

*Making Documentary as Methods: (Re)imagining the Hong Kong Landscape and Geo-politics*

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Abstract

This paper explores the strengths of a documentary and the cultural identification of Chinese audiences, by showing them my geo-political documentary and conducting ethnographic interviews with them. The 20-min long documentary 'We Used to Make Bread. Now We Get Dirt' was about the profit-oriented urban redevelopment plans, which destroyed the traditional neighbourhood in one of the oldest town in Hong Kong, were deleting the cultural identity and collective memories of the local people. Due to this, the urgency of preserving locality and democratizing the way of urban planning has filled up Hong Kong in the summer of 2013. By showing this documentary and conducting detailed ethnographic interviews with different kinds of Chinese, including Hong Kongese, Taiwanese, mainland Chinese, British Born Chinese and European Born Chinese, the complexities of the traditional audience-text-context triangulation are restructured. It shows that different kinds of Chinese diasporas considered different contexts which work as determinants affecting how they read the texts, how they interpret the signs and how they construct/reproduce/circulate meanings. This audience research also tests how influential a geo-political documentary, as a cultural product and an ideological mode of narrative, can be. The research method includes semi-structured interviews, opinion sharing and non-recorded dialogues, in order to test the possibilities of mobilizing identifications.

## Introduction

In the terrain of traditional audience research, the triangulation of text, context and audience is the basic research framework. Text could be the determinant, affecting audience's willingness to watch it but it is not always monolithic. The audiences decide to watch a particular visual text based on different reasons and contextual situations. In Chinese culture, we have a saying: 'The drunken man is not really interested in wine' (*zui weng zhi yi bu zai jiu*). The same logic can be applied to the cinema-goers or visual text viewers, who could decide to watch the text by particular physical and/or psychological contextual situations. Thus, I would like to investigate the reasons of why the audiences are interested in watching a particular Hong Kong geo-political documentary.

I chose a 20-min long documentary *We Used to Make Bread. Now We Get Dirt* as text in this research. Since this documentary was made by me, I can have better control of the contents in it. By selective editing, I encoded meaning in every sequence and scene, but every meaning is open for interpreting. Furthermore, I would like to experiment the strength of a social activist documentary and see how much it could influence the audience. This documentary is about the profit-oriented urban redevelopment plans in Hong Kong and how these plans destroyed the traditional neighbourhood in one of the oldest town in Hong Kong, and how, by these, they deleted the cultural identity and collective memories of the local people. This documentary aims to express the urgency of preserving locality and democratizing the way of urban planning in Hong Kong. Indeed, the urban redevelopment is also a hot topic in mainland China. In the name of processing modernization, there are many old buildings and communities being torn down in exchange for modern buildings. Demolishing a living community we are familiar with, shatters our cultural identities, which were built by the intimate neighbourhood relationship between the local people. Hence, the theme of this documentary could reflect the contemporary geopolitical situation of the Chinese and how would the Chinese respond to it.

The aim of this research is to explore the cultural identification of Chinese audiences, by showing them my geo-political documentary and conducting ethnographic interviews with them. It also proposes to investigate different socio-cultural contexts which work as determinants affecting how different Chinese Diasporas read the texts, how they interpret the signs and how they construct/reproduce and circulate meanings. Up to now, the audiences and interviewees include Taiwanese, mainland Chinese, British-born Chinese and other European Chinese. This research paper just shows the preliminary observations of the entire research. In the future, I will conduct more similar screening and interviews with Hong-Kongese and other kinds of Chinese diasporas.

The research questions of this paper are stimulated by Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identification. 'Cultural identities is a matter of becoming, as well as of being' (Hall, 2003, p.238). Then I would question when and what was the moment of becoming a British-Chinese, a non-Chinese or becoming a Chinese again, and how and when this moment was shaped.

