

THE PRODUCTION OF ART CINEMA
CULTURE IN CHINA: AN EXPLORATION
OF THE ROLE OF CULTURAL
INTERMEDIARIES

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Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Declaration of Authorship

IXiang Fan.... hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:_____Date:

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Abstract

This thesis offers an ethnographic account of how art cinema culture is produced in China since the turn of twenty-first century. With an underdeveloped art cinema infrastructure and the endurance of forceful Party-state control over public cinematic spaces, there have emerged numerous individuals and organisations taking part in circulating the information and appreciation of the art of film through a number of different alternative paths and networks. This thesis scrutinises the role of the intermediary practitioners – particularly those involved in independent exhibition, internet criticism and underground distribution – and how they think about cinema, negotiate judgement and appreciation, and construct a discourse of value and taste. It is argued that, although their motivation was derived from a cinephilia seeking to forge an alternative mode of distribution and reception, the ‘new’ cinema culture they have produced simultaneously negotiates a subtly complicit relationship with authoritative and market forces. Their cultural practices and engagement oscillates between the status of independence and autonomy, a rejection of cultural homogeneity and monopolisation, and culture as promotion that accrues a public image and recognition. Moreover, involved in diversified practices and taste formation, the intermediary practitioners have also sought to produce a new form of legitimacy in reference to cultural value and judgement. To attain their legitimacy, they have sought to constitute a coordinated and interrelated network in the site of art cinema. The network is manifested – its mode of operation explicitly – as part of the art film culture in a way that represents the larger spectrum of socio-cultural hierarchy in contemporary Chinese culture and society.

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Introduction

I was raised in a provincial city in North China, but I did not have much interest in film until 1998 when my father brought home a VCD player.¹ This also came with ten Hong Kong film VCDs as complementary gift for purchasing the player. I was about nine years old and what I knew about film was from the dull dubbed films on television and blurred images and distorted sound of videotapes at my fashionable uncle's house. I was particularly fascinated by *Seong lung wui* (*Twin Dragons*, Tsui Hark and Ringo Lam, 1992, Hong Kong) and *Jing wu ying xiong* (*Fist of Legend*, Gordon Chan, 1994, Hong Kong) and must have watched them dozens of times, coming to know every scene by heart. However, my parents would not buy me more discs as they doubted whether watching such films was a healthy entertainment for a young girl, while I could not afford a proper disc, which cost at least 30 *yuan* in the market, triple the amount of my weekly pocket money. Fortunately, at the time VCD rental stores started mushrooming in my neighbourhood, one just downstairs next to the main gate of our apartment, and at least two around the corner on my way to school. On a typical holiday in the early 2000s, browsing from the video-store's 'action' to 'thriller' shelves, I singled out one pack to take home (by paying only five *jiao*).² I preferred to watch the disks myself in the afternoon, while listening to the buzzing whirring sound from the VCD drive. Since this ritual recurred over and over, as a juvenile my interest switched from Hong Kong popular entertainment to Hollywood romantic films, however, there was not enough options in my local video shop. Wishing to have my own collection, I started to stroll around the biggest piracy market in my city.

¹ In Asia and other developing countries, VCD is a popular CD-ROMs format that can hold approximately 45 minutes of moving images and audio on an inexpensive player (Davis, 2003). See more explanations of VCDs and VCD market in China in Davis, D. W. (2003) 'Compact Generation: VCD markets in Asia', *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television*, 23(2), pp. 165–176.

² One Chinese *yuan* is equivalent to ten *jiao*. British pound sterling to Chinese *yuan* is approximately 1: 8.8, according to the conversion rate on 12 September 2019. Five *jiao* is approximately 44 pence in British pound sterling.

My inaugural experience of the piracy market left me surprisingly overwhelmed by the many unknown exotic film cultures, Korean, European, South American, which I had never come across in the local stores. I remember stumbling on my first art film at the market. I was flipping through the VCD covers, while *Les amants du pont-neuf* (*The Lovers on the Bridge*, Leos Carax, 1992, France) came into my sight: it was a blurred close-up image of the actress, Juliette Binoche, except her eyes are captured in sharp focus. Impressed by the offbeat cover, I ended up bringing it home and was completely blown away by the end of the film. I experienced it as a strange and incomprehensible story, but, on the other hand, I found it fascinating and attractive, somehow ushering me into an unknown world. Not soon after, ubiquitous computer and internet access opened up a vast array of opportunities for the immediacy of access and acquisition of filmic knowledge and information: I switched my filmic journey from VCDs/DVDs to online discussion forums, to online video streaming and downloading, and to independent screening events and activities.

My experience of expanding alternative access to the world of (art) cinema is one that is shared by millions of other film lovers in China, a country with very limited infrastructure for art-house cinema. As the formal paths of filmic circulation is strictly determined by the national apparatus, Chinese viewers have long suffered an insufficiency of supply of diverse and multicultural filmic experiences. As Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke once wrote:

China has a big demand for films. However, the Chinese film industry has suffered isolation from other cultures, from the classic films which have touched and affected human beings...It was hard to imagine that an ordinary citizen could ever watch Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* [*Breathless*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1960, France], or Andrei Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo* [*The Mirror*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1992, Soviet Union], or even popular American films like *The Godfather* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, USA] or *Taxi Driver* [Martin Scorsese, 1976, USA]. People [in China] were incredibly estranged from cinema, and didn't share the century-long cultural experiences that human beings have drawn from the art of cinema. (Jia, 2017: 33) [my translation]

The Chinese viewer's predicament resides in the complex relationship between (art) cinema and state regulation. According to Yang (2018), *yishu dianying* 艺术电影 (art cinema) fundamentally grow with the two major art waves (the Fifth and Sixth Generation Cinema) and the film industrial reform in the 1990s when Chinese cinema shifts from

socialist propaganda towards commercialised mechanism. Indeed, since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the dissemination of foreign cultural products has been ideologically manipulated, controlled and restricted by the authorities for the sake of consolidating the socialist regime (Clark, 1987). In the socialist era, cinemas in China were substantially bound by strict ideological control and utilised as a showcase for socialist propaganda, which was fundamentally characterised by 'heroism', 'collectivism' and 'optimism' (Dai 1993 in Zhang, 2004: 223). Meanwhile, the film industry was completely nationalised and subject to the agenda setting of communist propaganda or adherence to the virtues of central control (Clark, 1987; Berry, 2004; Zhang, 2004; Yeh and Davis, 2008; Tang, 2015; Yang, 2018). Subsequently, the implementation of the Chinese Economic Reform in 1978 ushered in the rapid transformation of Chinese society, a series of reforms 'built on the premise of a continuity in the political system of governance coupled with a discontinuity in the state's promotion of radical marketization and privatization' (Berry and Rofel, 2010: 6). The new form of economy implicates overriding changes of power relations in Chinese cinema. Since the early 1990s, the Ministry of the Radio, Film, and Television (MRFT) have implemented a series of policies to stimulate the marketisation of film industry, and to reinforce the national state power via market mechanisms (Yeh and Davis, 2008: 49).³ Public cinematic space in China since the turn of twenty-first century then becomes not only subject to the Chinese state's ideological control and bureaucratic regulation but also to commercial value and profitable growth. The complicit relation of market and government censorship together forge the space of legitimate film culture in China, insidiously advantaging commercial mainstream cinema at the expense of diversity and independent spaces. On the one hand, the commercial orientation of state support for the Chinese film industry led to the homogeneity of the cinema available to Chinese audiences: only the Film Bureau approved films (known as 'dragon seal films') are allowed to be exhibited in public cinemas, the vast majority of which are popular entertainment films. On the other hand,

³ In 1998, the MRFT (transferred from the Film Bureau in 1986 as the central authority for regulating all film-related activities) was renamed as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). In 2013, the SARFT was then reorganised as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). In 2018, the SAPPRFT was abolished and the Film Bureau became subordinated to the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCPPD).

the development of an infrastructure of art cinema as a space for circulating films understood in the discourse of the West as art cinema or humanistic, realist cinema remained comparably neglected. Although there existed a few art-house cinemas governed by national cultural institutions such as the China Film Archive and private corporations such as Broadway Cinematheque in Beijing operated the Hong Kong-based Broadway Circuit (Gao, 2014b; Lu, 2016), they did not fundamentally change the situation that public sites of exhibition were conditioned by bureaucratic state power and stimulated by economic incentives. Film festivals in China also faces similar issue. From the ‘official’ film festivals such as Shanghai International Film Festival (established in 1993) and Beijing International Film Festival (established in 2011) (Berry, 2009a; 2017; Ma, 2012; 2017; Pollacchi, 2017), to those claim to focus on supporting talented young filmmakers such as First Youth International Film Festival in Xining, Pingyao Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon International Film Festival, and Inner Mongolia Young Film Week in Hohhot, ‘[t]hey all attempt at negotiating the position within the tightening control of the domestic political condition and the increasing economic-industrial opportunity’ (Nakajima, 2019: 238). Given some necessity to ensure revenues and profits and to negotiate with censorship regulation, there are also a very limited number of distribution companies devoted to art-house and independent films. What is lacking in the circuit of art cinema in China is the role of the government as an institutional body supporting and nurturing a national (art) cinema culture.

Rather than criticising how government repressive control and commercial aspiration have a powerful effect upon the way Chinese audiences view films and go to cinemas, I am particularly interested in how people proactively get involved in renegotiating their relationships with cinema in the Chinese context. Today, over a decade after Jia Zhangke’s comments above, although still circumscribed to cultural repression at the hands of government censorship and ubiquitous mainstream entertainment, ordinary viewers’ access to global art cinema in the new millennium era is no longer as elusive as it used to be. Numerous individuals and organisations have emerged to take part in circulating film material and knowledge, contrasting and being involved in a discourse of taste through various alternative paths and networks, hence making significant contributions to the forging of a cinephilia and an art cinema culture in China. Their practices function as informal grassroots forms of participation and use of these channels nurtures an appreciation of ‘the art of film’ by a wider potential audience.

The first cine-club in China was established in Shanghai in 1996 by seven film lovers, all of whom were enthusiastic amateurs eager to share their thoughts about films with a wider audience (Zhang, 2011; Xu, 2016). From publishing a grassroots film magazine to organising screening events, this cine-club, *Dianyning 101 Bangongshi* (101 Film Studio), inaugurated new modalities of ‘ordinary’ viewers’ interaction and engagement with films, in the ways that films are not simply viewed but also taken up in a cultural production process. Following 101 Film Studio, there have emerged a great number of screening groups and cine-clubs dedicated to the dissemination of art and independent films across China (Zhang, 2011), some of which took part in significant events in the history of Chinese cinema including initiating the first Chinese independent film festival, *Zhongguo Duli Yingxiang Zhan* (the First Unrestricted New Image Festival) in Beijing in 2001 (Zhang, 2007c: 31). The emergence of independent screening events and film festivals of this kind nurtured spaces where a wider spectrum of culturally and ideologically diverse films are circulated, and substantially encouraging Chinese independent filmmakers and artists by providing alternative spaces of exhibition. Whilst independent exhibition emerged as part of a narrative about how the practitioners play a negotiating connection between public and private cinematic spaces, film enthusiasts also expand and diversify their practices in spheres external to the tradition of ‘cinema’ going.

In addition, the last thirty years have seen major developments in the viewing and transmitting of alternative audio-visual materials in the home space where the individual viewer can find a degree of freedom in choosing what they want to see. Facilitated by the new technologies and operations (VCD, DVD, and more recently, the internet), piracy functions as an effective way of steering away from the all-pervading Party-state cultural control throughout the public space. As Zhang Zhen remarks, ‘the revival of a cinephile culture in China is in large part made possible by the “primitive” or “pirated” form of postmodern technology of the VCD’ (2007c: 27). The development of piracy in part constitutes an alternative space of cinema that generates new modes of amateur filmmaking and viewing practices (Zhang, 2007b; Li, 2012; Gao; 2014). What piracy brings to the art cinema culture in China is a also alternative spectatorship that emphasises on individualised filmic experiences and practices. In other words, the dissemination of piracy gives rise to new patterns of consumption and filmic experiences, allowing the development of notions of personal choices and taste, through a home film culture. Cultivated by individualistic predilection and aspiration, this home film culture allows the construction of some kind of opposition to the legitimate mainstream film culture that

is stimulated by the professional film industry, or more precisely the commercially and industrially oriented film distribution and exhibition system. What is of interest about this home film culture is not only the way people are viewing film in private settings but also the type of cultural practices it facilitated, a challenge to the cultural homogeneity of cinema in China channelled by amateur initiatives.

In this sense, the vast majority of film enthusiasts involved in the production of art cinema culture embody amateurism. They articulate cinephile values, marking a difference and alternative to the state-commercial ideology of the mainstream film culture. They attempt to disseminate films and values that might not be available or allowed in public circulation, by providing recommendations and (free) resources, thereby also encouraging them to explore the world of cinema. Such practices have continued to expand at a rapid pace via online spaces and platforms. Around 2001–2002, built on the dedication to bringing in foreign-language audio-visual products through (voluntary) fan translation, *Renren yingshi* (YYeTs), *Yidianyuan* (Garden of Eden), *FengRuan* (Wind Soft) emerged as influential subtitling communities acquainting Chinese viewers with not only American TV series but also other non-commercial alternative films from a diversity of origins (Zhang and Mao, 2013: 52). Over the next two decades, fan translation communities and groups have functioned as an informal mode of distribution in fostering the flowering of a culture of home viewing and downloading, to an extent circumventing the obstacle of bureaucratic state regulation. As the dissemination of artistic and multicultural films expanded dramatically, film enthusiasts have also sought to develop their practices into the production of discourses of value and taste through internet commentary and criticism. Unlike film criticism in the past that established a broad canon of film tastes in the western context mainly produced by established professional film critics and essayists across a range of print media and, later, academic scholarship, the lack of legitimate institutions for supporting domestic artistic cinema and critical discourse in China led to the development of a unique mode of film criticism through the internet. ‘Ordinary’ film lovers became noted internet critics, their value and taste in films circulating through the internet expanding their readership’s interests in films, inevitably impacting on the consumption of (art) cinema.

However, the enthusiastic practitioners who engage in the production of art cinema culture have not featured prominently in the study of Chinese cinema culture. The title of this thesis, *The Production of Art Cinema Culture in China: An Exploration of the Role*

of Cultural Intermediaries, is a scrutiny of how the intermediary practitioners, particularly involved in independent exhibition, internet criticism and underground distribution, think about cinema, negotiate judgement and appreciation and construct a discourse of value and taste that forges the culture of art cinema in China since the turn of the twenty-first century. In Bourdieu's original formulation, cultural intermediaries denotes groups of workers engaged in 'occupations involving presentation and representation... providing symbolic goods and services' (1984: 359). One of the central point of the term of cultural intermediaries in academic writings is that it refers to those practitioners who are continually involved in the forming an articulation between cultural production and consumption (Negus, 2002). Drawing upon the conception of cultural intermediaries, the main concern of this thesis is how the intermediary practitioners coalesce to produce the art cinema culture and its influence on film consumption and taste shaping through different practices and activities. This thesis aims to foreground the heterogeneity of art cinema culture in the specific context of China, allowing us to understand an alternative account of Chinese cinema that considers the way in which the culture was created and promoted by idiosyncratic and autonomous individuals amidst the multiplex of forces in contemporary (cinematic) life.

Looking at the discourse of choice and taste for film, I want to draw out the ways in which the cultural intermediaries' practices and activities construct what Bourdieu characterises as a field, an interwoven network structured by social distinction and hierarchy. In Bourdieu's account, one's practice is subject to her or his position in the social-cultural field as a representation of one's social origin and cultural experience. As far as Bourdieu's conception is concerned, the inherent structure and dynamic relations between the cultural intermediaries themselves, and between them and other individual actors (ordinary audiences in particular), need to be taken into account as central to the understanding of this art cinema culture in China. Pivotal here is the question that concerns the role that intermediary agents play in reproducing social relations and distinctions. What intermediary agents bring to films, cinemas and their audiences inevitably embodies the positions of their enduring dispositions (or habitus) derived from social background in terms of class, gender, education and profession. Considering the way each individual intermediary articulates values derived from different social categories, it is necessary to deem the reciprocal relationships between them as internally and hierarchically divided. As the cultural intermediaries examined in this thesis are involved in different aspects of cultural engagement of art cinema, a key concern is to

excavate the ways in which their social positions and habitus effectively redefine the limits and boundaries of the access to the field, to in turn understand how social distinction and hierarchy serve as a significant part of our relationship to cinema.

If we agree that social relations and distinction internally inform the diversified practices and taste formation in the process of cultural production of art cinema in China, how then can we understand the autonomous existence of this field in terms of tackling external legitimate forces from the authority and the market? This returns us to the point at which, following the government's overwhelming control and regulation, the site of Chinese cinema can be seen to undergo a division into that of what Bourdieu (1996: 124) termed 'a field of large-scale cultural production' (legitimate mainstream/commercial cinema) and 'restricted cultural production' (artistic and independent cinema). This division, I argue, implies more complex configurations and relations than two completely polarised fields. The practices of the cultural production of art cinema oscillates between the status of independence and autonomy, a rejection of cultural homogeneity and monopolisation, and culture as promotion which accrues a public image and recognition. The strength of legitimate culture and economy are so disjunctive that while they exclude the alternative cinematic practices in some ways, they include them in other ways. My argument here is not that distinct art cinema practices emerge as absolutely opposite to the legitimate sphere, but rather that they become visible and recognisable by virtue of negotiating a subtly complicit relations with authoritative and market forces. This paradox is intrinsic to understand the role of art cinema cultural practitioners whose motivation is ostensibly arising from a cinephilia seeking to frame a new mode of distribution and reception different from those possible within the established legitimate realm, but simultaneously this 'new' cinema culture they produce shares some common ground with the commercially dominant and state sanctioned legitimate sphere.

Based on this focus on the practices of cultural intermediaries, the concept of art cinema culture in China thus operates on several themes: the consideration of social distinction and hierarchy as a decisive factor that shapes filmic value and taste; the operation of networks of relations within the spatial context of circulation; the intermediary practitioner's negotiation of tensions between idealism and economic opportunities, between the spirit of cinephilia and professional ambition, and between public initiative and government power. Each chapter involves a research and analysis of a different area

on which the field of art cinema in China develops while simultaneously addressing recurring elements and issues that are shared between them in the cinematic discourse.

In the first two chapters, I start with an overview of existing literature and map out a system of ethnographic methods for researching this project. The literature review addresses four main themes: defining art cinema; mapping *yishu dianying* in the Chinese context; framing art cinema in field theory; locating cultural intermediaries in alternative systems of diffusion. Each theme brings along with it a specific theoretical emphasis, which will also reappear throughout the thesis and which is thereby associated with the practices of different intermediaries on a conceptual level. In the first theme, addressing existing theories and literature revolving around the subject, I particularly zoom in the institutional dimension of art cinema. I argue that art cinema is characterised by the refusal of mainstream cultural dissemination and the conviction of cultural heterogeneity and artistic creativity, whilst the institutional sites and relations are forged in a process of triangulating heterogeneous artistic and marketing values. Then, I describe the emergence and development of art cinema (*yishu dianying*) in the Chinese context. It is argued that *yishu dianying* in China since the turn of the twenty-first century grows with both commercial and independent film cultures. I also argue that in China individual autonomous viewing activities and practices appear to play an important role in constituting the art film culture, an alternative mode of film culture that presents a distinct spectatorship and cinephilia. Then, I discuss field theory and the work of Bourdieu to draw a theoretical framework for art cinema culture that helps me to examine the specific situation in China. And finally, I focus on the role of cultural intermediaries involved in the alternative system of diffusion and who position themselves in the alternative cultural field. I analyse the socially and culturally functioning characteristics of their mediating practices in the framing of value and taste. Following the literature review, Chapter 2 gives an account of the ethnographic approach I have employed in this research, detailing my participant observation at diverse sites in the production of art cinema culture and in-depth interviews with different groups of intermediaries. Drawing upon existing theoretical studies and empirical research on ethnography, the methodology section expatiates the methods of data collection and analysis and concerns about any ethical issues that may need to be addressed as a result of the research process.

In Chapter 3, I examine the expansion of alternative exhibitionary spaces with the emphasis on home piracy and theatrical arthouse cinemas. This chapter manifests the

foundation of the cinephile and art cinema culture by tracing the relationships between home space and public space, between individual aspirations and Party-state apparatus. The first half of the chapter addresses how individual filmic experiences began to be nurtured via informal modes of distribution, piracy, in the context of the home viewing environment and leading up to a new art cinema culture. With public exhibition space dominated by Party-state apparatus, it was the informal grassroots modes of distribution and exhibition that sowed and cultivated the appreciation of the 'art of film' among a wider viewership. It is argued that piracy functioned as the kernel agency of this alternative film culture that both counters and complements the dominant cultural system and film industry. The second half of the chapter shifts away from home space to formal theatrical spaces for exhibiting arthouse films. Taking public arthouse cinemas in Beijing as case studies, this section zooms in the way that those cinematic spaces are embedded in a matrix of dynamic relations of politics, art and commerce as well as foreign cultural institutional forces. As part of the established art cinema infrastructure in China, these alternative exhibitionary spaces provide some opportunities for aesthetic appreciation and public engagement.

From Chapters 4 to 6 I start to develop an ethnographically informed account of the work of cultural intermediaries, situated in different positions in the field of art cinema in China. As mentioned before, the intermediary agents I am looking at in this thesis are grouped loosely into three major roles, according to which practices they operate: independent exhibitors, internet film critics and fan translators. These three roles would be respectively distributed in the following three chapters, while simultaneously connecting to one another in a certain sense. Following Chapter 3, Chapter 4 continues to address exhibition spaces but with an emphasis on the independent sites of screening. Different from the arthouse initiatives discussed in Chapter 3, these independent exhibition initiatives are understood as attempts to establish/promote cultural values and ideas in public circulation that are not accommodated within the commercial sector. In this chapter, I provide a detailed account of current modes of independent exhibition spaces and the strategies through which the independent screening group organisers negotiate the competing demands or commitments to be public whilst also allowing voices and ideas, that otherwise have been marginalised or suppressed, to be heard, hence building new art film publics. The independent exhibitors serve as gatekeepers and provide new spaces where public and private discourses are negotiated and where the strategies of avoiding scrutiny from authority and, on the other hand, being publicly visibly are

conducted. It is also argued that the new art film publics as mediated by this process, clusters into groups that manifest a division in terms of social categories, as distinct spatial domains and temporal practices.

In Chapter 5, I address the dimension of film criticism in which the intermediary agents present their values and tastes to consumers. Drawing upon my empirical research, this chapter examines the mediating practices of this group of cultural intermediaries and their role as tastemakers involved in the framing of value and the making of taste within art film culture. The Chinese mode of film criticism is distinctive in the sense that the activities and practices of ‘writing about films’ are mainly operated via online platforms and online spaces, in contrast to the conventional and professional modes based in mainstream media or academic institutions. Based on my participant observation, the ‘amateur’ critics have sought to coordinate a consistent network so as to produce a ‘new’ legitimacy of taste and judgement. I argue that the aesthetic value and taste that they (re)produce is mainly based on their personal disposition (or habitus) rather than professional expertise, representing the preferences and judgements of relatively educated, middle-class males.

Chapter 6 addresses the work of fan translators, those who are involved in the underground distribution of global art film in general and specific fan subtitling or other forms of translating practices. This chapter examines this group of cultural intermediaries’ work of mediating the meaning of art film between China and the rest of the world by the means of translation. Different from the previous two groups of cultural intermediaries whose activities and practices are more or less involved in the accumulation of economic capital or symbolic capital, fan translators operate their practices revolving around the spirit of amateurism and volunteerism. Rather than striving to acquire economic and symbolic profits, their commitment to cinema appears to be determined and sustained by several interests, for example, the love of cinema or particular films, improving foreign-language skills, and stepping into a career related to the film industry. Moreover, I observe that there inherently and centrally exists a hierarchal system both inside and outside the community of fan translation. It is argued that fan translators, largely constituted by university students and young professionals who draw on their linguistic competence, are situated on the periphery, or even outside, of the field of art film. Therefore, as the final analytical chapter, this chapter testifies to the argument made in the preceding chapters and throughout this thesis that the art film culture is inherently

structured around a hierarchal system in which powerful and established agents (such as, noted film critics and exhibitors in China) dominate the discourse of value.

Accordingly, this thesis demonstrates three main features of art cinema culture in China since the turn of the twenty-first century. First, this art film culture functions as a popular form of alternative film culture. 'Alternative film culture' is typically defined by independent cinema's engagement with for social and political realities outside the hegemonic public space controlled by the central authority and commercial industry (Zhang, 2004; Wang, 2005; Berry and Rofel, 2010). In contrast, the art cinema culture features as an interplay of independent and commercial cinema, negotiating the complex relations between politics, art, and commerce. Second, this art film culture involves the cultural intermediaries' objectives of forging a new form of legitimacy. Engaged in different domains of the circuit of art cinema, the intermediary practitioners (independent exhibitors, internet critics, and fan translators) have sought to construct a new art cinema institution vis-à-vis the legitimate film industry. In order to sustain their legitimacy, these intermediaries play as gatekeepers by demarcating a boundary of access to and inclusion in the field. Finally, this art film culture involves a gendered and hierarchical network within the field. Revolving around the masculine tradition of cinephilia, this field is central to dominant male cinephile agents in their mid-30s, while female and junior practitioners' voices and efforts are placed on the edge of the field. All of the above three features traverse and permeate in art cinema culture, as well as our understanding and experience of cinema in China of today.

This thesis is not only about Chinese cinema culture, nor is it just about people who take part in circulating filmic products and values that target niche audiences. The point that foregrounds 'ordinary' viewers as significant makers in the formation of culture is more fundamental, revolving around the ways of which people come to redefine their relationship with cinema and cinema culture rather than simply being affected by the text and apparatus of cinema. Certainly, cinema culture in China is a complexity distinguished by a vast array of networks and power relations, my thesis can only provide a partial study in the discourse. Whilst very few academic studies emphasise Chinese art cinema, my focus allows a detailed study of the modes of distribution and exhibition involved in the reception of art cinema in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It also attempts to make a substantial contribution to the broader spectrum of art cinema studies by locating Chinese art cinema on the map of global (art) cinema culture. This thesis is not

only designed to help fill a gap in scholarship and to develop a new perspective on Chinese art cinema. It also raises the question of what is distinctive about film culture in the People's Republic of China. By examining the cultural practices associated with art cinema, I hope to foreground the importance of individual practitioners for what they contribute to an abiding culture of cinema that implies their values and struggles in contemporary life.

1. Literature Review

In January 2017, I encountered my informant Ye in Tromsø International Film Festival in Norway. Known by his pseudonym ‘Muweier’ on multiple social media platforms, Ye is an illustrious internet film critic in China. At the age of thirty-two, Ye had over 100,000 followers on both Sina Weibo and Douban.com.⁴ Invited by one of the festival organisers, Ye was visiting Europe for the first time, so after the festival, he spent another month travelling in Europe notably to Rotterdam and Berlin for the upcoming film festival events. Impressed by the atmosphere of European art cinema culture, he often made comparisons between the film industries in Europe and China, such as that in Europe cinema exhibition offered a wide range of options for film goers; while, Chinese audiences are only allowed to access to limited number of international (art) films in the public context of screening. On an ordinary day during the festival time, Ye usually got up early to catch a morning film as part of his routine activity as a cinephile as well as a film critic. After three to five films in a row, at night he finally sat down to write some comments about the films he saw during the day as a record of his filmic experiences at the festival. The commentary and reviews would be available for his subscribers on multiple social media platforms by the following day. He stated his mission simply:

What I want to bring to my readers is what I saw and heard at the film festival from my point of view. I want to explore better films, recommend them to the home audience, and let them know that there still exist films different from the commercial mainstream. [my translation] (Ye, interview with author, 11 February 2018)

In his statement, Ye regards the characteristics of being ‘different from the commercial mainstream’ as the essence of art cinema. As he further explained,

⁴ Launched in 2015, *Douban* (www.douban.com) is a social networking for finding and sharing information and views on cultural product, especially books, films and music. The site allows users to keep track of every film/book/music they have ever encountered. See more information and discussion about the site in Perfect’s (2014) article ‘*Zhang Yimou’s sexual storytelling and the iGeneration: contending Shanzhashu Zhi Lian (Under the Hawthorn Tree) on Douban*’.

If a film achieves big commercial success, can we say it is an art film? An art film usually does not have as much financial support for its promotion to a broad audience as the commercial films do. Especially in China, for many reasons, the audience can only have limited access to information and knowledge about art cinema. As a film critic, I just want to tell my readers what the (art) film looks like, whether it is worthy of a watch, and whether it is good or not. [my translation] (Ye, interview with author, 11 February 2018)

The filmic value judgements and appreciation he makes are purported to impact on how his readers inside China think about a film or in advocating an alternative or wider concept of ‘cinema’. Ye’s case indicates one exemplary instance where intermediary practitioners can play a part in creating a Chinese art cinema viewing and taste culture. In the PRC where the mainstream film industry and official (art) film institutions are conditioned by the rules of commercial and state censorship, inhabited by industry professionals, there is a large number of individual actors like Ye who may not have acquired a formal education in film studies or engaged in the professionalised film industry, but who operate in ‘grassroots’ practices that are engaged in widening the public’s access to diverse and multicultural film. This thesis then scrutinises how these practitioners think about cinema, negotiate taste and judgement, and promote a discourse of value that potentially shapes the culture of art cinema in China.

Before leading the discussion into a deeper level, it is crucial to consider the question of how we understand the notion of ‘film culture’. In her exemplary work *Film Cultures*, Janet Harbord describes the notion of film culture as ‘embedding film within practices of everyday life that are to a certain extent mapped out historically, filling the contours of the existing socio-cultural formations’ (2002: 5). In Harbord’s account, film culture takes root historically in the relationship between socio-cultural structure and individual practice and agency. Following Bourdieu, Harbord (2002: 3) suggests that one’s taste and relationship to cinema, as a manifestation of film culture, is affected not only by individual habitus (derived from social class, ethnicity, education, gender, etc.) but also by the multiplex of ‘intermediary networks’ and pathways of filmic circulation that forge connections between texts and space, between consumers and makers, between the local and the global. Here, the circuits and networks in film distribution, exhibition and marketing are embedded in the complexity of the socio-cultural distinctions within a particular spatial and temporal context.

I agree with Harbord's account of the emergence of film culture within the paradigms of social tradition and cultural hierarchy where individual preferences are produced, and would like to suggest that it is a part of the narrative that entails the circumstance of art cinema circulation in China today. Indeed, in the People's Republic of China, cinema and cinema culture inevitably is in part formed in a structure through and by Party state policy. As mentioned in the Introduction, the past few decades has seen a tidal shift in which the key concern in the Chinese film industry and culture has switched from demonstrating its alignment with socialist propaganda to promoting the commingling of commercial gain alongside the perpetuation of the CCP regime. In post-socialist Chinese society, or more precisely, the post-1989 era when involvement in global capitalism and consumerism grew rapidly, the implementation of reforming policies has allowed the film industry greater initiatives and opportunities, including studio production autonomy and foreign investment, a cinematic manifestation of the disruption of the highly centralised socialist economic structure (McGrath, 2008). As Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu claims, 'what formerly appeared to be a singular Chinese collectivity is now an ensemble of heterogenous, discontinuous, and disjunctive elements, an entity that lacks a unified global meaning' (1997: 114). Nevertheless, that does not mean that the government mechanism for ideological control and the promotion of homogeneous and monolithic values has disrupted. Drawing upon Lyotard's notion of postmodernism, Berry suggests that, for the People's Republic of China, 'the forms and structures of the modern (in this case socialism) persist long after faith in the grand narrative that authorises it has been lost' (2008: 116). Whilst cinematic discourse is fundamentally circumscribed within a framework of government control and censorship, what is significant in the post-socialist/postmodernist conditions is that the field of (art) cinema is becoming more fragmented and socially demarcated. This film culture can not only be understood from within the Party-state framework but also from within the fragmented range of exhibitionary sites, diversified diffusing channels, and an eclectic spectrum of tastes and judgement.

If we follow Berry's (2004) argument that (post-socialist) cinema as a social institution is engaged in discursive practices and shaped by contemporary Chinese history, a key question concerns how the fragmentation of cinematic discourse is manifested in the practices of art cinema circulation as well as the art film culture I am talking about in this thesis. Whilst official public discourse is largely determined by a Party-state agenda, the site of art cinema appears to be operated through various networks of relations by

different human actors and organisations. This project therefore looks at individual practitioners involved in the production of art cinema culture in China as cultural intermediaries, through distribution activities, the creation of screening contexts and in the production of filmic value and taste in critical writing. I argue that the ostensibly distinctive intermediaries constitute a coordinated and interrelated network of art cinema practitioners, which thereby in part constructs and facilitates an alternative film culture in China. The argument is based on three main research questions: The first one is a general question about what role cultural intermediaries play in the construction of art cinema culture in China. The second question concerns how cultural intermediaries mediate the field of cultural production and consumption. The third question concerns what tastes and values intermediary agents produce and how they represent the social and cultural hierarchies in Chinese society. In the following discussion, I will approach these research questions through four main routes. It consists of a literature review concerning three aspects that will be developed in this thesis: defining art cinema; mapping *yinshu dianying* (art cinema) in the Chinese context; framing art cinema in field theory; locating cultural intermediaries in an alternative system of diffusion.

1.1 Defining Art Cinema

The emergence of art cinema in Europe since the postwar era has a profound impact on the development of cinema by bringing into heterogeneity of cultural and economic values in the process of filmmaking, circulation and reception. There has been a proliferation and increased debates of art cinema among critics, cinephiles and scholars. Nevertheless, ‘art cinema’ remains a problematic and slippery concept; its flexible boundary and open-ended relationship with other categories of cinema such as ‘avant-garde’, ‘independent cinema’, ‘mainstream cinema’, ‘world cinema’, or ‘national cinema’ are often contested (for example, Bordwell, 1979; Abel, 1984; Lev, 1993; Nowell–Smith, 1996; Elsaesser, 2005a; Galt and Schoonover, 2010; Andrews, 2013). For example, Geoffrey Nowell–Smith writes that ‘art cinema has become a portmanteau term, embracing different ideas of what cinema can be like, both inside and outside the mainstream’ (1996: 575). Barbara Wilinsky (2001) suggests that art cinema has different meanings for different people at specific historical and geopolitical contexts. And Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover contend art cinema’s ‘mongrel nature’ and ‘impurity’

(2010: 3) as its core essence, as it subverts the conventional homogenous standards of categorising institutions, locations, histories, genres, or spectators. These debates illustrate that despite the prevalent use of the term, the variations in meanings fundamentally attribute 'art cinema' to a flexible and discursive category. If the starting point of this project is the idea that Chinese art cinema audience taste and habitus are nurtured in the alternative film culture, and therefore part of a process of social transformation in post-socialist China, it is necessary to begin with the question: on what basis would one put forward a claim for an art film or art cinema, identifying its distinctive properties from other terms?

To grapple with the question requires a scrutiny of the two key poles of art cinema in academic discourses: art cinema as a formal-aesthetic mode of narration and art cinema as an institutional category. David Bordwell's *The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice* (1979) and Steve Neale's *Art Cinema as Institution* (1981) remain the most influential scholarly works on each polemic approaches. Both writers provide insightful examinations of art cinema mainly in the context of Europe after the World War Two. In Bordwell's seminal article, coterminous with specific artistic movements and the development of national cinemas, art cinema serves as a European paradigm of narration fitting between the two diametric ends: classical Hollywood cinema and modernist cinema. On the one hand, descending from the high art tradition of modernist cinema (for example, Film d'Art, German Expressionism and French Impressionism) that asserts a radical rejection of narrative structure, art cinema functions as an alternative cinema practice that breaks the coherence of classical Hollywood linear cause-and-effect logic. On the other hand, art cinema does not completely object classical cinema but distinguishes itself by articulating a formal-aesthetic mode of narration that centres on realism, authorial commentary and ambiguity. As he argues, '[t]he art cinema softens modernism's attack on narrative causality by creating mediating structures— "reality," character subjectivity, authorial vision— that allowed a fresh coherence of meaning' (Bordwell, 1979: 62). For Bordwell, the concept of art cinema very much resembles to what Richard Abel (1984) called 'narrative avant-garde' (a terminology that distinguishes from artists' avant-garde with its radical high-art origins), but creating its own cinematic system of new form and content to mediate between avant-garde and the classical narrative structure. Art cinema then, as Galt and Schoonover understand Bordwell, serves as 'a hybrid form that allows realism and modernism to co-exist within one text' (2010: 17). The imbrication of realism and modernism engenders art cinema to be a flexible and

‘impure’ (Galt and Schoonover, 2010: 3) category of cinema, as it has become embedded in a mixed traditions and displaced or extended across various film forms and genres.

Bordwell’s formalist analysis is grounded and its influence is traceable in many later academic works in the form and text of art cinema. Kovács, for example, maps out the historical trends and styles of European art films between 1950 and 1980, reinforcing that art cinema is central to an understanding of ‘abstraction, subjectivity, and reflexivity’ (2007: 140) figured by the conjunction of the term modernism. Similarly, Betz (2010) looks beyond the landscape of West European art cinema. Addressing the stylistic works of a range of international art filmmakers including Lisandro Alonso, Idrissa Ouedraogo, Wong Kar-wai, Abbas Kiarostami, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Carlos Reygadas, Abderrahmane Sissako, Chen Kaige, Kim Ki-duk, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Betz argues that art cinema is featured by a ‘parametric’ tradition, a term borrowed from Bordwell that foregrounds a “‘style-centred” narration’ (2010: 34).⁵ For Betz, art cinema is formally constructed by parametric and modernist codes, in which authorial style serves as key shaping force in the films nonetheless the coherent plot construction.

Whilst the formal-aesthetic discourse provides a fundamental insight of art cinema as a cinematic practice, it is deemed by later scholars and critics as a conventional idea in the debate. For example, in a recent article, Thanouli criticises Bordwell’s definition as a ‘canonical account’ that ‘undermine the applicability of art cinema as a cohesive paradigm of narration’ (2009: para. 3). Steve Neale’s 1981 landmark article then embarks on a new perspective, looking at the concept of ‘art cinema’ as an institutional category, in other words, as a set of industrial distribution and exhibition system that is collectively and consistently developed over time. Neale conceives the textual features of art film as heterogeneous ‘marks of enunciation’ (as signifiers of the author’s vision or mode of narrating) that ‘tends to be unified and stabilised within the space of an institution which reads and locates them in a homogenous way... and which mobilises that meaning in accordance with commodity-based practices of production, distribution and exhibition’

⁵ This term ‘parametric’ is borrowed from Bordwell in his analysis of the forms of narrations in his 1985 book *Narration in the Fiction Film*. For Bordwell, there are five main forms of narration in the history of fiction filmmaking: classical, historical-materialist, art cinema, parametric, and palimpsestic.

(1981: 15) including the sources of finance, the relationship with the state and other cultural institutions, and the modes of circulation and promotion. Neale's formulation foregrounds a social-historical context that partly determines the definition of art cinema which softens the polarisation of art and commerce but emphasises the variety of economic infrastructures of art cinema in individual European countries. Neale provides a perspective that locates the properties of art cinema within the specific European institutional context, necessitating a link with former aesthetic traditions.

Following on from Neale, there has been a significant body of studies and research looking at art cinema as an alternative industrial institution and how art films are circulated through different institutional and discursive sites, different paths and networks, are presented as a range of aesthetic and cultural objects scale (Lev, 1993; Wilinsky, 2001; Guzman, 2005; Wasson, 2005; Elsaesser, 2005a; Tudor, 2005; Wong, 2011; Andrews, 2013).). Specifically, festival circuit and arthouse theatrical circuit are exploited as the major approaches to distinguish art cinema from the mainstream cultural dissemination. As a consequence, films showcased in arthouse theatre and presented in film festival circuits (including both major A-festivals like Cannes Film Festival, Berlin Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, and smaller-scale festivals) are usually deemed as 'art films'.

Despite substantial differences in the extent of deviation from the mainstream distribution and exhibition system, it is worth noting that both film festival and arthouse theatre do not reject commercial imperatives while pursuing artistic appreciation. As Budd contends, '[a]rt cinema is not just a type of film, but a set of institutions, an alternative apparatus within the commercial cinema' (1984: 13). Wilinsky (2001) in her book *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*, provides insightful analysis of the paradoxical role of the postwar American arthouse cinema that shapes a distinctive intellectual filmgoing environment and maximises profits by promoting the exclusivity of the prestigious highbrow culture to wider audience. She argues that the development of arthouse cinema in the form of American 'independent' film neither intends to be regarded as peripheral nor wishes to be regarded as exclusive from the mainstream film market. Rather it aims to balance 'its desire for difference and its desire for maximum profits' (Wilinsky, 2001: 5). By promoting European highbrow culture, arthouse cinema appeals to both cultural and intellectual elite and potential audiences who are prone to seek ways to distinguish themselves from the mass by taking part of something different or alternative (Wilinsky, 2001; Guzman, 2005). Wilinsky's discussion is so significant that it helps deconsecrate

the understanding of art cinema as a niche product limited to elite audiences, situating its meaning in the context of high art culture. In an earlier work, Lev foregrounds the diverse and multicultural nature of art cinema by characterising the art cinema audience as a ‘cosmopolitan, non-chauvinist spectator who can empathise with characters from many nations’ (1993: 5). Wilinsky and Lev’s glosses together go some way to demystify the image of the art cinema audience as a niche elite group, and more significantly demonstrating the obscure boundaries between the intellectual and the mass, between art and commerce, between the local and the international in the institutional and discursive domains of art cinema. Looking at the commercial success of art films, from *Blow-up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966, UK and Italy), *Ultimo tango a Parigi* (*Last Tango in Paris*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972, France and Italy) to more recent *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017, Italy, France, USA), *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019, South Korea), artistic distinctiveness and repertory as summarised by Bordwell does not necessarily come into contradiction with the aim of reaching a larger audience base. In other words, despite of economic incentives, art cinema embraces a larger audience based on the premise of perpetuating its taste, quality and artistry (Nowell-Smith, 1996: 576).

Similarly, recent studies in film festival also provide an insight for the combination of economic, artistic, cultural, geopolitical factors concerning the networks and discourses of festival circuits (Stringer, 2001; Elsaesser, 2005a; Harbord, 2002; De Valck, 2007; Porton *Ed.*, 2009; Wong, 2011; Ahn, 2012; Fischer, 2013; Idordanova, 2013; Dovey, 2015; Berry and Robinson *Eds.*, 2017). Scholars take notes of how the film festival functions as ‘a network with nodes and nerve endings’ (Elsaesser, 2005a: 87) for the operating of films distribution, exhibition and production business in the non-Hollywood sector, and as a complex interplay between art and commerce. In her seminal work *Film Festivals: from European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, Marijke De Valck identifies the film festival network as an alternative cinema network in the sense that ‘it sustains different models for economic sustainability and thereby complements the dominant model of Hollywood media conglomerates’ (2007: 101). In the account of De Valck, being alternative means embraces the ideas of ‘diversity’ and ‘otherness’ by adding cultural and aesthetic values in the programme selections, ostensibly challenging the singular dominant model but ultimately seeking to consolidate a larger industrial system. De Valck’s argument shows parallel to Elsaesser’s comments in his seminal essay ‘Film Festival Networks’ (2005a) about how the festival, as a response to Hollywood, has become a key force in the global film business, a ‘postnational’ mechanism for facilitating

auteurism, economics, cultural prestige and recognition. As Andrews, following De Valck and Elsaesser, contests, 'The festival is art cinema's fundamental institution, then, the one that best captures the naked contradictions of a commercial area whose marketability is determined by aesthetic rituals that testify to its purity' (2013: 182). Consequently, there emerge what Elsaesser called festival 'commissioned' films with which 'power/control has shifted from the film director to the festival director, in ways analogous to the control certain star curators (rather than collectors) have acquired over visual artists and exhibition venues' (2005a: 93). Here, the existence of art cinema becomes 'contingent' (Galt and Schoonover, 2010: 7), a notion that is not only subject to artistic texts or authorial signature but also distributors, curators, programmers and critics according to festival cultural profile and marketing incentives.

If art cinema functions through artistic tradition, commercial interest and curatorial integrity, this assertion in the meantime raises a question concerning how the complex formations of art cinema, for example the more independent/avant-garde pole of the spectrum, take place within the paradigm. In 1996, Nowell-Smith (1996: 575) suggests to place international art cinema into two rubric categories: internationally and critically acclaimed national cinema that shares similar value and distribution mode with the mainstream, a type of work more close to the quality tradition of cinema that conventional art cinema like the French New Wave in the 1960s rejected; and low-budget independent films with more political and aesthetic radicality from a variety of countries. Nowell-Smith's perspective arguments provide a fundamental sense of which independent films stand in the nuanced relationship to art cinema, but his discussion of filmmakers and artists such as Jim Jarmusch, David Lynch, Wim Wenders and Pedro Almodovar whose works somehow span both categories remains vague; it is unclear whether such films refer to a more specific delimited concept of cinema, or whether it incorporates multiple forms of experimentation within a legitimate system. In *Film Cultures*, Harbord (2002: 60) provides insights into four types of discursive formation – discourse of independent filmmakers and producers, discourses of media representations, discourses of business and commerce, and discourses of tourism and service industry – operated in the spatial dimension of film festival. The discourse of independent cinema, according to Harbord, is not built on the opposition of other discourses but rather 'variously the values of bourgeois culture, nationalism and commercialization' (2002: 60). Whilst independent cinema often refers to matters of political radicalism and social realist traditions, what the label of 'independent' inscribes in art cinema is more than the political context and

autonomous sponsorship, is ‘the dialectic of mainstream, monopolized filmic culture and a tradition separate from and acting against its definition of film’ (Harbord, 2002: 43). Here, the point is just not that art-cinema, at the more radical end, completely stands in an oppositional position to commence and mainstream cultural dissemination, but that it carries out a heterogeneous programme of film through its distinctive aesthetic, socio-cultural, political, and economic practices. In other words, the notion of art cinema serves as ‘an outsider’ to both independent/avant-garde and mainstream cinema: ‘It has not been assimilated to mainstream tastes, and it lives in a ghetto, albeit often a posh or bourgeois one’ (Galt and Schoonover, 2010: 7).

Drawing upon Miriam Hansen’s account of ‘discursive horizons’ (1995: 365), Wong (2011) suggests that the film festival clusters creative film texts, engaged participants as well as other subsidised infrastructures (for example, museums, galleries, cine-clubs, film societies, educational organisations, film journals and magazines, home video, and online streaming platforms) within a larger framework of global cinema. This operation of this framework attributes to its multifaceted nature that ‘relied on its mass appeal, yet demanded and sustained more “serious” inquiries from certain classes of people in society’ (2011: 35). This framework articulates the heterogeneous attribute of art cinema: its attendant seriousness and elusive appealing to mass audience; and the diversity of institutional and discursive locations that provides different filmic experiences within different socio-cultural networks.

After all, apart from conventional institutions like arthouse and the film festival, there have developed a vast range of subsidised channels and pathways that offer distinct possibilities of art cinema distribution and reception. Looking into artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s transvesal works across movie theatre and gallery installation, Kim contests that the interplay between art cinema and video demonstrates ‘the ontological duality of cinema’ (2010: 126). Here, the conjunction of theatrical space and gallery space redefines and transforms art cinema ‘through its negotiation with and the containment of its contiguous media practices and the spatiotemporal aesthetics they articulate’ (2010: 125). Kim’s observation evidences to the mutual relationship between ‘conventional’ (art) cinema institution and ‘alternative’ spatial and temporal circulation of culture by which one influences the other. For example, Wasson (2005) in her monograph attests how The Museum of Modern Art in New York, functions as popular education and publicity machine that reproduces and disseminates the value of modern

art beyond the New York elites by virtue of its role of arthouse cinema. Herbert (2011) demonstrates how home video distribution companies (including Kino International, Facet Multimedia, Zeitgeist Film, and MUBI) organise to provide arthouse in Hollywood-centric home video landscape by fostering the ideas of exclusivity, cosmopolitanism, intellectualism and social activism. These works alluded above in part help explain how art cinema takes up in production and dissemination practices in relation to other paradigms. What is worth noting here is that art cinema, once marked as the narratives of modernism by Bordwell, has become fragmented, synthesised in the process of dissemination where different circuits, locations, networks come into redefining the discourse of art cinema. Indeed, recent scholarship has started looking at art cinema as a relational concept in a way that conjures disparate discursive frameworks together. In *Theorizing Art Cinema*, Andrews characterises art cinema as a ‘subcultural aggregate’ (2013: xi), a notion that reverberates across cultural stratifications. For Andrews, art cinema centralises high art tradition as its canon, giving rise to a hierarchical structure of subcultural categories: traditional art cinema along with its extension of networks of circulation has become the legitimate institution, contributing to the canonizing process of art cinema culture; on the other hand, beyond the legitimate, each type of subcultural art cinema represents its local ideas of high art by, for example, disseminating mixed content of high art and lowbrow subjects from cult genres with pornographic or semipornographic overtones. In other words, each subcultural enclave of art cinema is constructed in the process of being established in conjunction with other cultural norms and disseminating methods, creating distinct discursive paradigms.

According to all the studies discussed above, art cinema is defined by its complexity and inclusivity. It is predicated on a refusal of mainstream cultural dissemination, whilst the institutional sites and relations are forged in a process of triangulating artistic, heterogeneous and marketing values. Yet, the unasked question at the centre of these studies is the extent to which art cinema is situated in the narrow context of Western democratic societies that allow for justifiable and diversified exercises of circulation. In the next section, I will expand on the definition of art cinema in China and how the circulation of art cinema is exploited in academic debates.

1.2 Mapping *Yishu Dianying* (Art Cinema) in the Chinese Context

In the previous section, I addressed the refusal to mainstream cultural dissemination as a core attribute to the definition of art cinema. Borrowing film cultural prestige from the West for use in the Chinese context, *yishu dianying* also has been long characterised by its oppositional identity towards dominant film system. In 1994, Nick Browne defines Chinese art cinema as ‘an “event” against the background of the “dominant cinema”’ (1994: 9). Browne’s statement was written in the early 1990s when the Fifth Generation filmmaking was flourishing (the Six Generation had just come out into view but scholarship had not yet taken it into serious account) and the film industrial transition just started facilitating new mechanism that less adhered to the socialist system than commercialised entity. Yet in today’s China where film industry and film culture are immersed in a thoroughly commercialised context, I would argue that art cinema in China since the turn of the twenty-first century is shaped by a dialectical relationship with the dominant mainstream cinema. While a voluminous amount of scholarship has sought to tackle both historical and current account of art cinema in a variety of contexts, few academic writings expatiate on the question concerning what art cinema means in today’s China, or more precisely, what is the Chinese perception of art cinema (both domestic and international) within the rubric of a national film culture that is consolidated by institutional framings and artistic practices.

