Going Global: Chinese Independent Documentary

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As my talk's title suggests, today I'm going to talk about how independent Chinese documentary cinema goes global. Independent cinema's a form of film production and circulation that's been present within the Chinese media ecosystem to a greater or lesser degree ever since the early 1990s. The expression signifies films made outside the state-endorsed studio systems, and either refused release into domestic cinemas by the censors or never submitted to them for approval. So that's how I'll be using the term this evening. By "going global" I mean how these films enter exhibition and distribution circuits outside China, and, in particular, Anglophone film markets. There's a long history of Chinese independent filmmakers collaborating with overseas partners of various kinds to produce fiction films for both domestic and international consumption. But one of the features of documentary filmmaking in China since the turn of this century has been the increasing involvement of foreign stakeholders in making non-fiction in China that's intended at least in part for overseas audiences. This is particularly true in relation to the growth of events we'd associate with the international documentary film *industry*. These include the "pitching forum"—where filmmakers get to present a film concept to potential investors; and the production workshop or seminar—where filmmakers work with industry professionals on a film in progress. While both these fora have been established at officially approved film festivals in China, they've also started to make inroads into independent filmmaking.

This for me raises two particularly interesting questions. First, how are these events shaping independent documentary filmmaking in China? Overseas professionals trained in a commercial environment may come with specific understandings of what makes a good documentary that are very different from those prevalent within Chinese independent documentary film culture, which historically has been resolutely anti-commercial. What are the consequences of these encounters for the films that come out of them? And then the second key question: how, if at all, might these developments impact the ways non-Chinese audiences respond to these films? This seems important because of the particular investments that viewers often have in non-fiction film, in particular the idea that a documentary conveys certain empirical truths about its subject matter. If the involvement of overseas industry professionals is shifting the nature of independent Chinese documentary production, it's not impossible that this involvement is also transforming what viewers outside the PRC take away from these films. At a time when China is obviously increasingly central to global politics and economics, that seems like an issue worth confronting.

Today, I'm going to address these questions through a particular case study that allows be to trace connections between film production, form, and reception. And so that's the structure this lecture will follow. Initially, I'm going to talk about a series of production training workshops run in China by the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Programme, in conjunction with CNEX, or China Next. Then I'm going to shift to talk about the documentary *Plastic China*, directed by a filmmaker called Wang Jiuliang, who actually attended some of these workshops. And then I'll finish by discussing the ways in which audiences in the UK responded to *Plastic China* during a film tour I helped organise in the Autumn of 2019. The thread which connects these three stages is a specific non-fiction format: the character-driven story. Increasingly, this format's promoted as a way for Chinese independent documentary filmmakers to expedite the circulation of their films globally. As I'm going to explore, the format has its roots in what we can term an industrial-humanitarian logic, a logic that encourages a particular affective and empathetic response in viewers.

Such a response has been argued to privilege individual action over structural critique—and I'm going to suggest today that, based on the audience responses we received to our screenings of Wang's film, this argument's fair. But in the context of screening films about China, we can push it further. In particular, I believe this affect sits within a broader, liberal approach to the "problem of China", that both positions the PRC as outside the established global political order, and seeks to encourage the country inside that order by adapting to the order's established norms. 'Worrying about China's the structure of feeling that I'm associating here with that position. And it's broadly the response that I think the character-driven documentary format often encourages in overseas audiences when they're watching Chinese material. Ultimately, I'm interested in thinking through how Chinese independent film goes global, under what conditions—and with what consequences. And so, to get us started, I'll turn first to the workshops co-organized by CNEX and the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Programme

CNEX is a pan-Chinese documentary production and exhibition platform based between Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei. It was established in 2006 by financiers Ben Tsiang, Ruby Chen and Zhang Zhaowei, with input from Chen's husband, the Taiwanese filmmaker Hsu Hsiao-ming. Sundance is the famous non-profit organization established by Robert Redford in 1981, which now manages a number of significant documentary programmes in the US and overseas. In 2011, the two organizations set up China-based collaborative production workshops. The first took place over three days in Beijing's 798 complex, where the CNEX salon was located. It combined public panels, open to a general audience, with smaller, private sessions focused on 11 Chinese documentary projects selected via submission from CNEX's contacts in the independent filmmaking community. These closed sessions ultimately became pitch workshops, where invited Sundance advisors—largely foreign industry professionals—provided the participating filmmakers with feedback on initial cuts of their work. In 2016, the Sundance-CNEX Documentary and Story Edit Lab was added by Rick Perez, who took over the programme from its original manager, Cara Mertes. This was a private workshop focused on editing and narrative. Sundance had already been running versions of these workshops in the USA for some years.

