

SWALLOWING AN IRON MOON AND EATING A PERSIMMON: CHINESE
SUBALTERN POETS IN DOCUMENTARY FILMS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Ying Tang

December 2020

© 2020 Ying Tang

ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of Chinese independent films in the late 1980s, documentarians in China have shown great interest in exploring, disclosing, and registering the population at the lowest rung of Chinese society via their cameras. While scholars like Yiman Wang praise documentaries for raising public attention to the Chinese subaltern class' interests, I hold the opposite idea and argue that documentaries and filmmakers generally fail to achieve the goal of "giving a voice to the voiceless." In my thesis, I focus on two Chinese documentary films, Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue's *Iron Moon* (2015) and Fan Jian's *Still Tomorrow* (2016). By looking at visual evidence from close examination of cinematic scenes, focusing on textual evidence provided by the poetry written by the subaltern poets (both inside and outside the films), and analyzing the intentions and the effects of the filmmakers' arrangements, including the composition, cutting, editing, and costuming, I argue that the migrant worker poets and Yu Xiuhua in the two films are portrayed as weak, manipulated, and stigmatized, and that they become the victims or servants of the camera. Moreover, by discussing different modes of documentary film-making, I show how Qin, Wu, and Fan's involvement in *Iron Moon* and *Still Tomorrow* respectively reinforce the subaltern poets' powerlessness.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In 2015, Lishu Tang gained her BA in English from Birmingham Southern College. From 2016-2017, Tang studied comparative literature, Chinese literature and cinema at Postbaccalaureate program of Columbia University. From 2018-2020, Tang pursued her MA in Asian Studies at Cornell University, where she did research on the Chinese subaltern class in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and cinema.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor and committee member Professor Nick Admussen, who gave me precious advice and suggestions for my MA thesis. I want to show great appreciation for my vice committee member, Professor Andrew Campana, who confirmed my project when it was emergent and provided me with many helpful reading materials. My writing skills would not have improved without the support from various people, including one of my former professors at Columbia, who was always there to help when I struggled with my writing. As a graduate student, I have benefitted hugely from the Writing Center Service provided by Cornell. It is the assistance from the writing tutors that helps me perform better in my class and grow more confident in my academic writing. Finally, I am also very grateful to my parents, who have always supported my education and allow me to make free decisions for my life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
PART I:	
<i>Iron Moon</i> (2015): Text and Context	3
Alienation and Suppression in Factory Life	4
The Challenge of Defending Yi Ethnic Identity and Culture	8
The Denial of the Poet's Identity and the Contempt for Poetry Writing	12
The Filmmakers' Manipulation Over the Deceased Subject	15
PART II:	
Yu Xiuhua in <i>Still Tomorrow</i> (2016)	18
Yu as the Voiceless Who Fails to Defend Herself	22
Representing Yu's Fragility with the Assistance of Video Clips: A Life Overshadowed by Disability	25
PART III:	
A comparison between <i>Iron Moon</i> and <i>Still Tomorrow</i>	32
Conclusion	36
Bibliography	40

SWALLOWING AN IRON MOON AND EATING A PERSIMMON: CHINESE
SUBALTERN POETS IN DOCUMENTARY FILMS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Lishu Tang

December 2020

© 2020 Lishu Tang

ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of Chinese independent films in the late 1980s, documentarians in China have shown great interest in exploring, disclosing, and registering the population at the lowest rung of Chinese society via their cameras. While scholars like Yiman Wang praise documentaries for raising public attention to the Chinese subaltern class' interests, I hold the opposite idea and argue that documentaries and filmmakers generally fail to achieve the goal of "giving a voice to the voiceless." In my thesis, I focus on two Chinese documentary films, Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue's *Iron Moon* (2015) and Fan Jian's *Still Tomorrow* (2016). By looking at visual evidence from close examination of cinematic scenes, focusing on textual evidence provided by the poetry written by the subaltern poets (both inside and outside the films), and analyzing the intentions and the effects of the filmmakers' arrangements, including the composition, cutting, editing, and costuming, I argue that the migrant worker poets and Yu Xiuhua in the two films are portrayed as weak, manipulated, and stigmatized, and that they become the victims or servants of the camera. Moreover, by discussing different modes of documentary film-making, I show how Qin, Wu, and Fan's involvement in *Iron Moon* and *Still Tomorrow* respectively reinforce the subaltern poets' powerlessness.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In 2015, Lishu Tang gained her BA in English from Birmingham Southern College. From 2016-2017, Tang studied comparative literature, Chinese literature and cinema at Postbaccalaureate program of Columbia University. From 2018-2020, Tang pursued her MA in Asian Studies at Cornell University, where she did research on the Chinese subaltern class in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and cinema.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor and committee member Professor Nick Admussen, who gave me precious advice and suggestions for my MA thesis. I want to show great appreciation for my vice committee member, Professor Andrew Campana, who confirmed my project when it was emergent and provided me with many helpful reading materials. My writing skills would not have improved without the support from various people, including one of my former professors at Columbia, who was always there to help when I struggled with my writing. As a graduate student, I have benefitted hugely from the Writing Center Service provided by Cornell. It is the assistance from the writing tutors that helps me perform better in my class and grow more confident in my academic writing. Finally, I am also very grateful to my parents, who have always supported my education and allow me to make free decisions for my life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
PART I:	
<i>Iron Moon</i> (2015): Text and Context	3
Alienation and Suppression in Factory Life	4
The Challenge of Defending Yi Ethnic Identity and Culture	8
The Denial of the Poet's Identity and the Contempt for Poetry Writing	12
The Filmmakers' Manipulation Over the Deceased Subject	15
PART II:	
Yu Xiuhua in <i>Still Tomorrow</i> (2016)	18
Yu as the Voiceless Who Fails to Defend Herself	22
Representing Yu's Fragility with the Assistance of Video Clips: A Life Overshadowed by Disability	25
PART III:	
A comparison between <i>Iron Moon</i> and <i>Still Tomorrow</i>	32
Conclusion	36
Bibliography	40

Swallowing an Iron Moon and Eating a Persimmon: Chinese Subaltern Poets in Documentary Films

Introduction

The Chinese subaltern class – a group of people that belong to “the bottom of the pile” or “the lowest rung of society” (Sun 2014: 11) – have been portrayed frequently in Chinese documentary films since the emergence of independent films in the late 1980s. Inspired by the Tiananmen Movement and shocked by the ensuing massacre in June 1989, a group of independent filmmakers decided to explore and understand China’s society from top to bottom; their focus on “a more grassroots perspective” (Edwards 2015: 28), ordinary people’s normal lives, including subaltern people’s daily experiences, became a major theme in documentaries and feature films. Filmmakers who record and present underprivileged people’s lives are commonly seen as benefactors or even saviors – they either draw public attention to this group or alleviate their pain and suffering. For example, the scholar Yiman Wang argues for the moral significance of the emergence of amateur DV documentary-makers. Calling them “a hybrid of social ethnographers and social realists” in postsocialist China, Wang eulogizes documentarians for “bringing subaltern interests into public consciousness, thereby producing an alternative strategy of representation and articulation” (Wang 2005: 24). On the contrary, critics like Pooja Rangan hold a pessimistic attitude towards documentary work. She not only rejects the belief that documentaries “giv[e] a voice to the voiceless,” but also criticizes them for what she sees as their crime of exploiting the disenfranchised and the powerless;

furthermore, by asserting that “endangered, dehumanized life not only sustains documentary, but supplies its *raison d’être*,” Rangan discloses and stresses the reversed role of the filmed subalterns – they are transformed into contributors who serve and bring success to documentaries, sometimes at the expense of sacrificing themselves (Rangan 2017:1).

Like Rangan, I argue that documentarians often betray, whether deliberately or unintentionally, the declared goal of defending and empowering the underprivileged. In this thesis, I will focus on two Chinese documentary films: *Iron Moon* (2015), filmed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue, and *Still Tomorrow* (2016), filmed by Fan Jian. I am going to study how the subaltern characters in these works are portrayed as weak, manipulated, and stigmatized, and how they become the victims or servants of the camera. In my research, I have chosen to look within the films and texts themselves. My analysis mainly uses three methodologies. First, I will center on visual evidence from close examination of cinematic scenes. Second, I will focus on textual evidence provided by the poetry written by the subaltern poets (both inside and outside the films). Third, I will discuss the intentions and the effects of the filmmakers’ arrangements, including the composition, cutting, editing, and costuming.

