



THE URBAN GENERATION

Chinese Cinema and Society
at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century

ZHANG ZHEN, EDITOR

the urban generation



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For Loke and his generation

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Introduction

bearing witness

Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of

“Transformation” (*Zhuanxing*)

ZHANG ZHEN

Since the early 1990s the landscape of film culture in Mainland China has been radically reshaped. While the state-owned studios have been faced with the dire reality of financial and ideological constraints exacerbated by the top-down institutional reforms of the mid-decade, there has emerged both within and outside of the studio walls an alternative or “minor cinema.”¹ This cinema is largely represented by what my colleagues and I call the “Urban Generation” filmmakers and their supporters, followers, and fans.

The term “Urban Generation” was coined for a film program presented in spring 2001 at the Walter Reade Theater at New York’s Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. The program showcased an array of works centered on the experience of urbanization by young filmmakers who emerged in the shadow both of the international fame of the Fifth Generation directors and of the suppressed democracy movement in 1989.² The term also refers to a film practice caught in the dynamic tension between “deterritorialization” by the state or commercial mainstream (both domestic and transnational) and the constant “reterritorialization” by the same forces that have alienated or marginalized it. The “minor” status of this new urban cinema is marked on one

hand by its youth, by virtue of its overlap with the “coming of age” of the so-called Sixth Generation and the appearance of other newcomers in the 1990s. On the other hand, the term signals its position as a “minority” in relation to but also in dialogue with the officially sanctioned mainstream cinema. The latter includes the state-sponsored “leitmotif” (*zhuxuanliu*) films, which by and large are aimed at repackaging (or fetishizing) the founding myth of the Communist Party and the socialist legacy in an age riddled with ideological and moral uncertainty. The Urban Generation also includes both domestic- and foreign-produced commercial cinema. The Sixth Generation started as a small maverick group consisting of mainly disaffected graduates of the Beijing Film Academy (notably Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, He Yi, and Lou Ye), who emerged immediately after the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989.³ Over the past decade, this group has transformed itself and converged with a broadly defined and increasingly influential movement of young urban cinema that is breaking new ground on many levels. The multifarious institutional, social, and artistic identities of this emergent cinema and its relation to contemporary Chinese film culture and society in the era of the so-called *zhuanxing* (transformation), or the “post-New Era” (*hou xinshiqi*),⁴ constitutes the central focus of the collective project of this book.

The actual far from “minor” significance of this urban cinema stems not so much from its recent arrival as from its singular preoccupation with the destruction and reconstruction of the social fabric and urban identities of post-1989 China. Harry Harootunian, in his theorization of modernity and everydayness across the uneven but coeval global arena, recasts Benjamin’s critical thinking on the fragmented yet ceaseless “new” as the “unavoidable ‘actuality’ of everyday life.” In so doing Harootunian reaffirms that the city “make[s] up the contemporary scene, the now of the present.”⁵ The historicity of this particular “new” or contemporary urban cinema is precisely anchored in the unprecedented large-scale urbanization and globalization of China on the threshold of a new century. The intensity of these changes in China, along with the socioeconomic unevenness, psychological anxiety, and moral confusion caused by the upheaval can perhaps only be compared to the first wave of modernization of major treaty ports such as the rise of the Chinese metropolis of Shanghai around the beginning of the twentieth century. To be sure, over the past century the Chinese city has not stood still in terms of urban development. But such development has been largely contained or hampered alter-

nately or concomitantly by war, natural disasters, or ideological imperatives. It was not until the 1990s when the post-Mao reform programs (first adopted in 1978 but primarily applied in the 1980s to the agricultural sector and, to some extent, the service sector) began to exert a visible impact on the cities where the majority of the state sectors—industrial, political, as well as cultural—are located, and where an exuberant consumer culture and mass culture began to take root.

If the swath of yellow earth—economically and culturally impoverished but cinematically enriched and eternalized by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou’s ground-breaking film *Yellow Earth* (1984)—has been etched in our mind’s eye as the quintessential symbolic image of the Fifth Generation cinema that took the world by storm in the mid-1980s, I would offer as the trademark of Urban Generation cinema the ubiquity of the bulldozer, the building crane, and the debris of urban ruins as carrying a poignant social indexicality. While the mythic, larger-than-life icons of the repressed peasant woman (embodied by Gong Li) dominate the Fifth Generation’s glossy canvas in the era of reform, the subjects that populate the new urban cinema are a motley crew of plebeian but nonetheless troubled people on the margins of the age of transformation—ranging from aimless bohemians, petty thieves, KTV bar hostesses, prostitutes, and postmen to neighborhood police officers, taxi drivers, alcoholics, homosexuals, the disabled, migrant workers, and others. More importantly, these characters, often played by nonprofessional actors, share the same contemporary social space as the filmmakers as well as of the viewers. This cinema thus constructs a specific temporality that is constantly unfolding in the present, as both a symbiotic partner and a form of critique of the social to which it tries to give shape and meaning.

In the 1990s Chinese cities both large and small have seen tremendous changes in both infrastructural and social dimensions. Vernacular housing compounds (the *hutong* in Beijing and the *longtang* in Shanghai, for example), neighborhoods, and old communities of commerce and culture have been torn down to give way to expressways, subway stations, corporate buildings, and shopping malls—all in the wake of a ruthlessly advancing market economy and the incursion of global capitalism. The reforms in the 1980s are best described as an ideological reorientation that effected an ambivalent embrace of a postsocialist ethos and the adoption of a “march into the world” (*zouxiang shijie*) attitude in intellectual discourse, cultural production, and popular



A residential area in central Shanghai in the process of being demolished. (Photo by Zhang Zhen)

“A major change in Shanghai in three years” (Chinese characters on the wall). (Photo by Zhang Zhen)

consciousness.⁶ All the while, the concrete mantles of the socialist economy and social order stayed mostly intact. The relentless urban demolition and transformation in the 1990s has forever altered the spiritual as well as the material topography of socialist China and has ushered the reforms to points of no return. The mantra of the new decade, following Deng Xiaoping's "southern trip" in 1992, is the notion of *zhuanxing*, or transformation and system shift. In a speech reflecting on the success of the Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen and other coastal cities following his tour there, and in an effort to jump-start the "modernization" program that had encountered a serious challenge in 1989, Deng resolutely pronounced that "socialism can also practice market economy." The fourteenth Communist Party Congress officially ratified Deng's new formula, which then propelled the large-scale "transformation" of state-owned enterprises.⁷ This transformation is no longer about gradualist reforms and a half-hearted embrace of the market but about a kind of structural overhaul in mentality and ideology as well as infrastructure. While the central government and the ruling party still uphold socialism (and essentially one-party rule) as a window-dressing ideology affirming its legitimacy in the name of continuity and stability, the tides of commercialization and globalization which it helped to bring in and now to accelerate have resulted in widespread privatization and a blatant form of capitalism that voraciously mixes the rawness of industrial capitalism and the slickness of the computer-age postindustrial capitalism thriving alongside the residues of socialism.

The cities are the most visible and concentrated sites of this drastic and at times violent economic, social, and cultural transformation.⁸ On the one hand, urbanization has spurred an energetic mass-consumer culture, including the establishment of a real estate market that effectively has turned housing units and office and retail space into consumer goods. The relative stasis in the 1980s of the boundary between the city and countryside has been replaced by a far-flung nationwide movement, with millions of migrant workers, men as well as women, swarming into urban centers to partake in the demolition of old cities and the construction or expansion of globalizing enclaves such as Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing.⁹ While a large contingent of working men from the country are engaged in demolition and construction, countless young rural women have entered the booming service and entertainment industry. It is hardly surprising that the portrayal of this

group of floating new urban subjects was to become one of the defining features of the new urban cinema, as illustrated in films such as *So Close to Paradise* (1997), *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) (both by Wang Xiaoshuai), *On the Beat* (Ning Ying, 1995), *Call Me* (Ah Nian, 2000), *Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke, 1997), *City Paradise* (Tang Danian, 1999), and *A Beautiful New World* (Shi Runjiu, 2000) and in documentaries like Li Hong's *Back to Phoenix Bridge* (1997) and Wu Wenguang's *Jiang Hu: On the Road* (1999) and *Dance with Farm Workers* (2001). The salience of the floating urban subjects, particularly the figure of the migrant worker or *mingong* (literally, "peasant worker"), registers the scale and intensity of the urbanizing process and acknowledges the labor of migrant workers in the building of the new Chinese city. The centrality of the floating urban subjects foregrounds the radical unevenness of this process, which has created new class divisions and social inequity and hence some of the most glaring contradictions in China's latest drive toward modernization. The figure of the migrant worker, unlike the timeless cipher of Gong Li, is hardly an icon for a "national cinema." Migrant labor problematizes China's image as a "third world" country by exposing the internal rift between the city and the countryside, or the affluent eastern seaboard and the impoverished "vast west" (*da xibu*), within one of the most rapidly developing economies in the world. The new urban cinema, especially its independent segment, articulates with this figure its radical contemporaneity and its localized critique of globalization.

