

This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 22 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Edited by Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison
and Alex Marlow-Mann

The Routledge Companion to World Cinema

Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison, Alex Marlow-Mann

The cinematic and the real in contemporary Chinese cinema

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch1>

Yingjin Zhang

Published online on: 27 Sep 2017

How to cite :- Yingjin Zhang. 27 Sep 2017, *The cinematic and the real in contemporary Chinese cinema from: The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* Routledge

Accessed on: 22 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315688251.ch1>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

1

THE CINEMATIC AND THE REAL IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CINEMA

Yingjin Zhang

Introduction: the cinematic and the real

In the cinematic landscape, the real is never a pure ontological entity transferred directly from the external world. At the birth of cinema, when the Lumière Brothers were thrilled at capturing reality in documentary shorts such as *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, 1895, France), Georges Méliès would soon discover the cinematic capacity for manipulating images and visualising fantasies in fiction films such as *Le Voyage dans La Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, 1902, France). Méliès's fantasy and Lumière's reality were subsequently postulated as two distinct traditions in early cinema, although filmmakers tend to posit reality as their primary end and fiction as the means to that end; indeed, scholars believe the two traditions eventually merged in Hollywood's classical cinema (Katz 1994: 854, 927). Yet, with the advent of postmodernism, the real is increasingly seen as mediated by technological apparatus and human intervention, and "reality" is claimed as "always-already present in people's minds as textual fabrication, model, or simulation that in fact precede reality or even generate it" (Shaul 2008: 48). In documentary film studies, the tension between reality and representation is perceived as unresolvable in

the perennial Bazin *vs* Baudrillard tussle, both of whom—from opposite perspectives—argue for the erosion of any differentiation between the image and reality, Bazin because he believed reality could be recorded, Baudrillard because he believes reality is just another image.

(Bruzzi 2000: 4)

In contemporary Chinese cinema, this sense of the real as a creatively constructed image rather than a politically postulated, "objective" referent to the empirically verifiable external world would exert a tremendous impact on filmmaking in the post-Mao period (since 1976). After three previous decades of strict ideological control and oftentimes-brutal political repressions, in the early 1980s Chinese filmmakers gradually learned to expand their visions of the real beyond those authorised by the Communist Party. Thirty-five years since then, the real in Chinese cinema has appeared to pertain more to individual perception and interpretation than to ideological promulgation and political administration, although the party-state still maintains the power

of propaganda and censorship. Given this situation, the cinematic landscape of the real has developed into a site of contention, and realities of various kinds have gone through continual reconstructions, often in relation to what is alleged to be unreal or no longer real.

On China's post-Mao screen, socialist realism—the “official brand” that “forgets realism’s realist potential and capacity for critical questioning of established conventions and reality”, has become “no longer real and is out of touch with the actual conditions of society” (Wang 2008: 498). With its formulaic typical characters and its teleological vision of history, socialist realism (Y. Zhang 2004: 202–205) was discredited by two prominent groups of Chinese avant-garde filmmakers. First, in the mid-1980s, the Fifth Generation of directors (e.g., Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou), who were so named because they mostly came from the fifth class admitted to the Beijing Film Academy, began to distance themselves from the urban centre of *realpolitik* by directing their camera at the breath-taking rural *landscape* in an attempt to retrieve memories of Chinese national culture and history repressed in dominant Communist narratives. Second, in the early 1990s, the Sixth Generation (e.g., Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai) started to delve into the *mindscape* of alienated urban souls so as to reinstate their own individual perceptions of the real; along the way they challenged both the official media’s hackneyed versions of Chinese reality and the Fifth Generation’s reinvented Chinese tradition in its “ethnographic cinema”, which was popular in the international arthouse circuit for a while (Chow 1995; Y. Zhang 2002: 207–239). Entering the twenty-first century, several young independent directors (e.g., Jia Zhangke, Ying Liang) have reconstructed the cinematic real by revisiting rural and hinterland landscapes, but this time not to fix them as readily decipherable symbols of China or Chineseness but to project a precarious sense of landscape in motion.

The idea of “landscape in motion” derives from twin realisations that nature and culture specific to a locality are increasingly subjugated to transnational, translocal flows in the current age of globalisation and that sometimes the cinematic is the only means of capturing the real in transformation or even in ruins. The flows of capital and labour have further compelled independent directors to move toward the *ethnoscape*, which Arjun Appadurai defines as

the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals [who] constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.