In her monograph *The Formation of Chinese Art Cinema 1990–2003* (2018), Li Yang provides a seminal account of the shaping of Chinese art cinema in the post-socialist era by tracing the influence of two major Chinese art waves (best known as the Fifth and Sixth Generation Cinema) and the historical development of Chinese film industry. Yang (2018: 3) contends that the emergence of Chinese art cinema was marked by the film industrial reform in the 1990s that denotes a shift from socialist propaganda towards commercialised mechanism.⁶ The conflicts between the old socialist system and new

⁶ In 1993, the MRFT enacted a new policy document (known as ‘No.3 Document’) which officially terminated the monopoly of the socialist film system in which the China Film Corporation film had fully control over film distribution. It for the first time declared the focus of the film market to be on audiences; the proposed reforms of the film market were focused on both economic and social arenas. See more about

industrial transition on the one hand enabled Chinese art film to grow but on the other hand repudiated its legitimacy (Yang, 2018: 3). Whilst this paradox endowed the alternative attribute of Chinese art cinema, the Fifth and Sixth Generation Cinema fundamentally articulate what Chinese art cinema should be. In the aesthetic aspect, the Fifth Generation filmmaking that emerged in the early 1980s re-examines Chinese traditional culture through exhibiting ‘rural landscape, traditional culture, ethnic spectacle, grand epic, historical reflection, allegorical framework, communal focus, and depths of emotion’ (Zhang, 2004: 290) in films such as *Huang tudi* (*Yellow Earth*, Chen Kaige, 1984, China), *Da hong denglong gaogaogua* (*Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou, 1991, China), *Daomazei* (*Horse Thief*, Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986, China), *Heipao shijian* (*Black Canon Incident*, Huang Jianxin, 1985, China), *Lan fengzheng* (*The Blue Kite*, Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993, China). Following their predecessors, the Sixth Generation filmmakers kicked off in the late 1980s by enunciating a more personal commitment to prospect the ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ (Dai, 1999: 382). Their films exemplified ‘an urban milieu, modern sensitivity, a narcissistic tendency, initiation tales, documentary effects, uncertain situation, individualistic perception, and precarious moods’ (Zhang, 2004: 290) in films like *Mama* (Zhang Yuan, 1990, China), *Dongchun de rizi* (*The Days*, Wang Xiaoshuai, 1993, China), *Beijing Zazhong* (*Beijing Bastards*, Zhang Yuan, 1993), *Youchai* (*Postman*, He Jianjun, 1994, China and Hong Kong), *Wushan yunyu* (*Rainclouds over Wushan*, Zhang Ming, 1996, China), *Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke, 1997, China and Hong Kong), *Yue shi* (*Lunar Eclipse*, Wang Quan’an, 1999, China), *Suzhou he* (*Suzhou River*, Lou Ye, 2000, Germany, China and France), and *Zhantai* (*Platform*, Jia Zhangke, 2000, China, Hong Kong, Japan and France). Accordingly, Yang (2018: 8) defines Chinese art film as those inscribed by these filmmakers’ individual visions and appropriated by a niche market, while wrestling with both commercial and political forces. As she writes,

‘The very existence of Chinese art film hinges on a delicate balance among art, commerce, and politics: it should be artistic but not so esoteric that no audience could appreciate it; it should present a fresh political or moral stance but not to the extent of seriously upsetting the authorities.’ (Yang, 2018: 8)

the policy in Dou, S (1993) ‘Guanyu Dangqian Shenhua Dianying Hangye Jizhi Gaige de Ruogan Yijian de Shuoming [Instruction of the Several Opinions on Further Reform of Current Film Industry System]’, *Movie*, (2), pp. 3–28. See more discussion about the film reform in Zhu, Y. (2002) ‘Chinese Cinema’s Economic Reform from the Mid-1980s to the mid-1990s’, *Journal of Communication*, 52 (4), pp. 905–921.

I agree with Yang that Chinese art cinema is cultivated within a context in which commerce, art and politics are thoroughly imbricated, both aesthetically and institutionally. Yet it is worth noting that Yang's description of Chinese art cinema only traverses the time period from 1990 to 2003. Today, almost three decades after the film industry reform in the 1990s, film marketisation insinuates itself in Chinese cinema in copious ways. Since 2003, the SARFT (and later the SAPPFRFT) have issued a set of policies that affirmed cinema institutions as being relatively freed from the central authority by, for example, encouraging private bodies to take part in cinema circuits (*yuanxian* 院线) and the production and distribution of domestic films, allowing more foreign films to import into the Chinese market (Yeh and Davis, 2008 Braester, 2011; Ying, 2011; Lu, 2016), and launching the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas (*quanguo yishu dianying lianmeng* 全国艺术电影联盟).⁷ In parallel with the neoliberal market mechanisms in the legitimate film industry is the boom of independent film festivals that strive for 'not-for-profit' model (Lichaa, 2017: 101) such as *Zhongguo duli yingxiangjie* (Unrestricted New Image Festival), *Beijing duli dianyingzhan* (The Beijing Independent Film Festival, BIFF), *Zhongguo duli yingxiangzhan* (the China Independent Film Festival CIFF), *Yunzhanan jilui yingxiangzhan* (Yunnan Multicultural Culture Visual Festival, Yunfest), and *Chongqing minjian yinghua jiaoliuzhan* (Chongqing Independent Film and Video Festival, CIFVF); and the expansion of screening and discussion events devoted to foreign and Chinese art films (Zhang, 2007c). These independent film events stretch out geographically and profoundly invoke social and political engagement as well as the appreciation of film. Following Yang's argument that Chinese art cinema is cultivated by the film industrialisation and filmmakers' innovative

⁷ In 15 October 2016, the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas was launched during Changchun Film Festival (Xinhua, 2016). Supported by the Film Bureau and the China Film Archive (CFA), the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas incorporates a number of cinema theatres operated by leading exhibitors such as Wanda, Broadway, Lumiere Pavilions, and regional cinema circuits and online ticketing platforms (Shackleton and Wong, 2016). See more description about the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinema in the CFA's website <https://www.cfa.org.cn/tabid/587/Default.aspx> (Accessed: 02 September 2020); Also see Sun, X., Jiang, Z., Lu, W., and Sun, D. (2018) 'Quanguo yishu dianying fangying lianmeng: cong gouxiang dao shijian [Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas: From Concept to Practice], *Contemporary Cinema*, (02), pp. 4–10; and Li, H. (2020) 'Xinshiji yilai zhongguo yishu dianying fazhan chutan [The Exploration of Chinese Arthouse Cinema in the New Century]', *China Film News*, 22 July (008).

practices in the 1990s, I would argue that the institutional infrastructure of art cinema in China in the first two decades of the twenty-first century burgeons along with the development of both commodity culture and independent film culture. Here, art cinema carries forward the historical legacy, in navigating the interplay of commercial and independent film cultures as a negotiation of diverse values and social functions. Whilst these two labels rest on their own artistic and cultural positions and usual distribution and exhibition networks within a framework of Chinese cinema, they somehow overlap and interlock with each other in shaping the meaning of art cinema in China. In the following discussion, I will expand on two labels *wenyi* 文艺 and *duli* 独立 that are often associated with art cinema to explore further the understanding of the subject.

Art film has long been re-termed as *wenyi* film (*wenyi dianying*, or *wenyi pian*) in the Chinese context (Cai, 1985; Yeh, 2009; 2012; 2013; Tam, 2015; Yang, 2018). According to Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (2013), *wenyi* was borrowed from the Japanese term *bungei* by Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century to describe translated Western and Japanese literatures. In existing film history and literature writings (largely focusing on early Chinese cinema, Hong Kong and Taiwan cinemas), *wenyi* film is often juxtaposed with emotion, sentiment and romance (Cai, 1985; Law, 1986; Teo, 2006; Yeh, 2009; 2012; 2013; Tam, 2015; Guo, 2018). Stephen Teo (2006) defines *wenyi* film as equivalent to the genre ‘melodrama’ in Chinese-language cinema, an ‘enigmatic’ genre that assimilates the essence of *wenming xi* 文明戏 (civil drama) into the ‘woman’s picture’ with a focus on female protagonists’ desire, romantic love story and family life and ethics, for instance, from Fei Mu’s *Xiao cheng zhi chun* (*Spring in a Small Town*, 1948, China) to Wong Kai Wai’s *Fa yeung nin wah* (*In the Mood for Love*, 2000, Hong Kong and China).⁸ Yeh (2009) critiques that Teo and other historians’ claim for *wenyi* as melodrama overstates sentimentalism, emotional excess and romantic encounters. For Yeh, *wenyi* is more than a cognate melodramatic genre focusing simply on emotions and romance but exemplifies the process of Chinese modernity. With its Western literary and artistic provenance, what

⁸ Adopted from Japanese version of Western drama (*shimba*) in the early twentieth century, *wenming xi* is a folk term referring to new and modern type of drama. Teo suggests that *wenming xi* is ‘modern plays with melodramatic content, emphasising love affairs, adventure and crime’ (2006: 204). See more discussions of *wenming xi* also on Zhang, Z. (2005) *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

is implicit in the notion of *wenyi* is the advancing of diverse interests and modern sentiments. The foreign connotation serves as a significant benchmark in defining *wenyi* that evokes the quests for social improvement, cosmopolitan aspirations, artistic and cultural modernisation. Yet, it is also worth noting that, whilst *wenyi* fosters the development of Chinese modernity, it also to some extent advances the canonization of famous Western works. Corresponding to *wenyi* tradition, *wenyi* film is in turn suggestive of the connection between Western (European in particular) art cinema culture and the Chinese perception of what art cinema can be. Since the Reform Era, the European art film canon has played a pivotal role in educational curriculum and cinephile agendas in China, inspiring the creative practices of the Fifth and Six Generation directors (Browne, 1994; Yang, 2018).

Another important connotation of *wenyi* in art cinema suggests its relationship with Chinese mainstream film practices and commodity culture. According to Yeh (2012; 2013), *wenyi* entered the realm of commodification since the 1930s, which functioned as an effective marketing strategy to elevate the public stature of cinema (foreign films in particular) and certain films to a higher level of cultural consumption. During the 1980s and 1990s, *wenyi* in the PRC largely refers to popular culture from Taiwan, such as Qiong Yao's romance fiction and its screen adaptations, that express individual emotions rather than ideological Communist themes, which partly contribute to the redefinition of 'modern' Chinese life at the end of the twentieth century (Gold, 1993; Guo, 2018). From the 1990s onward, *wenyi* film has developed in conjunction with the quality mainstream productions (Yang, 2018), evolving as a notion characterised by commercialised film discourses and open to diverse and artistic practices outside the institutional framework. Taking Chinese filmmaker Xu Jinglei's works as case studies, Guo (2018) provides detailed analysis of how the *wenyi* sentiments in Xu's films make a departure from a cosmopolitan aspiration and self-indulgent expression of female agency in *Yige mosheng nvren de laixin* (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*, 2004, China) to a cluster of commodified elements in *You yige difang zhiyou women zhidao* (*Somewhere Only We Know*, 2015, China) to appeal mainstream audience. In Guo's analysis *wenyi* films are bearers of 'modern' cultural values and artistic practices, while also being shaped by a negotiation between art and commerce. In this sense, as a profound label of art cinema, *wenyi* is suggestive of the dialectical relationship between art cinema and commercial cinema in which the former pullulates with the latter but not necessarily against it.

If the label of *wenyi* thoroughly blurs the distinction of art cinema and commercial cinema and represents a cinema that integrates aesthetic practices with modern sensibility, what about other forms of art films that do not blatantly appeal to mainstream audiences and those international/domestic art films that are not permitted a release through legitimate channels? And what is the property that shapes art cinema's 'alternativeness'? According to Yang, 'Chinese art cinema derived its contrastive identity mainly from institutional opposition to the political authorities (for example, how the film was made) more than an aesthetic rebellion against a powerful commercial mainstream' (2018: 15). Indeed, as art cinema often addresses controversially (socially) realist subject matters (such as politics, displacement, marginality, violence and sexuality), censorship and regulation is often applied to these areas of cinema in many countries (Lev, 1993; Kovács, 2007; Kuhn and Westwell, 2012). However, different from the Euro-American nations where art cinema is in part the outcome of a negotiation with both state censorship and industry self-regulation, the growth of artistic and independent cinema in China appears predominantly hobbled by the rules of commercial and government regulation (Berry, 2009b; Berry and Rofel, 2010). Art cinema in China then, in many ways, shares analogous properties with *duli dianying* (independent cinema). As discussed in the previous section that the appropriation of heterogeneity thoroughly shapes the institutional and discursive domain of art cinema, I would like to argue that art cinema in China, assimilating indie cinema properties, identifies its agency as alternative to a monolithic political mechanism and institutional cultural authorities.

There have been abundant academic writings on the topic of Chinese independent film and documentary, defining its subversive filmmaking practices (Lv, 2003; Berry, 2006; Pickowicz, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Cheung, 2007; McGrath, 2007; Zhang, 2007c; Berry and Rofel, 2010; Zhang, 2013), or mapping its screening scenes and institutional structures (Yang, 1994; Nakajima, 2006; 2010; Berry, 2009b; Nornes, 2009; Lu, 2010; Rhyne, 2011; Robinson and Chio, 2013; Bao, 2017; Lichaa, 2017; Yu and Wu, 2017). In the opening chapter of *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (the first English-language proceedings on Chinese independent filmmaking and film culture), Paul G. Pickowicz defines the concept of Chinese independent film as 'independence from the Chinese state rather than independence from the sort of powerful private conglomerates that have dominated Hollywood' (2006: 3). In other words, for Pickowicz, independent film in the Chinese context is 'independent' or 'underground' particularly in the sense of free from the monolithic control and influence

of the Chinese government, both ideologically and financially. In the same volume, Berry argues that Chinese independent filmmaking is not simply equivalent to a dissent culture that built on the freedom from power, but is subject to ‘a three-legged system, composed of the party apparatus, the marketised economy, and the foreign media and art organizations’ (2006: 109). In other words, whilst Chinese independent filmmaking strives for ‘independence’, it is inevitably conditioned by the triangulated relations of power. In a recent volume collection, Sabrina Qiong Yu and Lydia Dan Wu provide a nuanced account of Chinese independent cinema by analysing the institutional features of the China Independent Film Festival. They refer to Chinese independent films as the low-budget films excluded from the commercial mainstream circuits, or more precisely, those that could not acquire permission from the authority, or more precisely, the so-called ‘dragon seal’ issued by the SAPPRT (2017: 172). According to Yu and Wu (2017: 172–173), the Chinese government plays a fundamentally important role as ‘policymaker’ in suffocating independent events, which distinguishes itself from most western countries in which the government acts as ‘stakeholder’ in providing funding resources with the aim to promote national cinema. Stringent censorship rules and financial control force independent filmmakers and artists to seek support from overseas distribution agents and make their films public in foreign exhibition sites, and therefore also to some extent has determined the diffusion of Chinese independent films in prestigious international film festivals and among western audiences (Ma, 2009). As Zhang Yingjin argues, ‘Independent filmmakers turned their financial disadvantages into ideological advantages and negotiated their ways through the cracks and fissures opened up by their market economy’ (2007a: 54).

Despite its paradoxical relationship with the triangulated forces, the term ‘independent’ implies ‘pluralism’ and ‘public opposition’ outside the hegemonic cultural framework, contributing to an alternative film culture in China (Berry and Rofel, 2010: 136). It in turn invokes an alternative space and practice of exhibition, including independent film festivals and independent film-related screening and discussion events that sporadically located in university campuses, libraries, café, galleries, filmmaker and artist’s studios (Zhang, 2007c; Berry and Rofel, 2010). From Mayfair Yang’s pioneering article ‘*Film Discussion Groups in China: State Discourse or Plebian Public Sphere*’ (1994) and Seio Nakajima (2006, 2010)’s investigation on urban film clubs to Chris Berry and Luke Robinson’s recent edited volume *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation* (2017), the first book to feature research on Chinese film festivals. Academic attention to

independent exhibitionary spaces and practices and their role in developing alternative film culture has grown in recent years. However, the appropriation of *duli* (independence) in the sphere of art cinema and these two terms integrate into an alternative film culture is barely discussed in existing literatures. In the introduction of *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Zhang Zhen (2007c: 32) provides an insightful overview of independent filmmaking and screening practices and alternative film spectatorship in the turn of the new century. In Zhang's (2007a: 31) description, along with the development of independent filmmaking, there emerged a range of 'minor' and 'nomadic' cine-club communities that were devoted to screening and discussion of foreign and Chinese art films, such as 101 dianying bangongshi (101 Film Studio), *yuanyinghui* (The U-theque Organization), *houchuang kan dianying* (Rear Window Film Appreciation Club). These cine-club communities are 'independent' in the sense that they are '[n]either commercially oriented nor socially pretentious' but are 'dedicated to the enjoyment of alternative cinema as an antidote to the isolation of the individual in the age of the Internet, VCD, and DVD, and to the contrived film culture dominated by the deluge of Hollywood blockbusters and the continued hegemony of state-sponsored "correct" cinema' (2007a: 31).⁹ In other words, the cine-club community, as a key form of art cinema culture in China, coincides with the outbursts of independent film culture and cinephile culture. The cine-clubs were founded on a critical distance from homogenous mainstream film viewing modes and overtly commercialised contents. At the same time, they distance themselves from the explicitly noncompliant aspect of independent film culture. Referring back to Berry and Rofel's discussion in the beginning of this paragraph that Chinese independent cinema's alternativeness is consolidated by 'pluralism' and 'public opposition' (2010: 136), I would like to argue that art cinema in China since the turn of the twenty-first century couples cinephilia and the pluralistic identity of independent cinema, but not necessarily involved in seditious utterance against the monolithic political mechanism and institutional cultural authorities.

The notion of cinephilia, generally speaking, designates the love of cinema, as de Baecque and Frémaux defined: 'a way of watching films, speaking about them and then diffusing

⁹ I do not fully agree that cine-clubs or film societies in China are 'independent' from economic and social determinants. Nakajima's (2006, 2010) research provides a detailed account of the complex power relations behind the operation of Chinese film clubs (which I will address later in the chapter).

this discourse' (1995: 135). In the account of Paul Willemen (1982), the notion of cinephilia entails a strong desire of cinema. As he writes,

cinephilia was founded on a theory of the sublime moment, the breathtaking fragment which suddenly and momentarily bore witness to the presence and force of desire in the midst of appallingly routinised and oppressive conditions of production. (1982: 49)

In a later essay, Willemen (1994) re-examines cinephilia by linking it with cinephiles' subjectivities in the moments of revelation. In such moments, the cinephile is able to interpret coded cinematic representations of Hollywood genre films by identifying "excess of 'the seen' beyond 'the shown'" (1994: 242). For Willemen, cinephilia is very much close to netrophilia, fetishizing fragments and marginal details of 'something that is dead, past, but alive in memory' (Willemen, 1994: 227). In light of Willemen's description of the cinephiliac moment, Christian Keathley (2006) characterises the vision of the cinephile as 'panoramic perception'. Keathley argues that the cinephile is able to panoramically scan the film including marginal details and contingencies in order to 'register the image in its totality' (2006: 8). In other words, what distinguishes the cinephile from the ordinary viewer is that of the capability of visually sweeping the film not as random fragments, but as a related and legible entirety. In this sense, cinephilia designates as the love and discernability of the wholeness of cinema, but it is also fragmentary in a way that represents individual cinephile's own film experience and evaluation, as Elsaesser states, 'in whatever form we view or experience it, only one part, one aspect, one aggregate state of the many, potentially unlimited aggregate states by which the images of our filmic heritage now circulate in culture' (2005b: 41).

In the past two decades, with the decline of movie theatres and the emergence of new digital media, the worry over the death of cinephilia have been shared by many film intellectuals and cinephiles (for example, Sontag, 1996; Denby, 1998; Dargis, 2004; Thomson, 2004; Paglia, 2007). In her resounding essay *The Decay of cinema* (1996), Susan Sontag laments that the decline of the movie theatres has led to the erosion of cinema and cinephilia. For Sontag, the essence of cinephilia is profoundly defined by the way of 'going to cinema'. In response to Sontag's melancholia in cinephilia, a large amount of the debates emphasis on the way how new (home) technologies (such as, video, DVD and internet) impact on the cinephile's practices of "going out" versus "staying in" (de Valck and Hagener, 2005: 13). New-generation cinephiles and film theorists believe that new technologies foster a new diversified breed of cinephilia (Rosenbaum

and Martin, 2003; Rosenbaum, 2004; Behlil, 2005; de Valck and Hagener Eds., 2005; Balcerzak and Sperb Eds., 2009; Jordanova, 2012; Slater, 2012). Jonathan Rosenbaum (2004), for example, contests that what at stake for cinephilia is not to deal with the crisis of death but to reconfigure the term into an ‘indeterminate space and activity where we find our cinephilia stimulated, gratified, and even expanded’ (2004: 9). In their joint anthology *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia*, Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin explore how transnational communications and new technologies (for example, video, internet and international film festival) linked up filmmakers, critics and scholars around the world together, constituting a global cinephiliac community. In de Valck and Hagener co-edited collection *Cinephilia, Movie, Love and Memory*, Elsaesser argues that the way new cinephilia embraces new technologies ‘re-masters’, ‘re-purpose’, and ‘re-frames’ the traditional cinephiliac discourse that characterised by ‘anxious love of loss and plenitude’, ‘in all the richly self-contradictory, narcissistic, altruistic, communicative and autistic forms that this emotion or state of mind afflicts us with’ (2005: 40). As he concludes in his essay, ‘[c]inephilia, in other words, has reincarnated itself, by dis-embodiment itself’ (2005: 41).

I agree that the advance of new technologies partly contributes to the renaissance of cinephilia and cinema culture. In context of China, the revival of a cinephile culture is largely ascribed to the popularisation of pirated videos by which Chinese viewers could consume a wide range of art films with minimal restrictions (Zhang, 2007a: 27). And, more significantly, piracy inspired them to engage in creative filmmaking practices and cultural production. Certainly, there have been a wide range of academic writings examining the moral and legal issues of piracy, mostly focusing on its offence of intellectual property rights (for example, Mertha, 2005; Mertha and Pahre, 2005; Pang, 2006; 2012; Cheung, 2009; Dimitrov, 2009; Montgomery, 2010; Montgomery and Priest, 2016). Laikwan Pang, for example, writes that ‘[m]ovie piracy can be seen as the largest crime collectively committed by the Chinese people against the authority of both the State and the global culture industry’ (2004a: 116). Whilst she admits that piracy serves as an ‘egalitarian effort’ in contesting the authoritarian structure and hegemonic culture, she narrowly assumes that Chinese audience’s only desire is to gain entertainment from commercial Hong Kong and Hollywood films out of the state ideological constraints (Pang, 2004a: 115). Pang’s attitude is inherently suggestive of an elitist stance: distrust, or even denial, of ordinary audience’s film taste and value (Zhang, 2007b: 215). In her monograph *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China*

(2004), Shujen Wang looks at piracy from a slightly different angle. Wang rethinks the role of piracy in relation to the existing infrastructure of cinema and reframes it in a larger social and cultural framework of the greater China region rather than simply regarding it as a moral and legal issue. Wang maps out an economic and political aspect of film piracy network in the Chinese-language market as an effective way in defiance of legitimate circulation led by global capitalism. However, although Wang provides valuable interview data with different people (such as, viewers, businessman or street vendor) involved in the network, her analysis substantially underscores the role of digital technology within the economic and political purview but gives little space for the function of human agency and subjectivity.

In contrast to Pang and Wang's perspectives that mainly focus on the consumption of film piracy, Zhang (2007b) considers piracy as a key to reframe contemporary screen culture in China. For Zhang, piracy serves as 'a space of weak power' that 'operates in an array of tactics of access, appropriation, proliferation, subversion, and (self-)empowerment—tactics that emerge in better view from a bottom-up' (2007b: 217). It fundamentally nurtures a kind of 'visual democracy' (Zhang, 2007b: 227) outside the state legitimate framework of what visual materials should be like and by which means they should be disseminated. Whilst Zhang's discussion mainly revolves around Chinese filmmakers' creative and critical agency invested in the use, or reuse, of piracy, Jingying Li pays meticulous attention to how piracy help invigorate avid cinephiles to become 'D-generation' filmmakers (2012: 543). Compared with Zhang's (2007c) term of the 'urban generation' that focuses on the collective identity and cultural production during China's urbanisation, Li's concept of the 'D-generation' underlines 'the technological materiality of this generation's collective digital practices in both film consumption (digital piracy) and film production (DV filmmaking)' (2012: 552). In Li's (2012) investigation, the practices of 'D-generation' creates an alternative public sphere of cinema in urban China, whose engagement with political and social realities potently challenges the power of authoritarian film institutions (Zhang, 2004; Wang, 2005; Berry et al., 2010).

Whilst I agree that piracy in part constitutes an alternative space of cinema that generates new modes of filmmaking and viewing practices, I would like to add that what piracy brings to the art cinema culture in China is an alternative spectatorship that is less embroiled in the dominant cinematic apparatus, one that accentuates individualised filmic experiences and practices. Observing the situation in Southeast Asia, May Ingawanij in

her co-edited volume *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (2012) provides a discussion of situating empirical practices of filmic experience in Southeast Asia in relation to what the film theorist Francesco Casetti (2009) calls the ‘performance’ mode of spectatorship with which spectators’ filmic experiences are relocated in the transformed media environment and are engaged with more personalised proactive performances rather than simply situated in a moment of theatrical ‘attendance’. As Ingawani writes,

The proliferation of film consumption sites and screen contexts in the contemporary period signals a new culture with which cinema must engage, characterised by the equation of identity with expressivity and the need for the relational engagement of social subjects amid the fragmentation of pre-established social networks... This personalised, elective mode of spectatorship is both expressive of identity and part of the process of constructing social networks via acts of discussion, exchange, and sharing. (2012: 10)

The scenario that Ingawani observes resonates with similar situations in China: an alternative film culture began to emerge in urban locales, facilitated by a series of new technologies of diffusion, from videotape, VCD (Video Compact Disc), DVD (Digital Video Disc), to, later, online surfing, each of which situated the viewers in relation to a more personalised and private environment. Indeed, film scholarship, from Susan Sontag’s renowned lament on the death of cinephilia in 1996 to David Bordwell’s latest whimper ‘films have become files’ (2012: 8), has often expressed concern about the sense that digital (and internet) media might challenge the ontology of film and entirely reshape the film industry or signal, precisely, a sense of its own autonomy, as signified in the phrase ‘post-cinema’. However, possible reasons for regret aside, recent academic works start to pay attention to the practices of film distribution and consumption in the digital age and how they redefine the function of audience within the whole process of circulation (for example, Cunningham and Silver, 2012; Gubbins, 2012; Tryon, 2013; Crisp, 2015). According to Tryon, the multiple platforms and services of cinema generate a sense of ‘digital delivery’ which is integrated into the broader spectrum of cinema institution, not simply providing audiences multiple choices and spatial and temporal flexibility, but also creating a form of individualised consumption, so that the repertoire of cinema has seemingly come to be determined by the viewer’s choices (2013). Tryon’s construct is somehow in line with what Dudley Andrew (1986: 4) suggests in *Film in the*

Aura of Art that the identification of art film relies on individual spectator's choices and experiences but Andrew is not here implying some simplistic notion of the sensitive individual's voluntarism. The way that I am referring to the realignment of the relationship between audience and cinema, taking the cue from Tryon or Andrew, provides possibilities to evade central control and form a network of art cinema in China. Given the way the state circumscribes the accessibility and publicness of art cinema, individual autonomous viewing activities and practices appear to play an important role in constituting the art film culture, an alternative film culture that presents a distinct practice of alternative spectatorship and cinephilia.

1.3 Framing Art Cinema in Field Theory

The previous discussion is based on a scrutiny of existing texts and studies of art cinema and how they may be useful in further analysis of the putative film culture in China. However, there has been very little work on such a film culture in China which is based on a systematic, academic study. Like most areas of film studies, research on Chinese cinema predominantly emphasises film texts with which textual analysis as the preferred method (Stacey, 1993). And therein lies the most common type of study, that is, situating selected films in the trajectories of China's social transformation, characterised by the style of the filmmakers (for example, Berry, 2004 and 2007; Lu, 2011; McGrath, 2007 and 2011; Pickowicz and Zhang, 2006; Zhang, 2004 and 2007). In addition, some research written in Chinese pursues the industrial approach to the Chinese film market, including analysing mainstream box-office data, numbers of cinema theatres, and types of audiences, and, when it comes to culture and policy, suggesting solutions for protecting the domestic film market from the 'invasion' of Hollywood blockbusters, or (mostly) promoting local mainstream or (rarely) art film to the international market (Gao, 2014a; Gong, 2014; Lu and Zhang, 2014; Li, 2020). These publications are largely subsidised by state-funded institutions. In recent years, English-language scholarship has increasingly attended to the specificity of the filmic experience or the distribution and exhibition of art cinema as a series of consistent practices, and as an important or expanding part of Chinese film culture (for example, Berry and Robinson Eds., 2017; Yang, 2018). Building upon the works that attempt to make a specific argument about the Chinese case (for example, Pickowicz and Zhang Eds., 2006; Berry and Robinson Eds., 2017; Yang, 2018)

and other seminal studies that address film culture more broadly or of specific cases (for example, Harbord, 2002; Larkin, 2008), this research aims to address a detailed account of art cinema diffusion and reception in China in the twenty-first century beyond the realms of film production, to enrich the film studies research agenda and hopefully provide an impulse to interdisciplinary research in film and media studies, especially as regards China.

From the various approaches within cultural studies, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has been the most influential on my thinking on film culture and the socio-cultural relations within it. His conceptual and methodological system has helped me to understand and relate the various individuals and entities that may be said to constitute the art cinema circuit in China, such as the cinemas of various kinds and with various patronage, cine-clubs, exhibitors, translators, critics and cinephiles as well as the piracy practitioners. The turn to Bourdieusian theory takes its cue especially from the perceived problematic term ‘art’ of ‘art cinema’. The virtue of the sociological understanding of art cinema is its refusal to accept it as given or even once analysed, a concept of art that is an ideal or based on art’s supposed intents or essences; these are not the parameters of any sociological approach. Here, following Bourdieu, I understand art cinema culture as spatially embedded in what he conceptualises as a field, which is generated by a set of practices of those individuals and entities mentioned above and situated within a larger context of socio-cultural formations. The choices and tastes about film are derived from one’s position within the field where multiple relations are structured by class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Bourdieu argues that in modern societies, the process of socialisation generates bundles of relatively autonomous social spaces (social microcosms) with their own logic and rules to demarcate themselves from one another. The social space is conceptualised as a ‘field’ by Bourdieu, ‘a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions’ which ‘impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.),’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97). In Bourdieu’s formulation, each field is relatively autonomous, consisting of multiple relations (and struggles) between agents and institutions determined by the composition and the distribution of various conceptions of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic, etc.). Also, the volume and structure of capitals in each field causes specific internal hierarchies, or more

precisely, oppositions between the dominated and the dominant which ultimately designates the type of field (for example, the science field is mainly sustained by scientific capital or academic capital, whilst economic capital or social capital seems to be overlooked vis-à-vis the literary field).

Among all the fields that Bourdieu addresses, the literary field (or the artistic field), is the one that is closest or similar to the field of film. The literary field is present as an ‘inverse economy’ (1993: 59), in which holders of cultural capital place themselves in a more dominant position than holders of economic capital. However, still, no literary field could ever achieve absolute autonomy, as they are all to some extent affected by what Bourdieu called ‘the field of power’ which regards economic or political capital as the principle of legitimacy. By the effect of the field of power, the literary field of cultural production is divided into two contradictory poles: ‘the subfield of large-scale production’ complies with the dominant economic or political orientations, whilst ‘the subfield of pure/restricted production’ insists on greater autonomy as encapsulated by the formula of ‘art for art’s sake’.

If one follows Bourdieu’s (1993) anatomy of the literary field, it becomes possible to explain or conceive of the film field in China as one dominated by political authority, whilst, art cinema culture articulates a subfield of pure production whose principle of legitimacy is supposed to be based on its cultural capital or symbolic capital. However, what is problematic here is that Bourdieu’s field theory is based on Western cultural traditions and social structures and differentiated capitalist society, implying that it might not be so applicable for a non-western socialist or even post-socialist society like China, in itself built on hundreds of years of different social, economic, political and cultural continuities and operations of the various aspects of social structure, which we can no longer be confident are all ‘reducible’ to an over-arching theory of social structure and determinism. As Wendy Larson argues, the ‘third-world’ countries, such as China, are situated ‘in a culture that has not experienced the same economic system as those under capitalism, or in a society where “art for art’s sake” is not a widely accepted concept’ (1999: 180). Larson’s argument particularly emphasises the state of dependency of the economic field in a third-world country vis-à-vis the first-world society on which Bourdieu’s field theory is based. Addressing Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou’s *Huo Zhe (To Live)*, 1994, Zhang Yimou, China and Hong Kong) as a case study, Larson (1999: 181) suggests that the field of film in China is culturally inhibited by global

(western) capital which means that the participants have to sacrifice the fine logic of 'art for art's sake' to accommodate the interest of foreign investors and audiences. However, Larson fails to mark a shift from the solo emphasis of the foreign-capital dominant economic field towards the construction of an elaborate landscape of the field of film into which domestic agents and institutions are involved.

However, Chinese Bourdieu-influenced scholar, Zhu Guohua (2016), discovers that in Bourdieu's less noted work *Practical Reason* (1998) he has sought to use the concept of political capital to demonstrate how his framework could be applied in socialist regimes, such as East Germany and the Soviet Union. The concept, or its application, of political capital may allow a productive understanding of state concentrated power in socialist countries that makes Bourdieu more directly applicable to Chinese cultural and social studies (Zhu, 2016). Zhu argues that the reason why many Chinese scholars failed to analyse China's situation through Bourdieu's approach is that they misuse the concepts like cultural capital and economic capital, which Bourdieu uses to predominantly refer to Western socio-cultural and historical hierarchies. Similarly, Chinese modern literature scholar Michel Hockx also remarks that,

Bourdieu's work has had a stimulating impact on the study of modern Chinese literature by calling attention to ways in which literary communities can be relatively autonomous and by broadening our perspective beyond the Cold War political dualism and beyond the politicised narrative of 'mainstream' development. Yet the emphasis on autonomy and the introduction of more and more different authors, groups and styles should not detract from the fact that, throughout virtually the entire modern period, the Chinese literary field was operating under conditions of state interference and state control (2012: 60) [my translation]

What Zhu and Hockx suggest here is that for the Chinese case the relations between the state-involved and the autonomous field-generated institutions and practices are open to analysis with Bourdieusian approaches.

Indeed, in the field of film as well as the field of art film, state involvement, often operated via formal and informal codes of censorship in particular, is an indispensable element to be analysed. In film studies on Chinese independent cinema, the role of state and politics is highlighted in the analytic frame. As mentioned before, Berry (2006) identifies that Chinese independent filmmaking is conditioned by a 'three-legged system' that brings

together the power of Party-state apparatus, marketisation and globalisation. Berry's formulation is suggestive of the necessity of political engagement in Chinese independent cinema, but moreover, in the analysis of Chinese independent cinema it is impossible to eliminate or ignore the other two forces. Later in another Berry contributed volume, Zhang (2007a) argues that politics, art and capital has fed into a new relatively stable alliance in which complicity, co-optation and accommodation compose the main characteristics of Chinese cinema today. As Zhang writes,

While politics readjusts its strategic relations to art from all-out domination to sugarcoated co-optation, art may have willingly accommodated politics to such an extent as to be at times entirely complicit with official ideology... Similarly, capital also changes its strategic position on art from domination to co-optation and in some cases the lure of prestige and profit sharing has compelled art to accommodate capital... or become complicit with – if not dependent on – capital (2007a:71-72)

Berry and Zhang both provide insightful framing of the complex relations within Chinese cinema. With the development of Chinese cinema studies, some leading academic scholars also started expanding the idea to incorporate a consideration of film culture as regards diffusion and consumption. As mentioned before, the study of Chinese film festivals, for example, has become a key subject matter in the discourse (for example, Ma, 2009; Rhyne, 2011; Robinson and Chio, 2013; Berry and Robinson *Eds.*, 2017). For example in *Chinese Film festivals* (2017), Yu and Wu (2017) provide insightful and exploratory scrutiny of the CIFF festival. Following Julian Stringer (2013), Yu and Wu contemplate Chinese independent film festivals as a form of cultural institution that plays a significant part in the process of developing Chinese visual culture and public culture.

Whilst I agree with Yu and Wu that independent film festivals, as institutionally and discursively organised sites, create an alternative public sphere under a volatile social and political environment, it becomes necessary to pose the question concerning the way in which the agents located within such autonomous sites bridge filmic texts and consumers. As one of the contributors of *From Underground to Independent* Seio Nakajima (2006) points out, 'Even in the autonomous field of independent films, producers and consumers do not always coincide' (2006: 185). What Nakajima wants to suggest here is to highlight the field of cultural production and consumption within which non-filmmaker-or-producer participants are involved. Nakajima initiates his first attempt toward a sociology of film consumption by analysing five film clubs in Beijing through Bourdieu's

conceptual and methodological approach. Nakajima's analysis examines the distribution of capitals within the field of cultural consumption in Beijing, which is positioned in a three-dimensional space assigned by three different forms of capital (cultural, economic, and political). Drawing on his participant observation of the selected film clubs, he develops a typology which labels the film clubs as 'politically oriented', 'commercially oriented', 'art-for art's sake' and 'artistic/ commercial'. He argues that even in the relatively autonomous field of Chinese independent films, the field of power in Chinese society still plays a substantial role which divides the field of cultural consumption of Chinese independent films into a dominant pole defined by economic capital and a dominated pole to which clarify 'art for art's sake' belongs. Moreover, Nakajima's empirical research also depends on the habitus and practices of individual participants such as film club organisers and members who serve as agents constituting the field. Nakajima attempts to prove the possibility of extending an analysis of cultural production to that of cultural consumption which in part inspires this thesis, but on the other hand, Nakajima misses the point that the film-club organisers who he conducts observations and interviews with also serve as what Bourdieu calls 'cultural intermediaries', mediating the production and consumption of independent film culture in China. The next section of this literature review will elaborate the concept of cultural intermediaries and what role it might play in the field of art cinema.

1.4 Locating Cultural Intermediaries in an Alternative System of Diffusion

In Bourdieu's formulation, the notion of cultural intermediaries refers to a new fraction of middle-class workers that 'comes into its own in all occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services ... the most typical of whom are the producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or the critics of "quality" newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers' (1984: 359; 325). Bourdieu argues that those new occupations arise from the new economy (at the time of writing) 'whose function depends as much on the production of needs and consumers as on the production of goods' (1984: 310), in other words, the consumer economy. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu's analysis of cultural intermediaries is

based on French capitalist society in the 1960s when Maoist China underwent the stern Soviet-style socialism (Lin, 2010: 104). The turning point was the economic reform in 1978 when a planned economy carried over to the officially called ‘socialist market economy’, which also brought a shift from ‘comrade to consumer’ (Croll, 2006: 16) in the sociocultural realm. This new mode of economy not only has given rise to an immense economic growth, but also has entailed the so-called ‘postsocialist’ condition that ‘fraught with experiences of fragmentation and anxiety in addition to the awakening of new desires and identities’ (McGrath, 2008: 2). One of the consequences of ‘the awakening of new desires and identities’ is that of the ascendancy of popular culture and consumer society (Lu, 1997: 140), a boom in light and service industries (Liu, 2011), and new formations of social strata. The economic development has led to the rise of a new middle class, determining habits of consumption and specific cultural values, and moreover, merging consumerism into the legitimacy of culture and society (Croll, 2006; Elfick, 2011; Goodman, 2008; Smith-Maguire, 2013).

The legitimation of consumerism appears to blur the boundary between legitimate and popular culture. In the account of Bourdieu (1984), legitimate culture denotes the appropriation of cultural goods and its associate symbolic profits that defined by the authority and the dominant class. For the film industry in China, it is indicative of what Zhang calls ‘a complicit partnership’ (2007a: 72) between politics and capital celebrating political correctness and mass entertainment in mainstream cinema since the 1990s, which I would say formulates a new legitimate film culture. In addition, Zhang’s (2007a: 71) mapping of the nexus of Chinese filmmaking between four players (politics, capital, art and marginality) is suggestive of a relationship between this new legitimate film culture and the alternative film culture (exemplified by art and peripheral underground film, according to Zhang) revolving around the market: the legitimate does not eliminate the alternative, but the two have sought to coexist and collaborate in a subtle way. Similarly, in *Film Festivals*, Marijke de Valck argues that the film festival network as an alternative cinema network which is ““alternative” in the sense that it sustains different models for economic sustainability and thereby complements the dominant model of Hollywood media conglomerates’ (2007: 101). De Valck stresses that the network is not completely against Hollywood but, in fact, sustained by multiple actors including Hollywood whose movements serve as linkages that connect the seeming discrete film events into a larger network.

In light of this, I would like to refer back to the field of film discussed in the previous section as well as reconfigure the role of cultural intermediaries involved in the alternative system of diffusion and who position themselves in the relatively marginal cultural field. The turn to cultural intermediaries takes its cue from the perceived inadequacies of the latent connection between the subfields of art film and legitimate mainstream in describing film culture in China. Drawing on ethnographic research, this thesis then identifies a group of cultural intermediaries who participate in independent exhibition, underground distribution and amateur criticism, simultaneously serving and constituting the alternative film culture. In examining their work, I want to analyse the socially and culturally functioning characteristics of their mediating practices, highlighting some of the ways that identification with the fields upon which they act affects their role as gatekeepers, as mediators, or as ‘middle-brow’ taste makers within art cinema culture and their positions and dispositions towards the mainstream. Their practices also cut across different sectors of the institution of art cinema, providing a specific context for the work of cultural intermediaries.

Sociological research has provided discussion and analysis on intermediaries in relation to the economic and cultural logic of their professional activities in the circulation of cultural goods (for example, Du Gay, 1996; Negus, 1992, 1995, 1998). In *Art Worlds* Howard Becker (1982), for example, examines intermediaries engaged in the distribution of art works, whose activities he seeks to define as markers of a distribution system that bear upon art works. What Becker emphasises is that intermediaries play the role of being professional market actors involved in the qualification of artistic and cultural goods, bridging the movement of art work and money between artists and audiences, and mediating the communication and influence between the two groups. Becker’s work can be taken to represent many recent studies on cultural intermediaries that seek to demonstrate that their economic activities are culturally formed. However, few regard intermediaries as culturally and socially situated agents whose motivation is (thoroughly or partially) the inherent rewards of the work (Woo, 2012). In other words, amateurism and its relation to cultural intermediaries’ immaterial practices is relatively underestimated in academia. Certainly, in speaking of amateur and professional, it does not necessarily or only mean the occupational status and practices of the actors (for example, volunteer or paid workers) but, more importantly, refers to the struggles and contrasting positions and dispositions (or, habitus) towards the fields. In his famous discussion on professionalism and amateurism, Edward Said points out the differentiation

between these two terms in that professionalism focuses on reputation, profit, a narrow specialisation of knowledge and inevitably subordinates intellectuals towards power and authority; whilst, amateurism represents ‘a different set of values and prerogatives’, motivated by love and interest, by care and affection (1994: 82). Given the distinction between professionalism and amateurism, two important questions related to this thesis concern what role amateurism and professionalism play in the framing of value and the making of taste in an alternative cultural context and how they represent the relationship between art film culture and the mainstream.

In a journal article, part of a special issue on cultural intermediaries, Woo (2012) draws on ethnographical research on a group of retailers and event organisers who are involved in subcultural practices in both voluntary and small-business organisation in a Canadian city. According to Woo’s study, although these subcultural intermediaries express values of both amateurism and professionalism, the amateurism intrinsically sustains their ‘geek’ communities and represents their dispositions towards the mainstream. Similarly, research in amateur production has provided insights into diverse modes of participatory practices, such as fan fictions, and fan films, that create new models of consumption and change our relationship with mass media (Jenkins, 1992, 2006). For film theorists and historians, amateurism is important in the sense of being ‘not measured by ordinary standards’ (Bazin, 1967: 133). Remaining in this field of reference, in the past amateurism flourished particularly due to the boom of portable and affordable 16mm filmmaking technology and the development of home video (Chalfen, 1975; Zimmermann, 1995; Klinger, 2006). In terms of the exhibition of art cinema, amateur and volunteer institutions (such as film societies and cine-clubs) played an important role in disseminating and constructing art cinema culture. Here, amateurism refers to not only the ‘rough’ way of filmmaking but to a certain cinephilia and the possible will of challenging the established commercial professional system and apparatus. In *China on Video*, Poala Voci proposes the concept of ‘lightness’ to distinguish such smaller-screen films, amateur filmmaking and viewing from ‘heavy’ legitimate film product, ‘light’ in the sense of ‘production costs, distribution ambitions, economic impact, limited audiences, quick and volatile circulation’ with ‘resistance to being framed into and validated by either market, art, or political discourses’ (2010: xx). But simultaneously, as Voci points out, ‘light’ visual practices also aim to preserve and expand on expressing individuality, in other words, ‘unsanctioned, unregulated, and intensely private realities’ (2010: xxi), however, within public spaces precisely dominated by legitimate culture. Voci’s discussion is indicative

of not only the blurry boundary between private and public discourses but also the negotiation between amateurism and the legitimate.

Admittedly, being cultural intermediaries means being involved in framing their goods and value as a kind of legitimacy, which requires claims to expertise to distinguish them from other actors (Negus, 2002; Nixon and Du Gay, 2002; Moor, 2012; Smith-Maguire and Matthews, 2012). As one of the significant components of expertise, professionalism, in the form of professional expertise, is indicative of professional credibility and occupational legitimisation, which relies on standardised devices and qualifications. Professionalism in turn serves as a form of symbolic capital, which is both internally (in terms of enduring disposition or habitus) and externally (in terms of position) embedded in power-driven contexts, contributing to what Bourdieu describes as ‘fields of power’ (Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2010: 68). Bourdieu, in his conversation with Wacquant, identifies the notion of profession as a field of ‘competitions and struggles’ that has multiple positions but only the admitted occupant is eligible to command the whole structure (1992: 243). As he writes,

The very notion of writer, but also the notion of lawyer, doctor, or sociologist, despite all efforts at codification and homogenisation through certification, is at stake in the field of writers (or lawyers, etc.): the struggle over the legitimate definition, whose stake - the word definition says it - is the boundary, the frontiers, *the right of admission*, sometimes the *numerus clausus*, is a universal property of fields. (1992: 245)

With the identification as admitted professionals, cultural intermediaries tend to maintain ‘the boundaries of access and inclusion’ rather than innovating new cultural value or taste, or challenging the existing socio-cultural structure (Negus, 2002: 531). Access and inclusion denotes not only the involvement of a certain cultural industry or occupation, but also extends to the attribution to social groups, within which boundary networks of connections, shared values and common life experiences play more important roles than formal-education qualifications (Negus, 2002). Cultural intermediaries are inclined to build up an enduring line between the inclusion (the practitioners themselves) and exclusion (the consumers) rather than bridge them together. Consequently, to maintain this relationship, cultural intermediaries intend to produce a new pattern of legitimacy which is based on the existing socio-cultural value system and hierarchy. For example, researching the British music industry in the late 1980s and the 1990s, Negus (1992; 1999)

discovers that the aesthetic hierarchies and working practices within the British music industry represent broader class divisions. More specifically, the agendas of British music rely on the decision of experienced white male executives with an educated middle class background and habitus involved in the business and management, a reflection of their preferences and judgements instead of the diversity of music (Negus, 2002).

Considering cultural intermediaries involved in alternative institutions of cinema, I would add the argument that amateurism applies to internal distinctions with which they distinguish themselves from their legitimate mainstream counterparts whose motivation of intermediary work is solely determined by economic, or symbolic, capital. Sharing similar characteristics with common intermediaries, the alternative cultural intermediaries, who seek to frame a new mode of distribution and reception different from those possible within the established legitimate professional realm, coordinate binary practices and spaces that are both cinephilia-oriented and professionally ambitious, both independent and public, both amateurish and self-constituted. In this thesis, I distinguish the cultural intermediaries by their roles and involvement in the alternative modes of art cinema distribution, exhibition and criticism. Each main research-based chapter focuses on a different group of cultural intermediaries and the specific area they are involved in. Consequently, the three groups that are presented in the chapters each revolve around a different function with which the cultural intermediaries operate while simultaneously sharing common modalities between them.

2. Methodology

This PhD project develops an ethnographic approach towards Chinese cinema and an analysis of what roles and how intermediary agents come to mean in the circulation and appreciation of art cinema in China. To address the lack of existing knowledge about the roles of cultural intermediaries and their practices involved in the production and consumption of art film culture, I have undertaken theoretically informed ethnographic research in relation to three main practices: independent exhibition, internet film criticism and informal distribution (fan translation, as well as piracy production and distribution that serves as a foundation for all the three aspects). The reasons are because I am not simply interested in the analysis of film texts but in the way in which people pass around the texts. In doing so they produce the very cultural contexts in which any discourses about films can be generated. Indeed, historically film studies was centrally focused on the analysis of the film text. In recent years, there has been a growth of interest examining cinema beyond the film text. The majority of seminal markers in the field have not only ruminated on the analysis of (female) audiences (for example, Staiger, 1992; Stacey, 1994; Kuhn, 2002; Klinger, 2006; Atkinson, 2014), but also in social spaces of scenes of reception, including diverse distribution networks (for example, Iordanova and Cunningham Eds.; Lobato, 2012; Crisp, 2015) and exhibitionary sites and film festivals (for example, Wilinsky, 2001; Wasson, 2005; de Valck, 2007; Wong, 2011; Berry and Robinson *Eds.*, 2017). While Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings argue that ‘most studies of film make claims about the effects that films have upon their audiences’ (2003: 6), the role of intermediary practitioners who are involved in the negotiation between production and consumption has remained a relatively unexplored area of academic attention.

With the aim of producing an ethnographic account which addresses all the three aspects, it is essential to employ an in-depth study that encompasses a multiplicity of research methods that accord to different situations with different respondents. The methodology of deeply tracing the practices and networks of intermediary agents serves as part of a conversation about how I as an ethnographic researcher might analyse and understand how they play in negotiating between amateurism and professional ambition, between idealistic commitment and profitable pursuit.

