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Observational Representation of A Rural Chinese Family's Life: The Return

by

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1. Abstract

The Return is a 60-minute observational documentary film that follows a Chinese family's life story from 2013 to 2016. The film focuses on the main character Li Shuixian and her daughter Li Meng's experience in Lilame, their home village and Xiangyun, a city in Yunnan province, southwestern China. Shuixian's family are members of the Lisu ethnic group, which follows the tradition of matriarchal society where women take more responsibility to support their family. In order to build a bright future for her family, Shuixian goes to Xiangyun with Meng and works at her younger sister's restaurant. She sends Meng to a kindergarten in the city to give her better education. However, Shuixian's husband Li Runde stays in the village to maintain crops and tend livestock. Later, because Shuixian's younger sister closes the restaurant, Shuixian returns to her home village and Meng loses the opportunity to study in the city. Through the efforts and struggles of Shuixian's family, the film shows the closeness of the family members and their strength in overcoming the challenges in their life.

The story of Shuixian's family reflects some of the social problems caused by the urban-rural gap. Nevertheless, the film does not intend to expose audience to the difficulties of Shuixian's family in order to arouse audience sympathies for the people who live in remote areas. The approach of making this film uncovers the problems subtly in the moments when mother and daughter are together in hardship, which encourages audience to observe the situation and develop critical thinking about the social problems involved in the film. This paper discusses the aesthetic and ethics concerns of making this film.

2. Project Description

The main character in this film, Shuixian, Meng and their families are my friends, whom I find myself identifying with. I met Shuixian in the summer of 2014, when I returned to my

hometown in China to spend my summer vacation. I was introduced to her when I had a dinner at the restaurant where she worked. I was impressed by her experience of moving from the mountain village to the city, which resonates my life of moving from Beijing to New York in 2013. I went to her home village and saw the contrasts of her life in the village and in the city, and decided to make a project about her and her family. The farming methods in her home village are primitive. The mountainous terrain makes efficient agriculture difficult. Therefore, most villagers find jobs in the nearby cities and eventually move out of the village. Shuixian's younger sister was the first one in her family to start her own business in the nearby city, which gave Shuixian a chance to get a job quickly in the city. In order to make a better living, people in the remote areas have to leave their hometowns and seek for opportunities in the cities.

What impressed me most was Shuixian's efforts to bring Meng to the city and send Meng to the kindergarten in the city, which reminded me of my parents, who support me a lot. I chose to make an observational documentary film about Shuixian's story to guide an audience to form their own understanding of how the main characters try to overcome the rural-urban divide. I wanted to make a documentary with an open voice that gives audience space to develop alternative interpretation of the story. The film shows the life of Shuixian's family to "reveal aspects of character and individuality" and "call(s) on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done" (Nichols 174). This film touches upon some social problems, and it puts the discussion of the involved social issues in the story of Shuixian as a mother and wife, and Meng as a daughter who struggle in their dilemma. I followed Shuixian's family for more than three years and witnessed the challenges of their life. Most of the raw materials are edited in chronological order.

The beginning of this film introduces Shuixian's home village, Lilame, a remote mountain village where Shuixian and her family live for generations. Starting with extreme wide and wide shots of the house Shuixian's family, as well as long shots of Shuixian tending to cattle, life in a typical southwestern mountain village with backward production and living conditions is shown. Followed by a brief text to describe the villager and villagers, the film establishes the background of the story. Shuixian and other villagers are Lisu people, an ethnic minority group. Most villagers had moved to the nearby cities and Shuixian is one of the remaining farmers who works with traditional tools on mountain lands. After providing the basic information of the village, life in the village is elaborated by scenes of everyday life to render the slow pace of the countryside. Those scenes of everyday life also demonstrate the intimacy between parents and daughter, for example, Shuixian teaching Meng to read, the family having pancakes and Shuixian washing Meng's legs. At the end of the first part of the film, a news broadcast on television is also used to introduce the urban-rural economic gap as a national problem for China, linking Shuixian's individual story with bigger social background, and helping the audience to understand more about the subject.