Iron Moon and *Still Tomorrow* distinguish themselves from a great number of conventional Chinese documentary films that merely chronicle the life and work experiences of subaltern figures. These two works also demonstrate the subaltern populations’ poetic writing practices. Composing and publishing poems have been

considered activities that are limited to intellectuals who possess “leisure time” and “cultural capital” (Sun 2014: 186). Cinematic exhibitions of subaltern poets are extremely rare in the history of Chinese documentary filming, because the subaltern group are considered as belonging to the lower social class and stereotyped as not well-educated (or even as illiterate) people who spend most of their time striving for basic survival.

***Iron Moon* (2015): Text and Context**

Also called *The Verse of Us* (*wo de shipian*), *Iron Moon* portrays six representative migrant worker poets from a variety of social backgrounds, including Xu Lizhi (1990-2014, an assembly line worker from Guangdong), Wu Niaoniao (b. 1981, a forklift driver from Guangdong), Jike Ayou (b. 1985, a down coat filler from Sichuan), Chen Nianxi (b. 1970, a demolition worker from Shanxi), Wu Xia (b. 1982, a garment factory worker from Sichuan), and Lao Jing (b. 1968, a coal miner from Jiangsu). Among them, the former Foxconn worker Xu Lizhi is the only poet who does not actually participate in the shooting due to his suicide in September 2014. The directors thus included Xu’s archives in the film. They also invited his brother Xu Hongzhi to perform a poetry recital.

In China, millions of rural residents choose to migrate to urban areas because they feel the need to mitigate their family poverty or they dream of achieving individual development and success (Tan, 2004, Cai et al., 2009; cited in Zhong and Arnett 2018: 123-24). Like those rural migrants, the protagonists in *Iron Moon* have to leave their hometowns and travel great distances to unfamiliar lands to make a living. However, while they do very laborious and dangerous work, they often receive meager payment or

no remuneration due to wage theft; while they desire to be included in the urban community, they are branded as outsiders (*wai di ren*) who cannot enjoy the same rights as city residents with *hukou* registrations. *Iron Moon* depicts the subaltern subjects in a sympathetic way. Through focusing on various challenges and struggles the worker poets encounter in their daily practices, the directors Qin and Wu leave the impression on the audience that the migrant workers are the oppressed, the marginalized, and the fragile who fail to substantially change their circumstances.

Alienation and Suppression in Factory Life

In *Iron Moon*, Wu Xia is depicted as an individual who suffers from both physical and mental torture as a result of repetitious and painstaking work in the garment factory of Shenzhen, a place where she had spent nineteen years at the time of the documentary's production. In the eyes of Qin and Wu's camera, Wu becomes an exploited object whose life is bound to ironing, sewing, and packaging clothes day and night. For example, one extreme long shot of the film shows Wu is working in the workshop during an extra night shift, as usual. Standing among piles of clothes, Wu seems to melt into her surroundings, making her body hard to recognize. As the camera gradually moves forward, we see Wu is concentrating on her work ironing a plum sundress. This is followed by a close-up, with Wu's enlarged face occupying the screen. Her expression is one of exhaustion, and her face and hair have been soaked with the sweat caused by the steam from the hot iron and the sultry summer air.

In the documentary, the workshop Wu works is compared to a prison that locks her

up. During work hours, Wu is no longer an independent individual; instead, she is similar to a criminal who is forced to obey the rigorous discipline set by her boss. And she is deprived of the freedom to engage the outside world. Wu is also prevented from wearing her own clothes – a symbol of her inability to pursue beauty as a female. The discomfort of tolerating isolation and loneliness as well as the frustration of hiding femininity are also vividly displayed in Wu’s “Sundress 吊带裙,” a poem that is recited by Wu in the opening sequence of her part of the film.

Sundress¹

The packing area is flooded with light
the iron I’m holding collects
all the warmth of my hands

I want to press the straps flat
so they won’t dig into your shoulders when you wear it
and then press up from the waist
a lovely waist

where someone can lay a fine hand

吊带裙

包装车间灯火通明
我手握电熨斗
集聚我所有的手温

我要先把吊带熨平
挂在你肩上不会勒疼你
然后从腰身开始熨起
多么可爱的腰身
可以安放一只白净的手
林荫道上
轻抚一种安静的爱情
最后把裙裾展开
我要把每个皱褶的宽度熨得都相等
让你在湖边 或者草坪上
等待风吹
像花儿一样

¹ The poem “Sundress” is translated from Chinese into English by Eleanor Goodman. See Wu, Xia. “Sundress” in *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Worker Poetry*, edited by Xiaoyu Qin, translated by Eleanor Goodman, New York: White Pine Press, pp.165, 2017. Print.

and on the tree-shaded lane
caress a quiet kind of love
last I'll smooth the dress out to iron the pleats to equal widths
so you can sit by a lake or on a grassy lawn
and wait for a breeze like a flower

而我要下班了
我要洗一洗汗湿的厂服
吊带裙它将被运出车间
走向某个时尚的店面
等待唯一的你

陌生的姑娘
我爱你

Soon when I get off work
I'll wash my sweaty uniform
and the sundress will be packed and shipped to a fashionable store
it will wait just for you

unknown girl

I love you (Wu 2017: 165)

While readers tend to be impressed by the poet's optimistic attitude towards her hard life, it is also worth noting the unconquerable sorrow and struggle hidden beneath her surface enthusiasm. I interpret "Sundress 吊带裙" as a poem in which Wu tries to reach out to the external world to assuage her sense of solitude during working hours, but ultimately ends up failing to do so. In the poem, Wu imagines she is paired with an unknown girl, a potential consumer of the sundress that she is working on. She not only patiently describes how she fabricates and cares for sundresses but also expresses her

love and passion to the visualized girl. Instead of perceiving herself as a stranger who prepares a dress for a consumer, Wu takes the role of a deliverer of blessings: she wishes this sundress will bring its future owner elegance, romance, and happiness. In this way, Wu attempts to emphasize her association with the world outside the factory that is represented by the unknown girl. However, Wu's effort to develop a friendship with this imaginary figure, which might also be understood as an attempt to create solidarity between producer and consumer in order to oppose the dictates of owners, does not succeed. Whereas Wu expresses her deep thoughts and strong affections, the virtual girl who is supposed to interact with Wu remains totally silent throughout the poem. Even if Wu passionately asserts "I love you," the girl does not utter a word, nor does she show any emotions, as if she cannot hear.

"Sundress 吊带裙" is filled with references to inhuman control and exploitation over the female body, and it demonstrates Wu's resilience and submission as a powerless factory worker. As shown in the film, Wu's body is not just detained in the workshop; it is also constrained in the factory uniform – a loose, light blue, short-sleeved shirt designed for both male and female workers. According to Wu in the documentary, she dislikes the uniform very much because "[it] doesn't show [her] figure, let alone the shape of [her] waist." Wu's pursuit of beauty is a gendered part of her nature, and she feels upset when she is forced to wear the same clothes every day. Even though Wu is attracted to various types of sundresses, she hardly gets a chance to wear them. And the only moment she can put on a sundress is when she gets off work in the early morning; quietly smuggled from

her dormitory into the public bathroom, Wu, in her colorful sundress, felt satisfied even if only she herself and the mirror were watching. The “sweaty uniform” that appears in both the poem and the film restrains and tortures Wu; it transforms her into something without individual characteristics. Wu’s female body is treated as a machine or a tool that produces profits for the factory owner. To Wu, putting on a sundress might be equal to liberating her body from the restrictions imposed by the factory uniform, even though it is not a resolution but simply a temporary escape and preparation for the next round of physical exploitation. Despite Wu’s disgust for the unattractive uniforms, the documentary never shows her in any other clothes as she performs on stage. This indicates that the filmmakers have imposed another round of abuse on Wu’s female body, which I will also discuss in the comparison part of my thesis.

The Challenge of Defending Yi Ethnic Identity and Culture

As a result of displacement, many migrant workers become members of alienated and marginalized communities. They are not embraced by the cities in which they are located: as a group of rural *hukou* holders with little opportunity to acquire permanent urban residence, migrant workers fail to grow “a sense of belonging” in the strange lands (Sun 2010: 294). At the same time, they are segregated from their native places that could provide comfort, since they are prevented from returning there by economic or social pressures (Sun 2010: 300).