(1996: 33)

In addition to *ethnoscape*, Appadurai delineates four other major spheres of globalisation: *mediascape*, *technoscape*, *financescape* and *ideoscape*. To reframe Appadurai’s vision of current global flows for Chinese cinema, we can conceptualise the party-state sector of film enterprise as a propagandist *ideoscape* centred on politics and power, the commercial sector as a *mediascape* anchored on capital and profits, the art film sector as a *mindscape* inclined toward aesthetics and prestige, and the independent sector as an *ethnoscape* aligned with marginality and truth (Y. Zhang 2010: 43–48).

In what follows, I first discuss the Fifth Generation’s rediscovery of “the real” by way of confronting the natural landscape, which enabled them to project a vision of national culture distinct from that endorsed by Communist historiography. Second, I analyse the Sixth Generation’s passion for individual perception, their exploration of the *mindscape* of urban youths and their persistent claims to truth and reality. Third, I turn to a group of young independent directors who emphasise polylocality and the deliberate integration of fiction and documentary in their depiction of an *ethnoscape* of precarious mobility and private memory. By analysing landscape,

mindscape, and ethnoscape as three intertwined tropes, as well as nature, truth, and polylocality as three focal concerns, this chapter seeks to advance our understanding of a complex, on-going process of negotiation between the cinematic and the real in contemporary Chinese cinema.

The Fifth Generation's landscape of nature: in search of national culture

Martin Lefebvre draws attention to two issues when approaching landscape and cinema. First, according to Sergei Eisenstein, landscape is “the least burdened with servile, narrative tasks, and the most flexible in conveying moods, emotional states, and spiritual experiences” (1987: 217). In other words, cinematic landscape enjoys certain autonomy from narrative and therefore induces interpretations and emotions that may not fit a film’s plot-driven actions. Second, for cultural geographers, “landscapes do not exist independently of human investment toward space, which is one way of distinguishing them from the idea of ‘nature’ [. . . for nature] would likely continue to exist” without human intervention (Lefebvre 2006: xiii). It is through human actions that nature and the environment are transformed into the landscape. The etymology of “landscape” (along with its earlier versions, “landskip” and “landskip”) traces its suffix to “-shaft”, “-scape”, “-ship” and other related terms such as “gescape”, “gescape”, and “ishapen” all of which mean “to give form or shape”. Lefebvre reasons that human perception through certain mental “framing” is what gives form to the otherwise “formless” natural environment: “With that frame nature turns into culture, land into landscape” (Lefebvre 2006: xv). Landscapes, therefore, reflect human experiences.

The Fifth Generation announced their arrival with two avant-garde films that feature the significance of landscape over that of narrative plot and dialogue. In *Yi ge he ba ge* (One and Eight, 1984, China, Zhang Junzhao) and *Huang tu di* (Yellow Earth, 1984, China, Chen Kaige), the experimental use of minimal plot and dialogue compels the viewer to contemplate



Figure 1.1 Communist soldier Gu Qing emerging into the horizon of Loess Plateaus in *Huang tu di* (Yellow Earth, 1984, China, Chen Kaige). ©Guangxi Film Studio.

the awe-inspiring barren landscapes in central China. *Yellow Earth*, in particular, presents the lands and ravines of Loess Plateaus along the meandering Yellow River in Shaanxi province (Figure 1.1). In sharp contrast to its overwhelming visual images, *Yellow Earth* contains very little in terms of narrative or character development, and its uncanny landscapes puzzled contemporary viewers who had been entrenched for decades in socialist realism that insisted on explaining every detail of a film.

Chen Kaige offered this instruction to his film crew: “in terms of cinematic structure, I want our film to be rich and variable, free to the point of wildness [. . .] The quintessence of our style can be summed up in a single word: ‘hanxu’(concealment)” (Barmé and Minford 1988: 259). This style of *hanxu* was radical then in that it refused to restage the party-endorsed myths of the Chinese revolution, its prolonged shots of the natural landscape challenging the film establishment. Xia Yan, a ranking film bureaucrat and veteran screenwriter from the 1930s, admitted his discomfort: “I simply fail to understand how people so close to Yan’an could remain completely untouched by the new spirit that came from Yan’an” (Barmé and Minford 1988: 267)—Yan’an here being the Communist headquarters in the early 1940s. What is absent in *Yellow Earth* is the received historical wisdom—namely that Chinese peasants always awakened to their innate revolutionary spirit once they were mobilised by the Communists.

