



YU, Kiki Tianqi. 2019. *'My' Self on Camera: First Person Documentary Practice in an Individualizing China.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Luke Robinson



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/9757>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.9757

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2019

Number of pages: 54-55

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Luke Robinson, "YU, Kiki Tianqi. 2019. *'My' Self on Camera: First Person Documentary Practice in an Individualizing China.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.", *China Perspectives* [Online], 2019-4 | 2019, Online since 01 December 2019, connection on 30 March 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/9757> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.9757>

This text was automatically generated on 30 March 2021.

© All rights reserved

YU, Kiki Tianqi. 2019. *'My' Self on Camera: First Person Documentary Practice in an Individualizing China*.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Luke Robinson

- 1 Who am I? This simple question was the catalyst for Kiki Tianqi Yu's first book. Compelled to reflect on her own subjectivity while working as a researcher for a BBC-commissioned documentary about China's modernisation, Yu responded by turning to the problem of how contemporary Chinese filmmakers have documented their own "I" on camera. Self-inscription, or including oneself at the centre of one's film, has been common amongst Western filmmakers and artists since the 1960s. Yu notes in her introduction that despite a long history of such literary expression in China, moving image work in this vein only began to gather pace with the popularisation of analogue and digital video in the late 1990s.
- 2 Consequently, while an established body of literature exploring audio-visual self-inscription already exists, its focus - Japan excepted - is largely Western. *'My' Self on Camera: First Person Documentary Practice in an Individualizing China* is one of a number of recent works that seeks to broaden that focus. It does so by bringing existing theory into dialogue with contemporary first-person filmmaking in the People's Republic of China to ask: what kind of Chinese "I" emerges from these practices, and how might it be distinct?
- 3 Yu argues that two key characteristics of this "I" are its relationality and multiplicity. In contemporary Chinese self-inscription, the self is

always relative. Despite the withering of the socialist legacy, individuals are still bound by traditional obligations into a number of social roles, most obviously familial and gendered. Though the state has withdrawn from much public space and provision, this loss shapes the relationships within these spaces, and the subjectivities that emerge there, as surely as its presence did. Yu thus uses “first-person documentary practice” in preference to other potential terms (including autoethnography, autobiography, and the Chinese *si yingxiang* 私影像, or “private image”) precisely because she believes it captures the ambiguous intersections between personal, collective, public, and private that characterise both contemporary China and these films. “First-person” also allows Yu to extend this sense of relationality to filmmaking itself. Chinese self-inscription may be a genre or an aesthetic, particularly of the amateur, but it is also an “action” or performative act. The filmmaker does not simply document him- or herself on camera; through the filmmaking process, he or she “further constructs [their] own self as an individual, in relation to others, society and the state” (p. 16). These directors also use filmmaking communicatively, to bridge difference in its various forms. Yu here positions first-person documentary filmmaking as a socially engaged and political activity through which those behind the camera explore a number of different social identities: daughter, son, citizen, peasant, and filmmaker, amongst others. She is thus as interested in how the practice of filmmaking is implicated in the construction of these “I’s” – including not just the making but also the circulation and reception of these films – as in the formal qualities of the documentaries discussed.

- 4 Structurally, the book falls into two parts of three and five chapters respectively. The first half considers the formation of the private self within the domestic sphere. Chapters One and Two complement one another. In both, filmmakers use the camera to challenge family norms, and to try and reconnect with relatives. They simultaneously perform the role of insider and outsider; as such, the circulation of these films was controversial, generating debate about whether domestic problems should be made public through filmmaking and film screening. Yet this controversy was heavily gendered, with the female filmmakers considered in Chapter One – Yang Lina 楊荔納, Wang Fen 王分, and Tang Danhong 唐丹鴻 – facing more opprobrium than Hu Xinyu 胡新宇, the male director who is the focus of the second chapter. The patriarchal structure of the family is thus replicated in the field of Chinese documentary filmmaking more broadly. In contrast, Chapter Three explores the nostalgia of two younger filmmakers – Shu Haolun 舒浩論 and Yang Pingdao 楊平道 – for the traditional family home, and how the invocation of the latter is central to both directors’ construction of selfhood on screen. Here, the personal speaks to broader issues of development and modernisation, particularly the impact of urbanisation on family networks and traditional domestic spaces. Chapters Four to Eight address the formation of the public self. Again, the first two chapters form a pair, with chapters Four and Five both focusing on the

films of Xue Jianqiang 薛鉴羌 and Wu Haohao 吳昊昊. Here, Yu argues that the combative and aggressive nature of both filmmakers' work reflects the absence of community in urban space. Xue and Wu's films can be understood as attempts to bridge that communicative gap, while also illustrating the traditional social and ethical forces that continue to shape this emerging sense of public self. Chapter Six considers Ai Weiwei's 艾未未 *Disturbing the Peace* (*Lao ma ti hua* 老媽蹄花, 2009), the formation of the activist self in relation to the state, and the construction of the artist's image in relation to the collective. Chapter Seven echoes this discussion in its analysis of the tensions inherent in Wu Wenguang's 吳文光 Village Video Project (*Cunmin yingxiang jihua* 村民影像計劃, 2006-ongoing), particularly the question of rural self-representation within elite participatory projects, and the role of different documentary aesthetics in the formation of a peasant sense of self. Finally, the last chapter considers live streaming (*zhibo* 直播) and online self-presentation, while suggesting further directions the investigation of first-person filmmaking in China might take.

- 5 'My' *Self on Camera* is perhaps most compelling in its consideration of Chinese first-person documentary as a form of social action, and less detailed in its theorisation of the practice's formal qualities. The author's insistence on the politics of such filmmaking is well taken; the issue of what is lost in the transition away from long-form observational documentary to a more personal focus is nonetheless one that, for this reader, shadows the book. However, for those of us who teach documentary, Yu's work will be invaluable in expanding the focus of the curriculum. It's a shame, then, that so few of the films she considers here are commercially available, inside or outside of China - a separate, and ongoing, infrastructural problem.

AUTHOR

LUKE ROBINSON

Luke Robinson is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom
luke.robinson@sussex.ac.uk