Iron Moon especially foregrounds the ethnic minority poet Jike Ayou’s very ambiguous position caused by relocation – he not only becomes alienated from his own

culture as a Yi but also fails to assimilate to the unified Han culture. Drifting through cities that have long been dominated by Han culture, Ayou is physically and spiritually distant from the Yi village and Yi people. For example, he does not have sufficient opportunities to speak his mother tongue, practice religious ceremonies, or wear traditional clothing like he does in his hometown. This creates Ayou's sense of self-doubt and self-denial as an authentic Yi individual. Like the scholar Yuxiang Wang who claims that "[l]anguage use, culture, history, religion, and shared ancestors are important factors in determining identity" (Wang 2013: 9), Ayou also insists on the concept that a Yi person's good command of his/her indigenous culture guarantees his/her Yi identity. Acknowledging himself as someone who does not know how to practice Yi rituals, who fails to retain Yi people's conventional eating and living habits, and who is accustomed to speaking Mandarin instead of Yi dialect², Ayou gives up defending his genuine Yi identity. This is manifested in the line "I pretend I'm still a real Yi 我谎称自己仍然是彝人" in his "Yi Year 彝年," a poem describing Ayou's regret at his estrangement from the Yi community and culture, which is also discussed in the following passage. Furthermore, Ayou feels he is excluded from Han communities. Hence, he labels himself as an "acquired cultural mongrel" (*houtian wenhua zazhong*)³ and recognizes himself as an identity-less individual who is consistently disturbed by his indeterminate status and

² See Chen Wei's report on Jike Ayou. "只有写诗, 是他们人生里有点诗意的事情."
<http://www.fx361.com/page/2015/0514/6530125.shtml>

³ See Chen Wei's report on Jike Ayou. "只有写诗, 是他们人生里有点诗意的事情."
<http://www.fx361.com/page/2015/0514/6530125.shtml>

position.

While being a migrant worker conflicts with Ayou's Yi ethnic identity, pursuing a migrant life further challenges the collective identity of Yi people. As specified in the documentary, it has become a trend for the young Yi generation to leave the village to seek wealth and prosperity in megacities. However, the absence of young people has significantly damaged the cultural vibrancy of the Yi community, as the elders of Yi can no longer find proper successors to pass down their cultural heritage. The anxiety of the possible disappearance of Yi tradition has been expressed in Ayou's poem "Yi Year 彝年," which is also performed by him in the documentary.

Yi Year⁴

The cactus on the top of the wall, living hard like the Yi village

It keeps the thorn of my childhood, the thorn of my mom's
death

The verses written by me on the wall of the old house
buffeted by wind and rain, already blurred and become the
traces of our nationality

All the returning days are Yi Years, elders urge me to drink

The niece dreaming of working in the city keeps pestering me

彝年

墙头的仙人掌，像彝寨一样艰难地活着
保留着我童年的刺，阿妈亡故的刺
那些我写在老屋外墙上的诗句
被雨打风吹，已模糊成了我们民族的踪迹
所有归来的日子都是彝年，长辈劝酒
做着打工梦的侄女缠着我
做一场反诅咒的仪式越来越难了
逮只小猪转转脑壳容易，却请不到真正的毕摩
我谎称自己仍然是彝人，谎称晚辈都已到齐
但愿先祖还在，还认得我们穿过的旧衣

⁴ The first three stanzas of the poem "Yi Year" are translated by me from Chinese to English. The last two stanzas are quoted from the documentary *Iron Moon*.

It's harder and harder to do rites to lift curses

It's easy to spin a piglet's skull, but not to find a real shaman

I pretend I'm still a real Yi, pretend the younger generation is all here

If only the ancestors were still with us, and still recognize the old clothes we wear

Ayou's poem "Yi Year 彝年" looks like an elegy. In it, he mourns the unfavorable situation of Yi culture, which is compared to a cactus that is struggling to survive in a harsh environment. However, unlike the cactus that can continue to thrive without special care, the Yi nationality might face the risk of damage and erasure if left without enough attention and protection by descendants. For example, Ayou's niece in the poem and the Yi girl in the documentary are very obsessed with a migrant life that strikes them as new, and they fail to realize or take their responsibility for preserving the ancestors' cultural legacy. As the poem "Yi Year 彝年" implies, migrant life brings much less prosperity to the Yi villagers than they might have expected; instead, it is potentially destroying the energetic core of the Yi community. Nevertheless, Ayou and the villagers do not have enough power to change such a situation. They are forced to accept the pain of cultural loss. Such weakness and passivity are fully expressed in "Yi Year 彝年," in which Ayou, the speaker, becomes a sufferer who witnesses and records the tragedy of the Yi community rather than an activist who uses his language as a weapon to protect or revive Yi culture. As a result, Ayou's performance of his poem "Yi Year 彝年" in the documentary vividly demonstrates his powerlessness at resisting the cultural diminishment brought about by migrant life, a mortal threat to the entire Yi nationality.

The Denial of the Poet's Identity and the Contempt for Poetry Writing

Migrant workers struggle to receive official acknowledgement as genuine poets. They are given the title of “*dagong* poets,” or “migrant worker poets,” in Chinese literary circles. And such a label does not convey pure confirmation – rather, implies deep stigmatization. It highlights the particularity of this group of poets – they are grassroots writers who have been differentiated from other conventional poets not simply because they compose poems with *dagong* subjects but also because of their insufficient literary talents or skills in the eyes of specific literary elites (Sun 2014: 203). For example, critics such as Xie Mian, a professor at the Chinese Literature Department of Beijing University, argued in the 2007 *Dagong* Literature Forum that *dagong* writers were required to meet literary standards by abandoning and removing coarse and sorrowful elements from their work;⁵ recently, Xie Youshun, a professor at the Chinese Literature Department of Sun Yat-sen University implied in a 2017 literature conference that the public should be lenient about the “very coarse” and “inferior” *dagong* literature.⁶ These scholarly reviews perfectly respond to Sun’s finding that *dagong* writers are often seen as connected with negative vocabularies such as “coarse,” “grassroots,” and “primitive”; while poetry created by migrant workers is praised for its social significance, it often has been denied aesthetic value (Sun 2014: 204; Crevel 2019: 138). Such top-down judgment

⁵ See essay “[记录]11月22日，出席“第三届打工文学论坛”的部分学者专家的言论”。
http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4a3e667f01000elv.html

⁶ See essay “峰会 | 专家学者共话构建粤港澳大湾区文学新生态” published online
<http://www.gdzuoxie.com/v/201801/8227.html>

indicates that the majority of migrant workers have been deprived of their reputations as real poets, and many of them end up as marginalized writers who are kept out of elite-dominated literary circles.

In addition to disinterest and criticisms from the elite side, migrant worker poets also confront denigration and exclusion by the public. As part of the underclass who have been stereotyped as uncivilized and ignorant, migrant workers often fail to convince other people of their poet identities or literary capacities. The scene about Wu Niaoniao looking for a position as a literary editor in the crowded human resource market best illustrates this. In it, the camera witnesses and records the situation it has created –condescending judgements towards Wu. Probably wanting to make themselves look “good” in front of the camera, the employers in the job market try to educate and edify Wu, who appears to be a naïve and idealistic man that needs to be enlightened. The employers in the film attempt to save Wu through discouraging, belittling, or denying him; none of them appreciate Wu’s work after they read it or listen to his on-site recitation. Moreover, instead of respecting Wu’s poetic pursuits and artistic aspirations, they criticize his writing activities as illusory and meaningless.

In general, Wu’s poetry is assessed as lacking aesthetic, social, and economic significance. For example, one woman at the hiring fair who personally favors literature with happy themes denounces Wu’s poems as too pessimistic and replete with darkness and evil; and other employers emphasize the futility of Wu’s poetry because it cannot make money. Moreover, Wu’s identity as poet is denied by others. During a conversation

with an older male employer, even after Wu introduces himself as a writer who can compose poems, the man still identifies Wu as a forklift driver. After informing Wu that the company has no openings for the position that Wu is seeking, the employer does not end the interview but begins a personal conversation. On the surface, he pretends to be very humble, confessing that he lacks the ability to understand Wu's poems due to his deficient education; nevertheless, his look – filled with subtle disdain and derision – as well as his lecturing tone all suggest that he might be mocking Wu as a poorly educated migrant worker who is trapped in an impractical dream of being a famous poet. In Wu's case, while the camera seems to be a silent or neutral bystander, it has played the role of evoking, catching, and proving the public's prejudice towards migrant worker poets.