This absence is most powerfully staged in the film’s final scene, where the Communist soldier Gu Qing returns to a village devastated by drought. After a long sequence of an all-male crowd of superstitious peasants praying for rain to a dragon king statue, the taciturn boy Hanhan seems to catch sight of Gu and rushes against the frenetic crowd to greet him. However, through a series of cross cuts, Gu appears to be caught on the horizon, as if he were a mirage flickering between the empty sky and the parched land. The off-screen song sung by Cuiqiao, Hanhan’s elder sister, only intensifies this optical illusion, for the viewer knows by this point that Cuiqiao was forced into an arranged marriage and was drowned while attempting to escape across the Yellow River, singing a revolutionary song without finishing the phrase “Communist Party”, the organisation that would “save the people”.

Two interpretations of the final sequence are worth contemplating. First, Esther Yau hints at an unyielding presence in *Yellow Earth*, namely a “simple Taoist philosophy which (dis)empowers the text by (non)affirming speaking and looking: ‘Silence is the Roaring Sound, Formless is the Image Grand’” (1987–88: 32). This idea, taken from the Daoist classic *Dao de jing*, “great music has no sound (*dayin wusheng*), the great image has no form (*daxiang wuxing*)”, supports the film’s extensive use of silence and empty space, which works to empower the viewer to distance themselves from the illusion promulgated by the rhetoric of *realpolitik* and to reconnect with the real through the wordless contemplation of the natural landscape. Second, even though the Fifth Generation was initially fascinated with the Daoist rendition of landscape, their ultimate concerns remained with the human world. According to the film’s cinematographer Zhang Yimou, their landscape images were designed to capture “the sustaining strength and endurance of a nation” (Barmé and Minford 1988: 259). Through wordless images and avant-garde techniques, the emergent Fifth Generation sought to articulate a new sense of the real radically different from the socialist construction of history and reality, ultimately aspiring to present a new representation of the Chinese nation.

In hindsight, it is ironic that the Fifth Generation first found their receptive audiences not inside China but overseas, and their growing international fame would soon undermine the radical manner in which they redefined the cinematic real through uncanny landscape. After *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987) won the first Golden Bear for Chinese cinema at the 1988 Berlin Film Festival, natural and cultural landscapes took on a different meaning on the international screen. Increasingly, exotic cultural practices characterised Fifth Generation productions, and

erotic sexuality became prominent. From *Ju Dou* (1989, China/Japan) to *Da hong deng long gao gao gua* (Raise the Red Lantern, 1991, China/Hong Kong/Taiwan), Zhang Yimou's overseas-funded art films of the period showed increasingly less open landscapes and more enclosed—even claustrophobic—spaces. Just as Zhang's screen protagonists quickly changed from rebels to conformists, his audiences were lured into a mesmerizing display of Orientalist motifs as quintessential images of “Chinese” culture. In the meantime, even the natural landscape had lost its transformative power at the hands of the Fifth Generation, and the stunning beauty of desolate terrains in western China provided but an empty stage for enacting an enigmatic tale of dedication, desire, and desperation.