The effort to make visible the migrant workers and other marginal urban subjects, which is often done through the conscious exploration of a combination of humanist and modernist concerns and in an aesthetic both documentary and hyperreal, has endowed this cinema with a distinctive social urgency as well as a formal rigor. The strength of that urgency to document the rapidly changing urban physiognomy and to expose through the cinematic lens the accompanying social contradictions is, in view of Chinese film history, comparable only to the socially engaged urban cinema produced in Shanghai in the 1930s. While selecting films for the "Urban Generation" series I was also working on a separate project on the topic of early Shanghai film culture.¹⁰ During this period I was struck by the glaring similarity between the two urban cinemas separated almost by a life span. The exponential change in urban infrastructure, demography, and class formation in major Chinese cities, particularly in Shanghai in the late 1920s and early 1930s, was famously

captured and made into a historical archive in a body of classic silent and early sound films, such as *Daybreak* (Tianming, 1933), *Morning in the Metropolis* (Duhui de zaocheng, 1933), *Boatmen's Song* (Yuguang qū, 1934), *Little Toys* (Xiao wanyi, 1933), *Spring Silkworms* (Chuncan, 1933), and *Sister Flowers* (Zimeihua, 1934). In modern Chinese history, the 1930s and 1990s stand out as strikingly parallel in terms of accelerated modernization and urban transformation, aggressive industrial or postindustrial capitalism, and an explosion of mass culture with the accompanying issues of social fragmentation and dislocation. Shanghai in the 1930s and the vibrant urban cinema it yielded has become an object of nostalgia in both popular culture and academic scholarship inside and outside of China.¹¹ The analogy I am drawing here, however, comes with an emphasis on the irreducible social experience of both eras and the lessons we have yet to learn from each epoch's struggle over the meaning of "modernization" and its human cost.

Although in terms of film form there are many differences between the two eras, I choose to concentrate on their shared features such as the prevalent use of documentary footage of the actual city and the use of a combination of melodrama and a form of critical realism. This approach allows the filmmakers to explore the dialectic relationship between the cinematic and the social, both in form and content. When asked about the influence on him of the cinema of the 1930s, Zhang Yuan characterized it as the "most stylish and moving" and the "most lively period" in Chinese film history.¹² The phenomenological excess of the social and the anarchy of the market during these two periods, coupled with media explosion, provided ample material for cinematic representation while also challenging the filmmakers to seek an innovative film language that comments and critiques social reality instead of simply mirroring it. While the filmmakers of the 1930s tried to create a collage of Hollywood narration and Soviet montage in order to appeal to and educate the masses, many of the young filmmakers of the 1990s draw on both the Chinese legacy of critical realism and more recent international art cinema. They favor in particular the long take and the hyperrealist aesthetic for foregrounding the rawness and emotional charge of social experience while also revealing its often absurd or unjust causes or consequences. In this regard the contemporary filmmakers depart consciously from the more didactic tradition of Chinese cinema as a whole, be it critical realism or socialist realism, by taking up instead a more humble position of the witness who produces testi-

monials rather than epistles. Yet this form of witness is one mediated through the visual technologies used for making the films or embedded in the films as metacommentaries, which are deployed as resources for social critique, collective recovery, memory production, and reflections on the nature of cinematic representation itself.¹³

This volume as a whole seeks not to construct a parallax film historiography, although a few of the authors do suggest connections between these two cinemas. Suffice it here to state that a critical juxtaposition and differentiation will indeed facilitate a nuanced reinterpretation of Chinese film history in view of the question of modernity, and to a certain extent postmodernity, in the past century as a whole. This volume is instead directly concerned with the radical contemporaneity and formal innovation of this emergent cinema, for which our first aim is to identify and define the Urban Generation in relation to the restructuring of the film system and the urban and social experience in the wake of intensified globalization. Second, by engaging in the intertextual and textual interpretations of a number of representative works we attempt to outline some of the formal and aesthetic features that characterize this stylistically innovative cinema. In moving away from a central focus on the Beijing Film Academy and a chronological ordering of “generations” of Chinese filmmakers, we focus instead on the substantive temporal-spatial configuration of this new film practice. Though we refer primarily to the generation that emerged in the 1990s, we conjoin this group by overlapping generations and practices, including the new documentary movement and commercial cinema along with other cultural practices such as photography and avant-garde art. Thus, rather than designating a cohesive movement, the rubric of Urban Generation provides a shared platform for a number of allied or competing filmmakers and their creative engagement with the shared historical moment. The term also allows us to move away from the auteur-centered discourse that has contributed to elevating the elite status of a few directors from the Fourth Generation and the Fifth. Instead we use it to include a wide range of urban, quasi-urban, and cosmopolitan subjects who populate the representational space as well as the social and spectatorial space of this cinema. In this sense, then, the Urban Generation is as much a term for periodizing contemporary film history as it is a critical category that places film practice right in the middle of a living, if often agitated, social, cultural, and political experience.

While the 2001 film program in New York consisted of works by the young filmmakers of the 1990s, the symposium from which this volume evolved addressed issues and films beyond the 2001 program per se. Taken together, all of these films, despite their diverse styles and approaches, document with care, originality, and a sense of urgency both the demolition of old cities, lifestyles, and identities and the construction of new ones. Though by no means a self-declared cinematic movement, this new wave of independent and semi-independent Chinese filmmaking has come of age—ironically, but also rather hopefully—in a time when the existing Chinese film industry is faced with a deep crisis. What used to be a small-scale underground phenomenon (named variously the “Sixth Generation” or “Newborn Generation” cinema) has, following on all the changes in China and the world in the past decade, increasingly transformed itself into a vibrant and diverse form of film practice that is not only going international but also going public inside China. In this volume we do not offer definitive conclusions on this formation but rather aim to understand the historical and social conditions that gave rise to the new cinema and its aesthetic uniqueness and complexity, including its ambivalent relationship to the mainstream film industry at home as well as to the international film market.

THE IDENTITY OF AN “INDEPENDENT” CINEMA

The badge of independence, with its troubled baggage, is perhaps the single most important attribute of the Urban Generation, one that is shared both by experimental filmmakers (Zhang Yuan, Zhang Ming, Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke, Wang Quan'an, and documentarians like Wu Wenguang and Jiang Yue) and by more commercially oriented directors (Zhang Yang and Shi Runjiu, for example). The Fifth Generation directors, despite their reputation for avant-garde art cinema as well as the political controversy surrounding some of their productions, worked by and large within the state-sponsored studio system. Many younger filmmakers, however, have identified themselves at the outset as institutionally and financially independent. They have resigned from assigned jobs in state-owned studios, engaged in underground low-budget productions, and participated in international film festivals without official sanction. In this sense, the key difference between the Urban Generation and the earlier generations of filmmakers, who were trained and employed by the state

is defined by their different social and professional identities as well as by their aesthetic outlooks.

The thorny crown of “independent cinema” (*duli dianying*), however, did not descend upon the heads of the Sixth Generation filmmakers gratuitously. Just how “independent” the Sixth Generation cinema was in its formative years, or remains today, has been the focus of critical debates both inside and outside of China—an issue that is also addressed in this volume by several contributors. The early international recognition of the independently produced works by Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, He Yi, and Wu Wenguang gained at several less commercially oriented or second- or third-tier film festivals (notably Rotterdam, Tokyo, Nantes, and Cairo) was regarded with suspicion by various interest groups. The friction between the status quo and the independents was exacerbated by the events in Tokyo in 1993 and then in Rotterdam in 1994, when several of these filmmakers submitted their works for competition and screening without the official approval from home. As a result, they were promptly punished by the authorities for “illegally” shipping their films abroad, which resulted in the confiscation of their passports and a ban on further filmmaking. On the other hand, the Chinese critics and established directors, though patronizingly sympathetic to some extent, also regarded the victims as artistically immature and engaging in too much political savvy. Zhang Yimou, once a maverick himself, frowned upon the newcomers as opportunists who he described as “so well-informed about the outside world and so familiar with the path to success” and eagerly catering to Western critics.¹⁴ By 1993 the Fifth Generation as a whole (except for Tian Zhuangzhuang) had been finally and decisively embraced and even given crowning awards by the Chinese official film apparatus, as well as skillfully transitioned into the market through big-budget hits (Zhang Yimou again shows his mastery in this league), and thus it is ironic that the younger generation would take over wearing the hat of “sinner” that used to be worn by their own precursors in the Fifth Generation.

