

to “exist outside history” (p. 183). Attention is drawn to the dark “shot” of the reluctant Qing official which opened the book and was, and is ever-increasingly, historicized.

This book is beautifully written in language that is accessible. It is a fantastic model for the combination of image and text in academic publishing, and it could therefore be of value to scholars who use or aspire to use images in their work, as well as to students of Chinese history, politics and art at all levels.

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Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street, by Luke Robinson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. viii + 198 pp. £50.00/US\$115.00 (hardcover).

At the heart of this book is the theme of *xianchang* as contingency, providing the focus for Luke Robinson’s investigation of what characterizes and differentiates the films of independent Chinese documentary directors during the 1990s. So what is *xianchang*? According to Robinson, it is part of the *vérité* aesthetic of a new film practice that emerged in response to the studio productions in the dogmatic-formula mode of the Mao period, and the post-Mao state media system. *Xianchang*, then, challenges studio-based film-making by shifting the emphasis to location-shooting in identifiable, actual places, the here-and-now of filmed subjects, the quality of accidentality, variability and, ultimately, the uncontrollability of what is to be represented. Robinson gradually refines his explication of *xianchang* as he explores various stages and modes of Chinese documentary practice as the production of a differentiated and yet cohesive body of cinema.

Following the Introduction, where Robinson states his main thesis and its proposed elaboration, Chapter 1, “Mapping Independent Chinese Documentary”, grants us an overview of the theorization of the “New Documentary Movement” in both China and the West. This includes generous acknowledgments of the investigative work that has already been done, while at the same justifying why Robinson has opted for the label “independent Chinese documentary” in contrast to the standard account, in which it is known as the “New Documentary Movement”. This serves his aim of teasing out salient differences in the practices of independent documentary directors. Each of the following four chapters addresses a specific manifestation of *xianchang* as representation of the contingencies of the scene, its here-and-now, and the intensely personal, in contrast to the predilection of generalities favored by the state studio system. In arguing for this fundamental difference, Chapter 2, “Metaphor and Event”, discusses the

disparity between the *public* and *private* documentary, the former addressing such broad themes as the “greater social and political good”, the latter preferring an introspective attention to “the fate of the individual”. This, Robinson claims, constitutes a radical shift from earlier documentaries, not only in the sense that those collective concerns are now replaced by an emphasis on the individual, but also in that the celebration of the private no longer resonates with a socialist vocabulary characteristic of a specific, political culture. This shift leads him to ask whether “perhaps the genre is proof that a post-socialist Chinese interiority is coming to fruition” (p. 39). The chapter then turns to three detailed case studies demonstrating their common character of “preserving the open-endedness of the profilmic” and the “accidental, unexpected and uncontrollable” nature of documenting actual events by employing “visceral signifiers of material reality’s unpredictability” (p. 67). At the same time, the “shift from the metaphorical to the particular” allows the director to address the specifics of filmic space, such as the demise of an industrial complex, together with the intensely personal. In this sense, the *xianchang* aesthetic of independent documentaries is argued to be, not so much a rejection of political messages, as a way of letting such messages emerge from the particular. This shifting of the form of communicating messages, Robinson suggests, indicates a broader theme, one that reflects a “clear post-socialist sensibility” which “permeates Chinese society” as a whole (p. 72).

The focus of Chapter 3, “Time, Space and Movement”, is a further differentiation of the meaning of the *xianchang* aesthetic of post-1989 independent documentary film in China. Making reference to Deleuze’s “distended temporality”, Robinson claims that a group of documentaries announce disenchantment with Western as well as Chinese narratives of progress. The cinematographic tool that best serves the filmic realization of this new sense of time is identified as the *long-take*. Robinson illustrates this claim by investigating three versions of the long-take aesthetic: the traditional, teleological use of time in the *zhuantipian*, *River Elegy*; the unfolding in real-time in *At Home in the World*; and the excessive long-take, combined with a minimization of camera movement, in the documentary *In Public*. Having invoked the Deleuzian theorization of cinema to address the topic of time, half-way through the chapter Robinson concedes that the notions of “movement-image” and “time-image” may not be quite as fruitful for the analysis of Chinese documentaries as one might expect. Other issues are shown to play a more tangible role in the documentary treatment of temporality, such as technological innovations providing greater camera mobility. What these films do convey, Robinson insists, is that *xianchang* has undergone yet further and more complex transformations as cinematic praxis.

