

# THE TREE

# 2023

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# LINGUISTIC BARRIERS AND INFORMATION ACCESS



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**The Reed**  
Weatherhead East Asian Institute  
420 W 118th St  
New York, NY 10027  
212.854.2592

**Director**  
Lien-Hang T. Nguyen  
**Executive Director**  
Katherine Forshay

**Edited by**  
Ariana King  
Lin King



## Linguistic Barriers and Information Access



**Lien-Hang T. Nguyen**  
Director, Weatherhead East Asian Institute; Dorothy Borg Associate Professor in the History of the United States and East Asia

This year's issue of *The Reed* posed a prompt directly to the community: "Highlight an area of interest concerning East/Southeast/Inner Asia that you think has not received enough attention specifically due to linguistic barriers or other limitations on information access." We were pleased to receive a wide variety of submissions that showcased the diversity of our students' backgrounds and interests.

One essay submission in particular caught our attention for blending personal family history and research to spotlight the curious background of the Central Vietnamese dialect. This newsletter begins with that essay by Dylan Tran (CC '26), titled: "The Central Vietnamese Dialect: Gateway to Vietnam's Vedic Past."

We also tapped into the Weatherhead East Asian Institute's expertise and asked Professor John D. Phan to shine more light on the history of Vietnamese dialects and the Cham ethnic minority that feature in Tran's essay. We are pleased to share Professor Phan's response in this issue as well.

The wonderful cover of this issue was contributed by Skylar Hou, a PhD student at Teachers College. Hou's artist statement on the piece, "Literacies: Weaving the Threads of Wisdom and Expression," is also featured here.

Another well-written student essay contributed an insightful example of how a lack of linguistic and cultural context impedes our understanding of literary and artistic works. Recent MARSEA graduate Kar Lok Pang addresses culture-specific symbolism in an essay titled "Uncovering the Symbolic Significance of Animals in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* for the Non-Chinese Viewer."

Pang's essay is followed by excerpts from WEAI Professor Ying Qian's forthcoming book, *Revolutionary Becomings: Documentary Media in Twentieth Century China* (Columbia University Press, 2024). This section, from the book's epilogue, notes the impact of documentary film and raises questions about the future of their accessibility.

Finally, we close this issue of *The Reed* with a review of "Voices Beyond the Wall," an event series held this past spring as part of our Asia in Action initiative, by postdoctoral research scholar JM Chris Chang. As you will learn, not only did the content of these events seek to address the work being done to confront barriers to information access, but the events themselves were shaped by these barriers.

As always, thank you for taking the time to read this year's issue. In the interest of breaking down linguistic and accessibility barriers, we hope you learn something and discover new curiosity about the topics these essays cover.

Sincerely,

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen  
Director, Weatherhead East Asian Institute





**FEATURED STUDENT ESSAY**

# **The Central Vietnamese Dialect: Gateway to Vietnam's Vedic Past**

**DYLAN TRAN, COLUMBIA COLLEGE '26**





# “Cái gì?”

I asked my aunt again, struggling to parse the impenetrable current of her words, its trilled cadence mountainous like the highlands of Đà Lạt, but familiar and articulate, yet elusive to my comprehension—as if from a foreign language.

“What?”

Despite growing up with her, I never got around to fully understanding the way she speaks, even though our shared mother tongue is Vietnamese. Apparently, neither did most of my family. While my family and I hail from Southern Vietnam, my aunt came from further north in the highlands of Central Vietnam. Despite the proximity of our homelands, her speech sounds foreign to my Southern ears. Although most of her dialect’s fundamental diction and syntax are characteristically Vietnamese, her differing system of tones, I find, blurs the identities of her words, and her unique Central vocabulary defies my understanding.

Last fall, in “Introduction to Linguistics,” taught by Professor John McWhorter, I learned about the dialect continuum, a geolinguistic phenomenon in which a language gradually varies across a geographic area such that each neighboring dialect is mutually intelligible. However, as the differences accumulate, there will be increasingly drastic linguistic variation between the more distant varieties until they become distinct languages, an example being the continuum of the Romance languages.

I expected something similar of Vietnam; I should be able to understand Central Vietnamese better than Northern Vietnamese. Yet, despite my hometown being so geographically separated from the North, I can understand the Northern dialect of Hà Nội far better than the Central dialects of Huế or Đà Nẵng. Upon analysis, Central Vietnamese possesses striking distinctions from its Northern and Southern counterparts, with its tones refashioned and its pronunciations of certain sounds altered until almost unrecognizable from the two, not to mention its unique vocabulary. What about Central Vietnamese, I wondered, defies the dialect continuum? Why is it so different?