Generally speaking, ethnography is a research method that requires researchers to deeply engage in the world being studied (Amit, 2000; Hine, 2009; Ortner, 2013; Walsh, 2006; Willis and Trondman: 2000). In the account of Hammersley and Atkinson, the ethnographic 'deep engagement' is depicted as 'participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts - in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry' (1995:1). This definition is suggestive of the way that ethnography as a research method is mainly grounded in the researcher's direct contact with respondents via participant observation and associated with prolonged fieldwork. As far as the idea of deep engagement is concerned, it is necessary to examine the matter of the distance between the researcher's anthropological field and 'home' (Amit, 2000). According to Amit, the idea of 'home' stands for the ethnographer's 'usual place of residence' (2000: 5), or more concretely, her or his 'usual relationships, routines, commitments and preoccupations' (2000: 6). Bearing this in mind, it brings us to some questions for an enquiry into the relationship between the researcher and those being studied, or more precisely, how the researcher places themselves as a stranger or a member in the given field. On the one hand, as a member of a social or cultural group, the researcher is probably so familiar with the culture that she/he may simply assume how the culture looks like from her or his own perspective, rather than reflecting on the experience and observation during the fieldwork of research; while on the other hand, if the ethnographer is unfamiliar with the field, she or he may not possess an insider's view of the culture, which may ultimately lead to them finding some practices strange and questionable (Schutz, 1944). The dialectic relationship between a researcher's roles as member and stranger is also incarnated in a Geertzian conceptualisation of 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant'¹⁰ that the restriction to 'being a member' leaves the researcher 'awash in immediacies' and 'entangled in vernacular,' while 'being a stranger' leaves her/him 'stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon' (Geertz, 1974: 29). Geertz's description is illustrative of the junctures and predicaments that ethnographers

¹⁰ Borrowing from Heinz Kohut, Clifford Geertz develops the idea of 'experience-near' as 'one which an individual... might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others'; while the concept of 'experience-distant' is explained as 'one that specialists of one sort or another... employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims' (1974: 28).

may encounter during their research journey. In what follows, I will discuss the vantage point and premise of my role as an ‘insider’ involved in the field of my ethnographic research.

When I first encountered the multiple roles of cultural intermediaries during my research – chiefly independent exhibitors, internet film critics and fan translators, in my case – I felt I was re-examining a world that I thought I was familiar with. I have been immersed in what I had directly conceived of as an art cinema scene in China for years - from an ordinary film viewer seeking pirated VCD and DVD from local video shops, to contributing to film reviews and subtitling activities. However, regarding my role as an ‘insider’, a key question concerns whether it is necessary to interrupt these regular involvements simply in order to immerse myself in a ‘strange’ field and generate more objective data. One of the significant issues I need to account for in my research are the challenges and opportunities faced in moving from being a participant member to an ethnographer of Chinese-language art cinema scenes and networks. These challenges and opportunities will vary depending on different situations with different groups of respondents during the research. For example, being a ‘local’ member, I am capable of reading my informants’ behaviours and activities, including their nuanced subtle body language. Indeed, the Chinese (Mandarin) language can be demanding for a non-native researcher, and it is even harder (not only for foreign researchers but also for domestic older-generation scholars) to interpret the affiliated emotions and cultural meanings behind the words (many of the respondents are my peers who apply trendy internet slang often in both daily life and online context) in the ‘right’ way. In this way, ‘home’ knowledge becomes fundamentally supportive of my role of being the ethnographer, suturing over the differences. On the other hand, in certain specific circumstance, it would be a challenge for me to avoid affirming my own assumptions, possibly ‘constructed’ by the very field I am studying during participant observation.

Accordingly, this project takes an ethnographic approach and fieldwork encompassing participant observation and in-depth interviews with three different groups of cultural intermediaries. During the ethnographic research period, I also kept a research diary to document my own reflexivity upon the field. Interview data analysed in this thesis were mainly collected between approximately September 2016 and July 2018, whereas the participant observation was relatively prolonged, covering the whole four-year period of the PhD. My previous years of experiences of exploring and viewing art film also

contributed to developing my thoughts and understanding of the whole project. In the following discussion, I will elaborate the ways of which I invested myself in approaching and building connections with the respondents.

2.1 Participant Observation

Like many viewers, I was drawn to Hollywood ‘blockbusters’ and American television drama in my early encounter with cinema and related media. I did not have much knowledge or experience of other art films until 2009 when I started browsing several film-related sites on the internet, especially Mtime.com and Douban.com. From these sites, I developed a knowledge and understanding of global art cinema, and leading me to choose to study film for my Master’s and PhD degrees in Britain. In the past ten years, via these online sites, I have been tracking my own film-viewing records, communicating with other film lovers with the common interest of art cinema and attending film screening events.

In the initial stages of my research, my plan was to focus on Social Networking Service (SNS) spaces, such as Weixin (WeChat),¹¹ Sina Weibo and Douban, each of which has distinct features for circulating filmic knowledge and information. Subsequently, I have shifted my focus to investigate the role of cultural intermediaries (independent exhibitors, internet film critics and fan translators) in the production of art cinema culture in China, whose activities and practices are more or less dependent on these online platforms. Regarding participant observation, by building personal relationships as the primary vehicle for collecting data, I will expatiate on the ways that I mediated and constituted my fieldwork relationships with the three different groups of respondents in the following discussion. The analysis of each group of cultural intermediaries will be structured as an independent chapter in this PhD thesis.

2.1.1 Independent Exhibitors

¹¹ Launched by Tencent in 2011, *Weixin* (WeChat) is a Chinese mobile texting and networking platform, which is the most widely used among Chinese social media users (Svensson, 2013; Tu, 2016).

The first role of the cultural intermediaries I intend to trace is that of independent exhibitors. In the literature review, I argue that art cinema in China assimilates the pluralistic identity of independent cinema. The appropriation of ‘independent’ here is not simply designated to being independent from, or opposite to, the authority or commercial cinema, but rather connotes a diversified channels and practices of art cinema culture as part of the response to the dominant film culture. In 1996, seven film lovers founded Film 101 Studio in Shanghai in order to disseminate filmic information and knowledge to broader viewership (Xu, 2016: 2–6). Having been operating screening events for over 20 years, Film 101 Studio is regarded as the very first grassroots screening group in China. Soon after the founding of Film 101 Studio, there emerged numerous cine-clubs and screening groups in urban areas in China, notably *Yuanyinghui* (The U-theque Organisation) in Guangzhou and *Shijianshe* (Practice Society) in Beijing (some of my informants used to participate in those screening groups but now the majority of them operate their own group and exhibition sites). Precisely because China has lacked any recognisable infrastructure of art cinema and suffered forceful state control over public cinema, those screening practices provide alternative cinematic spaces for viewers to access ‘art film’ and gain an understanding of it. In 2009, as a second-year undergraduate student, I happened to read a post on Douban, which was about a free screening of *Hallam Foe* (David Mackenzie, 2007, UK) hosted in a quaint underground bar near my university in Beijing. I attended this screening with a friend and we both enjoyed the entire viewing experience - watching an interesting film in a dark semi-cinematic place, interacting with the organiser and other film lovers and strangers after the screening. It was my very first experience of visiting such screening sites and associating with other viewers with common interests in film. After the screening, the organiser, Lao Yao, invited me access to a private online group on Douban called Le Le Bar and Lao Yao’s Friends where the regular (or occasional) viewers like me can check out the information about past and upcoming events. Since then, I started to explore such screening events organised by different exhibitors in Beijing and other cities in China. Such screening events enabled me to view and understand film in a screening context that provides an experience distinct from both public popular cinema and home viewing.

With the aim of studying how independent exhibitors as cultural intermediaries negotiate an alternative cinematic space between a public and private context, I conducted my research mainly in four cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen) by visiting and taking photographs of eleven independent exhibition venues that committed to

showcasing international arthouse and independent films, examining the programme schedules, and observing and communicating with the exhibitors and viewers (detailed information about the screening spaces and the exhibitors is set out in the Appendix). Independent screening practices are not simply circumscribed within the large metropolises but also extended to the so-called second, or even third, tier cities. The reason for narrowing the scope of my research to the four large cities is attributed to the concern that, with a comparatively better artistic atmosphere and larger population of (art) film audience, large cities appear to demonstrate multiple modes of screening practices drawing on independent and artistic films; some informants I encountered during my research used to organise screening events in provincial cities like Changsha and Changchun, but they stopped doing that mainly because of the lack of regular audiences and instability of the screening venues. At the very beginning of my research, I reached my informants chiefly by talking to them after the screening and revealing my identity as a researcher. However, I found it difficult to schedule a formal interview, because some of them, as independent exhibitors, were showcasing unlicensed films and had concerns for themselves and the screening group about talking to a ‘stranger’ about their activities. I then shifted my strategy for recruiting informants to draw upon my personal network that included independent film industry practitioners and film critics. For instance, William (manager of Breathless Film Club) introduced me to other independent screening group organisers based in the same region (Guangzhou and Shenzhen) with him. In this way, given the assurance of a trusted friend, independent screening group organisers became more willing to talk about themselves and their experiences of operating screening events and dealing with local authority regulation. Therefore, by virtue of my personal connection with William and other informants, I successfully conducted participant observation with thirteen independent exhibitors (including two respondents, Don and Maojie, recruited earlier by myself).

Considering the gender dimension of the art cinema culture, I have sought to balance the number of female and male respondents – eventually conducting interviews with five females and nine males. Yet, as the following chapters will discuss and analyse, access to women in the field of (art) film has been limited, because the network is predominately manipulated by male agents. While the majority of my existent informants (William, for example) are male, they also tended to introduce me to male exhibitors whom they often interacted with. In this sense the ethnographic research also revolved around my experience, as a female researcher, of networking with other (male) respondents, in a

situation where I dealt with the dense and multiplex network between not only independent exhibitors but also film critics in the field.

2.1.2 Film Critics

If the difficulties associated with conducting research in the field of independent exhibition was mainly about gaining the respondents' trust, the problem that arose immediately during the research process of studying internet film critics was where to start approaching respondents, many of whom are esteemed figures in the field. First of all, since 2015, I have started to participate-observe in this online film group called *Shen Jiao* (Deep Focus). Initially founded by a PhD student (Jin, one of my informants) based in Paris, Deep Focus is determined to disseminate global (primarily European and North American) art cinema culture to its audience.¹² Deep Focus is involved in a variety of filmic practices and activities, including producing relatively serious film critiques and reviews, delivering international film festival information and translating global film publications and academic articles. Their works are published in its public accounts mainly based on three internet platforms: WeChat, Sina Weibo and Douban. By July 2019, Deep Focus already has over 192 contributors situated in more than ten countries. The majority of the members are constituted by young film lovers in their 20s possessing a higher education background in a wide range of subjects. Since 2014, Deep Focus has sought to deliver first-hand information on international film festivals (especially large-scale film festivals like Cannes and the Berlin International Film Festival) to its subscribers in China. Overseas (film) students like me are welcome to participate in the film festivals, and writing reviews and even conducting interviews with prominent filmmakers and artists. My identity as a PhD film student allowed me to get access to its contributors' WeChat chat group, a sphere for work assignment and film-related discussions. Since joining Deep Focus, I have been actively taking part in those discussions, translating film-related articles and writing film reviews for its public accounts. Meanwhile, in order to recruit informants, I have attempted to conduct private conversations with other members within the group.

¹² See description on Deep Focus's website <http://www.filmdeepfocus.com/>.

To approach more established film critics, I immersed myself in two different European film festivals: the Tromsø International Film Festival, a small-scale festival that helped me build strong social network with key respondents; and the Berlin International Film Festival, that allowed me plenty of interview opportunities with film critics and independent and art film industry practitioners from China inside the festival context. First and foremost, in January 2017, I visited the Tromsø International Film Festival in Norway for my field research. The reason for choosing this festival as one of my key fields is because I was impressed by a presentation about Nordic films and the Tromsø Film Festival by Wen, a young programmer of 'Beyond Front Point: Stories from the North' (an emergent Nordic film festival in China), during my fieldwork in Beijing 2016. The programmer who gave this presentation comes to Tromsø every year to find potential programming for their next event and attend related industry meetings and seminars. Therefore, I decided to visit him in Tromsø to examine how he conducted his mediating practices in the film festival, and more importantly, building connections with him and his colleagues. In such a relatively 'minor' film festival in a small Scandinavian town, it was easier to build a strong network with potential informants because there were only a limited number of participants from China. For instance, introduced by Wen, I met Ye, a noted Chinese film critic who later became one of my key informants. Ye's trip to this film festival was sponsored by the programme 'Beyond Front Point: Stories from the North' that Wen is involved in, and for purpose of marketing this film event to his readers in China. Because of Ye's lack of fluency in English, my English language skills and experience of living in Europe made me useful when taking a tour of Tromsø. Becoming friends with Ye signalled a milestone for my ethnographic research progress, as Ye invited me to join him and his other friends at the Berlin International Film Festival later on and introduced me to the central circle of internet film criticism in China.

Following Ye's invitation, I started my fieldwork in the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2017 and began to approach more film critics as my respondents. During the festival period, I stayed with Ye and his friends (Xiaojia and Chun) who work for one of the leading Chinese art film distribution and marketing companies called Fang Da (Blow-Up, named after Michelangelo Antonioni's famous work). Being close to these informants in my study and feeling a strong friendship towards them enabled my fieldwork to run smoothly, in understanding and collecting information about the circle of criticism; as well as independent exhibition, because Chun used to be engaged in showcasing Chinese independent films in Changsha and has connections with numerous

independent screening groups and club organisers in different cities in China; and the broader independent film scene, even encompassing rumour and scandals. Maintaining a good and steady relationship with Ye, Xiaojia and Chun helped me not only through the time of reaching film critics in the festival but also developed my network in China, so that my future research with independent screening group organisers went more smoothly. But, on the other hand, I was cognisant of the distance between me as an ethnographic researcher and the informants, therefore being able to distinguish the nuanced differences between the information the respondents presented to me and what I observed in the field.

Meanwhile, during the period of the Berlin International Film Festival, I also kept networking with my Deep Focus fellows to examine their behaviour and activities in terms of producing film reviews and diffusing filmic information to domestic readers. The role of being a member of Deep Focus clearly enabled me to have an insider's view of a group of film critics conducting their mediating practices in a larger festival network. Given the consent from my Deep Focus fellows, I participant-observed the ways the entire team worked to produce commentary and film reviews in a relatively short time and sharing their values and judgements with a Chinese audience. I also kept tracking individual respondents' social media activities to see their reaction to the festival or a particular film or filmmaker and how they communicate with their followers. Engaged in such global festival network, I was also able to reach more informants (out of Deep Focus, but connected to Deep Focus contributors or Ye/Xiaojia/Chun) and conduct in-depth interviews with them. Furthermore, as addressed earlier, I have sought to address the balance between the number of male and female respondents. Although I have conducted interviews with slightly more female critic respondents (five out of fourteen) than independent exhibitors, it is worth noting that they are all not as noted and successful as their male counterparts.

2.1.3 Fan Translators

Finally, I conducted fieldwork with fan translators who are involved in the subtitling of foreign-language (art) films and the interpreting of literary materials related to international art and independent film culture. There are a large amount of fansubbing groups in China looking at different types of visual products, from popular American TV

series, to Japanese Anime and Turkish arthouse films. The ones I approached are fundamentally devoted to subtitling art films or translating art cinema related materials, mainly surrounding the Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group, Ganhuo Fansubbing Group, IB Fansubbing Group, and Deep Focus (engaged in literary translation like journal articles, reviews, academic works, etc).

In fact, when I was an undergraduate student, I always looked up to people who work on a voluntary basis without remuneration, pursuing their venture of cultural translation and informal distribution of (art) cinema as an idiosyncratic commitment to what they love. With the dream of becoming an altruistic fan subtitler and bringing international visual products to domestic viewers, I applied to enter a fan subtitling group called Shen Ying Zi Mu Zu (Shen Ying Fansubbing Group), one of the most noted fan subtitling groups devoted to both Hollywood film and European cinema. I was assigned to translate a clip from the American TV drama *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 22 September 1976) as my entry test. However, as a first-year undergraduate student, my language proficiency and pass experience was not sufficient for joining the group: I got rejected soon after handing in the translation test. After ten years since my very first experience with a fan subtitling group, I had another try at joining a translation group (IB Fansubbing Group) to investigate how a fan translation group works for my research. While taking the entry test, I was surprised to see that the clip for the translating test was drawn from exactly the same American TV drama. In other words, it is possible that many fan translation groups use similar examination materials for testing newcomers.

Once I passed the test, I became a trainee translator situated in a group full of newcomers passionate about getting involved in voluntary translating practices. I particularly investigated the process of appraisal and promotion in this group and how the tasks are distributed to group members. I also looked at the ways in which the detailed information about films that have been translated and transmitted by the group members and how these films are described while being circulated via multiple online platforms.

Certainly, the group I participated in is not the only fan translation group that I attempted to examine. To get a greater understanding of their interpretative practices, I also kept an eye on, and was actively involved with, other fan translation groups. For example, situated in Deep Focus, I cooperated with other translator members working on the translation of film related articles and reports. To distinguish the differences between mainstream and art-film centred fan translation groups, I looked into the ways in which

the fan translators also compared the quality of the texts subtitled by them. In this case, I approached my interviewees from both mainstream fan translation groups and those who have a clear focus on subtitling foreign-language art films, and also attempted to contact with some translators in person via some online platforms, such as Weibo and Douban. However, it turned out that the recruitment of fan translators was not as easy as I thought it to be, because many translators articulated their unwillingness of expose themselves in public discourse. To sort out this problem, I reached back to my informants (such as, William, David and Rui) who also operate noted art film/video essay subtitling groups and they introduced me to some of the group members as potential interviewees.

In addition, I also kept a record of key debates and discussions revolving around informal film distribution in China. With the purpose of employing them as possible supporting materials for my arguments, I immersed myself in such discussions and took screenshots of important points and archived them. In particular, there has been much discussion regarding pirated video making and sharing via online platforms in China. For instance, in August 2016, Taiwanese independent filmmaker Tsai Ming-Liang condemned online pirated video sharing platforms like lanyingwang.com, and bilibili.com for illegally listing his films on their sites. To urge these sites to remove his films, Tsai Ming-Liang sent a formal letter pleading with the National Copyright Administration of the PRC to respond to the copyright infringement. He also constantly posted on Weibo for over three months to rail against these sites and the idea that piracy serves as the main way for mainland China's film lovers to get access to his films. Certainly, Tsai Ming-Liang is not the only filmmaker who denounces piracy, and many mainland China filmmakers (both mainstream and independent, for example, Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Feng Xiaogang, etc.) have also presented an ambivalent attitude towards piracy on many occasions. Regarding their words as exemplary instances of filmmakers showing their reactions to the informal institutions of art cinema, I archived their posts and summarised their positions, as well as the comments made under their own posts. Simultaneously, I also made notes of how other film lovers especially my respondents who are involved in the informal system of diffusion, reacted to the debates, such as utterly expressing disagreement with the filmmakers, or behaving cynically towards the State's censorship of foreign films, or those considering both the positive and negative aspects of piracy and its consequences as regards the effect on multiple 'stakeholders'.

2.2 In-Depth Interviews

Complementing the observation of and participation in the field that cultural intermediaries take part in, interviews allowed me to gauge the informants' own accounts of their status and practices. In all, during my fieldwork research, I conducted in-depth interviews with 14 film critics, 13 independent exhibitors, 13 fan translators, and four former practitioners in the piracy industry (see Chapter 3, which traces the historical trajectory of the production and diffusion of pirated DVD in China between 1990 and 2010). The majority of my in-depth interview data was collected in five cities in China (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Shenzhen, and Changchun), in London, and in Berlin during the festival period, while some were conducted via telephone, Skype/WeChat video call. I tended to build a connection with the subjects before requesting a formal interview. Certainly, these connections came about and were cultivated in a variety of different ways. In the following discussion, I will describe in detail the ways that I cultivated connections and conducted interviews with a variety of interviewees. Furthermore, I will also elucidate the design of my interview questions and how they correspond to the research questions of my thesis.

As mentioned before, I primarily developed my network with several key respondents by reaching them via film festivals and making good use of my role of being a member of the cinema group Deep Focus. Being friends with my informants allowed me to be more deeply engaged in their daily life and their values and opinions about various issues. And simultaneously, they also knew my research and interests more than other interviewees. Conducting interviews with my friends/informants could be both smooth and challenging in a way that they might assume some seemingly 'self-evident' questions I must already know in the previous interactions and events with them or avoid unwanted controversial questions. On the other hand, the unsaid and the unwanted that informants neglected to tell me allowed me to triangulate: to compare the way they behave or engage with in daily life relevant to their film-related work on the basis of my participant observation and what they presented during the interview. Again, ethnography can remedy the methodological repercussions of formal interviews in terms of distortions and blind spots, and vice versa.

Whilst many of my respondents were formed on the basis of friendship, others were cultivated particularly for 'research'. For example, I sent friend requests via WeChat to an interviewee that my friends/informants introduced to me but who I had not yet met

face to face. I explained to them about my research project and invited them for a formal interview. As I had never encountered the interviewees in person, it was essential to do some research on the interviewees and the exhibition groups/digital magazines/translation groups they have been working on before the interview, therefore gaining some kind of impression or background on the interviewee's personality and interests. For instance, before formally conducting an in-depth interview with an independent screening group organiser, I usually attended screenings and examined the exhibition venues in and had conversations and interviews with the organisers afterwards. However, conducting interviews with fan translators transpired slightly differently from the other two groups of cultural intermediaries and usually on the condition that interviews were conducted mainly over the telephone. Unlike film critics and independent exhibitors who are mainly situated in big cities, fan translators are scattered widely in different locations in China. It thus became financially untenable to conduct face-to-face interviews with all interviewees. A more significant reason for not conducting face-to-face interviews with fan translators is ascribed to the respondents' disinclination to reveal their identity to a 'stranger'. Perceiving themselves to be a 'nobody', or just an amateur film lover making a personal contribution to things they love, or being concerned about privacy or security, fan translator informants did not see the necessity of formal interviews and conversations. As a consequence, whilst I suggested the options between telephone interview and WeChat video interview, almost all the informants chose a telephone interview in order to withhold their identity. I eventually conducted 10 interviews over the phone and only three face-to-face interviews (with David, administrator of the Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group and Milly and Shimiao from Deep Focus). Although I was unable to meet the informants in person, being WeChat friends with all the informants helped me to understand their practices and self-representation outside the interview context.

As my interviewees are mainly comprised of three groups of cultural intermediaries, the interview questions with each group varied to take account of the practices they are involved in, but what is invariant is the interior logic of connection to the research questions that defines the argument of the ethnography (the interview question design is set out in the Appendix). As alluded to in the beginning of this chapter, this project is fundamentally structured around three parallel sets of research questions. These research questions draw on what roles that cultural intermediaries play in the construction of art cinema culture in China; on how cultural intermediaries mediate the field of cultural production and consumption; and on what taste and value intermediary agents produce

and how it represents the social and cultural hierarchies in Chinese society. In addressing the research questions, my interview questions to the three different groups of cultural intermediaries was designed to focus on three aspects: their understanding of being cultural intermediaries (independent exhibitors, internet film critics and fan translators) in the course of producing art cinema culture in China, their values and taste for art cinema, their experiences of intermediary practices, in terms of organising independent screening groups/performing as film critics in the internet context/translating filmic materials on an amateur basis. In many ways, the accumulative interview data collected from each aspect provides evidence of the types of information on different cultural intermediaries' practices, and links each to three dimensions of art cinema cultural production in China. This logic, therefore, helped me substantiate these dimensions in an ethnographic analysis of cultural intermediaries from my fieldwork.

2.3 Data Analysis

According to Geertz, the concept of culture is semiotically and systematically structured in a 'web of significance', and the ethnographic analysis of it is therefore 'not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (1973: 5). In understanding what is a culture, an ethnographic analysis is required to implement 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973: 6) in the work. Borrowing the terms from Gilbert Ryle, Geertz enunciates the differences between 'thin' and 'thick' description that the latter articulates the object of ethnography in a way that 'a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures... are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not... in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do' (1973: 7). In other words, to 'thickly' describe an ethnographic field, it is crucial to identify and scrutinise the data that would enunciate the inherent structure and dynamic relations beyond superficial details. It then comes to the question of which meanings and symbols embodied in the data we should emphasise in analysing cultural intermediaries' roles and practices in the field of art film in China.

Taking the cue from Bourdieu, the methods of studying how a field works are subject to three aspects: first, 'the position of the field vis-a-vis the field of power'; second, 'the objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions who compete for the legitimate form of specific authority of which the field

is a site ; and third, ‘the habitus of agents, the different systems of economic condition, and which find in a definite trajectory within the field under consideration a more or less favorable opportunity to become actualised’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:104–105). Following Bourdieu, I identified three types of questions that provided pointers to the analysis of my ethnographic data.

First, I looked into the questions about informants’ attitude and social relations to the field of power, or translated into more concrete questions like how do informants agree or disagree with authority’s regulations and censorial forces, and when and how does either conflict or cooptation between informants and authority happen? What are the financial sources of making a living for what they do? As the collection of such data could be regarded as raising controversial issues at times, I also traced how the informants reacted to the questions in terms of speaking tone, body language, etc. While analysing the data, I have noticed that, overall, informants represent a nuanced divergence in dealing with the questions of their relation to political and economic fields as between established figures (such as prominent film critics and exhibitors) and less known practitioners.

This then brings me to my second point that relates to the network and hierarchical relations between cultural intermediaries and between them and their audiences/readers. In order to explore the features of the hierarchical relations inherent in the network, I captured the data by identifying with whom do informants regularly socialise, and what do they talk about, and how do the social relations with one another affect their work and their position within the field; what are their thoughts and understanding about their audiences/readers and how do they maintain an abiding relationship with their audience, and how does their position in the field affect their thoughts and relationship to the audiences/readers. I also traced some key words frequently brought up by the informants, for example, ‘level’, ‘beginner’, etc., while describing their position and relations with others.

Third, I evaluated the symbolic cultural goods that cultural intermediaries (re)produce. As mediating symbolic cultural values are central to the daily practices of cultural intermediaries, examining their work becomes a particularly analytical concern to apprehend and tease out the features of their taste and judgement in terms of (art) cinema, and how they (film critics and independent exhibitors in particular) legitimise these values and taste and disseminate them to their audiences. For example, during my fieldwork, I

have sought to observe and ask questions about their filmic preferences and opinions about certain films. Having followed many of these informants' social media accounts, I also conducted online observation to examine their posts and reviews in reference to films. From these sources, I compared their opinions on different films (for example, between foreign-language arthouse films and domestic indies, between popular entertainment and art films, etc.) and attempted to tease out what evaluative judgement of taste is centralised within the field of art film.

2.4 Reflexivity

Needless to say, the field is about me as a researcher in ways that I need to reflect upon and subject to ethnographic analysis as well as part of that process. As a young female researcher, gender issues became particularly significant for me while pursuing this doctoral research. As I attempted to carry out my ethnographic research in a field that is dominated by senior male agents, I was constantly confronted with negotiating with a perpetuating patriarchal legacy of male privilege. The following discussion draws on some of the accounts of the junctures and predicaments that I encountered in my ethnographic field as an early-stage female researcher.

As mentioned before, at the very beginning of my research, I attempted to reach informants by sending messages to their WeChat public accounts and expressing my research interests. As my 'avatar' I have always used a hopefully reasonably 'accurate' image of my face as my WeChat profile, and I believed such a straightforward mode of representation was a normal and professional thing to do. However, while in Berlin, I was secretly told by a female respondents that one male informant shared my profile photo with their chat group and made comments about my look, a group mainly encompassing male practitioners involved in the film industry (the Chinese independent film industry in particular). Because of this experience, I started reconsidering gender roles and gender inequality in the field and how women are being looked at and judged as an object through a patriarchal male gaze. Moreover, some of my male informants, while offering advice that could be useful, often presented themselves as having particularly incisive insights and experiences in the field, offering me 'valuable' advice about my research. For example, they often talked to me like 'Did you interview this person? S/he is very important. You must speak to them,' or 'I know XX (for example, well-known film critics,

exhibitors, independent artists and filmmakers, etc.) really well; we often go out for a drink'. They have sought to exhibit their knowledge and networking power, even economic status at times, in the way that foregrounded their privileged access to the field of (art) film.

Ironically, my access to and reach in the field in general and with particular informants were in fact largely dependent on the network constructed by for the most part those (male) informants. In order to attain sufficient data for the research, I had to comply with the rules determined by the male agents and fit into a culture which makes a great deal of gender and social hierarchy, for example, by simply acting as a less discerning and 'harmless' student. Certainly, to prevent my ethnographic data becoming predominately bound up with a masculine perspective of the field, as mentioned earlier, I had sought to reach more female informants by my own interaction with friends/informants from Deep Focus and other sources. On the other hand, I am also aware that being a young female researcher enabled me to create a more comfortable environment for the informants, both male and female, to speak about their thoughts and experiences. Hence, I will address some gender issues that I encountered during my ethnographic journey in this project, and I hope to further explore these issues seemingly inherent in the sphere of Chinese art and independent cinema in my future research.

2.5 Ethical Issues

As part of my ethnographic approach is observation and participation in the events and activities of some online platforms, it is crucial to give careful consideration to the issue of privacy throughout online participant observation, a subject much discussed in the ethics of virtual/digital ethnography (Elm, 2009; Hine, 2000). Privacy is 'one of the most enduring social issues associated with digital electronic information technologies' which 'enables pervasive surveillance, massive databases, and lightning-speed distribution of information across the globe' (Nissenbaum, 2010: 1). In the Chinese context, privacy is regarded as 'a sweeping term encompassing everything from the quest for personal dignity and safety to the growing sense of political participation' (Yuan, Feng and Danowski, 2013: 1029). According to Litt and Hargittai (2014), the way that people manage social boundaries is affected by a range of factors such as individual experiences, political and legal tradition, and socioeconomic status. While the past one decade saw the

development of digital privacy law and cyberspace regulation as part of the internet governance structure of China (Han, 2018a), individual internet user's understanding of privacy and the way they manage their social boundaries between themselves and between them and the government authority changes accordingly. As an ethnographic researcher, I concern the issue of piracy as an important element to question to what extent Chinese internet users consider the information they share and the spaces they visit online as confidential. The issue of privacy in the Chinese context of my research would be then related to both the specific online spaces and the content of the information.

The internet is comprised of spaces that can be considered private or public to varying degrees. Elm categorises the environments as 'public' (open to everyone on the web), 'semi-public' (accessible to most people, but firstly requires registration or membership), 'semi-private' (only available to individuals, requests a more strict membership, such as belonging to the organisation), and private environments' (unavailable to most people except the creator and her or his invited guests) (2009: 75). Then, with the exception of 'public' spaces, doing participant observation in the other three environments essentially requires informed consent from those observed. For my research, most of the observation has not taken place in an unambiguously open space,¹³ but with more-or-less limitations of access. In almost all the spaces where interactions are studied (for example, Weibo, Douban), registration usually is not a requirement for content-viewing but it is for posting. Compared to other sites or platforms, WeChat seems much more problematic. As mentioned before, the WeChat 'Friends Circle' is enclosed in relatively close personal relationships barely shared with strangers. Therefore, usually, to access to a WeChat user's post on her or his timeline (depending on the user's privacy setting in WeChat), I must send a friend verification with my identification or relationship with the person. Even when the person has accepted my request, the friends circle she or he shares with me should serve as a semi-private environment. Among all the circumstances in WeChat, the private conversation between the user and myself that is conducted through WeChat messages should be concerned with the most private content. The advantage of WeChat is that I can get relatively quick and efficient feedback, however, set in the semi-public environment, I may face a problem that informants may not reflect on an informed-

¹³ In my research, the open sphere or data that do not need informed consent includes (but is not restricted to) online film journals, apps, public articles or blogs, translated foreign-language (audio-visual) works and independent film-related sites.

consent message in time. Therefore, the strategy for collecting applicable data without any risks of breach of privacy is to inform informants in my WeChat Friends Circle that 1) I am conducting research for a PhD thesis on the production of art cinema culture in China 2) I am observing how you express and diffuse the values of art cinema. For the semi-public online spaces, informed consent will depend on the content of the messages I may employ in my research.

To ensure the protection of my informants' personal privacy, I categorised the information accessed into three aspects: recognisable personal information; (politically and socially) sensitive statements; and other issues around individual awareness of privacy. First, recognisable personal information has a lot to do with my observation of individuals, especially the pseudonym they employ in online spaces and platforms. I do not reflect their online pseudonyms (and real names) directly, but paraphrase them into a similar literal meaning. Second, as my research may address some remarks against the central control and censorship, this can become highly sensitive for some of informants. I would first inform them which pieces I might refer to in my research, assure them that their identity would not be revealed and then request permission from them. I would not utilise the phrases if the potential respondent refused to grant permission. Finally, back to the previous discussion of 'being a member', as an ethnographic researcher who is familiar with the culture, I should not simply assume what is *not* sensitive for the people under my study. Despite that information is already posted online, it does not mean the users do not care about further exposure of the information, of which they may only post on certain online spaces. Hence, it will be always important to be aware of the content that involves any personal relationships, sentiments, even physical or mental health issues, such as whom the informant went to cinema with (especially involving minors under 18) or discussion of their own experience about their own mental health under some film commentary. Otherwise, it may cause inconvenience to the informants, or even more seriously affect their normal life. To distinguish the informants who did not give consent for their names to be used in this PhD, in the thesis I took inspiration from their real name's initials and chose English names as pseudonyms. In fact, as my informants are involved in different modes of practices in the field, the negotiation of consent to use either a pseudonym or their real names appears to suggest a remarkable dichotomy between illustrious film critics and exhibitors and the unrecognised ones that are mostly engaged in the events and activities of underground distribution. Specifically, among all the informants, only two film critics and three independent exhibitors preferred to be

anonymous and not to reveal their identities (and the name of the exhibition venue and group names, in the case of independent exhibitors, whilst the figure comes to eight (over half of all) for fan translators. In other words, reputation and public recognition to some extent secure consent to the naming of informants and the content they produce. It then brings us back to the central issue that I have been talking about so far in this chapter: social distinction and hierarchy in the field of art film. In the following discussion, I will locate the distinction in (art) film culture in the PRC in both historical and contemporary contexts.

3. From Home Piracy to Limited Arthouses: the Expansion of Alternative Exhibitionary Spaces in China

In a typical month in Beijing in 2016, cinema goers could choose from a wide variety of possibilities. They might spend their evenings watching the latest Hollywood blockbusters in the UME Huaxing, which has Beijing's first IMAX screen. They could watch more than a dozen Chinese romantic comedies, all featuring popular stars. If not mainstream fans, they could go to China Film Archive Art Cinema to watch a 1930s black-and-white film or plunge into The Institut Francais for a New Wave masterpiece. Or during the Beijing International Film Festival in April, a wide range of recent and classic international films are available for the city audiences.

Back in the early twenty-first century, all of this seemed unimaginable. As mentioned in the Introduction, I evocatively traced my experience of growing interests and love of cinema by hanging around local pirated VCD/DVD rental shops and markets in the late 1990s and the beginning of the millennium. This is not just my personal experience but an experience that is familiar to many film lovers nationwide. As one informant Hua recollected:

Before 2000, I was crazy about rock music. Because of loving music, I bought a lot of dakou CDs,¹⁴ and came into contact with VCD in the meantime. At that time, I had some friends bringing those kinds of ripped VCDs from Beijing, such as *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988, Italy and France), *A Brighter Summer Afternoon* (Edward Yang, 1991, Taiwan), *Children of Heaven* (Majid Majidi, 1997, Iran). I started watching film from then on. Then after I graduated from university, I bought myself a DVD player and started collecting DVDs. Not many people were purchasing

¹⁴ Named after a cut nicked into the edge of the disk to render them unsaleable, 'dakou CD' refers to illegally-imported Western CDs. See more discussion on dakou CD and popular music in China in De Kloet, J. (2010) *China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

vast quantities of [pirated] art films. From those art films, I traced the history of film and the genres of film – it is literally an entry for logically and systematically viewing and thinking about film. [my translation] (Hua, interview with author, 17 June 2017)

Everyone's interests in film and art film seem derived from a range of different objectives as they seek to explore the world of cinema. As discussed in the literature review, the popularisation of pirated disks among cineastes in the 1990s engendered a new cinephile culture in China (Zhang, 2007c), a country that has a very limited infrastructure for arthouse circuits. Here, piracy became one of the very few paths to knowledge and understanding of otherness, of what is culturally different from both Hollywood blockbusters and domestic mainstream films. As Li (2012: 555) remarks, as a significant cultural element in Chinese cinema, piracy functions as a 'pirate film school' by a vast range of films that could not be accessed elsewhere in China. Meanwhile, it also becomes a major underground channel for disseminating alternative film works that are prohibited by the state censorship (Li, 2012). What is significant in piracy is that it generates an alternative space of cinema, or 'minor cinema' in Zhang's (2007a: 1) words, that entails new modes of amateur filmmaking practices as well as cultural production (Zhang, 2007b, Li, 2012). This alternative space mostly captures the way in which independent cinema's quests for social and political realities outside the hegemonic public space controlled by the central authority and commercial industry (Zhang, 2004; Wang, 2005; Berry and Rofel, 2010; Li, 2012). Nevertheless, given the attributes of art cinema culture, its celebration of heterogeneity and cinephilia and its evasive relationship with the commercial mainstream, the 'alternativeness', I would like to add, mainly concerns the dynamic relations between state, art, and commerce outside the legitimate film culture but somehow complicit with it. The space for screening and circulating pirated arthouse film, therefore, is inevitably mired in the alternative film culture that both counters and complements the dominant cultural system and film industry.

In parallel with the proliferation of piracy is the soaring commercialisation of mainstream cinema. Since China joined the WTO in 2001, China have allowed more Hollywood blockbusters and foreign films to enter into the domestic film market (Braester, 2011).¹⁵

¹⁵ Since 1994, the Film Bureau approved an international profit-sharing agreement to import ten 'first-class' foreign films annually (Yu, 2006; Lu and Zhang; 2014). Following the WTO agreement, the quota for foreign-film imports increased to 20 from 2001 and then 34 since 2012 (Zhang, Tan and Liu, 2012: 1).

It is worth noting that, although the authorities claim that the imported films should fundamentally reflect the great advance of world civilisation and represent the achievement of contemporary film art and technology, for distributors and exhibitors, they would prefer to choose those predictably more popular films thereby giving rise to the age-old tension in a national film industry between the interests of indigenous production and exhibitors who may not care where a film comes from as long as it fills cinema seats (Bian, Wang and Lu, 2014: 22). In order to boom domestic film industry, the SARFT produced a set of industrialisation policies that affirmed cinema institutions as being relatively freed from the authority's regulation, and encouraging private corporations to get involved in the establishment of cinema chains and the production and distribution of domestic films (SARFT, 2003). In other words, instead of merely dominating the film industry, the state empowers capital and the market to control the course of the industry (Yeh and Davis, 2008), which turned the mainstream cinema space into what Bourdieu called 'large-scale production' (1996: 124). Ostensibly, the public exhibitionary space for ordinary audiences has gained a higher degree of autonomy than before, but on the other hand, its activities are constrained by the dual forces from the economic and political fields. Between the political correctness of censorship as a necessity, and the perceptions of successful films being evaluated simply through commercial success, the reception of the mainstream audience is mired in a hackneyed sphere of leisure, entertainment, and virtual reality. On the other hand, there also emerges alternative exhibitionary spaces of cinema that is comparatively independent of the central regulation and less dedicated to making the most profit possible and is capable of guiding its audiences and shaping their taste in different ways and in different spatial contexts. Art cinema institutions play important roles in presenting heterogeneous values of film to their audiences outside the mainstream norm, reinforced perhaps by new media platforms that allow in principle more diverse and marginal avenues of film circulation and debate, when not drowned out by the ever-dominant mainstream marketing and consumer culture that have embraced these new media as much as any other media.

This chapter traces the expansion of alternative exhibitionary spaces in the new millennium, from the viewing and disseminating of pirated DVD to theatrical screening venues of arthouse films. In the first part of the chapter, I focus on the proliferation of pirated DVDs, and how it contributes to a cinephile culture in China. The reason for taking DVD use as a case study is that the DVD era see the proliferation of art film consumption in the twenty-first century, which foster a cinephile culture in which

multiple entities and individuals were involved and characterised by the diffusion of cinephilia and the need for the engagement of social and cultural subjects. This section starts with an overview of home space and piracy since the 1990s. I analyse how the transformations of film distribution, in particular the development of home video, have redefined cinematic space. I then shift my focus to the DVD as a material object of exchange for individual exhibition and the actors involved in the piracy industry. I consider pirated DVDs as symbolic goods that function to frame the field of restricted cultural production of Chinese cinema. And finally, I examine the consumption of the pirated DVD from which ultimately emerged a particular Chinese cinephilia and the new cinema culture. Subsequently, the second part of the chapter addresses different types of theatrical venues for screening arthouse films. Taking five arthouse theatrical venues in Beijing (the China Film Archive Art Cinema, Broadway Cinematheque MOMA,, The Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, Institut Francais and The Goethe-Institut) as case studies, this section expatiates the dynamic relations of state, commerce, art as well as forces from foreign cultural institutions that built in the theatrical spaces of art cinema. Certainly, there are more theatrical venues exhibiting art films outside Beijing, such as the Shanghai Film Museum, OCT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shenzhen and Shanghai, and mainstream movie theatres associated to *Shanghai yishu dianying lianmeng* 上海艺术电影联盟 (Shanghai Art Film Federation) and *quanguo yishu dianying lianmeng* 全国艺术电影联盟 (Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinema). The reason for taking Beijing's arthouse cinemas as case studies is ascribed to its dynamism and multiplicity of configuration in the national capital, a megapolis exists in the most powerful clustering of political dominance, commercial functions, diplomatic forces, and artistic appreciations. Outside Beijing (and significant cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen that foreground flagships of art and creativity as the new economy), however, arthouse films largely are inhabited in mainstream cinemas and have limited access for the public.

By examining the expansion of exhibitionary spaces for art films from home piracy to public arthouse theatres, this chapter aims to capture the foundation and limitation of the alternative film culture from two perspectives. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive but together constitute what Bourdieu termed 'the field of restricted cultural production' as the subfield of the genetic film field in China, in contrast to 'the field of large-scale cultural production' (1996: 124) of the commercial mainstream film industry. In the literature review, I discussed field theory and the work of Bourdieu to draw up a theoretical framework for art cinema culture that helped me to examine the case in China.

Here, I would like to focus on this subfield in which the alternative film culture in China in the twenty-first century has been grounded by piracy (individualised cultural consumption and production) and established arthouse theatrical venues (institutional and discursive sites inscribed by the matrix of power relations).

3.1 Home Space, Piracy and the Rise of Cinephilia

Barbara Klinger (2006) argues that the home serves as an ancillary venue of exhibition, a sphere of post-theatrical movie-going where films are repurposed for sale, reissued in a different social and historical setting, and rereleased in a different context of reception. Households in China, however, are unable to enter into the similar milieu of reception as their Western counterparts. Instead, in China, where theatrical release is subject to stringent censorship and limited quota for foreign film importation, the home, along with privately owned venues such as KTV bars, movie bars, video halls (Zhang, 2007c; Gao, 2014a), serve as an significant exhibition venue for Chinese viewers to approach multiple ranges of (non-mainstream) films. Since the 1990s, the descending price for video recorders and cassettes invoke film lovers to buy or rent video tapes (and then compressed disks and), which consequently brought forward the shift in film consumption from the public venues of video bars into private home spaces (Gao, 2014a: 129). Klinger (2006) also noted such a circumstance taking place in some non-Western countries and mentions the idea that ‘cinema’ exhibition shares more in common with television than public movie theatres in this circumstance. The idea of viewing films on television and video at home has been examined by film scholars and talked of as a quotidian practice determined by ‘segmentation’ (Ellis, 1982: 119), sited in distracted home conditions (Corrigan, 1991) that might endanger a film or cinema’s sense of authenticity (Hill, 1998). Following Casetti (2009), who discusses the relocation of the filmic experience in which the spectator’s filmic experience becomes more personalised and proactive, I would argue that the home in China embodied dichotomous tendencies: on the one hand, it mediated the power relation between the national governing power and personal habitus, and between public exhibition venue and private screening, through television broadcasting and legitimate videos; on the other hand, the personalised filmic experience emerged from the boom of piracy, which ultimately makes the home an ‘independent’ venue of exhibition.

As Morley suggests,

Traditional ideas of home, homeland and nation have been destabilised, both by new patterns of physical mobility and migration and by new communication technologies which routinely transgress the symbolic boundaries around both the private household and the nation state. (2000: 3)

The destabilisation between the home and the state have brought about discussions at the level of diffusion affecting the networks of film circulation. Certainly, there exists concern that without the national apparatus' modality of being a gatekeeper, the circuit is likely to be concomitant with 'unwelcomed' penetration and pollution, such as pornography and violence (Silverstone, 1999: 3). However, the use of 'unwelcomed' appears problematic: in what sense can we speak of sexual or violent scenes in a film as 'unwelcomed' or 'unwanted' elements? Should we not rather pay attention to *who* determines the criteria of the 'welcomed' and 'unwelcomed' and makes the decision for us? For example, the state Film Bureau navigates cinematic content in China. Whilst new technologies of diffusion render the reception of film in the space of home, they redefine cinematic space and disrupt the pre-established power relation with the field of power, 'a shift away from the confining boundaries of nation states towards a postmodern fluidity of exchange' (Harbord, 2000: 148). The home arena appears to experience the deconstruction of the forces that take place in a theatrical space, but, in the meantime, celebrates the potency and autonomy of individual actors. As Harbord argues,

The tensions of liberalization and regulation produce a number of discourses that offer to interpellate the individual subject simultaneously as an actor in the global network, a citizen of a national/supranational state, and an individual consumer at home. (2000: 151)

The concept of 'home' in Chinese is expressed as '*jia*' (家), while 'nation' ('*guo jia*' 国家) can be literally translated as the 'national home'. This reflects the classic Confucian values of the relation between individual (*ge ren* 个人), home (*jia*), and nation (*guo jia*):

cultivate yourself, pacify your home, manage the nation, then bring peace to the world (*xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, ping tianxia* 修身, 齐家, 治国, 平天下) (. In other words, there is no clear boundary between individual, home and nation; one's behaviour and practice might affect the course of the nation, and vice versa. Chinese habitus is nurtured in the interface between home life and a national governing mechanism. For example, every

evening sitting in front of the television to watch the Central Television's 7pm news programme (*xinwen lianbo* 新闻联播) was a routine ritual for every Chinese family.

By the same token, the early years of home video in China experienced the binary of individual interest and national regime. Since 1993 when VCD players were introduced in China, Chinese viewers have finally been able to widen their own choice of what they would like to watch on a home screen beyond the monotonous TV broadcasts that were available up until then, but from a larger selection to be found in the video market (Davis, 2003). In 1997, the Ministry of Culture issued a policy, approving the importation of home videos for domestic distribution.¹⁶ For example, between 1997 and 2000, over 800 home video titles were imported to the domestic market, compared to ten theatrical releases per year (Wang, 2003: 63). In contrast to the strict censorship and very limited import quota for theatrical releases, home videos experienced a relatively quicker review process and more lenient regulations. This meant that many foreign and domestic films that could not be formally exhibited in cinemas might be alternatively distributed via sanctioned home video publishers.

As Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke once recalled:

One afternoon [presumably around 2000], in a shop next to Dangdai Shopping Mall [in Beijing], I bought two VCD disks. One was Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potemkin* [*Battleship Potemkin*, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925, Soviet Union], the other was Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* [Orson Welles, 1941, USA]. At the beginning, I didn't give this purchase much thought, however, while on my way home passing the farmland near Dazhong Si [Dazhong Temple], I suddenly realised that I spent only a few coins putting the two masterpieces in my own pocket. It warmed my heart when thinking about how things have changed: the films that used to be secretly locked in a library for internal reference only have now entered freely into ordinary homes; people who are not film professionals but still interested in film could study montage or deep focus while eating noodles. (2017: 40) [my translation]

¹⁶ Details about the policy can be found on the SAPPRFT official website: <http://www.sapprft.gov.cn/sapprft/govpublic/6682/316.shtml> (Accessed: 10 October 2017).

Nevertheless, the Film Bureau still had control over the distribution of legitimate videos on the domestic market. Although Zhu and Nakajima (2010) believe that the annual importation of ten theatrical films brought in Western-style distribution in China, this can only refer to China's adoption of Hollywood's means of profit making, for example, the revenue sharing system. After all, the bureaucratic state power still more or less plays a crucial role in cinema spaces, both theatrical and non-theatrical. To distribute both domestic and foreign-language films, every home video publisher must work with the bureaucratic regulations: to get official approval of distribution from the MRFT, they must first provide all information about the films to the provincial Bureau of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television to request permission (MRFT, 1997: 1). Therefore, the approving procedure is relatively prolonged, and certain scenes in the movie might be edited or adjusted according to the censor. Jia Zhangke's *Zhan Tai* (*Platform*, Jia Zhangke, 2000, Hong Kong, China, Japan and France) was not allowed a legitimate DVD release in China until 2006, six years after its debut at the Venice International Film Festival. Li Yang's *Mang Shan* (*Blind Mountain*, Li Yang, 2007, China), which addresses the issue of women trafficking in rural China, had to be edited into an alternative version with an upbeat ending and contained numerous cuts, particularly for the video release in China. Moreover, the process of legitimate home video distribution was based in a hierarchical machinery within which videos must be selected and purchased by the wholesalers affiliated to the cultural publicity department of a provincial government and then distributed from regional cities to local towns. The videos found in a local legal video shop were approved by the provincial government: apart from a national political authority, geographic limitation was therefore another issue for legitimate home video. It appears that although legitimate home video was situated in a relatively less-regulated arena, the home still echoed the power relations that existed over the long term in the public arena of cinema in China.