Chapter 4 addresses ethics via the representation of the queer subject, embodiment and the emergence of queer directors. Wary of the potential for degradation in the filming of the marginal body, Robinson discusses a new generation of queer directors who are able to do justice to “disidentification” by which queer

subjects “appropriate a cultural form that might otherwise exclude or even denigrate them” (p. 127). Here, *xianchang* serves to blur distinctions between subject and director, and so create a new sense of liveness. Chapter 5, “Sound and Voice”, explores *xianchang* in terms of the mediation of the *talking head*. Uncontrollable off-screen sound, the director’s embedded voice of prompting, and the timbre of the voice of the filmed subject speaking directly to the camera—in short, the voice of the *laobaixing*—are shown to conspire in the production of a quality of mediated immediacy as a reality effect. Once again, Robinson points to the role played in this evolution by the “popularization of the digital” (p. 151). In a brief Conclusion, he reviews his argument as a refinement of the concept of *vérité* realism. Indeed, the focus on *xianchang* as contingency makes us see these films as a diversified and yet cohesive body of cinema, as well as nudging us to notice their relation to the broader theme of capitalist modernization. The book is a must for all readers interested in Chinese cinema and documentary film in general.

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Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China,
by Rossella Ferrari. London: Seagull Books, 2012. xviii + 365 pp. Rs595.00/
US\$24.00 (paperback).

Published writings about avant-garde theatre in China have been limited in scope and much about the field remains critically unexamined. Rosella Ferrari’s book marks a substantial and innovative step forward in redressing this problem, filling an important gap in our knowledge with a compelling and fluent account that will be of benefit to scholars in a range of disciplines.

The book is devoted to the exploration of what Ferrari calls a new theoretical construct for understanding experimental theatre and drama in contemporary China, namely the “pop avant-garde”. She uses this term to describe the melding of experimental theatre with elements of popular culture and the post-reform forces of marketization in which “avant-garde artists and cultural producers were not discouraged by these new developments but, rather, made deliberate use of their ties with both institutions and capital to intervene actively and constructively in such change and articulate alternative modes of creativity and resistance” (p. 91). As she comments, “the pop avant-garde as theorized in this volume is rather an attempt to take a more dialectical position in regard to recent aesthetic and cultural debates and disentangle theoretical quagmires by considering the progressive potential that some meaningful and select popular phenomena may offer to high cultural constructs in the contemporary age” (pp. 18–19). In doing

@article{Zhou2015IndependentCD, title={Independent Chinese Documentary: From the studio to the street, by LUKE ROBINSON}, author={Kui Zhou}, journal={Chinese Journal of Communication}, year={2015}, volume={8}, pages={323-326} }. Kui Zhou. Published 2015. Sociology. Chinese Journal of Communication. View via Publisher. Save to Library. Create Alert. Cite. Independent Chinese Documentary Luke Robinson Springer 9780230298293 : The rise of independent documentary film production is the most radical development in the contemporary Chinese mediascap.Â Indeed, this is not confined to Chinese national history. In stark contrast to the earlier self-centred preoccupation with Chinese history, there has been an upsurge in interest in foreign history, with a view to illuminating Chinaâ€™s role not only in world history, but also on the global stage today, and in the future. This book examines three recent Chinese documentary television series which present 'Luke Robinson's Independent Chinese Documentary is the first monograph in English on this crucial cultural movement. Robinson sustains a beautifully clear argument for spontaneity and contingency as the key elements that make independent documentary the cultural response to China's shift from socialist planning to citizen initiatives. Rigorously researched, it covers the entire twenty years of independent Chinese documentary in sophisticated yet lucid detail.' - Chris Berry, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. Show all.