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Murmuring Voices of the Everyday: Jia Zhitan and His Village Documentaries

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Abstract

This essay examines the documentary films made by Jia Zhitan, a 64-year-old Chinese farmer who has been participating in the ‘Villager Documentary Project’ initiated by Wu Wenguang, the renowned independent documentary filmmaker in China. By looking at seven documentary films made by Jia Zhitan between 2006 and 2013, this essay draws upon the concept of everydayness and presents a localised picture of rural life in contemporary China as reflected in Jia’s films. It also aims to investigate the meaning of peasant documentary filmmaking in the contexts of independent documentary culture in China, as well as the century-long sociological and ethnographic probing into Chinese village life. My analysis focuses on three aspects of village life featured predominantly in Jia’s films: the rhythm of everyday life, village politics, and the history of the socialist past. Taken together, these aspects point to the aesthetics, politics and historicity of the concept of everydayness.

Keywords

independent documentary film; Jia Zhitan; Wu Wenguang; rural China; everydayness

This anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. In all ages, he comes before texts. He does not expect representations.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

For Jia Zhitan, his camera has been functioning as a stick to aid him walking in the darkness. Camera does not mean power for him, but freedom and self-emancipation. 对贾之坦来说，摄像机就像上夜路的拐杖。摄像机不是权力，而是自由的使用，自我解放。

Wu Wenguang (personal communication, 29 Nov 2014)

Everyday life, mundane, repetitive, and meaningless as it looks, is no longer a worthless subject for philosophers, historians, and social scientists. Thanks to the efforts to ‘theorise the everyday’ made by many twentieth-century philosophers (including Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, among others), everyday life was increasingly seen as a site ‘that revealed symptoms of society’s deepest conflicts and aspirations’ (Harootunian 2000, 69). This subject matter has also entered into the intellectual landscape of China Studies. Substantial research has been conducted with an effort to understand the manifestations of modernity at the everyday level in China (Lu 1999; Dikötter 2006; Dong and Goldstein 2006, to name just a few). **The concept of everydayness provides a useful lens through which documentary films, the subject of this study, can be examined in relation to a broader social context of contemporary China.**

The films I will discuss were made by Jia Zhitan 贾之坦 (1951—), a farmer who lives in Jimingqiao Village, Baiyun Township, Shimen County, Hunan Province. Jia is one of the ten farmers who participated in the ‘Villager Documentary Project’ (*Cunmin yingxiang jihua* 村民影像计划) initiated by Wu Wenguang 吴文光 in 2005. Funded by the European

Union and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*Minzhengbu* 民政部) of the Chinese government, the project aimed to film village elections. Wu selected ten villagers from numerous applicants, trained them how to use a DV camera, and then sent them back to their own villages. Footage shot in villages was eventually edited into short documentaries (Anon. 2013; Wang 2010, 223–26; Berry and Rofel 2010, 150–51).¹ Jia Zhitan’s ‘film career’ started there. The then 54-year-old farmer, who attended middle school for only one year and had been a peasant for his life time, had never dreamed of such a ‘career’ until he became connected with Wu Wenguang and his independent documentary making enterprise that can be dated back to the late 1980s.

Chinese independent documentary filmmaking started in the late 1980s. Much has been said about this cultural phenomenon as well as a large body of works produced under the general rubric of the New Documentary Movement (*Xin jilupian yundong* 新纪录片运动). Scholars have characterised this body of documentary films as independent, underground, unofficial, avant-garde, marginal, alternative, ‘on-the spot realist’ (*zhenshi* 真实, in opposition to socialist-realist), and exemplary of both amateurism and auteurism (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006; Zhang 2007; Berry, Lu and Rofel 2010; Robinson 2013). **Wu Wenguang’s recent projects that focus on the mobilisation of students and villagers to record rural China have added new nuances to the aesthetic and political meanings of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking. This article attempts to explore these new nuances by means of a focused study of Jia Zhitan as an example of peasant filmmaking, which has not been closely examined in the existing scholarship. Of course, Shao Yuzhen 邵玉珍, Zhang Huancai 张焕财 and other farmer filmmakers who participated in the ‘Villager Documentary Project’ also made their own unique contributions; I chose Jia Zhitan because his works have been more influential thanks to the multiple screenings arranged by Wu Wenguang in and outside China.**²

My discussion of Jia’s works engages with a framework built up by the extensive scholarship on peasants and Chinese village life. Since Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910–2005) pioneered the field of sociological and ethnographic research on peasant life and rural China

¹ Wu Wenguang made a documentary film about this project: *Bare Your Stuff* (Liangchu ni de jiahuo, 2010). Jia Zhitan is a main character in this film.

