



**EXPERIENCES, ISSUES, AND CHALLENGES OF CHINESE  
INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY, FILMMAKERS IN THE PRODUCTION  
OF CHINESE INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY FILMS**

By

**WANG ANTING**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**August 2024**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment  
of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chinese independent documentary films have become vital in reflecting social realities and cultural diversity in China. However, they still lack recognition and support from both the government and the mainstream film industry. Since 2012, successive closures of three major independent film festivals have deepened the crisis in independent film production and distribution. The official termination of the China Independent Film Festival (CIFF) in 2020 highlights the significant challenges these filmmakers face, including limited opportunities, political restrictions, funding difficulties, and distribution barriers. These obstacles have made it difficult for Chinese independent documentaries to gain exposure, prompting filmmakers to develop strategies to overcome these difficulties. This qualitative phenomenological study, grounded in Auteur Theory and Framing Theory, explores the key characteristics of Chinese independent documentary development from 2012 to 2022 in amidst restrictive policies and a rapidly changing social environment. It examines the survival status, unique challenges, and strategies employed by filmmakers during

this period. The study was conducted in cities such as Beijing, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Xiamen, and Changsha, with a purposive sampling of 22 experienced independent documentary filmmakers and practitioners, each with more than a decade of experience. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and field notes, followed by thematic analysis using NVivo 14. By expanding on Auteur Theory, this study highlights the collaborative roles of stakeholders such as producers, curators, and critics in shaping the distinctive features of Chinese independent documentaries and aiding their dissemination. Additionally, it deepens the understanding of how framing theory conceptualizes the challenges filmmakers face, offering insight into necessary strategies. The study identified 14 themes and 43 sub-themes, revealing the unique style, challenges, and strategies of Chinese independent documentaries. The findings underscore the critical role these documentaries play as tools for self-expression, despite limited opportunities and external pressures. Research also highlights issues related to film quality, creative mindset, and ethics, which present ongoing challenges for the industry. The study concludes that strategic collaboration, innovation, and a gradual shift in attitudes toward limited commercial investment are essential for the sustainable development of Chinese independent documentaries. Balancing creative autonomy with market adaptation is key to ensuring their continued growth and impact.

**Keywords:** Auteur Theory, Balancing Commercialism and Autonomy, Chinese Independent Documentary Films, Co-production Collaboration, Film Censorship Policies

**SDG:** GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PENGALAMAN, ISU DAN CABARAN PEMBIKIN FILEM DOKUMENTARI  
BEBAS CINA DALAM PENGHASILAN FILEM DOKUMENTARI BEBAS  
CHINA**

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Filem dokumentari bebas Cina telah menjadi penting dalam mencerminkan realiti sosial dan kepelbagaian budaya di China. Namun, mereka masih kekurangan pengiktirafan dan sokongan daripada kerajaan dan industri filem arus perdana. Sejak tahun 2012, penutupan berturut-turut tiga festival filem bebas utama telah memperdalam krisis dalam pengeluaran dan pendedaran filem bebas. Penamatan rasmi Festival Filem Bebas China (CIFF) pada tahun 2020 menonjolkan cabaran besar yang dihadapi oleh para pengeluar filem ini, termasuk peluang yang terhad, sekatan politik, kesukaran pembiayaan, dan halangan pendedaran. Halangan ini telah menyukarkan dokumentari bebas Cina untuk mendapat pendedahan, mendorong pembuat filem untuk mengembangkan strategi bagi mengatasi kesukaran ini. Penyelidikan fenomenologi kualitatif ini, yang berasaskan Teori Auteur dan Teori Framing, meneroka ciri-ciri utama pembangunan dokumentari bebas Cina dari 2012 hingga 2022 di tengah-tengah dasar sekatan dan persekitaran sosial yang berpaksi kepada dasar-dasar kerajaan di China yang berkaitan dengan penerbitan dokumentari. Penyelidikan ini mengkaji status