The Sixth Generation's mindscape of youth: in defence of individual perception

In the early 1990s, the emergent Sixth Generation began to question cultural traditions reinvented by the Fifth Generation and lamented the lack of a “sense of reality” (*xianshi gan*) in Chinese filmmaking (Cheng and Huang 2002: 31). For them, to return to the real was to venture from history to reality, from the countryside to the city, from overloaded symbols to contingent situations, from gorgeous landscapes to precarious mindscapes (Z. Zhang 2007). For example, Sixth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yuan's way of recapturing the real was to draw inspiration from “real people and real events” (*zhenren zhenshi*), as he did in *Mama* (1991, China), which cast a real-life autistic boy and his agonizing mother forsaken by an indifferent society. Likewise, Wang Xiaoshuai cast a real-life artist couple in *Dongchun de Rizhi* (The Days, 1993, China), which ends with a narcissistic moment when Dong (played by the Chinese artist and actor Liu Xiaodong) talks to himself in front of a mirror. Wang continued in this vein in *Jidu Hanleng* (Frozen, 1997, China), a fictional re-creation of the shocking suicide of Qi Lei, a Beijing performance artist, adopting a minimalist documentary style (*jilu fengge*). Indeed, documentary aesthetics are characteristic of the emergent Sixth Generation in general (in part constrained by their independent low-budget productions). Zhang Yuan, for instance, integrated into his fiction film, *Beijing za zhong* (Beijing Bastards, 1993, China), a large portion of documentary rehearsal footage of Cui Jian, the first rock star in China and a symbol of rebellion in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to take early Sixth Generation films as exemplary of a desire for pursuing reality as it is. Just as the Fifth Generation was fascinated with the real beyond their natural landscapes, the Sixth Generation intended their documentary-like urban images to convey a specific type of truth characterised by psychological complexity. While acknowledging that *zhenshi* (“truth” or “the real”) is the weapon each new generation of filmmakers uses to blaze a new path for themselves, Zhang Ming categorically dismissed any sense that his films are intent upon presenting “life as it is” (*xiang shenghuo benlai yiyang*) and questioned: “Who has ever captured the real? The real itself never exists in a work of art. What we have is the author's vivid imagination (*bizhen de xiangxiang*), his attitude, taste, sensibility, and personality” (2003: 28).

Among the Sixth Generation, Zhang Ming is not alone in highlighting the indispensable role of the artist's imagination and sensibility in reconstructing the real. Jia Zhangke likewise contends that what is important to a film is not the real itself but the “rendition of the perception of the real” (*chenxian zhenshi gan*), and he further claims that “the perception of the real may not always come from directly capturing the outside world, for it may possibly come from subjective imagination” (Jia *et al.* 2007: 24). Not surprisingly, Jia's word “imagination” (*xiangxiang*) echoes Zhang Ming's, while his term “subjective” dovetails with this assertion by Jiang Wen, a popular male star-turned-film director: the more an artist is subjective, the better

the film becomes, because “everything is subjective, and objectivity resides in subjectivity” (Cheng and Huang 2002: 77).

For the Sixth Generation, *zhenshi* is inevitably filtered through subjective perception, and their cinematic real therefore emerges as a series of mindscapes. What Jia Zhangke seeks to convey in his underground trilogy—*Xiao Wu* (Pickpocket, 1997, China/Hong Kong), *Zhantai* (Platform, 2000, Hong Kong/China/Japan/France), and *Ren xiao yao* (Unknown Pleasures, 2002, China/Japan/South Korea/France)—is the “condition of life” (*shenghuo zhuangkuang*) as he experienced it in his hometown (Cheng and Huang 2002: 326). Similarly, Zhang Ming aims to capture in *Wu shan yun yu* (Rainclouds Over Wushan, 1995, China) the “mode of life” (*shengming zhuangtai*) of his hometown, “the real existence (*zhenshi cunzai*) that escapes the naked eye but can be sensed spiritually” (Cheng and Huang 2002: 25, 34).

The subjective grounding of the Sixth Generation’s individualised perception of the real brings us to the manifesto-like statement, “My camera doesn’t lie”, which has come to characterise this group with regard to truth and reality. The statement first appeared as Lou Ye’s idiosyncratic justification of his neo-noir feature, *Suzhou he* (Suzhou River, 2000, Germany/China/France), which deals as much with lies and betrayals as with unreliable memory and vanishing idealism in an elusive mindscape of Shanghai. Nonetheless, Lou argues that, as a filmmaker, he himself did not lie, despite all his tricks of cinematic doubling, narrative suspense, and optical illusions. After all, *Suzhou River* was started first as a documentary project (Y. Zhang 2002: 329–330) because Lou wanted to record the “real look” (*zhenshi mianmao*) of life along this once polluted river hidden behind the shining façade of a globalizing Shanghai (Cheng and Huang 2002: 258). Regardless of its documentary and fictional components, the film *Suzhou River*, to quote Lou Ye (Cheng and Huang 2002: 265), “can express my true impression (*zhenshi yinxiang*) of the Suzhou River. My camera doesn’t lie (*sahuang*)”. If we think through the implications of Lou’s phrase, the real (*zhenshi*) for him relies first on “my impression” (as individual perception) and then “my camera” (as cinematic technology), which finally produces “my truth” (as coded in the filmic text).