Another essential fact that the documentary does not disclose is that migrant worker poets are further challenged by exclusion from their peers at work. The worker poets are immersed in an environment where the majority of their colleagues seek fun through computer games, pop music, and gambling during their leisure time and lack interest in reading migrant-worker literature, which is seen as being as boring as their daily job (Sun 2014: 189, 208). Hence, the workers who choose reading and writing as an approach to entertainment seem quite alien. They face the risk of segregation, since their writing practices are not embraced but are unfavored or disdained by their coworkers. Worker-poets' engagement in literary creation, as Sun argues, signifies a betrayal of their current worker status; once the rural migrants start to speak in a poetic language that is unintelligible or unfamiliar to their colleagues, they are deemed to no longer fit their

subaltern identity, nor are they accepted as members of the worker community (Sun 2014: 187). In other words, worker-poets' passion for literature is considered as an escape from or rejection of the lower social class to which they originally belong. This causes discomfort and anxiety among their counterparts, who might regard themselves as subordinate or inferior. Consequently, while some migrant worker writers strive to speak out about their individual and class needs, they are subject to misunderstanding, discouragement, and exclusion from their worker peers.

The Filmmakers' Manipulation Over the Deceased Subject

Even though the Foxconn worker poet Xu Lizhi (1990-2014) had already passed away when *Iron Moon* was filmed, he nevertheless plays a central visual role in the film. The filmmakers' portrayal of Xu is controversial, because it breaks the ethical principle of documentary production. Qin and Wu do not succeed in obtaining permission from Xu. This not only results from the restrictions of reality – there is no possibility of asking Xu's opinion since he has committed suicide – but also from the fact that Xu once rejected Qin's invitation to be filmed when he was still alive (the reason Xu gave was that he had stopped writing poetry).⁷ Therefore, Qin and Wu are blamed for lacking ethics since they fail to obey the principle of “informed consent,” an essential step in work and research related to anthropology, sociology, and medicine which is also widely applied in

⁷See “秦晓宇：《我的诗篇》诗意征程(组图)”
<http://news.163.com/15/0629/08/AT8VQU9D00014Q4P.html?f=jsearch>

documentary filming. This first requires the filmmaker to inform the subjects of the potential results they may face in advance of soliciting their agreement to participate (Nichols 2017: 10). The documentarians Qin and Wu choose to ignore Xu's unwillingness to be filmed, and they might believe it is their privilege to reproduce Xu's image as long as they gain approval from his family. In this way, Qin and Wu mistakenly and deliberately equate Xu's family members' feelings with Xu's personal preference; they ignore and abandon Xu's own wish and impose others' desires (including those of the directors and Xu's family) on him.

Although Xu is ostensibly featured for his poetry and his writing talent, Qin and Wu sensationalize and focus on Xu's death. As the documentary critic Bill Nichols' argues: "filmmakers who set out to represent people whom they do not initially know but who typify or have special knowledge of a problem or issue of interest run the risk of exploiting them" (Nichols 2017: 9). Under the influence of the "cult of poetry,"⁸ a cultural phenomenon in contemporary China that refers to the public's obsession and fanaticism regarding with poet-suicides like Haizi, the death of Xu immediately stimulated great general interest, as was shown by the overwhelming public comments and news reports centering on the topic of Xu. Like Haizi, who committed a "young and violent" suicide – "a powerful mix" led by the combination of "creation and (self)-destruction" (Crevel 2008: 94), Xu also wrote about death consistently up until his

⁸ See Yeh, Michelle. "The "Cult of Poetry" in Contemporary China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55.1 (1996): 51-80. Print.

suicide. Even though the director Qin indicates that he is amazed by Xu's work rather than attracted to his suicide, and that he wants to film Xu because his poetic genius makes him stand out from other migrant worker poets,⁹ the abundant depictions of Xu's death in his documentary disprove this claim. Xu had composed nearly two hundred poems with diverse themes including love, dreams, and nostalgia. However, Qin selects and presents those with a death motif such as "On My Deathbed 我弥留之际," "I Know There Will Be One Day 我知道会有那么一天," and "A Screw Plunges to the Ground — 一颗螺丝掉在地上." While the scholar Barbara Herrnstein Smith believes that poetry is a form of art that contains the quality of "fictiveness" (Smith 1971: 259), Qin attempts to prove poetry can be real and authentic. He chooses Xu's poems "On My Deathbed 我弥留之际," in which Xu says farewell to this world, and "I Know There Will Be One Day 我知道会有那么一天," in which Xu describes others tidying the room where he stayed when he was alive. In this way, Qin makes Xu a prophet who predicts his own fate.

It is evident that the directors rarely wasted any opportunity to take advantage of Xu to promote their film both domestically and globally. Even though Xu is not the film's main protagonist, everything related to him is given great emphasis. For instance, one of the English-language titles of the documentary *Iron Moon* is borrowed from Xu's poem named "I Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron 我吞下一枚铁做的月亮." Also, Xu is the only person who is shown in the promotional poster. On it, his face is enlarged, made to

⁹ See the interview " [专访] 这部讲述“工人诗人”的纪录片，剑指第 89 届奥斯卡" <https://107cine.com/stream/78169>

be part of the moon, and hanging in a dark sky; below his portrait is the Shenzhen Foxconn factory where he once worked. These examples all suggest that Xu's poetry and his image have been used as a strategy of propagation and advertisement.

Besides benefiting from Xu's death, Qin and Wu applies, interprets, and distorts Xu's poetry with excessive freedom and authority. The verse "Terracotta Army on the Assembly Line 流水线上的兵马俑" is a typical example of how Qin altered a poem's content without acquiring the author's authorization. In his original lines, Xu listed his and his colleagues' real names (Xia Qiu, Zhang Zifeng, Xiao Peng, Li Xiaoding, Tang Xiumeng, Lei Lanjiao, etc) to reveal the pain of life on the assembly line. However, the poem displayed in the documentary is a new version. In it, Qin substitutes the names of Xu's coworkers with the names of other subjects of the documentary: Wu Xia, Chen Nianxi, Laojing, Jike Ayou, and so on. Such arbitrary alteration betrays Xu's wish to expose the mistreatment of the workers around him, and it satisfies the director Qin's hope of raising the plight of representative migrant workers (whom Xu was unfamiliar with or even never knew) in *Iron Moon*. In order to achieve the desired cinematic effect, Qin distorts and transforms Xu's original lines to make them compatible with his own work.

Yu Xiuhua in *Still Tomorrow* (2016)

Unlike *Iron Moon*, which registers the experiences of a group of subalterns, Fan Jian's documentary film *Still Tomorrow* concentrates on Yu Xiuhua (1976-), one of the most successful poets in contemporary China. Yu has caught the attention of the public

not only because of her genius in poetry composition but also due to her personal background: she is a disabled woman born into a poor farming family in the village of Hengdian in Hubei province. Since Yu became well-known overnight for her poem “Crossing Over Half of China to Sleep with You 穿越大半个中国去睡你” in 2014, she has been consistently labeled as a peasant woman poet or as a “brain-paralyzed” poet by multiple official media.¹⁰ My impression, based on the news reports, Yu’s interviews, and people’s comments, is that Yu fails to receive enough understanding and empathy from the public. Instead, she is frequently challenged by various forms of stereotypes targeting her disability. For example, the hostess from the Beijing TV station thought that cerebral palsy (CP) causes damage to Yu’s brain (Xu 2018: 197). Fan’s *Still Tomorrow* seems to be opposing the public’s prejudice towards Yu. By depicting how Yu successfully surmounts obstacles that prevent her from getting a divorce, the film tries to impress the audience with Yu’s courage, perseverance and commitment to personal and emotional freedom. Nonetheless, although Fan ends *Still Tomorrow* on a positive note, the entire film fails to show Yu’s immense cultural power; it centers around Yu’s suffering and struggles as a disabled woman in her family, marriage, and society. The predominant focus on misfortune and bitterness makes Yu’s power almost invisible. In the following section, I will use visual evidence from the film to show how Yu has been disempowered.