The second part of the film shows the process of Shuixian and Meng adapting to the life in the city. Shuixian's job consists cleaning and handing out flyers for the restaurant at first. Gradually, Shuixian learned to cook and run the restaurant business. Meng is lonely at first. Later she makes friends and receives commendations at school. This part also uses everyday life situations to reflect the life in the city. What is different between the city scenes and village scenes is the editing style. The faster pace of city life is pictured through the short middle close-ups of Shuixian working in the restaurant. For example, a sequence of Shuixian cooking in the kitchen and Meng playing with herself in the restaurant is composed by short shots of Shuixian

being busy, making pizza, spaghetti, ice cream and serving the customers. Meanwhile, long shots of Meng playing a jump rope, eating ice cream and drawing pictures parallels the mother's busy working scenes to create the relationship of mother and daughter. The rhythm created by the combination of long shots and short shots underlines the dilemma of the mother and daughter's relationship. The mother has to work hard to support the family, even though the daughter wants more attention from her mother, which makes the sequence not only a warm and touching mother-daughter love scene, but reflects the burdens of Shuixian and Meng's life.

The turning point of the story comes in the third part, in which Shuixian and Meng have to return to Lilame because Shuixian loses her job in the restaurant. In the summer of 2015, influenced by El Niño Phenomenon and deforestation, Shuixian's home village Lilame is experiencing a drought. Shuixian and Meng return to Lilame to take part in a ceremony to pray for rain. The rain comes after the ceremony. However, Shuixian's younger sister, the owner of the restaurant visits the village and tells Shuixian she will close the restaurant. As Shuixian loses her job, Meng loses the opportunity for better education in the city. Both of the mother and daughter return to their home village. Shuixian has a second child soon and sends Meng to the boarding school in the village. The beginning of the third part reconnects audience to the mountain village with the ceremony to pray for the rain, which recalls audience' memory of the poor work and living conditions of the village. The mysteries of nature can be experienced in the ceremony when Shuixian's family and other villagers holding a ritual in their traditional costumes, and in the scene a newborn calf standing up after the ceremony. The rain comes with the birth of the calf, which symbolizes the hope of Shuixian's family to live a better life. And the newborn cows attempt to establish the intimacy with the mother mirrors the closeness of Shuixian and Meng. To lead audience to the turning point of Meng and Shuixian's life, the film

cuts in television news about the forest fire to prepare the expectation of the dramatic change in main characters' life.

Even though the film does not portray a lot of details of Shuixian's husband, Runde, his image as a husband and father supports the development of the story. When Shuixian and Meng leave Lilame, the film avoids showing a separation scene of family quarrel or burst out crying to ask for sympathy for the family. Instead, a scene of Runde walking a flock of goats into the mountains in the rain and fog implies the family's anxiety and the uncertainty of their future, and aims to give audience more space to develop their own thoughts on how the separation can influence the family. This scene also links Runde's character with the image of the mountains and nature, which implies the contrast of the mountain village and the new world that Shuixian and Meng will encounter in the city. Similar strategy also used in a scene of Runde calling Shuixian to elaborate the separation of the family. Runde is herding goats in the mountains, which shows the remoteness and wildness of the village. When he calls his wife who works in the restaurant in the city, the cell phone service loses signal suddenly. The scene ends with a long and extremely wide shot of the mountains to imply the mountains cut off the signal and encourage audience to imagine how the natural condition of the village restricts the family's life. After Meng and Shuixian returns to the village, a sequence of Runde feeding a turtledove also resembles the relationship between Shuixian and Runde. The turtledove is a symbol of love in Chinese culture. The situation that Runde keeps the turtledove with meticulousness symbolizes his determination to maintain his love to Shuixian and Meng. The intimacy between Meng and Runde is strengthened after the return of Meng. In a wide shot, the family staying in a sofa like the two side of the scale, followed by medium close-ups of Runde and Meng playing with a

cellphone, and Shuixian taking a nap, the frame divides the family into two sides, which strengthens the daughter and father relationship.