kelangsungan, cabaran unik, dan strategi yang digunakan oleh para pembuat filem dalam tempoh ini. Penyelidikan ini dijalankan di bandar-bandar seperti Beijing, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Xiamen, dan Changsha, dengan pensampelan bertujuan daripada 22 pembuat filem dokumentari bebas yang berpengalaman dan pengamal, masing-masing dengan pengalaman lebih dari satu dekad. Data dikumpulkan melalui temu bual mendalam dan nota lapangan, diikuti dengan analisis tematik menggunakan NVivo 14. Dengan memperluaskan Teori Auteur, Penyelidikan ini menonjolkan peranan kolaboratif pihak berkepentingan seperti pengeluar, kurator, dan pengkritik dalam membentuk ciri-ciri khas dokumentari bebas Cina dan membantu penyebarannya. Selain itu, ia memperdalam pemahaman tentang bagaimana teori framing mengkonsepsikan cabaran yang dihadapi oleh pembuat filem, menawarkan pandangan mengenai strategi yang diperlukan. Penyelidikan ini mengenal pasti 14 tema dan 43 sub-tema, mendedahkan gaya unik, cabaran, dan strategi dokumentari bebas Cina. Penemuan ini menekankan peranan kritikal dokumentari ini sebagai alat untuk ekspresi diri, walaupun dengan peluang yang terhad dan tekanan luaran. Penyelidikan juga menonjolkan isu-isu berkaitan dengan kualiti filem, pemikiran kreatif, dan etika, yang menjadi cabaran berterusan bagi industri ini. Penyelidikan ini menyimpulkan bahawa kolaborasi strategik, inovasi, dan peralihan sikap secara beransur-ansur terhadap pelaburan komersial yang terhad adalah penting untuk pembangunan lestari dokumentari bebas Cina. Mengimbangi autonomi kreatif dengan penyesuaian pasaran adalah kunci untuk memastikan pertumbuhan dan kesan mereka yang berterusan.

**Kata kunci:** Dasar Penapisan Filem, Filem Dokumentari Bebas China, Kolaborasi Penerbitan Bersama, Mengimbangi Komersialisme dan Autonomi, Teori Auteur

**SDG:** MATLAMAT 12: Penggunaan dan Pengeluaran yang Bertanggungjawab

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACFF	Annual Copenhagen Film Festival
BIFF	Beijing Independent Film festival
CCD	Caochangdi Workstation
CDFE	The China Documentary Film Festival
CIFF	China Independent Film Festival
HKIFF	Hong Kong International Film Festival
IDF	The West Lake International Documentary Festival
IDFA	International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film and Television
YunFest	Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the study and the concept of Chinese independent documentary films. The discussions in the chapter focus more on discussing the latest situation of the independent documentary films in China, some discussions on the statement of the problem, research questions, research objectives, significance of the study, scope, and some definitions of key concepts that are significant to the study.

### 1.2 Background of the Study

Film is an important and popular cultural product. As a genre, documentaries can have important social and political consequences (Collebrusco, 2012). The image of a documentary serves as a symbol and a medium of information transmission, allowing people to re-understand the real world through its portrayal of life (Zhang, 2018). A well-known American documentary filmmaker Wiseman Frederick once discussed that a documentary is a metaphor for social problems. This kind of idea has been influencing the filmmaker's image thinking and image production (Minich, 2008).

According to the similarities and differences between mass media, documentaries appear in front of the public in two main forms, such as documentary films and TV

documentaries. Likewise, Chinese documentaries have always existed in these two different forms (Li *et al.*, 2020). In retrospect, Chinese early documentaries have always played the role of political propaganda. Later, TV documentaries added entertainment elements, gained public recognition, and won ratings, but they were still preaching. It was not until the emergence of the Chinese independent documentary film in the early 1990s that this television tradition was completely broken (Shen, 2015).

