In the summer of 1966, a young Chinese worker makes a decision that is going to change his life and that of his family. He swims down the Yangtze River, calculating his strokes in such a way that he would arrive in the waters of Wuhan on 16 July. Chairman Mao, at the age of seventy-three, had his swim there that day as a famous message to the world: he was still robust and strong enough to be the leader of the state. Three weeks later, the Cultural Revolution started. However, the pious young worker arrives one day too late and misses the Great Leader. At around the same time, his wife gives birth to their son. After returning to Sichuan where he works and lives, the man lies about his experience, elevating it to an enviable tale of his meeting with Mao. He soon becomes the head of the local ‘rebel faction’ (zaofan pai) in the Cultural Revolution, which in his city deteriorates into armed fights between factions that all claim to be Mao’s devoted followers and guards. Bullets fly, weapons strike and limbs thrash about, killing and injuring many. The man becomes increasingly violent at home as well, submitting his wife and son to frequent abuse. The young boy grows up with accumulating hatred and pain.

Such is the background of *Born in 1966* (Shengyu 1966), an unrealised screenplay by the film critic Cheng Qingsong (b. 1968), who edited *My Camera Doesn’t Lie* (Wo de sheyingji bu sahuang) – a quintessential dossier of Sixth Generation filmmakers of China. In my interview with him in November 2005, Cheng spoke in particular about the ending of the story. The son, also the first-person narrator, finds himself aboard a ship on the Yangtze River. The year is again 1966, but the narrator is at the same age as his father when he made his fateful swim. The ship is about to depart. A young man yells from the bank, ‘Wait, please wait!’ The narrator, recognising the man as his father, helps him to get onboard. Unaware who the helper really is, the young father offers him a cigarette. ‘Are you going to Wuhan?’ asks the narrator. ‘No. Why would I go to Wuhan? I’m on a business trip to Chengdu’ is the reply. Knowing exactly why he asks the question, the narrator turns around, emotions welling up. The ship is departing. He sees his mother, pregnant with him, standing on the pier and watching the ship leave. In Cheng’s own words, the ship is leaving on the Yangtze and at the same time on Lethe – the river...
of oblivion in Greek mythology. The pained and spiteful son finally reaches reconciliation and starts forgiving his father. Before his fateful pilgrimage in 1966, the father was once apolitically ordinary and fundamentally human.

Coincidentally, Cheng’s story resonates with a scenario by Wang Guangli (b. 1966), the filmmaker of I Graduated (Wo biye le, 1992), which inaugurated China’s contemporary independent documentary movement together with Wu Wenguang’s Bumming in Beijing (Liulang beijing, 1990). Wang envisions a science fiction film that also involves time travel between the present and the Cultural Revolution. An extremely successful Chinese businessman, also born in 1966, finds himself with access to all the resources ever dreamed of as regards money and power. Marvelling at the perfection of his existence, he becomes enamoured by the idea of creating someone who would live exactly like himself, from birth and every step along the way. He immediately puts this fantasy into practice: finding the most fitting woman, getting her pregnant and calculating the pregnancy so that his son will be born under the same zodiac signs as himself, thirty-six years before. Everything happens just the way he plans it. For the son, who is never to know or meet him and for whom a surrogate father will be arranged instead, the businessman buys the village where he himself grew up and remolds it in meticulous imitation of what it was like in his own childhood and adolescence. The village is furnished with all the elements of socialism and the Cultural Revolution: tractors, Maoist slogans on the walls, propaganda broadcasts, the Red Guards, the sent-down educated youth, open-air screenings of revolutionary opera movies and so on. Satisfying the man’s monitoring, his son turns out exactly like him. Every experience in the boy’s life replicates his own, thirty-six years before. However, the businessman forgets something very important. It is something that has to do with feelings, a missing memory that proves fatal. Because of it, his son, while as intelligent and perfect as himself, grows into his exact opposite and undertakes evil deeds powerfully and successfully.  

Although narrated in very different tones – one dreamy and melancholic, the other sarcastic and humorous – these two anecdotes of cinematic imagination demonstrate a number of intriguing parallels. First, both stories accommodate a double temporal frame of past and present, with the past specifically located in the Cultural Revolution that is at once a historically real time and an imaginative background for fictional relationships. Plus, the autobiographical resemblance between the protagonists and the authors – Cheng and Wang were born in 1968 and 1966, respectively; Cheng came from Sichuan and Wang grew up in a village – means that past and present acquire an even more unsteady aura in the quivering waves of fiction and non-fiction.

Second, both stories demonstrate a desire to return to the past and ‘correct’ something at its origin. To do that, both assign narrative centrality to the trope of memory (and its opposite, forgetting), which is mobilised as a powerful yet tricky tool for relating to the past. Specifically, memory of a very personal and revisionist kind becomes a crucial means for the birth of a new self. By imagining a different past where his father has never left on a political pilgrimage and
subsequently never inflicted such harm on him and his mother, the narrator in *Born in 1966* is able to break free from the damage that time has done to him through the father figure. While the megalomaniac in Wang’s magical realist tale appears much less reflexive in his desired relationship with the past, the slipperiness of his memory proves iconoclastic and liberating, as his son, like the father figure in Cheng, is able to break free from the inertia of history (and, perhaps, becomes truly renewed and reborn).

Third, besides the figure of a returned and reborn self, the historical vision implied in both stories recognises cycles and searches for an opportunity to break these cycles. For example, both feature an intergenerational relationship that is characterised by a shared and intertwined victim/victimiser status. The father as a victim of history is bound by his experience; as a victimiser, he imposes violent authority upon his family. The son suffers from his father’s violent authority; he also becomes a victimiser when relaying the kind of violence he suffered. In *Born in 1966* the son strikes a woman who loves him and drives her to attempt suicide; in Wang’s story the manipulated son is described as an evil scourge. The parallel victim/victimiser status is also relayed and returned, and father and son seem like comparable and recycled subjects of socialist history, until the son returns to rewrite the past and give a new birth to himself (as well as a new beginning for his father). Wang’s futuristic imagination has a much darker and more cynical twist, but his narrative arrangement of the son going against the father’s intention (as a result of the latter’s forgetfulness) also evidences a break away from slavish memory and the need for imaginative revisions of the past.