However, both *Zhan Tai* and the unabridged *Mang Shan* could be found on the pirate market. In 2002, Bandai Visual released the first DVD version of *Zhan Tai* in Japan. Soon after, Jia Zhangke was amazed to hear about the up-coming pirated *Zhan Tai* from the mouth of the vendor whose shop he often visited (Jia, 2017: 117). This anecdote about *Zhan Tai* shows that piracy functioned as an alternative distribution channel that enabled moving images to circumvent the censor and allowed Jia Zhangke and other art filmmakers' work to enter into potentially hundreds and thousands of homes and subsequently reverberate among Chinese film viewers. Many scholars have argued that

the new digital technologies of diffusion play a distinctive role in disrupting the balance of power and consequently reshaping the film industry (Wang, 2003; Gao, 2015; Zhang and Zito, 2015). Certainly, in recent years, given the profound development in digital technology with which piracy's mode of diffusion is facilitated, spatial limitations have decreased, the waiting time for newly released foreign-language films has been shortened, and the titles on offer are thousands more than what one can be found through the legitimate pattern of release. I agree with Ingawanij's argument on cinema spectatorship and piracy in Southeast Asia, a region that shares some similarities with China:

The paucity of commercial art cinema circuits and cinematheques, or institutionalized courses in film history and appreciation, and the absence of local, moderately priced DVD labels for art or independent films, together propel those hungry for expansion of their filmic horizons to seek out pirated modes of dissemination. (2012: 10)

It is the hunger for expansion of their filmic horizons that has stimulated the pirated route of diffusion rather than the technologies that determine what can be seen and how they can be approached. Moreover, Zhang suggests that the emergence of piracy initiated a sequence that foregrounds the liberating function piracy offers: 'a liberating function in contemporary China where the previously exclusive privilege of film professionals has been stripped away and now handed over to consumers at large, from whom future film masters may eventually emerge' (2007b: 226). Growing out of an individual spectator's proactive engagement, piracy endowed the home with a more liberal and personalised sense of a new cinematic space, an exhibition venue ultimately 'independent' from the force of the authorities.¹⁷

Certainly, piracy (*daoban* 盗版) is always a controversial concept, receiving a large number of denouncements from many perspectives and interested parties regarding the abuse of copyright in particular. According to a special report of the International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA) in 2001, China was denounced as the 'piracy capital of the world' with 'piracy levels of 90 percent and above' (Wang, 2003: 73). In fact, copyright abuse seems not to have been a big issue for the authorities until the new millennium. Instead, Chinese administrators' focus was more on repressing the

¹⁷ Klinger has illustrated the relationship between home and its representation of 'independence' in *Beyond the Multiplex* (2006).

dissemination of pornography (and, of course, political disagreement). In August 1989, a few months after the Tiananmen event, the CCP founded the National Anti-Pornography Working Committee. The office was situated in the MRFT, constituted by Beijing City Council and fourteen other institutional members from the major departments of the central government.¹⁸ It was not until February 2000 that the committee amended its name to The National Anti-Piracy and Pornography Working Committee (*Quanguo Saohuang Dafei Gongzuo Xiaozu* 全国扫黄打非工作小组) (Wang, 2003). It is worth noting that the two key terms, ‘*saohuang*’ (literally meaning ‘sweeping the yellow (pornographic)’) and ‘*dafei*’ (literally meaning ‘striking the illegal’) are reversed in the English name of the committee. Considering China’s strong will to join the WTO in 2001, highlighting ‘anti-piracy’ was clearly a symbol to present China’s readiness to regulate and bring into line its formal economy in the face of globalisation. Since then, the nouns ‘*saohuang*’ and ‘*dafei*’ have often been aggregated together to refer to the government’s anti-piracy activities.

Addressing the scene in He Jianjun’s film *Man Yan* (*Pirated Copy*, He Jianjun, 2004, China) in which a Chinese police officer pronounces *Ai no korîda* (*In the Realm of the Senses*, Nagisa Oshima, 1976, Japan and France) as pornography based on the graphic cover image, Zhang questions the state’s dividing line between artistic material and pornography, saying, ‘The state’s legal power rests on regulating the content of pirated visual material rather than the effects of its consumption’ (2007b: 221). This brings us to the previous discussion in the literature review on art film and its ‘adult’ elements (sexuality, politics, violence) that represents its ‘realism’ and art values outside of the mainstream norm, on the one hand, and as selling points, on the other. For example, at the time in China, typical art films like *37°2 le matin* (*Betty Blue*, Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1986, France), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Philip Kaufman, 1988, USA), *Lust och fägring stor* (*All Things Fair*, Bo Widerberg, 1995, Denmark and Sweden), and *La double vie de Véronique* (*The Double Life of Veronique*, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1991, France, Poland and Norway) were claimed to be either pornographic films (*seqing pian* 色情片), or adult films (*chengren pian* 成人片), or even ‘life-style’ films (*shenghuo pian* 生活片) in a subtler way, by piracy merchants (Wei, 2016). But there has evolved

¹⁸ See more information on the official website of the film authority: <http://www.shdf.gov.cn/> (Accessed: 12 October 2017).

a ‘new film genre’ according to this characteristic of art film (European art film in particular) called ‘*qingse pian*’ (erotic film 情色片), distinguished from ‘*seqing pian*’ (pornographic film), where the former puts the sense of ‘*qing*’ (emotion) ahead of ‘*se*’ (sex) while the latter does the opposite. The odd aggregation of piracy and art film consequently creates an intimate environment of reception between the spectators (masculine spectators, in particular) and the film text.

3.1.1 The ‘Region 9’ DVD

Committed film viewers in China have always been keen to collect D-9 disks (*diejiu* 碟九, double-layered DVDs, which comes from higher quality originals) rather than those made from videos directly camcordered in movie theatres (*qiangban* 枪版) or D-5 disks (*diewu* 碟五, single-layered DVDs) (Li, 2012: 547). *Jiuqu die* 九区碟 (‘Region 9’

disks) is a name often mentioned by my interview for high-quality pirated DVDs, which implies a subtle difference from D-9 disks, a notion simply defined by the technological format and capacity of the disk. The Region 9 disk connotes the system of international region coding designed to protect legal territorial circulation so that film distribution companies can control every aspect of DVD distribution, including release date, price and content, according to the region. According to Jim Taylor (2000: 187), the system carves up the world’s DVD film market into eight geographic regions (or locales) whereby DVD players coded in one region can only play DVDs from the same region.¹⁹ For example, a Region 6 DVD player in China cannot play the Region 2 DVD of *Kes* (Ken Loach, 1970, UK) purchased from the UK. This system also allows the ‘same’ film’s DVD in different regions to have different content according to the region’s regulation, including different

¹⁹ As Taylor (2000: 188) listed in *DVD Demystified*, the regions are as follows:

1 Canada, United States, Puerto Rico, Bermuda, the Virgin Islands, and some islands in the Pacific

2 Japan, western Europe (including Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Balkans), South Africa, Turkey, and the Middle East (including Iran and Egypt)

3 Southeast Asia (including Indonesia, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Macau)

4 Australia, New Zealand, South America, most of Central America, western New Guinea, and most of the South Pacific

5 Most of Africa, Russia (and former Russian states), Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and North Korea

6 China and Tibet

7 Reserved

8 Special nontheatrical venues (airplanes, cruise ships, hotels)

subtitle options and special features (such as director's cuts and extended versions, audio commentaries, behind the scenes, documentaries, deleted scenes, and alternate endings).

The 'Region 9' DVD does not belong to any of the regions above but is a decoded, region-free version that can be played on any player. Often, 'Region 9' DVDs not only transgress region boundaries but could sometimes have better image quality than some regional versions, with more subtitle options and special features, and sometimes more information or booklets. For example, in 2010, the Criterion Collection released a 4-disk special edition of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987, UK, Italy, China and France). Soon after, pirated copies were available in China, which first and foremost retained the original content and package design and also included ten different subtitle options (including traditional and simple Chinese, Japanese, Thai, French, Danish), and over 430 minutes of additional special features from other regions (including four exclusive documentaries produced by the Manchukuo Film Association, Japan). Certainly, not all the 'Region 9' DVDs would be as well packaged as this example (see Figure 18). But at least, through a typical 'Region 9' DVD, viewers might be able to see the best quality moving images from Region 1, with Region 3 subtitles, plus Region 2 exclusive audio commentary. For sure 'Region 9' not only distinguishes itself from the blurred and distorted image quality from the VCD era, which were largely either camcorder-recorded directly in a cinema abroad or through mediocre home video recording or copying technology, but also implied more of a selection, aggregation, and re-composition in the text and the form of the film, for the 'discerning' viewer, collectors and completists.



Figure 1. The pirated copy of *The Last Emperor* directed by Bernardo Bertolucci in 1987 (pictures provided by Michael, a piracy merchant based in Guangzhou).

3.1.1.1 Behind the Brands

For the ‘Region 9’ generation, their experiences of film were associated with the variety of piracy brands and treated as an important part of their collection. In 2004, Rui started collecting pirated DVDs when he was a second-year undergraduate philosophy student:

When starting to buy the ‘Region 9’ disks, I thought the exquisite disk packs were the legendary licit DVD from Regions 1 and 2. I was too young and too naïve! At that time, I did not know that pirated DVDs had different brands. But later I found that the special editions that I bought in the early years were largely from a DVD manufacturer called ‘*Jin Qiu* [Golden Global]’. Their selection was not bad at all. [my translation] (Rui, interview with author, 13 June 2017)

Jin Qiu was certainly not the only piracy brand on the market. In mid-1997, DVDs started taking the place of VCDs in piracy market (Wu, 2012: 509). Given the high storage capability of DVD, ‘speed’ became less important than ‘quality’ and ‘selection’ for both piracy buyers and manufacturers (William, interview with author, 10 June 2017). Committed buyers, after years of viewing the distorted VCD images, would rather wait slightly longer to receive a better filmic experience with higher image quality and more accurate subtitles. In addition, due to increased competition, pirate distributors and manufacturers looked for new ways to attract more buyers, in supplying more symbolic capital and consequently achieving economic capital within the field of the piracy market. The most visible way was to signify the distinctive brands of the piracy corporations. At that time, each company had their identifiable name, brand logo, and unique serial numbers printed on the DVD covers manufactured by them. For example, as with the two cover photos shown below, the pirate corporations Ying Huang (EE) and Wei Xin (WX)’s name, logo, and serial number are printed on the bottom right corner above the ‘DVD’ logo in Jan Svankmajer’s shorts collection and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s documentaries collection respectively. The act of integrating the brand labels with the original design and packaging appears to be a declaration of authority and ‘copyright’ ownership, a ‘self-awarded’ certification with an attempt to ‘legitimise’ the act of piracy to some extent.

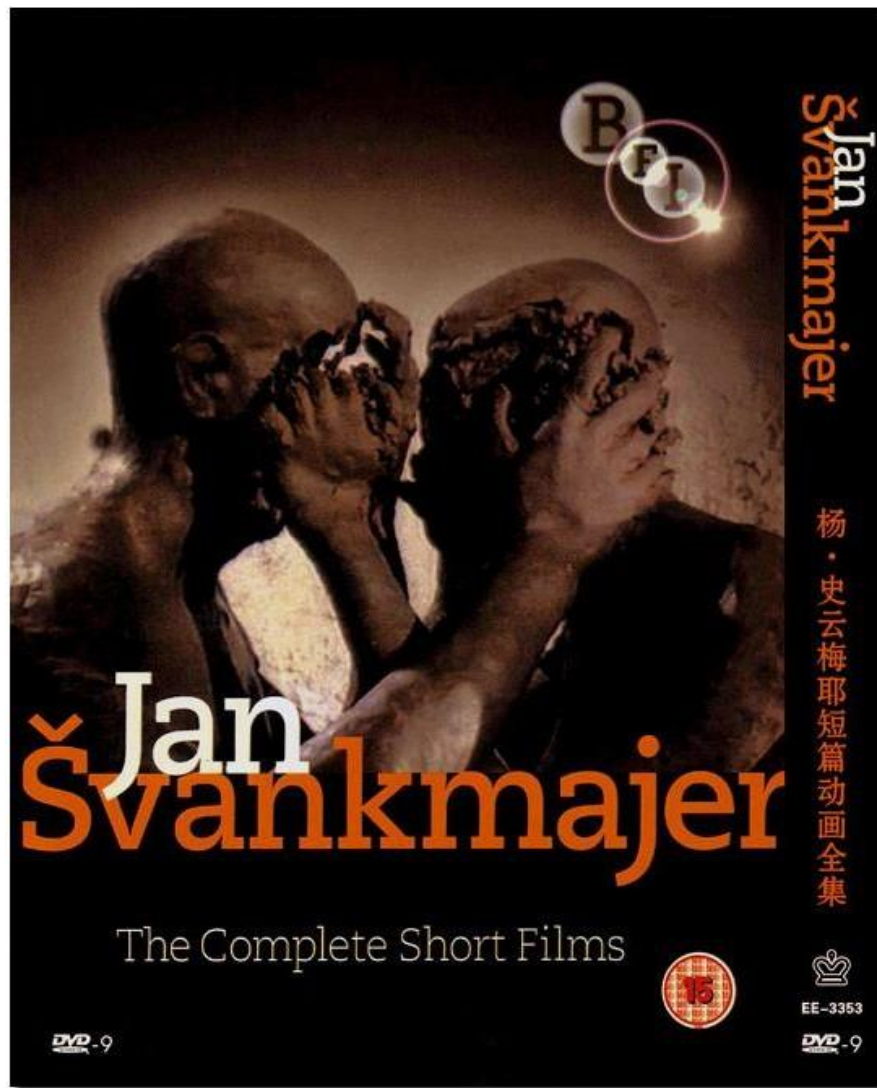


Figure 2. The pirated copy of the collection of Jan Svankmajer's shorts by EE, original version by British Film Institute in 1992 (picture provided by Michael).

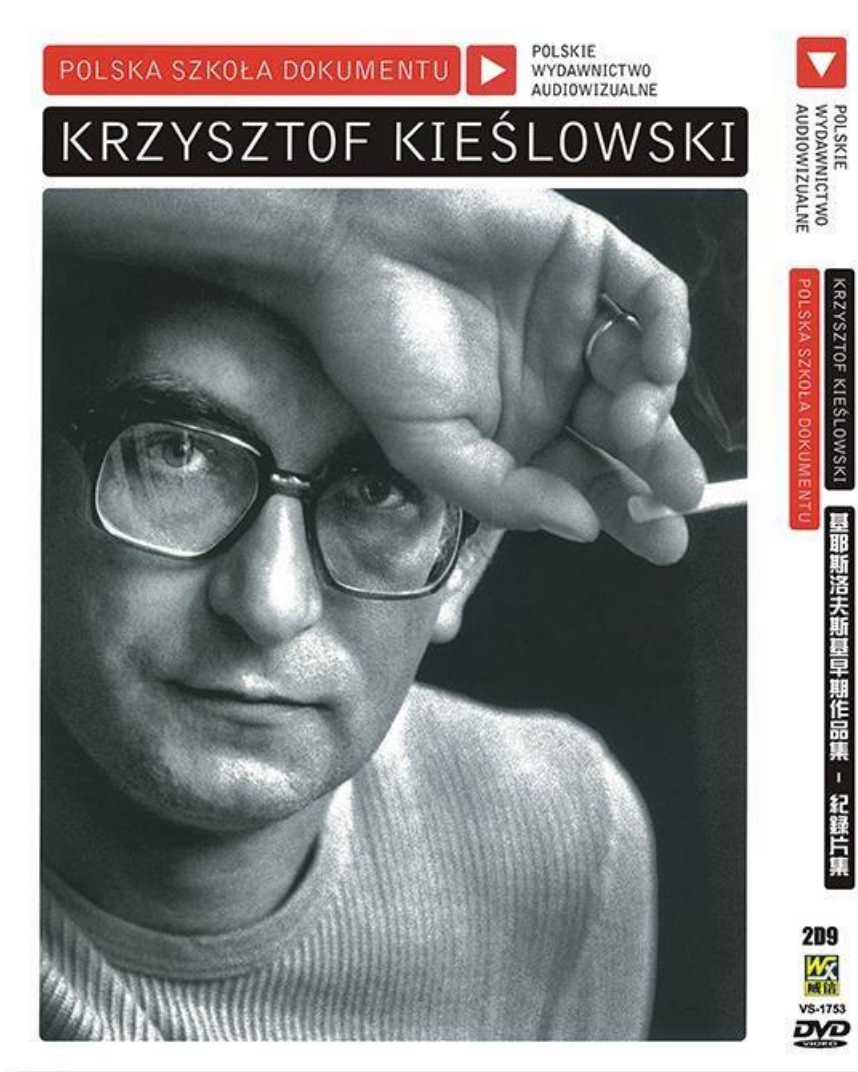


Figure 3. Pirated copy of the collection of Krzysztof Kieślowski's documentaries collection by WX, original copy by Polish National Audiovisual Institute (picture provided by Michael).

3.1.1.2 The 'New Gameplay'

With the labels printed, the reputation of the brand among viewers really mattered. To reach more loyal clients and to seize on more symbolic capital within the field, there emerged a 'new gameplay' ('*xin wanfa*' 新玩法), as my informant William put it, himself a former contributor to the piracy industry (William, interview with author, 10 June 2017). Bourdieu often uses the analogy of 'game' to refer to the rules and regulations of the social field with which an individual player has their position as represented by their habitus and the capital that they have acquired. A 'new gameplay' in the piracy DVD market can be understood as indicative of the new breed of rules and (unofficial)

regulations in the post VCD era when the accumulation of symbolic capital has become increasingly associated with the practices of individual ‘players’. Drawing upon my observations and interviews with WX’s former distributors and employees, the new game rules in the Region 9 era involved increasing *the assortment* and enhancing *the quality*. Because of that, more and more art film DVDs began to emerge on the market and enter individual domestic spaces.

In 2006, William left his job as a tutor in a university in Guangzhou and was hired as a consultant by WX, responsible for spotting global film industry trends and selecting eligible films to be reproduced and diffused by the pirate corporation. In his late 30s, William now operates a small but noted company in Guangzhou involved in art film screening, fan subtitling, and amateur criticism. He is nostalgic (and still passionate) about the DVD era while working for WX, because he was permitted to feel free to choose whatever he liked – whether a Hollywood blockbuster or a niche film – while his distribution boss never meddled in his work. Under William’s guidance, in six years WX produced over 7,000 DVD titles of various sorts, including at least 20 percent ‘art’ films, including: *Tôkyô monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, Yasujiro Ozu, 1953, Japan), *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964, Italy and France), *I Vitelloni* (Federico Fellini, 1953, Italy and France), *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, Akira Kurosawa, 1954, Japan), *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1960, France), *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*, Satyajit Ray, 1963, India), *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, Luchino Visconti, 1963, Italy and France), *Marketa Lazarová* (Frantisek Vlácil, 1967, Czechoslovakia), *Cría cuervos* (Carlos Saura, 1976, Spain), *Beau-père* (Bertrand Blier, 1981, France), *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (Nagisa Oshima, 1983, UK, New Zealand and Japan), *Nostalghia* (*Nostalgia*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983, Italy and Soviet Union), *La double vie de Véronique* (*The Double Life of Veronique*, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1991, France, Poland and Norway), *Caché* (*Hidden*, Michael Haneke, 2005, France, Austria, Germany and Italy), and *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006, Germany). I was amazed by the pirate mogul’s lenient and undemanding attitude towards those seemingly unprofitable art films. On 10 June 2017, William took me to meet the mogul who stopped doing business after being arrested by police for piracy in 2010. At the time, he and his business (for cosmetics smuggling) partners were entertaining themselves in a loud karaoke room. He said that putting out as great an assortment as they could was a basic competitive strategy. ‘He (William) didn’t have to convince me’, said the mogul, 38,

I've never watched any art film. I do not have much of an education. All I know is, the market demand was high, the competition severe. Our aim was to get the whole range, even without profit, because the clients would see whether you had everything they wanted. [my translation] (Lu, interview with author, 10 June 2017)

It appears that under the circumstance of commercial films being available from many sources, the output of art film was treated as an effective strategy to develop new markets and target clients so as also to nurture the symbolic capital of the pirate brand. Even at the time, there emerged a few specialised pirate manufacturers that particularly focused on putting out not only classic art films but also cult films, experimental films and other niche films (William, interview with author, 10 June 2017).

It is undeniable that every DVD buyer expected to acquire a pack of good quality disks. 'Quality' for buyers implied 'valuable' and 'worth the money': having the same (or even better) quality as the legal version but costing less. Moreover, 'quality' does not only mean the image quality but also includes the reputation of the filmmakers, good subtitles, and soundtrack options, special features, and even the design of the main menu. Keeping a higher quality than other rivals meant production time and development was longer, threatening profit margins or having rivals beat them to the market with a lesser quality product of the same film. 'No matter whether you built in three versions [from different Regions], or five versions, or eight versions, the ultimate price of the disk stays the same,' William claimed that WX lost 160,000 *yuan* on the special edition of *The Last Emperor* because it took them too long to prepare it for release: 'Some company produced a single disk [of the film], some produced a double, we decided to make it four disks, adding the Manchukuo documentaries, for instance, and we even made a special order from Japan. Even if it turned out to be our biggest loss ever, the boss didn't blame us' [my translation] (William, interview with author, 10 June 2017). Nevertheless, it was not possible to have all releases achieve the deluxe quality of *The Last Emperor* release. As Gang, a former technician for WX, recalled,

To make it quick, I can complete it within two hours, from 'mao pian' [unrefined film 毛片] to press into a complete disk, can you imagine? I can also do it slowly, like two or three months. It really *depends on what you want it to be*. Depends on the mood. The most we did was for *Nostalgia*, so complicated. Because we had the Japanese version, the British version, also the Russian version, and so on. What we did was to make good use of each version's strengths. There are also a lot special features. The

whole process took almost half a year, and because we had to review it again and again, nobody in this country has watched *Nostalgia* as many times as we did! [my translation] (Gang, interview with author, 14 June 2017)

Gang mentioned *Nostalgia* several times in our interview and admitted to it being one of his favourites; whilst his ex-workmate, Jun, complained of being the most wretched one among all the team members, because he had to work on at least two action films per day for half a year in a row, which really stressed him out. It appears that apart from super popular films like *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009, USA), every manufacturer wanted to do their best to stand out in terms of image quality, packaging and marketing, and other films' quality largely relies on the personal preference and performance of those involved in the procedure. If one was not into *Nostalgia*, he might just treat it as a two-hour-quickly-done film and rush to the next: human agency was embedded in the pirate DVD film culture throughout the process.

In Akira Kurosawa's film *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*, Akira Kurosawa, 1954, Japan), a band of misfit warriors are hired by peasant farmers to defend them against dangerous marauders. Gang believes that this film precisely symbolises him and his workfellows at the company:

We are a gang of people who could not make use of our talent through legitimate paths but finally found our place when entering this business, but it [the pirated DVD period] was just too short. Seven samurai wasn't equal to 'qixia wuyi' [the seven heroes and five gallants 七侠五义]?²⁰ If we didn't come together, we might be just a bunch of 'dragons of disk' – who would ever think of making *Nostalgia* or *The Lives of Others!* [my translation] (Gang, interview with author, 14 June 2017)

'Xia' (errant knight 侠) and 'yi' (justice 义) serve as the supreme codes of behaviour in martial arts novels. In popular culture, a 'xia' refers to a hero who lies outside of authority, who may not follow the established social order but always faces danger in saving people while the authorities are powerless or do not want to help (Yang, 2009a: 171). For many pirate participants like Gang, if the Chinese film industry is viewed as a martial-arts world,

²⁰ The Chinese phrase 'qixia wuyi' refers to a Qing-Dynasty Chinese novel that tells the story of the legendary judge Bao Zheng and how a group of 'xia' (knights) helped him fight against crimes and corruption.

pirate DVD workers are poor but noble hired swords doing right but outside legitimate authority.

3.1.2 ‘*Tao Die*’ as an Individualised Filmic Experience

For film lovers in early 2000s China, shopping for DVDs, *tao die* 淘碟 in Chinese, was an indispensable part of their filmic experience. Here, *tao*, as a verb, appears different from simply purchasing (*mai* 买, in Chinese) and more similar to what Anne Friedberg discusses in *Window Shopping: Cinema and Postmodernity*: to shop ‘implies choice, empowerment in the relation between looking and having..., an activity that combines diversion, self-gratification, expertise, and physical activity’ (1993: 57). In Friedberg’s account, in the context of the urban environment and commodity culture where ‘the shopper enacts the social relations between things’ (1993: 53), both public space like the shopping mall and the private home sphere of the VCR are constructed around a subjective mobilised and virtual gaze that recasts the relationship between the shoppers, as well as the spectators, subjectivity, and consumption. Due to the illegal nature of piracy, the gaze shifting across a range of pirated DVD copies is chiefly conducted in a semi-public or semi-private sphere that might only be known among loyal patrons. Following Friedberg’s discussion, I would argue that the DVD lovers’ act of looking constitutes behaviour that firstly relies on the social connections in the context of the cloak-and-dagger piracy stores and secondly involves an individual subjective examination of DVD copies on display and the temporal tourism of the global cinematic world.

3.1.2.1 From Electronic Market to Secret Stores

That day Yang Lu and I went to Daduhe Road electronic market to do VCD shopping. We checked over every store very carefully so as not to miss any good ones. Although it is almost closing time, we suddenly realised that there’re almost a hundred booths and began to move our searching faster. To save the time, we split in two to check different booths. At the booth that I was looking at, the VCDs were scattered all over the table and everyone had a pile of disks held in their hands. My eyes were drawn to a name: *An Lian Tao Hua Yuan* [*Secret Love for the Peach Blossom Spring*, Stan Lai,

1993, Taiwan] Perhaps I heard of it from somewhere? Looks quite famous? Without asking myself any further questions, I bought it. [my translation] (Xu, 2016: 287)

In his recollection of VCD shopping in 1997 in Shanghai, Xu, the founder of the first cine-club in China ('101 Film Studio'), describes the scene of VCD shopping by linking the public space of the VCD market and a personal experience of lighting upon the unfamiliar Taiwanese modern drama *An Lian Tao Hua Yuan*. In his story, he presents a moment of mobilising his look to screen out desirable disks from a motley crew in the public arena, the electronic market. Growing with the development of digital technology, electronic markets in China are usually located in urban centres or central streets, a retail place where people might find a cheaper and larger range of electronic products than the high street. In such an environment, pirated disks were blatantly displayed and sold, while the government had not yet put much effort into anti-piracy campaigns and laws before the WTO accession.

Xu is not alone among film lovers at that time in remembering being a part of such a public arena, shopping for pirated video disks. Many informants offered similar recollections of *tao die* in urban electronic markets. Hua used to spend a lot of time on business trips between cities and the local electronic markets were always the first destination of his city tour:

We disk buyers are like drug addicts. While visiting a strange city, a regular disk buyer can find the marketplace within two days, just like a drug addict who can quickly find the local dealer: we all have the instinct for locating the cultural product we want. [my translation] (Hua, interview with author, 17 June 2017)

Hua's words suggest a particular type of cultural tourism in early twenty-first-century China, where the force of an emergent consumer culture and the desire for proximity to cultural products from elsewhere realised a new form of cultural experience.

After years of *tao die*, Hua now runs a noted commercial cine-club in which one of the walls is decorated with art film DVD covers. Looking at the wall with pride, he admitted that they are all handpicked Region 9 DVDs. Nevertheless, these DVDs were rarely from the electronic markets: 'Usually the disks on display were not the good stuff. They [the piracy vendors in electronic markets] were not willing to stock many art films. They bought in lots of blockbusters and resold them', said Hua, 'Good art films were usually secure in the hands of fixed sellers' [my translation] (Hua, interview with author, 17 June

2017). At the time, to minimise the risk of losing money on art films, pirate corporations distributed only a limited number of copies per film. For example, WX produced only 3,000 copies of most art films. This meant that, except for those going to specialist art film sellers, very limited copies of DVDs were scattered all over the nation: to find desired art films among the crowd in a sizable electronic market very much depended on luck.

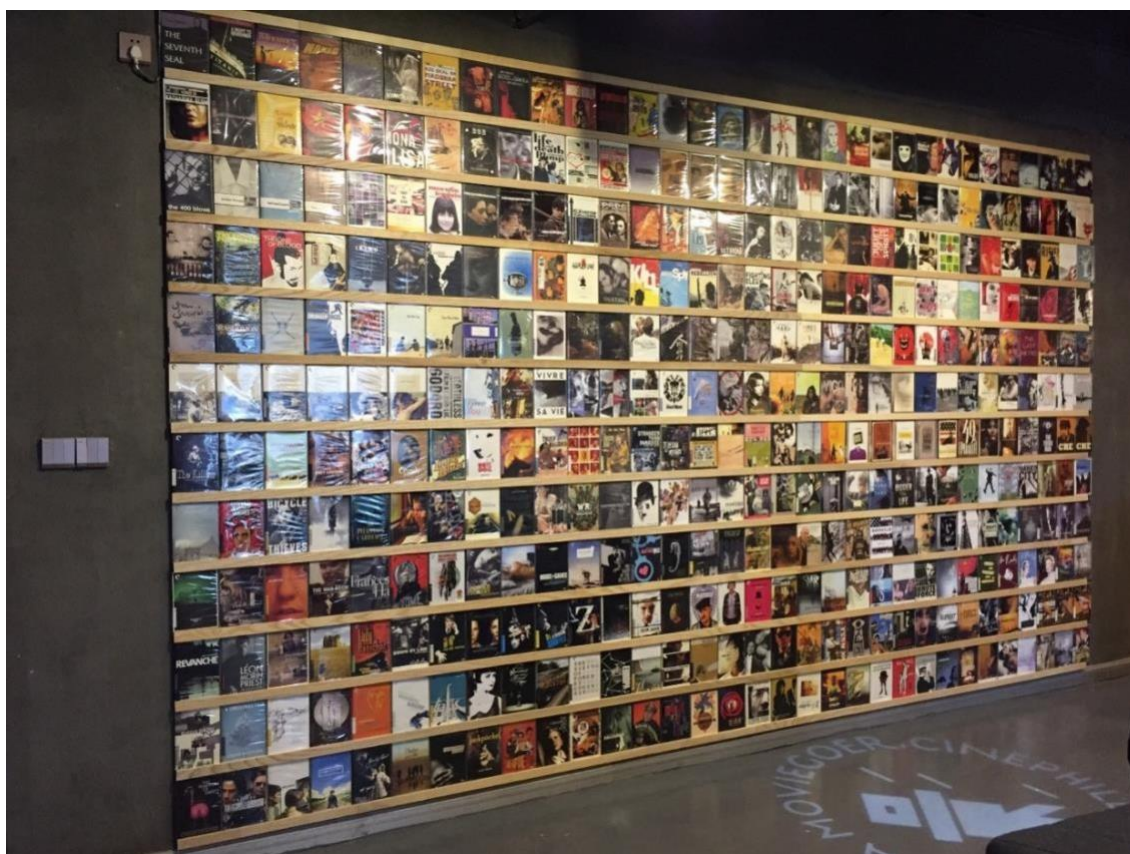


Figure 4. Pirated DVD wall in Cinexpress, Hua's cine-club in Shenzhen.

Instead of being part of a public marketplace, most of the art film vendors tend to run their own business in an obscure locale. ‘Where can I buy DVDs?’ is the first post that William made in an online DVD forum when he was an ordinary film lovers, a few years before becoming directly involved in the industry. As he recalled, all the information about the DVDs and purchasing locations in that forum were coded with the initial *pinyin*

letters.²¹ Almost at once, William's post was deleted by the forum administrator with a warning that it was strictly prohibited to discuss such a thing in the forum. Nevertheless, he soon received a private message from the administrator with detailed instructions for finding the underground pirate DVD location. Named after a popular shooter game 'Counter-Strike' (CS) in which players are involved in counter-terrorist combat, the pirate shop was secretly located in a wholesale vegetable market. 'Without other's guidance, you'd never find this place. After a mucky road, keep walking along a narrow lane, both sides of the lane were lined with street pedlars selling vegetables and meat, then go into a residential building; one of the apartments on the second floor; a great world is revealed to you. The apartment was about 80 square metres, a lounge, two rooms, full of pirated disks,' recalled William (William, interview with author, 10 June 2017) [my translation]. Likewise, informant Maojie shared her detailed recollection of a secret DVD shop that a friend of hers once brought her to to buy pirated DVDs:

Very old place, no lights, have to climb dark and narrow stairs. Most of the residents in the building were migrant workers, many people wedged in one room. Very out of sight, you can never find that place without detailed directions. [my translation] (Maojie, interview with author, 20 June 2017)

Like William and Maojie, many informants make brief mention of going to the hidden DVD shops having been informed by others (usually friends, or people who shared a common interest in film). In this case, if reading pirated art film DVD as an objectified form of cultural capital, the accumulation is facilitated by one's social capital that involves the social relations between the individual agent and other processors. Different from the public or semi-public space where the buyers' mobilised cultural gaze determines what they might want to get, in confined spaces like very informal pirated art film DVD shops, the trade of pirated DVDs, as well as the diffusion of art film, relies on a network of connections which situates art film as a desired cultural product and the slightly illicit context of acquisition and 'underground' or 'alternative' business operation can be said to have added to it being an object of desire.

In addition to the relationship between DVD lovers, the connection between buyers and vendors also plays an important role in the network. 'DVD vendors and I, we are very

²¹ *Pinyin* is the romanisation system for standard Chinese widely used in mainland China.

good friends. When new stuff arrived, they'd immediately text me, so that I could make sure that I didn't miss anything new,' said Hua [my translation] (Hua, interview with author, 17 June 2017). In the documentary *Pai Gu* (Liu Gaoming, 2005, China), piracy vendor Pai Gu's life is captured by his client, filmmaker Liu Gaoming. Starting his business in 2003, Pai Gu ran one of the most 'well-known' underground art film DVD shops in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province. Pai Gu had knowledge of numerous art filmmakers and their seminal works despite claiming no understanding or appreciation of any of the films because of his low educational level (no more than secondary school education). With a notebook full of customers' contact numbers, he knows well which films and filmmakers each customer is after and keeps them updated on newly arrived items and hard-to-find pieces. If one follows Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory whereby different forms of capital may convert from one to another, secondary-school-educated Pai Gu tries hard to acquire knowledge of art film to build better social relations with his film-lover clients, with which the cultural capital and social capital could ultimately converge as economic capital. As shown in one scene (Figure 23), Pai Gu parodies Mao's famous phrase '*wei renmin fuwu*' 为人民服务 (serve the people) that was printed on a cultural-revolution-style satchel bag by drawing a character in between, which turns the Maoist slogan into '*wei renmin bi fuwu*' 为人民币服务 (serve the people's money). On the other hand, DVD lovers utilise their social capital to get access to the esoteric DVD shops so as not only to possess the desired cultural products (the objectified state of cultural capital) but also to generate personal taste (the embodied state of cultural capital).

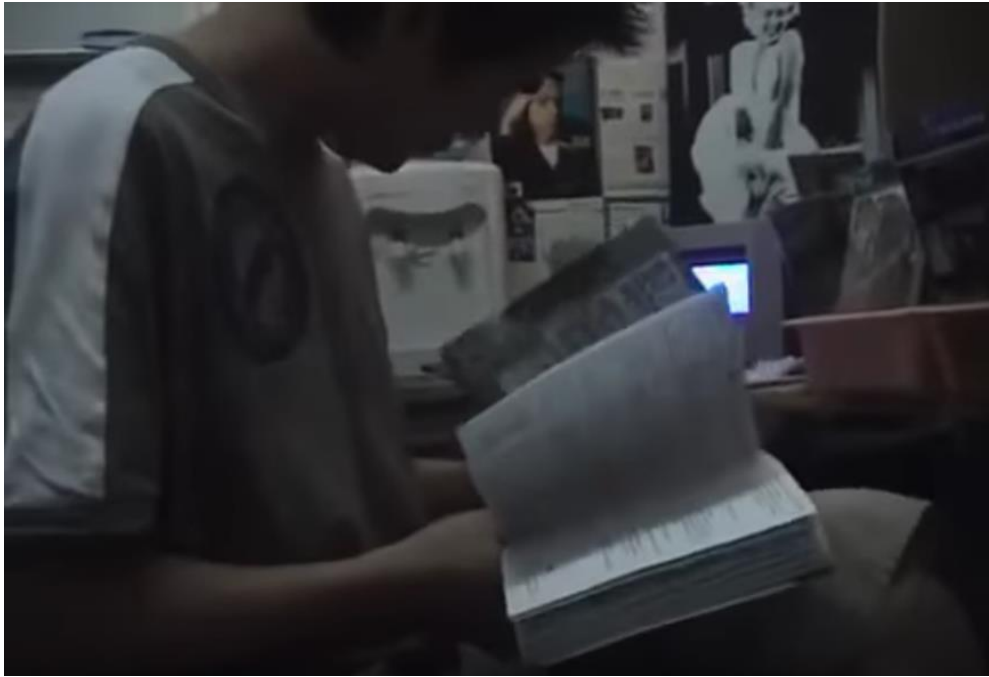


Figure 5. Pai Gu is checking a film dictionary in *Pai Gu* filmed by Liu Gaoming, 2005.

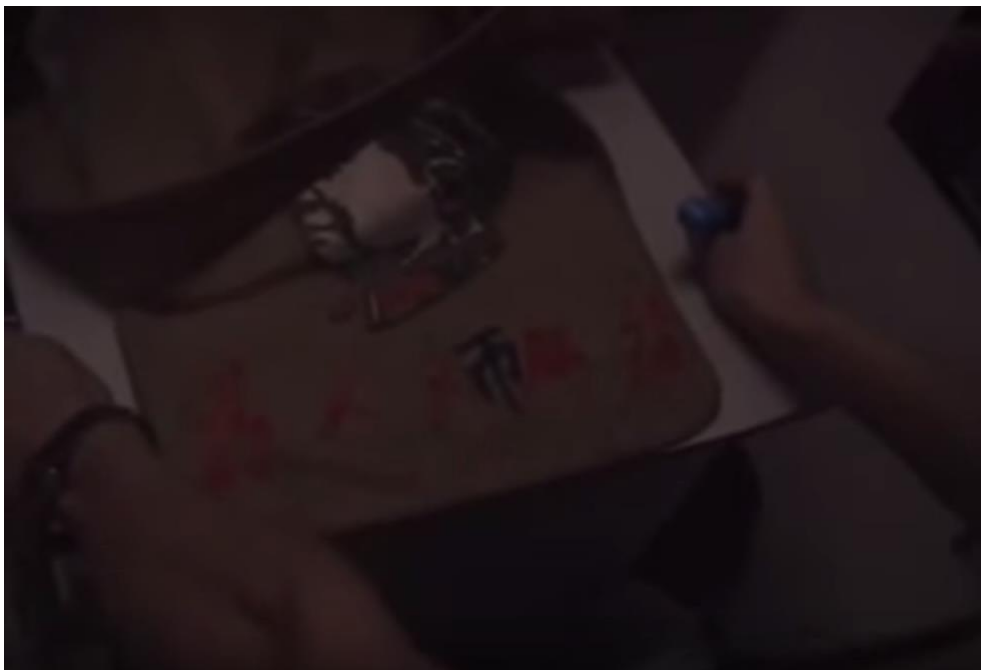


Figure 6. Pai Gu is drawing a character on the Mao-style satchel bag in *Pai Gu* filmed by Liu Gaoming, 2005.

3.1.2.2 From 'Film Bible' to Personal Wish List

Around 2000, a film list was widely circulated among film lovers in China, mainly via piracy shops or personal connections among friend circles. The list comprised over 200 global art films that had been distributed by a film distribution company called 'Sozoshu'

(a tribute to Nagisa Oshima's own production company Sozosha) in Hong Kong. Founded by Hong Kong filmmaker and critic Shu Kei in 1987, 'Sozosha' was initially designated to bring good foreign-language art films to Hong Kong. In the previous chapter I discussed the role of Hong Kong as a type of intermediary between typical Western cinema culture and domestic popular culture in accruing commercial arthouse cinema in the PRC. Bordering Guangdong province in southern China, Hong Kong was not only a node of the circuits of alien cultural products but a cradle of where the new valuesystem in contemporary China was constructed. Whilst pirate manufacturers bootlegged the 'Sozosha films' and distributed them in mainland China, it consequently stoked up the market for art film and, for the first time, led film lovers to explore this previously undiscovered cinematic world.

Recalling her early experience searching for art films, Yanbin said that she spent a lot of time trolling piracy spots to prospect those films from the list:

At the time, thirsting for knowledge, I really relied on those pieces of A4 paper [the film list]. Anytime and anywhere when seeing a disk sale, I would check it out, whether in markets or on footbridges. Once I came across a pack of Kieslowski's Three Colours Trilogy. You can not imagine how excited I was! [my translation] (Yanbin, interview with author, 15 June 2017)

During our conversation, Yanbin repeatedly referred to the list as the 'film bible'. Although later there were a lot more similar film lists with even more inclusive selections, certainly the 'bible' played a fundamental role in offering viewers in the PRC a solid image of what art film was, and as the name suggests, functioned as a canon based on an evaluative standard that Yanbin and other film lovers in China espoused. As Janet Staiger (1985) points out, the selection by evaluation in film formation is made culturally and ideologically with a politics of the inclusion and exclusion of the chosen standard and with a politics of centring certain cultures, genders, classes, or sexual orientations. As the 'bible' was subject to the Hong Kong filmmaker and critic Shu Kei's selection, his habitus of being an educated male (with a degree in literature from the University of Hong Kong) and familiar with foreign language and culture certainly nurtured the value system. Moreover, arranged alphabetically by the name of the director (occasionally by nationality but with the filmmaker's name always included, according to my informants), the 'bible' brought the film lovers into an auteur-centred cinema world. As William recalled his first encounter with the 'bible', 'There were names of filmmakers listed that

I would never heard of elsewhere before in my whole life! I suddenly realised that there were so many filmmakers in the world' [my translation] (William, interview with author, 10 June 2017). By checking out each filmmaker's masterpieces, those in the know about the list started to recognise which auteur and which styles they preferred and conceptualised their own wish list and evaluative standards.

Pirated video disks played an important role in the filmic experience of viewers in China who were young and eager to know more about film at the time, providing new visions, inspiring their own taste and values, and animating social and cultural activities with other viewers. In these ways, film lovers brought into their home space something of the otherness that this foreign-language cinema signified and was part of and could not be found anywhere else. For some of them, it meant bringing cinema into their personal lives, in an emergence of the love of cinema, a cinephilia. The pirate DVD world went further than being a provisional solution for eager viewers but engendered an enduring cinema culture centred on the love of cinema. Today, in the age of the internet, which provides immediate access and acquisition (though not without restrictions for some), the once crowded electronic market and underground shops have disappeared, and many informants admitted that they no longer continue buying or collecting DVDs anymore. Nevertheless, the experience of once strolling around the pirate locations and viewing the disks and once again on home screens, involved them in the process of eluding a censorious (and culturally-limited) authority, making their own discoveries and forming their own values and tastes (albeit guided somewhat by the 'film bible' list). As the first generation of cinephiles in China, many of these people have now become cultural intermediaries and brought their own knowledge and understanding of films to a broader audience through multiple activities and practices that followed on from this period.

3.2 Alternative Public Exhibitionary Space: Theatrical Venues for Art Cinema

In recent years, the circulation and appreciation of arthouse films is not confined within home space anymore but extends to a range of theatrical spaces. In 1995, the first state-owned art cinema, the China Film Archive Art Cinema (CFA Art Cinema) with a capacity of was set up in Beijing (Fu, 2009: 39). Since then, CFA collections that used to be chiefly

marked as internal-reference only started to be made accessible to the public. Fourteen years later, in 2009, the Hong Kong cinema chain Broadway Circuit came to Beijing and established mainland China's first commercial arthouse Broadway Cinematheque MOMA (BC-MOMA) (Lu, 2016; Wu, 2016). Working closely with Beijing International Film Festival and Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas, the CFA art cinema and the BC-MOMA have become the most influential art cinemas not only in the capital city but also across the country. These two leading art cinemas, along with a variety of alternative institutions and organisations (such as art galleries, museums, cultural institutes, and academic institutions) involved in art film exhibitions, regularly or occasionally, constitute the public exhibitionary space for art cinema in China, constituting what in the West would be known as an art cinema circuit. Here, different art cinema venues are involved in dynamic forces arising from politics, economy and art, therefore it is indicative of various filmic experiences, different ways of shaping taste for their audiences and locating it within complex socio-cultural networks. The following discussion is based on my participant observation of art cinema venues in Beijing in November 2016. I also supplement my observation of art film exhibition by interviewing organisers and audiences. Based on this empirical research, I classify the existing art cinema sites into four models: state-owned cinema institutions; foreign cultural institutes; commercial arthouses; and independent art institutions. In the following sections I conduct nuanced discussions of each model.

3.2.1 Reconciling National Culture, Artistic Value, Education and Economic Pursuit

Within existing film studies, art-cinematic exhibition space is typically interpreted in cultural and social (especially class) terms, including who goes to art cinemas and how both art films and their exhibition venues relate to cultural and class hierarchy. For Barbara Wilinsky (2001), the intellectual and exclusive environment of arthouse cinema in her example of post-war America serves as a manifestation of alternative film culture, a strategy of differentiation from the dominant Hollywood industry. Harbord (2002) suggests that different contexts of exhibition articulate different traditions of film culture: for example, arthouse exhibition focuses on its independence from mass cultural distribution, a response to and articulation of aesthetic traditions and political affinities.

These and other studies and approaches to cultural capital and a society's conceptions of what constitutes 'art' or different kinds of art, as represented by Bourdieu's work and his notion of 'fields', inform my research and make some of these conceptualisations more concrete, in analysing each venue's financial source(s), locations, film programming (and promotional material, onsite publicity and information), ticket prices, and cinema atmosphere (décor, layout and design, and connected facilities such as cafes, hang-out/social spaces) in the discussions below.

Clearly, the CFA Art Cinema represents the model of a state-owned cinema institution and organisation. Founded in 1958, the CFA is a cultural institution governed by the central film authority (Fu, 2009). It primarily combines cultural and educational roles, bringing together film exhibition and festivals at the CFA Art Cinema, and film studies and education at the China Film Art Research Centre. As a department of the CFA, the Art Cinema also takes on educational and cultural responsibilities. There are two signs on the wall in front of the main door of the art cinema, saying: 'Beijing education centre for ethnic unity' and 'Beijing special cinema-art cinema' [my translations]. The signs suggest the dual role of the state-owned art cinema: as a designated place for ethnic unity in the first place, and then as a cinema space contributing to promotion of art film-related cultural values.

Social education is particularly manifested in its selections of Chinese films. During my observations, excepting recent low budget art-independent films,²² Chinese films on exhibition were featured by virtue of their perceived prominent national heritage, including *Shen Nv* (*The Goddess*, Wu Yonggang, 1934, China), *Xiao Cheng Zhi Chun* (*Spring in a Small Town*, Fei Mu, 1948, China), *Wu Ya Yu Ma Que* (*Crow and Sparrow*, Zheng Junli, 1949, China), *Ai Le Zhong Nian* (*Sorrows and Joys of a Middle-Aged Man*, Sang Hu, 1949, China), and a series called 'In Memory of Lu Xun', a leading figure of Chinese modern literature, including two biographical documentaries and three adaptations based on his novels.

Perhaps it is surprising that, in such a cinema governed by the central relevant cultural authority, none of the films explicitly presented the so-called 'healthy' social values that

²² All the recent Chinese films have national distribution and exhibition licenses granted by the Film Bureau.

are still of ‘conservative’ political concern, such as patriotism. Moreover, watching a domestic film in the cinema only costs 10 or 20 *yuan*,²³ which is much cheaper than a foreign-language art film (with an average of 40 *yuan*) or any mainstream film. It is likely that the concept of social education is embedded in the education of national film culture: that watching classic national cinema masterpieces that are not necessarily straightforwardly or in any way ideologically ‘correct’ from any of the eras of Chinese socialism still retain the purpose of generating national and cultural identity.

Apart from promoting national film culture, the CFA Art Cinema has also sought to contribute to circulating international art film culture as a way of cultural exchange. According to the curator of the CFA Art Cinema, Sha, it is required to showcase domestic and foreign-language films on a roughly 50/50 basis (Sha, interview with author, 5 July 2017). During my fieldwork, I observed that 71 films in total were showcased in the CFA Art Cinema in November 2016. Half were foreign-language art films, or what in this context are perceived as such, that is a kind of ‘canon’. They were largely presented as series defining the national cinema or cinema culture of a nation or as auteur/director cinema, including Shakespeare on Film (presented by the BFI and The British Council): *All Night Long* (Basil Dearden, 1962, UK), *Henry V* (Laurence Olivier, 1944, UK); French film series: *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, Georges Méliès, 1902, France), *Pierrot le Fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965, France and Italy), *Lulu femme nue* (*Lulu In The Nude*, Sólveig Anspach, 2013, France); German film series (Fritz Lang’s early pieces, a special section of the German Film Festival): *Die Austernprinzessin* (*The Oyster Princess*, Ernst Lubitsch, 1919, Germany), *Der Müde Tod* (*The Three Lights*, Fritz Lang, 1921, Germany); Polish film series: *Popiół i diament* (*Ashes and Diamonds*, Andrzej Wajda, 1958, Poland), *Seksmisja* (*Sexmission*, Juliusz Machulski, 1983, Poland), *Krótki film o zabijaniu* (*A Short Film About Killing*, Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1988, Poland), *Chce sie zyc* (*Life Feels Good*, Chce sie zyc, 2013, Poland); and Russian film series: *Oktyabr* (*October*, Grigoriy Aleksandrov and Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1927, Soviet Union), *Neokonchennaya pyesa dlya mekhanicheskogo pianino* (*An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano*, Nikita Mikhalkov, 1976, Soviet Union), *Utomlennye solntsem* (*Burnt by the Sun*, Nikita Mikhalkov, 1994, Russia and France).

²³ British pound sterling to Chinese yuan is approximately 1: 8.8, according to the conversion rate on 12 September 2019. 10 yuan is approximately 88 pence in British pound sterling.

Although the tickets for foreign-language films are far more expensive than those for domestic films, foreign-language art films still attract larger audiences than classic Chinese films screened from the archive. Notable foreign-language films like Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* were extremely popular, and tickets sold out a few days before the screening. It is worth noting that the selection implies the canon formation of traditional (European) art films involved in the discursive exhibitionary space navigated by the authority-operated arthouse cinema. In her exemplary essay *The Politics of Film Canons* (1985), Janet Staiger contests that selection is based on efficiency, worthwhile grouping and evaluation. For Staiger, providing a canonical project with 'long-honored and traditional pursuits in the acquisition of knowledge' generalises the characteristics of certain works and it is easier to appeal to the public (1985: 9). More significantly, the canon represents a consistent system of evaluative authority that determines what is appropriate to the members of a society. As she writes,

Thus, selective choices based on criteria supposedly for the good of society end up being canons supportive of the interests of a hegemonic society, not necessarily in the interests of all segments of that culture or other cultures. Claims for universality are disguises for achieving uniformity, for surpressing through the power of canonic discourse optional value systems. Such a cultural "consensus" fears an asserted "barbarism" and a collapse into the grotesque and monstrous, because it recognizes the potential loss of its hegemony. (1985: 10)

By supplying programmes based on universal established canon, the CFA, as a national archive, is apt to produce a film educational remit, thereby seizing control of cultivating a domestic art cinema culture or almost universally recognised 'film culture'.