The ancient stone temple, embossed with layers of symmetric carvings, stood imposing before me, reverent and timeless. Two pyramid-esque protrusions flanked the horizontal cylindrical dome roof, and geometric etchings adorned the columns and gateway of the temple. I squinted under the burning Vietnamese sun to discern what was inside its sanctum sanctorum: a shrine decorated with marigolds, a red tapestry with traditional Vietnamese embroidery, and a small brown statue of Thiên Y A Na, the mother goddess of the indigenous Chăms people of Central Vietnam. My father tapped me on the shoulder to light incense sticks, and as I offered them in the traditional Vietnamese altar and bowed down before the goddess, I was struck by the oddness of it all. Not only was this Hindu temple located in the middle of Vietnam, with its goddess—an established Vietnamese deity—sharing identities with Hindu goddesses Bhagavati and Mahishasuramardini, but my family and I—who are not Hindus, but Buddhists—were worshiping an idol descended from Hinduism, along with hundreds of other visitors of Ponagar Temple in Nha Trang, Vietnam.

Ponagar Temple is only one of many Vedic ruins scattered throughout Central and Southern Vietnam. From the grand archaeological site of Mỹ Sơn in Đà Nẵng, to Yang Prong Temple in the Central Highlands of Đắk Lắk province, they are relics of the once mighty Champa Kingdom, which ruled Vietnam from the second century to its destruction by Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mạng in 1832. Its close ties with India through trade brought Hinduism into its society, mixing with Chăms folk religion and producing deities like Thiên Y A Na. In addition, the ancient Indic language Sanskrit intermixed with the native Chamic language, so much so that in one third-century inscription found near the Champa capital Indrapura in modern-day Quảng Nam province, Sanskrit words occupied a significant portion of the Chamic language (Thurgood 1999, 3-4).

Today, the Chăms people are predominantly Muslim and a recognized ethnic minority group in Vietnam. Their language contains traces of many others, including Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, and Sanskrit—a reflection of the many cultures that left imprints on Vietnamese soil. Their population concentrates in Central Vietnam, where their ancient culture and traditions are still practiced.

As my forehead touched the warm stone ground before the Hindu temple, I wondered if that is precisely what makes the Central Vietnamese dialect so unique. Perhaps the melding of the Chăms people into Vietnamese society, like how a Chăms goddess became a Vietnamese deity, linguistically influenced the cadence and diction of my aunt's speech, with there being seeming cognates between the two languages—like how “ni” means “this” in both Central Vietnamese and Chamic (Alves 2012, 3; Thurgood 1999, 3). Consequently, perhaps Central Vietnamese inherited the Chăms' Indo-Brahmanical linguistic past, along with Arabic and Chamic itself, producing its distinct dialect. Perhaps this was what intercepted and severed the Vietnamese dialect continuum. These possibilities, though, I could only conjecture.



Despite this dynamic cultural mixing in Central Vietnam, it is not studied enough. Understanding what makes this dialect so different could divulge rich historical, sociological, and linguistic secrets that define this multicultural region of Vietnam.

But these secrets are under threat. Despite being Vietnamese citizens, the Châm people are marginalized: their ancient temples and tombs, vestiges of their Hindu past, are gradually being razed, replaced by paddies, plantations, farms, and Buddhist temples. Their history is being erased from important Central Vietnamese sites with centuries of Châm roots, like Hội An. Their language is in danger of being lost, with many Châms abandoning their mother tongue in favor of the more widely used Vietnamese, and their living conditions are extremely poor (Bray 2014). The systematic erasure of the rich history of the Châm people could hinder future studies on their culture, language, and traditions. Further research into the interactions between Central Vietnamese and Chamic is essential to better comprehend the full picture of Vietnam as a heterogeneous, historically-dynamic country, influenced by myriad contacts from foreign cultures.

## **And maybe then I'll be able to understand my aunt just a little better.**

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# LANGUAGE AND DIVERSITY IN THE STUDY OF VIETNAM

**JOHN D. PHAN**

It is very gratifying to read an essay like the one written by Dylan Tran, because his experiences exploring the structural diversity of language, while simultaneously exploring his own cultural heritage, emblemize exactly what Columbia has to offer—an interlacing of personal curiosities, passions, questions of identity, together with training in the great intellectual questions of humankind. Dylan's response to his own aunt's dialect is a true scientific one—observation, reflection, and then the posing of a question. All great knowledge begins with curiosity like this.