One of the most striking features of the Chinese film scene since the 1990s has been the rise of independent documentary films and the simultaneously emergence of independent film festivals in which these documentaries are screened (Robinson & Chio, 2013). Many scholars believe that the definition of independent documentary is “independent create” or “independent spirit”. The independent spirit is the core and soul of independent documentary films. This is the author’s expression (Jiang, 2012; Shen, 2015; Gao, 2015; Bertozzi, 2016)). Chinese independent filmmaker Wenhai once said that an independent documentary is the author’s critical reflection on current social issues (Duan, 2005). Mei and Zhu (2004) argued that the key to independent documentary creation lay in how the authors viewed the society in which they lived and how they made a connection with society.

Furthermore, Chinese independent documentary films have played an important role in Chinese media culture. It is both the product and the criticism of the post-socialist reality of China (Zhang, 2004). To a large extent, Chinese independent documentaries emphasize the author's personality and the significance of independence. This means that most independent filmmakers attempt to distance themselves from the mainstream

discourse and pay attention to the reality of China and the emotional appeal of vulnerable groups from a bottom-up perspective. These are all blind spots in the traditional mainstream discourse documentary (Lv, 2003). However, this may lead to confrontation from supporters of China's official ideology (Pickowicz & Zhang, 2006).

In January 2020, the China Independent Film Festival (CIFF) was closed indefinitely. CIFF has been one of the largest platforms for Chinese independent films, screening around 1,000 films, including fiction film and documentary film (Guo & Zhang, 2020). Established in 2003 in Nanjing, it has been staged 14 times since then. Most films focused on sensitive topics such as the Cultural Revolution, vagrants, HIV patients, migrants, from the Three Gorges area, environmental problems and women's lives (Nornes, 2019).

With the announcement of the suspension of the *China Independent Film Festival* (CIFF), the three most influential independent film festivals in China have all come to an end (Guo & Zhang, 2020). This includes the Yunnan Multi-Culture Visual Festival (YunFest): Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) and China Independent Film Festival (CIFF). Before the Chinese government disconnected the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2012, CIFF was successful for a brief period. After that, strict censorship followed and these independent documentary films went underground as they lacked the requisite government censorship approval for public screening (Zhou, 2015).

For Wang (2022), today's independent documentary works are actually much closer to people's social lives and experiences from the perspective of content. Scholar Zhang Xianmin also insisted that independent documentaries have changed significantly, with increasingly documentary filmmakers focusing on their own personal issues. It will become more personal in its expression, a form of personal cinema. Additionally, its dissemination method also has a certain instant; it may be deleted on the Internet at any time, so it is difficult for some viewers to watch these kinds of films (Wang, 2007).

Under these circumstances, what will happen to the entire ecology of independent documentary film? The purpose of the present research is to explore the status quo of independent documentary films in China. The study of the documentary independent film is of great significance, as it demonstrates the richness and complexities of Chinese society and maintains the diversity of opinion and dissent.

### **1.3 Statement of Problem**

Chinese independent documentaries serve as a means of expressing social reality and cultural diversity, playing an increasingly significant role in the development of Chinese society (Tong, 2019; Zhang, 2004). Moving beyond their previous function as carriers of high-density information and ideas, independent documentaries now embody a deeper social function and role, becoming iconic symbols that reflect social change and human destiny (Edwards, 2015). By documenting real social phenomena and individual destinies, documentaries provide viewers with a more realistic and profound understanding, expanding their perspectives and enriching their minds. Moreover, documentaries offer a platform for their directors and creators to convey

their thoughts and attitudes, guiding viewers to contemplate social issues and individual destinies while promoting the sharing of ideas and the renewal of concepts among the public.

Although independent documentaries in China are playing an increasingly important role in society, the mainstream film industry and the government of China still lack recognition and support for these films (Robinson & Chio, 2013), and have been marginalized and excluded by the political and social establishment (Edwards, 2015; Berry, 2008). Chinese independent documentary filmmakers face significant obstacles in terms of censorship and regulation, limiting their ability to produce and distribute their work both domestically and internationally. The restrictions imposed by policies have put significant pressure on the development of independent documentaries.

