in creative power after submitting to the authority. Given typical transformations like Jia Zhangke’s, it’s not surprising to see a similar pattern in other Sixth Generation directors. For example, Zhang Yuan directed *Jiang Jie* 江姐 (2002), Guan Hu 管虎 directed *The Sacrifice* 金刚川 (2020), and Zhang Ming 章明 frequently took on projects commissioned by local governments with themes of tourism promotion.

Another Sixth Generation director, Lou Ye, despite emerging into the mainstream film scene and becoming involved in making ‘dragon seal’ films, still to some degree maintains independent thought and instinctual resistance against stringent film censorship. He once made a widely circulated statement on his Weibo: ‘Don’t be afraid of films; films are not so frightening or important. If a country or a regime fears films, it’s definitely not because films are too powerful, but because they themselves are too fragile.’ This is not just a challenge to the authority of censorship; it can also be seen as a dialogue across nearly a century between a Chinese filmmaker and Lenin, albeit one that clearly contradicts and defies Lenin’s perspective, violating Marxist Leninist principles and the Party’s view on literature and art. Fortunately, this is not the era of Mao, and Lou Ye did not suffer the fate of being swiftly severed as a poison weed, like Sun Yu and Wu Han.

Independent Cinema’s Struggle for Survival in the Cracks of Film Censorship

In the history of Chinese cinema, the filmmakers who have disregarded official taboos most resolutely and been driven by individual free will are independent filmmakers, especially independent documentary filmmakers who consider film as a form of free expression and reflection of reality. Starting from the late 1980s, the dominance of official television stations and film studios in documentary production began to crack, allowing the Chinese public the possibility to use documentary images for their own expression. In the new millennium, especially around the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, perhaps influenced by the atmosphere of the times, independent documentary filmmakers demonstrated greater ‘subjectivity’,⁸ and displayed a stronger moral courage to engage with reality, criticize, and self-reflect. During this time, a large number of outstanding independent works emerged, focusing on various aspects of society, from social livelihoods to personal lives, from immediate realities to historical truths, addressing topics that were previously forbidden, such as layoffs, petitioning, pollution, corruption, rights defence, demolitions, mining accidents, homosexuality, prostitution, drug use, political ecology, the Cultural Revolution, the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Great Famine, and many more. Despite varying aesthetic and production methods, these works share common traits such as a resolute pursuit of truth, bearing witness to history, paying attention to social change, caring for the grassroots and marginalized, exploring inner emotions, confronting human nature, and boldly experimenting with form. They comprehensively challenged banal official values and aesthetics.

Understanding the experiences of previous leftist filmmakers, the Fifth and Sixth Generation directors, it's not difficult to imagine the predicament faced by those independent filmmakers who persist in their pursuit of creative freedom. Being outside the realm of censorship, lacking official permits for filming and screening, their situation is very challenging in terms of production and distribution. Without financial support from the market, they can only maintain low-budget, small-team production models, even resorting to handmade workshop-style 'one-person operations'. Their equipment is rudimentary, and their images are coarse, something that is often criticised. In terms of distribution, they struggle to gain access to mainstream venues and official theatres, and can only rely on semi-underground independent film festivals or grassroots screening institutions, holding screenings in cafes, bars, art galleries, and university campuses, or turn to emerging internet platforms and disseminate their work via the tightly controlled online space. As a result, the audience of Chinese independent films is very small. This situation is somewhat reminiscent of the 'samizdat'⁹ phenomenon in the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist countries during the Soviet era. However, beneath the high pressure of the surface, the fire of resistance smoulders in secret. Stringent censorship has led to various forms of resistance in creation and distribution, whether active or passive. We call these strategies and practices 'anti-censorship', which has constructed a unique landscape of pursuing freedom in the authoritarian system—a struggle for survival within the cracks. Despite being suppressed, these filmmakers continue to forge ahead, full of vitality and creativity, and at certain moments, even experienced fleeting periods of prosperity.