² Jia’s documentary *I Want to Be a People’s Representative* was shown at an event on Wu Wenguang and Chinese independent cinema in the University of Edinburgh in November 2014. This is the immediate reason that caused my writing of this article.

in the 1930s, this topic has attracted enthusiastic attention from sociologists, anthropologists and historians throughout the ensuing decades up to the present day. Case studies of particular Chinese villages and rural life (treating the Nationalist and socialist eras as well as the post-Mao market reforms) abound (Fei 1939; Yang 1948; Gamble 1968; Friedman, Pickowicz and Selden 1991 and 2005; Yan 2003). More recent developments and problems that have emerged in rural China in the new millennium—including rural elections, pollution, and migrant workers—have been addressed in a rapidly expanding literature (Göbel 2010; Lin 2013; Harwood 2013; Ahlers 2014). What can Jia Zhitan’s films tell us about village life in China? Which aspects of everyday life in rural China as revealed in Jia’s films resonate with issues addressed in the aforementioned scholarly literature? **What have Jia’s filmic representations conveyed that scholarly studies do not?**

To be sure, with limited space this paper cannot fully address a wide range of questions and key issues under the framework. My modest approach is to follow Jia’s perspective and to consider what he saw and what he wanted to show through his camera lens. Filming and editing are subjective in a philosophical sense. Any choice a director makes must reflect his/her consciousness and/or subconsciousness. Through a close reading of Jia’s shots, stories, and viewpoints, the first goal of this article is to present a localised picture of village life in Jia’s eyes. Second, I seek to explore the meanings of peasant documentary filmmaking in the contexts of independent documentary culture in China, **as well as the multi-dimensional representations of rural China**. The concept of everydayness will guide my investigation. Primary source materials I analyse include seven documentary films made by Jia Zhitan between 2006 and 2013 (see Filmography), as well as email interviews I conducted with Jia, and email posts on a mailing list run by Wu Wenguang. After viewing all available Jia’s films, I found that three aspects of village life stand out and are considered by him as worthy of being recorded: certain events and scenes in everyday life, village politics, and the history of the socialist past (especially the great famine of 1959–1961). Taken together, these aspects point to the aesthetics, politics and historicity of the concept of everydayness.

The Rhythm of the Everyday

Fragmentation and randomness might be the right words to describe the unique ‘aesthetics’ of Jia Zhitan’s documentary filmmaking. Several key issues in village life

(pollution, the organization of a co-op, etc.) reappear in all his films and can be understood as master 'plotlines' in his village series. But sometimes fragments about various aspects of village life are inserted somewhat randomly into these main plotlines. **This approach stands in opposition to the realist principal of crafting a coherent narrative, but at the same time Jia's works can hardly be classified as experimental art which embraces fragmentation as a stylistic norm. I would argue, however, that this neither realist nor experimental style echoes the deeper nature of village life. Seemingly irrelevant shots, scenes and sequences reveal the natural rhythm of the village's everyday life, which has more often than not been overly neatly framed in scholarly research. By this way, peasant documentary filmmaking makes its unique contribution.**

Time

Marking the passage of time is a basic need for storytelling. Jia Zhitan uses weather, the growth of plants and crops, and festivals as markers of time in his documentaries. These are exactly the sorts of natural reminders of time one finds in rural traditions. *My Village 2008* and *My Village 2009* both start with Jia's voice-over: 'This is the first snow of this winter.' He holds his camera to shot a snow-covered field and speaks to imagined audiences at the same time. The weather before the lunar new year of 2007 is much milder. Jia speaks to the camera: 'The bees are buzzing and the butterflies are dancing. The birds are singing and the flowers are fragrant (*fengfei diewu, niaoyu huaxiang* 蜂飛蝶舞, 鳥語花香). Spring is here.' The parallel prose captures the beauty of the natural rhythm of village life. His 2008 film has a similarly lyrical episode, introducing the coming of autumn in his voice-over: 'Osmanthus flowers are blooming. Oranges are turning yellow. Red peppers are ready to eat.' **Jia's apparently 'primitive' technique reminds us of the importance of the change of weather and the growth of crops in agricultural societies.** Festivals are another kind of marker of time in Jia Zhitan's films.

The Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) is featured in nearly all of his documentaries. *My Village 2007* features a sequence on village life during the Spring Festival, including a family reunion dinner, a New Year's sacrifice, a mah-jong gathering, and so on. But Jia also highlights new problems associated with this traditional festival. In the opening scene of *My Village 2006*, which takes place on the lunar New Year's Day, Jia's camera focuses on the closed door of a family whose members are working in the city. According to Jia's

explanation, the family do not return to their hometown for the celebration of the Spring Festival because they have failed to earn enough money in the city. The market reforms have caused a flood of migrant workers and also many social problems accompanying this phenomenon (Mallee 2000). The closed door in Jia's film mirrors a wider range of problems facing this group of people. The rhythm of village life is changed in this new era. In addition to the Spring Festival, the Qingming Festival (Tomb-sweeping Day) is also featured repeatedly in Jia Zhitan's documentaries (in *My Village 2008*, *My Village 2010*). It is interesting to note that new festivals initiated by the state since 1949—National Day, Labour Day, and the like—never appear in Jia's films. This might suggest that, for Jia, the inherent rhythm of peasant life is more closely associated with deep-rooted agricultural traditions than state power.