3. Research Analysis

In China, ethnic minorities are concentrated in the southern and western areas of the country ("PERMANENT MISSION OF CHINA"). Lisu ethnic minority is one of the minority peoples. The major population of Lisu people "live(s) in concentrated communities in Bijiang, Fugong, Gongshan and Lushui counties of the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture in northwestern Yunnan Province". There are also Lisu people scattered in other parts of Yunnan Province and Sichuan Province, "living in small communities with the Han, Bai, Yi and Naxi peoples". ("The Lisu Ethnic Minority"). "Before the founding of the People's Republic of China" in 1949, "agriculture and animal husbandry, the main economies in China's minority areas, developed very slowly". After 1949, the national policy is "on the basis of equality of all rights, the people of all ethnic groups unite of their own accord for mutual promotion and common development and dedicate to the building of a strong, prosperous, democratic and civilized New China" ("PERMANENT MISSION OF CHINA"). The ethnic minorities get the opportunity to develop themselves under this policy, but there is a distinction between the developed areas and the minority areas. The provinces and autonomous regions inhabited by ethnic minorities are usually underdeveloped economically. In *Minority Rights in Asia: A Comparative Legal Analysis*, the authors wrote about the social problems in the minority areas. The authors came up with the question whether the ethnic minorities are able to enjoy equal benefits of China's economic and social achievements with the ethnic majority (Castellino and Redondo 134). And "the fruits of the improvement in education have not accrued equally: minorities, 130 rural areas, and women still show lower literacy rates than the rest of the population" (125). Historically,

many minority areas have their special languages and cultures, which makes it difficult for them to participate in the development of the develop areas.

In my film, the main characters live in a small Lisu community in Dali Bai Prefecture in western Yunnan Province. This small community is mingled with the nearby areas inhabited by the Han people, who's the ethnic majority of China. My film shows the underdeveloped economy and education of Shuixian's community. Shuixian's community shares similar customs, habits and festivals with the local Han people. But her community speaks Lisu dialect, which is the biggest difference of this Lisu community and the Han people in the nearby cities. Shuixian's family teaches Meng the local Lisu dialect as a baby, which helps Meng to learn the Lisu culture and history. However, the Lisu dialect is not widely used outside the mountain village.

Shuixian's plan to send Meng to the school in the city is to build a better environment for Meng to learn Mandarin and the Han culture. Mandarin is the official spoken language in China, and speaking fluent Mandarin is a required skill if Meng wants to get better opportunities in the future. But Meng might lose the chance to inherit the Lisu culture since she was exposed to the world outside from an early age. For children who come from the ethnic minorities, "u(U)nless they become effectively bilingual in their own languages and Chinese, they run the risk of losing their own languages and cultures or not being able to participate in the national life of China as conveniently" (Lam, 174). Shuixian and Meng have to find a solution to get out of the dilemma if they want to stay in the city.

Shuixian's community is matriarchal, which is unique compared with the rest of the world. The most typical matriarchy in China is the Mosuo tribe in Ninglang, where is 500 kilometers away from Lilame. In the Mosuo tribe, women "make most major decisions; they control household finances, have the rightful ownership of land and houses, and full rights to the

children born to them" (Shaitly). Since Lilame is a small community, I cannot find any academic reference about the matriarchy in this village. Based on my experience in Lilame, the local women are dominant in their workspace and they are the head of the household, which is similar to the matriarchy in the Mosuo tribe. Shuixian's father cooks and looks after the younger generation at home when Shuixian's mother works in the fields. Shuixian is the breadwinner of her family. She looks after livestock and walnut trees before moving to the city. While Runde spends a lot of free time playing, chatting and drinking with friends. Though Runde worries about separating from Shuixian and Meng, he doesn't show any disagreement with Shuixian's plan because Shuixian has the right to make big decisions. In order to fulfill the responsibility to support her family, Shuixian has to work in the city to make more money.