¹⁰ Yu Xiuhua has been constantly labeled as a “brain-paralyzed” poet by various official media. For example, in 2016, when Yu was invited to give a speech for Inviting Protagonist (Youqing Zhujuer), a TV show that is produced by Liaoning Television, she was introduced as a “brain-paralyzed” poet (“naotan” shiren). Later in 2018, Yu was invited to give a speech for the Super Speaker (Chaoji Yanshuojia), a TV show that is produced by Anhui Television, and she was again called a “brain-paralyzed” poet (“naotan” shiren). Besides, in various news report, the name Yu Xiuhua often comes along with the adjective “brain-paralyzed.”

Meanwhile, I will also focus on Yu's poetry, some of which appeared in the documentary and substantially amplified the protagonist Yu's tragic situation.

In the documentary, Yu's struggle with her husband Yin Shiping elicits conflict with her parents, especially with her mother Zhou Jinxiang (1953-2016), who had a commanding, almost dictatorial role in Yu's marriage. According to scenes showing a family conversation during the meal and Zhou's interviews with the director Fan, Yu's marriage was arranged by her mother without Yu's permission. Even though Yu is a woman who has great passion for romance and has her own standards for selecting a partner, Zhou believes her daughter is a subordinate and an inferior who cannot successfully find an ideal husband due to her disabled body: she says "If my daughter had been healthy, she could have picked a man she really liked." She assumes that making Yu marry Yin, a man who is thirteen years older than Yu, is a good outcome since the son-in-law "was very healthy" and "had accepted [her] daughter." Like many disabled people who have been stereotyped as "dependent," "passive," and "less competent" (Linton, 1998: 26), Yu is misunderstood by and experiences prejudice from her parent. She has been deprived of the right of making her own decisions, and she has had to submit to her mother's marriage arrangement, which later became a major source of her agony. Such domination over Yu from her family has been delineated in "Marriage 婚姻,"¹¹ a poem in which Yu likens her marriage to a persimmon – a fruit that is picked by her mother

¹¹ The poem is translated by Elise Huerta and Hangping Xu. See "Twelve Poems." *Chinese Literature Today* 7.2 (2018): 6-17. Print.

according to her personal wishes. Yu repeatedly asks her mom why she is given a persimmon, a fruit that signifies marriage and that she is allergic to, but she never receives an answer.

Still Tomorrow portrays Yu as a lonely fighter who pursues a divorce without support from her parents, who continuously and strongly oppose her idea of leaving Yin. It is worth mentioning that Yu's parents are absent in almost every instance where Yu is having arguments with Yin; even if they do show up, it seems they prefer not to get involved in the couple's quarrels. Instead of lending a hand to Yu, they leave their daughter alone and let her digest her sorrow and anger all by herself. For example, in one scene, Yu is having a violent quarrel with her husband Yin in the yard of her house. Yu is angry at Yin for again rejecting her request for a separation, and because he is accusing her of mistreating him. At the same time, the camera shows that Yu's father, who probably has become too familiar with such scenes, is sitting far away on a chair, smoking and watching the verbal abuse between his daughter and son-in-law, as if he is an indifferent onlooker. As the wrangling lasts and becomes fiercer, Yu's mom finally shows up and takes the role of a mediator. At once, Yin starts to complain to his mother-in-law about Yu's fault in instigating the quarrel. But Yu is given no chance to explain herself or to interrupt Yin, nor does she receive any attention from her mother, who is busy listening to Yin's grievances. Consequently, Yu is left alone, frustrated and silent, a loser in an unfair battle. A few seconds later, the camera shows her standing up and getting out of the door, running with faltering steps on the path, as if she is trying to

escape the world, giving the impression that she is one of the voiceless and the helpless.

Unfortunately, Yu's accomplishing of the divorce further increases the conflicts and alienation between mother and daughter. Yu's excitement and happiness after divorcing Yin could not last long; they are soon balanced by mother Zhou's displeasure. In *Still Tomorrow*, the camera quickly cuts from a shot of Yu filled with extreme joy after finishing the divorce registration to another shot of Yu overflowing with grief after failing to obtain her mother's acceptance. In one scene filmed outdoors in the dark, Yu is trying to share her thoughts with her mom, who becomes very upset about her daughter's broken marriage. Zhou keeps her distance and turns her face away from Yu, as if she rejects basic engagement in conversation with her daughter. Even though Yu shows concern for her tearful mother, Zhou is unwilling to open up, nor does she have any interest in responding to Yu's questions. After a long period of silence, Zhou accuses Yu of being "cold-hearted" and then walks away. Fan's camera shows that Yu is left there alone; as I see it, her face is filled with sadness. It is very ironic that Yu's happiness becomes the source of Zhou's pain. Her fulfillment of the dream of separation with Yin challenges the family relationship. Finding no approach that will lead to her mother's appreciation or backing, Yu is forced to let the discord last.

Yu as the Voiceless Who Fails to Defend Herself

Still Tomorrow presents Yu as a voiceless individual who fails to defend herself, especially when she encounters judgment and criticism from people like her husband. Indeed, the filmmaker Fan provides Yin with a lot of opportunities to speak up for

himself. The documentary is composed of multiple moments when Yin complains to others about his wife. For example, while Yin is having a meal with his friends, he blames Yu for her bad morality. He claims that Yu looks down upon him and chose to abandon him after she became wealthy and famous. In addition, Yin also makes an effort to present a good image of himself throughout the film. For example, in the conversation with his mother-in-law, Yin argues that he is a responsible husband who works hard to support his family; he also emphasizes his great love and care for Yu since he “bought her new clothes and never spent on [himself].” However, although *Still Tomorrow* frequently displays Yu’s resentment and curses towards Yin, the reason behind Yu’s attitude and action is slightly ambiguous. That is, unlike Yu’s poetry which straightforwardly discloses Yin as an abusive and inconsiderate partner who causes her both mental and physical harm, the film rarely allows Yu to go into details about how Yin has disappointed her (although in the poem “My Dog, Little Wu 我养的狗，叫小巫” she expresses her opinion of Yin’s behavior), nor is Yu able to refute Yin’s subjective claims. For example, although Yu explains during her interviews and on her Weibo that she never depends on Yin’s money for a living, the director does not clarify this in the documentary. However, while Yu generally remains silent in the face of Yin’s condemnations and biased words, Yin is endowed with the privilege to deny or oppose the criticisms made by Yu. For example, Fan shoots the spectacle of Yin trying to prevent Yu from falling on the rugged road in the darkness: he lends his hand to support Yu and gently reminds her to “watch [her] step.” Such an action by Yin directly disproves Yu’s earlier accusation that

Yin is an indifferent person who “never came to walk with [her], to hold [her]... [And] would laugh at [her] if [she] fell.” Also, in one sequence, Yu quotes the lines from her poem “My Dog, Little Wu 我养的狗，叫小巫” to denounce Yin’s disrespect for and humiliation of her female body as well as his disloyalty to the marriage:

He said there is a woman in Beijing

他说在北京有一个女人

prettier than me. When he’s not working, they go dancing

比我好看。没有活路的时候，他们就去跳舞

他喜欢跳舞的女人

he likes the dancing women

喜欢看她们的屁股摇来摇去

他说，她们会叫床，声音好听。不像我一声不吭

还总是蒙着脸

likes to watch their butts swing over and over

he said, they know how to moan and groan, in a sweet voice. Unlike me, without a

sound

always covering my face

Nonetheless, in the later part of the film, Yin responds to Yu’s poetic accusation by putting the blame on her; he suggests that it is actually Yu’s fault since she fails to satisfy him sexually, and thus his hurtful words or behaviors are excusable.

Yin’s incessant self-defense or justification effectively help him gain a group of people’s support both within and outside the film, while Yu’s relative silence places her in a very disadvantageous position – she is too passive to fight against the stigmatization and stereotype that others inflict upon her. Going back to the meal scene mentioned above, a middle-aged man, who might be Yin’s colleague, expresses strong sympathy for Yin after hearing his complaints. To him, Yu is a woman with moral defects; she is heartless and ungrateful since she does not appreciate Yin’s kindness in having accepted

to be her husband; Yin is an innocent and generous man who condescends to marry a disabled woman. Such conception presupposes that Yin is a noble man who sacrifices himself to be with Yu, a woman with physical flaws. It also reflects ableism: Yu is prejudicially considered unequal to someone like Yin with a sound body. Here, however, instead of protecting Yu from being attacked, Fan's camera seems to be complicit with the men present in the scene; it excludes Yu and silently witnesses her being judged and censured in a world dominated by males.