The situation of foreign cultural institutes appears less complex. The Goethe-Institut and Institut Francais serve as the most active cultural institutes in terms of art film exhibition. Supported by their home country embassies, the Goethe-Institut and Institut Francais both contribute to promoting knowledge of languages and fostering cultural cooperation with China. Art film exhibition is a part of their 'soft power' diplomacy, a way that, according to Nye (1990; 2004), attracts and co-ops people rather than coerce them through military and economic forces. Consequently, for the Goethe-Institut and Institut Francais, 'culture' stands out from the other three fields (economy, art and education) and serves as the most crucial element in determining their approach to art film exhibition. 'Images' of French culture and German culture have permeated in the films that are disseminated to Chinese

audiences. For example, from 11 to 19 November 2016, The Goethe-Institut co-organised the 4th German Film Festival in Beijing. The festival comprised multiple events in different art film venues, including the latest German films, a ‘Rainer Werner Fassbinder Retrospective Screening’ series and academic discussions. The Fassbinder retrospective took place at the Goethe-Institut in 798 Art Zone. Like most Goethe-Institut exhibitions, they were free to view. At the same time, the Institut Francais conducted a Jean-Luc Godard series where each screening was priced at 20 *yuan*. It appears that the least important factor for foreign cultural institutes is ‘economic’ – making a profit is of no concern at all, rather, such institutes seem incline to promote its cultural values and artistic traditions in what it does as a source of soft power attraction.

In contrast, economic consideration seems a bigger issue for commercial arthouses. A typical case is represented by the BC-MOMA, which is run by Broadway Circuit, one of the major (mainstream) cinema chains in Hong Kong. Since the 2003 industrialisation policies, Hong Kong exhibitors or corporate companies are permitted to invest in the exhibition enterprise in mainland China. With historical connections to the UK, Hong Kong provides a source of capital behind the commercial mode of art cinema on the mainland. The BC-MOMA adapts the typical Western mode of arthouse business to the context of the market economy and cultural control on the mainland.

For their programmes, the BC-MOMA runs both mainstream and art films. As one of the cinema venues for the 4th German Film Festival, the BC-MOMA showed two films every day from the festival, while the rest of the programming was fully scheduled for mainstream films. BC-MOMA’s tickets were also the most expensive among all the researched art cinemas: the German films were priced at 50 *yuan*, while mainstream films were an average of 80 *yuan*, with the highest prices reaching up to 130 *yuan*. Aside from box office income, the BC-MOMA also develops a set of related businesses, notably the ‘Kubrick’. Named after the great filmmaker Stanley, the Kubrick is a combined café and bookshop next to the cinema selling not only film-related products (for example books, posters, DVDs) but also (Western) contemporary literature, art-related products and design books, and creative handicrafts. But with such related outlets, so familiar to American or European art cinema and gallery visitors, the BC-MOMA has other imperatives than turning a profit. There is a small film library on the first floor of the cinema containing film magazines from dozens of countries, film books (written in English), VCD/DVDs, and film soundtrack CDs. The library runs free documentary

screenings every Sunday and discussions, workshops, and occasional short courses. However, the library is located inside the members' lounge zone. In other words, except for some special events, the library collections are accessible to members only. Member subscription costs 100 *yuan* per year, or 1,000 *yuan* per year for a premium membership. Apart from library access and a private retreat area, a member can also get discounts for tickets and items in the Kubrick. Among all types of art film exhibition sites, the BC-MOMA no doubt offers the highest quality environment to its regular customers. To some extent, it fosters the circulation of art film culture in the capital city. On the other hand, behind all the fancy services, it also implies its commercial incentive through providing an arty mecca and privileged experience as part of the reception of art cinema.



Figure 7. A corner of the Kubrick bookshop.



Figure 8. Overseas cinema magazines are available to pre-order at the Kubrick bookshop.

Compared with the foregoing models, independent art institutions seem to identify themselves as ‘independent’ of both state sponsorship and commercial concerns. The Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA) was founded in 2007 by Belgian art collectors and philanthropists Guy and Myriam Ullens. Sponsored by many individuals and corporations, it has become the most influential independent contemporary art gallery in China. It defines itself as ‘non-profit, non-collecting, non-governmental’ and ‘aims to elaborate an inclusive, cosmopolitan vision of China in the world’.²⁴ To ‘elaborate an inclusive, cosmopolitan vision of China’, pure exhibition is not enough: the UCCA also

²⁴ See the UCCA’s official website: <http://ucca.org.cn/en/> (Accessed: 12 March 2017).

involves itself in talks, workshops, and discussions to link worldwide artists to the UCCA's visitors. These events mostly take place in UCCA's art cinema. Art film exhibition events are treated as a part of the wider and extensive artistic programming. During my fieldwork, the UCCA art cinema also hosted four films from the 4th German Film Festival. Compared with other venues, UCCA ticket prices lay in the middle: 30 *yuan* for single access to a film and 80 *yuan* for a bundle of four tickets. Excepting a documentary about German filmmaker Fritz Lang, the other three exhibitions were all followed by Q&As and discussions. The high focus on 'discussion' is also manifested in other activities of UCCA associated with art film. During my research time, excepting the German Film Festival screenings, UCCA also operated another five screening events, all with discussions included. George, 35, independent film producer and curator of three of the events, who had been doing such events for years, explained why discussions are treated as crucially as the films themselves:

I do not want my screening events to be entitled as "such-and such" screening, because cinema should not be a mere screening place. Cinema, especially art cinema, is about interpersonal communication. The end of the film does not mean the end of the communication between the filmmaker and audiences. Discussion gives audiences an opportunity to speak to the filmmaker and learn more from the filmmaker, while the filmmaker also learns from them as well. It is a process of mutual learning. [Through the events] I want to build a platform exactly like this, and eventually achieve a sort of film-education effect. [my translation] (George, interview with author, 12 November 2016)

It appears that UCCA's art cinema is cultivated in a larger conceptualisation of the field of art more overtly than earlier examples but is also involved in disseminating (cosmopolitan) cultural values, cultural communication, and education.

3.2.2 Strategies and Practices of Art Cinema Exhibitors

While visiting the screening spaces of art cinema, I was impressed by the strategies and practices developed by the cinema exhibitors. Having been to many mainstream cinemas in different cities in China, I found that such cinemas represent homogeneous and monolithic values not only in terms of their film programming but also in appearance,

decor, and even the packaging of their popcorn. In contrast, the art cinematic spaces share distinctive atmospheres with their audiences and offer different types of film-going experiences. Immersed in the screening context of art cinema, I felt myself not being treated as part of a mass, herded into a spacious auditorium and urged to consume food stuffs that can generate more profit for cinema venues than ticket sales, but as an individual who is not a message receiver but a participant. The distinctive atmosphere that the art cinemas offered appeared to encourage a refreshing relationship between me as film viewer and the cinema itself. Of course, this does not constitute empirical evidence – I have just placed myself very firmly as part of the ‘habitus’ of art film culture as Bourdieu would characterise it. The evidence applied in this section demonstrates that the construction of a distinct cinema atmosphere is a key tactic of relationship building, in which the art cinema institutions engage in promoting their interpretations of art cinema for targeted audiences. Drawing upon the previous discussion, I would point to three ways these strategies imply the attachment of certain ideals in relation to cinema-going.

3.2.2.1 National-Cultural Connection

As official cultural institutions, the CFA art cinema and The Institut Francais offer special cultural connections for their audiences. Above all, the decor of the cinemas is associated with national-cultural elements. Opened in 1995, the CFA art cinema illustrates a conventional style of national cinema theatre presentation: from the main ticket lobby, to handrails, to the expansive auditorium, primarily coloured in red and decorated with traditional cultural elements, such as red pillars, engraved wooden screens, gold Chinese symbols. With a capacity of 927 red sofa seats, the CFA art cinema has the largest screen and best sound equipment ahead of all other art cinemas in China (Fu, 2009: 39). Sat in the super comfortable and spacious seats, enjoying the splendid visual and surround sound effect of Chinese film *Lu Bian Ye Can* (*Kaili Blues*, Bi Gan, 2015, China), audiences are offered an exclusive filmic experience. *Lu Bian Ye Can*, seen as one of the most successful Chinese indies in recent years, is a film essay featuring long takes and tracking shots. Xiaojia, recently graduated from one of the top film schools in America, shared her experience of *Kaili Blues*:

I didn't like Chinese independent films when I was studying in the US. The first time I watched *Kaili Blues* was on my laptop, however, the film was too slow and rambling,

I could not focus, and I gave up halfway. Then, after my graduation, I came back to Beijing and watched it at the CFA: it made me think, the relationship between people, between people and the local environment – it suddenly lit up my hope and enthusiasm for independent Chinese film. [my translation] (Xiaojia, interview with author, 13 February 2017)



Figure 9. Ticket lobby of the CFA art cinema.



Figure 10. The decorations of the CFA art cinema.

Similarly, The Institut Francais also contributes to promoting cultural traditions and relations for its Chinese audiences. The lobby is designed as a gallery, which features a library, contemporary paintings by French and Chinese artists, and a café. An array of small white lights and sporadic blue illuminations sparkle in the ceiling and adorn the entire lobby in the French national colours of red, white and blue. The small and comfy cinema has dark blue sofa seats surrounded by walls mainly painted blue, white and light rusty red. In other words, here, the elements of the French national culture envelop the subjects of art and cinema. Although sometimes the Institut Francais also screens non-French films, in such settings audiences not watching French films would not lose contact with the culture.



Figure 11. Art gallery of the Institut Français.



Figure 12. Cinema room of the Institut Français.

3.2.2.2 Public Discourse Construction and Interpersonal Interactions

The UCCA art cinema and the Goethe-Institut both contribute to constructing an arena of mutual communication and free engagement. The UCCA art cinema is placed in an empty factory-like building, adjoining the UCCA main gathering space, which contains a gallery, library, shop, and café. As mentioned before, as well as art film exhibition, UCCA also holds discussions and workshops in its art cinema. Therefore, it resembles more a conference room for idea sharing than an art cinema as a screening place. In this respect, the Goethe-Institut illustrates a more paradigmatic presentation. Although the Goethe-Institut and The Institut Francais were discussed previously in terms of their functions as foreign cultural institutes with a high focus on national cultural promotion, they each offer different atmospheres. Adopted an architectural structure with typical ‘severe, geometric and undecorated’ Bauhaus style (Chilvers, 2009: 47), the Goethe-Institut features an open space philosophy that combines the former industrial building with modern environment. Compared with the gallery-like Institut Francais, the Goethe-Institut seems inspired by a public square or forum where everyone can speak. The cinema is not enclosed in a completely dark room but sited in a semi-open arena, with transparent windows on each side of the cinema screen, through which people could take in the institute’s office. Everyone walking in the institute can join the screening, however, when the seating area is full, late arrivals have to stand at the sides. In contrast with others, this cinema offers a more intimate (but less comfortable) setting: a few front rows of simple chairs and stair seats with cushions at the back. The environment of the cinema encourages people to congregate and interact with others without any barriers, creating an open forum atmosphere.



Figure 13. Discussion was held after the screening of four Nordic shorts in the UCCA art cinema.



Figure 14. The Goethe-Institut art cinema is showing *The Marriage of Maria Braun* by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1979.

3.2.2.3 Cinephile Identification

Finally, the commercial arthouse BC-MOMA is apt to create a superior film community. As discussed before, the BC-MOMA creates a string of businesses in relation to art film, including the Kubrick bookshop, café and film library. Art film posters can be seen everywhere in this three-storey building; every visitor is enveloped by art film signifiers. In such a cinephiliac atmosphere, it has become a sacred space for Chinese film lovers, surrounded by icons to worship – or to buy, of course. Selling film books, posters, even T-shirts, the arthouse encourages audiences to purchase the goods which serve as a sort of cinephile identification, creating a sacred environment. The notion of cinephile identification seems to be quite significant for promoting a sense of exclusivity and belonging at the arthouse.



Figure 15. Inner look of the BC-MOMA.

3.2.3 Locations

While staying in Beijing, I was living in the upper North West in Haidian District, surrounded by many universities. It took me an average of 1.5 hours by public transport to arrive at the art cinemas that I intended to visit. The art cinemas seemed randomly scattered around the city (see Figure 14). In fact, the physical locations closely corresponded with the characteristics of the cinema, and more importantly suggest a direction in which art cinemas in China are heading.

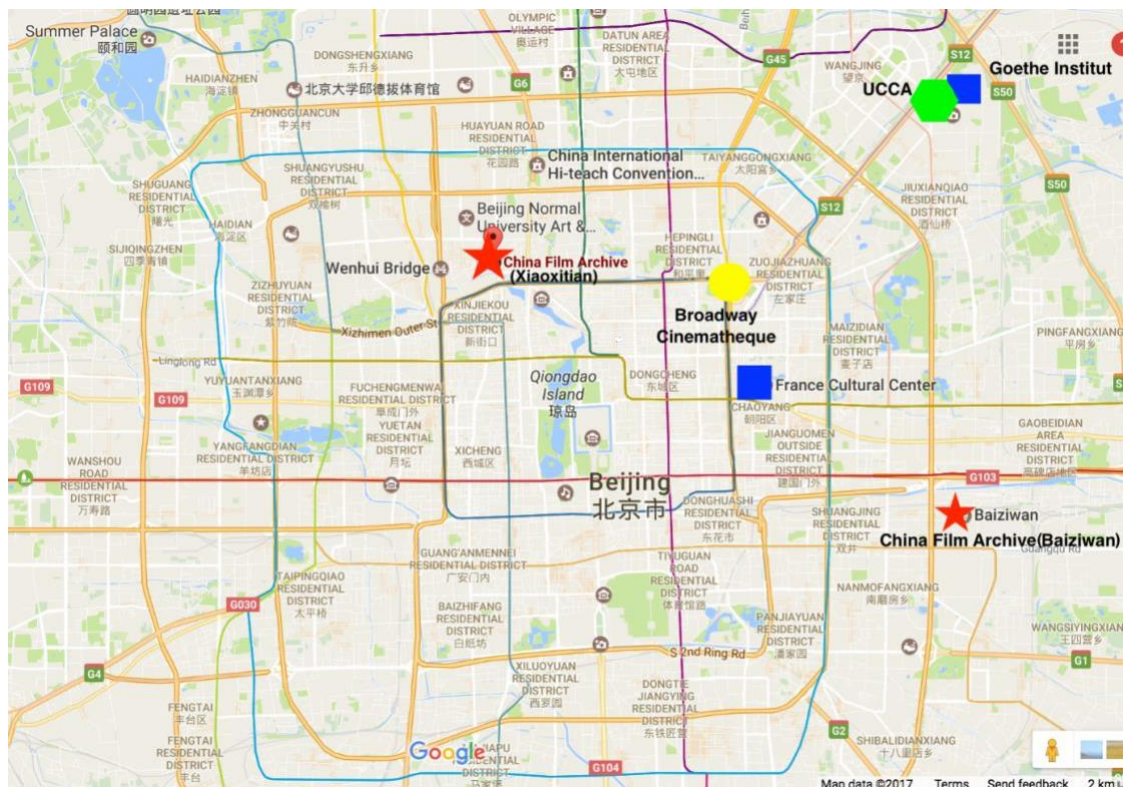


Figure 16. The locations of art cinema institutions in Beijing.²⁵

The CFA art cinema has two branches. The main one already discussed in this section is located in Xiaoxitian. Founded in 1995, this art cinema is sited next to the main building of the CFA in Haidian District, North West Beijing. Haidian District is commonly perceived as the core area for higher education in the country. Based in this locale, it is close to the bulk of top universities whose students and staff may form a core audience for art cinema. Certainly, as the leading art cinema with the best facilities and resources, it attracts film lovers from all over the city. Moreover, as the CFA is the national centre

²⁵ The road network shown here is using Google Maps (Google, 2017).

for film archiving, it is also adjacent to other governmental (film-related) institutions, including the National Archives Administration, the Film Bureau, Beijing Film Studio, China Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio, and Beijing Film Academy. It is worth noting that the academic and national institutions in the area were already established before the reform era.



Figure 17. China Film Archive and its art cinema (the lower building) in Xiaoxitian.

The locale of the new branch in *Baiziwan* is in stark contrast to Xiaoxitian. Set up in 2014, the branch is based in the newly-developing community for cultural and creative industries in Chaoyang District, South East Beijing. Chaoyang District is the largest and most modern district in Beijing, with a stronger focus on developing cultural and creative industries, and international communications. This cinema is adjoined to the Beijing Central Business Centre (CBD) which is not only predominantly a financial and business centre but also embraces more than 1,800 domestic and international media corporations and institutions, including the new buildings of China Central Television, Beijing Television, and BBC Chinese.²⁶ In recent years, small media companies and film studios have also tended to locate themselves in this area. Therefore, in recent times *Baiziwan* and other areas nearby have been gradually developed into fashionably populated communities to attract more people to work around the CBD, though they were relatively less-developed areas just a few years ago. It appears that the patrons of this new CFA art cinema are very likely composed of local people involved in the cultural and creative industries.

Furthermore, the BC-MOMA and The Institut Francais are both located near *Sanlitun*, in the heart of Chaoyang District. *Sanlitun* is the most fashionable destination for shopping, dining and entertainment in Beijing, especially known for its night life. Surrounded by a variety of embassies and international corporations, it is popular among both locals and expatriates. Although close to *Sanlitun*, the BC-MOMA and the Institut Francais lie in different areas. The BC-MOMA is enclosed by blocks of modern apartments where upper-middle-class locals and expatriates chiefly live, while The Institut Francais is in a busier neighbourhood with a cluster of restaurants (Western restaurants particularly), pubs, and night clubs. Referring to the characteristics of the cinemas discussed previously may explain why they are sited differently. First, the BC-MOMA, the pioneering art cinema in China, focuses on representing its elitist position. For this reason, it seems to deliberately distance itself from the crowd but is close to its elite people. Second, the purpose of the Institut Francais is to promote French national culture, which means that it is open to everyone who is interested in knowing about France, including the language,

²⁶ See the official web page of the CBD: <http://www.bjcbd.gov.cn/NewsDetail.aspx?id=10675> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

art, and cinema. It also appeals to the kind of population in the *Sanlitun* area: elites and fashionable younger people who are willing to embrace different cultures – in other words, cosmopolitans.



Figure 18. Modernist architectural style of the BC-MOMA.

Finally, the Goethe-Institut and UCCA chose to open in the 798 Art Zone (or, Dashanzi Art Cluster), also part of Chaoyang District but located in a fringe suburban area called Jiuxianqiao. The 798 Art Zone comprises a complex of decommissioned military factory buildings built with the assistance of East Germany in the 1950s. For this reason, the complex still keeps its original Bauhaus look. The development of the 798 Art Zone

began in 2001 – now there are more than 500 art galleries, studios, independent theatres, and foreign cultural institutes.²⁷ Based in 798, the Goethe-Institut and UCCA receive an influx of visitors from around the world. The visitors are primarily artists, art-lovers, or at least curious about art. UCCA, as the leading art organisation and iconic site of 798, certainly receives lots of visitors with a special passion for art. For the Goethe-Institut, its visitors are not only interested in art in general but also German art and culture in particular. Moreover, as with Jiuxianqiao, 798’s location is remote from central Beijing. In most cases, people visiting 798 have to make a long journey (with no direct underground station nearby). Thus, it is not easy for both the Goethe-Institut and UCCA to maintain regular patrons of their art cinema exhibitions. Putatively, the people who visit the cinema exhibitions regularly may be divided into two groups: artists and personnel working in 798; and people who are really keen on art (and) cinema.



Figure 19. Based in a former factory, UCCA is a significant landmark of 798 Art Zone.

²⁷ See the official webpage of 798 Art Zone: <http://798.bjchy.gov.cn/sub/viewDetail/266759/11342.htm> (Accessed: 20 March 2017).

Based on the discussion above, it is not difficult to find that, except for the CFA art cinema (Xiaoxitian), other art cinema venues are all located in emerging culture-and-art-based areas. These areas – *Baiziwang*, *Sanlitun*, and the 798 Art Zone – all boomed after the reform era began and progressed and the areas particularly embrace and represent the idea of ‘opening’. Although the CFA art cinema (Xiaoxitian) still serves as the most influential art cinema with the best facilities in the country, the centre of film art in Beijing has been shifting eastwards, from the traditional and political centre dominated by governmental and academic institutions to the new one driven by contemporary art and cosmopolitan culture. These two new elements together have brought new vitality to the progress of art cinema in China.

Ostensibly, arthouse cinemas in China have experienced a dynamic development. However, it is worth noting again that the patterns elaborated above are only located in Beijing, the capital city, a mega-city whose political networks of power draw different sectors of production to it – whether desired or not, and perhaps in ways that are not in the interest of other locations of cultural history and the cultural industry in China that may also be or should seem to be ‘natural’ or historically established locations of culture industries. I also conducted observations and interviews in Shanghai and Changchun, the latter a relatively smaller but provincial capital city in north-east China. Intriguingly, some interviewees – exhibition and festival programmers – were bitter about the exclusiveness of formal art cinema venues in Beijing, typically saying such things as, ‘We are not like Beijing. They have the CFA, loads of collections and the support from the authorities; we can only rely on ourselves’ [my translation] (Xu, interview with author, 22 November 2016). On the other hand, in Beijing, the impact of the art cinemas is only limited to certain groups. Except for film students, specialists and film lovers living nearby, people do not go to art cinemas regularly. In 2004, the China National Film Museum conducted a survey of the Beijing art cinema audience. The results illustrate that only 20.1% of Beijing art film viewers had ever visited an art cinema regularly, while 25.5% watched art films on DVDs, and 84.6% principally did so via the internet. ‘It is too far to travel to the east, even to the CFA, costing me at least half an hour. It is not worth it, just to see one film,’ said Don, 26, a postgraduate student who self-identified as a film-lover: ‘I would rather stay in my room, lie around and watch more films on the internet’. Don’s case is not unusual. The economic reforms brought about not only continuous changes in the Chinese film industry, and the inequalities of (cinema) resources and geographical limitations, but also the rise of informality – piracy – which

focuses more on individual's demands and frees one from having to experience cinema in a physical space. Even without piracy or a person's knowledge of 'where to go on the internet' to find films, the fast developing and attendant culture of new media technologies that the entire Chinese population, or at least the urban populations, have embraced as much or if not more than anywhere else in the world, encourages an often physically isolated or isolating mode of accessing film as part of the so-called 'post-cinema' condition.

4. ‘Independent’ Exhibitors: Mediating between Underground and Publicity

The development of independent exhibition in China is split between two overlapping but contrastive modes. One is the festival screening, primarily an institutional mechanism for showcasing and promoting low-budget independent films. Yet in China anything called a ‘film festival’ (*dianying jie* 电影节) falls into the remit of the authorities who oversee cinema. Even though independent film festivals often identify themselves as ‘*dianying zhan*’ 电影展 (film exhibitions) to distinguish that they are ‘not officially registered’ (Berry, 2009b; 2017), they have struggled to sustain the exhibitions under the stringent political and economic pressures. Since the launching of the first Chinese independent film festival the First Unrestricted New Image Festival in Beijing in 2001, independent film festivals held in a variety of cities including Beijing, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Kunming and Nanjing, Shanghai (Zhang, 2007c; Nornes, 2009; Svensson, 2012a; Robinson and Chio, 2013; Zhang and Zito, 2015; Bao, 2017; Lichaa, 2017; Yu and Wu, 2017; Nakajima, 2019). They have profoundly established ‘an alternative public sphere in a restricted social environment’ (Yu and Wu, 2017: 171), effectively facilitating communication and interaction in the independent film circle. Despite continued attempts to move screenings to secret venues, a number of major independent film festivals, such as BIFF, CIFF and YunFest, have been forced to shut down by the authorities in recent years (Yu and Wu, 2017). Cine-club screening, by contrast, permeates in quotidian spaces from private residences to municipal libraries, bookshops, university campuses, art galleries, and even night clubs. The cine-clubs, and the parallel emergence and diversification of independent screening sites in which these events are conducted have contributed to nurturing an appreciation of art films, and other alternative fare for wider audiences and to reviving China’s cinephile culture (Zhang, 2007c). The first cine-club, ‘101 Film Studio’, was formed in 1996 in Shanghai, mainly by a group of film enthusiasts (Zhang, 2007c; Zhang, 2011; Xu, 2016). The participants began their screening event in a private residence where they watched *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*, François Truffaut, 1959, France) without subtitles, and the French-subtitled *Kagemusha* (*Shadow Warrior*, Akira Kurosawa, 1980, Japan and USA) for the first time (Xu, 2016). In the past

two decades, a number of such cine-clubs and screening organisations have emerged like 101 Film Studio, growing in size and expanding geographically across the country, notably Shijianshe (Practice Society) and Fanhall Studio in Beijing, *Yuanyinghui* (The Utheque Organisation) in Shenzhen, *houchuang kan dianying* (Rear Window Film Appreciation Club), CNEC (Chinese Next and See Next), *Piaochong yingxiang* (Pure Movies) (Zhang, 2007c; Zhang, 2011; Gao, 2015; Zhang and Zito, 2015; Tong, 2020). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, cine-clubs serves as an effective pathway for independent films and documentaries to gain public exposure for independent films (Nakajima, 2006). Cine-club screenings, coupled with the boom of VCD and DVD, have helped cultivate new generation of cinephiles, filmmakers, screenwriters, critics, curators (Li, 2012; Gao, 2015).

The erratic trajectory of independent screening events coincided with a series of structural changes in the film industry in the 1990s. As discussed previously, the marketization of the film system since 1993 brought in the share-based distribution mode that overtly plays up the privilege of commercial mainstream cinema. Alienated by the authorities, films offering an alternative to officially endorsed values are pushed further to the edges. Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, piracy has sown an appreciation of the art of film among wider audiences and facilitated their personal habits of small screen consumption. Cine-clubs have constituted new spaces in which alternative voices and values that are not accommodated within the commercial sector or rejected in official discourse can be circulated and discussed in public or semi-public settings.

In China, such viewing scene is often called ‘independent exhibition’ (*duli fangying* 独立放映). Defining ‘independence’ is one of the discernible tasks in studying contemporary Chinese cinema. As discussed in the literature review, Chinese independent cinema has a great deal to do with exploring an alternative to political and bureaucratic film institutions in the post-socialist context. It is argued that, the development of art cinema culture in China since the turn of the new century takes up cinephilia and the pluralistic property of Chinese independent cinema as its core, but not necessarily involved in subversive practices against the authorities. Here, the notion of ‘independent exhibition’ within the field of art cinema plays into the tradition of the independent cinema culture, that strives for the plural of values and separation from the constraints of state control and censorship, and at the same time reminds us that grassroots moving-image practices also play a part in enhancing alternative film’s publicness by

making these films more accessible than the authority would allow. Drawing upon Hansen's (1991) seminal studies of early cinema spectatorship in the USA, Ingawanij sees the possibility of configuring 'a shared public horizon that recognises experiences elsewhere denied' (2012: 9) via viewing practices in Southeast Asian. She writes:

Cinema as the public space for rehearsing desired futures, disinterring forgotten ones, and for projecting social collectivities to come – no doubt plays a large part in energizing the present organisation of film screening and filmmaking events by independent groups. (2012: 9)

Ingawanij's premise resonates with a similar situation in China. With the control of Party-state apparatus, the publicness of cinema is enriched in acts of autonomous viewing practices in collective spaces and situations. As Berry argues in *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, the cinema becomes a form of 'social institution' that 'opens up lines of flight within that formation does not necessarily lead towards asignification but towards the possibility of conceiving of and discursively articulating difference' (2004: 20). Here the articulation of difference and heterogeneity is discursive in the sense that the independent cinematic practices facilitate the emergence of variant opinions and ideas as well as the formation of discriminating audiences, in contrast to that acted upon by dominant power structures. Robinson and Chio (2013), in their research of Yunfest (an independent film festival based in Kunming), argue that the film event makes a space for the creation of discursive post-socialist publics where individual subjective transformations are stimulated, social imaginary is enacted, and the boundary between personal and communal experience is re-established and re-examined. Robinson and Chio's case study points the way to a larger spectrum of an alternative viewing culture that has become an immensely fertile ground for crafting a post-socialist public culture.

A number of academic works surrounding independent screening practices in China have offered a glimpse into the process of making space for discussion of social subjects and political themes (for example, Nornes, 2009; Rhyne, 2011; Berry and Robinson *Eds.*, 2017), and many such studies are conducted within the context of film festivals, where multiple human actors congregate to conduct their activities at particular moments in time and space. Without denying the significance of studying film festivals in the field, my point at the outset is that without regular programmes of screenings film festivals cannot single-handedly contribute to the creation of a new art film viewing culture. Therefore, this chapter illustrates the importance of the variety of independent viewing groups and

organisations to understand art cinema and paves the way for the following consideration of the practices cultivated by the groups as important forces for defining art cinema culture in China.

Moreover, in order to host a ‘harmonious’ Beijing Olympics in 2008, increasing government interference pushed independent film festivals and forums further to the edges, away from accessible public locations (Lichaa, 2017). Ultimately, after receiving iterative warnings from the authorities while refusing to make concessions, major independent film festivals including the BIFF, CIFF and Yunfest, have all been shut down. Given the deterrent examples of the precedents, it is not surprising that the existence of independent exhibition is fundamentally jeopardised by the state’s repressive power. As discussed in the literature review, one of the discernible inquiries around Chinese independent cinema is how filmmakers and artists strive to produce their works outside the Party state structure of production funding, distribution and exhibition, by virtue of domestic private capital and foreign institutions and transnational market forces (Berry, 2006). Pickowicz and Zhang propose that Chinese independent cinema has shifted ‘away from “underground” and toward semi-independence or “in dependence”’ (2006: vii). From ‘independence’ to ‘in dependence’, the way Pickowicz and Zhang use these terms signifies the condition whereby Chinese independent cinema has switched its key concern from ‘independence’ from the Chinese state’s oligopolistic control to co-optation with the commingling of commercial entities and institutional forces in a post-socialist Chinese context. In other words, Chinese independent cinema cannot fully evade from the state to be financially and institutionally independent, but it is ‘in dependence’ on the state and the network of powers that have formed in the country (Zhang and Zito, 2015: 21). Reflecting on this issue, recent scholarly works on Chinese independent film and contemporary art exhibition sites provide valuable insights of ‘in-dependency’ on the matrix of power relations embedded in the spatial context and ‘interdependency’ (Zhang and Zito, 2015: 21) among filmmakers, writers, distributors, exhibitors and audiences (for example, Nakajima, 2006; 2010; Robinson and Chio, 2013; Bao, 2017; Lichaa, 2017; Yu and Wu, 2017; Welland, 2018).

Taking the cue from the above scholarship, it becomes necessary to examine how the idea of ‘in-dependence’ is pronounced in a variety of art cinema screening spaces. The spaces are indicative of more than situations of viewing in terms of eschewing the official discourse; they represent the dialectical tension between ‘independence’ and

‘dependence’, between private and communal spheres. While this would seem to indicate one instance where the ‘dialectics of independence’ (Ingawanij, 2012: 1), as well as the multiple factors devoted to it, can play a part in the making of a Chinese alternative viewing culture, it is also crucial to pay attention to how the organisers themselves are adapting their understanding of the visibility and publicity of independent events, or how the intermediaries act in securing their autonomy of ‘independent’ exhibition as a sphere of public discourse – mediating and cementing the links between makers and consumers, and finding a combination or compromise between art house/public aspirations, political co-optation and economic necessity.

Each overarching frame proposed below therefore highlights a key respect of independent exhibition in contemporary China, whose combination with one another characterises the post-socialist art film viewing culture. Section one maps out the variegated locations of independent exhibition. Section two addresses how the exhibitors build contacts with audiences to create unique publics in each space. Section three tackles the organisers’ strategies and demands of negotiating with government interference.

4.1 Dispersed Exhibition Spaces and the Representations of ‘In-dependence’

In the beginning years of independent exhibition, we were like ‘*menglong shiren*’ [朦胧诗人, misty poets] – that kind of underground culture. Then, we bunched up to form a festival, a more orderly and efficient way to expand the influence. Now, again, we can only take the sporadic, loose, individual-organised mode to keep the diffusion on going. It is a turning back! [my translation] (Lewis, interview with author, 23 July 2018)

In the history of contemporary Chinese literature, ‘misty poet’ refers to a poetry generation (mainly constituted by send-down youth) evolved from the Cultural Revolution era that inwardly reacted against the state repression on art by creating a new type of poetry different from the Maoist revolutionary values (Huang, 2007): ‘The Night has given me dark eyes. But I use them to look for light’ (Gu, 1979) is one of the imperishable misty poetries lines. In drawing the analogy to misty poets, Lewis attempted

to enunciate the predicament of independent exhibition in its earlier age, a wispy and fragmentary mode of activities lying low to avoid detection. However, what is different from the present conjuncture is that, after the Cultural Revolution, many misty poets and their innovative work became endorsed and accepted; while today independent exhibitors like Lewis still have concerns about ‘being underground again’ under repressive state forces. Certainly, Lewis is not alone among screening group organisers in perceiving the tendency of the segmentation and diversification of independent screening spaces. Given the volatile political climate today, ‘the sporadic, loose, individual-organised mode’ serves the purpose of ensuring autonomy and political survival, preventing events from being intervened in by the authority. ‘It is not excessive to say that the situation today is just like *‘fengsheng heli’* [风声鹤唳, the sound of the wind and the cry of the crane].²⁸ A small group like us, without big scale and influence, is not going to catch the attention of some Party’s eyes,’ said Galaxy, co-organiser of Sound & Sense, a screening group based in Shengzhen [my translation] (Galaxy, interview with author, 13 September 2017).

Yet today’s independent organisers are also confronting a different situation from what the Maoist poets and artists faced in the sense of the current post-socialist environment. Losing faith in socialism, China now functions in a context dominated by a variety of political, economic, and cultural forces. Despite the volatile political climate, the post-socialist condition brings certain opportunities (for example, creative and cultural policy) which can be usefully explored in relation to screening location. Independent exhibitors as cultural intermediaries utilises the opportunities for political and economic sustainability and thereby complement their configuration of the alternative mode of exhibition. In the following part, I present five main ramifications of independent screening locations. Each form derives in part from its exhibition spaces within spatial contexts, while simultaneously implying the organisers’ understanding of independent exhibition spaces as well as their relations with the state and the market as a part of the art cinema culture.

4.1.1 Artist Colony

²⁸ The Chinese idiom refers to being jittery at the slightest sound.

At the time, everyone was passionate. Mr. Li has great influence, many friends of his came to support us. The events, we'd never wanted to make it luxurious and glossy, but we are all satisfied. We tried our best to make it happen. Every year, we had very limited funding, but money was not a big issue – it is probably the most budget film festival in the universe. Because of the grassroots mode, we didn't charge any fees. Sometimes we even provided food and snacks, even a BBQ. Because the screening place was remote from the city centre, not convenient for some audiences, we used to arrange two shuttle buses at the nearest subway station. Very utopian! [my translation] (Lewis, interview with author, 23 July 2018)

In his recollection of conducting BIFF events, Lewis sets the 'utopian' scene by highlighting the importance of collective enthusiasm and social networks, then puts economic aspirations aside as they are squarely in opposition to the 'grassroots' (independent) ethos. Although BIFF had been stopped by the authorities in 2015 due to its 'bold' representation of political themes and social issues, Lewis persists in his uncompromising commitment to such 'perfect' independence by contributing to 'a community of independent practitioners', both real and imagined.

As the event organiser of Li Xianting's Film Fund, Lewis conducted film screening events in the underground cinema of the Film Fund in Songzhuang. Songzhuang is a remote outback village outside of Beijing, best known for its artist colony where the famous art critic Li Xianting and other modernist artists live. The viewing and discussion events are sustained by Li Xianting himself, while occasionally receiving funding from other artists. The reputation of Li Xianting and other artists' stamps of financial and practical support gave great credibility and cultural capital to the film events. With the consent of independent filmmakers, the Film Fund has showcased a great number of Chinese independent films, including *Yan Mo (Before the Flood)*, Li Fanyi and Yan Yu, 2005, China), *Qing Nian (Youth)*, Geng Jun, 2008, China), *Tian Jiang (Falling from the Sky)*, Zhang Zanbo, 2009, China), *Gu Nai Nai (Madame)*, Qiu Jiongjiong, 2010, China), *Han Jia (Winter Vacation)*, Li Hongqi, 2010, China), *Tang Huang You Di Fu (Emperor Visits the Hell)*, Li Luo, 2012, China and Canada), and *Bei Xi Mo Shou (Behemoth)*, Zhao Liang, 2015, China and France) (Lewis, interview with author, 23 July 2018). The Film Fund favours and nurtures a social space for dialogue between cultural intellectuals, or more specifically, between modernist artists and independent cinema practitioners, via domestic (and sometimes international) links to the film events.



Figure 20. Li Xianting's Film Fund and its bolted door in Songzhuang, Beijing.

4.1.2 Public Institutions within Official Cultural Infrastructure

In contrast, many screening groups and organisations resort to official institutions, such as university campuses, public libraries, museums, and commercial cinemas to de-marginalise art and independent film in public recognition. As Yanbin, former curator of *Xianfeng Guangmang Yishu Yingzhan* (Screen-out Art Film Exhibition), put it:

Every year there are at least 15 to 20 very well-made Chinese art films coming out, but nobody knows about them, because cinema theatres do not give them the chance to meet the audiences. So, we only used normal cinema theatres. The films were made for cinema theatre. There's no need to showcase them in other places. People can definitely feel the difference. [my translation] (Yanbin, interview with author, 15 June 2017)

Showing films in the scope of official institution properties, screening events are subject to state regulation. Screen-out Art Film Exhibition only circulated Chinese art films that

had already passed censorship and received a “Film Public Screening Permit” (the so-called “dragon seal”) including *Mama* (Zhang Yuan, 1990, China), *Wu Shan Yun Yu* (*Rain Clouds over Wushan*, Zhang Ming, 1995, China), *Jing Zhe* (*The Story of Ermei*, Wang Quan’an, 2004, China), *Xun Zhao Zhi Mei Geng Deng* (*The Search*, Pema Tseden, 2009, China), *Dbus lam gyi nyi ma* (*The Sun Beaten Path*, Sonthar Gyal, 2011, China), and *Gao Su Ta Men, Wo Cheng Bai He Qu Le* (*Fly With The Crane*, Li Ruijun, 2012, China), and had invited filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Zhang Yuan to discussions with audiences. Yanbin’s contribution to this project is in fact part of her job as an employee of the major sponsor *Southern Weekend*, a Guangzhou-based mainstream liberal newspaper famous for its promotion of values of ‘justice, conscience, compassion, rationality’ [my translation].²⁹ *Southern Weekend* has played an profound role in facilitating public democratic debate, liberal intellectual commentary, and civic engagement (Svensson, 2012b). Its dual roles of being quality mainstream press and of being representative of liberal intellectuals transformed cinemas and the exhibition space, creating both a popular and intellectual interface and attracting viewers from different social and cultural classes.

Similarly, with the support of a trendy film journal, 101 Film Studio was allowed to host screening and discussion events in public libraries and cinemas. Screenings included a Fellini film series, *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, Jacques Demy, 1964, France and West Germany), and *Ta’m e guilass* (*Taste of Cherry*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1997, Iran and France) and drew great media and public attention. Simultaneously, 101 Film Studio also collaborated with official film festival Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF), for example, assisting with audience surveys and volunteer recruitment (Xu, 2016). The acknowledgment from both ordinary audiences and the government authority gave great credibility and positive reputation to this nongovernment group, as well as the organisers themselves. Today, the core organiser Xu has become a famous critic and curator involved in multiple projects endorsed by the Shanghai government, especially SIFF and Shanghai Art Film Federation, which increasingly makes 101 Film Studio’s activities part of the official film events. Therefore, it becomes possible to explain why 101 Film Studio rarely faced government inference,

²⁹ See ‘About us’ in *Southern Weekend* official website. <http://www.infzm.com/about> (Accessed: 20 October 2020).

while other contemporaneous screening groups (for example, Beijing Film Practice Society, Guangzhou U-theque Organisation) were condemned as ‘unlawful assemblies’ and forced to shut down.

Another remarkable site within the official sector is the university campus. In the past two decades, there have emerged numerous university film societies and non-profit organisations devoted to promote independent films and documentaries through university campuses, for example, Film Class at Shanghai Normal University (FilmatSHNU), Sliding Doors Association at Sun Yat-sen University, CNEX Campus Tour, and *Piaochong yingxiang* (Pure Movies). Pure Movies, for example, from May 2012 to December 2018, have exhibited 101 titles of Chinese-language documentaries over 896 screening events, at 39 university campuses in 10 different cities in China.³⁰ However, in recent years, university administration began imposing a tighter constraint of campus screening space. Especially since the implementation of *Dianying chanye cujinfa* (Film Industry Promotion Law) in 2016, exhibitionary activities organised by individuals and private organisations have faced with greater challenges of the exhibition space with restrictions imposed by the authorities.³¹ As Rui, core committee of Sliding Doors Association film Society at Sun Yat-sen University for over ten years, said:

The university has been increasingly obstructive. They want to transmit Societies to an adolescent second-class model. Censorship [in university] becomes more and more stringent. It used to be perfunctory in the earlier age. When I first started taking part in the Society [in 2006], they only requested the film screening list. Then it became the list plus short descriptions for each title. In recent years, apart from these, they also check out the films [and their comments] on Douban. Sometimes they even quickly go through the film files to see if there are any inappropriate contents. [my translation] (Rui, interview with author, 13 June 2017)

³⁰ See the description of Pure Movies’ in its official site at *Douban* : <https://site.douban.com/177837/room/2069615/> (Accessed : 20 October 2020).

³¹ See full detail of the Film Industry Promotion Law in the official website of The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China: http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/xinwen/2016-11/07/content_2001625.htm (Accessed : 20 October 2020).

By the time of our conversation, Sliding Doors Association had sought to switch its main screening space from the university classroom to external spaces. Indeed, university rigorous regulation to a large extent compelled the film Society to seek resources and opportunities outside of the campus where it was originally founded. However, according to Rui, what is at stake in furtherance of the film Society is that of ‘market’ and ‘promotion’ (Rui, interview with author, 13 June 2017). In order to expand its market beyond the circle of university students, the film Society has sought to collaborate with a variety of organisations (both commercial and non-for-profit) and film clubs such as D-Doc and Breathless Film Club (which I will address in the next sector).

4.1.3 Cultural and Creative Industrial Clusters

A number of the exhibition spaces I visited were located in a state-supported cultural and creative industrial cluster. In 2006 the Party leadership brought the notion of ‘cultural creative industry’ 文化创意产业 (*wenhua chuangyi chanye*) into mainstream discourse to accelerate ‘the economy focused on extending and exploiting symbolic cultural products’ (Keane, 2007: 4) as a part of the country’s ‘soft power’. Today, an increasing number of cultural and creative industrial clusters have been established in urban spaces, most of which have been transformed from disused factories.

Looking at the street sign of a cultural and creative industrial cluster, Galaxy smiled grimly: ‘Now the clusters are everywhere, like a gesture that shows laid-off workers get re-employed’ (interview with author, 13 September 2017) [my translation]. ‘Laid-off’ was a popular term during the reform age in reference to those who were forced to leave state employment, while the government encouraged unemployed workers to find new opportunities in the private sector. Galaxy’s comment about cultural and creative industrial clusters as a resolution for unemployment in a post-socialist policy context is suggestive of its attribute that links up ‘state and market sectors around national efforts to remake media, technology, and the arts’ (Neves, 2011: 28) in urban spaces. Moreover, the large-scale social restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s saw increasing collusion of private real estates and government administration in order to attain market-driven goal as well as to assert the state’s legitimacy (Abramson, 2008). In *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art*, Sasha Su-Ling Welland (2018) demonstrates how contemporary art exhibition spaces represent the nested relationship of state-led urban planning, privatized real estate, and art. With state urban renewal

initiatives coincided with a commodity housing regime, real estate profession incorporate art galleries and cultural centres into their plans as part of the commodity apartment enterprise (Welland, 2018: 86). In other words, real estate developers see the promotion of art and cosmopolitan culture as an effective marketing strategy to attract potential middle-class homebuyers.

The art cinema exhibition spaces within the cultural and creative industrial cluster therefore illuminate the politics of the film events in two aspects. First, state-supported initiatives to accelerate creativity provide opportunities for individuals who wish to create art cinema public programming. Here, the spatial practices unites the organiser's will to present an appreciation of art film in public and the state's ambition to accelerate creativity and cultural industry in relation to national economic growth. An illuminating example is the 'Heaviness and Lightness' art film exhibition series in OCT-LOFT, a subsidiary cluster set up by Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) group, one of the largest real estate developers in China that is also involved in tourism and electronics manufacturing businesses. The exhibition series occurred 2–4 times a year, having showcased global art films such as *Moe no suzaku* (*Suzaku*, Naomi Kawase, 1997, Japan) and *La misma luna* (*Under the Same Moon*, Patricia Riggen, 2007, Mexico and USA), to marginal Chinese independent film and documentaries like *Chai Guan* (*Cop Shop*, Zhou Hao, 2010, China), *Chi* (*Mr. Zhang Believes*, Qiu Jiongjiong, 2015) and *Shi Ren Chu Chai Le* (*Poet on a Business Trip*, Ju Anqi, 2015, China), although most of the films do not hold an official certification for public exhibition in cinemas. The exhibitor, Lei, worked for OCT-LOFT as a PR responsible for media promotion and event curation. To work at OCT, Lei gave up his four-year contribution to a non-profit organisation devoted to independent documentary tours of university campuses. 'Because it (OCT-LOFT) offered higher degree of autonomy,' said Lei,

OCT wants to increase the quality of its public culture to square with the housing price. Building this kind of public cultural space can let the additional value come true one day. It is certainly not a temporary thing, only long-term effort can really increase the value. OCT itself has the understanding and appreciation of culture and art. It provided me with funding and space, which I really appreciated. [my translation] (Lei, interview with author, 4 July 2017)

It is worth noting that, as one of the most powerful real estate development empires in China, OCT is also recognised as a state-owned key enterprise, a status within the

government hierarchy higher than that of the City of Shenzhen, a sub-provincial-level city (Sonn et al., 2017: 309). As a highly autonomous firm that ‘wields strong bargaining power over the local government when making planning decisions’ (Sonn et al., 2017: 309), OCT has been supportive of Lei’s planning and operation of culture-rich and artistic screening events as long as it benefits the reputation of the company.

The idea of converting symbolic capital into economic capital is not just invoked among state-supported initiatives. This leads us to the second point that independent viewing events which take place in this context are also shaped by the commercial ambitions of their sponsors who wish to leverage the symbolic prestige of art cinema. Here, exhibition space itself is more than a sphere for consuming films; it also contributes to brand-building and enhancing constituencies. For example, in 2017 William opened his bookshop ‘Breathless Film Club’ (anonymous, as required by the informant) with free-of-charge art film viewing events every Saturday night in Guangzhou Shuter Life Hall, in a creative industrial zone. Shuter Life Hall is a project operated by Guangdong Shuter Industry Co. that provides a space for promoting its ideas of creativity, design and modern lifestyle. While considering Breathless Film Club is already a prominent film company associated with art film subtitling, distribution and online amateur criticism with tens of thousands of subscribers on WeChat and Weibo, it is reasonable that Shuter Life Hall offers it a rent-free bookshop and screening space to increase traffic to and the reputation of the Hall. With most Breathless Film Club staff paying attention to the operation of their official WeChat account and other related business, there is no clerk around if there is no screening: the self-checkout bookshop is not intended to acquire profitable gain. It

appears that the value of the bookshop or screenings is to add symbolic lustre to the names of both brands and ultimately achieve economic benefits.



Figure 21. Inside Shuter Life Hall.



Figure 22. A staff member of Breathless Film Club is doing final testing prior to Korean filmmaker Hong Sangsoo's series screening.

Similarly, as one of the most influential independent cine clubs in South China, Cinexpress (*Miying Hui*, literally, cinephiles' club) is an affiliate of Shenzhen Cinephilia Culture Developments Ltd., located in a cluster specifically for the film industry. Cinexpress' operative model is different from the above in the sense that the screening events themselves are largely attributed to an economic imperative. Showing art films and/or related film education events every day, Cinexpress is a composition of professional cinema theatre (a leather 20-seat auditorium with Dolby Atmos sound, and VIP private hire room), café, library, and management office. Repeatedly calling their audiences 'our members', the organiser (manager) Hua identifies Cinexpress as 'a high-end art film club brand'. The ticket price can vary from 50 *yuan* to 100 *yuan* (if the screening is followed by a presentation by an expert speaker or special guest), which is even higher than a normal commercial cinema ticket. Paying a 500-*yuan* annual fee, members can receive not only concessional tickets and coffee but also a personalised screening experience, for example, through screening-on-demand and private viewing room hire.



Figure 23. The Lounge of Cinexpress.



Figure 27. The screening seats of Cinexpress.



Figure 28. Member-only activity rooms in Cinexpress.

Within the domain of the cultural and creative industrial cluster, the screening events also rely on official approval. Although government officials do not actually meddle in the exhibition programming, none of the organisers above have expressed willingness to deal with films associated with politically sensitive themes and social subjects. As Hua claimed,

We keep away from political stuff. We always do what the national film law prescribes. We do not deliberately advocate that stuff. It does not make sense to us. We love film, we do not make film into that stuff, so we'd love to get more legal copies to do so! [my translation] (Hua, interview with author, 17 June 2017)

Whilst political and social critique is toned down in these screening locations, the organisers also seek cooperation with government officials in terms of training and cultural activity. For example, Figure 30 shows that Cinexpress held a movie salon as an English learning and exchange forum in collaboration with the Futian Civilisation Office (a government agency responsible for promoting civilised standards and values), Shenzhen University and Shenzhen Translators Association – a huge poster board next to reception that no one coming to the cine club would miss attested to this fact. Ironically, most of Hua's exhibitions are based on his own piracy collection or online downloaded

sources, while no government or other force had ever interfered in the screening for this reason.



Figure 24. Large poster in Cinexpress.