On the other hand, Gordon Mathews (p.10, 2007) states that 'Cultural globalization cannot be viewed as an isomorphic process, but as multiple processes with different valences and trajectories'. The process of identification and the texture of viewing

experience of Chinese audiences are full of complexity, heterogeneity and hybridity. While absorbing different sorts of mediations in the UK, Chinese media audiences/users/creators or voyeurs may have reinforcement, reconstruction, re-imagination and/or denial of their Chineseness.

## Methodology

This research begins with the making of a geo-political documentary. According to Paula Rabinowitz's notion of political documentaries (1994, p.7), 'documentaries have and present values; they are persuasive...and they can 'even control of history'. This documentary targets to influence people to concern about the importance of the 'right to the city'<sup>1</sup> under neoliberalism, and the social inequalities gentrification<sup>2</sup> generates. This documentary style resonates with Rabinowitz's idea (1994, p.7) about 'remaking the relationship of truth to ideology by insisting on advocacy rather than objectivity'. I would test the strength of this geo-political documentary and the distance between the audiences and the filmed subjects, by showing it to the audiences and interviewing them. Judging from Paul Rotha's notion of documentary (2008, p.4) which is '...something closer to an idea, a form of social intellection"', Jonathan Kahana (2008, p.1) suggests that 'the flexibility and endurance of the documentary apparatus, its simultaneous appeal to both state and capitalist institutions and their critics, owes much to this capacity for intellection and its varieties: ideology, theory, imagination, and belief'. Making a documentary and showing it to the audiences could be a way to arouse social concerns to particular social issues and challenge their taken-for-granted imagination of a place. It could be a way to shorten the distances between the sufferers and the audiences.

According to Bill Nicholas's concept of documentary modes (1991, p.32), my documentary contains hybrid modes, which are expository and participatory. The hybrid mode can make the audiences to get into the filmed situation more directly and stimulate them to think about the appropriateness of a forced urban renewal plan.

The interview part of this research is ethnographically oriented, combining two traditional dimensions of ethnography: participation and observation. By evaluating the suggestions of Hammersley and Atkinson, Ann Gray (2003, p.95) points out the importance of establishing 'a good rapport with the respondent', 'reflexive interviewing', conducting unstandardized questions and 'being a good listener'. For the past few decades, the debates of the usefulness and effectiveness of ethnography are continuous. However, Ien Ang (1996, p.71) states that 'what ethnographic work entails is a form of "methodological situationalism", underscoring the thoroughly situated, always context-bound ways in which people encounter, use, interpret, enjoy, think and talk about...'. In this research, all interviews are semi-structured with a lot of open questions.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The right to the city is that we have a real need right now to democratize decisions as to how a city shall be organized and what it should be about, so that we can actually have a collective project to reshape the urban world.', David Harvey, <http://urbanhabitat.org/node/4225>,

<sup>2</sup> 'It is increasingly argued that gentrification is incorporated into public and the by-product of a range of contemporary neoliberal urban development policies intent on attracting investment capital. However, gentrification can also be the unintended outcome of well-meaning urban policy frameworks, such as urban densification, inner-city regeneration and urban heritage conservation but with arguably negative consequences.'

<http://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs12132-012-9182-9.pdf>

Inspired by Jean Rouch's filming method of ethnographic documentaries, I hope to conduct the interviews with the interviewees as a kind of casual sharing in order to make this research participatory, rather than a top-down investigation. Jean Rouch 'involved his "actors" [interviewees] in the process of constructing the films themselves' (Bogue, 2003, p.151). More interesting is that Ronald Bogue connects Rouch's interviewees to Gilles Deleuze's 'function of fabulation' (Bogue, 2003, p.152) which is about inventing new identities through the process of making film and ethnographic exploration. Rouch's *Jaguar* and *Moi, un noir* both were filmed in this style. Thus, I hope to explore the possibility of mobilizing identification of the interviewees and myself through a transversal way of researching.

### **The audience sample**

Up to now, the interviewed audiences are the people I know in the UK. The following is the preliminary results of the ethnographic oriented interviews and observations I have done. When I asked the respondents 'What do you think about this documentary?' I get the following answers, which show that different Chinese people have different ideas of their identities.