It turns out that the coincidence in Cheng’s and Wang’s cinematic imaginations is not an isolated case in the visual culture of contemporary China. From the early nineties on, a large body of cinematic and other media creations – mostly independently produced – demonstrate a similar keen interest in the trope of personal memory, the intricate relation between past and present, and the inscription of the self in the representational text that sets to write history differently. Cutting across feature films, documentaries, experimental videos and digital media, this practice of what I call ‘personal filmmaking’ often boldly experiments with narrative and film form. With its highly stylised and frequently idiosyncratic imaging of Chinese life, it forms a stunning contrast to official and commercial media that rely on conventional classical narratives and star appeal in visualising Party state endeavours and creating communist or martial arts heroes.

Why is there such a phenomenon at this moment in Chinese history? Apart from the technical reason that independent productions became allowed in the reform era and personalised digital media (especially DV) was increasingly available for individual expression and creativity, what other factors – particularly historical, cultural and psychological – need to be considered for a precise understanding of the ideological content and aesthetic forms of this personal cinema and media? What kind of new historical subjects do they give birth to? And toward what kind of new relation to history and representation do they contribute? These are some of the questions this book ponders and answers.
Specifically, through a study of selected texts of personal filmmaking and related media, particularly focusing on works that are created by generational cohorts of Cheng Qingsong and Wang Guangli – whom I identify as the ‘Forsaken Generation’ of postsocialist China, including figures such as Meng Jinghui, Jiang Wen, Guan Hu, Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Cui Zí’en and many others – this book provides a critical narrative of the development and manifestation of a peculiar historical consciousness that is postsocialist and millennial, generational and individual, imagistic and representational. Experimenting with various forms and functions of memory, narrative and subjectivity, these works not only engage the viewer in an epistemologically conscious relationship with the text, but also in the process produce – or give birth to – their creators, characters and subjects, as well as their audience as self-made, conscious subjects of history in the postsocialist era.

Understanding Postsocialism on a Personal Scale

Much like the characters in their stories, Cheng and Wang were born in the sixties and came of age at a time when China started moving away from socialism into the contemporary reform era. In 1976, Chairman Mao died and the decade-long Cultural Revolution ended. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping implemented economic reforms and introduced a market economy. The 1980s ushered in liberation, exhilaration and confusion in many aspects and culminated in the Tiananmen democratic movement (and its crackdown) in 1989. From the early 1990s on, the past was further submerged under the fold of reform and development that spread as the country’s new skin and identity and that, most recently, received intensive facelifts through the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. A lot has happened within a very short span of time. Yet because of official control of speech and media, unofficial interpretations of the past and alternative observations of the present remain at the margins of society and history.\(^5\) When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, it was concluded as ‘ten years of great disaster’ (shinian haojie) to be hastily turned over as an embarrassing and painful chapter.\(^6\) The official strategy of forgetting and moving on, while indeed having success vis-à-vis economic reforms, leaves its toll in the realm of personal memory as inconclusive mourning and in the realm of the social psyche as a continued wound, because the system of oblivion is operating on a principle of neglect and injustice in the name of progress, stability and, most recently, harmony. While the world gasped at China’s miraculous economic body-building, what cultural critic Liu Xiaobo observed in 1994 holds true, dismally evidenced by the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner’s recent incarceration for his dissident speech and petition for political reform:

\[\text{Economic takeoff has not changed the one-party dictatorship created by Mao Zedong; the improvement in the standard of living has not led to increased human rights; the market economy is not predicated on a legal structure based on private property; eerie political movement strikes terror}\]
in the hearts of the new rich; the popularity of karaoke bars and the flood of violent and pornographic literature has not enhanced the status of freedom of speech; industrial reform that has led to the separation of Party and industrial management and the conversion of state industries into companies has not given the masses any greater opportunities or rights to participate in the political life of the nation.7

The staggering national economic leap to a capitalist market economy with Chinese characteristics is accompanied by massive unemployment, inept health care, rampant corruption, a deepening gap between rich and poor and continued disrespect for civil rights. While a sense of national success and nationalistic pride is obvious and understandable, the many reports of Chinese citizens being subjected to self-immolation, fruitless petitions, obscure detentions, arrests, trials and imprisonment for trying to negotiate individual rights with the state bears horrific evidence of a pervasive spiritual milieu that feels anything but secure and content. The imbalance between national prowess and civilian undergrowth urges one to pause and ponder what exactly has happened in the name of change when socialism transformed into postsocialism at breakneck speed and how legacies of the past need be reassessed for a truly smoother transition to the future.

Thus, as a temporal indicator, postsocialism is an open frame whose beginning indicates less a clean end of socialism than a conflict-ridden move away from it as an absolute organising principle of political, economic and social life. This is what happened in the Soviet Union, several Eastern European countries, Cuba and China. The closing side of the postsocialist time frame, if there is such a thing at all, is even less definite as the various countries and societies came face to face with the task of moving toward, in the words of Martin Jay, "an amorphous and still-unsettled something else".8 That undecided something else – to put a twist on a much-used term – has been shaped into various versions of ‘actually existing postsocialism’.9

In the case of China, which distinguishes itself with the continued reign of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this indefinite character of postsocialism manifests itself even more saliently as a confusion of continuity and discontinuity and as an intriguing question about the ideological flexibility (or longevity) of socialism and capitalism in regard to modernity. Arif Dirlik, broaching the subject before 1989, uses it as a description of the CCP’s reform ideology (as represented by Deng Xiaoping’s ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’), which resorts to capitalist remedies for certain (mainly economic) deficiencies without cancelling out socialist legitimacy.10 Different from Dirlik’s critical tendency for continuity, Paul Pickowicz chooses to view the matter ‘from the bottom up’ in the domain of 1980s popular culture. There he discovers signs of cultural diversity, ambiguity and confusion that, for him, essentially evidence a dystopian perception of socialism’s essential bankruptcy.11 Sheldon Lu and Xiaoping Lin, enriching the discussion with analyses of newer films and avant-garde art, emphasise the felt effect of Chinese postsocialism as an uneasy and traumatising
move toward its ideological opposite: capitalist economy and its incumbent consumer culture.\textsuperscript{12}