The takeoff of the Fifth Generation built on the advantage of the relatively stable studio system and the transnational coproduction trend that attracted large amounts of Hong Kong and Taiwan funds—an advantage that reached its apex in the early 1990s. The young directors were excluded at the outset from such institutional support. After embarking upon the independent path, it is much more difficult to avail oneself of “official” resources (even overseas

funds for coproduction managed by the studios). The ban issued by China's Film Bureau on Zhang Yuan and six other filmmakers in 1993 was sent to sixteen state-owned studios, processing labs, and equipment rental services nationwide so as to effectively forestall any further independent moves on the part of these filmmakers. Even for those with formal affiliations at state-owned studios, their junior status leaves them at the bottom of a hierarchy based on seniority and loyalty (to the system). In response, many of the young filmmakers take long leaves of absence (paying meanwhile a maintenance fee to the studios to retain their job titles and health or pension benefits) in order to engage in MTV and TV productions. Meanwhile they try to muster non-official or nonstate (i.e., *minjian* or *shehui*, meaning "popular" in the sense of nongovernment) resources to prepare for their feature projects.

Significantly, the erratic trajectory of independent cinema paralleled that of the structural changes in the film industry in the 1990s. The ban on the seven filmmakers in 1993 coincided with a series of "deepened" (*shenhua*) reforms, or more thorough marketization, in the (socialist) film system as it began its tortuous metamorphosis into a (quasi-capitalist or state-capitalist) industry. The restrictions placed on so-called "underground" film are part of an effort to ensure that there is minimal disruption in the enforcement of the new policies, which overtly facilitate the often imposed or organized popularization of the leitmotif films.¹⁵ These policies also privilege covertly commercial, "harmless" genres such as the "New Year celebration" comedies (*hesuipian*). A decisive move in this reform is the official endorsement of the share-based distribution (*fengzhan*) policy that applies to both domestic and imported products, promulgated to stimulate the exhibition sectors and draw the audience back to movie theaters. The independent young filmmakers were thus pushed further to the margins, alienated both by the authorities and by a market dominated by the so-called big pictures (*dapian*), domestic or foreign. These daunting circumstances, however, hardly deterred the determined young filmmakers from exploring the narrow space created by the shifts in the studios and the market economy. In the most difficult years of 1994 to 1996, some of the most daring films by the new generation were made almost simultaneously by Zhang Yuan (*The Square*, *East Palace*, *West Palace*), Wang Xiaoshuai (*Frozen*, *So Close to Paradise*), Hu Xueyang (*Morning Glory*), Guan Hu (*Dirt*), Lou Ye (*Weekend Lovers*), He Jianjun (*Postman*), Ning Ying (*On the Beat*), Zhang Ming (*Rainclouds over Wushan*, a.k.a. *In Expectation*). Most of

these films won critical acclaim and awards at various international film festivals, even though many of them remain inaccessible to the Chinese audience at home due either to stringent censorship or to disinterest on the part of profit-driven distributors and exhibitors.

While many explicitly “independent” films are still censored and banned for release in China, a new kind of flexible “independent” has begun to emerge in the context of a new wave of policy changes and institutional restructuring. The 1996–1997 reforms—riding on the momentum created by the celebration of the centenary of cinema, the ninetieth anniversary of Chinese cinema, and the imminent fiftieth anniversary of the PRC—were aimed primarily at reasserting the top-down “support” for, or rather control of, film and TV production to ensure their proper contributions to the “construction of socialist spiritual civilization” (*shehui zhuyi jinshen wenming jianshe*). A number of new regulations on censorship, coproduction, taxation (on box office receipts), and the protection of the ratio of domestic films were promulgated,¹⁶ along with the installation of a set of official awards (for example, the Xia Yan Award for film literature and Huabiao Government Award for best feature film, which carries a hefty monetary prize) to stimulate the aesthetic improvement and popularization of leitmotif films.

The institutional change that shocked film circles most is the complete shift of administrative power over film, with all of the ensuing financial, cultural, and political consequences, from the Ministry of Culture to the newly established Ministry of Broadcasting, Television and Film as the central organ overseeing all government-sponsored media production. (The ban on the seven filmmakers mentioned above was issued by this new authority, which obviously tried to show its iron fist upon taking over the film sector.) Needless to say, this change created a serious identity crisis in the film industry as a whole. Mainstream cinema welcomed the crackdown on the maverick filmmakers because such action would free up space at the international festivals (official entries are not allowed to compete with independent ones). The film branch as a whole, however, found itself confronting a reality in which film began to lose its elite status in the cultural arena and ceased to be the standard-bearer in the business of moving-image production, while ideologically it would still be more closely monitored. In financial terms the studios, already deprived of the protection of prepaid blanket sales following the reform of

1993–1994, have been forced to solicit more resources on their own while competing with other entities for limited government funds under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Broadcasting, Television and Film. This set of straitjackets, often tailored according to conflicting principles, resulted in further rigidifying and weakening the studios. The output of studio feature products reached a forlorn total of 88 in 1997, and in 1998 reached a low of only 82—a sharp drop from the earlier years when the output amounted to around 150.¹⁷

The simultaneous dispersal of the entitlement and locations to make films, coupled with the tightening of ideological controls, has created a cultural space fraught with tension and contradictions. As the most firmly entrenched state-owned sector, the film system—because of its paramount ideological function as the arbiter of the regime’s authoritarian discourse and because of potential financial value for the state—stands as the emblematic force field where convoluted and competing claims for “transformation” collide. This is where the ambiguity of the postsocialist ethos and its attendant modes of production are made most visible. If, above all, *zhuanxing* means the dissolution of a planned economy—or the giving way of state control to privatization and capitalist modes of management, which affects the national economy and social experience on a large scale—the state is reluctant to completely let loose of the film system while “unleashing” it, albeit with many strings attached, into the market.

Paradoxically, the withering of the state-owned studios stimulated film production by different groups of independents or semi-independents outside of, or partially overlapping with, the “system.” One particular regulation promulgated in December 1997 further legitimized alternative channels of feature production, thereby allowing other institutions such as television stations and licensed production entities to submit scripts to the Film Bureau for approval and to obtain a permit for a “single feature production.” This act spurred the establishment of a host of production entities, often under the umbrella of an official institution or commercial enterprise. The trend of financially independent and successful MTV, advertisement, and other media-related enterprises also inspired independent filmmakers, who often are entangled with the more free-spirited producers of popular or mass culture, to set up creative workshops or form media companies, mostly in a cottage-

industry fashion. The majority of this new crop of independent films continues to seek cooperation with official studios in some capacity in order either to access the facilities or acquire a release label, or both.

The popular and commercial turn of independent film practice was marked by the domestic and international success of Jiang Wen's independently produced *In the Heat of the Sun* (Yangguang canlan de rizi, 1994), which came about in part as a result of the celebrity status of the producer and director (who is widely regarded as a top actor) and the popularity of Wang Shuo's original novel. This event was followed by Zhang Yang's *Spice Love Soap* (Aiqing malatang, 1998), which, along with *A Beautiful New World* (Meili xin shijie) and *Shower* (Xizao), was produced by the Beijing-based Imar Film Co. Ltd. Founded in 1996 by the American Peter Loehr (Chinese name Luo Yi),¹⁸ the Imar phenomenon, which involves foreign investors and producers but also collaborates with the Xi'an Studio, clearly testifies to the advantage of marketization and multimedia approaches (Imar made and marketed music and TV products and also ran a Web site) for sustaining an alternative cinema that is neither "mainstream" nor confrontational toward the political status quo. Meanwhile, Lu Xuechang's *The Making of Steel*, less confrontational than other recent independent work in both subject matter (about a young man's painful journey through the 1970s to the 1990s and his nostalgia for revolution) and film form (told in a mostly realist manner), was affirmed as the milestone work for the Sixth Generation's "coming of age" (a pun on its alternate Chinese title, *Zhangda chengren*).¹⁹ Its release and box office success in 1998 signaled the beginning of an uneasy cooperation between a changing film system and the young filmmakers who regard themselves as more or less "independent."