This project is influenced by the observational documentaries made in the Chinese New Documentary Movement in late 1980s and early 1990s, in which filmmakers developed their own voice independent of state-own media. The intention of making this project to show the individuality of the main characters and lead audience and to develop individual interpretation of the story coincides with the goals of films made in the New Documentary Movement. "What the New Documentary Movement has in common is the attempt to re-energize humanism so as to present a new reality from the perspective of the disenfranchised social sectors, thereby to inject critique, sympathy, and collective concerns into an increasingly atomized, commercialized society" (Wang 220-221). Inspired by Frederick Wiseman, Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan and other independent documentary pioneers in New Documentary Movement construct critical reflection of the society with style of observational documentary and open voice. For example, in *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* (1999), Wu Wenguang followed a peasant troupe to travel in villages and recorded the performers singing and dancing on the stage, as well as everyday life of the

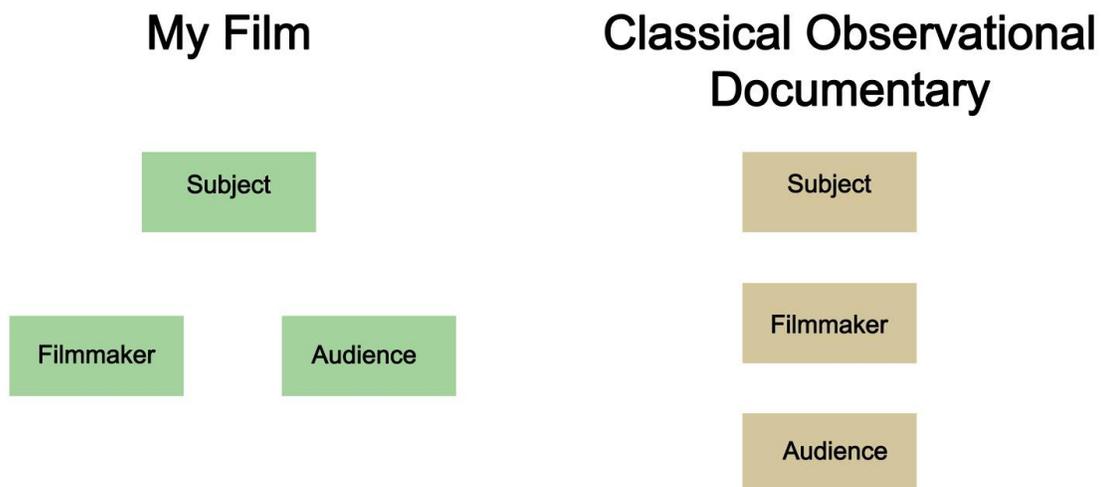
performers on the trip. An intimate image of the peasants is portrayed through the closeness of Wu's camera and the main characters' in the film. Wu's observation offers audience alternative interpretations of peasants' life in the film. However, the situations in which the peasant performers were drunk and fighting were captured by Wu as well. On one hand, Wu dug out the hidden aspects of the peasant troupe to help audience find their conclusions; on the other hand, the privacy and dignity of the main characters were devastated. Therefore, showing the intimate authenticity and exploitation of real people become the ethical paradox of this type of documentaries. In the New Documentary Movement, there is also another kind of subject exploitation that "involves a largely sympathetic treatment and is therefore benign in nature and in a sense unavoidable" (Zhang Yingjin, 128). Zhang discussed the problem of subject exploitation in *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997) and *Along the Railroad* (2000). In these two films, the filmmakers won trust from the subjects who were marginalized groups of the society, but they believed that they took advantage of the image of the subjects to complete their documentary. The filmmakers used the image of the subjects' suffering to make the films and the completed films didn't benefit the subjects. The subjects didn't get chance to watch the films or discuss with with filmmakers whether their images were shown appropriately.