Unfortunately, as time went on, these narrow cracks have become increasingly narrower and even perilous. In 2012, with the rise of new leader Xi Jinping 习近平, the political environment became harsher, and ideological control grew stronger. Independent films were repeatedly subjected to heavier suppression: the three major independent film festivals in Beijing, Nanjing, and Kunming respectively were repeatedly obstructed and eventually shut down; in 2014, the office of the Li Xianting Film Fund 栗宪庭电影基金会 in Songzhuang, Beijing, an important base for independent cinema, was raided, and over a thousand films in its collection were confiscated by the police; at the same time, various marginalized and loosely organized grassroots screening activities also faced interference, and some organizations were shut down, and those involved were punished. The already narrow space for dissemination almost disappeared, and independent filmmaking entered a period of decline. With the introduction of the 'Film Industry Promotion Law' 电影产业促进法 in 2017 and the 'Film Administrative Penalty Discretionary Measures' 电影行政处罚裁量办法 in 2018, independent Chinese cinema is facing its darkest moment. The state exerted comprehensive control over independent films on the legal level: independent films without the dragon seal, whether in production, screening, distribution, release, or participation in foreign film festivals, became illegal. The authorities have the power to impose a series of severe penalties, including fines, property freezes, and revocation of industry qualifications, on individuals involved in the 'illegal' production and distribution of independent films.

The community of independent filmmakers became divided or atomized, either transitioning to the mainstream or going further underground. Independent film screenings became even more covert and challenging, with many screening groups ceasing operations or rebranding. Although the concept of 'independent film' has always been controversial, Chinese independent film once shone brightly as a unique cinematic trend. It has never entered the mainstream cultural system, but it remains an undeniable presence in the history of Chinese cinema. However, in the current context, the term 'independent film' itself has become sensitive, rejected, excluded, and avoided to the point of near disappearance in public discourse. Therefore, the popular assertion in both domestic and international critical discourse that 'Chinese independent film is dead' is not accurate in describing the current state of independent film production and screening, but instead accurately portrays the current situation where independent film has been made 'socially dead'. Beneath the iron curtain, even Hong Kong, which was once considered a free zone, has been not spared. A number of Hong Kong films that contradicted Beijing's mainstream values and ideologies were banned consecutively. A few years later, the implementation of the 'National Security Law' 国安法和 the 'Film Inspection Regulations' 电影检查条例 severely undermined the freedom of visual artistic creation in Hong Kong.

With the strengthening of cultural control and the commercialization of film, many former independent directors have either actively or passively entered the mainstream film system, becoming 'dragon-sealed'. This seems to be a replica of the path of the Sixth Generation filmmakers; history repeats itself again. The most typical and intriguing transformation of becoming 'dragon-sealed' occurred with Wei Tie 卫铁. This once independent director, who has made several independent fiction films and documentaries,¹⁰ completed a 180-degree turn from making underground films to creating propaganda films: in 2018, he directed *Amazing China* 厉害了，我的国. This is an ultra-main melody documentary produced and highly promoted by the government, which 'for the first time presents the development and achievements

of China since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, as well as the significant statement of Xi Jinping on socialism with Chinese characteristics entering a new era, in the form of a documentary on the big screen.’¹¹ The film showcased the country’s confidence in its ‘rise as a great power’ and stirred up a wave of extreme nationalist sentiment in China, profoundly influencing China’s subsequent foreign policies and diplomatic relations. Interestingly, due to concerns that the unrestrained self-praise in the film would provide the United States, which was in the midst of a trade war with China, with an excuse to impose sanctions, the Party’s Propaganda Department 中宣部 urgently halted the screening of this film, which had already generated a high box office revenue of 470 million RMB. Overnight, it was removed from all major Chinese video websites and cinemas, disappearing without a trace, and even the rating and review system on Douban.com was shut down—ultimately, an ultra-main melody film received the same treatment as a banned film, a reality that can only be described as surreal.

Such surreal experiences are not isolated cases. Under the censorship system that follows the will of power rather than the rule of law, the dragon seal is not an eternal talisman; whether or not a film is banned can change in an instant of power’s whim. Jia Zhangke’s *A Touch of Sin* 天注定 (2013), after passing censorship, was suddenly banned just before its release; Li Ruijun’s 李睿珺 dragon-sealed film *Return to Dust* 隐入尘烟 (2022), after being released in the cinema and well-received by both audience and critics, was suddenly removed from the entire internet, and even faced strong online criticism from official media, giving people a sense of returning to the era of *The Life of Wu Xun*; not long ago, a fairly long list of films was circulated online and sparked hot discussion, and the films on the list were mainstream films that had disappeared from the public eye ‘for no reason’ shortly after completion. ‘For no reason’ means that censors issue bans without providing any reasons, and every filmmaker and every film can become a target of the arbitrary iron fist.