When I interviewed Perez in Los Angeles in 2019, he described these workshops as having a dual purpose. First, to encourage the development of an independent documentary filmmaking community in the PRC. Second, to help these filmmakers—and I quote—'refine and advance the narrative and storytelling of their work.' This immediately raised two questions for me: how are 'narrative' and 'storytelling' understood here, given the many ways these forms can manifest. And, why should cultivating them be important for independent Chinese documentary production? The film scholar Tong Shan connects both these issues to what she argues were the primary aim of the Sundance-CNEX workshops: facilitating the access of Chinese independent filmmakers to the global non-fiction market. Tong attended the workshops in 2016. Based on her observations, she suggests this access was not just about networking with the overseas industry guests invited by Sundance. It was also the goal of the practical suggestions made to filmmakers, including suggestions made by CNEX representatives. Participants were informed that a character-driven narrative, goal-orientated logic, and the dramatic arc of the three-act structure, would ensure their films were universally accessible. This accessibility would in turn increase the likelihood of selection by major global film festivals and expedite commercial deals with overseas distributors. Storytelling, in the sense of the classical Hollywood narrative, was therefore presented as a universal form through which Chinese filmmakers could transform their documentaries from local to global commodities. As Brett Story's recently noted, 'A story – as we have come to use that term – belongs, confers rights, can be exchanged, and is invested with value. A story is mine or it's yours.' When we think of a story, then, we think of someone 'owning it'. In this sense, it already constitutes the perfect property form.

Clearly, these workshops used storytelling to shape documentary films so they might circulate more easily through global creative industry networks. More specifically, I think it's to facilitate access to the Anglophone market. Documentary filmmaking in North America especially has been dominated by character-driven storytelling since the turn of the millennium. But, Sundance also understood these workshops as a civil society project. Perez described the Sundance Documentary Institute to me as being 'founded on freedom of expression, and the independent artist and the independent voice.' It's this 'voice' that character-driven narrative is understood to help shape. Perez first encountered Chinese independent documentary at CNEX's own Taipei pitch forum in 2013. He said he was especially fascinated by the work of PRC filmmakers because of what he described as their 'spectrum of audacity': the range of their material from conservative to socially and politically challenging. He believed Sundance could help these directors 'articulate the story they were proposing to tell'—to assist them to locate their subject vis-à-vis the bigger socio-political picture. Perez acknowledged that there would be differences between the narrative forms needed to address

domestic and foreign viewers. He stressed that the three-act structure would mostly be needed 'if your goal [i.e. the filmmaker's goal] is to try to draw international attention to something that's going on in your country or story'. Here, storytelling's crucial to non-fiction filmmaking, but not just as a means to monetization. It also galvanizes documentary's capacity for what Pooja Rangan's termed 'humanitarian intervention': in other words, the form's ability to mitigate the impact of a hostile or absent state, in this instance by drawing global attention to the film's subject matter. Attracting such interest comes at a price, however; namely, conforming in style and substance to the ideological expectations of western liberal humanism.

This interweaving of character-driven storytelling and documentary as capacity building is a characteristic of what Paige Sarlin calls the 'Non-Profit Industrial Complex.' As Sarlin and other scholars like Sujatha Fernandes have argued, since the 1990s, storytelling's become key to the social and political work of NGOs. During this period, large-scale human rights events propagated the idea of the individual's story as central to the formation of publics and audiences. In doing so, storytelling was abstracted from the broader goals of mass movement politics, instead becoming 'a highly reproducible vehicle for producing consensus, the common, and the universal, through the endorsement of the "personal"'. As non-profits and NGOs moved increasingly into non-fiction funding, they brought these ideas with them. It shouldn't then be surprising that Sundance's China programme was underwritten by a grant from the Open Society Foundations (OSF). This is the organization that, according to its own website description, was founded precisely to support 'justice, democratic governance, and human rights' work round the world. This funding came with certain expectations. According to Perez, the OSF stipulated all the workshops include a public element, suggesting the funder's underlying commitment to the public sphere as a concept. Arguably, the logic of humanitarian intervention was therefore integrated into the CNEX-Sundance programme from its inception.