In 2004, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued the *Regulations on the Broadcasting of DV Productions via TV Stations, Cinemas, Film Festivals or Exhibitions, and the Internet*, setting up a legal framework for government oversight over the public exhibition of films and digital video works. This regulatory environment, while seemingly preserving market diversity, subtly began to limit the creative freedoms essential for independent filmmaking (Zhou, 2015). The condition worsened in 2011 with the release of a draught of the *Film Industry Promotion Law by the State Council*, which significantly increased creative restrictions on independent filmmakers (Ma, 2015). This legislative change stifled the diversity and richness of independent documentary production and highlighted the growing challenges faced by this sector. The mounting restrictions have resulted in a notable decline in the production and visibility of independent documentaries, sparking serious concerns

over the erosion of artistic freedom and the homogenization of cultural narratives. These trends are in sharp contrast to the need for a dynamic independent film industry, one that is capable of exploring diverse perspectives and challenging societal norms. In 2016, the new Film Law (People's Republic of China, 2016) stipulated that film production, distribution, viewing, and other activities related to film and other motion pictures without the permission of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television are illegal. This new regulation places the legitimacy of film production as the top priority. However, as independent filmmaker Li Yifan and researcher Zhang Xianmin have pointed out, the implementation of this regulation is very difficult, and the standard for determining whether a film is legally qualified is still unclear (Fan, 2019).

However, it cannot be denied that China's regulatory framework continues to pose huge obstacles to its production and distribution. The regulations issued by the China Netcasting Services Association in June 2017 attempted to ban online content that features sensitive topics. Therefore, all forms of free expression that can be considered to undermine social harmony or challenge the political hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party can be restricted or blocked (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). Based on these political influences, many independent documentaries face censorship and suppression in their distribution and promotion, preventing these works from being disseminated and resonating with a larger audience.

While Chinese independent documentary films have gained critical acclaim for their artistic and political significance, there is still a lack of understanding and awareness of these films among the public, both within China and internationally. The same level

of attention and distribution as commercial films is often not given to these films by mainstream audiences (Yu, 2016). There are several potential reasons for this lack of awareness and understanding. One factor is the relative scarcity of independent documentary films in comparison to commercial films in China, making it more difficult for these films to gain widespread exposure. Additionally, the subject matter of many independent documentaries, which often touch on sensitive social and political issues, can make them less appealing to mainstream audiences or subject them to government censorship. Another potential reason for the lack of awareness and understanding of Chinese independent documentaries is the lack of international distribution and exposure. Although many of these films have been critically acclaimed at film festivals and have received international recognition, they may not be widely available or accessible outside of these contexts (Shen, 2015).

Subsequently, Chinese grassroots film festivals no longer present the words “grassroots” and “independent”, and independent films face an identity crisis (Yuan, 2022). This is because independent filmmakers and stakeholders in China always face a tense relationship between attempting to mediate film policies and censorship, institutional policies, and individual filming and exhibiting rights (Tong, 2019). Since the announcement of the end of the three major independent film festivals, this ongoing challenge may become more apparent in the development of independent documentaries in China. In the face of a continuous stream of restrictive policies and unfavorable circumstances, what characteristics have emerged in the development of Chinese independent documentary films? What is the living situation of the filmmakers of Chinese independent documentary films and what methods will they adopt to cope with these new changes? This is a question worthy of exploration.

Notably, studies by Du (2012), Yu (2014), and Yu and Wen (2017) indicate that Chinese independent documentaries possess a significant awareness and function of auteur theory. However, there are several gaps and criticisms of the auteur theory. One of these criticisms is the exclusion of collaborative efforts. While auteur theory emphasizes the role of the director as the primary author of a film, it often overlooks the contributions of other creative professionals, such as screenwriters, editors, cinematographers, and actors (Lackey, 2019). This limitation can hinder the analysis of the artistic merit and impact of a film on society. Another criticism of the auteur theory is that it originated in Western cinema and few account for cultural differences and varying film production practices in other regions, such as China (Lim, 2007). Therefore, using auteur theory as a theoretical background to study the issues surrounding Chinese independent documentaries can effectively bridge this gap.