In 1998, both the Beijing Studio and the Shanghai Studio launched a Young Directors' Hope Project (Qingnian daoyan xiwang gongcheng)—a variation on the theme of the Hope Project in supporting rural education—which invested an average of two million Chinese yuan (US\$250,000) in each filmmaker's individual project (subject to censor's approval). In some instances the support is given in the form of equipment, service, and a release label. Both veteran Sixth Generation directors, such as Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and He Jianjun, and new talents, including Wang Quan'an, Jin Shen, Wang Rui, Li Hong and Mao Xiaorui, were in various capacities recruited to this project. The studios even made efforts to publicize it, such as organizing a

high-caliber critics' forum (also attended by studio officials and directors) and even securing the public release of some of the films. This overt move to co-optation, while diluting the avant-garde edge of the Sixth Generation,²⁰ unwittingly acknowledged the emergence of the Urban Generation as a broad and consequential trend.

AMATEURS ON LOCATION

The independent spirit that characterizes the early Sixth Generation, however, has not dissipated altogether but rather has taken on a new visage charged with new energy. In my view, the appearance in the late 1990s of Jia Zhangke and his films *Xiao Shan Going Home* (1995), *Xiao Wu* (1997), and *Platform* (2000) inaugurated a different phase in the independent movement that effectively ended the era of the Sixth Generation. Most of them were born in the 1960s and share the memory of the intense tail-end of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath (as exemplified in *How Steel Is Made*). Jia, born 1970, is emphatically a product of the reform era of the 1980s and represents a different mode of filmmaking. Rather than engaging in the anxious takeover of its precursors, the “amateur cinema” (*yeyu dianying*), or “unofficial cinema” (*minjian dianying*), advocated and practiced by Jia and his group (Beijing Film Academy Young Experimental Film Workshop),²¹ has found a following among emerging filmmakers mostly outside of the elite academy in particular and the professional branch in general. Despite its genesis in the Beijing Film Academy (BFA), this trend takes leave of BFA-centered genealogy and its elitism and joins forces with an incipient DV (digital video) movement. Jia and his friends took up the work of filming while studying in the Film Literature/Criticism Department. Their burning desire to make their own films and their distaste for the entrenched nepotism as well as for the kind of academic style of filmmaking perpetuated at the BFA plunged Jia and his group (including Wang Hongwei, who plays the lead role in all of Jia's three features to date) headlong into their extracurricular and extremely low-budget film projects.²²

Although here I am not able to offer a detailed account of the early amateur exploits of Jia's group and the social and aesthetic valence of Jia's acclaimed films (which is the exclusive focus of Jason McGrath's chapter in this volume), I would like to underscore the key shift in the transformation of the Urban Generation relating to questioning the issues of the nature and “ownership”

of cinema by the rise of a new wave of independent filmmaking that is less embroiled in a symbiotic relation with the state. Jia has described himself as an “ordinary director who comes from the lower ranks of the Chinese society.”²³ The term’s *minjian daoyan* (literally “unofficial director,” or one who works outside the state system) and *jiceng* (grassroots) are in direct opposition to conventional perceptions, both within and outside of the “system,” about the elite status of directors as a “high” class of artist and intellectual. Most of the Sixth Generation directors came from privileged backgrounds in big cities and studied in the elite departments of directing or cinematography. In contrast, Jia came from an ordinary lower-middle-class family in a small town in Shanxi, one of the poorest provinces. As an adolescent, he worked as a break-dance dancer in a local traveling troupe. Yearning for the big city, Jia spent much of his years after high school writing fiction, doing odd jobs, and living as a migrant “artisan” by painting advertisement billboards and putting up shop signs in Taiyuan, the provincial capital. While not a fully matriculated student at the BFA, he paid the tuition and supported himself in part by taking on “ghost writing” jobs piecing together TV drama episodes. Jia’s firsthand experience (as opposed to ethnographic “fieldwork”) as a migrant urban subject and his desire to reclaim cinema as a communicative tool for the ordinary Chinese citizen caught up in the tides of urbanization and socio-economic transformation have compelled him to place the “migrant-artisan” at the center stage of his cinema. As a result Jia has been called, admiringly, the “migrant-worker director” (*mingong daoyan*).²⁴

The distinction between the disaffected but nonetheless haughty urban bohemians found in early Sixth Generation films (e.g., *Beijing Bastards*, *Days*, and *Frozen*) and the “artisans” (petty thieves or migrant amateur performers) in small towns may be a visible marker for a paradigmatic shift within the Urban Generation in the late 1990s. From *Beijing Bastards* to *Platform*, from the angry yet fashionable artist with disheveled hair to the ordinary or even awkward-looking artisan with nerdy eyeglasses in the backwaters of urban modernity, the 1990s witnessed not only the emergence of the Urban Generation but also its diversification, quotidianization, and transformation. The bespectacled Xiao Wu is an incarnation of Robert Bresson’s poor bookworm thief in *Pickpocket* (1959). In a deadpan manner, he claims himself to be an “artisan” rather than a criminal, especially in contrast to his former cohort who reinvented himself as a “model entrepreneur” by dealing in imported

cigarettes on the black market.²⁵ The pickpocket “artisan” finds his craft out of fashion in a town in the process of being torn down and rebuilt in the race toward a market-governed economy and social order. While Xiao Wu’s figure stands as a feeble, passive protest as a lone outsider, the group of amateur performers in *Platform*, who transformed their collective identity from a Peasant Culture Troupe to a Breakdance Electronic Band, anticipates the emergence of the “amateur cinema” as a grassroots movement that has taken on a more salient shape at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The advent of the “amateur cinema” as a significant ramification of the Urban Generation cannot be separated from a decade-long struggle of the new documentary movement, which has run a parallel, at times intersecting, course alongside the experimental narrative film.²⁶ In terms of technology and method, instead of the bulky film camera it is the video camera and, more recently, digital video and editing software that have served as the critical catalyst for the conception and dissemination of “amateur cinema” as a democratic form of film practice. Many of the filmmakers mentioned above have made documentaries or docudramatic works, particularly Zhang Yuan. The documentary impulse found in many films of the Urban Generation, alternately passionate or clinical, resonates more with the contemporary documentary movement heralded by figures like Wu Wenguang and Jiang Yue than with the “documentary aesthetic” programmatically conceptualized and practiced by several Fourth Generation directors in the early 1980s (e.g., the works of Zhang Nuanxin and Lin Dongtian). A reading of Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards* and Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Days* (1993), for instance, is not complete without a consideration of their intertextual links to Wu’s *Bumming in Beijing* (Liulang Beijing, 1990), which documents the lives of four migrant aspiring artists in that city. Similarly, Jiang Yue’s *The Other Bank* (Bi’an, 1994), which addresses a group of trainee/amateur actors’ disenchanted life after leaving the BFA,²⁷ and Wu’s recent *Jianghu—Life on the Road*, which happens to be about a traveling amateur troupe in the same area where Jia’s film is set, can greatly aid our understanding of *Platform* as an epic of the lived experience of an entire generation. The ensemble characters, played by nonprofessionals (including the poet Xi Chuan, who plays the leader of the troupe) and framed in Jia’s master-shot tableaux, perform the historical process of a momentous change through the interweaving of everyday life (including the changing fashion in dress and hairstyle) and the history of popular culture

(including film). The time and space traversed by these amateur actors is also traversed by the Urban Generation as a collective, which takes as its primary task to bear witness to the rupture and transformation of history. More urgently, this cinema attempts to record and interpret the collective's relationship to the ordinary people around them—friends, family members, neighbors, colleagues, as well as strangers, who inhabit or come to inhabit the ever-expanding social and material space of the cities, be they large or small, metropolitan centers or provincial capitals, Special Economic Zones or inland county seats—a space that is at once enchanting and oppressive, liberating and violent.

The documentary form is inspiring because it speaks to an aesthetic interest that seeks to connect André Bazin's photographic realism and Siegfried Kracauer's materialist phenomenology with postmodern hyperrealism to find the shape and meaning of a multifaceted social experience in the era of transformation. In representing a new episteme, the spread of the documentary method—which has quickly seeped into mainstream tv programs—attests to the proliferation and visibility of everyday life in the wake of a burgeoning mass culture,²⁸ and in the popular desire to reclaim reality with the aid of more accessible visual technologies. Deployed with an experimental lens, the documentary method is instrumental in laying bare the oscillation between representation and actuality and in foregrounding the subject-object relation between the filmmaker and his or her subject matter so as to create a more intersubjective or democratic cinema. The quasi-documentary and hyper-realist aesthetic reveals that cinematic representation is hardly a transparent window onto reality but rather a form of interrogation of the “truth” value of both its referent and its image and their indexical rapport.