### **Being an 'Outsider' upholding two cultures**

'I think it is interesting for an 'outsider' to know there are also urban development's going on in Hong Kong. I thought it is just an issue in Mainland China, and to be honest I thought Hong Kong is already more 'developed' than anywhere else in Mainland China.' (Linda, 27, Chinese, born in Shanghai, migrated to Germany since she was 7)

Linda identifies herself as an 'outsider' in regard of her relationship with Hong Kong. Having been living in Germany for over 20 years, Linda has been a bicultural person who can speak Mandarin and German fluently. Linda thinks that she is not entirely westernized. During the semi-structured interview, Linda also emphasized that 'Her mind is German and her heart is Chinese'.

Also, she expressed her pride of Shanghai-ese literacy, which is one of the Chinese dialects. In our unexpected conversation, Linda talked a lot about her favourite Shanghai-ese dishes and how much she missed the food there. Linda never denied or tried to reject her Chinese identity and she is actually proud of her Shanghai-ese identity. Ien Ang (2001, p.9) states that, for her family, "'out of Asia into the West" meant the utopian hope and the dogged determination to fully westernize, and to claim the west as our destiny and our eventual site of belonging'. Ien Ang once cited Bhabba's notion of 'in-between' cultural identification which suggests 'almost the same but not quite' (Bhabba, 1994, p.89). However, Linda did not determine to be fully westernized nor 'almost German but not quite'. She is Chinese and German at the same time. The 'in-between-ness' is not Linda's major cultural identification but the possession of having both. Ien Ang further deconstructs diasporic identity, claiming that 'Identity politics, in this regard, is a local offshoot of the decline of assimilationism and its illusory promise of equality on the basis of a strived-for but not achieved sameness: the politics of identity relies quintessentially on the recognition and mobilization of difference once the ideal of sameness has proved unreachable' (Ang, 2001, p.11). During the conversation with Linda, she compared the redevelopment situations in mainland China with Hong Kong, but she never said anything about the urban plans or anything related to Germany. Linda strived for

getting to be more German as a life strategy but not aimed to archive to be a total German.

Valarie Walkerdine suggests investigating audience's subjectification process and their psycho-subjectivities while conducting ethnographic audience research. Walkerdine's conception of production of subjects is based on a mix of Foucauldian post-structuralism<sup>3</sup> and psychoanalysis, aiming 'to recognize the powerful place of those emotions in producing the very practices and subjects' (2001, p.176). Walkerdine (1986, p.340) proposes that 'fantasy and reality already operate in a complex and indiscernible dynamic'. However, I would include memory in this complex dynamics.

Linda also said that she liked my monologue in the documentary as it reminded her 'childhood memories in Shanghai - how it was and how it became now.' Here is the monologue:

'Kwun Tong, one of the oldest towns in Hong Kong, is being demolished and undergoing the so called "redevelopment". This redevelopment project is the biggest Hong Kong's ever had. This place is my hometown..., my childhood..., my teenage years... and... my roots. I was shocked by the huge amount of protest banners I saw, protesting against the upcoming redevelopment plan. Some people even claim that the redevelopment of Kwun Tong is a murder of local culture.'

She continued by saying that 'you have to explore the city by foot and see, smell and touch it'. Sengun Seda (2001) uses 'the metaphor of teddy bear during the mother's absence' to describe 'own culture'. She claims that 'When a migrant eats food which is specific to his original country, or listens to a song in his own language, he is immediately linked to his past and his own culture' (Seda, 2001, 68). Mediation has influence on the migrants just as food, sound and smell have.

Linda's sharing resonates with Bazalgette and Buckingham's idea (1995, p.5), which states 'childhood is partly a cultural and ideological construction' and 'is reproduced and reinforced in everyday practices'. Linda reinforced her memories of the old Shanghai while she was watching the documentary.