Besides, using the auteur theory as a lens to examine the collaborative efforts of independent filmmakers in China. Rather than focusing solely on the director, the researcher could consider the contributions of other creative professionals, such as screenwriters, editors, and cinematographers, to the overall artistic success of a film. This could help shed light on the collaborative nature of filmmaking in China and challenge the notion of the director as the sole “author” of a film (Lackey, 2019). Therefore, combining the auteur theory with Chinese independent documentary film research has the potential to provide new insights into the creative process of independent filmmakers in China and the unique challenges they face in a highly restrictive and censored environment.

Additionally, there remains a gap in using specific theories to explain the development, issues, and solutions of Chinese independent documentaries. On the basis of these studies, it can be confirmed that this gap exists both in theory and in practice. In identifying problems, making assumptions, and proposing solutions, the communication theory often used is the framing theory, as it can be an effective mobilization tool to motivate and instigate people to change (Coburn, 2006). However, there is little research on the application of framing analysis in film studies, which requires further exploration (Lin, 2016).

It is worth noting that much of the research on Chinese independent documentaries has been conducted from a secondary data perspective or using quantitative deductive methods (eg., Liu & Jin, 2017; Si & Lai, 2019; Tan & Yu, 2012), or from a qualitative analysis of a single dimension of independent works' distribution (e.g., Yuan, 2022). As a result, the existing research has failed to fully explore the specific impacts of the challenges and coping experiences faced by Chinese independent creators after 2012. Therefore, methodologically, it is necessary to delve into the problems and challenges faced by Chinese independent documentaries after 2012 from a qualitative inductive perspective to gain insights into the experiences of independent filmmakers, curators, audiences, and other stakeholders facing these challenges.

Among the regulatory and social challenges, a critical gap has been identified in the literature on the salient characteristics that define Chinese independent documentaries from 2012 to 2022 and the strategies filmmakers employ to navigate the complex landscape of censorship and suppression. Despite the recognized artistic and political significance of these works, the strategies utilized by independent filmmakers to

address and surmount these obstacles have not been adequately documented or understood. This lack of comprehensive insight into the creative and operational dynamics of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking underscores a significant research gap. It raises pertinent questions about the intrinsic qualities that enable these documentaries to resonate with audiences under restrictive conditions and the innovative approaches filmmakers adopt to ensure their narratives reach both domestic and international audiences. Investigating these aspects is crucial for a thorough understanding of the resilience and adaptability of the independent documentary sector in China, shedding light on the broader implications for artistic expression and cultural discourse in a tightly controlled media environment.

Furthermore, the challenges and issues encountered by Chinese independent documentaries not only underscore the need for a deeper exploration of their characteristics and filmmakers' strategies, but also represent a focal point of this research. These challenges, ranging from censorship and financial constraints to limited distribution channels and international exposure, critically impact the production, dissemination, and reception of independent documentaries. Addressing these issues is essential for understanding the current state and future prospects of the independent documentary sector in China, as well as for identifying potential pathways for its development and sustainability in a restrictive environment.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The gaps identified in the literature have guided the formation of research questions, expanding the scope of challenges faced by Chinese independent documentary

filmmakers. Most existing studies focus on film analysis, textual analysis, or single aspects such as distribution or censorship, lacking comprehensive research on the complex and dynamic processes involved in the creation, dissemination, and transformation of these documentaries. Specifically, few studies integrate the creative and distribution challenges, the tension between commercial and artistic goals, and the broader socio-political context in which these filmmakers operate. This study aims to explore how the salient characteristics of Chinese independent documentaries from 2012 to 2022 are manifested, how these characteristics frame the issues and challenges they face, and how filmmakers develop strategies to respond within a restrictive environment. This integrated approach not only addresses the immediate challenges, but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the resilience and adaptability of the Chinese independent documentary sector. Therefore, this study investigates the following questions in light of the problem statement.

1. How have the salient characteristics of Chinese independent documentary films been manifested from 2012 to 2022?
2. How do Chinese independent documentaries frame their issues and challenges from 2012 to 2022?
3. How do independent documentary filmmakers develop strategies to respond to the issues and challenges encountered from 2012 to 2022?

