

REVIEW

YING QIAN. *REVOLUTIONARY BECOMINGS: DOCUMENTARY MEDIA IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA*. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024. 328 PP. ISBN: 9780231204477.

Revolutionary Becomings is an ambitious and groundbreaking study that tackles documentary filmmaking in China throughout the twentieth century. At first glance, this gargantuan undertaking seems to be an impossible thing to do. However, Ying Qian accomplishes precisely such an arduous task with extensive research, comprehensive coverage, and persuasive arguments. This book “asks how media and revolution are mutually constitutive of each other: how revolutionary movements gave rise to media practices that reconfigured political relationality and revolutionary epistemology in specific ways, and how these media practices in turn informed and delimited the particular paths of revolutions’ actualization” (p. 3). As part of Columbia University Press’s book series “Investigating Visible Evidence,” the book makes a significant contribution to media studies in the modern era in China and beyond. It contests and “provincializes” what is regarded as standard (Western) approaches to documentary studies by bringing the long history and rich varieties of documentary practices from China into focus (p. 5).

The monograph dwells on documentary throughout the entire duration of the twentieth century from the 1910s to the end of the century. The book comprises the Introduction, six chapters, and Epilogue. Qian arranges the chapters and narrates the story of the development of Chinese documentary in a largely chronological order. The Introduction begins with an account of the screening of the documentary *The Chinese Revolution* in a theater in Nagasaki, Japan in 1911. It is noteworthy that this film about revolution in China is made by a Japanese filmmaker, Umeya Shōkichi 梅屋庄吉 (1868–1934), who is a follower of the Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866–1925). Indeed, revolutionary activities and media representations of revolution have been a main thread throughout the turbulent century. Hence, the title of the book: *Revolutionary Becomings*. The author demonstrates that Chinese documentary grows out of domestic necessities and “becomings”

as well as China's interlocking transnational relationships with other countries such as Japan, America, and the Soviet Union.

Chapter One, "Emergence: Colonial War, Nationalist Revolution, and Documentary's Beginnings," traces the origins of documentary in China. Documentary has been put to various uses and has served different ends: a commercial enterprise, an art form, a vehicle of nation-building, propaganda, and party politics. The author closely analyzes important films, including Lai Man-wai's 黎民偉 (1893–1953) documentary films. Among his many works, Lai filmed the Nationalist Party's First Congress in Guangzhou in 1924. He also made *Feng Yuxiang's Northern Expeditions* (1929), which was discussed by Qian extensively. Qian delineates the intricate lineage among media, culture, politics, and revolution in the early twentieth century. Film history usually highlights Lai Man-wai as the maker of the first Hong Kong feature film: *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* 莊子試妻 (1913). It is important to acknowledge his versatile role as a foundational Chinese documentary filmmaker.

Chapter Two, "Bombs and Seafarings: Documentaries Hard and Soft," examines Chinese documentaries made in the 1920s and mid-1930s. There exist socially tendentious "hard films" as well as modernist "soft films." As Qian points out, Chinese documentarians "negotiated between liberal premises of objective journalism, Marxist attention to class consciousness, and a modernist emphasis on open-ended subjective experiences" (p. 24). Many pages of the chapter are devoted to a discussion of Liu Na'ou's 劉吶鷗 (1905–1940) documentary *A Man Who Holds a Movie Camera* 持攝影機的男人 (1933). Liu's film is indebted to the documentary *A Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov. It enters a cluster of "city symphony films" in the world. Such a personal, amateur "soft film" is a sharp contrast to the socially engaged leftist films at the time, such as *Spring Silkworm* 春蠶 (1933), which is an adaption of Mao Dun's 茅盾 (1896–1981) fiction.

Chapter Three, "Winning Realities: Wartime Propaganda and Solidarity," focuses on Chinese documentary during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Civil War (1946–1949). The two wars intensify the utility of documentary as an effective tool of propaganda and nation-building. Qian offers insightful analyses of such important films as *Long Live the Nation(s)* 民族萬歲 (1941) directed by Zheng Junli 鄭君里 (1911–1969) and the Sino-Soviet co-production *Victory of the Chinese People* (1950) directed by Leonid Varlamov. One interesting detail noted by Qian was that *Long Live the Nation(s)* is a filming of China's varied ethnic minorities. Hence the ambiguity in rendering "minzu" into singular (the Chinese nation) or plural (China's ethnicities) in English. Qian also describes other fascinating episodes such

as a fruitful encounter between Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens and Chinese filmmaker Yuan Muzhi 袁牧之 (1909–1978). Documentary activities evolve and develop in Shanghai, China's wartime capital, Chongqing, communist-occupied Yan'an, and the Northeast (Dongbei 東北).