Ritual

Weddings and funerals appear in Jia Zhitan's films many times. His conscious or unconscious choice of this subject for filming demonstrates that rituals still play an important role in village life. There is a juxtaposition of two sharply different wedding ceremonies in *My Village 2006*. One sequence starts with a limousine, decorated with red paper-cut wedding decorations, that stops by the side of a country road. As the sequence unfolds, audiences see that the bride's mother is crying loudly and the bride, in a red Chinese-style garment, is crying as well. The next scene features the bride's older brother carrying her on his back and bowing to a picture of Mao on the wall. Then, amidst the loud noise of firecrackers and trumpet music, the bride walks down to the main road where the limousine is waiting. Upon arrival at the groom's house, the groom carries the bride on his back and brings her to the central room of the house, where the bride takes off her high-heels and changes into a pair of hand-made black cloth shoes. Jia did not provide any voice-over narration for the whole ceremony, but audiences learn that this must be a relatively old-style wedding ritual, a mixture of traditional elements (mother's crying, shoes changing...), new elements added during the socialist era (bowing to the Mao image), and modern ones (the limousine). In sharp contrast to this wedding ceremony, the wedding of Jia Zhitan's daughter featured in the next sequence is extraordinarily modern and Western-style. With Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* playing in the background, the bride, wearing a white wedding dress, and the groom, dressed in a black suit, take centre stage (Fig. 1). Under the

guidance of a host and a hostess, they exchange wedding rings, toast each other, parents and all the guests. Combining elements from Western wedding traditions (music, costume, exchange of rings) and Chinese TV shows (host/hostess), this wedding ceremony displays the latest fashion in the village's everyday life.

[INSERT Fig. 1 HERE]

Funeral rituals are another theme that have attracted Jia's attention. *My village 2009* includes two funeral sequences. One sequence, two minutes in length, shows a series of details from the ritual of moving the dead woman's corpse out of her house (with firecrackers cracking), to family members crying over the corpse (*kuling* 哭灵), a photo of the deceased, and a 'performance' that is common at such occasions in rural areas of China. The two performers, a woman and a man, are playing drums and singing spontaneously to the villagers who attend the funeral. Contrary to our common expectation, the tune and lyrics are not conveying sadness and the sense of mourning. The female performer's impromptu lyrics go like this:

[Our performance] for the funeral is like a cross-talk show on TV (来守亡就好比搞的相声和录像).

This uncle (referring to Jia Zhitan who holds the camera) looks very professional (这个伯伯好内行).

He's filming me (他还给俺照相).

It's not my wedding (俺又不结婚，又不拜堂);

Why does he bother to film me (一个么哒照相)?

If his wife knows about this (他媳妇晓得哒),

she would suspect me of having an affair with him (还说我和他有名堂).

The slightly lewd innuendo in these lyrics sounds very improper on this occasion, but this reflects the *reality* of village culture. This kind of funeral performances in rural China is also featured in another independent film entitled *Kuqi de nüren* 哭泣的女人 (Crying Woman, Dir. Liu Binjian, 2002). These grass-roots images and stories, unfiltered by state censorship, showcase the truly local (but not necessarily idyllic) features of rural China.

Food, Kids, and the Elderly

[INSERT Fig. 2 HERE]

These three words, juxtaposed in a seemingly illogical fashion, also capture the natural rhythm of post-socialist village life in China as revealed in Jia Zhitan's films. Food is not a problem for most villagers nowadays. Scenes of eating and drinking frequently appear in Jia's films (Fig. 2). The cultural importance of food and cuisine in the Chinese tradition is well-known. 'Eating and drinking' (*yinshi* 饮食), among the most basic needs and desires in life, is justified in the teachings of Confucius.³ Constant displays of the abundance of food may also be linked to Jia's subconscious engagement with childhood memories of famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Jia 2012). In addition to the round-table banquets that appear in almost all of his films, one particular kind of food appears in close-up several times, that is, salted/smoked meat known in Chinese as *larou* 腊肉, an important ingredient in the cuisine of Hunan. People produce *larou* when winter arrives, therefore this foodstuff is closely associated with the Spring Festival. In *My Village 2009*, a close-up of *larou* hanging under the roof of a farmer's house appears in the scene in which Jia Zhitan is chatting with an old couple about communal dining in the 1960s. This close-up of *larou* might function as a reminder of famine and hardship in those days, but it also has a symbolic meaning related to the festive mood and rhythm of village life. In an email posting to Wu Wenguang's Caochangdi mailing list, Jia said that he had just hosted two guests (a French documentary filmmaker and a Changsha-based pub owner) with a family banquet. The guests liked his 'home-made *larou*, free-range eggs, and fresh vegetables' (Jia 2015). We can feel that here *larou* means unpretentious hospitality. This kind of hospitality is inherent to the rhythm of the everyday in village life.

It is not surprising that kids and elderly people frequently appear in Jia's films. The dominance of children and old people is common in many Chinese villages today because a large number of younger working people have migrated to the city. Kids are wandering around. *My Village 2006* features an amusing conversation between Jia and a kid who is playing alone near his grandparent's house (Fig. 3):

Jia: Where is your grandpa?

³ The famous saying in *Li Ji* 礼记 (The Book of Rites) goes: "The things which men greatly desire are comprehended in meat and drink and sexual pleasure." (饮食男女，人之大欲存焉). See *Li Chi, Book of Rites*, translated by James Legge, New York: University Books, 1967, p. 380.

Kid: He went to Shenzhen.

Jia: He went to Zhuzhou, not Shenzhen.

Kid: Oh, yeah.

Jia: What is he doing in Zhuzhou?

Kid: To warm himself by the fire (*kaohuo qu le* 烤火去了).

Jia: Why can't he warm up at home? No fire at home?

Kid: No.

Jia: Where's your grandma?

Kid: Grandma died.