The first-person possessive pronounced in the statement “my camera doesn’t lie” foregrounds the agency given to the artist, whose individual perception of the real acquires a dynamic role in cinematic representation and who facilitates the integration of mindscape with landscape in the resulting film. Significantly, Jia Zhangke’s and Zhang Ming’s perceptions of the real in terms of *zhuangkuang* or *zhuangtai* (circumstance, condition, situation), as cited above, reveal a conception of the real as contingent, variable, and multivalent, rather than as an essence whose interpretation is reserved by the party-state (as in socialist realism) or whose symbolism is fixed in the natural landscape (as the Fifth Generation would have it). For the Sixth Generation, the mindscape of *zhenshi* is open to contradiction, and such contradiction is often scripted into an enigmatic “urban dreamscape”, where “phantom sisters”—two lookalike female characters played by the same actress—challenge the male artist’s ability to decipher a radically changing world (Z. Zhang 2007: 344–387), such as we see in *Suzhou River* and *Yue shi* (Lunar Eclipse, 1999, China, Wang Quan’an).

Independent directors’ ethnoscape of polylocality: in the name of private memory

In the new century, there is a veritable shift of emphasis from the mindscape of the artist (often singular) to the ethnoscape of ordinary people (always plural) in a reconfiguration of *zhenshi* in Chinese cinema. Jia Zhangke’s *Shijie* (The World, 2004, China/Japan/France) is a study of labour migration set in Beijing. Rather than insisting on the artist’s subjective perceptions



Figure 1.2 Migrant worker Han Sanming looking over the Yangtze River in *Sanxia haoren* (*Still Life*, 2006, China/Hong Kong, Jia Zhangke). ©Xstream Pictures/Shanghai Film Studios.

of the real as the early Sixth Generation did in the 1990s, Jia Zhangke and his younger colleagues tend to project their visions onto a series of ethnoscapes, of people who are forced to move around in search of opportunities. To be sure, such ethnoscapes are equally open to contradiction, just as the Sixth Generation's mindscapes from the 1990s were. This awareness of contradiction is evident in Jia Zhangke's description of what he perceives to be the reality of the Three Gorges area, the setting of the Yangtze River in his *Sanxia haoren* (*Still Life*, 2006, China/Hong Kong)—that is, a reality fraught with the absurd coexistence of “rationality and irrationality, progressiveness and backwardness, misery and optimism, vitality and repression” (Jia *et al.* 2007: 19) (Figure 1.2).

Two scenes in *Still Life* best illustrate Jia's imaginative merger of landscape and mindscape into a new ethnoscape. In the first, the male protagonist Han Sanming holds up a RMB banknote, which bears the picture of the Kuimen Gorge as national scenery, against the actual landscape he can see. Incidentally, Han first looks at the other side of the banknote, which bears a benevolent image of Mao Zedong, the supreme leader whose poetic vision of a man-made lake among mountains was partially responsible for the world's largest engineering project, the Three Gorges Dam. When Han flips over the banknote and the parallel landscapes on the banknote and in the background come into view, we realise that not only has the water level risen considerably higher but that Jia's creativity lies not so much in this visual comparison but in its symbolic evocation of political power over the natural landscape. Economic development, aided by national politics and transnational capital, has irreversibly changed the natural and cultural landscape of the area, resulting in over a million people being relocated and ancient relics being forever lost to the water.

In the second scene, which follows immediately after Han's puzzled look at the altered landscape, a flickering UFO flies across the Kuimen Gorge scenery, as if disturbed by the enormous change taking place in nature. Jia Zhangke's creative insertion of this surreal moment ties together two parallel narratives of troubled marriages. The scene continues with the UFO, but the onscreen character now is Shen Hong, a nurse from Jia's hometown province Shanxi. Other surreal moments in *Still Life* include a scene in which an oddly shaped concrete structure

suddenly takes off like a rocket when no one is looking, and another when Han, on his way back to Shanxi with a group of local prospective coal miners, is dumbfounded to see a tiny human figure walking on a tight rope between two hazardous buildings that are set to be demolished.