4.1.4 Independent Venues for Other Forms of Arts

There also exist screening groups that tend to join forces with other forms of independent arts by localising the screening in their presentation spaces below the official radar, for example, in small art galleries and studios, live music venues, even in underground night clubs. This is apparently different from the spaces that belong to public institutions, and from those within the planned cultural and creative zone, whose location is normally accessible to the public. Most attendants at the indie arts' venues appear to have a personal preference for certain form of arts or previous connections to the space. A compelling example is Galaxy's experience of entering the world of art cinema. Galaxy used to work as a metro engineer who liked to play and listen to music in his spare time. His first encounter with art film was at the venue that he regularly went to for live music. As he recalled,

Because I listened to a lot of rock music, I knew the Western cultural stuff, the things their youth likes. My knowledge of film was from music magazines that introduced some film soundtracks, those that feature rock music, like *Lost Highway* [David Lynch, 1997, France and USA], *Trainspotting* [Danny Boyle, 1996, UK]. Then when finally watching it, I was like “wow”, this is really something! It is absolutely different from what film values I used to have. It reversed my understanding of film – filmmakers can also have different ways and forms to put across their views. [my translation] (Galaxy, interview with author, 6 August 2018)

The exhibition that inspired Galaxy was part of the Sound & Sense screening events programme by the exhibitor Fei. Today, Galaxy has become a freelance camera operator in independent documentary and co-organiser of Sound & Sense’s weekly screening events. Different to other groups who have their own regular exhibition venues, Sound & Sense has moved over from one space to another, it is not only a live music venue but also an independent bookshop and art studio. The aggregation of diverse spaces and scenes not only helps accumulate the number and cultural quality of audiences, hence the symbolic profits linked to the screening group and the exhibitors’ social and cultural standing, but also illustrates the connection between the field of art film and other sub-fields that comprise the field of art as a whole. As Fei said,

Screening by screening, we’ve built connections with thousands of audiences. After all these years, we’ve got so many [WeChat] groups. Our exhibition information is shared in music scene, in literature scene. We didn’t try very hard to promote the exhibition, it is a kind of spontaneous attraction for the attendees... Film lovers may be into music, music lovers are perhaps fond of literature, while book lovers can also be film lovers: they are all in one scene. Small groups can be linked up into a bigger one, there’s an interconnection between them. [my translation] (Fei, interview with author, 6 August 2018)

Whether independent music or literature, these fields are relatively more autonomous than that of independent cinema. ‘Music is abstract. The state does not pay much attention on it, unless the musician themselves states their political standing in public’ said Galaxy [my translation] (Galaxy, interview with author, 6 August 2018).



Figure 25. Fei and his team are preparing for a Sound & Sense's screening at the live music venue.



Figure 26. Sound & Sense's reception at the live music venue.

Evidently, in contrast to those that take place in cultural and creative enterprises, the screening initiatives that are supplementary to live music venues/nightclubs/independent bookshops appear to develop a higher degree of autonomy in terms of content selection. For example, Maojie, who organised daily screening events in her little bookshop, Ozu, made it clear that she would not be too wary about showcasing moving images with political subjects and social issues, as ‘we are just a small target. And it [watching these works] is a way that you observe and discover the true fact of life’ [my translation] (Maojie, interview with author, 20 June 2017). In fact, as a cine-club widely known by cinephiles in Shenzhen, Ozu Bookshop is never a ‘small target’: Maojie has received a few advance warnings about screening content and encountered plain-clothes officers at the site. Nevertheless, during the interview, Maojie expressed her intention to apply for a local government cultural and creative industrial grant to sustain this bookshop, as the incomes from screenings (which are free but attendance is mandatory for a 40 *yuan* refreshment, or 30 *yuan* for members) is barely enough to pay the bills as well as support herself.



Figure 27. Pre-screening of Japanese film *Kai* (Hideo Gosha, 1985, Japan) in Ozu Bookshop.

4.1.5 Residential Neighbourhoods and Personal Property

A greater degree of autonomy can be found in screening activities that take place in residential areas. These take on the character of the individual organisers, reflecting their cultural interests and preferences. It is highly representative of organisers' own cultural identity and habitual preferences. 'Moonlight Exhibition Project' operated in an old residential community in Guangzhou as an irregular screening project, part of the programme of 'Upper Balcony', a storefront shop and studio for art, design, and lifestyle. This space is not large but with multiple functions including independent film screening, tattoo studio, arts lab, martial arts society, book store, printing service, snack bar, and travel agent, all of which are run by young artists from different domains. Often calling themselves '*yezhu*' (proprietors), those artists share the rent for the space and experiment with it as a local young community centre of their own where modern and creative thoughts and the old neighbourhood environment are merged, where art and quotidian urban experiences of public space are interwoven. Zimu, 28, core organiser of Moonlight Exhibition Project as well as a PhD student at City University of Hong Kong, stated,

It is hard to define what the space is for, because it is always changing. We regard it as a platform for living and working together. My exhibition is to use the most spontaneous form to unite us together. With the identity of being a filmmaker, I do not like things becoming industrialised and superficial, mixed with other impurities. Living in this city, I want to create the opportunity – gathering a group of congenial friends, screening becomes a part of our normal cultural life. And I like us doing something where everyone feels comfortable, getting rid of the red tape we might not enjoy. We watch good film work, staying focused and relaxed. [my translation] (Zimu, interview with author, 11 June 2017)

During the interview, Zimu constantly stressed her intention 'not to attract too many people but the right ones'. In such a close-knit atmosphere, where the viewers either know each other (at least one of 'proprietors'), share common interests or live locally, independent exhibition located in a residential area particularly sustains itself via social and cultural ties.



Figure 28. A screening night at 'Upper Balcony'.

Evidently, all the exhibition spaces discussed above do not simply represent a matter of spatial use. Matters of location and ownership of independent exhibition are linked to the types of film circulating within the context of post-socialist society in China. Addressing the relationship between exhibition locations and audiences of Yunfest, Robinson and Chio propose the term 'site-specific audiences' and argue that a particular type of audience is constrained and configured by the spatial and temporal context of a film screening, 'whose commonality was predominantly defined by their physical presence in particular venues, at particular times' (2013: 33). It is also arguable that the exhibition organisers' intermediate practices also play a key role in the making and building of the audiences' 'commonality' in taste and knowledge of art film.

4.2 Making the Art Film Public

The previous section shows that spatially dispersed locations represent the multiplicity and complexity of ‘independence’ in the Chinese context. Meanwhile, these dispersed spaces together constitute one sphere that gathers and builds art film public as a whole. This art film public is comprehensive in the sense that the manners in which the exhibitors or the programmers promote the films to the public draw the attention of audiences with different social backgrounds and trajectories. During the course of my research, I observed exhibitors’ attitudes and dispositions towards the relationship with (potential) audiences. A number of exhibitors sought to affect a greater public by running free screenings (or with a very low charge), but acted unconcerned, or even nonchalant, about the social habitus and taste of their potential audiences (which I will address later in this section). On the other hand, for some exhibitors, cementing the relationship with their regular viewers, paid members or congenial acquaintances, is equally as important as operating screening events. The exhibitors’ binary disposition towards ‘the general public’ and to ‘the privileged member’ opens a cleave within the art film public that articulates the hierarchy of the consumers of art films.

Indeed, China has a tradition of ‘private screenings’ of ‘internal films’ within the network of political or cultural elites in the socialist era. I would like to argue that socio-cultural distinction and hierarchy still plays a significant role in the formation of an art film public in post-socialist China. However, the difference is that the accessibility of internal film screenings was determined by the state power structure, while today in most cases the aura of exclusivity has been consciously or unconsciously created by the organisers themselves, a connotation of their symbolic struggles within the field.

I have an [official] institutional identification as a lecturer in higher education. But in the university, I am a quite marginalised person, I do not care about the academic title, I’ve been trying to minimise the connection with the institutional stuff. I only take basic salary and give good lessons to my students. Because I do not like the atmosphere of China’s mainstream academic scene. I prefer to deal with some grassroots independent writers or that kind of academic community... I think independent film is the most pioneering and avant-garde film in China, the real sense of art film. It corresponds to my consistent life trajectory. With this *consistency*, I would love to do everything for [Chinese independent film]. [my translation] (Lewis, interview with author, 23 July 2018)

In his description, Lewis (key curator and exhibitor at the Li Xianting's Film Fund) asserted the affinity between his disposition and the attribute of Chinese independent film by highlighting the consistency of being marginal to legitimate discourse. During the interview, Lewis often expressed denial of 'mainstream' independent filmmakers especially Jia Zhangke who seemed to him to be more into gaining profits from independent cinema rather than pursuing art: 'Not independent enough,' said Lewis. Likewise, many of my other respondents also expressed a cynical attitude towards Jia Zhangke and many other 'mainstream' independent filmmakers because 'they've been "zhao an" [granted amnesty by the authority]' [my translation] (Don, organiser of Lantern Film Club, interview with author, 15 November 2016). 'Zhao an' 招安, originating in the ancient classic Chinese fiction *Shui Hu Zhuan* (Water Margin), refers to a story about a the gang of 108 outlaws, who gathered a sizable army at Mount Liang in resistance to the injustice and corruption of the Song government, and are granted amnesty and sent on campaigns to conquer invaders (but eventually the whole army is annihilated). The amnesty metaphor suggests that there is a suspicion that those who operate successfully and with significant profile as independent artists have been co-opted, or been bought off, by the government authority; while those who retain marginality and lack profile are seen as a guarantee of independence.

For Don and Lewis, their commitment to improving the situation of Chinese independent cinema is to highlight 'professionalism' via relatively formal pedagogical practices. Taking the instance of Li Xianting's Film Fund, apart from screening events, it is also involved in archival arrangements, academic research and publishing, and a filmmaking class once a year. With noted independent filmmakers, screenwriters, critics and academic staff involved as tutors, places in the class for young talent filmmakers are very competitive. A successful candidate must provide a short film of their own and pass an interview with multiple examiners. Similarly, with the purpose of cultivating China's future filmmakers, Don also programmed a series of professional educational lessons with very high standard of admission. The training class is part of the programme of New Asian Filmmaker Collective, which is co-taught by independent filmmakers not only from China but also from other Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. Speaking of the standard of admission, Lewis confessed,

The most important criteria is that, you must know a lot about Chinese independent film, have a passion about it, you want to get involved in the work related to Chinese

independent film, regardless of creative practices or academic study. This person, from his personality to the state of knowledge must correspond to the field [of Chinese independent film]. It [the lesson] is a *scarce resource*, we must make sure that this resource is given to people who need it the most, deserve it the most. [my translation] (Lewis, interview with author, 23 July 2018)

According to Bourdieu (1984), the struggle of gaining scarce resources is intrinsically taking place within the dominant positions. Lewis's power of allocating the 'scarce resources' further demonstrates his privilege as well as providing a sense of professional and intelligent exclusiveness. As discussed earlier, Li Xianting's Film Fund created a unique social space for (film) intellectuals and professionals. Li Xianting's Film Fund and Lantern Film Club and other similar organisations fed into a new independent film culture, a collective horizon of specific experience for film professional and intellectuals.

In addition, by founding screening groups or cine-clubs with a membership fee, some organisers have sought to develop an interpersonal network with their patrons that consequently demarcates the cinematic space by class boundaries. For example, Cinexpress, as alluded to before, tended to work by annual subscription with members of middle-class and social elites, charging a membership fee of 500 *yuan* per year for priority booking, on-demand screenings, and discounts on film tickets and drinks. The crucial fact is that if one could afford a membership of 500 *yuan* a year or make acquaintance with the exhibitor, they may already stand in a higher social or cultural position than those who attend free events. The owner and organiser Hua also made it clear that Cinexpress relies largely on the attributes of independent screening as a means of social networking (for the higher social categories):

We provide a socialising platform where a group of people's personalities are reflected, world views are conflicted – this kind of platform for sharing stuff. The public can just watch films by downloading, but our people would love to communicate with human beings, not with a computer. After all, if one is willing to pay 500 *yuan* per year, (s)he recognises what you've been doing and anticipates being guided by you to somewhere (s)he always wanted to be – this is a type of cultural identity. While, one without this identity can just go home and watch free downloaded films. Why it is named "Cin-express", not "Fan-express"? It is because we are attracted to cinephiles, not fans. [my translation] (Hua, interview with author, 17 June 2017)

In Hua's perspective, the difference between cinephile and fan is not simply about the extent of their love for cinema but the way they invest money and time in cinema-going – aligned with a typical Western bourgeois higher social grade art cinema viewer. Markedly, not long after my interview with Hua, Cinexpress enacted a new membership option for more prominent members: paying a 4,800 *yuan* (approximately £550) annual VIP membership, one can bring a guest along to almost all screening events without spending a penny on entrance fees.

Another manifestation of such independent screening groups becoming a privileged vehicle is that members are given the power to determine the screening content. For example, every Tuesday night at Ozu Bookshop, the screening is specified to feed its members' on-demand appetite. Every viewer who signs up to a 300-*yuan* membership (complimentary refreshment valid for ten screenings, while the mandatory refreshment cost is 40 *yuan* for non-members) is eligible to nominate a film for screening by personal preference one week in advance. The reservation for the desired film screening is usually made through Ozu Bookshop's WeChat groups. Maojie currently operates two WeChat groups for sharing and discussing information about its screening events (and other artistic and cultural events in the city): one comprises approximately 400 regular and occasional viewers; whilst the other is exclusive to members – a limited circle of people who participate in the shaping of each other's encounter with film. Without access to the members' group, I have observed that, in order to encourage ordinary viewers to sign up a 300 *yuan* membership, Maojie (and her assistant) often points out the perquisite of being a member in the larger chatting group, which not only includes screenings of desired films but also sofa seat reservation, a free gift during certain festival times, or a free ticket for filmic or other cultural events based in Shenzhen. It is worth noting that, both being based in Shenzhen, Ozu Bookshop and Cinexpress share some common members. Whilst the majority of (art) film viewers still watch free downloaded films via the internet and go for screening events once in a while, those members who spend a minimum of 800 *yuan* per year on art cinema hold their social status and economic advantage in a situation that distinguishes them from the (art) public majority.

Regardless of dividing up the art film public by social categories, the subscription systems for members also serves as a strategy to circumvent censorial power. Since the screening events are mostly rendered between members and regular viewers (and friends they bring along) within a semi-private club, anyone unknown entering the space can be presumed

to be vested with censorial powers. In the following section, I will examine the strategies employed by independent exhibitors to deal with repressive forces from the local authority.

4.3 Out-Manoeuvring Censorial Mechanisms

One day in the early 2000s, Lewis was impressed by an exhibitor's talk who questioned: 'when can I have a stable exhibition venue?' Today, for many exhibitors, the main concern has been switched to 'how can I keep up my venue?' The censorious power of the regime is certainly one of the most difficult matters that the exhibitors have been tackling. In China, film censorship first and foremost refers to the censorial impositions on public exhibitions in mainstream or arthouse cinemas, articulating the official understanding of the limitations regarding what can be shown in public. For independent exhibitions, the apparatus of 'censorship' in this case is decentralised: it is embodied in the repressive forces of local cultural authorities (such as the municipal government, the university, the creative and cultural zone's administration department, even the neighbourhood committee) that do not supervise all the screening programmes but might intrude on the exhibition spaces at any time for the sake of the harmony of public culture. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, censorship, or more precisely structural censorship, articulates the existing powers structure, whose relationships with different habitus circulate in and construct a given field of cultural production. Bourdieu's formation of censorship illustrates that the extent to which structural censorship operates in a certain field has a great deal to do with the position and disposition of the agents (such as the filmmaker, exhibitor, censor and other political body).

Many respondents expressed their perceptions of the volatility of censorship in the post-socialist context. As Lei said, 'In China, censorship is just like a "rubber band". Without clear guidelines, being tight or loose is totally up to the censor's own will' [my translation] (Lei, interview with author, 24 July 2018). Lei's words are clearly suggestive of the binary distinction of censorship in China as a representation of the state Party apparatus on the one hand, and as habitual activity with self-standards of moral control and of the commands of political power on the other. For independent exhibitors, they need to negotiate a space for their activities in relation to a diverse array of potentially restrictive agencies. Specifically, to negotiate their spatial practices with possible censorial

imposition, independent exhibitors have to modify the visibility of their exhibition spaces, therefore securing the dissemination of messages to the public that they anticipate to reach beyond social and cultural constraints. In the following discussion, I will examine how the ways in which they negotiate that space varies according to their willingness to submit themselves to these constraints or to challenge them.

Among all other exhibition group and organisations, Li Xianting's Film Fund's screening practices have been most severely challenged by restrictive forces from government authority. The organiser Lewis is also the only respondent who recognised the censorial problem as being equally severe as financial issues. Failing to negotiate with the authority, Li Xianting's Film Fund experienced a power supply cut-off and had their door sealed up. 'What can we do?' Lewis questioned, 'in such environment in China, we used to fend against them. Citizens showed their resistance, then came power a cut and the door sealed' [my translation] (Lewis, interview with author, 23 July 2018). In fact, Lewis and the Film Fund have sought to implement a range of strategies of negotiating the state pressure. For example, they endeavoured to communicate with the authority and make compromises by only showcasing films within the tolerable borderline, by moving public events to secret internal screenings. However, none of these could help the Film Fund survive from the state force. 'Only when you tried everything, you will know what can work and what cannot. Now, we know that nothing in the yard is allowed to happen,' sighed Lewis [my translation] (Lewis, interview with author, 23 July 2018).

By contrast, some intermediaries' reflections on structural censorious power is carried out in such a way as to employ *self-censorship* on their exhibition space. According to Bourdieu, self-censorship cannot be accomplished individually but via 'complex networks of reciprocal dependence' (1996: 346) in which self-censorship is particularly determined by the sense of 'acceptability' aimed at maximizing symbolic profits (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 146). Evidently, the level of 'acceptability' is not completely determined by the intermediaries but represents their view about what might be most likely to be acceptable to the structural censors; 'personal negotiations' (Bonsaver and Gordon, 2005: 6) take place between aesthetic habitus and the censorial power of the regime, between cultural capital and symbolic and/or economic profits. It appears that the more symbolic and/or economic capital is attached to the exhibition space (and to the position of the intermediaries themselves), the more actively the exhibitors might respond to the regulatory limitations including politics, religion, vulgarity,

obscenity and explicit sexual content. For example, Xu talked about how he has sustained the 101 Film Studio for 20 years by reconciling his habitus and the restrictive limits in the spatial screening context. As he said,

We hold to the principle that we always keep our own standard of selection. We just need to make sure that the films we are showing do not step out of line – the host venue also has the requirement. We can not do something to our heart's content at high risk of losing the space, we prefer to run it like a babbling brook, low flow but everlasting [*xishui changliu* 细水长流]. [my translation] (Xu, interview with author, 6 December 2016)

Xu is not the only one who articulated the fear of the possibility of losing connections with the space as well as the attached capital and profits if not conforming with the cultural authority. However, it does not mean that all the intermediaries involved in self-censoring the content of screenings are only making concessions to the dominant mechanism. In fact, what they decide to exclude or admit in the exhibition space simultaneously suggests their understanding of publicness and cinema and how their power controls access to the cultural production.

For example, for Lei, 'publicness' means that every viewer has the right to access the screening space of art film freely and equally. As he said, 'One of the advantages of my exhibition is that I leave the door open. You can feel free to come and go with no charge, as long as you are not disturbing others – this is publicness' [my translation] (Lei, interview with author, 4 July 2017). However, he soon added, not to my surprise: 'After all, it is a public space. I do the curation from this scale. I am not going to show erotic film here, but I might do homosexual films' [my translation] (Lei, interview with author, 4 July 2017). In other words, for him, sexually explicit themes are inappropriate for the public while homosexual content is permitted. As a cultural intermediary, whilst personally disagreeing with the state's censorial activity, he becomes a gatekeeper himself by continuing to maintain the boundaries of acceptability in terms of screening content, and more crucially, upholding the hierarchy of cultural production, retaining his gatekeeping power in determining the reception of his viewers within the screening context. During our conversation, Lei repeatedly stressed that he is very '*ducai*' (autocratic) when it comes to programming – nobody's will and demand is allowed to inflict on his exhibition schedule (except his former supervisors in OCT or other higher

authorities). He believes that exhibitors are also creative by not simply showing the films but also actively being involved in ‘de-freezing (moving) images’ for the public [my translation] (Lei, interview with author, 4 July 2017) – but on the other hand the public are just passive spectators whose view is determined by the exhibitors. As he writes, “Audience” is an abstract term in reference to a particular social group, a type of imagined “community”. Exhibition does not need to consider this abstract concept too much ... Audience consumption cannot become part of the evaluation standards for an exhibition... Exhibition on demand will definitely diminish its publicness’ (Wang, 2017) [my translation]. In other words, for Lei, the concept of publicness does not have much to do with the public itself but is subject to the extent to which the (self-censored) exhibitors allow the public to access.

Apart from self-censoring screening content, almost half of my respondents (William, Maojie, Hua, Rui, Fei and Galaxy) choose to avoid scrutiny by *showcasing international art films only* (or for the most part), instead of domestic independent films and documentaries in general. In contrast to their counterparts (like Li Xianting’s Film Fund and Lantern Film Club) who only programme domestic films, with the focus of introducing universal artistic and unusual films, such screening groups rarely come into conflict with the authorities. An interesting example is that the exhibition events of Fei and Galaxy’s programmed screening group Sound & Sense are split into two venues: one in the aforementioned live house presenting domestic independent films irregularly; the other showing foreign-language art films every Wednesday night in a cultural and creative industrial cluster (as with other comparable groups). The division of spaces precisely demonstrates the distance between scrutiny of domestic independent films and permissiveness in relation to overseas art films. Using global film art as a strategy to avert potential external forces affirms the fertilization of cultural capital in the field, but at the same time gives away the textuality of domestic society and politics. It simultaneously entails a divide between the presentation of film aesthetics and the social dimension of independent exhibition reception, whilst also positioning this mode of screening culture as repertory programming of the canon of global film art and cultural spectatorship (MacDonald, 2016).

Evidently, in such fields of screening, the exhibitors exert more autonomy than the self-censored ones (for example, Lei and Xu). The exhibitors do not simply reproduce the aesthetic values of global art cinema institutions to the public but also mediate the film

canon compatible with their audiences' understanding and knowledge. In other words, instead of measuring whether a certain film is morally and socially appropriate for public, the exhibitors tend to adjust their judgement by being concerned about what mode of viewing might be more desirable and what might constitute a more effective mode of film reception. For example, many respondents stressed that they are not going to withdraw films just because they address explicit sexual relationships or violence. 'It depends on how you look at it. It is a part of human life, reflective of reality, no need to bottle it up,' Maojie explained (Maojie, interview with author, 20 June 2017) [my translation]. Talking about withdrawing Gaspar Noé's *Love* (Gaspar Noé, 2015, France and Belgium) from the screening programme, Fei explained:

Many films we selected include erotic or violent content. We've never attempted to avoid such themes. Because I do not think it is necessary. We are not showing pornography. But we are trying not to select those that are too excessive. For example, according to European film critics in general, Gaspar Noé's *Love* is definitely not pornography, it is an art film, isn't it? But I am not going to programme it, because nobody can understand it. People will come to see it just for curiosity. If one's film culture hasn't reached the level, occasionally viewing art films like *Man Bites Dog* [Benoît Poelvoorde, Rémy Belvaux, and André Bonzel, 1992, Belgium] can already stimulate you enough, no need for *Love*. In other words, we just need to show films whose level is slightly higher than that of the overall domestic films – the level of *Love* is too high. [my translation] (Fei, interview with author, 6 August 2018)

Repeatedly using the term 'level', Fei postulated a hierarchal system of filmic taste and consumption that tends to demarcate the spectators, preventing them from getting involved and identifying with the full spectrum of art film culture. From *Man Bites Dog* to *Love*, from domestic film to overseas art film, one's level of filmic appreciation is deemed dependent on their aesthetic experience of distance from familiar values and judgements rooted in everyday life and in a monolithic tradition of film as mass culture. Whilst Fei foregrounds the hierarchy of appreciation as the foundation of programming, he in turn situates himself in a position of cultural gatekeeper who determines whatever content is suitable/digestible for the masses, an act that is not substantially different from the official censorship mechanism.

Moreover, it is worth noting that in the screening groups almost all the exhibition sources of global art films are from pirated DVDs or online files. Most of the exhibitors (William,

Maojie, Hua and Rui) were committed pirated DVD buyers, William was even involved in the manufacture of pirate DVDs. For them, such exhibition serves as an heir to the piracy tradition, a practice that realises the transformation of film art appreciation from home space to public arena, from individual to collective consumption. As William put it,

I have thousands of DVDs in my collection, this is the accumulation from the past ten years. The more DVDs I watched on television by myself, the stronger will I have to share with others, and communicate with others. Sitting there [the exhibition place of Breathless Film Club], looking at the beam of the projector falling on the screen, I know that all the effort is worth it. [my translation] (William, interview with author, 20 June 2017)

Indeed, one of the most striking features of independent exhibition is the gathering and building of art film audiences from home to public space, and the parallel dissemination of aesthetic appreciation and critical judgement. Independent exhibition, along with various forms of independent film festivals, encompasses what Berry, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, characterises as ‘rhizome’ that enables ‘lines of flight’ within the formation of Chinese post-socialism, leading towards ‘the possibility of conceiving of and discursively articulating difference’ (2004: 20). On the other hand, in the post-socialist context, where the complicit relationship of market and nation state is overly mapped onto vast aspects of production, distribution and exhibition in China, independent exhibitors are simultaneously faced with the dilemma of self-sustainability (both economically and politically) and autonomy. To resolve the problem as well as to sustain exhibition space, independent screening group organisers have sought to employ a variety of strategies to renegotiate their relationships with the authority, market and audience, which substantially obscures the emphasis of the critical account of ‘independence’.

5. Networked Internet Critics: Forming a New Institution of Film Criticism

In 2006, Ye started his first film blog at Mtime.com³² while still a journalism student at one of top five universities in Southern China. The blog was named ‘Muweier’, a reference to the smallest moon orbiting Jupiter as well as a homophone for ‘movier’: ‘A moon in the sky, a person who likes film’, as he wrote in his profile. ‘After many years of “*tao die*” [pirated DVD shopping, discussed in Chapter 3], watching film became a habit. I had seen many films that were rarely known by others, for example, East European, Latin American. I would like to share my view with more people,’ said Ye (interview with author, 11 February 2017) [my translation].

His action had consequences. At that time, when blogs were becoming fashionable, ‘Muweier’ soon became an influencer among film lovers. Cultivating thousands of followers allowed Ye to make a living writing about film after his graduation. As a prominent internet critic today, he has published numerous reviews and critiques both online and in print media and has served on film festival juries, including Shanghai International Film Festival, Beijing International Film Festival, and Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival.

Like Ye, many publicly recognised critics in China started the practice of online film reviews as amateur enthusiasts outside of authoritative media and academic institutions. Their love of cinema drew them to write about film to a broader readership via the internet, even though, from the perspective of what Bourdieu calls ‘legitimate’ institutions, the critical discourse might be dismissed as amateurish. The growth of an online following empowers them to influence not only zealous film lovers but also denizens of the internet. For example, as an illustrious internet critic, Taotao has reached more than four million followers on Weibo and WeChat, and his posts offer up viewing recommendations from commercial mainstream to overlooked artistic gems. With a lack of solid institutions

³² Founded in 2004, Mtime.com is an online database of film and television information analogous to IMDb.

related to the role of professional criticism in China, such online critical commentary grown from a cinephilia and partly inevitable amateurism has become one principle mode of criticism in China.

In the previous chapters, I discussed that the film reform in the 1990s have had strong impact on the sectors of film production, distribution and exhibition. Just as film industry, criticism underwent a transition from state institutional system of cultural production to a part of marketised cultural industry (McGrath, 2008; Parfect, 2014). In order to surmount the drop-off of state funding, elite journals strive for attracting more readers and financial support by using more arresting lay-out design and glossy paper quality, promoting advertisements, incorporating private sponsorship, agitating much-hyped contests between writers, and introducing new and more popular genres of writing (McGrath, 2008: 61). Consequently, the exponential growth and commercialization of literature and film culture brought about the reality of film criticism in China today: traditional print or new media barely touch on non-mainstream cinema except a limited number of academic journals such as *Dianying yishu (Film Art)*, *Dianying pingjie (Movie Review)*, *Dianying wenxue (Film Literature)*, and *Yishu pinglun (Arts Criticism)*, and popular film magazines such as *Kan dianying (Movie View)* and *Huanqiu yinmu (World Screen)*. Given the ubiquitous market-driven cultural logic in post-socialist China, film journalists in the authoritative mainstream media tend to dedicate themselves to reporting on commercial films and celebrities, while the limited sections related to ‘art’ and independent cinema are largely taken up by ‘amateur’ contributors who predominantly work freelance or are self-employed. Those ‘amateur’ contributors, largely composed of identified online reviewers, generate a discourse of criticism grounded in an appreciation of values of judgement other than those that are otherwise deemed to be purely commercial. The emergence of online critical commentary to some extent challenges the monopoly on critical discourse and judgement exercised by ideologically aligned criticism and market orientated discourse.

Indeed, within the study of Chinese internet culture, many scholars has ruminated on the internet as a space of subversion, interrogating it in relation to issues of the potential for some kind of grassroots resistance against government control (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Giese, 2006; Goldsmith and Wu, 2006; MacKinnon, 2007; Yang, 2008, 2009a), and individual expression and practices antithetical to dominant discourse (Fung, 2009; Gong and Yang, 2010; Han, 2018b; Li, 2011; Yang, 2009b; Zhang and Mao, 2013; Zhang,

2016). A central part of recent academic writing on online film criticism in China has concerned internet reception as a way of challenging the dominant discourse implicated in the state–capitalist framework. Yu (2010, 2012) has pioneered an insightful discussion of the accounts of online film reviewing and debate on films in different online spaces. In her examination, she argues that the internet reception of Zhang Yimou’s *Yingxiong* (*Hero*, 2002) significantly challenges the elite discourse represented by prestige filmmakers and critics. Similarly, looking into internet reception of *Shanzhashu Zhi Lian* (*Under the Hawthorn Tree*, Zhang Yimou, 2010), Parfect (2014) suggests that film criticism in online spaces characterises what Yang terms ‘a culture of contention’ (2009a: 82), a form of resistance to the authoritarian discourse constructed by established social norms, state–endorsed filmmakers, and the commercial mainstream film market.

I agree with Yu and Parfect’s arguments that online critical commentary enables individual voices to be articulated outside elite or official discourse. However, what is lacking from existing studies and research in online film criticism is the attention to the part that illustrious online reviewers and influencers play in forging a new institution of criticism. Some esteemed influencers like Ye and Taotao, for example, could regularly participate in domestic major film events as critics’ jury members. It is also worth noting that, on 11 January 2017, the China Film Critics Association established an Internet Film Critics Committee that gathers a group of prominent internet critics, in doing so to ensure a so–called wholesome environment for online commentary (Renmin, 2017). Although their submission to authority was harshly deprecated by netizens, these previously ‘amateur’ reviewers’ burgeoning influence on the internet doubtless enable them to be acknowledged by the domestic professional film industry and market. At another level, their integration into official or professional film sectors blurs the distinction between the ‘old’ scholarly and journalistic critics and the ‘new’ internet reviewers, whilst also positioning this particular type of ‘criticism’ as heir to the Chinese post-socialist tradition.

While online critical commentary is flourishing, scholarly and journalistic criticism, along with the decline of print media, suffers from poor popular reception. The jeremiad of ‘the crisis of criticism’ or the ‘the death of the critic’ in the age of the internet has been pervasive among academic scholars and professional critics who are concerned with the changing status of film criticism (and arts criticism in general) as an institution and profession. One of the key arguments stresses the decline of professional, erudite, authoritative critics committed to public engagement and aesthetic evaluation, vis-à-vis

the internet's dumbing-down and fragmented voices where anyone can be a critic (Haberski, 2001; Kallay, 2007; McDonald, 2007; James, 2012; Frey, 2015). As Ronan McDonald laments in *The Death of the Critic*, the role of critics has shifted from a public intellectual, 'a figure to whom a wide audience might look as a judge of quality or a guide to meaning,' to a dumbed-down wordmonger that 'confirms and assuages their prejudices and inclinations rather than challenging them' (2007: 3; 7). For the defenders of traditional critics, the democratic elements of the internet lessen the authoritative relationship with the audience that ultimately implicates the decline of the profession.

However, does this mean that internet critics truly possess less authority than their traditional forebears? Or, can we say the traditional notions of 'authority' in criticism has been undermined in this 'democratic' dispersive discourse? To the extent to which this critical discourse can be mapped, recent scholarship has contributed useful insights by examining the role of aggregate sites and of individual reviewers in constructing the new digital criticism (Campbell et al., 2008; Behlil, 2005; Frey, 2014; Frey and Sayad eds, 2015; McWhirter, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2010; Shambu, 2014). In his case study of Rotten Tomatoes, Mattias Frey (2014 and 2015) demonstrates that although this site has sought to produce a more democratic method of film criticism in terms of greater access and participation in critical discourse, it simultaneously reinforces the top-down authority of traditional criticism and its gatekeeping hierarchies by validating a set of basic tenets of criticism and spotlighting their favourite critics. Frey points out that the difference of such online criticism from traditional criticism is not the attenuate authority but the purpose of 'moving from critical analysis or informed evaluation to simple promotion': 'rather than pedagogical insights or the search for an evaluative "truth," Rotten Tomatoes wants to provide a "consumer guide"' (2014: 138; 134).

Taking the cue from Frey, I would argue that, to sustain their authoritative position, the internet critics themselves have sought to coordinate a consistent network to generate a new institution of film criticism and film culture in general. As many online communication scholars indicate, individuals tend to manage their online expression in a manner that reinforces or stimulates offline social connections, 'so as to make this performance more convincing and more satisfying' (Papacharissi, 2002b: 645–646). As cultural intermediaries, the networked internet critics are involved in performing themselves as erudite, promoting their critical evaluation as authoritative, but simultaneously they also have concern based on the uncertainty of whether their

amateurish origin is compatible with the title of professional critic. Bearing this in mind, what follows in this chapter is a discussion of the behaviours and practices of internet critics, converging around three themes. Section 1 focuses on how critic intermediaries make a living outside of established institutions, struggling between retaining their profile as a cinephile based on an idealistic commitment to film and masking their need for financially sustainable practices. Section 2 examines how the intermediaries use the internet as a platform to perform themselves, establishing critical reputation and taste formation. Finally, in Section 3, I analyse the network of film critics as a reflection of the dynamic hierarchical society in today's China.

5.1 From Film Enthusiast to Self-Media Professional: Negotiating between Amateurism and Entrepreneurism

First of all, I am a film lover, then a critic and other roles. (Taotao, interview with author, 20 July 2017) [my translation]

Reflecting on his identity as a hardcore film lover, Taotao made his first journey to Cannes Film Festival in his mid-30s in 2016. After twelve years of online review writing, Taotao has become an influential critic whose social media account 'Taotao Choosing Film' has hordes of dedicated followers. Nevertheless, in terms of traveling to Cannes, Taotao made it clear that it was not necessarily part of his work but a realisation of his long-term dream as a film lover:

Film lovers like me, we are quite idealistic about the Cannes Film Festival – it is the pantheon of art cinema. I always wanted to go and watch good films there. It is a delight. Now I have been there twice, but every time I didn't give myself any task, like interview or writing. I didn't write, I only watched, purely enjoying films there. I could watch at least four films a day there, definitely awesome! [my translation] (Taotao, interview with author, 20 July 2017)

For Taotao, writing about film as a profession is demarcated from the delight of 'purely enjoying films' as a film lover. As he said, he acted as a common film enthusiast on social media, sharing his exhilarating experience in Cannes with his followers, for example, being thrilled to see jury president Cate Blanchett and his beloved filmmaker Hirokazu

Kore-eda on the red carpet. However, as a notable critic on the internet, it is almost impossible to be a laidback cinephile completely separated from work as he demonstrated. Taotao's Cannes trip was fully sponsored by IQIYI, China's largest online video platform – in exchange he had to contribute reviews and advertise the video platform on social media. 'It is just a trade-off,' Taotao admitted, insouciantly (Taotao, interview with author, 20 July 2017) [my translation].

Such a 'trade-off' is not uncommon among internet critics. A popular critic could easily draw sponsorship and commercial stakeholders inside and outside of the film industry. For example, as mentioned in the previous chapter, William was offered a rent-free space in Shuter Life Hall to screen art films, which serves as an indirect promotion of the funding body. It is their roles as influential reviewers that allows internet critics to realise their cinephiliac aspirations. In film studies, the ideas of amateurism and amateur filmic activities are crucial in the construction of an alternative film culture in the sense that it represents a set of values inscribed by sheer love of cinema instead of by ordinary standards in terms of popular perception and commercial viability (Bazin, 1967; Chalfen, 1975; Klinger, 2006; Zimmermann, 1995). The 'trade-off' thus revolves around their role as prominent influencers on the internet that reconciles their avowed amateurism, which is to say their declared 'idealistic' commitment to cinema for pure enjoyment and their material dependence on sponsorship and commercial patronage. According to Zimmermann (1995), amateurism safeguards pluralist ideals of freedom, creativity and spontaneity while simultaneously reinforcing the market as a consumer commodity. As she writes, '[T]he amateur's lack of fixity, regularity, and coherence disrupted, challenged, and in the end supported the capitalist system of efficiency, repetition, and prediction' (Zimmermann, 1995: 11). Taking the cue from Zimmermann, the paradox that internet critics and cinephiles contribute to the commercial promotion of mainstream media present the field of internet criticism as a mixture of alternative film culture and commodity culture within the post-socialist framework in China.

In fact, a great number of the interviewees preferred to be named 'self-media professionals' (*zimeiti zhuangaoren* 自媒体撰稿人), rather than professional (occupational) critics. In contrast to legitimate mass media institutions, China's notion of 'self-media' (or, 'we media') refers to a fashion of grassroots media entities based on internet platforms (the WeChat public platform in particular), distributing news and original articles to their subscribers. With the increasing number of Chinese smart phone

users, self-media subscriptions have emerged as the most fashionable way for consumers to acquire an array of information without an overarching ideologically motivated discourse by legitimate mass media institution. However, for film influencers, being ‘self-media professionals’ is not simply attributed to their act of diffusing filmic knowledge and information ‘independently’ from legitimate institutions but also to the economic opportunities afforded by their status as identified ‘professional’ critics. To make a living in the enterprise of self-media, simply contributing serious film reviews is not sufficient to gain public/industry esteem and financial success. Ostensibly, the respondents’ use of ‘self-media professionals’ manifests the state of the profession that allows better flexibility of working arrangement and higher autonomy of content navigation, but in the meantime, it also implies that they possess anxiety based on the uncertainty of whether the conjunction of their grassroots amateurish origin and current ‘professional’ behaviours are compatible with the traditional definition of criticism. In the literature review, I discussed how amateurism is crucial in the construction of art film culture in the sense that it represents a set of values that are motivated by the ‘pure’ love of cinema instead of by ordinary standards in terms of popular perception and commercial viability. The conjuncture of cinephilia-oriented activities and the tempting economic opportunities afforded by the enterprise of self-media therefore reveals the internet critics’ struggle between their cinephilia interior and ethics of entrepreneurship. In this section, I will expand upon the practices of internet critics as self-media professionals who have sought to negotiate the relationship between amateurism and entrepreneurship by analysing three main modes of practice: writing soft articles, integrating into the film industry, and trading cinephilia cultural products.

5.1.1 Writing Soft Articles

‘Soft articles’ (*ruan wen* 软文), an abbreviation of ‘soft-advertising article’, is often designated to sponsored articles posted on social media. The idea of a ‘soft article’ seems to provide an interesting intertextual reference to the ‘soft film’ of the 1930s, concerned with film’s entertainment function and aesthetic property beyond political and ideological discourses that were forcefully embedded in Chinese filmic norms and values; however, in today’s context, the article is ‘soft’ in the sense that it does not address promotional messages in a forceful and overt way. In contrast to their soft film predecessors, who were

concerned with how to emphasise the entertainment and aesthetic values of film in public discourse, today's internet critics particularly deal with the matter of how to sell such filmic values and knowledge as a form of commodity to make a good living. For internet critics in China, working as 'self-media professionals' means operating multiple social media accounts with which their voices could reach a broad range of readers. Among all the social media platforms, the WeChat public platform is the one that is most utilised by professional critics. It functions like a digital journal and a popular WeChat public account usually revolves around the key critic(s) and relies on (voluntary) cooperation within a small team. Directly distributed to subscribers every day, the content varies, from international and domestic film industry news and reviews to personal comments about trending topics. Therefore, the critics are equivalent to the 'chief editors' of a digital magazine, determining which topics and content are to be published. This requires them to continually balance writing that exemplifies their personal preferences and judgement as cinephiles with content that has a broader mass appeal. For example, to draw a great deal of attention from the masses, 'Taotao Choosing Films' regularly provides reviews and comments about commercial cinema, while at the same time it also addresses recent news and reviews about independent and art cinema. As Taotao said,

I do not excessively try to appeal to the masses. I also do something I like, for example, going to Cannes, promoting art films. Although increasing subscriptions and page views are important, I do not want to completely fling myself into the commercial mainstream. [my translation] (Taotao, interview with author, 20 July 2017)

Despite the low page views during Cannes, Taotao did not turn a loss: because he promoted IQIYI in the public account and other social media platforms, he could finally make his way to his 'pantheon of art cinema' for free.

In fact, operating an illustrious public account, noted internet critics like Taotao must have received numerous tempting offers like this. According to my interviewees, by virtue of their broad following, an internet critic usually can earn income of ranging from 1,000 to 50,000 *yuan* (depends on their reputation and social impact) for a sponsored review or post on WeChat. During the interview, Taotao constantly stated his plan of moving to Malaysia in the future and investing in properties in South East Asia, because 'the living quality is better, I can spend 2 million *yuan* for a villa with swimming pool. With that much money, you can not do anything in Beijing... Living abroad, work

focusing on the domestic, Chinese money is easy to make' [my translation] (Taotao, interview with author, 20 July 2017).

Nevertheless, possibly with the concern about falling short of their fans' expectations, during the interviews some respondents – especially the better-known ones or those based on more popular public account platforms, such as William, Taotao and Jin – became vigilant while talking about the matter of their soft-advertising business. It is vital for them to mediate the relationship between their readers and their clients, in other words, to maintain the readers' picture of them as cinephiles with strong conviction of the art of cinema, while seeking to appeal to the financial stakeholders in the meantime.

Indeed, many respondents expressed their wish to take soft advertisement to improve their current economic status. However, it does not mean that all the internet critics would take any ads as an opportunity for maximising monetary gains. As Ye stated,

I would like to help some [Chinese] independent films. They have small budgets, no promotional funding, but they need to be better known in the cinema market. These films do not need to inform me, I would write reviews for them either way... For commercial advertising, first of all, it must be appropriate, for example, cars, cameras, why not? How fantastic is that! A jewellery brand came to me once, I declined because it was advertised in *Xiao Shi Dai* [*Tiny Times*, Guo Jingming, 2013, China], I would never ever watch that film! [my translation] (Ye, interview with author, 11 February 2017)

Made by popular writer Guo Jingming, *Xiao Shi Dai* (2013) is notorious in delineating an (unrealistic) opulent lifestyle that celebrates consumerism and entertainment. If Ye soft advertised this brand by remarking on its appearance in *Xiao Shi Dai*, it is not hard to imagine the anger and disappointment of his followers as well as the fall of his esteem within the film criticism scene. After living in Beijing for over ten years, Ye recently decided to move to a smaller city in southwest China, because the rent and other living costs in Beijing had been persistently increasing. As one of the first batch of reviewers who became famous on the internet, Ye is far behind his peers in terms of financial success. Aged 34, Ye confessed that he has anxiety based on the uncertainty of whether to carry on with film criticism as a means of earning a living in the future or to devalue his cinephile standards to please popular tastes and commercial demands.

Similarly, Liankai, 24, identified his current state as ‘half working for money, half being a cinephile’ (Liankai, interview with author, 1 July 2017) [my translation]. Most proud of having a tattoo of the famous dance scene in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Bande à part* (*Band of Outsiders*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1964, France), he made it clear that he would only agree to promote a film that he appreciates:

Income from writing film review articles is not stable. I normally write four or five pieces a month, which can almost cover my rent in Beijing [about 5,000 *yuan*]... But my bottom line about writing soft-articles is that I can only accept to write a paid-advertising review for a good film. For example, I really liked *La La Land* [Damien Chazelle, 2016, USA and Hong Kong], so when the distribution company approached me, I didn’t hesitate at all. Although I took money from them, I am responsible for every single word I have written! I would not write a good review for a film I do not like, even if they offer me five figures! [my translation] (Liankai, interview with author, 1 July 2017)

Telling honest feelings and having independent judgement is no doubt one yardstick for what makes a professional critic. However, in the context of post-socialist China, where consumerism and commercialisation are ubiquitous, cinephilia as well as a sense of amateurism become valuable aspects of what makes a trustworthy influencer in the circle of film criticism.

5.1.2 Integrating into the Film Industry

Apart from writing soft articles, more and more critics have sought to integrate themselves into the (art and independent) film industry as a complement to their amateurish origins. Here, the internet critics successfully convert their online influence into offline career development. For example, having merged his public account with one of the top Chinese art film distribution companies in 2016, Taotao now engages in promoting films distributed by their own company as well as cooperating with other distributors to boost attention and discussion for a specific film before or during its theatrical run. Taotao’s co-partner Guai was one of the founders of Rear Window Film Appreciation Club, an influential online film forum in the 2000s engaged in discussing film and organising independent screening groups. Taotao and Guai’s joint partnership

perfectly links up Taotao's online influence and Guai's experience of conducting offline events. Since 2016, Taotao and Guai's team have run exhibition groups for screening independent films such as *Kang rinpoche (Paths of the Soul)*, Zhang Yang, 2015, China), *Pi Sheng Shang de Hun (Soul on A String)*, Zhang Yang, 2016) and *A La Jiang Se (Ala Changso)*, Sonthar Gyal, 2018), and selected commercial films like *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017, USA, China and Hong Kong) and *Xin Xi Ju zhi Wang (The New King of Comedy)*, Stephen Chow, 2019, China). Such an exhibition group is distinct from the independent screening group discussed in the previous chapter in the sense that, in collaboration with distribution companies as part of the marketing campaign, most of the exhibition events take place in proper mainstream cinemas or art cinemas like BC-MOMA. Taotao confessed that right now his career focus is more on exhibition matters than criticism.

Similarly, Deep Focus has also been trying to switch their main focus from film criticism towards distributing and marketing Chinese independent films. During my research at the Berlin Film Festival in 2017, Jin, 28, chief editor of Deep Focus as well as a Pantheon-Sorbonne University PhD student in philosophy, refused to label himself as a critic and made it clear that he was not interested in watching or writing about films this year in Berlin,

First of all, I am not satisfied with my writing, I do not think I have reached the standard in my mind. Second, I do not think critic is a decent title in China, it is too pervasive! It looks like everyone who writes a film review can define themselves as a critic. I refuse this label!... I am actually here for something else [networking, attending marketing conferences]. In other words, my attribute is not very 'Deep Focus', or not 'Deep Focus' at all. Of course, I still do some management work for Deep Focus, but more of supervising them [the junior critics]. [my translation] (Jin, interview with author, 11 February 2017)

Jin and his partners founded Deep Focus in 2015, and describe it as 'a cinephiliac magazine, providing the latest European and North American film news and critiques by our members all over the world. Meanwhile, we are the deep observers of international

film festivals and film industry'.³³ In the past few years, Deep Focus has accumulated the symbolic capital of being one of the very few online magazines in China that celebrates the idea of amateurism and produces competent criticism work. However, it is worth noting that, although most (junior) participants do not get paid for what they have contributed to the online magazine, noted critics (for example, Liankai, Sixue, and Tuoluo) do receive remuneration (between approximately 300 and 500 *yuan* per 1,000 words – the rate is subject to the chief editor's decision based on the critic's reputation and writing quality). Certainly, it is the reputation of Deep Focus that allowed Jin and his partners to achieve their career goals as film industry practitioners, and to recruit more passionate volunteer writers for the sake of amateurism.

5.1.3 Trading Cinephiliac Cultural Products

One of the main features of the WeChat public platform is that it links content creation and commercial merchandising. Internet critics with a greater number of followers are likely to exert their influence towards monetary gain from their followers. In 2016, critics Weixidi and Magasa began selling cinephilia cultural products via Magasa's publically operated account IRIS Magazine. The best seller of IRIS Magazine's online store is 'Moving Horse Tote', a tribute to the very first moving picture *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop* (Eadweard Muybridge, 1878). With a reversible design, the canvas tote can be turned inside out to reveal its 'Horse in Motion' interior. Each tote contains a cinematic year and five to eight memorable films that came out in that year, for example, in 1984 six films were chosen: *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1984, USA and Italy), *Amadeus* (Miloš Forman, 1984, USA, France, Czechoslovakia and Italy), *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984, West Germany, France, UK and USA), *Stranger than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch, 1984, USA and West Germany), *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984, UK and USA), and *Huang Tu Di (Yellow Earth)*, Chen Kaige, 1984, China). Certainly, choosing a limited number of films from the whole cinematic year is not an easy job. As Magasa explained in IRIS,

³³ See Deep Focus's homepage on Douban.com: <https://www.douban.com/people/139444387/> (Accessed: 9 November 2018).

The selected films have to be well-known, significant in film history, with good aesthetic quality, and personally liked by the selectors themselves. For example, Weixidi really wanted to include his favourite filmmaker Hong Sangsoo's work, I rejected this because of the taste is too minority! After all this, the tote for me is not only a canvas bag, but a small class for film history, a memory of the birth of film, and a longing for the future of film... It is the perfect compounding of cinephilia and artisan spirits.³⁴ [my translation]

Given such multivalent meanings, the tote is priced at 249 *yuan*, not inexpensive as a canvas bag. Nevertheless, it has been so popular among film fans that IRIS has sold thousands of them. The commercial success plus income from operating a WeChat public account allowed Weixidi and Magasa to live an enviable life (for example, having purchased and lived in high-end houses in first-tier cities, demanding to stay in five-star hotels when invited by film festivals and sponsored talks) that many of their peers desired. Since then, public accounts like Deep Focus and Breathless Film Club also set up their own online stores offering cinephilia cultural products, like calendars, notebooks, T-shirts, and posters. Although Jin and Masha kept asserting that Deep Focus was a not-for-profit organisation, it is undoubtable that they have drawn upon fans' cinephiliac passions for financial gain.

³⁴ See Magasa's description of the "Moving Horse Tote" from IRIS's WeChat public platform: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NzA1ODQzNA==&mid=2659207321&idx=1&sn=36dfdd48e61f3d02e16197856267c5b0&chksm=84233074b354b962024c6aa634f09aaff66225211de957e8f817fb7051ecafedad1703398dc7&scene=21#wechat_redirect (Accessed: 14 December 2018).



Figure 29. 'Moving Horse Tote' sold by IRIS Magazine (photo from online store of IRIS Magazine).