Jia: Died? When did she die?

Kid: Tomorrow.

Jia: Oh, she died tomorrow.

Kid: Yeah.

The kid has no idea about the difference between Shenzhen, the bustling 'special economic zone' in the South, and Zhuzhou, a city not too far from this village. He does not know that 'warming up by the fire' is not a justifiable reason for millions of migrant workers to make a living outside their hometown. He does not understand why it is impossible that people 'died' tomorrow. He is only aware of the fact that some key members of his family are not around. This sense of loneliness permeating village life is also felt by many elderly people.

[INSERT Fig. 3 HERE]

In the same film, Jia encounters an old woman on New Year's Day. Talking about her New Year's Eve dinner at her son's home, she is poignant: "She (her daughter-in-law) didn't call me over. My two grandchildren called me over. My daughter-in-law doesn't speak to me. Brother Jia, (life is) so meaningless." But the two grandsons are soon going to return to their work places in the city. The old woman, living alone in a small room away from her son's new house, feels lonesome and 'meaningless' (*mei yisi* 没意思), as she repeatedly mutters this phrase to Jia Zhitan. She earns a living by making bamboo baskets, which brought her an income of 2000 Yuan last year (2005) and 1000 Yuan the year before. She usually gives

some to her daughter-in-law, but the daughter-in-law even asks her to pay for meals the old lady gets at her home. ‘How much of their food could I possibly eat!’ she says bitterly. This old woman’s situation is not rare in rural China today. Anthropologist Yan Yunxiang has observed a ‘crisis of filial piety’ as part of ‘the structural transformation of family relations’ in 1990s China (Yan 2003, 162). He argues that radical socialism from the 1950s to the 1970s undermined this essential Confucian value and its institutional bases and the introduction of new values associated with the market economy further damaged the notion of filial piety (Yan 2003, 189). The fragments of daily life captured by Jia Zhitan’s camera provide insights into the deeper structural transformation of present-day Chinese society.

The everyday that unfolds in Jia Zhitan’s documentaries is full of fragmented representations of ‘firewood, rice, oil, salt’ (*chai mi you yan* 柴米油盐) and ‘weddings and funerals’ (*hun sang jia qu* 婚丧嫁娶), two Chinese idioms that capture the essence of the everydayness of life. But it is misleading to idealise village life. **The poignant examples of the elderly woman, the lonely kid, and the closed door at New Year’s Day remind us of the marginalised status of the countryside and the loss of traditional values in this era of urbanisation and economic reform. Jia’s camera, an extension of his eyes and thoughts, captures the moments of emotional engagement with prosaic, material impacts of societal transformations. It is these moments of intimate engagement that most scholarly studies lack. In this way, peasant documentaries shed unique light on the materiality and everydayness in contemporary rural China with their own aesthetics of fragmentation.**

The Politics of the Everyday

Michel de Certeau, in his well-known treatise entitled *The Practice of Everyday Life*, aims to investigate the ways in which everyday practices unfold and the possibility of articulating them in theoretical terms (xi). De Certeau’s thought belonged to the whole intellectual edifice built by a cluster of post-war French theorists (including Sartre, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Lefebvre) who devoted themselves to raising awareness and understanding of the institutions of the everyday in multiple forms. To a varying degree, these theorists shared a common political agenda, namely, a questioning of any existing power and an attempt to evoke grassroots resistance (in a broader sense). Taking issue with Foucault’s scrutiny of the

mechanisms of power (i.e. the apparatus which produces ‘discipline’), de Certeau attempted to discover ‘how an entire society resists being reduced to it,’ or in other words, ‘the network of an antidiscipline’ (de Certeau 1984, xiv–xv). Activities of antidiscipline certainly exist in any society. But grassroots resistance in an authoritarian society arouses special interest. Jia Zhitan’s documentaries provide a window that allows an intimate look at precisely such a ‘network of antidiscipline’ in today’s rural China, a modern country still under an authoritarian regime. Jia Zhitan has no doubt never heard of Foucault and de Certeau. His own words are more straightforward. When asked what kind of materials he usually wants to film, his answer is as follows:⁴

I feel that in rural areas of our country, the legal system and democracy are defective. Peasants are ‘vulnerable social groups’ (*ruoshi qunti* 弱势群体) and their interests are always infringed. When I started holding my camera to film their lives, my immediate thought was to speak for them and to record evidence about the infringement of their rights and interests. In doing so, we can petition to higher level officials in the hope of getting justice. Even if we fail, these materials can serve its historical purpose for posterity.

Jia did not lie. His documentaries are not only an idyll of village life, but also a record of the political life in the village. ‘Antidiscipline’ is a significant element of the everydayness that unfolds in Jia’s films. For example, in the opening scene of *My Village 2009*, following a depiction of the peaceful snow-covered field, his camera moves to a polluted river, accompanied by his seemingly unemotional narration: ‘The field is white and the river is yellow.’ Here, snow not only functions as a marker of time, but also gains a social meaning when juxtaposed with the yellow colour of the polluted river. Jia thus made a silent protest about pollution, a main issue in the political life of this village in recent years.