Other scholars try to inject greater hope (or urgency) for agency and expand the familiar binary set (of socialism versus capitalism) to view Chinese postsocialism – its tension and treachery, as well as its potential and even strength – in terms of modernity and globalisation. Lydia H. Liu, criticising a lack of serious attention to China’s socialist legacy that characterises typical Western discussions of transnationalism and capitalist globalisation, argues that postsocialism and transnationalism are actually ‘simultaneous’ and ‘mutually embedded’ processes.\textsuperscript{13} A particularly useful message we can take from Liu’s discussion is a sense of activeness and capacity that postsocialism exercises. Rather than occupying a passive role and waiting to be filled up (or conquered, however ‘peacefully’) by Western capital and its incumbent ideology, China as a postsocialist society engages with fitting opportunities and displays an ability to be a co-player and co-definer of itself, as well as transnationalism. The capacity for engagement and even change, according to Liu, comes from the ‘residual elements of socialist discourse’ (such as the ideology of class struggle) that promise to enable China to find ‘liberatory alternatives beyond the logic of capital’.\textsuperscript{14} In his fight against the ideological supremacy implied in the view of ‘capitalist globalization for the totality of human history and its future horizon’, Xudong Zhang also advocates possibilities of reinterpretation and change in ‘the resilient and the residual, the heterogeneous and the uneven’ elements that constitute energies of resistance against ‘the total truth-claim of capitalist globalization’.\textsuperscript{15} Jason McGrath presents a similar proposal, that we understand postsocialism as ‘an integral part of global postsocialist (capitalist) modernity’ (that is, rather than as a mere minor alternative), emphasising the current condition as a ‘dynamic process of becoming’ that provides a precious opportunity to rethink capitalism itself.\textsuperscript{16}

Whether using high or low angles (to use a term in cinematography) in approaching the subject of postsocialism, these various theorisations all acknowledge the fact and the importance of the socialist legacy. Residues of the past might be experienced as discomforting and painful due to their drastic contrast with the present, but they can also be mobilised in the search for new proposals and inspiring strategies for the future of China and global society as well. Both in experience and theory, the postsocialist condition in China is not a transitional stage to be quickly and neatly passed over before the nation takes a full leap into the embrace of capitalism. Rather, the current moment acquires a spatial character and is an open and uncharted site where diverse powers, intentions, desires and possibilities converge and negotiate with each other.

Indeed, if we visualise the image of China refusing to be a territory conquered by an expanding global capitalism and consider the historical specificity of Chinese modernity originating in a defensive response to Western powers and cultures, art critic Gao Minglu’s understanding of Chinese modernity as ‘a consciousness of space’ even more than of time seems highly applicable to the current moment of postsocialism.\textsuperscript{17} And if we imagine (and image) history in
spatial terms, as Henri Lefebvre famously establishes in a theoretical trio about the production of space, postsocialism, like all historical social formations and particularly as an integral part of global capitalist modernity (as McGrath has explicated), also has its own particular ‘spatial practice’ (for example, rural versus urban; the phenomenon of migrant rural workers working in the city and that of local Chinese white-collars working at foreign companies and bearing English work names, while being possibly Communist Party members at the same time), conceptual ‘representations of space’ (such as designed and executed by the state and capital) and, most relevant to our discussion here, an actually lived and experienced category called ‘representational spaces’. This last refers specifically to the affective and symbolic spaces, such as memory and art (including moving image).

This brings us to the subject at hand. As an ongoing spatial formation, postsocialism is being negotiated and shaped at many levels, ranging from the global and national to the personal and representational. Depending on the angle of perception, our perspective of a landscape might be quite different and sometimes even bring drastically contradictory impressions. Whereby state, capital and even theory might feel confident at moving forward and shaping the world, individual experiences and artistic creations might demonstrate suspicion, reluctance and, at the same time, cautious hope and grounded approaches to the unknown sphere that is postsocialism. As a daily experience and a lived space, postsocialism can be big, spacious, national and global; it is also small, intimate, personal and private. It enters the interiority and shapes the subjectivity of human factors that function in its midst and generate infinite mini-spaces, such as those of memory, desire, imagination and creativity, which, in their turn, change the overall spatial formation of postsocialism through their infinitesimal moves.

Two Siblings or Generational Subjects of Chinese Postsocialism

If on a grander scale postsocialism is a space between an inconclusively wrapped national past and a tendentious yet undetermined global future, the question left for us to explore then is: how can the human factors, as mini-spaces harbouring memories and desires, position and navigate themselves on this open landscape, without being manipulated and lost in the whirlwind of opportunities and traps? Unlike ideology, individuals cannot be easily named as capitalist, socialist or postsocialist. They deal with the historical space of postsocialism in concrete and heuristic ways. The particular shape of their navigating itinerary is the result of negotiations between intention, circumstance and the specific condition of their luggage or equipment (such as the residues of the socialist past filtered by personal experiences). In turn, their diverse itineraries and moves would illuminate previously unvisited corners of the landscape and chart out paths that lead to territories invisible to a bird’s-eye view. As Xudong Zhang envisions, in this ‘process of reflection, articulation, and emergence’ that is postsocialism, ‘new social subjects are bound to come into being, with their
political agenda and cultural vision defining the historical substance of Chinese socialism’.

For example, perhaps the most salient group of social subjects produced by recent Chinese history is the ‘educated youth’ (zhishi qingnian, often abbreviated as zhiqing) generation. Mostly born in the fifties, this generation made their (in) famous debut into Chinese history between 1966 and 1968 as the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution. As a solution to the resultant nationwide chaos and the increasing severity of unemployment for the high school graduates (or graduates-to-be) in the cities, they were sent ‘down to the villages and up the mountains’ (shangshan xiaxiang) for re-education by the peasants, workers and military.