On 9 June 2017, one of the most popular WeChat public accounts, '*Dushe Dianying*' (Sharp-Tongue Film), was shut down by the authorities because of its over-entertaining and commercialised content.³⁵ While talking about this, respondents did not express much sympathy, because *Dushe Dianying* desperately sought to appeal to the commercial stakeholders by only offering catchy titles and low-quality content to please the masses. As William put it,

They used less time-consuming methods to produce reviews but achieve the most profit. Indeed, they made some money but didn't build a brand. What is a brand? A brand should have its own value and abiding taste. Once a brand was built, it would become a key bargaining chip for future negotiations [with financial bodies]. Otherwise, if you just do the same thing as any other rubbish account does, plagiarising

³⁵ On 9th June 2017, a number of online public accounts were shut down for providing vulgar content, according to the regulation by the Beijing Cyberspace Administration (Xinhua, 2017). Most of these accounts were involved in posting entertainment industry news and celebrity gossip, some of which were operated by noted paparazzi. This action was following a statement posted by the Beijing Cyberspace Administration that appeals the public to report vulgar content to provide a healthier and safer internet environment for teenagers. See Beijing Cyberspace Administration Office's original post at: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/EXe73Vc6fXRSL63Hm96Lhw> (Accessed: 03 March 2020).

and advertising, what makes you stand out from other film accounts? (William, interview with author, 20 June 2017) [my translation]

Clearly, William's theory of 'brand building' in today's internet criticism echoes what he exercised in pirated DVD industry that the accumulation of symbolic capital functions as the most crucial part in the entire course of economic success. Like pirated DVD practitioners, without the support of an institutional body, internet critics must strengthen their brand value by negotiating the relationship between expanding business venture and representing a compatible taste with their well-known reputation.

5.2 Personal Performance and the Reproduction of Authoritative Taste

In August 2016, Liankai encountered one of his favourite films *La La Land* at the Venice Film Festival. At the time, *La La Land* was not well known among Chinese viewers, and Liankai was an ordinary overseas postgraduate student who loved immersing himself in cinema and presenting his penchant for certain films on social media. After seeing the film, Liankai wrote his first impression on Douban, in a fevered mind,

★★★★★ Standing ovation, can not stop crying. This is the return to the original nature of cinema. *La La Land* fulfils all my fantasies about cinema. Beautiful characters and scenarios, creation based on the traditional genre, non-cliché framework, and salute to the golden age of Hollywood, not to mention the touching music! I want to remember every scene, every second, every frame, it is just too perfect! Here's to the ones who dream. [my translation, except the last sentence, which was written in English in the original text]³⁶

Liankai's passion did not fade away over time. He trumpeted his love of *La La Land* on almost all popular social media platforms and contributed to numerous reviews and articles about the film on both the internet and in print media before and during its release

³⁶ See Liankai's comment on *La La Land* at: <https://movie.douban.com/subject/25934014/comments?status=P> (Accessed: 20 December 2018).

in China in February 2017. The commercial success of *La La Land* raised Liankai up from an ordinary film enthusiast to a known reviewer. To date, Liankai's original short comment has received 4,455 likes, and he has doubled the number of followers on Douban. As a better-known internet critic, Liankai has changed his username from his real name to a nick name and lists his favourite ten films in his profile as many other internet critics do.

Observing Liankai's behaviour was like looking at the contention of Erving Goffman's sociologies come to life. Liankai applied both direct textual expression (for example, writing review comments, bringing out selected top 10 films) and indirect textual expression (for example, liking or forwarding reviews, changing his username) on his homepage to construct what Goffman referred to as the 'front stage' of an internet critic's performance. In Goffman's formulation, 'front' refers to 'the expressive equipment' (1959: 13) that is selectively or unwittingly employed by an individual during self-representation. Moreover, according to Goffman, one's performance is not only associated with the 'personal front' made up by a person's 'manner' and 'appearance' (1959: 15) based on personal information, to a larger extent, the performance is also constructed by the established standard of the performer's social circle. Liankai, seen in the light of Goffman, presents his personal tastes in public to picture a certain persona, and takes actions that live up to the 'social front' that other internet critics present. This means that, although in the perspectives of their readers (or in Goffman's terminology, the observers) each internet critic seems to proclaim their distinctive preferences about film in different ways, they in a sense employ common elements and models to define their virtual performance on the stage, and furthermore guide and control the observers' impressions of them. As Goffman stresses,

it is to be noted that a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name. The front becomes a 'collective representation' and a fact in its own right. (1959: 17)

If one follows Goffman's argument that the front represents a collective voice and value, it is vital to explain what voice and value are represented by the internet critics to their readers, whether intentionally or unwittingly, and more importantly, what standard the internet critics apply to their performance. Looking closer at critics' homepages, their

profiles, the rates and reviews they give, and the favourite films or filmmakers they select, I would suggest that critics articulate ‘*personality*’ and ‘*extensiveness*’ in their performance.

First of all, ‘personal’ (*geren* 个人) is a much-mentioned word in internet critics’ self-representation online, for example ‘my personal top 10 films of 2018’, and ‘my personal forecast for Berlinale winners’. The frequent use of ‘personal’ implies internet critics’ ambitions to redefine the term ‘expertise’ by holding up their ‘personal taste’ as a new legitimacy, even though these seemingly erudite cinema experts do not possess academic qualification. An interesting instance is that every year after authoritative film magazines such as *Sight and Sound*, *Cahiers du cinema* and *Kinema Junpo* publish their critics’ poll of the best films of the year, many internet critics in China tend to compare their own best list with them and exclaim how much they coincide with one another. Moreover, looking into the respondents’ personal lists of favourite films, it is clear that they articulate a strong preference towards international art films, for example, *Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967, France and Italy), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968, UK and USA), *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984, West Germany, France, UK and USA), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994, USA), *Moe no suzaku* (*Suzaku*, Naomi Kawase, 1997, Japan), *Vozvrashchenie* (*The Return*, Andrey Zvyagintsev, 2003, Russia), *Sang sattawat* (*Syndromes and a Century*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2006, Thailand, France and Austria), *Aruitemo aruitemo* (*Still Walking*, Hirokazu Koreeda, 2008, Japan), *Book chon bang hyang* (*The Day He Arrives*, Sang-soo Hong, 2011, South Korea) and *Bacalaureat* (*Graduation*, Cristian Mungiu, 2016, Romania, France and Belgium). Ostensibly, each personal list represents the critic’s film taste that articulates the idea of diversity and otherness. But it is worth noting that, no matter whether *Paris, Texas* or *Syndromes and a Century*, they are all sanctioned by major film festivals that are held in Europe and North America. In other words, their seemingly distinctive tastes in fact reaffirm the European and North American centred evaluative standard transformed into a Chinese context.

One of the performative modalities among internet critics in China is to keep track of films they have watched on their home page on *Douban*: ‘It gives me a sense of vanity, marking films as watched and broadcasting it to the followers,’ said Shuang (Shuang, interview with author, 14 February 2017) [my translation]. But such records are not solely about vanity. Often, the total number of watched films immediately gives an impression

to observers about to what extent the critic devotes their life to cinema. It is believed that an extensive viewing experience serves as proof of cultural competence in the role of a critic as well as a cinephile. To some extent, it creates a mode of hierarchical structure between the critics and ordinary fans, and between illustrious and junior critics, in terms of the accumulation of cultural capital attained from wide viewing. For example, Sixue, 26, with 2,774 watched films on *Douban*, said,

To be honest, films recommended by those big names who have seen over 3,000 or 5,000 films are not that fascinating. The films always look excessively artistic, and the filmmakers I've probably never heard about. They [major critics] just employ a lot of rhetoric to show off their wide enough viewing. (Sixue, interview with author, 15 February 2017) [my translation]

Sixue's concern is not simply a personal opinion. The intention of imbricating their filmic judgement with vast viewing experience is reflected in many critics' writing. For example, in his review of Lee Chang-dong's *Beoning* (*Burning*, Chang-dong Lee, 2018, South Korea and Japan), Xi Pake writes,

Men always falls in love with the women of their fantasy. Just like James Stewart in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958, USA) is crazy about a non-existent woman, and trying to dress up Kim Novak like the woman he dreamed of, Jong-su's infatuation with Hae-mi appears to be the same... Like Anna in *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960, Italy and France), in the second half of the film, Hae-mi became the MacGuffin that the protagonist pursues, her loss pushes the wrestling between the two male protagonists... Learnt from Akira Kurosawa's *Tengoku to jigoku* (*High and Low*, Akira Kurosawa, 1963, Japan), Lee Chang-dong connects two worlds in the same city, by virtue of a lost person.³⁷ [my translation]

Xi Pake's pedantic writing style, which makes a display of his film viewing and knowledge, is not uncommon among internet critics, even though most do not possess academic credentials or professional qualifications on the subject of film and screen

³⁷ See Xi Pake's review from: <https://movie.douban.com/review/9593540/> (Accessed: 20 December 2019).

studies. In fact, internet critics have already been criticised for their stereotyped writing modality and unskilled high-blown style. Tuoluo, 28, put it honestly,

I would say I am not very educated, I do not read much. I just have some thoughts about film, but I do not think I have the ability to achieve it [the qualification as a professional film critic]. I can tell if the film is good or bad, or what elements make it a good film, but I can not analyse it properly by film theory. I did write something, but it is just a ‘*guanhou gan* 观后感’, not criticism. (Tuoluo, interview with author, 14 February 2017) [my translation]

In China, ‘*guanhou gan*’ refers to common homework for school students to practice their writing skills by recapitulating the main points and (briefly) expressing their opinions after watching a piece of audiovisual work. Among all the respondents, only three (Liankai, Sixue and Guojie) out of eleven had received a formal film education. However, an academic qualification does not make their voices more forceful than others who simply write a ‘*guanhou gan*’. Personal viewing experience indeed plays a significant role in demonstrating the critic’s authoritative taste, but more crucially, the criticism scene revolves around a dynamic hierarchal network particularly dominated by established male agents.

5.3 Networked Critics, Dynamic Hierarchy, and the Gendered Dimension of Cinephilia

In 2015, a group of critics set up a virtual organisation called ‘Cinema Trend’. ‘Cinema Trend’ regularly broadcasts critics’ ratings and reviews for cinema releases through eight platforms, including the authoritative Phoenix New Media, and seven self-media platforms (including IRIS, Taotao Choosing Film, Breathless Film Club, Movie1958, Watching Film Until I Die, Movie Island, and Cinematographe). Run by prominent critics, these platforms are best-known for broadcasting trendy (art and commercial mainstream) filmic knowledge and information. The broad following of each platform secures a stable viewership for ‘Cinema Trend’ as an influential aggregate for filmic judgement and taste production. In fact, according to the list of critics provided in ‘Cinema Trend’ from 2015 to 2017, the critics are not only constituted of those who make a living through self-media business but also by those involved in institutional sites of criticism, such as higher education researchers, (former) editors or chief editors of noted (film) magazines (for

example, *Dian Ying Shi Jie (Film World)*, *Zhong Guo Xin Wen Zhou Kan (China News Week)*) and large media firms (for example, Phoenix Media, Sina).³⁸ Even in the brief description of the critics, many of those who focus on self-media business also label themselves as film culture researchers, film industry participants, and film festival consultants, titles that mimic, and possibly contest, their professional counterparts involved in formal institutions for the legitimate form of authority in the site of criticism. What is significant here is that, whilst conventional and (established) internet critics have constituted a coherent network for authoritative taste and judgement making, junior critics, not as illustrious as the former in terms of public recognition, are barely incorporated into the centralised network that predominantly relies on social relations between established critics. The limited number of junior critics included in the Cinema Trend's list are most likely just regular contributors to prominent digital magazines like IRIS, Breathless Film Club, and Cinematographe. In speaking about how the self-media public account he operates has generated opportunities for young critics' personal development, Sha, chief editor of Movie1958 as well as curator of China Film Archive Art Cinema, said,

Many 'kids' enhanced their professional competence by writing articles [for me]. There's a girl from New York University who has been writing for me, not for a long time, but I think she's quite famous already – having some influence. After her graduation, she found a job in NetEase News, 200,000-*yuan* incomes in 17 months. You know how difficult it is to find a job today! [my translation] (Sha, interview with author, 5 July 2017)

Having attempted to convince me to write for him (with remuneration) by delivering the latest news and reviews about British cinema, Sha believed that the experience could enhance my public profile and ultimately benefit my future career back in China. For Sha and many other established critics, I am just one of the 'kids' who exercise our practices to get closer access to the centralised network developed in conjuncture with the hierarchal agenda of criticism. Through my participant observation, I saw that the established critics have demarcated a nuanced boundary between them and younger critics, or 'the kids,' as Ye and William also called them. For example, Deep Focus, as a

³⁸ The full list of Cinema Trend's critics in each year can be found on Cinema Trend's WeChat public account: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/4xxYR67yXlzFQA1KJD823g> (Accessed: 28 December 2018).

young-(student)-critic formed entity focusing on a relatively more serious and academic dimension of film criticism, is barely included in any collaborative activities (for example, contributing to Cinema Trend) with the so-called more established critics, even though it has become increasingly influential among film lovers in recent years. Indeed, as discussed in the previous section regarding junior critics at Deep Focus not receiving equivalent remuneration for their work, it becomes crucial to indicate that there exists a dynamic hierarchy within the network of criticism and within each group, marking out each participant as established or junior, as centre or periphery, as dominant and dominated.

If one looks closer at the Cinema Trend's critic list, it is not difficult to find that the comparatively junior critics are basically constituted by female writers, while established male critics account for as much as 95 percent of all contributors. Although in 2018 the number of female critics increased to 13 (out of 60), it does not fundamentally change the fact of the domination in the circle of criticism by male agents. On the other hand, apart from junior critics, the other female contributors are substantially engaged in prominent mainstream media or academic institutions, whose position of representation or symbolic power in the field of (art) film appears to be higher (but relatively lacking in attention among public audiences) than their male counterparts who are solely involved in self-media enterprises. Maggie Lee, for example, as the chief Asian film critic of *Variety* magazine, is included in the list as a prime contributor. In other words, in the male-dominated realm of film criticism, the scale of what makes a female writer a critic appears to hold a higher standard than their male counterpart.

Moreover, of the 50 best releases that are selected by the Cinema Trend critics between 2015 and 2018, it is influenced by a strong sense of taste and judgement dominated by a masculine perspective. For example, there is not a single female filmmaker's work selected for the list. Vivian Qu's *Jia Nian Hua* (*Angels Wear White*, Vivian Qu, 2017, China), which addresses sexism and patriarchalism in a small coastal town, which achieved considerable social impact and economic success, was completely outside of the critics' poll. By contrast, films like *Hacksaw Ridge* (Mel Gibson, 2016, Australia and USA) and *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017, UK, Netherlands, France and USA) focus on male protagonist(s) have been largely voted on the male critics' favourite lists that promote a refined taste and masculine mastery.

Such value is not only circulated via Cinema Trend but more oftentimes through a densely interwoven network of male critics. According to my participant observation, male critics are almost all connected to one another, sharing and commenting on each other's reviews and articles on social media from time to time. For example, in 2016, Yun Zhong, a male critic who contributes to Du She Film, directed a film called *Hu Xi Zheng Chang* (*Something in Blue*, Li Yunbo, 2016, China) by production company Cinephilia Media Co. Ltd. It is worth noting that many of the contributors including the producer himself are all famous established critics. As a first ever film directed and produced by actors within the network, numerous critics lavished praise for the film by writing testimonials to their fans and organising (both commercial and independent) exhibition groups. In the 2016 poll of Cinema Trend, *Something in Blue* remarkably ranked on the list above *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (Ang Lee, 2016, UK, China and USA) and *Ta Luo* (*Tharlo*, Pema Tseden, 2015, China). As Xi Pake comments,

When Richard Linklater's youth encountered Woody Allen's city blue: fragmented storyline of *Something in Blue* maintains the gentle rhythm. Yun Zhong's directorial debut has outstanding thoughts, definitely closer to our real life than the popular drama.

³⁹ [my translation]

However, given Xi Pake's generous recommendation, a vital question is raised concerning how the film represents 'our real life', or from whose point of view *our* real life is being observed. *Something in Blue* focuses on four young male protagonists who endeavour to find the meaning of life. In the gaze of the male protagonist as well as the director, the female characters are objects of desire and conquest that either yield or obstruct the goals of the male protagonist in the process of male's seeking gender identity.

Similarly, within the network of critics, women have been ubiquitously treated as objects of pleasure and fascination. 'Zhinan'ai 直男癌 [literally: straight-men cancer] is all over the place in this circle,' Xiaojia, 24, grumbled [my translation] (Xiaojia, interview with author, 13 February 2017).⁴⁰ After graduating with a BA in film studies from the

³⁹ Xi Pake's comment can be found on: <https://movie.douban.com/subject/26665828/> (Accessed: 20 December 2018).

⁴⁰ Broadly used in both online and everyday context, the notion 'zhinan'ai' refers to chauvinist men who exercise male-centred and male-dominated social values in everyday life, reacting disrespectfully and unconcernedly to females and femininity. The term "Straight Man Cancer," coined in mid-2014, refers to

University of California, Berkeley, Xiaojia has thrown herself into Chinese independent film distribution and marketing. In 2017, Xiaojia was invited by William to join a chat group named ‘old drivers’, a term intended to connote both sexually and cinematically experienced people. The group of 58 members is dominated by men, established critics but also prominent independent filmmakers, distributors and exhibitors, most of whom are in their mid-30s. The female members, of which there are fewer than 10, are like Xiaojia, young, passionate about film enterprise but much less well-known compared to their male counterparts. Apart from discussing film-related topics or social issues, teasing and judging of (some) female members with sexual language occurs regularly in the group. This testifies to the gender relations determined by powerful male critics to whom a woman is nothing more than an object both on the screen and in real life - sexism serves as the dominant tone of discourse.

With this in mind, it is necessary to examine how cinematic experience is gendered in such a way as to advantage men and disadvantage women. In Chapter 3, I noted that the underground attribute of piracy and the erotic image of art film forms an intimate and self-regulated environment of reception between (male) spectators and the film text. As most critics were first DVD collectors, the piracy and home film culture of the 1990s and 2000s undoubtedly grounded their strong interest in cinema, both cultural and sexual. First of all, when sex was pervasively below ground in Chinese public discourse, the piracy industry particularly articulated a strong marketing interest towards masculine public. At the time, to enhance DVD sale among male viewers, many piracy merchandisers disclaimed ‘controversial’ films as sexually provocative or X-rated, such as *Bitter Moon* (Roman Polanski, 1992, France, UK and USA), *La pianiste* (*The Piano Teacher*, Michael Haneke, 2001, Austria, France and Germany) and *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002, France), as part of their marketing strategies in the Chinese context of moral evaluation and patriarchal imperatives. Until now, the alleged top 10 list of banned films around the world⁴¹ concocted by piracy distributors and merchandisers still makes an

chauvinist, judgmental behavior and language that propels sexist double standards or belittles women. See media discussion in Tang N (2015) ‘Straight Man Cancer’: Sexism with Chinese Characteristics: Could an ill-advised social media comment spark a gender revolution in China?. *The Diplomat*, 5 May. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/straight-man-cancer-sexism-with-chinese-characteristics/> (accessed 05 January 2020).

⁴¹ These films are: *The Last House on the Left* (Dennis Iliadis, 1972, USA), *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975, Italy and France), *Ai no korîda* (*In the Realm of the Senses*, Nagisa Ôshima, 1976, Japan and France), *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe,

impact on spectator's film consumption. In the form of pirated DVDs, art film, as well as the female object displayed, became part of the intimate repertoire of domestic objects (Klinger, 2006: 177) that were subject to the determining gaze of the male collector. Seated in front of a home screen, a male collector could gain both pleasures of film ownership and of male voyeurism and fetishism.

However, none of the male critic respondents confessed that erotic soft-porn elements and adult themes had ever impacted their taste and consumption of film. 'People like us, we would not make that kind of low-level mistake,' said Rui (interview with author, 13 June 2017) [my translation]. In the previous chapter, I analysed the use of 'levels' among exhibitors who attempt to secure their gatekeeping status through the taste hierarchies they embrace and perpetuate. By the same token, the critics have also sought to pronounce their state of inhabiting a higher stratum in the taste hierarchy by denying their fascination with the subject of film simply through scopophilic eroticism. Ironically, to boost followers and page views of their social media accounts, many critics employ racy headlines that hint at eroticism or sexually provocative content, such as 'Innocent and Sexy, Her New Starred Film is Irresistible', 'Body might be Rotten, but Desire Lives Eternally', and 'No wonder the Kinkiest Director, His New Opus is Definitely an X-Rated', even though, in most of the cases, the articles are just a common review without overtly sexual language employed. Taotao's profile photo, as a lot of viewers are familiar with, is actually a close-up of a female character from a Japanese adult comic who is half-naked, covering her mouth with a hand and saying 'so wicked, so powerful'. As he explained,

It is just for fun. I found it amusing when first seeing the image on the internet. Then after a while I realised it is from an adult comic, but still didn't want to replace it. I am afraid that once I change the profile photo, people will probably forget about me. [my translation] (Taotao, interview with author, 20 July 2017)

Taotao's statement evidently indicates his commitment to drawing attention from a masculine public. The focus on a masculine public is not a new thing, and is traditionally

1978, USA), *Caligula* (Tinto Brass, 1979, Italy), *Ginî piggu: Manhôru no naka no ningyo* (Guinea Pig: Mermaid in a Manhole, Hideshi Hino, 1988, Japan), *The Baby of Mâcon* (Peter Greenaway, 1993, Netherlands, France, UK and Germany), *Ôdishon* (Audition, Takashi Miike, 1999, Japan), *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes, 2000, France), and *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky, 2000, USA), and *Irréversible*.

dwelled in the realm of cinephilic culture. As Geneviève Sellier points out in *Masculine Singular*,

Cinephilia, an amorous relation to filmed images, thus seems to be structured by a divided between a more or less conscious fascination for films that are actually addressed to a masculine public or constructed for a masculine gaze – the cinephilic preference for certain American genres (the thriller, the western) is explained as well by the gendered targeting of audiences by Hollywood, which has no equivalent in French cinema – and an intellectual effort that aimed to empty these films of any attachment they have to the world in order to make them into the sublimated objects of a cult. (2008: 28)

For Sellier, (male) cinephiles strived to repress the relationship between their state of being what Bourdieu (1984) characterises as ‘cultivated’ and the masculine perspective of Hollywood. On the other hand, the ‘new’ cinematic culture nurtured by (male) cinephiles is inevitably echoed and repeated in a way that (art) cinema is a reflection of masculine imagery. As the New Wave developed, film criticism thus became almost exclusively associated with a form of masculine sociability (based on the *Cahiers du cinema*) devoted to eroticism and desire for female objects in a cinephilic gaze, and more profoundly, inventing gendered stakes of cultural production of cinema in France (Sellier, 2008). In other words, traditional dominant white patriarchy functions as the basis of such traditions of film criticism (Bell, 2011; Lant and Periz eds, 2006; Selfe, 2012).

Similarly, as we have seen, the practices of Chinese critics echo the gendered dimension of cinephilia: cultivated in piracy and home film culture, they have sought to form a mode of critical reception that is strongly marked by the expression of male subjectivity and constructed for a masculine gaze. In the meantime, this gendered cinephilic culture is also defined by a clear hierarchical structure that centralises the interwoven nexus of established professional male critics, while depreciating female as well as junior reviewers’ jurisdiction. Remarkably, the prominent male critics were almost all derived from amateur enthusiasts who used to write for free, while today they have forged their own media empire through internet platforms, that is, a new authoritative institution of film criticism.

6. Fan Translators: In the Name of Amateurism

In 2014, Shooter.cn was cracked down on by the authorities for supplying unlicensed copyrighted materials. As the largest database site for foreign-language film and subtitled TV series in China, Shooter had been offering free fan-produced subtitle files to the public for fifteen years. Deprived of the confidence to confront state control targeting copyright infringement, the founder Shen Cheng left a final statement on Shooter's empty homepage:

What impact I expected Shooter to have is to let more people surmount national obstacles, understanding different cultures in the world. If this site helped to achieve this, I would be really satisfied. However, the era that needed Shooter has gone.⁴² [my translation]

In fact, the era of ardent fan translators has not passed. Shooter was not the only fansub community site that shares downloadable subtitled audiovisual resources, breaking loose from state oligopolistic regulation of distribution and exhibition, and it surely will not be the last one. Since 2000, numerous fan communities have emerged (as well as individual translators) that are engaged in transmitting literary and audiovisual works related to the global screen, from Japanese anime to Romanian new waves. *Renren Yingshi* (YYeTs), for example, founded in 2002, was one of the earliest and most popular fansub communities recognised by Chinese viewers with American TV series, while simultaneously exercising interpretative subtitling practices of foreign-language films, both commercial and artistic (Zhang and Mao, 2013). Fan subtitling, along with other fan interpretative practices involved in the interpretation and dissemination of a wide range of filmic materials associated with international (art) cinema (such as journal articles and academic works), play a significant role in generating a culture of film viewing and downloading, minimizing the obstacle of state control. Indeed, in recent years, online video platforms have sought to get more and more legally licensed international films streamed online. Unlike television broadcast and theatrical release, online video

⁴² See Shen Cheng's statement on the Shooter homepage: <http://www.shooter.cn/> (Accessed: 13 March 2019).

streaming content is not directly under the Film Bureau's stringent control.⁴³ IQIYI, for example, provides a range of authorised foreign-language arthouse films to its viewers (or more precisely, its members, as most of the films are required a paid membership—19.8 *yuan* per month—for the access), especially those recognised by major international film festivals, including *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes without a Face*, Georges Franju, 1960, France and Italy), *Camille Claudel* (Bruno Nuytten, 1988, France), *Carne trémula* (*Live Flesh*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1997, Spain and France), *Das weiße Band* (*The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, 2009, Germany, Austria, France, Italy and Canada), *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*, Paolo Sorrentino, 2013, Italy and France), and *Hrútar* (*Rams*, Grímur Hákonarson, 2015, Iceland, Denmark, Norway and Poland). However, to comply with the authorities' cryptic rules and erratic enforcement, online video sites like IQIYI are compelled to implement self-censorship over pornography, nudity, seditious and overtly political content in these films (Montgomery and Priest, 2016: 350). What is worth noting is that these films were already available in unbridged fansubbed versions, circulated among film fans long before they officially aired. State censorship and control of cultural products forces fan translators to seek alternative ways to circulate beloved materials by the informal method of distribution via internet platforms.

The history of cultural translation in contemporary China provides evidence of the way in which the value of film texts were mainly mediated by dominant institutions and intellectuals in conjunction with national and ideological agendas of cinema. Chinese audiences have long suffered in a culturally and politically conservative media environment where dubbing was one of the few sources for public viewers to make cultural connections with the rest of the world. The emergence and elaboration of online fan translation communities creates a (comparatively) decentralised network of content sharing and the disjunction between cultural engagement and state domination. For many scholars, the informal distributing and translating practices epitomise a form of resistance that enables ordinary audiences to express disagreement with commercial/professional media content (Cintas and Sánchez, 2006; Pérez-González, 2007; Pérez-González and

⁴³ The regulatory structure around online video streaming in China is more complex and ambiguous, which is subject to the discretionary power by multiple regulating bodies—the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Culture, the Cyberspace Affairs Council of China, and the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA, established in March 2018 by taking over the administration and supervision of the radio and television sector from the SAPPRFT)—each of which issues its own decisions (Wang and Lobato, 2019: 363).

Susam-Saraeva, 2012) and to gain freedom from state domination (Zhang and Mao, 2013; Wang and Zhang, 2017) through digital technology. Pérez-González argues that the subtitling practices conducted by ordinary citizens in the era of digital culture have led to ‘de-legitimizing the tradition of suppression and disrupt the assimilation of subtitles into the visual mode’ (2012: 5–6) imposed by traditional cinematic and subtitling apparatuses, hence fostering the formation of participatory citizenship. Pérez-González builds his argument around the idea that amateur translators’ mediated participation, empowered by new media technologies, exemplifies a subjective mode of spectatorial experiences representing the needs and preferences of their target audiences that they themselves are a part of. As spectators who are both constrained and empowered, amateur translators’ public engagement with cultural translation blurs the traditional boundaries between film text and viewers, invoking more pluralist patterns of film consumption, what Chouliaraki calls ‘new forms of playful citizenship, critical discourse and cosmopolitan solidarity’ (2010: 227).

Given the prominence of cultural and political control over formal distribution and exhibition sectors in China, individual citizens engaging in informal film circuits exemplifies a tidal shift from personal to public forms of consumption. Following my argument in Chapter 3 that pirated DVDs cultivated an art film culture based on personalised film experience among zealous DVD collectors, today’s fan-subtitled films to some extent supersede the role of pirated DVDs, and more dramatically improve public accessibility to international art film materials and civic culture in general via the internet. Following Jenkins, Zhang and Mao suggest that the translation of not-for-entertainment content, such as open courses from prestigious universities and academic and journalistic articles, implicate fan translators in the process of shifting personal interest towards the public good, therefore creating a ‘participatory civic culture’ (2013: 55). In Jenkins’ original formulation, fans’ participatory practices represent their resistance towards dominant cultural hierarchy where their desires are repressed, their voices are eliminated. As Jenkins writes,

Rejecting the aesthetic distance Bourdieu suggests is a cornerstone of bourgeois aesthetics, fans enthusiastically embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations into their own social experience. Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. (1992: 18)

Fan translators' participatory practices in China have more or less challenged the legitimacy of nationally and ideologically hierarchal agendas by intervening in filmic reception and circulation. Yet it does not make fan translators, as a group of cultural intermediaries, more rebellious for defying authority and restriction than the preceding two roles discussed in the previous two chapters. Much research on fansubbing in China (for example, Wang and Zhang, 2013; Zhang and Mao, 2013) points out that fan subtitlers are not intentionally engaged in expressing political disagreement. However, by circumscribing fan subtitlers within the context of popular culture or civic engagement, existing studies have barely attempted to expatiate upon the aesthetic account of fan interpretative/participatory practices and how such practice is conditioned by the power relations both inside and outside fan translation communities. According to my participant observation, I would argue that fan translators in China actually comply with the hierarchical system constructed by dominant agents within the field of art film, both inside and outside fan communities. Given the arguments in Chapters 4 and 5 that comparatively well-established exhibitors and critics seek to constitute a hierarchal institution between themselves and ordinary audiences, and between them with female and junior practitioners, it is argued that there exists an interior distinction and hierarchy within the field of art film in China by which fan translators are situated in a dominant position, mobilizing themselves around the periphery of the field. In contrast to the previous two groups of cultural intermediaries – independent exhibition organisers and internet critics – whose activities and practices are highly personalised and more or less acquire the accumulation of economic and symbolic capital to sustain their dominant status, fan translators barely resort to expressing self-preference or economic incentives but represent a higher commitment toward a certain film community built on the spirit of volunteerism and shared interests. Based on my participant observation and in-depth interviews with 14 fan translators from four different fan communities, this chapter reconfigures the role of fan translators as more than a mimic of the original filmic text but an interpreter who represents their aesthetic understanding of art cinema to potential consumers; on the other hand, their interpretive practices are also confined by certain rules and hierarchal forces inside the community. As the final analysis chapter of the thesis, this chapter also attempts to recapitulate some aspects of the arguments presented in the previous chapters, which suggests a linkage between all three forms of cultural intermediaries. In Section 1, I examine how the intermediaries mediate the meaning of art film between a foreign context and Chinese audiences. Section 2 scrutinises the

relationship between fan text translators' personal commitment and collective imagination. Finally, Section 3 analyses the hierarchical forces that exist within fan translation communities and extends the narrative into the wider field of art film.

6.1 'Text Porters'

Fan translation builds upon individual fan's interpretive practices, taking the original text as the base from which to reproduce and fit it into a new context of cultural distinction.

'We are just like a bunch of "*banyun gong* 搬运工 [porters]"', said Delpy, 'never thought of how significant we are. The most important thing is to redeliver what the author wants to present, in an accurate and good way' [my translation] (Delpy, interview with author, 6 September 2018). From Delpy's statement, an important question concerns how fan translator intermediaries 'port' between overseas filmic texts and domestic audiences, or more precisely, how they exercise their interpretive practices to accomplish the fidelity of translation to the original filmic texts and authorial intentionality. By answering this question, I would argue that their practices ultimately represent a pattern of consumption conducted in the circuit of informal distribution, connecting audiences to the understanding of the concept of art cinema.

Speaking of 'fidelity' in fan translated materials, some academic studies have found 'imperfections' (Flynn, 2016: 3) (for example, errors, nuances and ambiguities) to be an essential part of fan translation. The quality of fan translation has been seen both positively and negatively: on the one hand, presenting its inadequacy and informality to the consumers, on the other hand, implying its attributes are 'far less dogmatic and more creative and individualistic' (Cintas and Sánchez, 2006: 51) than conventional/professional translation. Moreover, it is necessary to point out that the coexistence of fan translation and errors is also partly because fan translation communities have become 'increasingly marketised, with groups behaving competitively and being encouraged to standardise (and professionalise) production to attract greater numbers of fan viewers' (Denison, 2011: 9). What emerges from competitiveness and standardised/professionalised production is a division between a cultural practice focused on the audiovisual piece itself, and a practice where market demands and speed take priority over the quality of translated work produced. Whilst 'amateur'/voluntary practice

becomes marketised, it is in turn suggestive of a binary status of fan translation: producing goods in the name of love and borderless cultural transmission, while providing a service based on consumerist demands. As Linda, 29, who has participated in the IB Fansubbing Group (a fansubbing group particularly focusing on trending British TV drama and comedy) for over five years, said,

We have to think about the market demand and supply. For example, if the drama or comedy could draw attention to viewers, subtitling then becomes meaningful. Because there are hundreds and thousands of programmes, if we blindly translated every one of them, it is actually kind of a waste of labour resources. [my translation] (Linda, interview with author, 7 November 2018)

To make the activity of translation and subtitling more ‘meaningful’ within the construction of popular culture most fan translation communities like IB, that focus on popular entertainment programmes, strain to become the first to produce and upload the subtitled version (*qiang shoufa* 抢首发), to achieve most attention and name recognition. In such a competitive environment, one could download and enjoy the latest episode of their favourite TV drama, such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2019), only a few hours after it aired on HBO, regardless of whether any mistakes or ambiguities might be caused by the haste. Because of the broad acceptance of downloading, an illustrious fansubbing group could make a fortune by embedding advertisements in the subtitled video materials. For example, as Figure 35 shows, the rolling advertisement (appearing approximately every 15 minutes) in a subtitled version of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2019) contains content like ‘Grand Lisboa Macau Entertainment Centre, www.457.net, watch adult video star deal live online, new registrations receive a bundle of benefits’ [my translation]. Apparently targeting a male market, such rolling advertisements are not unfamiliar to regular fansub viewers. What is of interest here is that the seemingly inappropriate advertisement content implies not only the underlying economic incentive but also the attribute of fan translation as an informal activity.



Figure 30. Roll advertisement in *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2019); subtitled by Yuan Jian fansubbing group.

Whilst symbolic and possibly economic profits remains a priority for a fan translation group, an individual participant's mediating function between screen content and audiences becomes less substantive. In order to accelerate progress, one video is usually splintered into parts and tasked to multiple translators at once (a ten minute clip per person on average), a standardised process of translation and subtitling in which each actor is placed in their hermetic isolation from the moving images as a whole (according to my participant observation, sometimes translators have no idea about what film or TV series they are working on, or have never heard of or watched the given visual materials before). Such a scenario appears to resemble the Fordist assembly line in which tasks were segmented, alienating the worker from the finished product. Whilst the surplus value created by assembly line labour is utilised to maximise capital production, the idea of volunteerism and idealism somehow becomes a tool in availing fan translators as free labour to achieve symbolic or/and economic profits. Although, in most cases, the breakaway translated texts will be ironed out by one or two proofreaders regarding any mistakes and incoherencies that occur before finally uploaded online, it does not change the fact that the reproductive paradigm has led to the disruption of cultural and aesthetic value that film evokes. On a more abstract plane, the disruption can be comprehended as what Walter Benjamin characterises as the contemporary depreciation of the aura of originality: 'the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and

humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction' (1936: 217). Drawing upon Benjamin's conception, fan translation and subtitling in general has become a mechanism for representing universal popular culture and mass production (the exhibition value of global screen culture, or linking to Bourdieu's term, large-scale production), garnering capital in the development of digital technology and (informal) distribution.

Despite sharing some affinity with the general process of fansubbing, art cinema focused translating practice, with its elevation of the cult value of texts, serves as an effort to consolidate the 'original' texts and retain the integrity and authenticity of cinema against an influx of mass culture. Following the discussion in the literature review that art cinema is attributed to the discourses with both its aesthetic account of texts and structural property of diffusion, it is necessary to investigate how the paradigms of cult values of art cinema have been mediated through the practices of the translator intermediaries.

According to interviewees, 'fitting the translation into the style of the (art) film' is clearly the foundation of the game. For instance, internet slang is strictly prohibited in the translated texts, as David, 26, coordinator of Breathless Film Club fansubbing group, explained, 'It is cool for a commercial film, but looks really awkward to see that kind of subtitle popping up in an art film' [my translation] (David, interview with author, 12 June 2017). Whilst internet slang and its distinct attribute to mass culture is circumscribed, translator intermediaries tend to shift the focus of online fan translation to film itself as an aesthetic experience and as a cultural form. Dina, 24, recalled her experience of subtitling *Paterson* (Jim Jarmusch, 2016, France, Germany and USA) with another two translators from Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group,

I was really excited about this film. As you know, Jim Jarmusch is quite pedantic, and the film itself is a poetic piece. We tried very hard to translate it into one as rhetorical as the original, even creating poetry in Chinese. And there was one scene where a girl and a boy were talking about a period of time in history, but we could not find information about this history anywhere, the translator ended up reading a book to make sure that part of the translation was correct. [my translation] (Dina, interview with author, 12 September 2018)

What is implicit in Dina's description is that she and her translator partners tied their efforts into suturing over cultural differences, and more importantly, reconciling the

filmmaker Jim Jarmusch's distinctive authorial signature with the Chinese context of consumption. Looking at the subtitled piece of *Paterson* accomplished by Dina's group, they indeed employed a variety of interpretative methods to represent the aesthetic essence of the film, for example, applying a cursive handwriting font for the poems that Paterson writes in the scenes (see Figure 36), and using annotations and glosses (see Figure 37, in which the upper line briefly explains the Italian anarchist newspaper that is mentioned by two young people in the scene). With such conscientious efforts, they ended up spending a week (the average time for art film subtitling, according to interviewees) to complete the translation, a relatively drawn-out process compared to those informed by high mass market demands.



Figure 31. Paterson is writing poem in the bus in *Paterson* (Jim Jarmusch, 2016, France, Germany and USA), subtitled by Breathless Film Club fansubbing group.



Figure 32. Two young people are chatting in the bus in *Paterson* (Jim Jarmusch, 2016, France, Germany and USA), subtitled by Breathless Film Club fansubbing group.

Like Dina, many interviewees gave an account of exerting their knowledge and perception of cinema in general or particular filmmakers to their interpretative practices. For example, Zhe, 37, speaking of his experience of translating Chinese Korean filmmaker Zhang Lu's *Yong Er* (*Ode to the Goose*, Zhang Lu, 2018, South Korea), remarked:

In his film, the characters' lines are slow, with a lot of modal particles. Normally we do not see many modal particles on subtitles, but it is actually how we talk to each other in everyday life. I noticed that modal particles can imply certain subtle nuance of emotion. I tried to represent such emotion, so that the viewers may find the characters real, mundane, ordinary, and not easy to be identified. It must be different from that in Korean genre films where standard heroes have a standard way of speaking, viewers can even figure out their personality from the way they speak! [my translation] (Zhe, interview with author, 3 March 2019)

As a Chinese Korean himself, as well as one of the few respondents who has an educational background related to film studies, Zhe imbricates the interpretative practices with his everyday life, which somehow represents the realist aesthetics of art cinema convention to viewers that are both embedded in the original texts and mediated by the cultural agency of the translator.

Both Dina and Zhe's words provide exemplary instances of the ways in which the 'text porting' process is more than simply mimicking but channelling a matrix of auratic values that are embedded in the original texts. Yet, in terms of non-English language films, not every translator could have mastery of another language as Zhe does. For most translators who do not know a given language well, a common solution is to access its existing subtitles in English, which could be downloaded from either domestic or overseas (mostly based in Russia) subtitle sites. Even with English as the language, misinterpretation can still be highly likely in the course of translation for art films. A compelling example is Minghang, 23, a respondent involved in the translation group of Deep Focus, who came to me and shared his experience of re-viewing a subtitled version of Japanese film *Den-en ni shisu* (*Pastoral: To Die in the Country*, Shūji Terayama, 1974, Japan):

It is probably a quite old version, I have no idea who did this translation. You know, the lines in this film are quite abstract, hard to translate. There was one line I really like: “我最爱的信鸽，带着一片云彩离开了我[my favourite dove left me, bringing away a wisp of cloud]”. It sounds poetic and artistic, does not it? I thought it was classic! But after asking some friends who speak Japanese to listen to it again, we realised that it is completely different from what Shūji Terayama actually means! The line should have been “我最爱的信鸽撞向阴云密布的天空，粉身碎骨 [my favourite dove crashed into darken clouds, dashing itself into pieces]” [my translation] (Minghang, interview with author, 7 November 2018)

What is of interest in Minghang's description is that, although the translated text is incorrect, the translator still attempted to create an elusive and philosophic sense in a way that accords to the aesthetics of the film. In addition, as Minghang repeatedly wondered who did this translation, or in other words, who was responsible for the inaccurate subtitles, it becomes necessary to reconsider the anonymous and voluntary attribute of informal/fan translation that, without remuneration as a social contract, one may not necessarily feel obligated to deliver strictly correct translations, unless one has a firm interest in the film.

To reduce whatever misinterpretation the English subtitles might contain, an ardent art film fan translator may check subtitles from different sources. As Delpy described her experience of tackling *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders, 1987, West Germany and France),

I firstly tried one from the CC [Criterion Collection] edition, but then found it lacking in some way! To find the best solution, I probably downloaded about seven or eight other versions of English subtitles, plus its German, even Japanese and existing Chinese subtitles, to compare the differences. It really took me a long time to finish it. One day, we received a comment saying that (s)he didn't understand when first watching this film but now (s)he can. I guess the one (s)he watched before was just translated directly from the CC edition. [my translation] (Delpy, interview with author, 6 September 2018)

Delpy's description seems to resonate with the similar scenario of pirated DVD production mentioned in Chapter 3 in which pirated DVD manufacturers used to integrate a variety of regional versions of DVDs into one while the quality of a pirated DVD would be subject to the manufacturer's judgement of taste and partiality. For example, as alluded to previously, Gang, former manufacturer of WX, a piracy corporation in the 2000s, took half a year to gather eight versions of *Nostalghia* into one only because of his personal predilection for this film. Yet, what is different between then manufacturers like Gang and present fan translators is that the former, as paid workers, did not have the faith as firm as the latter has toward cinema as well as toward the community they presume they belong to. The following section then turns to an analysis of the translator intermediaries' idealistic dedication to cinema and fan translation communities.

6.2 Personal Allegiance and the Imagination of an Idealistic Community

One day I saw a line on Weibo: in the circle of film fans, there are only two categories of people making real contributions: one is resource finders and updaters; the other one is subtitlers.⁴⁴ It really stirred my emotions. At the time, I was preparing for my CET-6 exam but not really in the mood of doing reading or practicing.⁴⁵ While the

⁴⁴ Resource finders and updaters refer to people who lurk on overseas film resource sites and upload the latest video source materials with better sound and image quality to the domestic.

⁴⁵ CET-6, short for College English Test-6, is a nationwide English proficiency test for both undergraduate and postgraduate students in China.

information of *Elephant Song* [Charles Binamé, 2014, Canada] leapt to the eye, I became keen to see this film, but could not find any subtitled material available. So I was thinking, why not give it a go? Then I found it interesting, and I cracked on with it until now. [my translation] (Dina, interview with author, 12 September 2018)

Inspired by the altruistic endeavour of fan subtitlers, Dina made her first steps towards translating the subtitles of foreign language films to access her coveted film *Elephant Song* (starring one of her favourite filmmakers and actors Xavier Dolan). In fact, before joining Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group, Dina had sought to subtitle three or four foreign language films (including *Elephant Song*) all by herself, because, as she explained, ‘I wasn’t good enough, I didn’t want to be the drag on the progress of ‘*zuzhi*’ [organisation] [my translation] (interview with author, 12 September 2018). The notion of ‘*zuzhi*’ (组织) in the contemporary Chinese context is commonly seen as the abbreviation of ‘*dang zuzhi*’ (党组织), in reference to the CCP, an association that clustered people with common political pursuits together by which the imagination of a socialist society was created and the idea of collectivism was heightened. Here, in Dina’s line, the political analogy implies the relationship between individual participants and the translation group, as well as between personal allegiance and collective imagination. It is worth noting that, during the interviews, the interviewees used the word ‘we’/‘us’ more often than ‘I’/‘me’ (as many of the previous and following interview quotes in this chapter indicate) in reference to their practices of translation regardless of whether the tasks were accomplished alone or together with other team members. What is significant here is that the use of the plural form is suggestive of the perspective of the fan translators in which their practices extend beyond the matter of personal contribution but simultaneously signify an epitome of what the group or community entails.

Anderson (1983) argues that all communities beyond face-to-face contact are imagined, whereby the members live the images of their connections with one another. Following Anderson, Baym suggests that the imagination of an (online) community is embodied in the ways in which the members ‘develop and maintain the rituals, traditions, norms, values, and sense of group and individual identity that allow them to consider themselves communities’ (2000: 218). Drawing on Anderson and Baym’s accounts, a more demanding question for the following discussion is how the practices of cultural translation and informal distribution function simultaneously as a form of personal representation and as a source of collective group identity, and how the translator

intermediaries exert idiosyncratic commitment to pronounce their collective identity of the community.

As far as individual engagement is concerned, a majority of interviewees (10 out of 14) made it clear that they are not placing themselves in a bigger picture or thinking about making a significant contribution in terms of a commitment to cultural diversity by broadcasting foreign-language film and film culture to Chinese audiences, but ‘just doing something that I want to do. The sense of achievement that subtitling gives me makes me happy,’ as Milly, 22, stressed [my translation] (interview with author, 12 September 2018). Indeed, as many interviewees indicated, ‘to reach the sense of achievement’ or ‘gratify my own vanity’, is the main motivation that induces them to translate filmic materials, because, for many of them, it simply means having an intimate connection with beloved films. As Penny said,

I just simply want to see my name appearing in the ‘crew’ of this subtitled version. It is a really niche one for Chinese audiences, not like those popular series, so it gives me the feeling that for all the viewers in this country who love this film I am the only outlet! [my translation] (Penny, interview with author, 5 November 2018)

Whilst the names of the translators, often embodied as humorous soubriquets, turn up in the very beginning of the subtitled film, it gives credit for their grassroots contribution to the interpretation and distribution of the film. However, most viewers are rarely attentive to who is actually involved in the process of translation, focusing more on the general quality of the translation the group delivers. It thus demarcates fan translators from the other two intermediaries discussed previously (independent exhibitors and internet critics): the former case emphasises the prestige of the group rather than the person, while the latter two intermediary roles’ cultural practice prioritises the recognition and enrichment of the community over personal gain in terms of the accumulation of symbolic or economic capital.

Individual fan translators’ practices, however, become a pursuit of film knowledge, language proficiency and taste, situating themselves within an idealist paradigm of imagined community. Almost all the interviewees made it clear that their motivations towards cultural translation simply revolve around personal enthusiasm towards film or a certain foreign (film) culture, an idealistic amateur commitment that has nothing to do with profitable gains. As Xiaoxia, 31, self-identified as a cinephile, articulated,

Subtitling is endowed with the idea of romanticism. It may sound a bit pretentious, but we are doing this without pay, and the work is really intensive! The spirit is opposite to the principle of the market, but deals with something pure, something romantic. [my translation] (Xiaoxia, interview with author, 22 August 2018)

As an employee of the civil service, Xiaoxia always finishes his work at 10 pm, albeit striving to squeeze some time out of his busy schedule to improve his English and do some subtitling, ‘a chance to let me get out of the mundane daily routine’, as he stated [my translation] (Xiaoxia, interview with author, 22 August 2018). Xiaoxia’s words provide an exemplary instance of how fan translators who work on a voluntary basis without remuneration regard their venture of cultural translation and informal distribution of (art) cinema as an idiosyncratic commitment to what they love but also an ideal extended beyond the parameters of contemporary mundane life. Love of cinema and the spirit of volunteerism appear to be the fundamental forces tying the translators together within what Jenkins characterises as a ‘Weekend-Only World’, a utopian social community that ‘offers not so much as an escape from reality as an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society’ (1992: 287). Whilst I agree with Jenkins’ account of the emergence of an alternative reality informed by fan community, I would argue that the community itself is one part of a narrative that produces a set of hierarchical forces as its basis. As individual fan translators are internally and hierarchically placed in different positions in the community, it ultimately restricts ordinary contributors from entering the field of art film. In the following section, I will examine how the wielding of hierarchical forces in fan communities restricts the activities of translator intermediaries within the dominant position in the field of art film.

6.3 The Hierarchical Structure of the Fan Translation Community

Although fan translation groups and community celebrate the idea of volunteerism, not everyone who has a general understanding of a foreign language could access the interior network of the community and participate in the fan translation culture. Generally speaking, every group or community has their own recruitment requirement and appraisal

system to evaluate a newcomer's competence in translating foreign language filmic material and commitment to the given fan community.

Having been involved in Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group as a translator for over three years, Delpy now also takes responsibility for recruiting and training new contributors. 'Our standard is quite high, not everyone can get involved. It is not like, you just passed your CET-4 exam and are then qualified to do subtitling,' affirmed Delpy, 'what we value most is their past experience, their English capability, or how much they like cinema' [my translation] (interview with author, 6 September 2018).⁴⁶ Indeed, according to my experience of participant observation in another fansubbing group, to get into the programme, a prospective participant must pass a set of appraisals conditioned by a specific fan group or community. In the first place, one needs to fill out an application form, including some essential questions like gender, occupation, degree subject, level of language proficiency (providing testimony of marks on an official language certificate, such as CET-4, CET-6, IELTS, or TOELF), relevant experience in translation/fansubbing, favourite film/genre/star/director, time flexibility, and possibility of long-term contribution. Once the information has passed internal checks, the enlistee would be added to a 'trial group' along with other new starters and tasked to translate a video clip from an old or unknown film (approximately 10 to 15 minutes long, depending on the number of lines) as an entry test. To successfully pass the test, one must complete the translation within a few days according to rigid and detailed prescribed rules of subtitle editing drawn up by the group, for example, punctuation marks like commas, full stops, question and exclamation marks are not allowed to be used in translated texts in Chinese. Mastering the desired language skills and being subservient to the group rules are not the only two components of the evaluation process. To make sure the fansubbing neophyte can maintain a constant commitment to the group may necessitate an average of one to two month trial period in which the new entrant must complete a satisfactory task on time every single week.