**JOHN D. PHAN IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EAST ASIAN  
LANGUAGES AND CULTURES AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**



And the target of Dylan's curiosity is by no means a simple issue. The linguistic diversity of Vietnam is broad and complex, nowhere more so than in the central regions where, as Dylan correctly identified, the dialectal divergence is at its greatest. In fact, Central Vietnamese is not generally mutually intelligible with either Northern or Southern Standard Vietnamese, and not only the lexicon, but also the phonology—and especially the tonal system—are deeply distinct from the rest of the Vietnamese dialects.

The reasons for this are complex and historical. As Dylan also noted in his essay, Central Vietnam was once the heartland of the Chamic states, a powerful Austronesian-speaking culture that inhabited the region since the early first millennium CE. It was only in the middle of the 2nd millennium that Vietnamese-speaking peoples began to push southward, conquering these territories. That also means that what is now called the “central” region was in fact the southern border of Vietic- and Vietnamese-speaking lands for most of history. Thus, the divergent quality of central dialects is also partially a predictable result of being on the periphery of a dialect continuum centered on the Red River Plain to the north. This dialect mapping is somewhat obscured by the fact that Vietnamese speakers would later settle the far south, bringing with them a form of standardized speech. But the historical margins

of the Vietnamese language lie directly over what we now call the “Center”—a border, shared for most of history, with Chamic-speaking peoples and cultures. Add to this the proximity of other mountainous peoples and languages, and one has the recipe for a mini sprachbund—an area of multiple linguistic convergences.

Dylan's reflections, incidentally, also illustrate one of the most important messages that we in the Vietnamese Studies Program here at Columbia are constantly trying to send: there is no singular “Vietnam.” Rather, Vietnam is a stunning diversity of languages, cultures, peoples, religions, cuisines, ethnicities, societies, and histories. The study of Vietnam is not the study of a single people or a single story, but the discovery of a rich and staggering multitude of culture; and we are dedicated to bringing awareness and understanding of that diversity to our students. In the end, complexifying our understanding of culture through science produces a stronger appreciation for the forms, structures, and phenomena that we not only observe, but partake in every day of our lives.

I hope that more and more students, whether of any of the multiple forms of Vietnamese descent or not, will discover their own curiosities about this region of the world, and in so doing, will find a home for sating that curiosity here at Columbia.



# LITERACIES: WEAVING THE THREADS OF WISDOM AND EXPRESSION

BY SKYLAR HOU





I speak five languages, yet a haunting void persists within me. As a descendant of an indigenous islander community in the West Pacific, I carry a poignant sense of loss, stemming from the rejection of my ancestral tongue throughout my upbringing. Regrettably, it was regarded as outdated, and lacked a writing form to ensure its survival.

In 2019, a transformative opportunity presented itself when I visited my ancestral island for the first time. There, amidst the embrace of the salty breeze and the rhythmic cadence of crashing waves, I was introduced to the exquisite artistry of weaving. Awestruck with wonder, I watched the graceful choreography of women: their nimble fingers dancing with colorful threads of cotton and hemp, skillfully intertwining them into garments that breathed life. A woman guided me through the intricate patterns, narrating to me their meanings, which told traditional tales and symbolized the animals on the island. In that moment I realized the striking resemblance between the creation and interpretation of textiles and the acts of writing and reading. I was compelled to reevaluate the very essence of literacy.

This artwork features a pair of hands delicately weaving what appears to be textile but is, at the same time, a page filled with words. This juxtaposition of mediums symbolizes the parallel of traditional weaving practice with what is conventionally perceived as script, thereby challenging the prevailing notion that “privileges certain kinds of literacy and certain ways of using literacy, disregarding the arbitrary nature by which certain practices are elevated as superior to others.”<sup>1</sup>

The central theme of this artwork lies in its critique of how the illiterate are perceived, as they may also possess a wealth of knowledge and expertise that allow them to actively participate in communications. Through mastery of textile making, the women in my story convey narratives, histories, and cultural values.<sup>2</sup> However, within a framework that positions written scripts as a measure of civilization, these alternative forms of communications are not only overlooked but also rendered as backwards.<sup>3</sup> This marginalization perpetuates a damaging cycle of cultural erasure and reinforces a distorted understanding of literacy.

*Literacies: Weaving the Threads of Wisdom and Expression* aims to disrupt the monoglossic narrative of literacy by highlighting the inherent power and beauty of weaving technique as an example of alternative communicative practice. The visual depiction of hands weaving the pages serves as a reminder of the importance of recognizing diverse ways of knowing and communicating that exist within marginalized communities. Through this art piece, I invite viewers, educators, and researchers to critically examine the dominant understanding of literacy, which is often narrowly confined to reading and writing of the politically dominant script in a way that contributes to the devaluation and othering of people within the narrative of modernity.