Their glorious dream of joining the socialist cause through rustication and devotion met with a harsh reality and resulted in disillusionment and awakening, which in turn turned them into highly articulate and important enunciators of a distinct experience of socialism, as well as postsocialism. In a comprehensive and insightful historical study on the educated youth and their literary productions, Yang Jian distinguishes five stages of this generational cultural phenomenon, charting this through to the late nineties, at which point he observes an apparent finale of the autobiographical contents of the educated youth. Yang’s study is particularly valuable and relevant to our discussion in two senses. First, it pays emphatic attention to the ‘non-official’ (minjian) and more independent strands of the educated youth literary activities and productions, such as the hand-copied literature, underground poetry and ‘personal narratives’ (siren xushi) that emerged at different stages in juxtaposition with, and frequently in critical contrast to, those writings more readily accepted by, or incorporated in, official narratives. While this subject calls for a separate research project, it is valuable to see such independent and personal creative efforts as literary precedents – in an age where (moving) image making was dominated by the state – for what would come forth in personal filmmaking in the nineties, in terms of an independent and alternative engagement with official history.

Second, Yang criticises the grand narratives of ‘heroic youth’ (beizhuang de qingchun, represented by writers such as Liang Xiaosheng and Zhang Chengzhi) and their commercialised and televised continuation for the dissolution of human suffering in glorious tales of sacrifice and the resultant cancellation of critical engagement with the past. Yang’s critique strikes a peculiar cord with what takes place in contemporary Chinese cinema. In the film circle, the educated youth generation has a ready equivalent in the Fifth Generation and its less famous cohorts. As the first group of postsocialist filmmakers that won international acclaim for Chinese cinema, early features by the Fifth Generation like Yellow Earth (Huang tudi, dir. Chen Kaige, 1985) and Red Sorghum (Hong gaoliang, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1987) doubtless engage with the past from refreshing perspectives, placing peasant figures and natural landscapes in a historical and cultural framework beyond the power of Party guidance. However, the directors’ reliance on cultural allegories and isolated spaces in critiquing the centuries-old patriarchal system – evidenced more explicitly by the stylistically secluded traditional Chinese households in Zhang Yimou’s Ju Dou (Ju Dou, 1990) and Raise the Red Lantern (Dahong
denglong gaogao gua, 1991) – tends to lose the historical contingencies of the past in an old and almost mystified tradition.

Other Fifth Generation pictures that directly deal with a revolutionary China – famous examples of which include Farewell, My Concubine (Bawang bie ji, dir. Chen Kaige, 1993) and To Live (Huozhe, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1994) – offer some of the most elaborate non-official tales of the past by screening national history through the life vicissitudes of ordinary civilian characters, such as Peking Opera singers, an ex-courtesan and a gambler turned shadow play entertainer. However, the alterity of these stories stays on the thematic level and fails to produce more sophisticated and liberating visions through which historical trauma can be explained beyond the consequences of fate and chance. In these pictures, individuals appear insignificant, powerless and doomed in the face of historical forces and political violation. Obviously, the Fifth Generation’s treatment of historical representation deserves a much more elaborate discussion than can be accommodated here. However, I would like to point out that, despite the Fifth Generation’s laudable experiments with contemporary social reality – for example, Zhang Yimou energised cinematic realism to a new level with films like The Story of Qiu Ju (Qiu Ju da guansi, 1992), Keep Cool (You hua haohao shuo, 1997) and Not One Less (Yige dou buneng shao, 1999) – their career trajectories over the past decade or so have revealed an eclecticism in subject matter and style that might also suggest their loss of rigorous personal visions not so much as masters of film language than as conscious critics of history. Besides a couple of martial arts blockbusters and a comedy adapted from Blood Simple (1984) of the Coen brothers, Zhang Yimou was also the director of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games opening ceremony. In his cinematic spectacles Hero (Yingxiong, 2002) and Curse of the Golden Flower (Mancheng jin dai huangjin jia, 2006) – the former, a martial arts piece; the latter, a period drama – the endings have the rebels willingly succumb to or fail in self-destructive manners in front of an imperial patriarch, reminding one of the same kind of fatalistic vision in his early pictures that now looks even more defeated and tragic. With all the breathtaking beauty illustrative of Zhang’s extraordinary aesthetic vision for mise-en-scène and cinematography and realised through commercial blockbusters’ high production values, the historical vision in his cinema is nevertheless dishearteningly passive.

It is against such a background of contemporary Chinese cinema and culture that another (and younger) generation – identified here as ‘the Forsaken Generation’ of postsocialist China – stands out as new social subjects who take up the postsocialist situation as the nurturing ground of an unprecedented historical consciousness. As we shall see, this historical consciousness originates in reflections on their unique relationship with socialism that has a peculiarly mediated and removed character, compared to the experience of the Red Guards/educated youth/Fifth Generation. It is through the questioning and exploring of that mediated relationship with history and its representation that this group arrives at insights in the treacherous nature of representation and history writing (in visual terms or otherwise).
The Forsaken Generation and Historical Consciousness

In her discussion on the role of history in the mid-nineties American moving image culture, Vivian Sobchack is appositional with her definition of ‘historical consciousness in the face of moving image representation of the phenomenal world’:

[Historical consciousness is] viewers’ awareness of, interest in, and tendency to question the boundaries, meanings, and place of history in their daily lives, as well as their own possible place in history. [It is] a peculiarly novel readiness for history among the general population. That is, people seem to carry themselves with a certain reflexive phenomenological comportment toward their immediate immersion in the present, self-consciously grasping their own objective posture with an eye to its imminent future possibilities for representation (and commodification) as the historical past.