Pollution

China’s environmental arteries are ‘bleeding,’ as one scholar puts it (Jing 2000, 143). Environmental degradation is one of the repercussions of ‘rapid economic development under weak institutional norms’ that characterises reform-era China (Zweig 2000, 121). The abuses of air, water, and land by industrial enterprises and development projects are ubiquitous and the political and legal institutions are ineffective due to corruption and many other reasons

⁴ Email interview conducted by the author (29/01/2015).

(Su and Link 2013). Consequently, the past few decades have witnessed an upsurge of environmental protests. The yellow river in Jia Zhitan's village is a manifestation of this situation, and the tensions among villagers, local officials and industrial developers recorded by Jia's camera are a microcosm of local environmental politics in rural China. **This section examines the year-long struggle of Jia and his fellow villagers against pollution featured in Jia's "My Village" documentary series from 2007 to 2009.**

The river is of vital importance to the villagers; Jia's camera captured the impact of the polluted water on villagers' daily lives. Lao Zhang cannot catch any fish in this river where, in the past, he could get 10 kg each time. An old villager carries buckets of water from this contaminated river for household use because 'there's nowhere else to get water.' A woman washes clothes there because she has 'no choice.' 'Our white clothes turned yellow. When we wear them, our skin itches,' she complains. Polluted water is seeping into their fields and the crops growing nearby are dead, some villagers report. 'I want to find someone to talk to. But I don't know who to talk to about this!...The water used to be blue and clear,' a frustrated old woman says (Fig. 4; all in *My Village 2007*). Scenes of people's daily activities as they relate to this polluted river abound in all of Jia Zhitan's documentaries. Jia becomes involved in an investigation and a long and hard negotiation with both the local government and the local coal mine that has been discharging its waste water into this river for eighteen years. The key events recorded by his camera resonate with many other similar cases of environmental protest in rural China (Jing 2000, 146–151).

[INSERT Fig. 4 HERE]

A key step in the environmental protest in Jia's village is a collective meeting of villagers featured in *My Village 2007*. The main purpose of the meeting is to gather villagers' signatures for a petition to higher authorities about closing the coal mine, the main source of pollution of the river. A middle-aged female villager (Wu Yuman) is the leading figure and her speeches at these meetings appear in Jia's films many times (*My Village 2007* and *2008*). Jia's camera also records villagers' feelings of powerlessness as expressed in their daily conversations. Jia says on one occasion: '[We believe] our activities are based on "our basic needs," but local officials can say we are "interfering with their work,"' a common accusation of social protest in official parlance (*My Village 2007*). Another villager comments: 'The coal mine settled the issue with money. What can you do? Without money, we cannot do shit' (*My Village 2008*). But there is considerable evidence of local courage and bravery. As an old

woman puts it: ‘If I can get my ID, I’ll go straight to Beijing to file a complaint (against the water pollution). I’m illiterate. Nothing I can do’ (*My Village 2008*). Wu Yuman mobilises her fellow villagers in this way: ‘If the Public Security Bureau arrests anyone, we’ll all go’ (*My Village 2007*). These dialogues suggest that the villagers are fully aware of the power relations that shape local politics. Jia Zhitan is quite explicit: ‘In old days there was a coalition between officials and bandits (*guan fei yijia* 官匪一家). Nowadays isn’t there a coalition between officials and entrepreneurs (*guan shang yijia* 官商一家)?’ (*My Village 2008*) How do the villagers fight against these strong bonds of power and interest? In which ways does grassroots resistance develop? In this particular case, the camera displays its power in intriguing ways.

The villagers go to the coal mine. The coal mine managers do not like Jia Zhitan’s camera. A manager insists that Jia show his ID or evidence of official permission for filming (*My Village 2007*). He even threatens to smash the camera. But at the same time, he seems to be afraid, probably because he knows that investigative journalism, which is familiar to the Chinese viewers due to some popular news programmes aired on the state TV channel CCTV, is sometimes conducted anonymously. At one point he steps back and says: ‘If you have a camera like this, it tells me that you actually have certain power’ (*My Village 2007*). Jia’s camera plays a similar role in the villagers’ negotiations with local cadres on the pollution problem. In fact, villagers have multiple meetings with village and township government officials. Officials do not like Jia Zhitan’s camera either. But gradually they seem to get used to the camera and also realise Jia’s power due to the fact that his documentaries are being shown in and outside China.

Holding his camera, Jia poses sharp questions for local cadres, including the Party Secretary and Head of Baiyun Township (Fig. 5). One question is about a fund of two million yuan which was allocated for pollution control and victim compensation. ‘What was it used for?’ ‘Where did the money go?’ Jia asks this question repeatedly, requiring local officials to give villagers an explanation, and to say ‘something of substance’ (*My Village 2008, My Village 2009*). Jia is empowered by his camera and his ‘fame’ among people over whom the local cadres have no control. On one occasion Jia says to the township Party Secretary: ‘If journalists from *The New York Times* come (to report on this matter), I’m afraid some “official hats” (*wushamao* 乌纱帽, referring to official posts) will be at risk.’ Since these officials have seen foreigners visiting Jia in the village, they have reason to believe that Jia

can bring journalists from *The New York Times*. In this case, Jia's camera functions as a significant weapon in an everyday 'network of antidiscipline' in Michel de Certeau's sense.