Contemporaneous with the popularization and advancement of video technology, the Urban Generation is decidedly a video-film amphibious generation. Many films deliberately incorporate footage shot with a video camera (interviews, street scenes, etc.), which gives the film surface an added documentary look and feel of actuality and liveness. This tangible sense of being “on the scene” (*xianchang*) allows both the filmmaker and the viewer to witness the film as raw life and as a history of the present. For those filmmakers drawn to documenting the everyday and the immediacy of happenings, video enhances the cinema verité style and the power of long takes that respect the “unity of the event.”²⁹ For those who have dabbled in MTV and commer-

cials, supple video editing can crystallize the montage of a fragmented urban space and its psychic undercurrents. Because of its portability, directness, and economy, video is often used in both preproduction research and on location shooting. In an interview by Wu Wenguang, Jia mentions that because he had no means of projection on location, in order to view the rushes shot on 16mm he had to have the person who transported the takes to Beijing for developing shoot the rushes in the screening room with a M9000 home video camera and then bring the tape back to Fenyang. This procedure was repeated at a three-day interval until shooting was completed, which altogether took only fifteen days.³⁰

The experience and conception of *xianchang*, or “on the scene,” indeed captures the contemporary spirit (*dangxiang*) of the Urban Generation in general and the “amateur cinema” in particular. It is also the space in which the conventional boundaries that separate documentary and fiction, video and celluloid film, and professional and amateur practice are challenged and transgressed. By insisting on blurring these boundaries, filmmakers subject such genre distinctions as well as the cinematic medium itself to critical scrutiny. Marginalized by the studios, and thus the exclusion from or limited access to expensive indoor shooting, the low-budget independent or semi-independent filmmakers take their cameras and crews to the street, the marketplace, the residential areas—in short, the vast “location” outside the walls of the system. For a filmmaker like Jia Zhangke, the documentary method is not only necessary when the film is set in his hometown, which supplied all the “locations” for *Xiao Wu*, but also critical for the particular kind of story he wanted to tell about people *in* their social milieu. It is an aesthetic grounded in social space and experience—contingent, immanent, improvisational and open-ended. In Jia’s own words, it is an “adventure on the scene of shooting, which will yield unexpected situations but also possibilities.”³¹ One such situation and its possibility created the unforgettable ending of *Xiao Wu*, where the gawking crowd during the shooting, refusing to be dispersed, came to “play” the diegetic witnesses “on the scene” of the crime, as it were, of a pickpocket’s utter humiliation and exposed marginality when he has been caught and chained to a telephone pole on the sidewalk of a booming town street.³² This is but one of many instances when the penchant for the palpability of *xianchang* evident in many Urban Generation films echoes Trinh T. Minh-ha’s astute observation that “reality is more fabulous, more maddening,

more strangely manipulative than fiction.” By throwing into relief the “unnaturalness” of a familiar reality—as Jia amply shows in his most recent film *The World* (2004), which is set in a “global” theme park—both the filmmaker and the viewer can “recognize the naivety of a development of a cinematic technology that promotes increasing unmediated ‘access’ to reality.”³³ While conveying a rawer sense of authenticity or believability by plumbing the depth of the real beyond the “frame,” this edgy realism also confronts the limits or adequacy of cinematic representation. As Lou Ye aptly puts it, “I wanted to touch that edge, the edge of film, to see how far it could go; or rather, to touch the edge of myself to see where it leads to.”³⁴

The poetics of *xianchang* goes hand in hand with a new politics represented by “amateur cinema,” which attempts returning to ordinary people the right to participate in the production of filmic images about themselves. Small wonder, then, that so many of the Urban Generation films, fictional or documentary or docudramatic, often engage nonprofessional actors to play themselves. Ning Ying, the only prominent woman director of the Urban Generation, admits that the stories that she likes to tell are particularly suitable for casting nonprofessional actors.³⁵ In fact, her work *For Fun* (1993), about the struggles of a group of retirees to keep an activity center open for practicing Beijing Opera, presages Jia’s *Platform* about amateur performers. Ning Ying’s third feature, *On the Beat*, a deadpan look at everyday life in a police precinct of Beijing, has a group of real policemen playing themselves. The use of dialects or local inflections, as opposed to the standard Mandarin Chinese (*putonghua*) that was uniformly adopted in Chinese cinema (except for a few local opera-films) in the entire socialist era, thus becomes the aural signature of the new urban cinema. Even in films set in Beijing, the characters speak heavily inflected Beijing vernacular rather than *putonghua*.

Suddenly, the vivacity of the texture of quotidian life, with multiple voices in multiple inflections emanating from multiple concrete localities, enters cinematic space as never before. *Xianchang* thus constitutes a particular social and epistemic space in which orality, performativity, and an irreducible specificity of personal and social experience are acknowledged, recorded, and given aesthetic expression. The operation of *xianchang* hence also stands for a particular temporality, which Wu Wenguang (its major practitioner and theorist) incisively interprets as of the “present tense” by virtue of “being present on the scene.”³⁶ The urgency of this temporality of the here and the now is

fueled by the relentless pace of urbanization but also the urge to intervene in a process that is rapidly erasing urban memory and producing a collective amnesia.

The documentary concreteness of *xianchang* is more often than not articulated through the meticulous use of locations that often bear concrete geographical identities. These could be as large as real cities (Beijing, Fenyang, Shanghai, Wuhan, and so on) or as microscopic as streets or rivers (for instance, the two important intersections in Beijing named Jiadaokou and Xisi, or the Suzhou River in Shanghai). The scenes in a large number of Urban Generation films are not artificial sets but material entities in contemporary urban geography. Ning Ying and Jia Zhangke are particularly keen on retaining the bleak and even dusty tone of their locations rather than glossing over them with lighting or decor. As the Chinese film critic Ni Zhen observes, the “police station, the empty lot in the midst of houses being demolished, alleyways in the old city, an abandoned temple—in these seemingly taken-for-granted environments which lack the effects of a visual spectacle, Ning Ying’s camera stubbornly reveals to us the spots branded with social and historical traces.”³⁷ The insistence on spatial indexicality and linguistic particularity in these films about and by “amateurs” may be an influence of the documentary movement (and, to some extent, the avant-garde performance art) that flourished in the 1990s.³⁸ More likely, however, is that fact that the narrative filmmakers share with their contemporaries who work with a more direct and accessible video medium a similar conviction in the power of moving images for grasping a transforming society as well as in the power of these images to bring about change in the perception and use of both old and new representational technologies. Their production methods, aesthetic orientations, and social engagement have propelled them to create not simply a new cinema anchored in the social and the now but also, in aesthetic terms, an alternative cinematic space that is haptic rather than optic, sensuous and open rather than abstract and closed.

THE TRANSLOCATION OF AN ALTERNATIVE SPECTATORSHIP

As discussed above, the emergence and diversification of the Urban Generation cinema in the 1990s is intertwined with a series of imposed and market-driven reforms, primarily in the distribution and exhibition sectors. These

fitful structural changes have seriously shaken the studios and forced them to yield, albeit involuntarily, the exclusive power as the sole state-sanctioned producers of celluloid culture that they had held since the early 1950s, after the completion of the nationalization of the film industry. The withering of the Chinese Film Distribution, Exhibition and Import and Export Corporation, the mammoth despot ruling every realm apart from production itself, further opened up space for a range of possibilities. This change has, however, posed new challenges to those who want to seize the opportunity to build an active and diverse local film culture before the avalanche of Hollywood blockbusters becomes an everyday reality in China. The attempt to create an open film market following the 1993 reforms proved stillborn due to the sudden severance of the link between production and distribution,³⁹ the lack of adequate policies regulating the now locally controlled, profit-driven market, and the continued harsh censorship of domestic and, in particular, innovative films. In the second half of the decade, while the output of domestic films and total box office receipts continued to decline, a more competitive domestic film market emerged, though with mixed repercussions. At the same time, an alternative space and practice of exhibition devoted to independent film and video—a Chinese cineclub culture of sorts—has also stubbornly appeared, against all odds.