As is well known, China’s film censorship is fundamentally different from the internationally practiced classification-based censorship. It involves thought censorship and ideological examination. In terms of its administrative nature, it constitutes crude intervention and suppression of art by politics; in terms of its spiritual essence, it represents ruthless indoctrination and punishment of dissent by authoritarianism. Both its procedures and methods are notoriously non-transparent, clearly contradicting the spirit of the rule of law and bearing the mark of rule of man. In a word, China’s film censorship is highly arbitrary, with blurred boundaries and highly concentrated power. In the past, the list of members of the Board of Film Censors 电影审查委员会 was not disclosed to the public; how they were appointed and what procedures they followed remained a mystery. So, the members hid behind the mask of nationalism, not needing to take individual responsibility, including moral responsibility, for their censorship decisions. Power (authority) and duty were thoroughly decoupled. Later, the list was published, but the presence of members from various of the authorities’ departments unrelated to the artistic field on the list indicates that ‘power still prevails’. This unjust essence of, and unreasonable procedure in, the censorship mechanism inevitably led to unfair outcomes.

This strict censorship has also created a situation where filmmakers constantly try to interpret the ‘intent from above’—the will of power—in order to pass censorship. They often have to compromise their own artistic vision, engage in self-restraint, and even self-degradation. This is known as ‘self-censorship’. Self-censorship is present throughout the creative process, and its impact on the creativity of authors and the nature of their works should not be underestimated. Perhaps the most apt metaphor for China’s film censorship system is the ancient Chinese idiom, ‘cutting one’s own feet to fit the shoes 削足适履’: to wear the ill-fitting shoes forced upon you by the authority, you need to cut off your own feet with a knife. Over time, people may come to believe that this is the only choice and forget that in a free world, there are various sizes and styles of shoes available, allowing you to choose a pair that fits and suits you perfectly, rather than inverting priorities as it is today. This is somehow similar to the traditional practice of foot binding for Chinese women in the past, which distorted and caused great suffering to women’s healthy feet in order to satisfy a pathological patriarchal ideology and aesthetics. Undoubtedly, in this sense, the domestication of women by patriarchy and the disciplining of artists by authoritarianism share similar characteristics.

Content and Structure of the Issue

The censorship of independent Chinese cinema discussed in this issue does not solely refer to the conventional meaning of censorship: the process of submitting films to the National Board of Film Censors 国家电影审查委员会 for review to obtain the ‘dragon seal’ and the final permission to screen. Many independent films have actually abandoned this ‘submission for review’ procedure from the beginning and became purely underground. The term ‘censorship’ is used here in a broader sense, referring to the restriction and suppression of filmmaking outside the official system, as

well as its grassroots distribution, by state power. This is examined and discussed in relation to the dynamics of anti-censorship and self-censorship, paying attention to the space emerging from the clash and tension between censorship and anti-censorship, and the complicity and mutual construction between censorship and self-censorship. We endeavour to examine the ecosystem of Chinese independent films under censorship from different dimensions and multiple perspectives.

Due to the extensive and disorganized nature of the relevant information, as well as the lack of publicly available literature, it is extremely challenging to scrutinise the overall state of censorship of Chinese independent cinema. Therefore, in this issue, we have chosen not to provide a comprehensive macro-level description but selected some representative individuals or cases to present a picture of the censorship faced by independent cinema over the past thirty years, especially in the last decade. The intention is to offer readers a glimpse into the nature and current status of film censorship. Moreover, based on the collection and compilation of facts and information, the excavation and verification of historical details, as well as the narratives and recollections of relevant parties, we attempt to provide a vivid account in an accessible manner, leaving a testimony for an era in which things are frequently obscured or disappeared. We hope to provide researchers with first-hand data and materials for studying Chinese film censorship, and encourage the future discussion and research on this topic.