[INSERT Fig. 5 HERE]

But the real turning point of the whole event has nothing to do with the camera. It is because Wen Jiabao 温家宝, the Prime Minister of China at that time, replied to the aforementioned petition letter sent by Jia and his fellow villagers to the central government. Therefore, the provincial environmental protection bureau orders the county government to conduct an investigation. The township officials are urged to monitor the polluted river and to install waste water treatment facilities at the coal mine. The goal of the villagers is the closure of the coal mine, which is not achieved. But the villagers win a temporary victory. When the waste water treatment work is completed, Jia Zhitan hangs a couplet on his door, with one of the sentences reading: 'The Prime Minister Worries about Clean and Foul Water (in our village)' (*Zongli qiangua qing zhuo shui* 总理牵挂清浊水). Jia seems content with this partial victory. But if Wen Jiabao did not respond to their petition (as was the case with many other petitions), how would their fight against pollution have developed? Jia does not give any further thought to the issue. But his camera nevertheless captures local politics in a subtle and nuanced way.

I Want to Be a People's Representative

According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (Article 97), deputies to the People's Congresses from counties and townships 'are elected directly by their constituencies,' and 'the number of deputies to local People's Congresses at various levels and the manner of their election are prescribed by law.'⁵ Jia Zhitan wants to be a delegate in the Baiyun County People's Congress (hereafter BCPC), in his own words, a 'People's Representative' (*Renmin daibiao* 人民代表). The Chinese constitution entitles him to this right. But what happens at the operational level? Jia filmed the entire process of his 'election campaign' and a documentary film was made accordingly. The film entitled *I Want to be a People's Representative*, Jia's most widely viewed documentary, has been screened at

⁵ 'Constitution of the People's Republic of China' (official English version, last amended 14 March 2004), http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372989.htm. Accessed 16 Apr. 2015.

various festivals and universities in and outside China.⁶ The enthusiasm, frustration, and resistance exhibited by a common Chinese farmer in a tangled network of local politics offers a window on to political culture in present-day China.

Jia functions as a ‘people’s representative’ in his village in many ways. He is one of the leaders in their fight against pollution, as discussed above. He cares about old people’s welfare and helps the elderly get access to minimum living allowances. He organises an orange farmer’s co-op in order to protect farmers’ common interests. In some ways Jia’s role in his village is reminiscent of the respected local elite or gentry in the ideal Confucian society (Yang 1948, 182–188). But modern day local gentlemen need to dance with the state power. Jia holds his camera and interviews village officials as the first step in his ‘election campaign.’ His conversation with the village Party Secretary goes like this:

Jia: Who are qualified to be nominated as candidates for the delegate election of BCPC?

Village Party Secretary: Candidates should be nominated by villagers.

Jia: Who do you think can be a candidate in our village?

Village Party Secretary: You.

Villagers do support Jia and many sign their names and place fingerprints on the nomination letter. But a villager (the former village Party Secretary) expresses his worry that no one on the election committee (made up of township and county cadres) would endorse the nomination of Jia. Jia goes to ask two township officials and learns that all preliminary candidates are required to pass a ‘qualification check’ (*zige shencha* 资格审查) conducted by the Party and the government. Jia belongs to the third electoral district of the county, consisting of three villages, with 4780 voters. Two of the three candidates would be elected as the BCPC delegates. Jia says to himself: ‘If this election is fair and strictly follows the law, I can say with pride that I would be elected. But if the government does not follow the procedures, making their own rules and choosing their own favoured people, all my efforts will be in vain.’ Jia is successful in the first stage. He becomes one of the four preliminary candidates in his electoral district, together with a village Party Secretary, a local oil factory manager, and another village official. A list of the candidates and voters is posted on a blackboard. But ironically there is a puddle in front of the blackboard, preventing people

⁶ It was screened at the Beijing Independent Film Festival in Songzhuang in 2013 and won Outstanding Documentary Award. It was also shown in various festivals in Nanjing, Yunnan, Guangxi, France, and USA, and in the University of California, San Diego and the University of Edinburgh, among others. Information is from Wu Wenguang and Jia Zhitan.

from taking a close look. For whom should they vote? An old peasant says to Jia: ‘They don’t really need my vote, then what am I voting for?...The winner might just be one of the village leaders.’

The old man’s guess is right. Jia Zhitan’s name is eliminated from the candidate list in the second round of selection. Jia is ‘tremendously puzzled’ (*dahuo bujie* 大惑不解). He asks the Party Secretary of his village and gets this answer: ‘You know (the reason). Why do I need to say it, right?’ A villager tries to persuade Jia not to petition to higher authorities because it would be futile. The explanation Jia gets from the township government is that Jia has failed to pass the qualification check conducted by the county government. Then Jia goes to the county government. After waiting for three days, the head of BCPC standing committee agrees to meet him. But Jia’s goal of learning the reasons of his failure is not achieved. The head of the county election committee tells him: ‘Let me tell you this: the Party has its secrets and rules. For some matters, I can only say that much’ (Fig. 6).