Every single appraisal procedure above is planned by a senior member of the translation group who, like Delpy, plays the role of a gatekeeper wielding power and authority until

⁴⁶ CET-4, short for College English Test 4, is a mandatory English exam for all undergraduate student in China. CET-6 mentioned earlier in the chapter by Dina is a relatively more difficult test for advanced learners.

they decide the probation is ended. In most cases, the senior members (approximately 10 to 15 percent of total members) are composed of two categories of roles within the translation group: proofreaders, who maintain and operate the fidelity and coherence of the translated text before it finally comes out; and coordinators, who stipulate the general selection criteria for potential films to be translated. In the following discussion, I examine how these two roles situate themselves within the hierarchal structure both inside and outside of the fan translation community.

The majority of proofreaders (for example, Delpy, Dina, Linda, and Yushuang) are promoted from ordinary translators by virtue of their reliable performance. According to the respondents, the existing proofreaders in their groups are mainly constituted by foreign language majors, film studies majors, university lecturers, overseas residences and veteran fan subtitlers. The composition is indicative of the ways in which their competence as ‘senior members’ is measured, that is, educational qualification and cultural experience. In Bourdieu’s formulation, cultural competence, as a form of cultural capital, is important in the field of cultural production because ‘a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded’ (1984: 2). Whilst the ability to decode foreign language film has become a central force in the fan translation community, it seems that one with a higher degree of cultural competence could retain their role in a relatively dominant position. In the context of fan translation groups, the acquisition of academic certification conferred by a legitimate institution is regarded as one of the most valuable attributes. Xiaoxia, for example, after providing his qualification as a certified translator, was immediately appointed to the proofreader position by the group leader. Interestingly, with a postgraduate degree in public management, Xiaoxia obtained the translation certification completely through self-study for the sake of his love of film. As a former DVD collector, he explained,

It is an insatiable pursuit. The more films you have watched, the more you feel that language has become an obstacle. If you do not understand the language, you can not really feel the fun [of film] coming over you. I like film, so I decided to improve my English. To prove how much I love film, I achieved an official translation certification. [my translation] (interview with author, 22 August 2018)

Nevertheless, during the interview, Xiaoxia repeatedly stressed that he is not good and ‘professional’ enough in comparison to appropriate (art) film industry participants.

Although possessing a WeChat public account to record his ideas and understanding about certain films, he declined to reveal his account or provide his writing as ‘it is too lousy’. Expressing his belief that there exists a certain ‘threshold’ for both understanding and participating in art cinema, Xiaoxia stated,

Art film equates to quality film. First of all, good stuff deserves a threshold [for deciphering the meaning]. Every time you reach a certain threshold, you accumulate a little more, and you understand it a little deeper. The higher threshold you have overcome, the higher level of joy you can find. [my translation] (Xiaoxia, interview with author, 22 August 2018)

For Xiaoxia, his linguistic capital does not serve as adequate symbolic power for him to successfully step across the high ‘threshold’ of the field of art film. Like Xiaoxia, the majority of the proofreader interviewees (as well as those who remain ordinary translators) see themselves as fledglings or even outsiders in the overall field of film. For example, terms like ‘outsider’, ‘intern’, and ‘apprentice’ were frequently used by interviewees to identify their roles in the bigger spectrum. As Yushuang, 24, said, ‘I am still an outsider. I do not have a film studies background. There are so many things I need to learn. At the moment, I lack knowledge and logic to do something more advanced’ [my translation] (interview with author, 25 August 2018). Like Yushuang, all the interviewees saw their competence of decoding foreign language as a less ‘advanced’ skill, a ‘nontechnical work’ (as many interviewees said) vis-a-vis other forms of participation in the art film scene, especially in terms of writing criticism.

But on the other hand, many interviewees revealed that they intended to gain more knowledge of film (cultural capital) by virtue of their practices in translating and subtitling, therefore ultimately gaining access to the field of art film. As Minghang points out,

I have found that many other participants are like me who are interested in film and can use the English language not very badly. But at the same time, we feel our ability of writing criticism is insufficient, or not skilled enough, so we start from translation to get access to the activity of film criticism. At the moment, our taste of aesthetics is still in the process of formulating. [my translation] (Minghang, interview with author, 7 November 2018)

With an accounting and finance undergraduate degree, Minghang's educational background has nothing to do with cinema. Whilst the experience of translating English language articles for Deep Focus involved his appreciation of the work of art film, Minghang is becoming one of the key figures in Deep Focus and expanding his social network with big names, such as Lin and William, within the field. Similarly, Shimiao, 20, always dreamed of being involved in FIRST International Film Festival in Xi'an as a volunteer to devote herself to the course of Chinese cinema. However, after failing the interview twice, she made up her mind to join Deep Focus, doing some literary translation (for example, journal articles, reviews, academic works) instead. 'I was totally a rookie, didn't know who Ken Loach was, not to mention Bruno Dumont! I had to grit my teeth and deal with it,' recalled Shimiao [my translation] (interview with author, 11 February 2017). Because of her diligence in Deep Focus, Shimiao got promoted and eventually made her way to the FIRST International Film Festival and some European film festivals like Berlin and Cannes as a press delegate of Deep Focus to provide film reviews and commentary during the festival. Shimiao has now acquired knowledge and understanding of more filmmakers than Ken Loach and Bruno Dumont. It is the experience of translation that required her cultural competence and aesthetic disposition in deciphering film work, therefore becoming a novice agent helped her to enter the art film field.

If we consider that proofreaders (as well as ordinary translators) have sought to exert their linguistic and aesthetic competence to get access to the field of art film, many of the translation group coordinators somehow have been involved in the field already. For example, David, the coordinator of the Breathless Film Club fansubbing group (one of the four full-time remunerated employees of Breathless Film Club, the media company run by William, the former piracy industry participant and noted film critic and screening organiser), is also a film blogger with over 16 million followers on Weibo. As an established film influencer with a broad following, he usually passes around all the subtitled films made by Breathless Film Club via the online platform, while simultaneously sharing news and information about the general trends of the art cinema world.

Although barely getting involved in the process of translation, David fundamentally determines the content of what needs to be translated and distributed and procures symbolic (and possible economic) profit for the group (as well as for himself). It seems paradoxical based on the previous discussion that fan translation groups focusing on art

and independent films do not situate themselves in an exceedingly competitive market environment like other mainstream fansubbing groups. However, it does not mean that there is no impetus among those translation groups and communities to gain market appeal and increase viewership. As Nate, 26, professional film editor and coordinator of Ganhuo Fansubbing Group (focusing on shorts and video essays associated about film history, auteur films and film aesthetics) stated, ‘We must consider the target audience, we can not select it simply based on my own taste’ [my translation] (interview with author, 25 August 2018). And David further explained that ‘What we select does not simply represent my own taste but the taste of Breathless Film Club. We do subtitling to let as many viewers as possible know about it and convince them that it is worth watching’ [my translation] (interview with author, 12 June 2017). It appears that the group coordinators principally play the role of the person who actively operates a negotiated agenda, the circulated filmic texts are emblematic of the group’s artistic attributes but meanwhile matches what the market may speculate about.

Looking at recent films subtitled by Breathless Film Club, it is not hard to find that the selections are interwoven by two different types of art film: first, relatively high-expectation art films (predominantly made by esteemed filmmakers, or winners of famous international film festivals), including *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017, Italy and France), *Happy End* (Michael Haneke, 2017, France, Austria and Germany), *Teströl és lélekröl* (*On Body and Soul*, Ildikó Enyedi, 2017, Hungary), *Zimna wojna* (*Cold War*, Pawel Pawlikowski, 2018, Poland, UK, France) and *Paterson* (2016) that help increase social recognition of Breathless Film Club; and second, overlooked gems (nominated or even winners of relatively less prestigious film festivals, like the Sundance Film Festival and Locarno Film Festival), such as *Hermia & Helena* (Matías Piñeiro, 2016, Argentina and USA), *Columbus* (Kogonada, 2017, USA), *Korparna* (*Ravens*, Jens Assur, 2017, Sweden), *Dovlatov* (Aleksey German, 2018, Russia, Poland and Serbia) and *En guerre* (*At War*, Stéphane Brizé, 2018, France) that reinforce the profile of Breathless Film Club as an unconventional, taste-making figure to follow. It is worth noting that when a newly subtitled film comes out, Breathless Film Club may use its WeChat public platform to publish articles relating to the film to enhance the overall symbolic profit of the brand. With great symbolic capital, one could get the chance to participate in relatively formal filmic activities. For example, Breathless Film Club have sought to supply (remunerated) subtitles for film festivals or screening series events – the Michelangelo Antonioni Retrospective collaborated with Shanghai Film Museum, and

because of its quality selection and translation, Deep Focus, as also alluded to in the previous chapter, began to appeal as an emergent distributor of Chinese independent film (for example *Lu Bian Ye Can* (*Kaili Blues*, Bi Gan, 2015, China), *Ba Yue* (*The Summer is Gone*, Zhang Dalei, 2016, China), *Rou Qing Shi* (*Girls Always Happy*, Yang Mingming, 2018, China) and *Man You* (*Vanishing Days*, Zhu Xin, 2018, China)) aimed at both the domestic and overseas film markets.⁴⁷ These examples illustrate that, following the direction of the group leaders, the interpretative activities conducted by translators (both ordinary translators and proofreaders) ultimately point towards symbolic and possibly economic benefits of the markers in the field.

As far as the accumulation of symbolic and economic capital is concerned, the vertical hierarchy serves to guarantee the effect in the field. However, those fan translators – who have acquired the key competence of deciphering a foreign language film but remained in the dominated position – are barely cognisant of the paradox that their practices for the imagined idealistic community is altruistic and yet profitable, unconventional and yet subservient, cohesive and yet hierarchal. In fact, for many participants, staying ‘ordinary’ is precisely in accord with the paradigm of their idealistic personal commitment. For example, speaking about the interior network of Deep Focus, Shimiao stated: ‘Obviously, the ‘bosses’ of Deep Focus are doing something different from us ‘kids’. What I can do is to help them as much as I can: being a loyal audience, and spreading the information’ (Shimiao, interview with author, 11 February 2017) [my translation]. If fan culture is framed by academic writing as a resistance towards dominant tastes and the cultural hierarchy, the analysis leads to my argument that the fan translation communities are themselves the product of constitutional distinctions of power relations and social hierarchy. Whilst the majority of participants are females in their 20s situated in the periphery or excluded from the sphere of art film, the key figures, predominantly male, strive to strengthen their dominant position within the network of the circulation of art cinema. The distinction permeates the circulation of art film culture spatially and temporally, and subsequently impacts on viewer’s consumption and taste for film.

⁴⁷ In a recent paper concerned with the relationship between fansubbing and state domination, Wang and Zhang (2107) discussed the phenomenon that some fansubbing groups like YYeTs strive to cooperate with legitimate commercial enterprises in assisting them with translating foreign-language entertainment or educational visual products as a strategy to survive copyright regulations and financial insufficiency.

Conclusion

In August 2016, Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang excoriated some online piracy sharing and downloading sites for circulating a vast assortment of his works unlawfully in mainland China. His argument is a polemical attack on the activities of circulating pirated films provide Chinese viewers an effective means of accessing films beyond the restriction of theatrical precincts. He stated,

I was told that I have a large group of audiences in the mainland, but I wonder where did you watch my films?... My films are not commercial ones, they are not going to be available on airplanes or television. I barely give DVD copies of my films to other friends. I really care about where my works are watched, because it directly links to the quality and effect. Apart from piracy, I've also noticed that some people in the mainland have organised screenings of my works, perhaps in cafes, bars or within some film societies, without my consent. Imagining they might be drinking and eating while watching my films, I feel my work being wrecked... You did somehow see my films, but you actually didn't (in the right way, in other words, through theatrical venues). I hope you will be able to truly see my films one day. [my translation]⁴⁸

For Tsai Ming-liang, informal distribution and nontheatrical exhibition activities do not simply infringe upon his copyright but dilute and redirect the experience of independent and artistic films in a more profound sense, in which the ambient space of filmic consumption cannot avoid a degradation of the experience of his films as 'cinema' that he clearly values. Tsai Ming-liang's words provoked debate as to how the activity of viewing and sharing illegal copies through the venue of the internet and home environment could be accused of violating the cinema experience, while so-called legal exhibition and distribution does not support alternative voices or the aesthetic properties of cinema so as to able to cultivate an alternative or richer theatrical experience than that supplied by the dominant mainstream. However, many commentators point to the problem that the recognition of Tsai Ming-liang as a prominent independent filmmaker

⁴⁸ Retrieved from Tsai Ming-liang's Weibo https://www.weibo.com/u/2287906644?is_all=1 (Accessed: 16 August 2016).

and artist by Chinese audiences derives from the circulation allowed through these informal or illegal activities: ‘without underground distribution, nobody would know who Tsai Ming-liang is,’ as one comment revealed [my translation].⁴⁹ What we need to reconsider in the debates is not simply whether the issue of ownership and copyright have been overlooked in the course of forging Chinese audiences’ viewing attitudes and behaviours, but the entire issue of the complexity of (art) cinema culture in China since the turn of the twenty-first century in which our access to and understanding of film and cinema is situated.

In China, the long-term insufficiency of an art cinema infrastructure and the state’s ideological regulation and cultural control over public spaces has inevitably entailed the development of alternative circulation of diverse and multicultural films, primarily via sites where filmic value and taste are produced. Whilst the contemporary idea of ‘going to the cinema’ has become largely engaged in the screening of popular entertainment, art film viewers are forced to explore a number of different ways of approaching films that are not accessible via public circulation by, for example, screening and downloading pirated films on the internet via home devices, or acquiring the latest filmic information and film reviews via their smart phones, or attending screening events located in quirky cafes. The relocation of the film image from cinema theatres to private spaces (or semi-private/public spaces in the case of independent exhibition) and quotidian life in turn facilitated amateur enthusiasts to take part in the process of circulating art films and creating ‘new’ values, which simultaneously demonstrate the limits of the central power and the tactics people adopt to circumvent it. The diversified paths discovered by ‘ordinary’ viewers, or more precisely ‘amateur’ practitioners, serve as what Harbord (2002) characterises as ‘the infrastructure of circulation’ and as ‘intermediary networks’ that affect and condition our relationship to cinema and more significantly, constitute the diversity and complexity of the art film culture. As she argues,

Our taste for film is suggestive of our relationship to these spatial sites and whilst we may not inhabit each of these sites exclusively, foregoing all others, patterns of

⁴⁹ Retrieved from the comments under one of the pirated film file sharing sites on Weibo.com https://www.weibo.com/p/1005052668045542/home?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1#_0 (Accessed: 16 August 2016).

consumption fall into familiar routines rooted in the social comfort of environments, the ease and familiarity of the habitus as a spatial framework (2002: 3)

Following Harbord, I look at the Chinese art film culture as a Bourdieusian cultural field internally and spatially structured around multiple social networks and pathways. Meanwhile, it is necessary to point out that, whatever the particular path people choose to approach cinema, the discourse of value is subject to intermediary practitioners' engagement with art cinema that is inherently associated with individual histories and their network of relations.

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to expatiate the heterogeneity of art cinema culture in the specific context of China in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. While the subject matter of art film culture could be developed from a number of different perspectives, I have emphasised the role of intermediary practitioners involved in the production of art cinema culture in China as a way of apprehending an alternative account of Chinese cinema, a film culture that is not simply a product of the professional film industry and other institutional bodies but which is produced by idiosyncratic 'ordinary' audiences/'amateur' actors. Foregrounding the significant role intermediary actors have played in the course of cultural production, I have tried to provide an understanding of the operation of the field of art cinema, focusing on: intermediary agents who contribute to the process of circulating art films and shaping audience taste (independent exhibition, underground distribution and internet criticism); multiple external forces (Party-state censorial power and market forces, in particular) and the network of relations between different agents (more precisely, between intermediaries and their audiences and between intermediaries with different positions and dispositions in the spatial framework). By analysing the structure of the spatial field of art cinema, I wanted to demonstrate this art film culture as a manifestation of the dialectic of contemporary Chinese culture and society, a tension between agency and structure, between commerce and culture.

For this conclusion, I would like to review the evidence discussed in the preceding chapters to support my arguments and tease out the key characteristics of the art film culture developed by the practices of intermediary practitioners. Whilst each role of intermediaries and their practices discussed in the preceding chapters represents a distinct realm of the film culture, I would like to summarise the account of this art film culture that encompasses at least three key features according to the subjects discussed throughout this thesis.

First, this art film culture functions as a popular form of alternative film culture, a blurring of the dichotomy between commercial mainstream and independent film culture. The use of the conjuncture of the terms ‘popular’ and ‘alternative’ is attributed to this film culture in which constructions of filmic value and taste are channelled through a number of different alternative sites and simultaneously is determined to spread out across the public and reach as much mass audience as possible. I argue that the infrastructure of art cinema in China since the turn of the twenty-first century grows along with the development of both commercial and independent film culture. This popular form of alternative film culture serves as a negotiation of diverse aesthetic values, cultural tastes and social functions in shaping the meaning of art cinema in China. In the introduction, I stressed that this thesis is not simply about a highbrow cinema culture targeting niche elite audiences but foregrounding ‘ordinary’ viewers as profound makers in the production of culture. This film culture is ‘popular’ in the sense that the paths that intermediary practitioners employ to disseminate art films and create the tastes and judgements discussed in this thesis serve the main purpose of broadening and popularising the connection between domestic consumers and global film culture, bypassing national and ideological particularity. The term ‘art cinema’, commonly perceived (still) as a manifestation of prestige highbrow culture in opposition to the popular values shaped by a commercial film system, seems to mask the genuine intention of forging connections between the local and the global. It is crucial to demystify the relationship between art cinema and its audience as an intellectual alliance but to focus on the dynamic film culture created based on the premise of perpetuating its multicultural value and aesthetic judgement.

I started the Introduction with my own experience, that my exploratory journey towards the world of art cinema involved prolonged stopovers at Hong Kong comedy and popular Hollywood, as an individual example of how the world of artistic and multicultural cinema is progressively imagined. Similarly, many respondents also evocatively expressed how popular entertainment films (especially Hong Kong films made in the 1980s and 1990s) inspired them to further discover and engage in the ‘world of cinema’. The very early experience of browsing and choosing films among the hundreds and thousands of motley assorted pirated VCD/DVD copies not only cultivates an interest and love for cinema, but it prompts the imaginary construction of cinemas as a heterogeneous subject, a mix of multiple values. The conjuncture of piracy and art film entailed an intervention in the conditions of consumption of the so-called highbrow culture such that

the growing film culture develops through a play of binary oppositions: art and commerce, underground and entertainment, amateurism and professionalised authoritative cadre. As discussed in Chapter 2, the manufacturing and reproduction of pirated art film DVDs was leveraged as an effective strategy for recruiting clients and gaining both symbolic and economic capital in tackling the increased competition in the piracy market. In a more profound sense, it lay the foundation of the (informal) circuit of art film circulation in the way that the acquisition of symbolic power becomes equated with monetary gain.

Through the internet, ordinary consumers are offered greater access to filmic knowledge and information than ever before. Simultaneously there are greater opportunities for intermediary practitioners involved in the enterprise of art film circulation to acquire both public recognition and economic prosperity. Needless to say, viewing and downloading fan subtitled films is one of the most common ways for a Chinese audience to access diverse global audio-visual materials through the internet. Known for celebrating the spirit of volunteerism and idealism, fan translation groups and communities surely exemplify a mode of individual engagement in the circuits of art cinema, a tidal shift from public to personal forms of consumption. However, as I discussed in Chapter 6, the idea of volunteerism and idealism to some extent has been used as a tool in availing zealous fans or enthusiastic students as free cultural labour to acquire potential symbolic or/and economic profits, for example, by the means of embedding commercial advertisements in the subtitled video materials or incorporated with formal filmic activities. As far as the acquisition of symbolic or/and economic profits is concerned, the leaders/administrators of fan translation groups play a decisive role in selecting which films are to be subtitled so as to ensure a valuable profile of the group and gain market appeal and increased viewership. Similarly, in Chapter 5, I expanded on how internet film critics who gain a reputation as illustrious cinephiles and online influencers, operate their 'self-media' enterprise as a way to disseminate filmic taste and judgement, while ultimately aiming to pursue economic opportunities and commercial collaboration. In doing so, they have sought to employ a number of different methods, such as, writing soft-articles for promoting either filmic or non-filmic related business, and transacting pricey cinephiliac cultural products. For these internet critics, it is important to maintain their profile as cinephiles with a knack for appreciating the art of cinema with which to ultimately elevate economic opportunity. Therefore, in both cases, fan translation and internet criticism, the different practices of circulation and taste making within the domains of art cinema are

affected by the paradigm in which the intermediaries negotiate relationships between economic, aesthetic and symbolic determinants and interests.

Apart from the online scenario, the independent exhibition sector also manifests the binary nature of the circuit of art film circulation as both artistry-oriented site and economic pursuits. In Chapter 4, I looked at the way in which independent exhibitors establish the public profiles of the screening groups and sustain themselves financially. Although it was shown that the majority of independent screening groups do not prioritise monetary gain (as many of them are financially supported by cultural institutions or private companies), there is also emerging an interesting phenomenon in which some of the exhibitors (Hua based in Cinexpres and Maojie based in Ozu Bookshop, in particular) turned to appeal based on class status and prestige as ways to encourage membership subscription, a method akin to what Wilinsky, referring to the post-war United States, describes as the art cinema exhibitors' strategy of 'offer[ing] potential audience members a way to achieve this distinction and shape their identities by being part of something different and alternative' (2001: 129). If we follow Wilinsky's main argument that art film culture is structured around domestic socioeconomic and industrial conditions, it becomes clear that the art film culture I have been discussing in this thesis is in part structured in relation to the putative economic imperatives in the context of post-socialist China.

In contrast to the other two modes of intermediary practice, independent exhibitors tend to be committed to supporting the scene of Chinese independent cinema. It is then suggestive of the other aspect of this art film culture that it is 'alternative' in the sense of interweaving with the site of Chinese independent/underground film culture. The independent screening group organisers' activities and practices enhance the publicness of films that are not allowed in public circulation, and effectively facilitate some types of alternative cultural values. It then leads to the question concerning to what extent do these 'alternative' films and their 'unconventional' cultural values contribute discursively to the making of a public for art and independent cinema.

In Chapter 4, I provided a glimpse of present independent exhibition practices that considered the way in which an art film public was cultivated by the exhibitor intermediaries with the multiplex of objectives in mind concerning a specific form of 'independent' cinema. Taking the cue from Pickowicz and Zhang (2006) that Chinese independent cinema has shifted from independence to 'in-dependence', it is necessary to

point out that the independent screening group organisers' practices of repertory programming serve as an effective strategy for making a film public as well as for sustaining themselves both financially and politically. Looking at their programming and their organised screening activities, I would like to suggest the complexity of the alternative film culture manifests a polarisation of international arthouses and domestic indies, the former concentrated on associating the public with a universal canon of the art of film, the latter relocating cinema to a public space for dialogue and social engagement. Whilst constantly screening Chinese independent films and documentaries that address polemical social matters and politically sensitive issues might cause trouble with the local authority, showcasing international arthouse films is regarded as a safe (and more profitable, in some cases) option for many exhibitors. In other words, the programming of international art films to some extent serves as the exhibitors' concession to sustainability in terms of economic and government censorial forces. Ironically, these venues are not paying for the right to showcase foreign-language art films but effectively disseminating them, while domestic indies, even with permission of the filmmakers or distribution companies, face difficulty in reaching the vast majority of the public.

Indeed, in speaking of the relationship between art and independent film culture, the questions of whether there is a subject of art film culture clearly distinguishable from independent film culture, or of whether the binary nature of art cinema irrevocably blurs its boundary with other forms of film culture, are questions that constantly arose during the study. In the literature review, I have attempted to touch on the nuanced relationship between *yishu dianying* (art film) and its two profound labels *wenyi* (literary art) and *duli* (independent) in the Chinese context. Existing literature and academic studies have not touched on how these two labels work together in framing the meaning of art cinema in China. I argue that art film with the label of *wenyi* incorporates aesthetic practices with modern sensibility. With the purpose of appealing mainstream audience, it fundamentally blurs the distinction of art cinema and commercial cinema. On the other hand, art cinema also assimilate the plural and multi-valued properties from independent cinema as a refusal to homogenic (film) culture, but not necessarily involved in radical transgressive act its independent counterpart. Here, in this conclusion, rather than distinguishing each terminology of analytical concern, I would like to bring these two co-existent and mutually influenced terms together as a manifestation of the distinctive hybrid of this popular alternative film culture.

Second, this art film culture involves the intermediaries' objectives of forging a new form of legitimacy. In Bourdieu and his successors' formulation, cultural intermediaries are engaged in framing their goods and value as legitimacy, which postulates the claim to expertise in doing so to distinguish themselves from other actors (Bourdieu, 1984; Negus, 2002; Nixon and Du Gay, 2002; Smith Maguire and Matthew, 2012; Smith Maguire, 2014). Involved in different domains of the circuit of art cinema, the intermediary practitioners discussed in this thesis have sought to attain their cultural legitimacy in reference to taste and judgement through a number of different ways. To distinguish their taste from the 'old' legitimate mainstream film culture, the intermediary practitioners leverage their public influence to promote a new mode of taste culture inside the site of art cinema and extending to the public at large. The new legitimate taste culture that is produced by these cultural intermediaries is manifested, and its mode of operation explicitly, as part of the art film culture in a way that it represents the larger spectrum of socio-cultural hierarchy. According to the preceding discussion and analysis, I would like to suggest that the new form of legitimacy constructed by cultural intermediaries is manifested in two dimensions as laid out below.

The first dimension is the intermediary practitioners' attempt to establish a new art cinema institution vis-à-vis an established official film industry and culture. In the literature review, I argued that the site of art cinema, as a representative of an alternative system of film diffusion, is distinctive from that of the legitimate mainstream in a way that embraces the idea of amateurism, a certain sense of cinephilia and the possible objectives of challenging the established commercialised and professionalised film industry. If legitimate mainstream film industry and culture is seen as inhibited by industry professionals and institutional decision-makers in reference to the rules of commercial and government censorial regulation, I wanted to demonstrate that the field of art cinema in China is intrinsically consolidated by the spirit of amateurism and the ardent love of cinema. As illustrated in the previous chapters, almost all the informants' initiatives for their engagement in disseminating artistic and multicultural films to wider audiences were motivated by the deep interest and love of cinema in general or particular films. Nevertheless, the argument proposed in this thesis is that the site of art cinema cannot be seen as a utopian realm constructed by idealistic cinephiles and film enthusiasts rather it is affected by the logic of legitimate (film) culture and social hierarchies at one and the same time. What is of interest here is that this new art cinema institution is grounded around the cultural intermediaries' oscillation between their cinephilia-oriented

practices and professional ambition. For many intermediaries, it is crucial to sustain their audience's picture of them as cinephiles with ardent and idealistic commitment towards the art of cinema, while seeking the opportunities of professional development and potential economic success in the meantime. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, many online film influencers label themselves not only as (internet) critics but also with quasi 'professional' titles that articulate possible commitment to an official film industry and institution, such as, film researcher and film festival consultant, therefore reinforcing symbolic status and accenting cultural authority in the site of criticism. Many informants I encountered have also sought to, or have expressed their purpose of, integrating into the formal film industry as a way of validating their aesthetic competence and 'professional' expertise. In other words, this new art cinema institution and its operation revolves around the spirit of amateurism and cinephilia but ultimately points towards a commitment to promoting the centralisation of cultural authority.

It then leads to the second dimension that focuses on the intermediary practitioners' attempts to demarcate a boundary of access to and inclusion in the field of art cinema. Here, they play the role of gatekeepers in maintaining the boundaries between themselves and ordinary audiences, and between dominant and dominated agents. In Chapter 4, I elucidated the way in which the independent screening group organisers apply a number of strategies of forming an art film public, a sphere that underlines aesthetic hierarchies and class division. I argued that the independent screening group organisers consciously or unconsciously categorise their audiences into a hierarchy of consumption in which social elites and intellectuals are prioritised in terms of their access to the appreciation of art film. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4, some exhibitors operate the programme under the assumption that the vast public could not fully understand a certain 'level' of art film, whilst, in membership-centred or film professional and intellectual focused film clubs, the viewers and participants are offered not only to choose the screening content but to develop their knowledge of film as well as social relations of network. Although the consumption and appreciation of the art of film have developed in the shifting and realigning of power dynamics, from state power structure to the multiplex of power relations in terms of politics, commerce and cultural value, in conditioning the public accessibility of the art of film, the art film culture has been indispensably forged within a paradigm where social difference and aesthetic hierarchies are unwittingly perpetuated. Thus, although these independent screening sites and events seem to claim autonomy of expression and choices, liberation from the restrictions of socio-political environments,

the exhibitor intermediaries, replacing the overriding power of state government, impose their cultural and pedagogical authority across the site, reinforcing their positions as dominant agents as well as gatekeepers in the field. Then, in Chapters 5 and 6, I provide more examples of the way in which intermediary practitioners coordinate a vertical, centralised network in conjunction with fixed hierarchical agendas in the field. It is argued that conventional and (established) internet critics have constructed a coherent network for the making of authoritative taste and judgement, while agents with less symbolic power, such as fan translators and junior critics, are not often included in the site of network. Therefore, it is these powerful agents, including both established critics and exhibitors, that operate the new institution of artistic and independent cinema and the discourse of value and taste in an ‘orderly’ way.

According to my participant observation in the field, I would like to add that the taste culture produced by those powerful agents is inherently structured around a hierarchy of taste and judgement in which an established global, especially western-centred, canon of the art of film is centralised and prioritised. For example, most established practitioners articulated their evaluative judgement and taste founded on foreign-language auteur films, especially those approved by international film festivals, beyond domestic arthouse and indies, accruing a transcendent sense of aesthetic values within a film culture focused on the reception of film based on the quantity and varied formats. Indeed, as discussed before, situated in the alternative site of circulation, the intermediary practitioners acquire cultural competence and expertise on film through habituated and routinised modes of reception rather than educational qualifications and professional credibility. For example, as mentioned in Chapter 5, the quantity of viewed films on Douban.com is seen as an important criteria for identifying one as a ‘critic’. The way that viewing experience is foregrounded as the main method of acquiring cultural competence and aesthetic disposition to some extent leads to the mode of hierarchical structure inherent in the cultural field that centralises dominant/experienced agents’ (established critics, exhibitors and other significant influencers) habitus and taste.

This brings us to the final feature of this art film culture which is that it involves networks that are gendered and hierarchical, such that the essence of cinephilia is defined as masculine. Looking at the sites where filmic taste and judgement are produced, it is clear that all the dominant agents are male, in their mid-30s, who claim to be cinephiles that represent the central value of the field. In this densely interwoven network, established male cinephile practitioners are almost all socially connected to each other, while female

and junior agents' voices and efforts are placed on the periphery of the site. In other words, those male agents are situated in the dominant position in the field that attributed to their gender prestige and their experience of viewing in a way that distinguishes themselves from ordinary film lovers.

These two aspects of the masculine-led network have been addressed throughout the thesis, which are materially rooted in places, in the film culture, in individual habitus. As I mentioned in the methodology section, I have attempted to balance the number of female and male informants while conducting the ethnographic research, but it turned out that the majority of female informants, especially female exhibitors and critics, are all not as well-known and successful as their male counterparts. It is attributed to the limited access of females to the field of (art) film while the central network is determined by significant male agents (established male exhibitors, critics, as well as independent filmmakers and artists) within the same circle. For example, in Chapter 5, I provided exemplary instances in which the male-centred network operates in the scene of internet film criticism where female and junior critics' voices and efforts are suppressed, a discourse in which sexism serves as the central tone. I observed that, in the circle of critics, the majority of junior critics are female except those who possess higher symbolic power from an academic institution and/or professional industry than their male counterparts. Therefore, it was argued that present criticism and online commentary advance a refined taste and masculine mastery, for example, the most rated films approved by established critics often have a strong and clear focus on male protagonist(s). Many internet critics also employ racy headline hints at eroticism or sexual content as an effective strategy to draw the attention of a masculine public. Whilst the network relations of the site are determined by powerful male critics, I observed that female practitioners are regarded as more than auxiliary members but objects of desire akin to the erotic female characters on the screen. If Chapter 5 examined the gender relations within the scene of film criticism, Chapter 6 identifies a hierarchal structure not circumscribed within fan translation groups but expanding beyond the circle to embrace the whole film culture. Specifically, there exists a dynamic hierarchy and appraisal system within each fan translation group, and each intermediary participant is labelled in relation to different roles (newcomers, ordinary translator, proofreader, and administrator) by their competence in the process of cultural interpretation and transmission. I observed that the (male) administrators (some of whom can be relatively well-known film influencers involved in piracy file sharing, internet criticism and even independent exhibition) strive to boost their strategic connection with

the audience and other (senior) practitioners in the field whilst the majority of zealous voluntary fan translation contributors (including both ordinary translators and proofreaders) are young female university students in their 20s. Indeed, the group of fans, as many academic studies of fandom point out, are largely deemed as white, middle class, female; fan translators in the Chinese context also are representative of the group of relatively educated females. Yet, in the field of art film, the majority of (female) fan translators are largely placed in the peripheral position or outside the socially sanctioned realm, because they are not recognised as ‘competent’ cinephiles or committed individual agents (nor do they see themselves as such in most cases). As illustrated in Chapter 6, many fan translator interviewees denied their linguistic skill as an important quality or structural property to understand film, while expressing their purpose to acquire more filmic knowledge and experience through their practices in doing so to get nearer to the film scene. In the field of art film where social distinction, including gender inequality, permeates the process of cultural production and consumption spatially and temporally, it is not surprising that cultural competence and aesthetic disposition in deciphering film work derived from individual histories and experience pronounce a more ‘advanced’ skill than that of linguistically interpreting foreign language through the course of education and commitment to cultural diversity.

This then brings us to the question concerning how the gendered field is framed according to cinematic habitus and experience. As discussed in the preceding chapters (3 and 5 in particular), the underground attribute of film piracy and the representation of eroticism and realism in art film forges an intimate and self-regulated home environment of reception between (male) spectators and the film text. When sex in public discourse pervasively served as an inhibition of social custom in China, the underground piracy market fostered the framing of a film public representing masculine desires and expectations. As the vast majority of dominant figures in the field of art film were former pirated DVD enthusiasts and collectors, it is inevitable that the piracy and home film culture in the 1990s and 2000s culturally and sexually grounded their interests and preferences in cinema. Ostensibly, film piracy allows ordinary audiences to get access to on-demand visual products in the home environment, and in doing so accelerates both the pleasures of film ownership and of male voyeurism and fetishism as the central value of cinephiliac culture in China.

What strikes me as so ironic in the field is that a site that purports liberation and diversity, equality and justice, fails to acknowledge female participants’ (as well as other sexual

and gender minority groups) work and effort because no firm belief exists in the scene that they could ever change the world. During the research, I have seen female critics' voices being overlooked, female filmmakers' and artists' work being marginalised, and even myself as a female researcher being relegated to the position of other. My reflexivity about the research not simply provides in part a rethinking of my own identity and situation, it also provokes me to reconsider how the established canon of global art film culture as well as cinephilic culture has impact on our thought and understanding about female and femininity, a culture that is distinguished in terms of social hierarchies and gender distinction. If female spectators and audiences have been framed by academic writing as providing subjective horizon in opposition to dominant discourse, how can we understand the role of female intermediary practitioners in their negotiation with male dominant discourse in the site of artistic and independent cinema? In the preceding chapters, it is argued that cultural intermediaries in general retain and comply with a system of hierarchy created by dominant agents, a chasm exists between them and ordinary audiences, and between established male practitioners and female and junior participants. According to my research, what is at stake is that many dominated agents are not aware of this issue ongoing in their everyday practices. Nevertheless, it does not mean that female and other social minorities have never endeavoured to challenge the dominant structure of production, distribution and exhibition in the site of Chinese cinema in general and artistic and independent cinema in particular. In my future study, I would like to develop a more vigorous conversation about how gender inequality and distinction is taking place throughout the scene of Chinese artistic and independent cinema.

This is a thesis about individuals and art cinema culture. It is not about the film industry, nor about the highbrow and prestige image of art cinema. Undoubtedly, both are part of the formation of film culture, proliferating the art of film in a way that is affiliated with institutions and ideologies of an array of socio-cultural contexts. Without denying the necessity of studying both in the field, my point at the outset is that cinema and art cinema without individual practices cannot single-handedly contribute to the creation of a new art cinema culture. With the development of film studies, academic attention marks a clear shift from film production to consumption, from cinema apparatus to spectators' social and cultural practices, from textual analysis to empirical research. However, very little of the existing theoretical and empirical writing by academic scholarship in the studies of Chinese cinema recognises the distinctive functions of individual viewers and practitioners that participate in the circuit of cinema. What I want to challenge in this PhD

thesis is the tradition that reads the cinema from the film texts or from the modes of cultural production and consumption generated by institutional bodies rather than illuminating the diversity and complexity of human agency. I hope that this thesis makes a substantial contribution to the studies of Chinese art cinema and stimulates further research and study into the varied manifestations of filmic activities and practices. Indeed, individual actors' relationship with cinema is also affected and conditioned by the overall socio-cultural structure, however, only by examining their habitus and practices can we fully understand what individual perspective and investment contributes in the process of creating a new (film) culture; only by locating their network of relations within the temporal and spatial context of contemporary Chinese culture and society can we further develop our understanding of cinema and of our relationship with each other. My intention is not to privilege the intermediary practitioners here, but I hope to demonstrate a new perspective for contemplating the relationship between humanity, cinema and cinema culture.

Appendix 1

In-Depth Interview Question Design

Independent exhibitors:

- 1) How did you start running a cine-club/film society?
- 2) How do you understand the role of being an organizer of a cine-club? What responsibility do you think you have?
- 3) Can you make a living from it? How do you manage to support yourself?
- 4) What drives you to keep doing this work?
- 5) Do you run the club yourself? If not, who else cooperates with you? How many of them? Are they male or female? How do you assign the work? Do you have other employees or volunteers to do this with you?
- 6) What film do you usually like?
- 7) Do you identify these films as art films? How do you understand the idea of art film? What qualifications does a film have that make it an art film?
- 8) How do you understand the concept of Chinese art film? What are the differences between art film in China and abroad?
- 9) What films have you operated to show since?
- 10) Where did you get the film from (for example, from the filmmakers, genuine DVDs, online source, etc.)?
- 11) Do all the films that you have exhibited correspond to your taste? Would you exhibit the films that you do not like personally (even though, it might attract more attendants)?
- 12) What criterion would you use for choosing the films to be shown in your club?
- 13) Would you often arrange a Q&A or discussion afterward? Why do you think it is important or not?
- 14) What do you want to bring to the club participants?
- 15) What do you usually do to attract more attendants? By which means?

- 16) Do you keep personal contact with the club participants? What kind of people comprise the participants? Do you identify them as well-educated in terms of film knowledge?
- 17) What difficulties have you met since conducting this cine-club?
- 18) As an independent/underground film group, how do you avoid the administrative intervene from the authority? Did you have any experience of being warned or intervened by the authority in terms of the films that you showed/or about to show?

Internet film critics:

- 1) How you start writing about film?
- 2) Do you identify yourself as film critic?
- 3) What responsibility do you think you have, as a film critic? How do you understand the role of film critic?
- 4) Point me a piece what they feel the best position/selection of their critique?
- 5) How can make a living from writing film criticism? How do you manage to support yourself?
- 6) What brought you to Berlin Film Festival?
- 7) Are you self-funded to the festival? Otherwise do you have any financial supports from any sponsors?
- 8) What else film festivals have you been to both in China and abroad? What are the differences between film festivals in China and abroad?
- 9) Which films do you expect to watch? Why?
- 10) Do you identify these films as art films? How do you understand the idea of art film? What qualifications does a film have that make it an art film?
- 11) How do you identify your role in the festival? And how do you define yourself in the circuit of art cinema in China?
- 12) What information would you bring your reader/followers during the festival time? By which means (such as, WeChat, Weibo, Douban, etc.)? Do you post different things in different spaces/platforms? Newspapers? Or other platforms they publish their papers?
- 13) Do you recommend every film you expect to watch or you have watched and really liked to your readers/followers? Do you have such concern that praising

or criticizing certain films may lead dissatisfaction by your readers or even the government?

- 14) Have you ever got reported by your readers/followers (or your post/writing deleted by the administrator of the sites) due to some 'inappropriate remarks' in your writing or post? (Can you describe the situations?) If so, does it affect the way you post? What do you do to avoid such trouble?
- 15) What kind of people comprise your readers/followers? Do you identify them as well-educated in terms of film knowledge?
- 16) What figure of yourself do you intend to shape for your readers/followers?
- 17) In your experience, what kind of post/writing drag more/less attention of your readers/followers?
- 18) What do you do to attract more readers/followers?
- 19) What strategy do you do to attract more hits/likes/reposts? Can you make some incomes if you got more hits/likes/reposts? How do you balance this and the quality of the information that you give to your readers/followers?
- 20) After delivering the films and film festivals in your eyes to your readers/followers, what reaction do your readers/followers have may you feel more encouraged/frustrated?
- 21) Can you suggest somebody else that I might interest to?

Fan translators:

- 1) How did you start translating foreign film text?
- 2) Which language(s) do you master?
- 3) How do you understanding the role of being a translator? What responsibility do you think you have?
- 4) Are you doing this as a part-time/voluntary? How do you manage to do the translating work?
- 5) Can you get any income from this?
- 6) What drives you to keep doing this work?
- 7) What film do you usually like?
- 8) Do you identify these films as art films? How do you understand the idea of art film? What qualifications does a film have that make it an art film?

- 9) What films or film-related materials have you translated?
- 10) Do all the films that you have translated correspond to your taste? Would you translate the text that you do not like personally?
- 11) What qualifications does a translated piece have that make it a good one?
- 12) Have you ever joined any other fan-sub group that focuses on commercial mainstream film or tv drama before? If so, what is difference before what you do now and previously, in other words, what is the difference between translating commercial film and art film?
- 13) As we know, art film is often obscure and closely related to alien culture, or even high art, how would you manage to interpret it properly?
- 14) Once you completed the translation, how would the piece be distributed? Would you keep an eye on the feedbacks from consumers?
- 15) Can you point me the best pieces of translation you feel you have ever done? Why are they?

Pirated DVD collectors:

- 1) How did you start with seeking VCD/DVDs from piracy market?
- 2) Could you describe the place(s) where you usually purchase pirated VCD/DVD from?
- 3) Could you describe the experience when first encountering with art film? (as detailed as possible, such as introduced by the vendors or attracted by the covers of films)
- 4) Do you still keep collecting DVD versions of film? By which means? If not, why?
- 5) How do you like the internet age when online film resource could be much easier found, compare with the old age?
- 6) How did you start with watching art film? (When did you start to be interested in art film? And why?)
- 7) How do you understand the idea of art film? What qualifications does a film have that make it an art film?
- 8) What element of an art film may attract you the most?
- 9) How does adult theme and sex elements affect your selection of art film?

- 10) How does the experience of seeking and collecting pirated VCD/DVDs impact on your view of the concept of film?
- 11) What type of film do you usually like? Is there any difference between what you like now and previously?
- 12) Could you take a photo of your collections? And point me the pieces you liked the most? Why these pieces are your favourites?

Piracy vendors & distributors:

- 1) How did you start with the business of selling/distributing pirated VCD/DVD? (when and why)
- 2) Where did you usually get the VCD/DVDs from?
- 3) What element of a film may prompt you to purchase them from the distributors/produce the pirated copies?
- 4) How did you promote the films to your clients?
- 5) In your experience, what kind of film could be a good-seller?
- 6) Were your clients mostly male or female? Were their interests different?
- 7) Have you watched the VCD/DVDs yourself? How did you like the films?
- 8) Are you still running the business? If not, why?
- 9) (to distributors) Do you know which part of China your VCD/DVDs were distributed towards?

Appendix 2

Informants Demographics

This appendix provides basic information to supplement what is presented in the thesis, including all the informants' demographic information (age, gender, education, occupation), interview dates, and the sites in which they conduct their practices. The information are addressed alphabetically by name or pseudonym.

David: 26, male, undergraduate in scriptwriting, employee of Breathless Film Club.

Interview: 12 June, 2017.

Active on: Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group as administrator; major online platforms as film influencer.

Delpy: 29, female, postgraduate in translation, employee in an immigration company.

Interview: 06 September, 2018.

Active on: Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group as proofreader.

Dina: 24, female, undergraduate in hotel management, employee of travel agency.

Interview: 12 September, 2018.

Active on: Breathless Film Club Fansubbing Group as proofreader.

Don: 33, male, postgraduate in filmmaking, filmmaker/producer.

Interview: 15 November, 2016.

Active on: organizing Lantern Film Club.

Fei: 48, male, undergraduate in commercial law, freelancer.

Interview: 06 August, 2018.

Active on: organising Sound & Sense screening group.

Galaxy: 33, male, undergraduate in engineering, camera operator/film editor.

Interview: 06 August, 2018.

Active on: organising Sound & Sense screening group.

Gang: 40+, male, education and occupation unknown.

Interview: 14 June, 2017.

- Active on: pirated film DVD industry as technician.
- Guojie:** 33, female, postgraduate in theatre studies, film critic.
Interview: 14 February, 2017.
Active on: writing critiques for online mainstream media.
- Hua:** 39, male, undergraduate in technology, exhibitor.
Interview: 17 June, 2017.
Active on: organising Cinexpress Cine-Club.
- Jin:** 28, male, PhD student in philosophy.
Interview: 11 February, 2017.
Active on: managing Deep Focus.
- Jun:** 50+, male, education and occupation unknown.
Interview: 14 June, 2017.
Active on: pirated film DVD industry as technician.
- Leche:** 21, female, undergraduate student.
Interview: 10 March, 2019.
Active on: Ganhuo Fansubbing Group as translator.
- Lei:** 33, male, undergraduate in economy, film producer/exhibitor.
Interview: 4 July, 2017.
Active on: curating Ju Zhong Ruo Qing Art Film Screening.
- Lewis:** 43, male, postgraduate in film studies, lecturer/filmmaker/script writer/exhibitor.
Interview: 23 July, 2018.
Active on: participating in Li Xianting's Film Fund.
- Liankai:** 24, male, postgraduate in film studies, entertainment journalist.
Interview: 1 July, 2017.
Active on: major online platforms as film influencer.
- Linda:** 29, female, postgraduate in communications, film distributor.
Interview: 07 November, 2018.
Active on: IB Fansubbing Group as proofreader.
- Lu:** 38, male, education unknown, smuggler.
Interview: 10 June 2017.
Active on: former pirated DVD distributor and pirate corporation owner.
- Maojie:** 40+, female, college education, bookshop owner and exhibitor.
Interview: 20 June, 2017.
Active on: organising Ozu Bookshop and screening events.

- Masha:** 25, female, postgraduate student in cultural journalism.
Interview: 13 February, 2017.
Active on: co-managing Deep Focus.
- Michael:** 30+, male, education unknown, piracy merchant.
Interview: 10 June, 2017.
Active on: merchandising pirated DVDs.
- Milly:** 22, female, postgraduate student in French literature.
Interview: 12 September, 2018.
Active on: participating in Deep Focus as translator and junior critic.
- Minghang:** 23, male, undergraduate student in accounting and finance.
Interview: 7 November, 2018.
Active on: participating in Deep Focus as translator and junior critic.
- Nate:** 26, male, undergraduate in transport engineering, film editor.
Interview: 25 August, 2018.
Active on: Ganhuo Fansubbing Group as group leader.
- Penny:** 23, female, undergraduate student in fine arts.
Interview: 5 November 2018.
Active on: Ganhuo Fansubbing Group as translator.
- Rui:** 39, male, post-doctoral researcher in philosophy.
Interview: 13 June, 2017.
Active on: managing Sliding Doors Film Society and Ganhuo Fansubbing Group.
- Sha:** 40+, male, postgraduate, film curator and critic.
Interview: 5 July, 2017.
Active on: curating CFA art cinema and BIFF; managing Movie1958 self-media public account.
- Shimiao:** 20, female, undergraduate student in philosophy.
Interview: 11 February, 2017.
Active on: participating in Deep Focus as translator and junior critic.
- Shuang:** 28, male, undergraduate student in film studies.
Interview: 14 February, 2017.
Active on: major online platforms as film influencer.
- Sixue:** 26, female, postgraduate student in film studies.
Interview: 15 February, 2017.

- Active on: participating in Deep Focus as junior critic.
- Taotao:** 36, male, undergraduate in economy, film critic.
Interview: 20 July, 2017.
Active on: managing Taotao Choosing Film self-media public account.
- Tina:** 23, female, undergraduate student.
Interview: 10 March, 2019.
Active on: Ganhua Fansubbing Group as translator.
- Tuoluo:** 28, male, postgraduate in film distribution and management, online video producer.
Interview: 14 February, 2017.
Active on: major online platforms as film influencer.
- William:** 40, male, undergraduate in Chinese literature, film critic and screening organiser.
Interview: 20 June, 2017.
Active on: managing Breathless Film Club self-media public account.
- Xiaojia:** 24, female, undergraduate in film studies, distributor/exhibitor.
Interview: 13 February, 2017.
Active on: participating in independent film industry.
- Xiaoxin:** 24, female, postgraduate student in Chinese literature.
Interview: 12 June, 2017.
Active on: participating in Sliding Doors Film Society.
- Xiaoxia:** 31, male, postgraduate in Public Management, civil servant.
Interview: 22 August, 2018.
Active on: Ganhua Fansubbing Group as proofreader.
- Xi Pake:** 29, male, postgraduate in scriptwriting, film critic.
Interview: 26 June, 2017.
Active on: major online platforms as film influencer.
- Xu:** 44, male, college diploma in customs, film festival curator and critic.
Interview: 22 November, 2016.
Active on: curating SIFF; major online platforms as film influencer.
- Yanbin:** 40, female, postgraduate in Chinese literature, film/television producer.
Interview: 11 February, 2017.
Active on: Screen-out Art Film Exhibition as curator.
- Ye:** 32, male, undergraduate in media and communications, film critic.

Interview: 11 February, 2017.

Active on: managing Muweier self-media account.

Yushuang: 24, female, postgraduate student in business management in Australia.

Interview: 25 August, 2018.

Active on: Ganhuo Fansubbing Group as translator.

Zimu: 28, female, PhD student in film studies.

Interview: 11 June, 2017.

Active on: organising Upper Balcony, Moonlight Screening project.

Zhe: 37, male, postgraduate in curation, self-employed online video producer.

Interview: 3 March, 2019.

Active on: Deep Focus as translator.

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