When we're making documentaries, we have to think about questions like: "Are we asking sacrifices on one side for a positive good on the other? What is the boundary between society's right to know and the individual's right to be free of humiliation, shame and indignity?" (Pryluck 24). Pryluck also mentioned strategies to alleviate the ethical paradox of documentary: to sign consents with their subjects or to work in collaborative approach to make the creative works to avoid overexpose the subjects (25-28). I had gotten consents from Shuixian's family and all other people who show up in my film. However, I find it's not enough to just explain

about my project and ask these people to give me permission to shoot the project. Considering the fact that Meng, who's a young child in the film may not fully understand how a documentary can influence her life in the future, my camera tried to find a balance of penetrating the surface of Shuixian's family and keeping a distance to respect their privacy. To explain my method, I will compare the storytelling of *Last Train Home* (2009) with my film.

Last Train Home tells a story of a migrant worker couple and their rebellious daughter. The film shows a scene of a family quarrel to present how the separation of the migrant parents and their kids destroy the warm and happy atmosphere of Chinese New Year. In *Last Train Home*, the daughter argues with her parents that they do not stay home and care for her and her younger brother. Gradually, the daughter and her father begin to fight with each other. The emotional outburst in this scene brings up the conflicts in the family and engages audience with the narrative of the film easily. Nevertheless, filming this scene exploited the family because it exposed the most intense conflicts in this family to public view. The violence of the daughter and the father may lead audience to over-read the family members' conflicts. I doubt whether the audience interprets the scene as child abuse in some cultural context. This obvious breakout of family conflicts not only leads to ethical problems, but also deviates from the feature of observational cinema's open voice that "observes or explores rather than explains" (Plantinga 108). "The open voice recognizes that we must approach some subjects with the humility of one who does not claim to know" and it "may withhold high-level generalizations about its subject not in the name of imitation, but in an unwillingness to offer neat explanations and contextualization" (Plantinga 118). Making the conflicts superficial in the quarrel scene, *Last Train Home* provides excessive explanation but not exploration of the family relationship. The intense relationship between the parents and the daughter is constructed clearly before the

quarrel, and the breakthrough of the conflicts is predictable. Thus, the violent quarrel meets audience's expectation of the development of the narrative to satisfy their curiosity of watching the chaos in the migrant workers' life. And the same problems can be seen in other documentaries that in classical observational style that "enables viewers to have the coherence, manageability, and often the moral order of their lives reaffirmed, while simultaneously allowing them to feel that they're interested in other classes, other people's' tragedies, other countries' crises" (Godmilow and Shapiro 87). Since my goal is to "facilitate a democracy of interpretation, allowing the spectator to come to her own conclusions." (Plantinga 118), I reconstructed spectatorship to position the audience where the filmmaker observes and creates the story. The following pictures can explain more of the spectatorship I tried to establish in my film.



My strategy is to minimize the conflicts in the surface storytelling, which refers to the direct burst of conflicts on screen. As I mentioned in the project description, I used a scene of Runde walking into the rain and fog to imply the unclear future after Shuixian and Meng left their home village. The possible quarrel or fights can exist in the audience's imagination. In the same way, it is not necessary for me to confirm the results of Shuixian's and Meng's leaving for

the city. I tried to give audience more space to select what they prefer to trust on the screen and think about the underneath layer of the story. In the process of making observational documentary films, filmmakers select what to be filmed and edited and imply their attitudes from their own perspective. "T(t)he filmmaker exists on the same plane of human existence as his or her social actors rather than on the more detached plane of commentor or poet" (Nichols 157). Unlike the classical observational documentaries that communicate to an audience by showing the audience's subjective representation, my strategy is to tell the story in a loose and detached style to give audience freedom to select the on-screen information and develop their own interpretation of the story.