The ascendance to the global stage of Chinese-language film in general and mainland cinema in particular in the last two decades of the twentieth century is inexorably linked to international festival culture, which itself experienced an expansion in this period. While Hong Kong cinema has enjoyed a booming local market, where the popularity of domestic cinema often surpassed Hollywood and other imports, the critical successes of the Taiwan and Mainland new wave cinemas in the 1980s have trod the path of glory paved by the festivals.⁴⁰ The Golden Lion Award for Zhang Yimou's *Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) at the forty-ninth Venice International Film Festival and the Palm d'Or award for Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993) at Cannes, and their subsequent releases both overseas and at home, marked the culminating success, both critical and popular, of the Fifth Generation cinema. This success then contributed to the consolidation of the international status of Chinese cinema as a whole. The success saga of the Fifth Generation was studied and repeated in varying degrees by its peers and latecomers. Chinese filmmakers realized that the festivals were not only a venue for obtaining critical acclaim and

financial reward abroad, but for many such a venue seemed also to be a stepping stone toward gaining recognition and a potential audience at home—even though it might be a long shot. And, indeed, the Urban Generation, both popular and experimental strands alike, has done just that. In his interview with Wu Wenguang, Jia Zhangke confessed that part of his “education” at the BFA included reading a book in Chinese called *A Survey of International Film Festivals*.⁴¹

As China has become deeply implicated in the global arena of the post–cold war era, the young filmmakers, who came of age in a time saturated with personal computers and the Internet, and in a China made smaller by the ease and expansion of transcontinental travels, are readily cosmopolitan in their outlook and professional conduct. More than any generation of filmmakers before them since 1949, who benefited from both the “iron rice bowl” and the prestige of a cultural elite, members of the Urban Generation have found themselves obliged to manage and promote their own projects, especially the independently financed ones. Like their contemporaries from other countries, they are at home at international festivals, large or small. Various documentary and short-film festivals, notably Yamagata, Rotterdam, and the Margaret Mead Festival in New York, present new arenas with which the big-feature-exclusive Fourth and Fifth Generations did not concern themselves. The major international awards garnered by the Fifth Generation in the late 1980s and early 1990s for their lavish historical melodramas or cultural allegories helped establish Chinese cinema as a “national” (and mostly *fictional*) cinema in the film studies curriculum in the West. The participation of the young independent filmmakers in the festivals in the 1990s have challenged that uniform perception of contemporary Chinese cinema by precisely opening up the time and space of the “contemporaneity” of Chinese society and its coeval relation, and tension, with global currents.

The festivals are, however, not necessarily final destinations where the fate of such films is sealed. A cosmopolitan audience does not have to consist of sympathetic foreign connoisseurs of Chinese cinema with an eye for the exotic or the dissenting. While most independent Chinese films that file through the festivals do not find a foreign distributor, they often travel further to local or small-scale “festivals” at universities, archives, museums, diaspora communities, and other art house programs. The “Urban Generation” series through which we participated in this international subculture is a case in point.



Enthusiastic reception of the Urban Generation at the Walter Reade Theater, February 2001. (Photo by Liu Xiaojin)

During several weeks in February and March 2001, about twelve films, including both award-winning films and new premiers, were shown to enthusiastic crowds at the Harvard Film Archive, the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in addition to audiences at several universities.

These “second-tier festivals” create audience responses that go beyond conventional expectations. Several months after the “Urban Generation” series event I learned of the existence of an online discussion among a group of young Chinese architects and architecture students (and their friends) who live in the New York metropolitan area and who had religiously attended the series and followed it by engaging in a heated discussion among themselves. When I logged onto the Web site maintained by these “archicomrades,” I found a special link created for the “Urban Generation.”⁴² Most of the online discussion revolved around Jia Zhangke’s *Xiao Wu*, with some members offering lengthy and incisive readings of the artistic and social significance of the film. Some members also tried to contrast the different approaches to the notion of urban made by the Fifth Generation directors such as Zhang Yimou

(*Keep Cool*) and Huang Jianxin (*Stand Up, Don't Stoop*) relative to the Urban Generation filmmakers. One member addressed the question by astutely pointing out that the earlier urban films are mostly about the “urban” as a given condition, whereas the new Urban Generation distinguishes itself by dealing directly with urbanization as a “process.” Another member made an attempt to compare, with palpable urgency, the social responsibility of his or her own group of aspiring architects with the filmmakers: “Today’s new Urban Generation—actually the same generation as us—is starting a new cycle of ideological struggle, by looking through the contemporary Chinese urbanization with their subversive aesthetics and producing strategy. . . . [For] Chinese architects, it may take at least five more years to fully conceptualize and then start their own critical work from their own discipline.”

Reading this online discussion by these future Chinese and Chinese-American architects, I was struck by how they wholeheartedly embraced the term “Urban Generation” as a “natural” designation for the cinema as well as for themselves. I was thrilled and encouraged by how organizing such an event could inadvertently create new, albeit “minor” and contingent, publics such as this Internet group.⁴³ By introducing this online cinephile community here, I intend to stress the permeability of different media as well as national boundaries in the formation of an alternative public sphere for Chinese cinema “against” the backdrop of globalization as both a homogenizing as well as differentiating process. Just as the young filmmakers are savvy about the festival industry, their fans are equally adept in finding films they like and ways of sharing their enthusiasm and insight. Long after the “festival” is over, the event seems to have gained an afterlife thanks to new communicative technologies.

Does a similar kind of audience or group of “filmmaniacs” (as the “archi-comrades” call themselves) exist in China? Does Urban Generation cinema, especially the independent productions, have a chance to be seen there? Since the mid-1990s the distribution system in China has, ahead of the production sector, marched by leaps and bounds into the market under internal as well as external pressure. After the retreat of the central power represented by the former Chinese Film Distribution, Exhibition and Export and Import Corporation (in 1995 changed to China Film Co.), a plural configuration began to emerge in the film industry. After 1997 in Shanghai and Beijing, where control had been most stringent but where film culture has always been most vital

(due to the high concentration of film resources there and the metropolitan culture), semiautonomous companies were established.⁴⁴ The leading players are the Zijincheng Company in Beijing and the Yongle Company in Shanghai, respectively. These companies engage in both production and distribution, promoting in particular the popular comedies of Feng Xiaogang (Zijincheng) and the “new mainstream” films by Feng Xiaoning (Yongle).⁴⁵ In the two cities there are now at least two competing distribution lines (*yuanxian*) in conjunction with separate chains of theaters that showcase different sets of films simultaneously. Occasionally, less commercially promising but innovative films by young directors have the luck to be picked up. I saw, for instance, Ning Ying’s *I Love Beijing* in a full room with an enthusiastic audience at a newly opened multiplex in Shanghai; as a result I was compelled to rethink the incursion of global-style multiplexes financed by transnational capital. While new distribution practices obviously pave the way for the influx of more Hollywood films (now twenty per year, with an increase expected in coming years) which poses a real threat to domestic cinema, it inadvertently also provided the arena for a new spectatorship with sophisticated, sometimes unpredictable “window-shopping” ability.⁴⁶ Popular films produced by the independent Imar company, such as *Shower*, are also favorites at these venues, generating formidable box office returns for such low-budget domestic products. In November 2004 *The Last Level* (Shengdian)—a small-budget (2 million yuan, or about US\$240,900) film directed by Wang Jing about a young computer-game addict’s adventures in cyberspace—had a successful premiere at the Huaxing International Multiplex following sold-out screenings at Beijing University.⁴⁷

What about other independent films that do not ostensibly cater to a mass audience, as well as those films that are explicitly banned? With the loosening of official control in the distribution and exhibition sectors and the boom in alternative venues other than state-owned cinemas, a whole cluster of new screen practices have been shaping a different kind of public sphere for moving images. Venues such as KTV bars, projecting videos and VCDs (often pirated versions featuring a mixture of soft-porn and action materials) have become ubiquitous in cities large and small, and in rural towns all over China. With their cheap price and other “services” (ranging from drinking to massage and more) they predominately attract the migrant and lower social classes. More recently, a number of movie bars, in part modeled on their



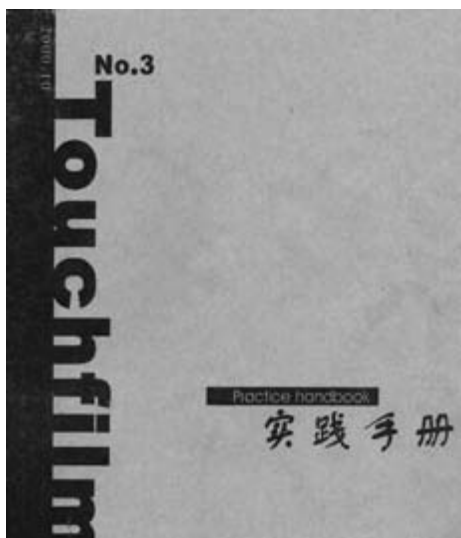
The Yellow Pavilion, the base for a cineclub near the Beijing Film Academy.
(Photo by Zhang Zhen)

lowbrow KTV and karaoke cousins, have appeared in big cities catering to students, intellectuals, foreign expatriate communities, and other film buffs who are eager to see, and talk about, both the foreign and Chinese art cinema that the mainstream cinemas rarely offer.

