in using video to create documentaries about their cultural worlds and histories they were able to take some steps to reverse processes through which aspects of their societies have been objectified, commodified, and appropriated. Their documentary productions have been central to efforts to recuperate their histories, land rights, and knowledge bases as their own cultural property. They raise important questions about the politics and circulation of knowledge at a number of levels; within communities this may concern who has had access to and understanding of media technologies and who has the rights to know, tell, and circulate certain stories and images. One might think of these media practices as a kind of shield against the often unethical use or absolute erasure of their presence in national and even global narratives. Now, terms such as the Digital Age can too easily gloss over such phenomena in their own right, and viewing such work as salutary extensions of the Western media genre of documentary can as well. Rather than parroting the widespread concern with increasing corporate control over media production and distribution, can we illuminate and support other possibilities emerging out of locally based concerns? Perhaps it is time to invent new language and begin to use terms other than Digital Age that better fit a more inclusive future. After all, when the conceptual playing field is leveled, it is much easier to see beyond the immediate horizon.

Notes


3. Ibid.


8. Ibid.

Wu Wenguang: An Introduction

by Chris Berry

“DV: Individual Filmmaking” was written at a watershed moment in the history of recent Chinese documentary. Its author, Wu Wenguang, is one of the most prominent and prolific independents in the country.¹ It gives insights not only into some
of the major issues but also into some of the major changes in Chinese independent documentary. These include debates over what true documentary should be and what it means to be independent as well as the shift from professional Betacam videocorders to DV cameras of all kinds.

Wu Wenguang is best known internationally as one of the founding figures in Chinese independent documentary. In her groundbreaking introductory article on the general topic Bérénice Reynaud recounts the first time she saw Wu’s debut film, *Bumming in Beijing—the Last Dreamers* (*Liulang Beijing*, 1990), as a revelation.\(^2\) In the early 1990s no doubt it was equally astonishing for many others both in China and overseas. Prior to this point Chinese documentaries were in what might have appeared to foreigners as a “BBC” mode: narrated, carefully composed, shot on film, with almost no interviews or other unrehearsed moments. In China this was known as the *zhuanti pian*, or “special topic film,” and most were thoroughly controlled.

In contrast Wu’s film used large amounts of handheld camerawork, featured much unscripted and stumbling interview material, and appeared largely unplanned. Furthermore, the topic was far removed from official culture in every sense. Wu’s subjects were artists living on a commune on the outskirts of Beijing. They were dropouts, something that was only becoming possible in the People’s Republic with the development of a nonstate sector in the 1980s. In the socialist system every Chinese was assigned a “unit,” which was responsible for providing a job, housing, education, health care, and so on. Opting to live outside this system was thus impossible. Doing so, as these artists did in the 1980s, promised liberation from the monolithic state structure. But it was difficult to get by because the private sector was very much in an embryonic state.

As the film shows, the artists in the commune have a hard time of it. An air of depression and personal crisis pervades the whole of *Bumming in Beijing*. This may well be because it was shot in the wake of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Unsurprisingly, all but one of the artists left the country soon after. (In 1995 Wu released a follow-up documentary on their new and, some would say, equally depressing lives called *At Home in the World* [*Sihai Wei jia*].) But the film itself is so refreshing and spontaneous that it is surprisingly uplifting. And its vision of China off the record and unplanned is totally original and exciting.

In Chinese the on-the-spot spontaneous realist style used in *Bumming in Beijing* is known as *jishizhuyi*, a term that stresses its quality of recording things as they happen. It can be used for either fictional forms or documentary, and it is found in literature, film, and many other discursive forms. It remains the dominant realist mode in China to this day. But Wu’s essay points to divisions, fissures, and shifts within that the documentary territory inscribed by this mode. In other words, the move away from the old “special topics” film style might have been decisive, but it does not mean that nothing has happened since.\(^3\)