In the context of our current discussion, the Forsaken Generation ‘filmmakers’ and ‘artists’ can readily join the ‘viewers’ in Sobchack’s definition, because the cultivation of such critical awareness starts with these creators’ exploration of the concrete ties between their lived experience and its media representation. I particularly want to emphasise and invoke Sobchack’s observation that being a historical subject is essentially being conscious of ‘one’s comportment as an historical actor’ who realises ‘a vibrant connection of present to past and a sense of agency in the shaping of human events’. That realisation and the resulting sense of agency are exactly what the Forsaken Generation filmmakers and artists have been striving for throughout two decades of work already.

This generation’s vibrant connection to the past is identifiable at the roots of their experience, which is the reason why Cheng Qingsong and Wang Guangli both design a scenario for their protagonists to go back to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Mostly born in the sixties, the Forsaken Generation grew up in the waning days of high socialism as a generation whose historical experiences had been forcefully mediated by government propaganda and were destined to be constructed, at first, as collective and impersonal. Chinese film and cultural production, distribution and exhibition during the Cultural Revolution were under the absolute control of the state. Communist ideology of the day emphasised the necessity of continuous, relentless class struggle and condemned almost all forms of unregulated, apolitical and individual entertainment as capitalistic or bourgeois – that is, corrupt, despicable, dangerous and counter-revolutionary. In such a context, the very few sources of mass entertainment, such as the ‘revolutionary model operas’ (革命样板戏) and their cinematic reproductions, became cherished by a people tired of class politics and hungry for any form of relief from the hyper-political tension of the day. The few propaganda operas and films were staged and screened nationwide repeatedly during those years. Despite their propagandistic messages and unified styles, a Chinese audience bereft of private entertainment embraced them enthusiastically. Subsequently,
memories of these operas and films, along with their promotional images, music tunes, lyrics and embedded political messages were etched into their young audience’s hearts and minds. Furthermore, in addition to the exhibition of the model operas and their film adaptations, public and personal spaces in China in the 1960s and 1970s were inundated with images and messages of Mao and the various hero and heroine creations of the Communist Party: posters, calendars, statues, busts, buttons, children’s picture books (xiaorenshu), picture stories (lianhuanhua), nursery rhymes and radio broadcasts, many of which would doubtless enter the magic realist world of the past that Wang Guangli envisions for his megalomaniac character. Cheng Qingsong also remembers the omnipresence of Mao through multiple channels of media and locates a precise representation of the era in a low angle shot of a larger-than-life statue of Mao, with which the film director Jiang Wen opens his debut hit In the Heat of the Sun (Yangguang canlan de rizi, 1994). The Forsaken Generation grew up amidst this highly mediated and politicised environment, where state collective education virtually replaced individual acculturation, and personal experience and memory became intertwined with official political imposition.

Yet compared with their elder siblings who had been active in the political heat, first as Red Guards and then as ‘heroic’ intellectual youth sent to the rural backlands, the Forsaken Generation – mostly born in the sixties, but sometimes also encompassing the late fifties and early seventies – seems insufficiently equipped with revolutionary experiences to proudly call themselves ‘God’s [or more precisely, Mao’s] children who died as sacrifice for the cause’. Instead, this younger generation is like actors for whom the anticipated stage suddenly vaporised, therefore the preparation for, as well as expectation of, any trained action to further the revolutionary cause appeared pointless and absurd. Literary and film critic Cui Weiping (b. 1956) recalls, vis-à-vis her own spiritual journey over the decades:

They [referring to the Red Guards and sent-down intellectual youth] have been up on the front of history’s façade, we have been on its back lot; they have found themselves with full awareness in ‘history’s conscious,’ and we have to stay in ‘history’s subconscious;’ they started from ‘history’s strongest note,’ while we began from a weak moan.

Cultural critic Xu Hui speaks about a similar Janus-faced sentiment:

We were born in the sixties. When the world was in the middle of revolutionary change, we were too young to understand. After we grew up and learned about the exciting events and scenes in that big era, our regrets were unspeakable . . . The generation before us has its weighty historical fragments to chew on, and the younger generation who was born after the seventies is already pressing on our heels. Between the fifties and nineties, we are a generation that appears the most insignificant and most readily forgettable.
In his turn, Zhang Hongjie (b. 1972), a slightly younger writer who is both popularly and critically acclaimed for his alternative biographies and histories, says:

We missed the greatest existence of this century after rubbing shoulders with it. When we were still obscure-minded infants, Chairman Mao had already left us, leaving us wanting in vain to hear his teachings with our own ears. In the early seventies when we were born, the revolutionary passion had already subsided. Countless incidents of cheating and treachery gave rise to a huge wave of suspicion within society. Distrust became our infant education.39

While such individual statements might not be taken as blanket conclusions for all those falling in this age group, it is not to be denied that their connection suggests an exemplar or even essential collective ethos. Due to the tender age of the Forsaken Generation at the crucial moments of socialist history, the first significant incidents that they experienced were not revolutionary highlights but anticlimaxes or endings such as Mao’s death and the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. These ‘infants of Mao’ inevitably display countenances characterised by puzzlement, helplessness, poignancy and distance that find expression in a variety of media and art forms.40 As the human capsules harbouring the faint memory of socialism as something intimate yet removed, inundating but distant, this generation has a dubious and unsure relationship with history from the very beginning. Born out of that peculiar relationship is a desire to re-image, re-imagine and refigure not only the past, but also oneself; also born out of this process of self-searching is a heightened awareness of the treacherous nature of history and representation.