The project is also influenced by woman filmmakers in China. "W(w)omen's cinema turned self-expressive and self-conscious in mainland China when a small group of woman directors began practicing a subjective and personal mode of cinema in the early 1980s" (Wang Lingzhen 333). When I was doing research about films made by Chinese woman directors, *Sacrificed Youth* (1986) by Zhang Nuanxin impressed me most. The main character of *Sacrificed Youth* is a seventeen years old girl who is sent to a mountain village in Yunnan province during the Cultural Revolution. The girl grows up in an intellectual family in the city, but she has to learn to live in the village with the Dai ethnic minority. Zhang showed the process of the main character adapting to the rural environment with gender consciousness. The girl puts on the costume of Dai people to show her beauty and fell in love with a young intellectual who also comes from city. The sexual awakening of the main character happens in the confrontation of the repressed urban culture and the unconstrained culture of the ethnic minority. Zhang's intimate illustration of the girl's awakening introduces a possible style to me to follow my main characters' development between their times in the mountain village and city.

Independent documentaries made by woman directors also inspired my project. Zhang Zhen analyzed some independent documentaries by woman director from the 1990s to the early 2000s and summarized the style of these films as "Video eye," which follows the subculture and marginalized groups and shows the diversity of life with intimacy and equality. The personal style of these films expresses individual voices in public, instead of speaking out for the state apparatus and the revolutionary cause. Compared with documentaries made by state media, these documentaries showed how filmmakers understood and interpreted society from an individual perspective, especially a female perspective. *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997) and *Bing Ai* (2007) are two examples of "Video eye". Directed by Li Hong, *Out of Phoenix Bridge* observed a group of woman migrant workers who lived in a tiny room in Beijing. Made in the 1990s, the observational style and individual perspective of this film resembles other works in the New Documentary Movement. However, compared with the work of male directors, such as Wu Wenguang and Duan Jinchuan, this film presented the subjects from a female perspective. Li constructed the story with compelling testimony and observational footage of the main characters' life in Beijing and their hometown in the countryside. As a woman filmmaker, Li got the access to participate in the main characters' life in their living space. Close observation of the women resting, preparing to have showers, and discussing relationships with men displays the changes of women's roles in developing China. Inherited the observational style and individual voice from the New Documentary Movement, *Bing Ai* (2007) was made against the background of construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Zhang Bingai, the main character of this film, refused to relocate and struggled to stay in the old house with her family for years. The film did not locate the camera in the position of an authority like state media or analyze the how the construction of the Three Gorges Dam would impact local people's life politically. The film

presents Bingai as a determined peasant, mother and wife who fights with the relocation policy. Bearing hardships without complaining, Bingai is a strong individual who had to sacrifice her interests to support the national construction. Both of the films take on their topics from an individual perspective with a gender consciousness. My film also tries to observe the main characters as mother, wife and daughter, which shows the conflicts in women's roles in the social context of the rural-urban divide.

4. Thesis Production Process

I have captured some important intimate moments of Shuixian and her family, which supports their individualities and contributes to the development of the story. Since I built a friendship with Shuixian's family, my camera could select the closest moments from their everyday life. I started this project by making friends with Shuixian and her family. After I attended some of their festivals, wedding parties and birthday parties and shot videos for their parties, they trusted me and became more open to the camera. Although most of the party footage couldn't function to tell the story, shooting these parties made Shuixian, Meng and other people adapt to the idea that a camera is in front of them observing their life.

The most difficult part of making this film was my insistence of editing the film chronologically while representing the subject with drama. I had watched all the raw footage more than twenty times before I tried to organize the selected clips to create the structure of the film. Nevertheless, the repetitive everyday events of the main characters as ordinary people only built a narrative with micro drama.