As Beijing is the center for Chinese independent cinema and for avant-garde culture as a whole, it is not surprising that several movie bars there are actively involved in the formation of a new cineclub culture. The popularization of the VCD and DVD has made it possible for the movie bars to screen a wide range of European, American, and Japanese art cinema. It is significant that the revival of a cinephile culture in China is in large part made possible by the “primitive” or “pirated” form of postmodern technology of the VCD. The development of this culture also benefited from the proliferation of urban venues with screen practices that hark back, in their heterotopic and communal character at least, to the teahouse form of spectatorship associated with early Chinese film culture.⁴⁸ I visited three such venues during a research trip in summer 2001: the Yellow Pavilion Bar near the BFA (which is probably the first of its kind), the Butterfly Swallow Movie Bar in the bar-congested Sanlitun area in the eastern part of the city, and the Box Café near Qinghua

University in the northeast corner of the city where colleges and research institutions concentrate. The Box Café has a separate movie room that in the program pamphlets is called “space for imagination.” The movie bars have varied formats of video or laser projection capacities and often hold informal discussions after screenings. Registered as commercial establishments, they take advantage of the loose regulations applied to the service industry. Such a space, which shares the same spirit with the numerous avant-garde gallery bars (such as the Top Gallery in Shanghai and the Courtyard in Beijing), combines leisure and education, consumption and cultural production, and provides a much-needed home for an alternative film culture.

At the time of my visit, the programs at the movie bars in Beijing were mostly coordinated by an association called Practice Society (Shijianshe), which was established in April 2000 by several BFA graduates and other cinephiles. A centerpiece of the Practice Society’s agenda has been its effort to promote independent and amateur cinema. True to its name, the Practice Society has also been committed to the filmmaking practice, in particular digital video making. Its DV documentary group met regularly to screen and discuss members’ works-in-progress. The influence of the Practice Society extended to traditional media (such as literary and arts journals like *Furong* and *Vision 21*, through a special “Practice” column or forum) as well as to the Internet. It also collaborated with culturally oriented Web sites (e.g., www.sina.com) by conducting online discussion groups with cinephiles interested in their activities. The fourth issue of the Practice Society’s *semizdat* journal, *Touch Film*,⁴⁹ published a set of online responses to the question: “If you had a [video] camera, on what subject would you focus your lens?” Cinephiles with aliases as varied as “witch’s mirror,” “cinokino,” and “Godard” sent in their intimate, imaginative, and sometimes outlandish film plans. The subjects seemed infinite, and a community of aspiring “amateur” filmmakers was created through participating in the “practice” of a collective dream factory online, part of which was realized in actual practice. This online association of amateurs, in a virtual yet instantly connected space, exemplifies the “tactile” perception of cinema (i.e., “touch film,” or *jiechu dianying*, where the members are only a mouse-click away from one another) and the “hands-on” approach of the Practice Society. Amateur cinema is not simply about an optically centered spectatorship derived from a passive love for watching films



Touch Film, the publication
of the Practice Society.

but also constitutes a productive spectatorial experience that includes using one's own hands to construct and share moving images that restore sensuality to everyday life. Such a tactile practice, through either the experience or production of an alternative cinema, and in its emphasis on directness, proximity, and involvement, embodies the spirit of *xianchang*. It is hardly surprising, then, that the DV group attached to the Practice Society is devoted primarily to the making of documentaries.

The kind of cineclub culture led by the Practice Society in Beijing has, in fact, precursors with a less ostensible avant-garde posture in Shanghai and Shenzhen. In October 1996 a number of cinephiles in Shanghai formed the 101 Workshop—named after the day, October 1, when it was formed. The organization consisted mostly of members of the “Readers’ Club” of the journal *Film Story*, published by the aforementioned Yongle Company. According to one report, in 2001 the club had 160 members and 300 new applicants. Although the majority of its members are young urban professionals in Shanghai, and most of its activities take place in the metropolis, its membership extends to about thirty cities. During the 1999 Shanghai International Film Festival, which is sponsored by the Shanghai Municipal Government, members of the 101 Workshop, concerned by the absence of a film guide and criticism in past

festival editions, created a pamphlet titled “10-Day Talk on the Festival,” which they distributed in the participating theaters. The pamphlet turned out to be very popular, selling out more quickly than tickets to the festival.⁵⁰

The devotion or, rather, obsession of this generation of cinephiles has been compared to that of the “feverish friends” (*fashaoyou*) of music and video who spend large amounts of money and time acquiring and enjoying top-notch audiovisual equipment, and who form a loose network of exchange among themselves. The crucial difference between “feverish friends” and the cineclub members lies in the latter’s active participation in the formation of an alternative public sphere by organizing discussions and programs, publishing reviews, and more importantly, exchanging and networking with other similar cinephile groups in cities nationwide. The founding of the Yuanyinghui Club (Film Connection) in Shenzhen, which bridges the two phenomena, is a case in point. An editor at the Guangzhou-based film magazine *Dianying zuoping* (Film works) shared his idea about a viewing club with the general manager of an audiovisual equipment company who was himself a fashaoyou and had set up a special demo space for the company’s products. In 1999 they turned the demo space into the club’s headquarters, where they printed a newsletter; organized regular screenings of foreign and Chinese art films both old and new as well as award-winning commercials and shorts; and held discussions with filmmakers including the Hong Kong director Ann Hui. Within the walls of their exquisitely designed screening room with its high-caliber equipment, the “feverish friends” of sound and images spend countless hours “sharing film and sharing life” (*fenxiang dianying, fenxiang rensheng*).⁵¹

The examples of the 101 Workshop, Film Connection, and Practice Society have among cinephiles in Shenyang, Nanjing, and Wuhan spurred great interest and desire for this type of fellowship, and similar clubs, though on a smaller scale, have been formed in all three provincial capitals. The Rear Window Film Appreciation Club was initiated by a lone Internet surfer who is also an avid VCD consumer. After going online to search for likeminded people, he realized that obsessed cinephiles existed not only in his hometown of Nanjing but all over the world. Using the pseudonym Weixidi (a homophone for VCD in Chinese), he started the Rear Window club along with friends like “Godard” in Nanjing. A cineclub in Wuhan was founded in spring 2000 by several VCD fashaoyou who, after a visit to Beijing to learn from their

comrades there, began screenings at a university and then moved to the Provincial Capital Library. The same year, the northeastern city of Shenyang (where the Changchun Film Studio is based) also saw the birth of a club, boldly named Ziyou dianying, or Free Cinema, accentuating the independent spirit of this grassroots-level cultural movement.⁵²

Indeed, independence is the common characteristic of this new breed of not-for-profit cinephile community, which has extended into a large number of university campuses. Neither commercially oriented nor socially pretentious, cinephile groups are dedicated to the enjoyment of alternative cinema as an antidote to the isolation of the individual in the age of the Internet, VCD, and DVD and to the contrived film culture dominated by the deluge of Hollywood blockbusters and the continued hegemony of state-sponsored “correct” cinema. At a time when using every possible minute for profit making is the trend in China, these amateurs willingly “kill time” by immersing in and sharing celluloid dreams. But their leisure-time hobby also has important social and even political implications. As Yangzi, one of the core members of the Practice Society, notes, the congregation of concerned critics, filmmakers, students, and other “feverish friends” of cinema is part of an effort to create an “open platform” for cinema. As a forum for alternative moving images that often have no chance of being shown at regular theaters, the movie bars and other venues engaged by the cineclubs thus become a kind of quasi-public outlet for the display of “nonofficial images” (*minjian yingxiang*) that articulate, in Yangzi’s words, “private discourse and personal expressions.”⁵³ These scattered spots are “like the oases in the desert, which signifies possibility.”⁵⁴