Outside the film, Yin convinces a group of spectators that he is the benefactor and the victim in the marriage, and Yu is the beneficiary and the manipulator who dominates and benefits from Yin. Besides the various forms of revulsion towards Yu from the internet since the release of *Still Tomorrow*, audiences also actively advocate for Yin. Some netizens on Douban, a Chinese social media platform that allows the public to rate and comment films and books, bemoan Yin's bitter fate. They are sure that Yin is the victim of an arrangement decided by Yu's family; to Yu, he is just "a gift" sent by her mother Zhou. They say that a man who has spent twenty years of his life supporting Yu and her family does not deserve unfair treatment, nor should he be thrown away by Yu like an undesired toy. This suggests that *Still Tomorrow* stimulates a group of audiences' passion for protesting on behalf of Yin. Unfortunately, as a voiceless figure who is often presented through Yin's perspective, Yu's needs are ignored by the director.

Representing Yu's Fragility with the Assistance of Video Clips: A Life

Overshadowed by Disability

Still Tomorrow might be seen as a collection of various video clips about Yu. That is, in addition to delineating Yu's weak condition via his own camera or from his viewpoint, Fan also displays Yu herself recognizing the torture and misery of being a disabled woman in front of other people's cameras. For example, Fan includes the video clip showing Yu giving a lecture from a stage. In it, Yu indicates that she is heavily disturbed by cerebral palsy. She poignantly and bitterly states: "My life is a life of struggles with disabilities." Yu believes owning a disabled body can be "devastating." As a little child, she was convinced by the shaman that cerebral palsy was a result of her bad deeds in her previous life. Such a conclusion brought significant mental pressure to Yu. Even after she grows into an adult, the trauma still remains. Yu's confession reminds us of her poem "I Please This World with Pains 我以疼痛取悦这个人世," in which she depicts her fragility and desperation as a person living with disability.

I Please This World with Pains¹²

我以疼痛取悦这个人世

My body is old, when I notice it for the first time, there is
no way to turn back time

当我注意到我身体的时候，它已经老了，无力回天了
许多部位交换着疼：胃，胳膊，腿，手指，

Many parts of it start to ache: the stomach, the arms, the
legs, the fingers

我怀疑我在这个世界作恶多端，
对开过花朵恶语相向
我怀疑我钟情于黑夜，轻视了清晨

I suspect that I have done many evil deeds in this world

还好，
一些疼痛是可以省略的：被遗弃，被孤独，被长久的荒凉收留
这些，我羞于启齿：我真的对他们，
爱得不够

¹² The poem is translated into English by Xinlu Yan. Yan, Xinlu. "Four Poems by Yu Xiuhua," *Transference*: Vol. 6:1 (2018):72-78. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol6/iss1/16>

Speaking harsh words to the withered flowers. I suspect I have favored the nights
and despised the mornings

But it's okay after all, some pains are negligible: Being abandoned, being made
lonely

Being adopted by a long desolation

These, I am too embarrassed to say: I haven't truly

Loved them enough

The poem puts an emphasis on physical weakness and spiritual alienation. Although Yu was only in her 30s when she wrote the poem, she indicated that she already had a very weak body. Finding no solution to improve her condition, Yu has to accept and tolerate her many kinds of pain. When Yu tries to explore the origins of her cerebral palsy in the second stanza, the poem suddenly turns into a court, and Yu herself becomes a judge. She looks to her past misbehaviors and charges herself with very romantic crimes that are not real – curses at wilted flowers and the preference for nights. Even though Yu demonstrates her innocence, she does not choose to fight against the stigma or the unfair retribution. Announcing “it's okay,” Yu pretends she can digest those pains by herself. However, the lines “I haven't truly 我真的对他们/ Loved them enough 爱得不够” in the last stanza indicate Yu's failed attempt at embracing the hurts she has experienced. As a result, Yu cannot adjust her mentality or deal with disappointment. Thus her sufferings

continue.

Fan selects another video clip showing Yu addressing the challenge of pursuing romance as a disabled woman. As far as Yu is concerned, love is one of the most significant things in her life. Lacking experience of true love makes Yu self-abasing; she disdains herself and acknowledges that “I’ve always been a failure.” Sadly, although Yu desires a partner very much, “love is so far away,” and no matter how much effort she makes, she ultimately fails. Yu’s persistence and passion as well as her poignancy and bitterness in the process of seeking a romance are prevalent in her many poems with love themes. “Every Spring, I Will Sing 每个春天，我都会唱歌” is a typical poem that portrays how disability becomes an unresolvable obstacle while chasing love.

Every Spring, I Will Sing¹³

Every spring I will sing, watch clouds from the south
When the breeze is lighter, it will be a real spring
On the ridge alone, dandelions embrace the little flame
Running in spring, running to the outside of the village
But he cannot hear my song
I always want to call him, I have so many things that haven’t

每个春天，我都会唱歌

每个春天我都会唱歌，看云朵从南来
风再轻一点，就是真正的春天了
一个人在田埂上，蒲公英抱着小小的火焰
在春天里奔跑，一直跑到村外
而我的歌声他是听不到的
我总想给他打电话，我有许多话没说
一朵花开的时间太短，一个春天驻足的日子太少
他喊：我听不清楚，听不清楚
他听不清楚一个脑瘫人口齿不清的表白
那么多人经过春天，那么多花在打开
他猜不出我在说什么
但是，每个春天我都会唱歌
歌声在风里摇曳的样子，忧伤又甜蜜

¹³ This poem is translated from Chinese into English by me.

talked about

The time that a flower blossoms is too short, the days that a spring stays are too few

He shouts: I can't hear clearly, can't hear clearly

He can't clearly hear the inarticulate confession of love from a person with cerebral palsy

So many people passed by spring, so many flowers are opening

He cannot guess what I am saying

But, every spring I will sing

The song sways in the wind, distressing and sweet

In this poem, Yu compares the persistence of singing to the consistency of pursuing a partner. To Yu, love might be like planting. She chooses to sing in the vibrant and hopeful spring, an action which resembles sowing the seed of love in the ground. Unfortunately, Yu is not rewarded with the fruit of love, since her effort does not pay her back. The singing, though brimming with passion and affection, fails to attract the man Yu loves. The repetitious assertion of "I can't hear clearly, can't hear clearly 我听不清楚, 听不清楚" from the man indicates the boundary between the two individuals. Due to the impact of the cerebral palsy, Yu is unable to articulate the thing she wants to express. This prevents her from being heard or understood by the man, and ultimately leads the communication to be ineffective. On the other hand, the man's claim also signifies his

unwillingness to accept Yu's love. He does not show any patience, enthusiasm, or curiosity for Yu's confession. He acts in a perfunctory manner. Instead of trying hard to figure out what Yu wants to convey, he simply leaves her words aside, and abruptly ends the conversation with "I can't hear clearly, can't hear clearly 我听不清楚, 听不清楚." While one cannot be certain, nevertheless I feel that as a sensitive poet, Yu might have already sensed the man's indifference to her, and she realizes that he has no interest to guess what she is saying.

As a female who fantasizes about romance, Yu however lacks sufficient courage and confidence to express her fondness to her loved one in real life. Not only does Yu describe herself as an ugly woman who does not deserve any men, but also is she anxious and scared that her physical condition would cause terror and embarrassment to her partner.¹⁴ Such extreme sensitivity and self-abasement are thoroughly delineated in Yu's essay titled "Brother Jie, Are You Okay 杰哥, 你好吗."¹⁵ In it, although overwhelmed by deep affection for Brother Jie, Yu makes an effort to inhibit and conceal her emotion to avoid embarrassing him. She is convinced that it is an act of cruelty and an insult to let a non-disabled man realize that he is admired by a disabled woman, and love from an "abnormal" woman like her is hardly a reason for pride but is instead a burden. Yu assumes Brother Jie will feel terror regarding her disabled body. Hence, she uses her

¹⁴ See Yu's interviews on how she describes herself as unattractive. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6awdcav7bg>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1t8AGWcUEQ>

¹⁵ This essay is originally published on Yu's Weibo and Wechat official account by Yu. See "Brother Jie, Are you Okay" (杰哥, 你好吗) on Souhu: https://m.sohu.com/a/318949091_642584?spm=smwp.media.fds.17.1573430400050UJ4Qvtp

silence as a method to protect him.