The main section of this issue is ‘Hidden Taboo Images: An Incomplete List of Chinese Independent Films Missing from Douban.com’. In fact, it was the starting point for this issue about censorship. We discovered that since the birth of independent cinema, being hidden, disappeared, or banned has become the ‘destiny’ of these films. The absence of entries on Douban.com reflects this fate in a straightforward manner. By using Douban.com as a starting point, we compile a list of ninety-six films that have been ‘disappeared’, and based on extensive interviews and literature reviews, we briefly but meticulously describe the censorship experiences of each film or film director, with the hope of allowing the ‘elephant in the room’ to appear relatively vividly and leaving a concrete record of film censorship in this era.

Another important section is our compilation and summary of censorship methods and anti-censorship strategies in the screening of Chinese independent films, presented in the form of a dictionary. This section consists of a total of thirty-one entries (thirteen for censorship methods and eighteen for anti-censorship strategies). We explain the original meanings of these terms and their implications in the context of independent cinema, accompanied by relevant examples for further illustration. These examples are diverse, reflecting the characteristics of the era and Chinese specificity, and even contain elements of dark humour. The grassroots screenings of independent films that emerged since the beginning of this century are an essential component of the independent film ecosystem and serve as a barometer for the censorship. We aim to observe the texture and operational mechanisms of film censorship through the ‘A Little Dictionary of Censorship in Chinese Independent Film Exhibition’, and document the valuable courage and wisdom displayed by grassroots cinema projectionists and curators when confronting the powerful censorship apparatus.

Alongside the two aforementioned sections, we also conducted in-depth interviews on film censorship and anti-censorship with Professor Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明, an independent documentary filmmaker, and Mr. Li Xianting 栗宪庭, an independent film curator and art critic, resulting in two extensive pieces. As two veterans of Chinese independent cinema, and subjects of close surveillance by the authorities, both of them candidly recounted their experiences of being subjected to censorship. They described how they navigated the challenges of engaging in independent filmmaking or circulation in a highly constrained environment, offering insightful perspectives and sober judgment on the censorship mechanism. We also interviewed Mr. Ou Di 欧迪, a grassroots film event organiser, to discuss the case of the closure of the Luoyang Film Archive 洛阳电影资料馆, a grassroots screening organisation. Ou Di also shared his experiences of running his own screening organisation, Topofilm 拓朴光影, and provided his views and reflections on the impact of censorship on grassroots film screenings. This interview can be considered a supporting and extending piece for the ‘A Little Dictionary of Censorship in Chinese Independent Film Exhibition’.

Furthermore, we invited independent documentary filmmaker He Yang 何杨 to write an article about his experiences and reflections as a director of human rights documentaries. Due to his work on human rights documentaries, he faced long-term repression in China and was eventually forced to emigrate to the United States. While his experiences are unique, they somewhat represent the journeys and experiences of some independent filmmakers who have left China in recent years. Zhang Zhanbo 张赞波, an independent documentary filmmaker and one of the editors of this issue, wrote about his memories of being censored and self-censoring after his first documentary *Falling from the Sky* (2009) came out, detailing how an independent documentary aiming to reveal the truth struggled to be seen. Through these first-hand

accounts, we wish to offer some vivid case studies for the study of China's film censorship. It is worth noting that both *Falling from the Sky* and He Yang's films are listed in 'An Incomplete List of Chinese Independent Films Missing from Douban.com', making these two articles complements of, and extensions to, that list.

We want to express our regret that, in the process of conceptualizing this special issue, we had originally intended to interview a censorship official or a related professional from within the censorship system, such as a film censor or a content reviewer from Douban. Our hope was to provide a perspective from within the system, different from that of the censored individuals mentioned above, to present a more comprehensive and balanced view of censorship. Unfortunately, due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the current political climate, we were unable to find a suitable interviewer from within the system, resulting in our inability to realize this plan.

In commemoration of the recently deceased director Wang Yunlong 王云龙—a rebellious wildflower that emerged from the cracks in the cement of the censorship system—we have dedicated a special section in his honour. This section includes his article 'Standing Alone', which he wrote in 2020 and revised in the final months before his passing while lying in a hospital bed, detailing his confrontations with the censorship system. Similar to the interviews with Ai Xiaoming and Li Xianting, this lengthy article presents a shocking and thought-provoking view of censorship, as well as the tenacious spirit of a filmmaker (and an activist) who 'fought like a trapped beast' in this situation. We believe this is an important text on censorship and independent filmmaking for future researchers and readers. In this section, we also include a memorial preface and an analysis of Wang Yunlong's documentary filmmaking career inside and outside the system, both written by the film scholar and one of the editors of this issue, Sabrina Qiong Yu 余琼, as well as a film review by Yu Huiming 余慧明 about Wang Yunlong's documentary *Dancer* 陪舞者 (2021), which is also included in the 'An Incomplete List of Chinese (including Hong Kong) Independent Films Missing from Douban.com.' Through these contributions, we pay tribute to Wang Yunlong whilst providing a more comprehensive and vivid case study of censorship and anti-censorship.