This possibility of forming a “minor” and “nomadic” film culture that engages both the margins and the center was tested and realized with considerable success during the first Unrestricted New Image Festival held in Beijing and in a number of other cities in fall 2001. The previously dispersed cells of a cultural phenomenon, linked together as “virtual neighborhoods” in cyberspace,⁵⁵ are through this festival coalesced, if momentarily, into an embodied movement in real time and physical location. Initiated collectively by the Practice Society, 101 Workshop, Yuanyinghui, and Free Cinema, and sponsored by a number of journals and Web sites, the festival showcased a wide selection of independent short features, experimental video works, and documentaries made since 1996. Works by foreign students were also admitted, and an official committee presided over the competition. The festival was held

at the BFA, to a full house of enthusiasts. In addition to the general programs, a workshop on digital video was conducted and two special series were offered dedicated to the works of Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke in conjunction with seminar discussions.⁵⁶ During the festival, Web sites carried ongoing reports and reviews. In November, the festival arrived in Shanghai. For three days the screening room inside the new state-of-the art Shanghai Library repeated the sensation that premiered in Beijing. To give the Shanghai edition a local accent, the program there highlighted works by several Shanghai-based filmmakers who met and talked with the audience.⁵⁷

I offer this sketch of a fast-emerging cineclub community and alternative film spectatorship around the turn of the century in part to underscore the broad empirical range as well as conceptual possibility of the Urban Generation cinema as both a descriptive and analytical category. The coming into being of this vivacious amateur film culture exemplifies in more tangible and meaningful ways the “amateur cinema” theory and practice advocated by independent filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Wu Wenguang. As forces that are dispersed yet increasingly joining together through the Internet and touring programs, these localized small groups are coalescing into an informal grassroots movement. The intimate movie bars, the nomadic style of the cineclub operations, and the diversity of the chosen film forms and formats (especially the shorts and DV film) encapsulate this grassroots movement as a “minor cinema” that potentially can reshape the structure of film knowledge and practice. Consciously going against the rampant commercializing trends in all sectors in China today, these cinephile associations are nevertheless not shy about strategically using resources from the official public sphere, such as the print media, TV, the BFA, and a host of semiofficial enterprises. Indeed, they cannot truly be described as “underground” because they also make forays into various public institutions such as universities and libraries. This form of cultural production that is amateur rather than activist (which can hardly be allowed in China) does not avowedly represent the disenfranchised social groups as the kind of “grassroots globalization” efforts described by, among others, Arjun Appadurai. In its attempt to challenge the existing power apparatus of image making and dissemination, represented by both the official mainstream and the Hollywood encroachment (and the complicity between the two), the goals of the amateur cinema movement are nothing short of striving, in Appadurai’s words, “for a democratic and auton-

omous standing in respect to the various forms by which global power further seeks to extend its dominion.”⁵⁸ The success of the first Unrestricted New Image Festival represents the first concrete fruit of globalization from below in the realm of cinema, one of the most visible and consequential grounds where the war of globalization is waged and where the reclaiming of an alternative public sphere is being attempted by an army of Chinese amateur filmmakers and their “feverish friends.” Together they are coming forward to embody a new century of image making and social, cultural, and political imagination.

The twelve essays in this volume are divided into three sections. Together they provide a framework for conceptualizing the Urban Generation and the attendant social transformation in contemporary China as well as detailed analysis of specific cinematic articulations of the recent urbanizing experience and the formation of new urban identities. The different approaches taken by each author, with some canvassing larger concerns and others concentrating on individual films or filmmakers, present both long views and close-ups of a rich yet varied cinematic and social landscape. In sharing the focus on urbanization and the method of contextual and intertextual analysis of films and other related audio-visual or literary material, our aim is to make broader, though by no means facile, connections between cultural production and its referents. For too long cinema studies has concentrated on self-contained textual analysis that tends to isolate films from their rich intertextual and contextual relations. This volume does not simply present an artistic movement per se, but rather attempts both to identify its unique contribution and to anchor it in the process of a widespread and complex transformation taking place in Chinese society and culture as a whole. While the issues and themes covered in the three sections of this book are not mutually exclusive, there is a sense of progression and deepening of the inquiry that begins by outlining the contours of the sociocultural ecology of the new urban cinema and moves to specific topoi in its imaginative terrain.

The first part, “Ideology, Film Practice, and the Market,” offers not so much an overarching definition of the Urban Generation as a nuanced analysis of the complex historical conditions involved in the rise of the new urban cinema, including the documentary movement. The authors in this section evaluate the applicability of “postsocialism” as at once a periodizing, analytic, and

aesthetic category. In so doing, they outline the connections between the emergence of the Urban Generation and the rise of the new market economy and mass culture within China, on one hand, and the impact of the transnational film practice, on the other. Yingjin Zhang attempts to map out the changing topography of the Urban Generation in the postsocialist landscape and the complex configuration of the underlying political economy involving four “players”: politics, art, capital, and marginality. He takes Guan Hu’s *Dirt* (1993) as a starting point for examining post-1989 Chinese filmmaking in general and the transformation of the Sixth Generation in particular. Zhang identifies the figure of the rock musician as the quintessential “rebel” in early Sixth Generation works and the rock music, along with the MTV that made it popular, as having left discernible aesthetic marks on these films. Challenging the prevalent notion of “underground” used by Western critics in describing the Sixth Generation, Zhang argues that the Newborn Generation as a whole is in fact defined by its ambivalent and at times symbiotic relationship with the official apparatus, the commercial mainstream, and the international art film market, especially toward the late 1990s.

Jason McGrath’s chapter, through close readings of Jia Zhangke’s works, extends and deepens the discussion on postsocialism by locating it squarely in film production methods and the resulting aesthetics, in particular the issues of realism. McGrath traces Jia’s career in terms of both his changing visual style and its local and global context—from the influence of a rough-hewn postsocialist critical realism inaugurated by independent documentary and fiction filmmakers in the early 1990s to the retooling of the more stylized long-take realism in the tradition of international art cinema. The power of postsocialist realist films lies in their direct “confrontation with reality through the rhetoric of their narratives and their cinematic style.” In Jia’s early works, this stylistic boldness is emblemized by cinema vérité-style shooting and the frequent “look to the camera” by pedestrian “extras,” which foregrounds the unevenness of “extradiegetic” reality and limits of representation. McGrath argues that Jia’s works in fact oscillate between two kinds of realism while suggesting a discernible trajectory of stylistic shift as the director marches further into the international scene. The oscillation ultimately also speaks to the aesthetic flexibility or anxiety of Jia and other filmmakers whose social and artistic aspirations are caught not only between the contradictory tem-

poralities of an unruly Chinese reality but also the competing cinematic discourses and practices in the transnational arena.

The importance of the documentary approach in the new urban cinema is more directly tackled in Chris Berry's contribution on the innovative and socially engaged documentary film and video practice since 1989. Quite separate from Sixth Generation or Urban Generation narrative filmmaking, this new documentary movement, institutionally speaking, has emerged for the most part from the world of television. Yet both forms share an acute desire to "get real," which Berry sees as the primary condition of contemporary post-socialist cinema in China. What makes the new documentary uniquely different from the official documentary is the method of spontaneous shooting (or "on-the-spot" realism) and the absence of the lecture format. These features give voice to ordinary people and their everyday concerns. The documentary trend (including its extensions such as the talk show) has helped create an emerging public sphere on television, taking advantage of its more rapid expansion and thorough commercialization than that seen in the film system in the 1990s.

Moving toward the more specific phenomenon of the intensified urbanization of the last fifteen years, the chapters in part 2 trace the engagement by cinematic and other media (including avant-garde art and literature) with a new politics and poetics of the urban. The contributions by Sheldon Lu and by Yomi Braester focus on the transforming cityscape, specifically the widespread phenomenon of demolition and relocation (*chaiqian*), and the concomitant fragmentation of the social fabric in 1990s urban China. Lu and Braester both survey a wide range of filmic and nonfilmic material while observing important distinctions between the variations in aesthetic appeal and social function.

Sheldon Lu approaches the phenomenon of demolition and its impact through a multimedia exploration of the changed sensory economy and competing temporalities in popular cinema (specifically the Imar productions *Shower* and *Beautiful New World* and Feng Xiaogang's *A Sigh*) and avant-garde photography and video. While the popular films portray in a direct and sentimental manner the destructive impact on family structure and old neighborhoods, in them and in certain avant-garde art Lu discovers different attempts to "project new zones of hopes, desires, and dreams" in metropolitan