[INSERT Fig. 6 HERE]

Jia returns home disappointed. His wife reminds him: ‘It’s time to look after our mandarin trees. We can live a peaceful life without you being a BCPC delegate.’ But Jia does not want to give up. He visits the township Party Secretary once again, stating that his purpose is to ‘defend my lawful rights to vote and being voted for’ and his question is why he is not qualified as a candidate. The Party Secretary refuses to be filmed. Jia turns the camera to himself and outspokenly states: ‘In the local government, there might be some powerful people who are manipulating their power. I don’t think this was a fair election according to the law.’ Jia’s persistent ‘grassroots resistance’ changes the subtle balance of power relations in village politics (with farmers as the powerless and cadres as the powerful). The Party Secretary pays a visit to Jia Zhitan and gives him two expensive bottles of alcohol as a gesture of appeasement. Jia says to himself: ‘I’m not qualified as a people’s representative, so I don’t need your gift.’

The last scene in the film looks at election day. Jia delivers a speech in front of the villagers, saying that although he is not a qualified candidate, he will still fulfil his responsibilities as a citizen, standing up for citizen’s rights and fighting against abuses of power. Do his fellow villagers care about this? Earlier Jia randomly interviews some peasants about their opinions of the election. Many of them show aloofness towards politics, saying that ‘it’s none of my business’ (*buguan wo shi* 不关我事, Fig. 7a). This is reminiscent of Lu

Xun's portrayals of the 'calloused and numb' souls of the Chinese in his essays and fiction (Lovell 2009, xvi). Jia Zhitan seems to have shared Lu Xun's feelings of loneliness and powerlessness. In the last shot in the film, Jia's camera moves up to the sky and we see a lonely bird standing on a wire (Fig. 7b). The screen turns black and an afterword appears:

This documentary is dedicated to all the villagers who supported me in the delegate election.

It is also for every citizen who cares about our move toward democracy.

Jia Zhitan, June 2013.

[INSERT Fig. 7a AND 7b HERE]

The stories about the politics of the everyday that unfold in Jia's films are frustrating, poignant, but encouraging to a certain degree as well. What is the role of a farmer like Jia Zhitan who has refused to be submissive, numb, and aloof? What is the role of the camera, used as it is to record and incite antidiscipline activities and spread the images to a wider audience well beyond the boundary of the village? What political resonance can this kind of activity possibly have? Chinese rural politics generally has a bad reputation for corruption and incompetence. It is true that farmers do not have much say in local decision-making processes, but sociologists have also observed that the opinions of local people (particularly local elites) have to be taken into account to a certain degree for fear of open resistance and protests (Ahlers 2014, 284–307). What Jia Zhitan's films show about the subtle relationship between the rural administration and grassroots resistance accords with this observation. Jia's fight with a camera is meaningful. **The camera empowers Jia by at least two means. First, like the 16 mm camera which played a central role in facilitating Italian Neorealism in the 1940s–1950s and French New Wave in the 1950s–1960s, DV camera has been hailed by Wu Wenguang and his fellow filmmakers involved in the New Documentary Movement as an emancipatory technology that has liberated them from state control (Wu 2010). Much the same can be said of Jia's camera and its power in antidiscipline activities. Despite the limitedness of the power, Jia's story suggests the impact of wider technological shifts on grassroots expressions and social transformations. Second, the coal mine manager's fear of Jia's camera (as he is reminded of secret investigative journalism conducted by the state TV channel CCTV) and Jia's threat of the local official by mentioning *The New York Times* suggest that rural China has been involved in the expanding mediascapes at both national and**

international levels. Jia seems to be taking advantage of this situation and consciously engaging with these changes through his camera.

At a more personal level, why does Jia Zhitan like the camera? Why does his camera tend to focus on, in his wife's words, 'pain and hurt' (*My Village 2006*)? One strongly suspects his orientation is closely connected to his 'unforgettable experience' during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) (Jia 2012). His three-year-old sister died in the famine, his grandfather was beaten to death because he 'stole' food, and his mother considered committing suicide. He also witnessed abuses of power by village cadres in food distribution. Although he was only a kid, 'the hurt seeping in my heart never goes away' (ibid). Therefore he uses the camera to search for truth and fight against social injustice, or in his own words, against 'the powerful who abuse the powerless' (*shi qiang ling ruo zhe* 恃强凌弱者). Jia's account explains why he likes to film faded Mao-era propaganda slogans and images on village buildings (Fig. 8). At first sight, these images do not seem to blend nicely into his narratives; but the intrusive nature of these historical remnants function as a stubborn reminder of an unforgettable past that is still relevant to the rhythm and politics of everyday life in the village. In order to 'archive' the historical memories of common people, Jia interviewed 85 old villagers who experienced the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine.⁷ Moreover, he made a documentary film (*The 'Yi da san fan' Campaign in Baiyun County*) based on his investigation of a false accusation against an alleged 'counter-revolutionary group' in his village during the Cultural Revolution.⁸ Space limitations do not allow me to discuss this issue at length. But the historicity of everydayness is a significant dimension of Jia Zhitan's films and adds depth to his recordings of village life.

[INSERT Fig. 8 HERE]

Ordinary Man, Intimate History

⁷ Jia used the word 'archive' in his autobiography. He writes: 'No state archive keeps records about the experiences and feelings of villagers. I want to work together with Wu Wenguang and his colleagues and build a folk film archive or museum. I hope everyone with conscience, including our next generations, will not forget this history which involves the loss of thousands and millions of people's lives.' See Jia 2012.

⁸ This film and his interviews were made under the Memory Project initiated by Wu Wenguang. For a detailed study of the Memory Project, see Zhuang 2014; Zito 2015.