## **1.5 Research Objectives**

The general objective of this study is to explore the experiences, issues and challenges in the development of Chinese Independent documentary films from 2012 to 2022.

### **1.5.1 Specific objectives**

1. To define the salient characteristics of Chinese independent documentary films manifested from 2012 to 2022.
2. To determine the representation of issues and challenges within Chinese independent documentaries from 2012 to 2022.
3. To explore the strategies developed by independent documentary filmmakers in response to the challenges and issues faced from 2012 to 2022.

## **1.6 Significance of Study**

This section provides a detailed overview of the study's significance across various dimensions, including policy, theoretical, methodological, and practical aspects. Each of these areas highlights the potential impact and contributions of the research.

### **1.6.1 Policy Significance**

This study is significant as it contains implications for policymakers. It can help the government of China to understand the content of independent documentary film. This study helps the government of China relax its censorship strategies a little bit to enrich Chinese film content and it has a positive guiding significance for the development of independent documentaries in China. More importantly, it can enhance the variety of Chinese films.

As a matter of fact, in the entire documentary industry in China, it seems that the area within and outside the system or at the border between non-governmental and governmental agencies appears to be more creative. This is because they operate with fewer restrictions than the creators that are within the official system. Furthermore, they also have a certain professionalism and quality of self-reflection (Mei & Zhu, 2004).

This is an important development because Chinese documentary films have evolved; as technology advances, the interrelationships and interdependencies between the two sides become more complex and increasingly interesting as a focus for future research in the field of documentary filmmaking. Therefore, it is hoped that this study becomes the original reason or creative spark for the government to take independent documentary filmmakers seriously, giving them the recognition they deserve and considering them for a less-regulated level of censorship.

### **1.6.2 Theoretical Significance**

This study combines auteur theory and framing theory, aiming to augment the development of auteur theory in the domain of film studies and to bolster the interpretative strength of framing theory in cinematic analysis. Previous studies have consistently portrayed auteur theory as a subject of perpetual critique and evolution, frequently highlighting the director's paramount control. Nonetheless, the synergy between the director and diverse stakeholders throughout the filmmaking process is pivotal for enduring advancement. In this context, delving into the theoretical significance of auteur theory within the milieu of Chinese independent creative

endeavors and ascertaining the theoretical ramifications of potential directorial authority are deemed crucial. The outcomes of this study shed light on the applicability and relevance of auteur theory in the sphere of Chinese independent creative practices. Moreover, this investigation deepens the theoretical discourse and advancement of framing theory within the scope of film studies. A prevalent contention among scholars is that framing theory does not represent a fully-fledged theoretical framework, owing to its absence of a standardized set of analytical methodologies and a lack of consensus. This study navigates the intersections of mass communication, sociology, and cinematography, thereby enriching the theoretical underpinnings and fortifying the role of framing theory in film studies. The findings of this research are anticipated to unveil novel insights into the comprehension of auteur theory, specifically within the parameters of this study. Such insights are poised to significantly contribute to the ongoing evolution of auteur theory. Importantly, the discoveries of this research endeavor are expected to make a substantial contribution to the expanding body of literature on the communication phenomena under investigation. A detailed elaboration on framing theory and auteur theory is provided in the literature review section.

### **1.6.3 Methodological Significance**

Methodologically, this research employed a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews. The primary focus will be on middle-aged and adult independent documentary filmmakers, curators, and stakeholders, ranging in age from 32 to 65 years. These individuals are poised to offer significant insights into the core characteristics, challenges, and issues faced by Chinese independent documentaries

since 2012. As creators and stakeholders in the field of independent documentaries, their responses on how they address challenges encountered in the development process will be pivotal. Additionally, they are expected to provide analyses and insights on enhancing sustainable distribution, direction, and the future prospects of independent creation. The successful addressing and answering of all posed questions will undoubtedly enrich and contribute to the knowledge base of the research topic.

In adopting this approach, the qualitative method facilitates an exploration of the phenomenon from a subjective perspective, enabling the researcher to engage closely with the subjects and interact with them. This interaction aims to elicit in-depth opinions based on their experiences (Rahman, 2020; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Therefore, this study adopts a methodology that garners first-hand information about the challenges and issues faced by renowned and experienced independent creators and industry practitioners. The objective of this research is to comprehensively understand the development of Chinese independent documentaries within their specific social context.