Rather than seeing the industrial-commercial and humanitarian facets of these training workshops as contradictory, it's perhaps better, then, to view them as complementary. Both Sundance and CNEX clearly understood the aim of these specific events as the production of independent filmmakers for the global–and particularly the Anglophone–film and TV industries. Sundance and the OSF seem also to have seen the programme as a way of producing filmmakers as civil society agents: individuals who could use filmmaking to capacity build at a local level, while also using non-fiction as a form of consciousness-raising for a global public. Storytelling, understood as a universal commodity to which all individuals have rights, draws these discourses together, becoming the perfect vehicle through which, the rights-bearing individual can both find their (creative) voice and build their public. This distinguishes these events from other China-based, not-for-profit video production workshops, which don't seem to have brought these ideas together in a single package in quite the same way. But what might this imply for the films produced through the Sundance-CNEX collaboration? If the workshops incorporated not just film industry but also NGO logics into their training, how might we trace the influence of the latter on the screen world of the documentaries that passed through them?

This is where I want to shift to think about a specific example: *Plastic China*. This documentary was one Perez flagged to me as having passed through the CNEX-Sundance workshops. The second film by Wang Jiuliang, after *Beijing Beseiged by Waste*, *Plastic China* focuses on the foreign waste processing business in the PRC. It's proven a hit internationally, being picked up by most of the major western streaming platforms: you can watch it on Amazon, Google, and iTunes, for example. And, it was selected for several major international film festivals, including Sundance and the IDFA in Amsterdam, where it won the Jury Award for first appearance. Domestically, the official response was more conflicted. According to the film scholar Jin Liu, while a 26-minute, media-friendly version exposing the global trash business received Chinese television coverage, the full-length film was banned as soon as it was released at the end of 2016. Furthermore, a video link of Wang's Yixi talk on environmental issues, was scrubbed from the internet and social media after going viral in January 2017.

Wang's film is set in Shandong, in a small town where thousands of households function as small factories processing imported foreign plastic waste. It focuses on one of these businesses, owned and managed by Kun, a former farmer and a local. Kun employs a family of rural migrants from Sichuan to work for him processing plastic. It's the daughter of this family, 11-year-old Yijie, who's *Plastic China*'s other primary protagonist. One strand of the film follows Kun and his family, as he works to save enough money to buy a car; the second follows Yijie, as she struggles with homesickness and the desire to attend school. This desire's highlighted through comparison with Kun's son, Qiqi, who's allowed to start primary school. In contrast, Yijie's father wants her to remain at home, working.

The film therefore mediates the social and environmental consequences of the plastic recycling business through a character-driven narrative that increasingly focuses on two small children, their distinct personal trajectories, and the role that education plays in gendered social immobility.

As a result, *Plastic China* has to constantly negotiate a tension between its ability to conduct systemic, structural analysis, and its desire to focus on the individual story. To give you some sense of how this plays out, I want to play two short clips. The first is the immediate post-title sequence from the beginning of the film. The second occurs right before the end of the film, and in it we see Kun, his wife, and his son Qiqi on a family visit to Beijing, before immediately segueing into a sequence with Yijie, back in Shandong. This is the first clip.

Contrast that with this second sequence.

As I hope those two sequences suggest, there's a distinct transition in the film as it progresses. That first montage sequence follows overseas rubbish as it arrives in Qingdao, and is then transported across Shandong to Kun's business. Combined with the intertitle, it explicitly positions the film's story as the product of transnational waste logistics, and visualizes those logistics for us, at different scales, through different modes of transport (tanker, lorry, bike). But analysis of that system quickly takes a back seat to a focus on Yijie and her family, and Kun and his. The film's emphasis is more on their individual desires and intra-familial relationships than their comparative positions within the global labour market. This latter issue can sometimes be inferred—for example, from the images of foreign brand packaging that are identifiable in the waste filtered by Yijie—but it isn't discussed directly. Similarly, while the intertwined story of the two families hints at issues of class—after all, Yijie's father literally works for Kun—explicit exploration of this conflict's avoided, softening the social violence involved. As a result, by the end of the film, the political's really become personalized in a manner distinct from the structural critique that launches the documentary. Where we started with a film supposedly about the inequalities of the global recycling industry, we finish with one that's focused more on a little girl who simply wants—indeed, has the right—to get an education.