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UNCOVERING THE SYMBOLIC  
SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMALS  
IN JIA ZHANGKE'S  
A TOUCH OF SIN  
FOR THE NON-CHINESE VIEWER

by Kar Lok Pang



Chinese film director Jia Zhangke is no stranger to patrons of contemporary Chinese cinema, yet his 2013 production, *A Touch of Sin*, stands out from his oeuvre in several aspects. Firstly, while his first three films were banned, *A Touch of Sin* was allowed to air in China: one explanation is that Jia has worked within the government system by submitting his films to nationally appointed censorship boards for review and approval; another explanation is that the film's depiction of violence is already well-known to the informed Chinese viewer, who cannot have missed the four viral murder cases on Sina Weibo. Secondly, *A Touch of Sin* received positive reviews from international critics, was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, and won the award for best screenplay.

In anthological progression, Jia's *A Touch of Sin* takes us through fictionalized accounts of viral murder cases in China. Crucially, these murder cases are not common knowledge outside of China, and the non-Chinese viewer may understandably not be able to fully flesh out Jia's message as conveyed through his heavy-handed usage of animal imagery, which is attention-worthy for the ways in which it subverts conventional associations with animals, both in the Euro-American and Chinese-speaking spheres. There is, however, a lack of scholarship which contextualizes the film for non-Chinese viewers. In fact, some non-Chinese critics make honest interpretative mistakes in their reviews, given their unfamiliarity with the Mandarin Chinese language and contemporary Chinese culture.

As a scholar of China/the East Asia region in general, I am interested to explore how a non-Chinese viewer, who does not speak Chinese and/or is unfamiliar with Chinese culture broadly speaking, can be helped in better understanding the film through sociocultural contextualization of its cinematography. The film's English title

evokes the title of iconic Chinese martial arts film *A Touch of Zen* (1971), which might lead the non-Chinese viewer to fall back on clichés surrounding Chinese martial arts films to understand Jia's production. Meanwhile, the film's Chinese title 《天注定》 translates to 'predestined by heaven'—an overt indictment of societal tensions precipitating the film's gore, suggesting that violence is predestined and inevitable. In this essay, I take a deep dive into how centering and contrasting animal motifs against the film's central male protagonist, Dahai, can unveil interpretations of Jia's message surrounding the futility of revolt against capitalism in China.

Dahai struggles to contend with the blatant corruption he sees happening in his village. The straw that broke the metaphorical camel's back is the moment when Dahai confronts a visiting high official. Dahai is beaten bloodily with a steel bar after this confrontation, even as the high official smilingly promises to investigate the corruption that Dahai brings to light. Embarking on his rampage, Dahai drapes a banner of a tiger over his rifle. The viewer's initial impression of Dahai, enhanced by noticing the tiger motif, is that of bravery and nobility. Unquestionably, tigers are apex predators on top of the food chain. That said, the tiger evokes mixed emotions in the Chinese spectator. On the one hand, the tiger placed third in the zodiac race after the bull, and it is proverbially associated with villainy and corruption (为虎作帐), which are issues that Dahai fights against. On the other hand, tigers are regarded as auspicious because the striped pattern on top of their heads is similar to the character 王, which means 'king'.

Jia's usage of animal motifs links different characters to specific animals. Dahai, set apart as the central male protagonist, seems most closely linked to the tiger. However, I posit that the significance of the animal imagery employed is reflected not only in the animal traits that each character



supposedly represents. Looking at the animals that are contrasted against the protagonists can unveil subtle interpretations of their underlying motivations, which is why I argue that understanding Dahai as a horse rather than a tiger is more faithful to Jia's commentary.<sup>1</sup>

Haunting moments abound in Dahai's act. Preceding his witnessing of a horse flogging, Dahai spectates a police check at the factory he works at. Random numbers assigned to migrant workers are called. The camera pans to the expressionless face of a young man, breathing through his mouth. He bolts. A policeman fires a warning shot before giving chase. Dahai flinches at the gunshot sound. Dahai's murderous rampage after he kills the village chief includes the horse flogger amongst his casualties. Now freed, the wagonless horse is seen trotting aimlessly across the road towards the end scene. By comparison, the tiger lacks physical manifestation in the film. We only hear its roar as Dahai drapes the banner over himself. At first glance, the viewer believes, as Dahai does, that he represents the tiger. However, I submit that Dahai is actually the horse. In ancient China, horses were only owned and used by the rich for transportation. Horses continue to be exploited in contemporary society.<sup>2</sup> Dahai flinches when he witnesses violence. Despite campaigning against corruption, he too suffers as a victim even after his cathartic murders.