#### **1.6.4 Practical significance**

This study, through qualitative research capturing the production practice process of independent documentary filmmakers, aims to enhance practical knowledge about contemporary independent documentary films and establish a database of experiential knowledge. This research holds particular value and significance for independent documentary filmmakers, directors, film scholars, policymakers, and professionals in the broadcasting industry. By gaining a deeper understanding of the characteristics and

challenges of independent documentaries, these groups can more effectively address challenges in the creation and distribution process while providing valuable insights and guidance for the development of the Chinese film industry. Additionally, this study contributes significantly to increasing public awareness and appreciation of independent documentaries, thereby promoting cultural diversity and social understanding.

The findings of this study provide specific practical measures for practitioners, such as documentary film producers and directors, aiding them in more effectively addressing challenges in the creation and distribution process. Additionally, these findings offer insights to policymakers on how to create a better film production environment and atmosphere, supporting the development of independent documentaries. This study hopes to make a positive contribution to realism in the broadcasting industry, particularly in the production of documentaries in China.

## **1.7 Scope**

The exploration of independent documentary films has consistently been a focal point in academic circles (Fan, 2013). This study specifically concentrates on Chinese independent documentary films released since 2012 that have garnered awards at domestic film festivals, notably the China Independent Film Festival (CIFF), Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival (YunFest), and the West Lake International Documentary Festival (IDF). Despite their production, these documentaries remain prohibited from screening in Chinese cinemas and mainstream media channels, leaving many of them relatively unknown to the general audience. Consequently, the

development of independent documentaries outside the mainstream media system forms the crux of this research. Importantly, the study zeroes in on the filmmaking aspect of independent documentaries. The primary focus is on mainland Chinese independent documentary filmmakers and their seminal works, while filmmakers from Hong Kong and Taiwan are not the central subjects of this research. The sample of interviewees encompasses directors, curators, producers, and other relevant stakeholders in the field.

## **1.8 Definition of Terms**

The key terms and concepts used in this study are defined as follows:

### **1.8.1 Film**

The film is a mass communication medium in the form of a series of motion pictures taken from moving objects and presented in a continuous movement of events that serves as a medium of entertainment, education, and information (Prayoga *et al.*, 2020). The definition of film and film genres is inherently flexible, evolving in response to societal shifts, technological progress, and artistic innovation. This evolution has given rise to new storytelling methods and visual representations, making the film a dynamic and ever-changing field (Chakraborty & Bhattacharjee, 2022). Consequently, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction films remains fluid, facilitating a dynamic interaction between these two categories (Matthews & Glitre, 2021). For example, in western research discourse, film includes fiction film, non-fiction, and documentary film. In other words, in western research discourse,

feature film and documentary are both considered films. However, in Chinese studies and theoretical systems, it is customary to assume that the word “film” refers only to fiction film (Jiang, 2012). As it is used in this study, the researcher focuses on non-fiction films.

### 1.8.2 Documentary

The word documentary stems from the Latin word “docere,” meaning to teach or direct (Juel, 2006). However, it is important to note that John Gleeson coined the phrase in film studies. Within film history, the term documentary has subsequently been given more concepts. For example, the documentary film originally concentrates on the social significance and is connected with “reality” (Cheng, 2016). At this point, it is a necessary condition for non-fiction film (documentary) as “facts” and “truth” (Juel, 2006).

Furthermore, the scholar Nichols (2017) supplement this point, “The term of documentary must itself be constructed in much the same manner as the world we know and share”. Primarily, documentaries in China are often defined as non-fictional images (Li, 2007; Berry *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, this study explores how the real world around the filmmaker is recorded. Most documentary filmmakers take up the tradition of the photograph’s truth claim – the camera cannot lie (Beattie, 2004). This point of view has also deeply influenced the shooting concept of Chinese documentaries in the post-production period (China’s New Documentary Movement) (Gillette, 2012). Likewise, the camera reproduces an image of the real world, creating an impression of authenticity that other art forms cannot replicate.