Also, I encountered the question of how to represent the already happened but not recorded events in the form of observational documentary. When I started to shoot the film, Shuixian had already moved to the city. I tried to show her life before moving to the city with

reenactment, but I lacked budget, equipment and technical support to work out something with high production value. Consequently, I had to add text to avoid making audience confused.

Apart from this, it was tricky to find a balance of engaging the audience and keeping the distance between audience and the subjects of the film. The most direct way of arousing audience's attention is to show the outbreak of conflicts, which would work if my intention is to make audience immerse in the sorrow of family separation, Shuixian losing job, Meng quitting the school in the city. However, the method I prefer was to hide the conflicts under the surface of the image, which guides audience with a more ambiguous voice. I couldn't determine whether my audience would reach the destination I guided them to. Some audiences might lose interests in watching the film if they cannot decode my subtle way of telling the story.

Moreover, how to offer enough background information to build a platform for audience to understand the subject was a question. The observational style of the film only exposed minimal information to the audience, which demanded that the audience participate in the interpretation of the on-screen events. This means that an audience might not have knowledge about the society and people depicted in the film, which required more techniques to find a balance of the minimal style and sufficient informational explanation. My solution was to show events that have universal meaning, for example, making the mother and daughter relationship as a clue to introduce the characters and support the development of the story. However, audience outside China might need more background information to follow the story.

5. Audience and Exhibition

As is known by all, the distribution and exhibition of independent films in China needs to work under censorship. The Yunnan Multi-Cultural Festival, known as "YunFest", was one of the most significant platforms for Chinese independent films to exchange ideas and discuss

works. It is "a crucial platform for young Chinese indie filmmakers to get their films seen and recognized internationally"(Bandurski), but it was shut down by authorities in 2013. Also, in 2014, Chinese authorities' interference with Beijing Independent Film Festival brought international media attention to the freedom of speech issue in China (Kaiman). However, sources of Wu Wenguang, Wang Bing, Zhou Hao and other independent filmmakers' works can be found on online platforms, such as Sina Weibo (<https://weibo.com/>), Bilibili (<https://www.bilibili.com/>), and Tudou (<https://www.tudou.com/>). Therefore, there is no clear regulation to show what kind of film contents or subjects will be considered as sensitive or banned by Chinese authorities.

Wang Xiaolu's essay on *The Economic Observer* came up with two possible directions for the development of Chinese independent documentary in terms of its aesthetics and distribution. The first direction is reusing the aesthetics of the New Documentary Movement, in which documentary films provided an open voice for audience to have alternative interpretation of the films. The second direction is making independent documentaries fit into international film festivals and universal aesthetics. The exhibition and distribution of *The Return* will combine the two directions. The early distribution strategy is to show the film in underground film festivals in mainland China, Taiwan and Hongkong, as well as Asian film festival in the US. However, I want the film to reach more Chinese audiences, though screening independent films in public is a sensitive situation in China. "Such subject matter is sensitive not because it cannot be addressed (for the official and semiofficial media have covered some of them regularly) but because its coverage requires an unwavering alignment with the official line of interpretation" (Zhang Yingjin 111). I don't think the topic and approach of my film involve sensitive contents, but there are no standards or regulations that define the extent of censorship. Thus, I don't know

whether I can get the freedom to show it in a public space. I prefer to show the film to small groups of filmmakers and film scholars and offer free download links online for other potential audiences. I plan to show the film to audiences who also work in the field of film to open discussion about the aesthetics and ethics of making independent documentary. For larger groups, I think watching the film online can involve the maximum audience. I believe sharing the film online is an effective way because "it's facilitating the participation of citizens from a broad range of backgrounds in independent film production" (Edwards 158). Watching independent films online gives more freedom and flexibility to audience to think critically and avoid the direct confrontation with censorship.

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Sacrificed Youth. Directed by Zhang Nuanxin, 1986.