In another scene, Dahai shoots a man, juxtaposed against the backdrop of a Buddhist temple. The viewer sees ten animals—none of which are the tiger or the horse—atop the temple's roof. The roof symbolizes the hat worn by ancient court judges and officials, which is in turn a symbol of justice. The exclusion of the animals related to Dahai's character hints

that heaven does not approve or predestine Dahai's murders, no matter how much he believes this to be the case. Dahai only takes things into his own hands after he repeatedly fails to persuade others in his village to join his cause. Blood splatters on pristine white snow outside the car—paralleling Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*—as Dahai refuses to give the corrupt high official a final chance at calm negotiations. Dahai is a blood-thirsty tiger on the prowl, exceeding his breaking point in trying to enact a twisted kind of justice. Yet, the end scene of the aimless horse reflects how his fate is resolved. Dahai is not a tiger because he does not emerge triumphant over his troubles. Instead, like the horse, Dahai is temporarily free from his burdens. But at what cost? Crucially, has justice really been dealt? The pervasiveness of capitalism in China will only enslave another horse, another Dahai, and any lawless subjugation will be for naught.

*A Touch of Sin* paints a complex picture of lawlessness, capitalism, justice, and law in contemporary China. The protagonists struggle against heaven's predestination in profound ways, but at the end of the day, Jia hints that Dahai remains as aimless as a horse who suddenly finds himself untethered. Understanding prominent characters not only through the eyes of their obvious animalistic counterparts, but also the animals they are contrasted against, reveals Jia's social commentary of capitalism in China. Beyond enhancing the film's portrayal of violence and oppression, construing Dahai's character as an allusion to the horse, rather than the tiger, thus uncovers the symbolic significance of the animal imagery in ways that may not be readily apparent to the non-Chinese viewer.

1        Chen, Lux, Cynthia Rowell, and Jia Zhangke. "Searching for Dignity in the Ocean of People: An Interview with Jia Zhangke." *Cinéaste* 44, no. 2 (2019): 22–25.

2        As seen, for example, in the practice of horse racing.



"JIA IS SIMPLY ONE OF THE BEST AND MOST  
IMPORTANT DIRECTORS IN THE WORLD."

—RICHARD BRODY, THE NEW YORKER

# A TOUCH OF SIN

A FILM BY

## JIA ZHANGKE



WINNER BEST SCREENPLAY  
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

OFFICIAL SELECTION  
51<sup>ST</sup> NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL  
2013



KINO LORBER, XSTREAM PICTURES (BEIJING), OFFICE KINO, SHANGHAI FILM GROUP CORPORATION PRESENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH SHANXI FILM & TELEVISION GROUP, GANDARI VISUAL, BITTERS END, A JIA ZHANG-KE FILM, A TOUCH OF SIN  
STARRING ZHAO YAO, JIANG WU, WANG GAOJIANG, LUO LANSHAN, CO-STARRING ZHANG JIAYI, LI MENG, ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS YU LIKWAH, LIU LIM GING, PRODUCED BY ZHANG YANG, EDITED BY LUO WENLIN, MUSIC BY MATTHEW LUCERO, LIN RUODONG  
PRODUCTION DESIGNER KAZUO KAWASHIRO, EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS YUJI SHIOI, LUO SHUYU, JIA BIN, PRODUCED BY EVA LAM, CHAN JIANPING, GAO XIAOJING, ZHANG GONG, WRITTEN BY SHOUZO KICHYAMA, DIRECTED BY JIA ZHANG-KE, MITSUYUKI MORI, REN ZHONGLIN, DIRECTED BY JIA ZHANG-KE

[atouchofsin.com](http://atouchofsin.com)

mk2



KINO LORBER



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Excerpts from the epilogue of

*Revolutionary Becomings:*  
*Documentary Media in Twentieth*  
*Century China*

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by Ying Qian



Ying Qian is Associate Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University

The full book, including footnotes, is forthcoming with Columbia University Press in 2024.



Documentary was a medium closely related to political initiatives throughout China's twentieth century. As an eventful medium, documentary participated in the unfolding of events large and small, shaping their inscription, interpretation, and entry into public memory. It mediated political relationalities and networks, and helped form technical, political, and historiographic knowledge. Central to documentary's mediations were questions about inclusion and exclusion: who was included in, or excluded from, the political communities that could shape the directions of social and political change, and whose knowledge became valued or obscured in the society's (re)productive processes.