Michel de Certeau dedicated his book to ‘the ordinary man,’ an anonymous hero who is ‘the murmuring voice of societies.’ Jia Zhitan’s films constantly remind me of the imagery of ‘murmuring voice of societies.’ The faces, voices, scenes, and conversations under Jia’s camera lens are not staged dramas or carefully rehearsed speeches, but the spontaneous ‘murmur’ of the villagers. The sound is not loud, and it may appear insignificant, but it is realistic, independent, unofficial, and alternative. These key terms that characterise the ‘New Documentary Movement’ are still valid as a way of accounting for the aesthetic and social meanings of Jia Zhitan’s films. But the major difference between Jia Zhitan and other independent documentary filmmakers is that Jia is a farmer, while most filmmakers involved in the broadly defined New Documentary Movement are from the educated stratum (journalists, film directors, writers, and university lecturers). This difference allows fresh perspectives. Although most independent documentaries are also about common people and everyday life, these filmmakers filmed the lives of others (usually people who occupy a less privileged social stratum) as an object of their artistic creation/sociological observation. Jia’s participatory position and amateurism⁹ have generated a unique aesthetic style and a truly grassroots point of view. The fragmented style of his narrative reflects the ‘organic’ rhythm of village life, which is not easily captured by an outsider. Moreover, his insider status gives us a deeper insight into village politics that are often opaque to an outsider. These aspects allow his films to connect to a larger body of intellectual inquiries into Chinese rural society, past and the present.

To understand ‘the deep continuities of culture in relation to rapid changes’ in a North China village is the primary goal of the award-winning book *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (by Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, 1991). The same tension between persistent tradition and social changes can be observed in Jia Zhitan’s films. Jia’s way of capturing elapsing time by means of weather and crops reveals a deep-rooted attachment to the soil among rural people. The seemingly random fragments about weddings, funerals, and traditional festivals prevalent in Jia’s films illustrate the importance of ritual. These dynamics have been extensively explored by Fei Xiaotong (1992, 37–44, 94–100; 1939, 144–153) and other sociologists. But some other rural traditions discussed by Fei and others have changed in Chinese villages today, as showcased in Jia’s films. The Confucian idea of ‘rule by elders’

⁹ Wu only gave the peasants who participated in the Villager Documentary Project very basic training about the use of camera. Many independent documentary filmmakers may not have received professional training either, but they have basic cultural knowledge thanks to a university education, which Jia and his fellow villager-filmmakers did not have. Therefore the level of amateurism is different.

(Fei 1992, 114–119) has collapsed. Indeed, we see the poverty and loneliness of elderly people in Jia’s village. This situation echoes Yan Yunxiang’s observation about ‘the structural transformation of family relations’ in rural China. The key events featured in Jia Zhitan’s films, i.e. the fight against pollution and opaque mechanics of elections are certainly hot topics in the study of contemporary Chinese society. **But Jia’s documentaries add to our understanding of contemporary rural China by means of a visually-based intimate engagement, which most scholarly studies ignore or fail to achieve.**

I feel that Jia’s camera is like a weapon, but Wu Wenguang insists that it means freedom and self-emancipation for Jia. Peasants are the least powerful social group in China. This huge segment of Chinese population is largely voiceless, marginal and neglected in the glamorous picture of China’s economic success. While globalisation might have a tangible impact on Chinese urban dwellers who use a brand new iPhone and carry the latest Louis Vuitton handbag, the majority of the Chinese peasants are trapped in their own local, everyday, unglamorous lives. The documentary films made by Jia Zhitan and other villagers involved in Wu Wenguang’s project made the murmuring voices of their mundane everyday lives audible to the outside world. These voices also remind us of the necessity of paying more much-needed attention to ‘the local’ in an effort to understand China in a more nuanced way.

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Appendix: Filmography

Wo de cunzi 2006 我的村子 2006 (My Village 2006), 75 mins, 2008

Wo de cunzi 2007 我的村子 2007 (My Village 2007), 80 mins, 2009

Wo de cunzi 2008 我的村子 2008 (My Village 2008), 75 mins, 2010

Wo de cunzi 2009 我的村子 2009 (My Village 2009), 70 mins, 2011

Wo de cunzi 2010 我的村子 2010 (My Village 2010), 75 mins, 2011

'*Yida sanfan*' *zai Baiyun* "一打三反"在白云 (The 'Yi da san fan' Campaign in Baiyun County), 80 mins, 2012

Wo yao dang renmin daibiao 我要当人民代表 (I Want to Be a People's Representative), 78 mins, 2013

Zhengfu datai wo changxi 政府搭台我唱戏 (The Government Sets Up the Stage and I Perform), 2014

Figure Captions

Fig. 1: Jia Zhitan's daughter's wedding ceremony (*My Village 2006*)

Fig. 2: A banquet scene in *My Village 2006*

Fig. 3: A kid in *My Village 2006*

Fig. 4: A frustrated old woman in *My Village 2007*

Fig. 5: Township Party Secretary (*My Village 2010*)

Fig. 6: A county cadre (*I Want To Be a People's Representative*)

Fig. 7a: A peasant showing aloofness to politics; Fig. 7b the last shot of the film (*I Want to Be a People's Representative*)

Fig. 8: A Mao-era propaganda slogan (*My Village 2006*)