### **In between two cultures**

Another respondent Candy, a British born Chinese, showed a sense of distancing and belonging to Hong Kong. As her father was born in Hong Kong and they would return to Hong Kong once per year, Candy considers Hong Kong as her second homeland. When she watched the documentary, she was so surprised that she immediately asked me 'Oh my god, what happened in Hong Kong?'. And then, she said that 'I just know the anti-braining protest last year in Hong Kong'. When I asked her what she thought about the documentary, she answered:

'It is really interesting and enlightening. Without watching it, I have no idea about what's going on [in Hong Kong]. Now when I go back home, I will do some research. I heard that Hong Kong is changing but

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<sup>3</sup> Walkerdine refers to Michel Foucault's notion of 'fiction which functions in truth' in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), 2001, p.176, *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*

I didn't realize how much it affects people like this. They [the Urban Renewal Authority] did not give them [affected shop owners] enough compensation and not help them. I know the brainwashing education. But, I don't really know about this.' (Candy, 23, British-born Chinese)

In terms of Candy's nationalistic mentality, she is experiencing a sense of 'between cultures' which is suggested by Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins (2003, P.4) when they investigated the case of Turkish migration in London in their diasporic cultural studies. During our conversation, Candy emphasized that 'My dad is always proud of being a Hong Kongese'. Although Candy does not speak Cantonese, she is sensibly aware of those differences between mainland China and Hong Kong. However, Candy's diasporic identification shows her lack of knowledge of Hong Kong locality.

She said that 'I don't know there are local stores for people renting books. I just know how the barber looks like'. The interesting thing about Kwun Tong is that it is full of individual self-run stores, which attracted Candy. At the end of our conversation, when Candy was writing her ethnic background in the demographic information, she wrote 'Chinese' and told me that 'See? I would still identify myself as Chinese'.

### **Being an active Investigator**

Melisa is another interviewee. She was born in China and is studying Journalism in the UK. She told me what she thought about the documentary:

'I remember that at the beginning [of the documentary], there are a lot of voice over to introduce the story. The colour temperature and the voice over are nice. I like some shots of the big demonstration and protest, that kind of stuff and also the later the demonstration and you talk to the government officials at the end. You showed your face in your film and it is good. It is a kind of journalistic documentary. For the first part, the colour temperature and the feeling are like [a Hong Kong lesbian movie] 'Butterfly'. The filmed landscapes are similar. Both films are about Hong Kong. I saw some familiar scenes.'

Melisa actively asked me 'Did you post-produce the colour temperature?'. To which I replied: 'Yes, it is about a city so that I showed a lot of landscape scenes'. Then, Melisa continued 'But not too many interviews at the beginning. It would be better to adjust the arrangement of the story a little bit more. I also like your interview with the bookshop owner and also a woman in front of the door'

At the beginning, Melisa was quite concerned about the artistic post-production methods more than about her identity relation to the contents in this documentary. After that, Melisa asked me 'Is it because the Chinese government or some other things make Hong Kong change a lot? like it made some stores closed?'. I told her that 'Actually it is the Hong Kong government. I didn't criticize Chinese government in this documentary because it is a big topic.' Melisa kept asking 'Does it happen after 1997?' and I said 'Well, the urban renewal authority was established after 1997.' Melisa continued by saying that 'So...Sorry that I kept asking you questions. How's the benefit system in Hong Kong? How about the retired people? Are there some national securities?'

Melisa was taking a journalistic role to investigate this documentary. Unlike Linda and Candy, Melisa did not directly put her relation to Chineseness into the progress of interpreting the documentary. However, when Melisa compared the documentary with a Hong Kong lesbian movie *Butterfly* (2004), she said that the demonstration and protest scenes in *Butterfly* brought her to know about Tiananmen Square Massacre for the first time. *Butterfly* is the first Hong Kong movie she watched and it was the first time she knew about 'June fourth' and homosexuality. Van Zoonen (1994, p.76) once envisages that 'signs derive their relevance not only from the particular articulation of signifier-signified, but also from their relation to other signs'. I would suggest investigating the collision between different similar signs. During the conversation between Melisa and I, she kept comparing the filmed Hong Kong landscapes in *Butterfly* and that in the documentary. Melisa paid attention in the voice of a space and was fascinated about the demonstration and protest scenes in both texts.