Sentiments of inferiority and self-oppression in a relationship are also prevalent in Yu's series of poems that she composed for Li Jian, a well-known Chinese pop singer. For instance, in her poem "The Yulan Magnolias on the Road Raise Their Glasses 路边的玉兰树都举满了酒杯,"¹⁶ Yu portrays herself as a fan who fervently and secretly loves Li. However, she gives up the chance to meet Li at a concert to escape from exposing her imperfect body, as well as to avoid derision from others: "They say, you are going to have a concert 他们说, 你要开演唱会了/ Forgive me I don't have the compulsion to see it 原谅我没有去看的冲动/ If you are a fleet venturing into the unknown 你如果是一艘探险的舰船/ I am just a bay that you pass by when you set off 我不过是你出发时经过的一域水湾.../ I will think of many people, including you that I have never seen 我会想起很多人, 包括不曾见过的你/How nice 多好啊/ as if I have never been cold-shouldered by this human world 仿佛我不曾被这人间嫌弃." Even though Yu might use her fame to build a connection with Li in reality, she does not take action, but relies on her poetry to declare her passion for him. In her confessional poem "I Like You, Li Jian 我喜欢你, 李健,"¹⁷ Yu again illustrates her dissatisfaction and diffidence towards her imperfect body, which inhibit her desire to meet Li: "You know I have to prepare for a long time, at least fully prepare 你知道我要准备好久的准备, 至少不要在/ to not show timidity about my disability 自己的残疾面前露怯." In her poem "I Will Lean on a Stick to Love You 我要

¹⁶ The excerpt of the poem "The Yulan Magnolias on the Road Raises Their Glasses" is translated from Chinese into English by me.

¹⁷ The excerpt of the poem "I Like You, Li Jian" is translated from Chinese into English by me.

拄着拐杖去爱你，”¹⁸ Yu finally makes up her mind to chase Li. However, the line “because you are not in the crowd 因为这人群里没有你” seems to suggest that Li is no longer living in this human world. Yu’s journey looking for Li becomes adventurous and risky: “I am on the way to love you 我在去爱你的路上/ I am terrified that the stairway to heaven will crack on the side of the cloud. terrified that the shout 怕这天梯断在云端 怕这呼喊/ chokes me to death 呛死我.” While leaning on a stick to seek romance sounds respectful and inspiring, the untold denouement of this love story makes us worry about the chance of Yu’s success.

A comparison between *Iron Moon* and *Still Tomorrow*

One significant feature that *Iron Moon* and *Still Tomorrow* share is that they are both affected by different degrees and forms of intervention from the side of the filmmakers. That means, unlike a group of Chinese contemporary documentarians who “prefer to face the world with minimal *a priori* knowledge” and let their lenses “wander and observe what unfolds” (Qian 2012: 105), the directors I study allow their cameras to record what they have designed, created, or altered, whether purposefully or inadvertently. Qin, Wu and Fan’s involvement not only implies their distinctive purposes as filmmakers but also reveal the various modes of documentary film-making.

Iron Moon shares characteristics with the poetic and expository modes that impose “all forms of control over the staging, arrangement, or composition of a scene” (Nicholas

¹⁸ The excerpt of the poem “I Will Lean on a Stick to Love You” is translated from Chinese into English by me.

2010: 172). Clearly, the directors of *Iron Moon* have prearranged and premeditated the scene of the migrant worker poetry recital at the New Workers Theater in Picun.¹⁹ As a screenwriter and a director, Qin has been endowed with the privilege to select the poems the protagonists should recite, determine the attire they should wear, and even instruct them as to the postures they should make when they perform. Even though Wu Xia is a woman who is greatly fond of sundresses, she chooses to put on the baggy work suit to conceal her figure and beauty in front of her audiences. One way to interpret this is that Wu's dressing style – hiding her interior dress under the cover of the factory uniform – might have been suggested if not arbitrarily decided by Qin, who would certainly prefer such a manner of dressing not simply because it introduces Wu's identity as a garment factory worker but also because it reflects her agony and restraint from undesired clothes, a symbol of her strenuous job. Such an arrangement signifies the inequality between the filmmakers and the filmed subjects. People like Wu hold a subaltern position; they are expected to make necessary concessions (though they might be willing to do it) to meet the preferences of documentarians.

I would interpret *Iron Moon* as a half-documentary film due to its fictional elements. Using the ideas borrowed from Nicholas, the characters of the film who are supposed to take the role of “social actors” or “cultural players” now become “theatrical players,” and they no longer “continue to conduct their lives more or less as they would have done

¹⁹ Picun is a non-governmental organization for migrant workers located in the northeastern suburbs of Beijing. For an introduction to Picun, see Crevel, Maghiel Van. “Debts: Coming to Terms with Migrant Worker Poetry.” *Chinese Literature Today*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, pp. 127–145., doi:10.1080/21514399.2019.1615334.

without the presence of a camera” (Nicholas 2010: 5). My reading of the scenes about Lao Jing reciting his poem “Site of Mine Disaster 矿难遗址” at the mine site and Xu Hongzhi chanting “On My Deathbed 我弥留之际” on the boat is that they show the poets are permitted or encouraged by the filmmakers to present artistic and romantic aspects of their lives which deviate from their daily practices. When the coal miner Lao Jing is invited by Qin to recite the poem in the location of a mine disaster as a way of commemorating the stranger workers who sacrificed themselves in an accident caused by a gas explosion, he not only agrees to Qin’s use of his poetry as a eulogy, but also supports him via his actions: under the gaze of the director and the camera, he kneels down, lowers his head, and begins to murmur the lines, as if consoling the souls of the deceased. Lao Jing’s performance is reminiscent of another scene in the film, when Xu Hongzhi is arranged sitting on a boat and reading Xu Lizhi’s poem “On My Deathbed 我弥留之际” in a very stiff tone – a prologue to the subsequent sea-burial. I use the word arranged because Xu’s awkwardness suggests that his behavior is not a natural response but very likely devised by himself or others. Similar to Lao Jing, his very stilted gestures, tones, and facial expressions unveil his effort to perform like a professional actor rather than just being himself. Nevertheless, even though both individuals’ self-awareness and alteration in behaviors are very visible, they are not disrupted or rejected by the directors, who seem to pursue more the dramatic effect than faithfulness to reality – the genuine side of the migrant worker poets. This further suggests the dependence of the subjects: their ostensibly independent decisions are closely interconnected with the filmmakers or

influenced by the cameras in the hands of the filmmakers.

Still Tomorrow tends to be categorized as an example of the participatory mode because of the close and sometimes intimate relationship between the director Fan and the subjects, even though it is unnoticeable and inconspicuous sometimes because of the removal of a substantial part of Fan's portion of the film, which I will discuss in detail later. Unlike observational documentaries in which filmmakers become objective or noninterventionist observers who speak about their subjects to audiences, *Still Tomorrow* shows Fan's role as an active and essential participant who speaks with the filmed characters for himself and the spectators. As a result, what the camera documents develops into "an index of the nature of the interaction between filmmaker and subject" (Nicholas 2010: 179).

In *Still Tomorrow*, Yu's victory in the war of her marriage – she finally gets her wish to leave her husband is heavily dependent on the director Fan's help and support. Based on the evidence from Yu's online essay "The Story I Have to Say about Fan Jian and Me 我和范俭不得不说的故事,"²⁰ the divorce could not be successfully achieved without the great contribution made by Fan, who took the role of a voluntary mediator and persuaded Yin, a stubborn man, to consent to a separation. Fan's assistance not only denies or weakens Yu's power and strength in liberating herself from the pain and suffering of the marriage, but also implies his domination and control over the storyline

²⁰ See Yu, Xiuhua's "The Story I Have to Say About Fan Jian and Me" (我和范俭不得不说的故事) on her Sina blog. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_61667c450102y0u8.html

of *Still Tomorrow*. As the documentary critic Nicholas argues, “[e]ven independent filmmakers usually see themselves as professional artists, pursuing a career more than dedicating themselves to representing the interest of a particular group or constituency” (Nicholas 2010: 13). It is reasonable that Fan, a trained filmmaker, is not satisfied by merely focusing on Yu’s weakness and helplessness; instead, he chooses to display her conquest of certain obstacles at the end of the film. While the repetitious and overwhelming pain and torture in Yu’s daily life evokes sympathy, it would be refreshing and stimulating for audiences to witness Yu’s growth and transformation as a disabled female at the last moment. Yu’s accomplishment of her divorce, which is presented as a symbol of her farewell to the struggling past and welcoming a new and promising future, encourages and inspires the public. Moreover, such a cheerful and uplifting ending further helps refine the theme of the documentary.