This narrowing of narrative focus is reinforced formally. As Jin Liu points out, initially the film makes careful use of mise-en-scène to highlight the pervasiveness of rubbish in the lives of its subjects. In particular, the use of angled shots creates an imbalance between the children and their environment, dwarfing the former with the refuse of the latter. But, as the film progresses, it foregrounds more mainstream, commercial editing and cinematographic techniques. Aside from the types of conversational address to camera that we might associate with TV documentary, these include using close-ups to draw our attention to individual characters, and using music to evoke a particular emotional mood or response to a scene. A good example here occurs about an hour into the film, where both families attend a car show. That final, unmoving medium close-up of Yijie is clearly intended to draw our attention to her. It suggests her sense of displacement in this environment, manifested through her physical movement. But I think it's also intended to encourage the viewer to empathize with her, and this is reinforced by the music. The composer of the film's soundtrack, Tyler Strickland, says one of its primary aims was to highlight Yijie's perspective and the 'strong mix of emotions that stem from her curious awareness of the extent [of] how bad those living conditions are, her dreams for the future, and her sadness of being away from home'. Though this knowledge doesn't exclude a more critical reading, it's clear that *Plastic China*'s formal choices are intended to draw us into the personal stories playing out on screen, rather than direct our attention to the complex structural dynamics that underpin them.

I'd argue that these formal characteristics—the prioritization of the personal story over structural analysis, an emphasis on our affective and empathetic response to that story, and a minimization of diegetic conflict—all reflect the humanitarian-industrial logic that I've identified in the CNEX-Sundance workshops. Paige Sarlin suggests that, as documentary storytelling shifted from a social movement to an NGO practice, it came to promote an idea of politics outside the political. It began to focus on the individual rather than the structural, on particular people rather than the social, political, and economic systems within which they're embedded. As a result, Sarlin argues that 'documentary storytelling has become a practice through which contradictions are harmonized, inequality and social justice are personalized, and social reconciliation is effected'. The telescoping of *Plastic China*'s vision such that structural issues fall away in favour of a personal story reflects this dynamic. So too does the decision to focus the film on the plight of the child, a classic trope of the humanitarian imagination, and one that's often assumed to elide tensions through the universal ethical response that children are believed to elicit in the viewer. And I think we can identify this impulse to harmonization in the emotive response that Tyler Strickland implies is central to the working of the film.

Rather than confront the systemic economic inequality keeping Yijie trapped in place—literally and socially—we're instead encouraged to sublimate our discomfort by empathizing with, or feeling sorry for, the story's victims. Character-driven storytelling in the contemporary humanitarian documentary not only gives voice to particular people: it establishes a framework for interpreting or responding to their stories. This framework doesn't emphasize mass mobilization or class struggle; instead, it accentuates catharsis and compromise. Ultimately, as Sujatha Fernandes points out, it links non-fiction storytelling 'to discourses of participation, empowerment, and social capital,' enabling such stories to be more easily recuperated by the existing political and economic system.

This reading of *Plastic China* departs from much of the literature written on the documentary to date. This literature tends to see the film as less conservative than I do. For example, in her recent book, *On the Edge*, Margaret Hillenbrand locates the film in relation to a range of Chinese artistic engagements with ragpicking. She argues that the film's "against the grain depiction of the ragpicker as artist" suggests an exploration of migrant worker subjectivity that's distinctly more humanizing than work that uses ragpicking as method, erasing the presence of the actual ragpicker in the process. I think that's a really useful way to understand how this film engages discourses around waste and migrant labour within China. In addition, it suggests why the final film might have been domestically unpalatable to the powers that be. But if we also think of *Plastic China* as a film consciously moulded to circulate outside the borders of the PRC, we can locate it within a genealogy of humanitarian media that adds another layer to our interpretation, while also raising further questions. And it's to these questions that I want to turn to in the final part of the talk—specifically, how does an overseas audience react to a film like this? Does this response correlate with the argument advanced by Sarlin and Fernandes that such stories reinforce rather than challenge global systems of inequality? And why might this be significant for our understanding of China in the world?

As I mentioned earlier, *Plastic China* featured in a UK film tour I helped to organize in November 2019. Entitled 'Earth in Crisis,' it toured four independent Chinese documentaries, all loosely addressing environmental themes, to seven screening locations in six British cities—London, Newcastle, Nottingham, Manchester, Edinburgh and Sheffield. All the films we showed were distributed by CNEX, who helped us to secure the screening rights. In addition, three filmmakers also toured the different cities, engaging in Q&A sessions on their films. After the screenings, we asked viewers to fill out forms where they could outline their responses to the film they'd just seen (131 did so, out of 616 total admissions). The forms were very simple, and mostly asked direct questions intended to gather basic attendance and impact statistics for the project funder. But, at the end, audience members were given space for an open-ended response, in which they were asked, 'What words would you use to describe this documentary and your experience of watching it?' And this is where the material actually got interesting. The responses demonstrated certain patterns. Overall, the word most closely associated with all the films was 'moving', used on 22 separate occasions by respondents to talk about their responses to screenings. This was over twice the number of times words more closely connected to documentary's traditional epistophilic function appeared, such as 'informative' or its derivatives (e.g. 'information') (10 in total)–and that's before considering responses that also used terms similar to moving, such as 'touching' (nine times) or 'emotional' (six times). 'Shock' was also a response invoked by many viewers (13 responses). Clearly, many members of the audience had a strong affective reaction to watching the films.