As the "vanguard" of cinema, documentary in the Mao era was meant, in principle, to facilitate the dialectical relationship between the masses and the party, not only to aid in their mutual constitution, but also to facilitate a collective formation of knowledge and priorities to direct the unfolding of the revolution. In practice, this dialectical relationship experienced severe crises, manifested by increasing exclusivity of who could be considered part of the "masses," what was permitted in party-people interaction, and the reification of old class categories that obscured, rather than clarified, new contradictions in the society. The Cultural Revolution encouraged the "masses" to challenge the "party," yet by that time, both the masses and the party had become exclusionary and crises-ridden entities, entwined with the crises of mediation that underlay their constitution.

Documentaries of the 1980s, as I discussed in the chapter 6, tried to mend the party-people relationship. They participated in rehabilitation campaigns, institutionalization of justice, and historiographic reconstruction. Documentary filmmakers used television as an infrastructure to pursue dialogical, reflexive, and interactive filmmaking, further strengthening documentary's mediating potential and bringing documentary into the midst of lived experience. The end of the 1980s, however, saw this decade-long effort to reconfigure party-people relationship came to a disappointing and sorrowful end. The Tian'anmen movement in the spring

and summer of 1989 was a deeply mournful, aspirational and multifaceted reckoning by the people with the party, a true event whose message was too new to be named. The violent shattering of this reckoning meant the shattering of the party-people relationship.

Independent documentary, having emerged after the suppression of the Tian'anmen protests in 1989 and developed in the post-1989 political ecology, no longer mediated party-people relationships. This refusal to take on this particular work of mediation was among the most substantial meanings of the "independence" in independent documentary. If documentary filmmakers in the Mao era, and even in the 1980s, had encountered their filmed subjects as emissaries from the party state, independent filmmakers after 1989 abandoned such an identity. Documentary became a personal (but still political) act.

This transformation brought substantial benefits. No longer bound by reified official ideology, the personal turn allowed documentary to be more attuned to what was around the camera, to the here and now. The relationship across and around the camera now became interpersonal, which brought a degree of equality between the filmmaker and the filmed subject. It allowed interactions facilitated by the camera to become more spontaneous, dialogical, even confessional and confrontational. Documentary could now reach into difficult spaces in personal lives and perform the work of inquiry and therapy. Autobiographical documentaries exploring family life and broader socialization emerged to further develop documentary's ability to interrogate as well as mend relationships in everyday life and reflect on the political, social, and historical formations of (inter)subjectivities. If, in the 1980s, documentaries made in the state system began the process of mourning but couldn't carry it through due to restrictions imposed by the party, then independent documentary continued the work of reckoning with the past, this time by investigating the past's varied legacies in personal lives of the present.

The personal turn of independent documentary was, of course, not without cost. Documentary filmmakers in earlier periods of



the twentieth century had almost always worked with political forces that had power to make social and political change. Not mediating the party-people relationship was a conscious choice by independent filmmakers, a resounding vote of no confidence in the party-state. Yet this choice also meant that independent documentary not only had no support from the state, but was placed under increasing censorship, which significantly limited its reach of influence. In the 1990s and early 2000s, with no possibility for legal distribution in the country, independent documentary had a small viewership, mostly composed of audiences at overseas film festivals, as well as Chinese urban middle-class audiences in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other large cities where independent documentary had a small presence in galleries and film clubs. This marginalized position led to a political and ethical impasse, especially for those films that exposed social injustices among marginalized and oppressed people. If documentary's exposure of injustices and sufferings could not reach a substantial Chinese public and foster social change, were they simply providing spectacles of suffering for the consumption of the privileged few? As I've written elsewhere, such uncertainties regarding the meaning and purpose of filmmaking has since troubled the interpersonal relationship between filmmakers and their subjects, and sustained heated debates on documentary ethics by filmmakers and film critics.

Around the early to mid-2000s, thanks to a series of developments, independent documentary began to reach a wider public. First, pirated films, including Chinese independent documentary titles such as Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* (Liulang Beijing, 1990), Yang Li'na's *Old Men* (Laotou, 1997) and Wang Bing's award-winning *The West of the Tracks* (Tie xiqu, 2002), became more easily available. Shops selling pirated films on VCD and DVD mushroomed all over China, in big cities as well as small towns. This was how Chinese independent cinema, including fiction films, such as Jia Zhangke's and Zhang Yuan's early films, gained its first mass audience. Wu Wenguang's *Fuck*

*Cinema* (Cao tamade dianying, 2005) documented how pirate film stores helped support the cinephilia in this period. Further expanding the viewership was online downloading, which had become a possibility in the early 2000s, thanks to P2P file-sharing software such as emule.