That is why the creative genesis of the postsocialist works featured in this book needs to be understood in the context of this peculiarly haunting experience of socialism. What drives the Forsaken Generation to a personal approach to (moving) image making and to creating narratives and images of past, present, self and others according to their independent perception is a desire to reassess the place of socialist history in their lives and re-establish their own place in (post)socialism. This trailblazing search for independent position and individual agency – that is, for one’s identity as a consciously self-made historical subject – in the face of official and national history, however, necessarily meets challenges from two issues. First, the past cannot be singled out as a straightforward epistemological object, because the highly controlled and heavily mediated nature of socialist historiography prevalent in their early lives necessarily permeates and ‘contaminates’ their personal memories with collective, official and national discourses.41 Second, the Forsaken Generation’s subject position is far less than integral, solid and secure, because their peculiar involvement with the past shapes their relationship with the present into something that is characterised by interruption and breakage, rather than smooth transition and effortless renewal. Their path to a more tenable position as an independent and conscious postsocialist subject necessarily involves many shifts between past and present, frequent exchanges of visions between self and other and constant attention to,
and wariness about, the habitual dividers between content and form, fiction and non-fiction, image and phenomenon, history as a text and history as a process of writing and rewriting. It is my main argument in this book that this highly reflexive attitude toward image making, representation and the writing of history grows precisely out of their peculiar sense of disillusionment and disjunction in regard to contemporary Chinese history. I also argue that this critical spirit of theirs is the most valuable result of a gradual, painful and thoughtful process of them finding and inscribing themselves as conscious and responsible historical subjects who work to realise greater agency, not only understanding the past and documenting the present, but also writing for the future.

**Material, Structure and Methodology**

As a critical narrative of the Forsaken Generation’s search for their identity as postsocialist historical subjects, this book examines some definitive achievements of that journey over the past two decades. The temporal distinction between past and present provides the general framework for organising the book, but this by no means dictates that the discussion follows a strict chronological order. Rather than providing comprehensive annals of Chinese independent cinema, I chose to focus on representative texts and forms that highlight important moments and shifts in the generation’s growth as both filmmakers and historical subjects. Apart from necessary references to, and occasionally detailed discussions on, selected works of theatre, literature, painting and (digital) photography, the analytical focus of this book is on the moving image, particularly independent films and videos. The moving image has no doubt been increasingly accepted as a highly legitimate and valuable source of historical knowledge, because of the undeniable fact of its role – through film, television and, increasingly, digital media – in ‘shaping the public imagination and (mis)conceptions of history’.42 While accountable as historical testimonies, as Michael Berry impressively illustrates in his book on the representation of trauma in Chinese literature and film, moving image works also qualify as historical narratives in which we find specific angles for reconstructing and understanding the past.43 Hayden White famously theorised about the central role of narrative as that which gives a written history its particular verbal structure and form of presentation.44 History informs media, but the particular mode of media – in this case, visual, cinematic, independent and then digital – also shapes the narrative about history and reality. In the case of the various films and videos analysed in this book, they not only join works of other genres (such as oral history, literature, painting and theatre) in offering testimonies of alternative historical experiences, but also exercise formal innovations and theoretical inquiries that significantly challenge accepted distinctions between fiction and non-fiction and between document(ary) and performance. Besides providing valuable historical data on the societal change and social psyche in the postsocialist decades, these works carry out vigorous critical thinking on the nature of history and representation.

In a delineation of the concept of postmodern history, Robert A. Rosenstone
foregrounds moving image representation as the site where unprecedented creative interventions in history writing take place. He lists the following eleven features that characterise the practice of this new historical thinking and writing through film and video. Interestingly, almost all of them also apply to the postsocialist independent moving image works that this book is set to discuss:

What do these (real) postmodern history films do to the past? Lots of things, including some or all of the following: (1) Tell the past self-reflexively, in terms of how it has meaning for the filmmaker historian. (2) Recount it from a multiplicity of viewpoints. (3) Eschew traditional narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end—or, following Jean-Luc Godard, insist these three elements need not necessarily be in that order. (4) Forsake normal story development, or tell stories but refuse to take the telling seriously. (5) Approach the past with humor, parody, absurdist, surrealist, dadaesque, and other irreverent attitudes. (6) Intermix contradictory elements: past and present, drama and documentary, and indulge in creative anachronism. (7) Accept, even glory in, their own selectivity, partialism, partisanship, and rhetorical character. (8) Refuse to focus or sum up the meaning of past events, but rather make sense of them in a partial and open-ended, rather than totalized, manner. (9) Alter and invent incident and character. (10) Utilize fragmentary and/or poetic knowledge. (11) Never forget that the present is the site of all past representation and knowing.45

A filmmaker who intervenes in history writing by way of moving image needs to explore the potentials, subtleties and risks of both narrative and imaging in representing history. Postmodern or postsocialist, such a filmmaker–historian seems almost necessarily associated with the following characteristics and commitments: reflexivity; multiplicity; a deliberate and productive disorder in narrative structure; an irreverent attitude informed by attention to, and concern for, one’s necessary yet limited relation to the past; an extremely flexible and democratic understanding about traditional generic contradictions; an honest and unflinching footing in his or her own creative self as the starting point of meaning production that is partial yet open; a ready reference to the emotive and/or psychological order of knowledge; and a solid investment in the here and now. All of these characteristics are exactly what we detect in the practitioners of personal cinema and media in contemporary China. The moving image should be regarded as not only a legitimate but also a rather necessary and desirable means through which new sorts of historical knowledge can be probed and produced. We can no longer do without it. What we are witnessing in the practice of personal filmmaking is not an ephemeral phenomenon, but the most recent development of a persistent line of personal historiography in recent Chinese history. It may well be the beginning of a major paradigmatic change in historical writing with (moving) image-based media.