Chapter Four, "When Taylorism Met Revolutionary Romanticism: Great Leap Temporalities," investigates documentary in China during the so-called "Great Leap Forward." Socialist China races against time in order to catch up and even surpass advanced capitalist economies. This mass movement was misguided at the outset and resulted in a horrendous failure. Nevertheless, documentary flourishes in this utopian period of socialism. Qian discusses films such as *Huang Baomei* 黃寶妹 (1958), a model textile worker in Shanghai, directed by Xie Jin 謝晉 (1923–2008). She teases out the irony between "the heavily mediated Great Leap Forward and the scarcely mediated Great Famine" in China's convoluted media culture (p. 175).

Chapter Five, "The Uncertainty of Political Knowledge: Documentary in Crisis," examines documentary films from the 1960s to mid-1970s, namely, to the end of the Mao era. Qian delves into intriguing examples and reveals the vagaries of media culture and political struggle in China during that time. A color (and colorful) documentary *Chairman Liu Shaoqi Visits Indonesia* 劉主席訪問印度尼西亞 (1963) was a sensation nationwide upon release. Liu Shaoqi's 劉少奇 (1898–1969) wife, Wang Guangmei 王光美 (1921–2006), accompanied Liu during the trip. It was a glamorous high-profile visit to an Asian country by the Chinese leader and his spouse. In a reversal of fortune, Liu Shaoqi and Wang Guangmei were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. In a spectacle of public shaming, Wang was condemned and paraded by the Red Guards and was forced to wear the kind of dress that she wore during the Indonesian trip.

In the next chapter, Chapter Six, "Rehabilitation: Documentary in the Post-Mao Decade," Qian narrates political reversals and acts of nemesis. In a dramatic historical turn, Jiang Qing and other members of the Gang of Four were arrested and prosecuted in the post-Mao era, and their trial was aired on state TV all over the country. The documentary of this trial was purported to be an effort to build China's rule of law. In the rehabilitation of disgraced party leaders and communist cadres, a memorial service for Liu Shaoqi was held. All these spectacles were captured by Chinese documentary and aired on national TV. The last part of the chapter also examines other noteworthy documentary works, such as *River Elegy* 河殤 (1988). The TV series calls on the Chinese people to step out of their self-isolating inward-looking traditional culture and to embrace an open oceanic blue culture. The film is a

reflection of the ethos of *Gaige kaifang* 改革開放 (Reform and Opening up).

The book concludes with an Epilogue, “Notes on Chinese Independent Documentary.” Of all types, the so-called independent documentary in fact has attracted the most attention from the West. Such works have been exhibited at international venues and have been studied by academia. These films include Wu Wenguang’s 吳文光 *Bumming in Beijing* 流浪北京 (1990), Wang Bing’s 王兵 *West of the Tracks* 鐵西區 (2002), and many others. As Qian poignantly observes, “Independent documentary, having emerged... and developed in the post-1989 political ecology, no longer mediated party-people relationships” (p. 250). It is a personal, subjective kind of film that nevertheless may have political implications and exact a cost to the career of filmmakers. Independent documentary could also be seen as a force of activism from the margins of the film establishment. It alerts people to crucial social issues such as the environment, the ecosystem, and the plight of ordinary people.

Revolutionary Becomings is an unparalleled academic study that reviews the entirety of twentieth-century documentary in China. No previous scholarship can compare to Qian’s book in breadth. The book is attentive to many types of documentaries in a long century. The author studies documentary as embedded “in a variety of situations, from revolutionary financing to war mobilization, industrial and agricultural productions, diplomacy, class struggle sessions, court proceedings, and others” (p. 4). Socialist documentary practices that might have been ignored and disdained as propaganda receive serious attention in the book. The film examples are well chosen and judiciously analyzed. The coverage of materials and topics is well balanced. The author conducts close readings of primary film texts as well as illustrating large socio-political contexts.

The examination of documentary filmmaking in China, Asia, and the diaspora is a fledgling field of research in the twenty-first century. There is not a lack of noteworthy book-length studies.¹ Qian’s book could potentially enter a dialogue with such studies. It might be difficult to situate documentary practice from an entire century under the framework of “revolution.” There are other fruitful angles of exploration: queer studies, feminist studies, ethnic studies, area studies, and so forth. However, it is impossible to do everything in a single book. In the end, *Revolutionary Becomings* is a new book that advances our understanding

¹ See Chris Berry, Lisa Rofel, Xinyu Lü, eds., *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), and Feng-Mei Heberer, *Asians on Demand: Mediating Race in Video Art and Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

of documentary as a modern medium in China and around the world. It deserves to be read by people who are interested in learning about media, film, history, modern China, and international politics.

Sheldon H. Lu

魯曉鵬

University of California at Davis