Such surreal moments in *Still Life* serve as Jia Zhangke's attempt to delineate a landscape in motion or in ruins, which is staged now through the interaction of people on the move. At the beginning of the film, Han Sanming travels south from Shanxi and joins the local workers in demolishing deserted buildings in the soon-to-be-flooded ancient river town of Fengjie, and by the end of the film he is leading a group of workers north to Shanxi, where the prospective income from life-threatening coal-mining is higher than the already dangerous demolition jobs in Fengjie. By referencing the polylocality in China's changing labour market in the age of globalisation (including the industrial hubs of Guangdong further south and the financial centre of Shanghai to the east), *Still Life* hints at an ethnoscape in motion, where the locals may no longer be able to stay long term; their frustrated emotions constitute a desolate mindscape mirrored by the landscape in ruins.

Yet, Jia Zhangke is not alone in reconstructing a new sense of the real through an ethnoscape of polylocality. Just as Jia's fiction film *Still Life* uses elements of documentary, Ying Liang's *Ling yi ban* (*The Other Half*, 2006, China) stages documentary-like scenes in order to capture contradictions in a globalizing China. *The Other Half* follows Xiaofen, a secretary in a law office whose observation offers a rare kaleidoscopic view of the changing ethnoscape in Zigong, an inland city of Sichuan province. Many clients seek legal advice for their troubled marriages, and their cases vary from gold digging (a young wife intent on divorcing her rich husband without his prior knowledge) and domestic violence (an abused wife prohibited from divorcing her army husband due to a legal code protecting military marriages) to wasted youth (an old lady eager to divorce her husband on the grounds of theirs being a "loveless" arranged marriage that has lasted for decades) and child custody (a mother trying to convince her young son to accuse her ex-husband of child abuse). As more clients join these women in front of the camera to bare their souls to the viewer, it becomes obvious that *The Other Half* aims at enumerating widespread social problems in a series of animated talking-head interviews. As the camera captures people from different age groups and social backgrounds eagerly stating their cases, the viewer gradually comes to terms with a dismal reality that is taking place in and through these staged interviews.

Sure enough, the staged on-camera interviews in *The Other Half* add a feel of authenticity to the ethnoscape in transformation, and the actual television news footage of the military police enforcing the evacuation order following an explosion in a local chemical plant contributes to the film's reality effect. Moreover, the invisible poisonous fume that emerges from the plant serves as a metaphor for an inland city plagued by such widespread social problems as public health hazards, environmental pollution, traffic accidents, unemployment, gambling, drinking, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, human smuggling, robbery and murder. The film engineers a further twist to its blurred line between documentary and fiction when Xiaofen herself talks to the camera and seeks a legal opinion about her boyfriend, a murder suspect who has disappeared. The untimely death of her friend, a prostitute who dreamt of migrating to the United States, casts an ominous shadow on Xiaofen's fate. Suffering from chronic asthma, Xiaofen collapses on a bridge at the end of the film, and the long take of a deserted, eerily quiet city under an evacuation order is disturbed by a cell phone message from her boyfriend, who has travelled to Shanghai and started a restaurant business there.

Polylocality is a defining feature of the ethnoscape in transformation in a globalizing China. Rather than translocality, which implies a connection and movement between two or more localities, polylocality points to both the multiplicity of localities out there and the condition of unevenness in which localities are brought into translocality in radically different ways

(Y. Zhang 2010: 6–9). In *The Other Half*, Xiaofen falls down in the midst of poisonous fumes, while her boyfriend starts a new life in Shanghai and her father works on the faraway northwestern frontier of Xinjiang. By mixing documentary and fiction, films such as *The Other Half* and *Still Life*—and we can further cite Jia Zhangke’s *Er she si cheng ji* (24 City, 2008, China/Hong Kong/Japan) in this regard, which features on-camera interviews with real-life and fictional characters, as well as his *Tian zhu ding* (A Touch of Sin, 2013, China/Japan/France), which consists of four fictional segments based on real-life tragic events—provide us with a unique way of reconstructing the globalizing China as an enormous ethnoscape in the midst of drastic transformation. Significantly, this time around the reconstruction of the real is filtered through the private memory not of an individual artist but of ordinary characters who never pretend to comprehend entirely what is happening to them or how they relate to the large-scale transformation of China in the age of globalisation.