In the midst of his dismissal of feature films and television, “DV: Individual Filmmaking” reveals that, around the turn of the millennium, Wu found DV as a positive way forward. As he puts it, “DV saved me.” Wu has developed a DV auteur-ism. The low costs and easy technology enable him to wander where he will without worrying about investment or budget. The result is an organic form of filmmaking that becomes part of the life he films.
Little wonder, then, that his essay and others like it have become manifestoes for the DV movement, which has given a new lease of life to *jishizhuyi*—spontaneous realism in Chinese documentary. In the last few years film clubs, film bars, and film cafes—most with their own websites—have sprung up in many of China’s major cities. As long as no one is buying a ticket and the spirit of amateurism is stuck to, the independents do not have to worry about getting their films classified for release. Through this movement Wu and other established independent documentary makers have found local audiences to add to the international film festival audiences many of them already had. The burgeoning scene has inspired both trained and untrained filmmakers to join in, and the ranks of China’s independents have mushroomed. In the process Wu’s stature has grown as the scene has expanded, and the DV aesthetic described in his essay has been widely embraced and celebrated.4

In particular, the passage where Wu describes his experience cooking for the traveling troupe in *Jianghu: Life on the Road* leaps out from the essay as a moment that condenses what documentary is all about for Wu. Through the DV practice Wu becomes one with his subjects, and they become one with him. He cooks for them and they eat what he cooks, incorporating it into their very bodies as they come on- and offstage from their performances. At the same time as he hands food around Wu also hands his camera around, and the subjects become the filmmakers and the filmmaker becomes the subject.

There is more than a little irony in this moment, for although Wu and his generation stand apart from Maoist socialism, this is a very powerful instance of the “going down among the people” that Mao demanded of the educated classes—except, of course, that these itinerant players in the market economy are far from the kind of proletarian and peasant masses Mao had in mind. Nonetheless, it is not surprising to find that Wu’s latest project has involved literally giving cameras to farmers to make their own films. In the China Village Self-Governance Film Project ten projects were selected from ninety submissions in late 2005. These filmmakers have headed off to make their own films now, but first they were trained in the use of the cameras at Wu’s own Caochangdi Studio in Beijing, and his latest film, *China Village Self-Governance Film Project: Villagers’ Documentary Films* (2005), documents that process of spreading the word—and the vision—of the DV aesthetic Wu sets out in his short essay.

Notes

1. This short introduction is based partly on interviews conducted with Wu and other Chinese documentary makers since the mid-1990s. The most recent interviews were conducted together with Lisa Rofel and transcribed by Zhang Mingbo and Zhang Shujuan as part of a research project supported by a grant from the University of California Pacific Rim Grant Program. The grant also supported the translation of the Wu Wenguang essay by Cathryn Clayton.


DV: Individual Filmmaking

by Wu Wenguang
translated by Cathryn Clayton

Two years ago, in May 1999, in a place in Shanxi Province called Guxian, I spent some time with a traveling performance troupe called the Far & Wide Song and Dance Troupe. This was a group of itinerant entertainers that traveled around from place to place, performing under the big tent they carted around with them. The boss, a fiftyish man named Liu, came from a small village in the Pingdingshan region of Henan Province. His two sons, their girlfriends, and some of his nieces and nephews were all in the troupe. Counting all the actors and crewmembers, there were probably around thirty people, all of them around twenty years old and most of them from rural Henan. I’d been spending time with this group since the previous year; I had first met them when they were performing on the streets outside the South Fourth Ring Road in Beijing. Ever since then I had been tagging along with them from time to time as they performed in suburban Beijing and Hebei and Shanxi provinces, filming them with a small digital video camera. Here I don’t want to talk about what material I filmed or what I discovered about the “lower rungs” or that kind of thing; instead, I’d like to talk about how the feel of this project was totally different from the very “professional” kind of documentary filmmaking I had done before. With this project I just carried the DV camera around with me like a pen and hung out with the members of the troupe. Every day my ears were filled with the rough sounds of Henan dialect; in the evenings, lying on the stage under the big tent, I was surrounded by the sleeping forms of the roadies, and the air was filled with the stink of feet and the smells of the wilderness while the stars glittered through the holes and cracks in the tent’s roof. Getting up in the mornings, I’d pull on my shoes, walk out of the tent, and take a piss in the wilderness, the air incomparably clear and fresh and perfectly silent. A young roadie would be squatting not far off, taking a shit; we’d greet each other: “You’re up.” At times like these, Beijing felt really far away. All that modern art—really far away.

Before that, for me documentary filmmaking wasn’t such a casual, individual activity. It was the kind of thing that involved a bunch of people carrying big machines on their shoulders—very conspicuous, even from a long way off. But in 1995, after I finished At Home in the World (Sihai Wei jia), I felt I had some serious problems.