Strongly inspired by New Historicism’s imaginative yet concrete engagement with history, this book searches for fresh and effective ways of making visible
the intertextual engagements between and among cultural texts and historical contexts. In the process of mapping out the itineraries by which the Forsaken Generation film and media makers navigate the land of postsocialism, several key terms – memory, narrative, subjectivity, spatiality, performance and the body – emerged as the multivalent theoretical nodes of my critical journey. At the textual level, in order to investigate the various strategies that are employed to construct alternative and personalised relationships to history and time, I undertake close analysis of selected works focusing on their narrative structure, the construction of cinematic space and its relationship with human figures, the confusion between fiction and non-fiction, the issue of performance and embodiment and so on. At the intertextual level, I demonstrate parallels and interconnections between texts of different media or genres and their historical cultural contexts. Weaving together textual, intertextual and contextual readings, this book seeks to invoke a cultural poetics for postsocialist China through the kind of montage technique found in the work of New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt:

Starting with the analysis of a particular historical event, he then cuts to the analysis of a particular literary text. The point is not to show that the literary text reflects the historical event but to create a field of energy between the two so that we come to see the event as a social text and the literary text as a social event.46

That ‘field of energy’ is what I work to evoke and illuminate in following the figures of the Forsaken Generation filmmakers between text and context, experience and representation, past and present. Their heightened historical consciousness has developed precisely from their tensioned relationship with the socialist past and official history. And that hard-earned knowledge of their own status as historical subjects, when translated into an agenda of action for the present such as documentary filmmaking, proves enlightening for greater reflexivity and agency in history and identity negotiations.

Specifically, the book is organised into two parts. Part I, ‘From the Past: Subjectivity, Memory and Narrative’, starts with vestiges of the socialist past, particularly those of the Cultural Revolution, and delineates the figure of the Forsaken Generation child, before entering into discussion of their proper works. The key concepts under examination include memory, narrative and the question of the subject, both as a textual (especially cinematic) construct and as an epistemological position from which to conduct critical interventions in the nature of history and representation.

Chapter 1 starts by establishing memory, particularly personal memory, as an important epistemological trope through which to contest and implode a teleological official history of socialism and modernisation. As studies of the literature and cinema of the eighties and nineties show, postsocialist writers and directors frequently invoke personal memories, private experiences and intimate dimensions in their construction of alternative narratives of the past. The
subjects – textual and often authorial ones as well – of such creative accounts of history tend to occupy a dual status as both victims and agents of the narrative (which is, indeed, history going through the process of narration and representation). Such an intriguing formal propensity for the mutual implication of text and subject evokes the compelling image of a figure layered in text, involved in narration, spatialised in time and at the same time conscious and critical of its own (con)text. That figure is what we will see, in varied forms and updated versions, in the texts and moving images from the nineties onwards that are under analysis throughout this book. To offer a necessary historical context as well as pretext for the entry and evolution of new narratives and subjectivities in the postsocialist era, I provide a succinct account of the representational mechanisms of subjectivity and spatiality found in the famous model operas (along with their contemporaneous cinematic reproductions) of the Cultural Revolution. To rewrite the past from a personal and humanist perspective, new films of the late seventies and the eighties, such as those directed by Xie Jin and members of the Fifth Generation, tried to bring onscreen subjectivities and spatial figurations that negotiate for a position capable of critical dialogues with history. As my own dialogue with the critical writing of Chris Berry, Nick Browne and others who write on this subject and this period shows, however, new screen subjectivities in the eighties seem both dynamic and inconsistent, forming what turns out to be a transitional stage in the development of Chinese cinematic, as well as historical, subjectivity in the postsocialist era.

In this rich yet unstable period, I rediscover Night Rain in Bashan (Bashan yeyu, dir. Wu Yigong and Wu Yonggang, 1980), a gem of a film whose peculiar spatial construct and figurative subject – namely, a cruising ship on a river and an orphaned child wandering onboard this ship – offer a most revealing ‘angle of incidence’ followed by a most imaginative ‘angle of reflection’, from which we are able to not only participate in an alternative relation with the past (that is, the Cultural Revolution), but also engage in a subtle yet vital process of subject formation, both on- and offscreen.47 Apart from locating a perfect case of the Foucaultian heterotopia in the ship as a space of alterity that sidelines official history and accommodates marginalised character positions, Night Rain in Bashan features the figure of the orphaned child as narrative excess whose significance is actually registered beyond the plot as an embodiment of historical commentary. Furthermore, this independent and searching child uncannily evokes the historical image of the Forsaken Generation (both in terms of their actual age and symbolic representation), thus qualifying as an unexpected yet wonderful ‘angle of reflection’ pointing beyond the text and revealing the uncanny but thought-provoking connection between then and now and between representation and history. Following the prescient singular sketch of the Forsaken Generation, Chapter 1 then presents the generation properly by way of their own creative efforts at self-portraiture across media, such as literature, music, painting, theatre and cinema.

To offer a revealing glimpse of the early nineties, which marks another important stage in the development of postsocialist subjectivity in dialogue with the
past as realised in some conflated efforts of historical representation and subject construction, Chapter 2 closely examines selected narratives presented by the Fifth Generation and the Forsaken Generation, with emphasis on those from the latter group. Revisiting two Fifth Generation epic classics about China’s modern and socialist decades – Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* (1994) and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993) – from the angle of narrative pattern and subjective volition, the chapter identifies their structure as characterised, respectively but comparably, by chanceful illogic, debilitating cyclicality and ineffective subjective intervention. The characters, being historical subjects presented as narrative elements, respond to and negotiate with narrative situations and historical circumstances with varying degrees of obedience and volition, yet end up with similar outcomes marked by futility and punishment. Such scenario arrangements involving the characters or subjects absorbed, consumed, rejected and wasted by (and in) the narrative structure, in my view, embodies the Fifth Generation’s understanding of history and subjectivity as something communicating a deep sense of distrust and powerlessness.