This pattern's replicated in interesting ways if we look at the responses specific to the *Plastic China* screenings (40 of the 131). Ten viewers talked of their shock at seeing the film, far more than in relation to any other film screened. Being moved or touched also came up seven times, while two viewers described feeling 'overwhelmed' by the documentary. Even more interesting, however, is what viewers attached these emotions to, and where they saw them leading. Almost all said they were unaware of the details of the plastic waste recycling business, and that this film brought the issue to their attention. However, few framed this as a structural problem. While some described their 'guilt' as consumers, only one respondent mentioned 'capitalism' as directly responsible for the conditions in the documentary, while one other highlighted the 'class elements' of the film as being of interest, over and above its 'environmental and basic human story.' Instead, it was precisely this basic human story that engaged many of the viewers. *Plastic China*'s use of a character-driven narrative focused on children generated many of these emotional responses. Some were quite general: for example, 'It made me very sad for the individuals'; or, 'I ... had no idea about the suffering of individuals as they processed plastics'. Others were more specific to particular sequences or images: one viewer commented, 'It was very moving and shocking to see the characters literally living in the plastic and still preserve humanity and cultivate hope for the future'; another said, 'It was shocking to see babies climbing the rubbish tips'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the issue of Yijie's schooling came up as an issue, sometimes distinct from, sometimes tied up with, environmental questions. As one viewer said: 'In the west we take for granted free access to school, good health care and freedom from child labour. These families considered education to be a privilege to escape poverty – a dream almost'. Another, more directly, asked: 'How do we ensure that ALL children are educated to at least 15 years of age?'

These responses chime with the claims I outlined earlier regarding the impact of character-driven story forms on documentaries and their reception. These arguments propose this format highlights the personal or individual at the expense of the structural. They also suggest that the format subsumes conflict—particularly class-based conflict—into a more emotive, cathartic reception, one that seeks points of commensurability over difference. In the reactions detailed above, we can see a clear focus on individual characters, especially children, as the site of an emotional response to the film. We can also identify a consequent gradual framing of certain responses around the right of the child, as a universal subject, to education. These responses are sometimes intertwined with questions of environmental degradation and poverty, but less so with analyses of the systems that result in these injustices. This is all the more apparent when we isolate those few responses that discussed what steps the viewers felt they should take next. One of the audience members who admitted to feeling 'overwhelmed' by the film asked, rhetorically, 'I wondered how as an individual I could help?' Another said that 'After seeing the movie, I started thinking of ways to concretely help the protagonist and her family ... '. Finally, one stated that 'The documentary has enlightened me; firstly to try to make effort to use less plastic; and secondly to write to my MP to raise the issue and try to address it.'

How to translate awareness into action has long been a conundrum of activist or com- mitted documentary filmmaking. Affect and sensation have played their part here, perhaps most famously in Jane M. Gaines's concept of 'political mimesis.' Gaines argues that committed documentary can be understood as a body genre: a type of film which produces in the viewer's body an involuntary sensation of what they see and hear on screen. Committed documentaries thus engage in political mimicry, seeking to shock or stimulate their viewers into action through their use of sound and image. In her essay, Gaines is discussing explicitly radical cinema that looks to incite collective political struggle. But what's striking about these responses to *Plastic China* is that they too mimic the logic of the film's character-driven storytelling, albeit with rather different consequences. Clearly, the film generated a powerful emotional charge. It seems to have affectively implicated at least some British viewers, producing in them a sense of their own complicity as consumers. This then translated into a concern for the impact of used plastic recycling on those they saw on screen. But, in rendering the scale of this problem through a story that centres round children as rights-bearing individuals, *Plastic China* apparently also generated a politically mimetic response of a similar kind. In asking what should happen next, respondents' queries rarely rose above the question of what they *as individuals* should be doing to address the problems captured in the documentary, right down to limiting personal plastic use. Where an interest in effecting structural change did manifest, as in that final response I just quoted, it was through the exercise of individual democratic rights within the Westminster system—namely, writing to ones MP. These reactions ultimately suggest a desire for change directed inwards, to the personal, rather than outwards, to broader society; and into actions that legitimate representative democratic institutions, rather than exploring how the problem of global plastic dumping emerged under these institutions' very watch in the first place. These viewers' responses largely didn't translate into thinking about the possibilities of collective action. Nor did they lead to explicit critiques of global capitalism—which is, after all, the system that sustains both plastic consumption and the uneven spatial division of its disposal. Instead, their reactions suggest the empathetic recuperation of audience members into the existing liberal, political, capitalist order through discourses of individual participation. As an example of documentary humanitarian intervention, *Plastic China* attempts to build a global public for environmental change by wrapping character-driven storytelling around the figure of the child in need. The resulting affective response, however, serves to reinforce key elements of the system that produced this environmental crisis in the first place, short-circuiting the impact of the documentary before it's really begun.