More importantly, the early 2000s was also a time when more and more activist groups came into being around various issues, such as labor protection, citizen rights, environmental activism, and the fight for equal rights for LGBTQ communities. These activist networks, aided by the internet as Guobin Yang has shown, began to create sites where political forces for social change could be cultivated. By plugging into these networks, independent documentary gained new political relevance as well as expanded and meaningful viewership. Elsewhere I have traced the reconfiguration of activist documentary in China between 2004 and 2009, from Hu Jie's *In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul* (2005), to Ai Xiaoming's films covering topics such as date-rape, village elections, and the plight of HIV/AIDS patients in rural China, to Hu Jie, Ai Xiaoming, and Ai Weiwei's collaborations on a series of documentaries supporting citizen investigations into schoolchildren casualties during the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008.

By the late 2000s documentary had allied with many other activist initiatives. Wu Wenguang's Village Memory Project, launched in 2009, uses cinema as a mediator for local memories and as a facilitator for village self-governance. The project has since cultivated prolific young filmmakers such as Zou Xuping and Zhang Mengqi, who have made multiple films in their home villages and combined filmmaking with social work. In Yunnan, the environmental film project *From Our Eyes* (Xiangcun zhi yan) began operation in 2007 and has since trained countless amateur filmmakers (many from non-Han backgrounds) to use the video camera to document environmental change in their villages and collect indigenous ecological knowledge. In 2008 Cui Zi'en, the queer activist and filmmaker, made *Queer China*, "Comrade" China (Zhi



tongzhi), depicting a large network of queer activists in action. As documentary entered activist networks, its eventfulness became multifold: it strengthened and expanded these networks, energized conversations, and began to form network-specific knowledge to propel the future development of activism. It was no coincidence that independent documentary began to run into more severe problems with government authorities shortly after its activist turn: police surveillance and shutdowns had been sporadic and selective in the 2000s but became more frequent and severe toward the late 2000s, leading to film festival closures and massive reduction of physical gathering space for independent documentary in the 2010s. By then, however, the era of online streaming was already dawning.

In the past decade, documentary has moved onto digital platforms. The independent documentary filmmaker Cong Feng has coined the concept of “social compound eye” (shehui fuyan) to describe the “participatory social cognition” that the internet now affords. Even though no one’s personal experience is “objective,” Cong writes, when people upload videos of what they see, they create materials that “can be compared to each other, complement each other, and can verify, supplement and revise [our understandings] of the overall reality.” As “the relay of seeing, and the uniting of perspectives,” the social compound eye brings personal visions together to “form a seeing that’s at the level of the society, a kind of trustworthy ‘just vision’ about social realities and history, a kind of revealing perspective that combines facts and truth.” Indeed, in China, “relays of seeing” happen almost daily, as people share videos in their WeChat groups and through their Weibo accounts, often reposting in a race with censors who seek to restrict the circulation of “sensitive” materials that could destabilize state authority. A collective and collaborative epistemology, however, is not easy to form. Everywhere the digital sphere has fueled fierce political polarizations. What one sees daily online, and in which community the seeing happens, is shaped by operations of digital capitalism, state surveillance, as well as online activism.

Cong’s social compound eye brings to mind the proposal by feminist scholars Sarah Harding and Donna Haraway to create a “strong objectivity” with “situated knowledges.” Instead of giving in to the illusion created by modern visual technology, imbricated in militarism, capitalism, colonialism and male supremacy, that one can “[see] everything from nowhere,” Haraway proposes that we return embodiment, specificity, partiality, and difference to our understanding and practice of vision. All eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems with specific materiality and embodiment, which offer “partial [ways] of organizing world.” This partiality must be acknowledged and understood in its specificity, in order for a collective and collaborative epistemology based on “situated knowledges,” that is, “partial, locatable, critical knowledges,” to take hold.

This book has located and investigated documentary’s specific entwinement with broader (re)productive processes in the society, its networking capacities and mediation of political relationalities, its radical proposals and hegemonic operations, and the inclusions and exclusions inherent in its constitution of political communities and formation of knowledge. All these have now moved to the online environment, underlain by even more complex and changing structures of power, technological affordances, and everyday media practices. As I conclude this book, the COVID-19 pandemic has kept Chinese cities under prolonged lockdown. The digital sphere has replaced the square, the street, and other public spaces to become the most vibrant arena where political contestations take place. How documentary will transform in the postpandemic world is yet to be seen, but one thing is certain: for its eventfulness and its situated inquiries into how the world is, and what is to be done about it, documentary will continue to be a privileged medium in movements seeking political and social change.



**JM CHRIS CHANG**

# NOTES ON PROGRAMMING

Around mid-November 2022, I began planning a spring workshop series for Asia-in-Action at the Weatherhead. In contrast to the series on archives and methodology I had organized the previous spring, we imagined that this new slate might bridge academic and public interest to tell stories about China primarily through the voices of Chinese people. Calling the series “Voices Beyond the Wall,” we reached out beyond our familiar circle of China scholars to bring together documentary filmmakers, podcasters, and new media journalists to engage with people and events in China through a different lens.