Conclusion

As a poetry reader and documentary spectator, I have analyzed the documentaries’ construction and reinforcement of subaltern powerlessness. Besides my viewpoint and interpretations, which might be subjective and personal, other available facts indicate the documentaries’ negative impact on individuals’ daily lives. For instance, Qin’s insistence on shooting scenes in a mine has severely jeopardized the interests of the rock miner Chen Nianxi and the coal miner Lao Jing, who engage in very dangerous mine-related jobs in China. Worrying that Qin’s filming of his employee Chen would expose the illegality of his mine company, the mine manager immediately dismissed Chen and

ousted him from the workplace (Liu 2016: 57-58). For migrant workers like Chen, losing the job that he and his family had relied on for a living was devastating. While Lao Jing was not laid off by his boss, the employer believed his participation in *Iron Moon* was a latent threat to the company's reputation; being concerned that Lao Jing might criticize the company in the public, the leaders tried to prevent him from attending cinematic or related activities, and their hostile attitude further made Lao Jing realize he would never get promoted, which is upsetting for a worker like him who has worked at his company for nearly thirty years.²¹ While Qin emphasizes the redeeming nature of his work, by claiming, for example, that *Iron Moon* brought some improvement, though not radical, to the migrant workers' lives,²² he does not publicly acknowledge or mention the troubles or disturbance his work has produced. Even the poet Yu, who consistently shows great support for Fan, expresses her feeling of being hurt by the filming. In her essay "No Irresistible Desperation 没有抵御不了的绝望,"²³ Yu describes her frustration of being a filmed subject. She points out that *Still Tomorrow* entirely unmasked her privacy and increased her insecurity. In Yu's own words, it is "as if she has had her underpants taken off and thrown in front of the audience by Fan Jian 如同被范俭脱去了内裤丢到了人们面前." This reflects Yu's sense of embarrassment and impotence under the gaze of Fan's

²¹ See the essay about Lao Jing published online. "【你好，煤炭人】纪录片《我的诗篇》上映，矿工诗人老井走上大屏幕！" <http://www.ccoalnews.com/201701/19/c157.html>

²² See Qin Xiaoyu's interview. <https://cinophilia.net/47408/>

²³ See Yu Xiuhua's essay "No Irresistible Desperation" (没有抵御不了的绝望) published on her official WeChat account.

camera.

Even though the success of *Iron Moon* brings the migrant worker poets some public exposure, in general, they still remain invisible and voiceless. For instance, although Wu Xia was invited to attend the Shanghai International Film Festival, her appearance did not attract the media, who were more interested in interviewing other movie pop stars.²⁴ As one of the most popular poets in contemporary China, Yu Xiuhua has always been a hot topic. However, the majority of the reports focus on her poetry rather than her participation in *Still Tomorrow* or her thoughts on the filming. Instead of directly interacting with the poets, the public tends to use the filmmakers Qin and Fan as the leading voice of understanding the needs or feelings of the migrant workers and Yu. For example, according to many video interviews or journal interviews on the internet, only Qin and Fan are shown answering the questions about the documentary characters. The characters themselves are never present to speak for themselves. This phenomenon reflects the critic Ying Qian's argument: "[the subalterns] have been held 'prisoner in the film', repeatedly put on display, and subject solely to the filmmakers' interpretative maneuvers" (Qian 2012). Making the documentarians speak for the poets represents the deprivation of the poets' opportunities for self-expression, which can be perceived as yet another round of control or manipulation.

To summarize, documentaries like *Iron Moon* and *Still Tomorrow* do not succeed in

²⁴ See the news report on Wu Xia. “工人女诗人 郇霞”
<http://www.hswh.org.cn/e/DoPrint/index.php?classid=17&id=32514>

empowering the subaltern figures. Nonetheless, they do bring great fame and recognition to the filmmakers Qin Xiaoyu, Wu Feiyue, and Fan Jian, who provide us with a new angle from which to examine the progress of documentary films of China. In distinction to the “amateur-author” of the post-1990s who claims to create “a third type of image” that is “characterized by independence, unofficial quality, and non-commercial interests” (An, 2003; cited in Wang 2005: 17), twenty-first century documentarians Qin, Wu, and Fan pursue the opposite goal. By relying heavily on their professional knowledge of filmmaking, they aim to demonstrate the poetics and aesthetics of their work.²⁵ By working hard to propagate the documentaries and to sell tickets to the public, they attempt to generate commercial value to their documentaries. Moreover, they might not be considered independent filmmakers. Their cooperation with the institutions (such as Youku²⁶ and various film companies) indicates they and their work are subjected to the censorship of the authorities. What should documentarians do to avoid exploiting subaltern characters? How can documentaries fully represent the needs and desires of the underprivileged? How can documentaries and filmmakers fulfill the mission of helping ameliorate and resolve social conflicts? These questions remain unsettled and deserve further research and analysis.

²⁵ According to the interview, Qin Xiaoyu believes in the aesthetic value of documentary. Hence, he decided to cooperate with the trained documentary filmmaker Wu Feiyue to make *Iron Moon* more professional and artistic. Similarly, Fan Jian rejects the coarse elements of documentary. In the interview, he emphasized that he pursued “cinematic” quality (dianying gan) in *Still Tomorrow*.

²⁶ Youku is a video hosting service based in Beijing, China.

Bibliography

- Crevel, Maghiel Van. *Chinese Poetry in times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*. Leiden: Brill, 2008. Print.
- Crevel, Maghiel Van. “Debts: Coming to Terms with Migrant Worker Poetry.” *Chinese Literature Today* 8.1 (2019): 127–145. doi:10.1080/21514399.2019.1615334.
- Crevel, Maghiel Van. “Misfit.” *Prism*, 16.1 (2019): 85–114. doi: 10.1215/25783491-7480341.
- Edwards, Dan. *Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2015. Print.
- Iron Moon*. Directed by Xiaoyu Qin and Feiyue Wu, China Film Group Corporation, Release Date: 1 Nov. 2015. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
<http://www.docuchina.cn/2016/11/21/VIDEoulgdZbeLxxBCDTrS1go161121.shtml>
- Liu, Liduo. “底层诗意：在中国深处记录他们。” 《天涯》 *Frontiers*, No.1, 2016: 49-61.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Ind, 2017. Print.
- Rangan, Pooja. *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Print.
- Still Tomorrow*. Directed by Jian Fan. Release Date: 21 June 2017. Accessed 5 Dec. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ix79QB_-Z4k

- Sun, Wanning. *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*.
Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, Cop, 2014. Print.
- Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York
University Press, 1998. Print.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. "Poetry as Fiction." *New Literary History*, 2.2 (1971): 259–
281. doi:10.2307/468602
- Wang, Yiman. "The Amateur's Lightning Rod: DV Documentary in Postsocialist
China." *Film Quarterly* 58.4 (2005): 16-26. Print.
- Wang, Yuxiang. *Language, Culture and Identity among Minority Students in China the
Case of the Hui*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Xu, Hangping. *Broken Bodies as Agents: Disability Aesthetics and Politics in Modern
Chinese Culture and Literature*, Stanford University, Ann Arbor, 2018. ProQuest,
[http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-
com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/dissertations-theses/broken-bodies-as-agents-
disability-aesthetics/docview/2435572669/se-2?accountid=10226](http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/dissertations-theses/broken-bodies-as-agents-disability-aesthetics/docview/2435572669/se-2?accountid=10226).
- Ying Qian, "Just Images: Ethics and Documentary Film in China,"
China Heritage Quarterly, No. 29, March 2012, Accessed 5 Dec. 2019.
[http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/scholarship.php?searchterm=029_qian.in
&issue=029](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/scholarship.php?searchterm=029_qian.in&issue=029)
- Ying Qian, "Power in the Frame: Chinese Independent Documentary Movement",
New Left Review, no. 74, March & April 2012:105-123.

Zhong, Juan, and Jeffrey J. Arnett. ““I Felt like There Would Be a Vast Sky out There”

The Leaving Home Decisions of Chinese Migrant Women Workers.” *International*

Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation 7.3 (2018): 121-36.