Conclusion: the real versus realism

Despite radically different perceptions in the past three decades, what is remarkable about the cinematic and the real on China’s post-Mao screen is that, in most cases, it is no longer superimposed from above but is tactically constituted from below. In the 1980s, the real was posited as an ontological entity and projected onto the natural landscape so as to keep its distance from the urban centre of *realpolitik*, a distance that empowered the Fifth Generation to reconstruct images of national culture and history beyond the Communist rhetoric. In the 1990s, the real was reconceptualised in an *existential* mode and internalised in the shifting mindscape of the urban youth, whose frustrations and pursuits enabled the Sixth Generation to conjure up improvised conditions of real life punctuated by alienation, contemplation, and rebellion. In the new century, the real is to be found in the process of verbal reminiscences of, or silent meditations on, things past and present, and these individual reminiscences and meditations find resonance in documentary-like observational images of historical traces left behind—or sometimes literally swallowed up—by a fast-moving society, as represented by independent filmmakers in a series of ethnoscapas in transformation.

Significantly, whereas Chinese independent filmmakers have consistently mobilised the claim to the real, they have also consistently avoided the topic of realism (either as *xianshi zhuyi* or *xieshi zhuyi*). One immediate reason is that realism, as an officially sanctioned concept in China for several decades in the mid-twentieth century, still carries negative connotations of cliché and propaganda (as in “socialist realism” or its equivalents, such as “revolutionary realism”). Another reason is that, rather than being restricted by certain aesthetic modes of representation, independent filmmakers aspire to remain creative with their own perceptions and renditions of the real, integrating those methods otherwise classified as contradictory or incompatible (e.g., both documentary and surreal in *Still Life*), and drawing on a wide array of cinematic genres and techniques, including animation (as in *The World*), or even resorting to television footage (as in *The Other Half*). For this generation, the real exists not only in mobility but also in mobilisation—mobility because they must actively chase after the real, and mobilisation because they must resort to a variety of cinematic means available to them. While a few scholars have explored the use of realism by independent Chinese filmmaking (McGrath 2008; Wang 2008), young filmmakers’ consistent preference for *zhenshi* and *jishi* (documenting the real) is yet to enjoy detailed scrutiny. Here *zhenshi* and *jishi* work to keep alive an imaginative space in which these filmmakers can articulate their own visions of the past, present, and future. Their preference for the real (as something to be creatively retrieved and reconstructed) over realism (as an over-determined concept or a hackneyed formula) has enabled, and will continue to enable, them to project challenging new cinematic landscapes, mindscapes and ethnoscapas.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barmé, G. and Minford J. (eds) (1988) *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience*, New York: Hill & Wang.
- Bruzzi, S. (2000) *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Cheng, Q. and Huang, O. (eds) (2002) *Wode sheyingji bu sahuang: xianfeng dianying ren dang'an—shengyu 1961–1970* Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chuban gongsi.
- Chow, R. (1995) *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Eisenstein, S. M. (1987) *Nonindifferent Nature*, Herbert Marshall (trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jia, Z., Rao, S., Zhou, Y. and Chen, X. (2007) “Sanxia haoren” (Still life), *Dangdai dianying* 2: 24.
- Katz, E. (1994) *The Film Encyclopedia*, 2nd edn, New York: HarperCollins.
- Lefebvre, M. (ed.) (2006) *Landscape and Film*, London: Routledge.
- McGrath, J. (2008) *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Shaul, N. B. (2008) “Morphing Realities: The Current Status of the Real in Film and Television”, *Framework* 49 (1): 48–54.
- Wang, B. (2008) “In Search of Real-Life Images in China: Realism in the Age of Spectacle”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 17 (56): 497–512.
- Yau, E. (1987–88) “Yellow Earth: Western Analysis and a Non-Western Text”, *Film Quarterly* 41 (2): 32.
- Zhang, M. (2003) *Zhaodao yizhong dianying fangfa*, Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe.
- Zhang, Y. (2002) *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.
- (2004) *Chinese National Cinema*, London: Routledge.
- (2010) *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii.
- Zhang, Z. (ed.) (2007) *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.