### **Clashes between Taiwanese, Hong Kongese and mainland Chinese**

At the beginning of the interview, when I asked a Taiwanese interviewee Teresa what she thought about the documentary and she responded:

'There are more and more Chinese go to Hong Kong to use their recourses, like education system, hospitals and the goods. It brings Hong Kong inflation. Everything becomes more expensive. It is an issue. A lot of people from mainland China go to Hong Kong. I think what you are talking in this documentary is also like that. Hong Kong is going to have more shopping malls. I think most tourists are Chinese from mainland. I think it is built for shopping. It is very tricky that more shops are opened for the tourists from China but not for Hong Kong people.'

Teresa related to the relationship between Hong Kong, Taiwan and China in an economic context. She did not directly refer to the contents in the documentary. Rather than that, she talked about the current conflicts between mainland Chinese and Hong Kongese at the beginning of her sharing.

When I asked her about the image of Hong Kong in her mind, she thought that 'Hong Kong is a financial center'. However, the landscape of Hong Kong in Teresa's mind is 'an economically power place and full of skyscrapers and shopping malls.' When I asked her 'What do you think about the locality of Hong Kong?', she said that 'I think it is quite similar with Taiwan's. I am quite familiar with the local shops. People have their own neighborhoods and communities'. During our conversation, she still kept talking with me about the urban redevelopment issues in Taiwan. She even sent me an inbox Facebook message and told me that 'Here is the news about the man who suicide after the local government demolished his pharmacy to make way for a public project. it is a project in Dapu district in Miaoli county, you might find more news in English'.

Teresa's continuous discussions about the social issue of urban redevelopment after viewing the documentary is a kind of extra-cinematic identification practice which is suggested by Jackie Stacey. 'Extra-cinematic identification practices' indicates that many forms of identification 'involves processes of transformation and production of new identities' and also passive 'confirmation of existing identities' (Stacey, 1994, p.172). The fluidity and temporariness of identification, which can be traced through a

different contextualization of viewing, would influence audience's activeness of accepting or rejecting being positioned in certain filmic elements.

### **Silenced Chinese?**

However, not all the respondents finished watching the entire documentary. Bell is one of the respondents, who married to a British for several years and have officially migrated to Britain already. I met Bell in a voluntary work and we chatted a lot. When I told her about the documentary I have just made, she was so interested in watching it and claimed that 'I am not that knowledgeable. My husband knows much about China and Hong Kong. I get the news of China and Hong Kong from my husband'. Then, one day I invited her to view my documentary in a café and she went there with her husband. At the beginning, we have a harmonious greeting and casual conversation. After Bell and her husband had been watching the documentary for 10 minutes, Bell's husband stopped her from watching it and said that 'It is very nice to meet you Mavis. But, I am sorry that she [Bell] cannot watch it'. Stuart Hall (2003, p.237) suggests that '[Cultural identities are] Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position...'. For Bell's case, as a married-to-British Chinese woman, she chose to watch this documentary but was positioned in a place that is not allowed her to finish watching it. The politics of positioning speaks louder than the politics of choice.

Chabot Davis (2003) criticizes Freud's identification theories and the essentialist notion of identification as a process of recognizing sameness and disallowing that identification may also entail an awareness of difference (p.6). However, I suggest that identification does not only about sameness and differences, but also confusion and contradiction in the process of recognizing the same or the different. Bell showed her curiosity and confusion about the social issues of Hong Kong. At the same time, the freedom of watching a Hong Kong documentary was not decided by herself but somebody else who is not Chinese. She was situated in the middle between the curiosity to Chinese issues and her husband's choice and "love".

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