Just after we had finalized our proposal to WEAI, an apartment fire in Ürümqi sparked an unimaginable occurrence—a wave of spontaneous demonstrations across Chinese cities in opposition to the Chinese government’s zero-Covid restrictions. Demonstrators held aloft sheets of blank A4 size paper to symbolically express the dissent that government censorship would not allow them to say. The ensuing “white paper protests” lasted barely two weeks, ending abruptly once the Party indicated a retreat on its zero-Covid policy and the lifting of mass lockdowns. In the US press, the protests were generally celebrated as a heroic and successful stand against the Chinese state, with at least one contingent of observers hailing the protests the “White Paper Revolution” even before the smoke had cleared.

As I watched the demonstrations unfold, I was consumed by conflicting emotions of hope, exhilaration, and fear. As a historian of China, I am deeply interested in critical politics and cannot help notice that these 2022 protests

presented the most widespread and grassroots challenge to the state since 1989. I was awe-struck by images of a crowd—mostly young people and students packed several rows deep—gathered one evening just blocks away from the apartment where I used to live in Shanghai. But I was also troubled by the constant presence of PSB police cars in the background, with reports of protesters being whisked away by officers and the silence that followed. Like others who teach at this university, I have countless current and former students in China who might have been out in the streets. It is harder to root for revolution when you know those on the front lines.

In the end, the spring Asia-in-Action event series went ahead, but differently than planned. All of our presenters from China were forced to drop out, while our remaining speakers and interlocutors—all based stateside—spoke in-depth about the protests themselves, the politics of dissent in China, and its translations abroad. One recurring strand of our conversations—it is difficult to infer the meaning of a protest from half the world away, but all the more so when the protesters themselves are holding blank canvases. Here in the US, stories from China are quickly co-opted into convenient narratives; even seasoned observers often end up rehashing the narratives we want to hear. Next spring, we will try again to program another series. Perhaps the next one will be different.

**JM CHRIS CHANG**

was a recent Postdoctoral Research Scholar in the Society of Fellows in the Humanities and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute.



ASIA IN ACTION EVENT



## ONE CHILD NATION

A conversation with award-winning filmmaker Nanfu Wang on her documentary on the fallout of China's One-Child Policy

**THURSDAY  
MARCH 30  
1:30 - 3:00 PM ET**

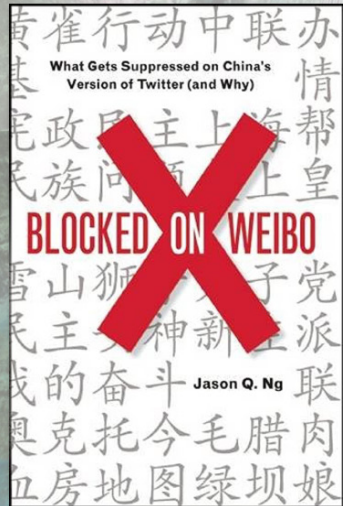
**420 W 118th St  
International Affairs  
Building  
Room 918**

**Speaker**  
**NANFU WANG**  
Filmmaker and Director,  
*One Child Nation* (2019);  
*Hooligan Sparrow* (2016)

**Moderator**  
**COLIN JONES**  
Adjunct Associate Research Scholar,  
Weatherhead East Asian Institute;  
Postdoctoral Fellow, Max Planck Institute  
for European Legal History

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
Weatherhead East Asian Institute

ASIA IN ACTION EVENT



## BLOCKED ON WEIBO AT TEN YEARS

Reflections on Social Media Censorship in China

**TUESDAY  
APRIL 11  
12:00 - 1:30 PM ET**

**420 W 118th St  
International Affairs  
Building  
Room 918**

**Speaker**  
**JASON Q. NG**  
Author, *Blocked on Weibo*;  
Senior Data Science Manager,  
Duolingo

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
Weatherhead East Asian Institute

ASIA IN ACTION EVENT



## TELLING 'DISSIDENT' STORIES

**FRIDAY  
APRIL 14  
1:00 - 2:30 PM ET**

**YANGYANG CHENG**  
Research Scholar, Paul Tsai  
China Center, Yale Law School

**ALISON KLAYMAN**  
Filmmaker and Journalist;  
Director, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*

**420 W 118th St  
International Affairs Building  
Room 918**

**COLIN JONES**  
Adjunct Associate Research Scholar,  
Weatherhead East Asian Institute;  
Postdoctoral Fellow, Max Planck  
Institute for European Legal History

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