### **1.8.3 Independent film/Independent documentary**

Independent film, also known as indie cinema, encompasses films produced outside the Hollywood mainstream. The roots of independent cinema trace back to the 1950s, a time when repertory cinemas showcased European art films to an audience of cinephiles. This era catalyzed aspiring filmmakers to venture beyond the commercial sector, fostering a movement defined by artistic autonomy and creative freedom (Tzioumakis, 2017; King, 2014). Independent films and documentaries stand out because they operate outside of the traditional studio system and are unrestricted by conventional commercialism (Baugh, 2012).

In contrast to the Western context, independent films in China are defined as creations outside the institutional framework, facing restrictions that prevent their public exhibition in cinemas. This limitation often stems from the films' engagement with topics considered sensitive within Chinese society (Yang, 2011). Moreover, there is a notable distinction between independent documentaries in China and their Western counterparts (Zhang, 2006). While the terms are synonymous in Western academia, they are mutually exclusive within the Chinese academic discourse (Jiang, 2012).

### **1.8.4 Chinese independent documentary film**

Independent documentary film in China refers to documentary images that have not been approved by the authorities or broadcast on mainstream media channels (Zhan & Yin, 2007; Viviani, 2014). The concept of 'outside the state system' refers to the system out of the image management, production, and broadcasting that is outside of

the authority of the national management authority (Jiang, 2012). Within the context of this study, the term “independent” should be construed as a relational term. Therefore, the independent documentaries in China defined by this study were created by individuals outside of that system. This is also an important aspect of this study. Zhan and Yin (2007) outlined three methods to assess the independence of Chinese independent cinema: (1) Its distinction from the mainstream system in terms of “identity”; (2) The independence of its financing sources from the conventional system; (3) The “legitimacy” of its production and distribution processes. As societal and cultural dynamics shift, the criteria for its evaluation are also complex and variable.

### **1.8.5 New Documentary Movement**

The New Documentary Movement in China appeared to be an inevitable Chinese independent documentary historical event (Cheng, 2016). It was a spontaneous appearance of Chinese independent documentary-making activities only started in the early of 1990s. Previously, the independent documentary film did not exist in China (Gillette, 2012). In fact, the term of New Documentary Movement was first proposed by the scholar Lü Xinyu, especially referring to the description of the phenomenon of new documentaries produced on both inside and outside of the boundary defined by the state system in the early to late 1990s (Lv, 2003; Berry *et al.*, 2010). More so, he claimed that the main purpose of the new documentary movement is to make a clear division between documentaries and documentary TV films (Mei & Zhu, 2004). Significantly, Chinese independent documentary style offers an attempt to resist documentary TV films (Zhang, 2004).

### **1.8.6 Independent Film Festivals**

Influenced by censorship constraints, the dissemination of Chinese independent cinema predominantly adopts an unofficial form (Pickowicz & Zhang, 2006; Robinson & Chio, 2013). Independent film festivals emerge as vital platforms for showcasing these films to the public (Yu & Wu, 2017), forging one of the most captivating public domains within the contemporary cultural sphere (Elsaesser, 2005). Although this scenario is observed worldwide, there is a notable difference: renowned independent film festivals outside China operate without governmental censorship. On the contrary, in China, independent film festivals risk being prohibited from screening films that lack the approval of the official media. Consequently, numerous independent Chinese films, unable to clear censorship hurdles, are left unscreened, leading to the dilemma of festivals having no films to present or having to cancel numerous screenings. This discrepancy highlights a significant deviation from the international standards of independent film festivals.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher had to identify the concept of Chinese independent documentary films. It can identify the research direction for the readers. Additionally, the investigator had to determine some issues and problems in this type of documentary, so that the reader gets some key points of the study topic. In this regard, the development of independent documentaries in China remains volatile and there is still little research on this topic discussed by previous researchers. Therefore, this study

needs to be given increased attention so that this type of documentary films can be further developed.



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