In the introduction to their book, *Global China as Method*, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere argue that there are three rhetorical frameworks used to place China 'outside' the existing global order. One's exceptionalism: the argument that China's inherently and essentially different from the west, associated by the authors with right-wing commentary. Another's whataboutism, a rhetorical trick often practiced by certain kinds of leftist commentators faced with criticism of Chinese policies. Finally, we have the ''mayutic' approach' favoured by liberal commentators. Here, China's perceived as fundamentally different, an authoritarian polity that needs to be coaxed more fully into the institutionalised international order.

Ultimately, the aim's for the PRC to become a 'normal' liberal democratic country. All three approaches cover a full range of political positions. But what they share is an 'underlying assumption of China's inherent separation and difference, and its status as an external agent of change'.

I'd argue that *Plastic China* presents us with a variation on the mayutic approach. The film performs a dual move. On the one hand, China's represented as a space 'outside' the global liberal order. It's somewhere that doesn't respect the rights of all children to an education, for example, and which forces some of them into menial labour at an unacceptably early age. On the other hand, the film's Chinese subjects are represented as 'like' the liberal western viewer: they're individuals striving for similar goals, even if they can't fulfil these over the course of the documentary's story. The intense affective response generated in many viewers by the latter in turn directs those viewers to try and bring these subjects 'into' that order, in the process validating the values, practices, and even subjectivities of liberal politics. This doesn't prevent criticisms that seek to situate the documentary's subject matter as a product of, and internal to, the existing global order. But I'd argue that it does seem to limit their efficacy.

Identifying structures of feeling is notoriously hard. Nonetheless, I term this particular combination of sentiment and subject matter, 'worrying about China'. I've (mis)appropriated this formulation from Gloria Davies's book of the same name. Davies uses the phrase in a precise manner: for her, it captures the desire in post-80s Chinese intellectual discourse to pinpoint, and seek solutions for, problems that impede China's perfection, both as a nation, and as a civilization. She names this dynamic 'patriotic worrying' (*youhuan*) which serves to localize domestic reception of critical thought from overseas. In *Plastic China*, this dynamic's inverted. China's also an object of worry, but for humanitarian rather than patriotic reasons, and primarily for foreign rather than local viewers. The resulting structure of feeling's a marker of concerns about the country's perceived difference from the global liberal order, but also a way to effect its successful incorporation into that same system. Chinese independent documentary may be going global—but at what cost?

So, briefly, to conclude. My aim today's been two-fold. First, to trace how a subset of contemporary Chinese independent documentary reaches an international audience, while unpacking certain assumptions implicit both in the structure of these films, and in the spaces that shape their production. As I hope I've demonstrated, the idea of story as a form both commercial and humanitarian is key here. It's central to how the CNEX-Sundance workshops believed that independent Chinese documentary could connect with Anglophone viewers overseas. Embedded in this understanding of story were presuppositions about its universal subject that manifest in the style and content of these documentaries, and thus in ways that they address the viewer. As a result, my second aim's been to unpack that address and its cultural politics; my argument is, in effect, that the response to *Plastic China* manifests, for some at any rate, as a type of liberal political mimesis. Here, affect's clearly important, both as an enabler and as a disabler of a particular critical reaction. This suggests how we might understand the local screening space as a media environment, one that's also shaped by, and connected to, a space of training and production that's both geographically and temporally distant to the moment of exhibition. But it also illuminates some of the pre-conditions to independent Chinese documentary 'going global,' and the compromises that filmmakers may be expected to make along the way.

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