Independent filmmakers who focus on various historical events from the Mao era have faced the harshest censorship and suppression due to the sensitive nature of their subject matters. In the 'Academic Articles' section of this issue, Judith Pernin's lengthy article thoroughly and systematically examines this segment of independent filmmaking from various angles, such as shooting, narration, and editing techniques. The films discussed by her and compiled in her list 'Independent Documentaries on the Mao Era' include many titles that also appear in 'An Incomplete List of Chinese Independent Films Missing from Douban.com.' Her observation that these independent directors use visual imagery to resist historical amnesia and caution against repeating past mistakes resonates with the original intentions and objectives to engage in independent documentary filmmaking of Wang Yunlong, the featured filmmaker in the commemorative section of this issue.

Compiling film lists, editing dictionaries, conducting interviews, sharing personal experiences, writing film reviews and academic papers ... there are various ways to address film censorship, the 'elephant in the room'. Censorship is not limited to the film domain nor exclusively associated with independent cinema. We sincerely hope that the literature and pathways offered in this issue can inspire or help more researchers to pay attention to and explore this important topic.

Notes

- 1 Quoted from *The Collected Works of Lenin*, Volume 44, page 360-361.
- 2 Situ Huimin was a close friend of Dutch documentary master Joris Ivens. Ivens donated his own camera to the CCP during the Yan'an period, and this camera is referred to as the 'First Camera of the CCP.'
- 3 Quoted from 'No Hope for Literature and Art Under Too Much Control', *People's Daily*, October 8, 1980.
- 4 This article referenced Mao Zedong's instructions to Peng Zhen and Liu Ren on December 12, 1963, regarding issues in artistic work, as well as his remarks on June 27, 1964, in the draft report on the rectification work of the All-China Federation of Literature and Art.
- 5 Quoted from *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Volume 2, p.382.
- 6 In China, for a film to be produced and distributed legally, it must obtain official permission and acquire shooting and screening licenses issued by the film censorship department. The latter, featuring the logo of a golden dragon, is colloquially known as the 'dragon seal' and appears at the beginning of all films that have been approved and permitted for screening.
- 7 In 'Dialogue with National People's Congress Delegates and Film Director Jia Zhangke', featured in the Voice of China 'Two Session' special programme 'Representatives' edition 3 at Voice of China of China Media Group, Jia Zhangke discussed China's epidemic prevention measures, saying: 'Chinese people have always had a historical trauma, which was described in the past as a society without discipline, a scattered society. After the founding of New China, we reorganized society to make it organic, efficient, and with a complete social structure. After the COVID-19 pandemic, I feel that this social structure has been successful ... In a broad sense, we are demonstrating that everyone can maintain social order under scientific

principles and discipline. This is very difficult to achieve; we are a country with a population of over 1.4 billion...'. Quoted from a March 6, 2021 article on the China Media Group's website titled 'Jia Zhangke: Serving as a National People's Congress Delegate for Four Years, I Feel Energetic'.

8 See Wang Xiaolu's 王小鲁 article 'The Gradual Emergence of the Subjectivity: Twenty Years of Observation of Chinese Independent Documentaries' in *Film Art* 电影艺术, Issue 6, 2010, p.78.

9 A homophone of the Russian word 'samizdat', which refers to underground publications as well as secret writing, printing, and distribution of banned works.

10 The independent films directed by Wei Tie include the documentaries *Yellow Stone Avenue* 黄石大道 (2001) and *Fairy Tales of the World* 人间童话 (2009), and the fiction film *Faraway* 远离 (2006).

11 Quoted from a report on February 24, 2018 on the China Media Group's website titled 'Showcasing the Development and Achievements since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: *Amazing China* to Be Released Soon.'