Interestingly, at around the same time in the early nineties, the Forsaken Generation began producing its own visions and voices regarding history and subjectivity. Provocatively different from those depicted by the Fifth Generation filmmakers, the subject–history relationships constructed in the Forsaken Generation’s narratives – cinematic as well as theatrical – implicate the subject in the representational text as a conscious, self-foregrounding and active (sometimes cunningly so) agent of enunciation and narration. Rather than being absorbed by official history, they put up a determined though difficult fight against narrative, text and even themselves, as narrators already contaminated with learned habits of official discourse. Although never emerging completely free of the past as freshly reborn subjects, the narrating ‘selves’ of the Forsaken Generation point to a more critical and conscious historical subjectivity at work in the early nineties. Following a discussion of the advent of independent cinema at that time in the light of a subjective turn in approaching historical representation and formal reflexivity – summarised by the term ‘personal filmmaking’ – Chapter 2 then looks closely at two quintessential self-narratives of the Forsaken Generation that came out at around the same time as *To Live* and *Farewell, My Concubine*: Meng Jinghui’s avant-garde play *I Love XXX* (*Wo ai XXX*, 1994) and Jiang Wen’s independent feature *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994). Employing a number of provocative strategies, such as first person narration (in singular as well as plural), radical recycling of fragments of history, memory and dream and inserting a Foucaultian crazy figure as a narrative excess, the two narratives depict generationally distinct memories of socialism and, more importantly, enact highly effective critiques of their own memory and narration as unreliable means to truly understand history. Though being a non-cinematic example (while mobilising moving image of socialism at crucial moments of presentation), *I Love XXX* not only evidences in a highly convincing and interesting manner the ‘generational’ character of these historically conscious narratives, but also demonstrates parallels and dialogues going
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on between the *moving image* (that is, independent cinema) and other sections and forms of *culture*. Alongside Meng Jinghui and Jiang Wen, practitioners of personal filmmaking such as Guan Hu, Zhang Yuan, Wu Wenguang and Wang Guangli worked in both fiction and non-fiction and developed a number of experiments with self-figuration as independent subjects rising out of obscure ruins of history and memory – a representative imaging of which is found in *Dirt* (*Toufa luan le*, dir. Guan Hu, 1994).

**Part II, ‘In the Present: Camera, Documentary and Performance’,** turns to cinematic works of the Forsaken Generation from the mid-nineties on. These later works particularly stand out with their critical interventions in the mechanism of (moving) image-based representation and its possibilities, as well as problems in constructing subject positions (including directorial/authorial, cinematic and spectatorial ones). Three chapters offer successive close examinations of a rich range of works that include fiction films by Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye; documentaries by Duan Jinchuan, Wang Guangli and Wang Bing; experimental non-fiction films by woman poet Tang Danhong; queer artist Shi Tou and writer Cui Zi’en; and new media animator Feng Mengbo. Organised around theoretical issues, such as the placement of the camera, modes of performance in both fiction and non-fiction films and the configuration of (human) figure and (visual) field, these intensive analyses have at their converging point a deep interest in the very complex and often subject-implicating nature of history and visual representation in contemporary times.

**Chapter 3 focuses on Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye – two directors from the Forsaken Generation who are arguably the worthiest of auteur status, due to the impressively distinct and consistent formal system in their films.** Jia Zhangke is often praised for his neorealism-inspired presentation of neglected small town existences left behind and sidelined following China’s growth towards capitalisation and globalisation. While acknowledging the importance of Jia’s apparently ‘objective’ style of realism that consists of location shooting, long takes, long shots, a static camera, slow pace and reliance on non-professional actors, I approach this important auteur from two refreshing angles. One is directed at the complex mechanism of multivalent and metanarrative subject positions in and beyond the frame, compelling the spectator to a highly active and conscious process of engaging with history and image critically. The other angle attends to the concept of ‘surface’, pointing at the texture of Jia’s highly stylised cinema that embodies a rich range of figural, tactile, spatial, temporal, literal and symbolic significations. Figured across Jia’s classics, such as *Xiao Wu* (*Xiao Wu*, 1997), *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao*, 2002) and *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, 2006) with emphasis on the first two, the concept of surface, for example, manifests itself literally in two self-referential ‘writings on the wall’ (in *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*, which, however, tend to bypass an unprepared Western viewer’s attention as negligible, minor mise-en-scène elements written in Chinese). There it plays out as a ‘superficial time’ suggestive of the conflation of story time, historical time and real time. In figural and spatial terms, the surface also exists in a constant interplay of ‘superficial’ elements, such as debris,
wanderers and vehicles, which together evoke a uniquely ‘superficial space’ in which motion becomes flat and stagnant.

In apparent contrast to Jia, Lou Ye’s highly expressionist works are more readily inspired by classical genres such as film noir and melodrama, as well as by Alfred Hitchcock and the French New Wave, enacting a very different aesthetic system that consists of the blurring of fiction and non-fiction, kinetic handheld cinematography, jump cut editing and a tendency for subjective narration that explicitly conflates screen subjectivities with directorial and spectatorial ones. My analysis of these aspects in Lou’s Suzhou River (Suzhou he, 1998) and especially Purple Butterfly (Zi hudie, 2003) will demonstrate that the epistemological motivation behind such drastically different styles of the two auteurs is a very similar theoretical concern for the relationship between history, (cinematic) representation and subjectivity.

Chapter 4 turns to the unprecedented phenomenon of Chinese independent documentary that also began in the early nineties and examines its non-fictional exercise of the subject-driven intervention in historical thinking. In preparation to distill a line of ‘personal documentary’ – the distinct non-fictional component of personal filmmaking – that somehow became submerged in the earlier directorial, as well as critical, excitement over the refreshing beginning of observational verité practices in China (as an effective alternative to official documentaries), I foreground the documentary practice of Duan Jinchuan, a quintessential practitioner of the non-interfering observational documentary in the spirit of Frederick Wiseman.\(^4\). Drawing on Western criticism (from Bill Nichols and others) of the rhetorical structure of Wisemanian documentaries, which, while socially significant and undeniably valuable, should be recognised as nothing short of manipulative arrangement of information in order to construct a specific spectatorial relationship to the image, I examine important works by Duan Jinchuan, such as The Square (Guangchang, co-dir. Zhang Yuan, 1994), South Bakhor St. 16 (Ba kuo nan jie shiliu hao, 1995) and especially The Storm (Baofeng zouyu, co-dir. Jiang Yue, 2005) for their structuring of cinematic space. I argue that the director’s invisible, non-interfering gaze actually displays a meaningfully intended, yet insufficiently reflected, vision on representing history and memory.

Chapter 4 then moves on to a proper definition of the concept of ‘personal documentary’, laying out its formal features as well as theoretical implications and situating the Chinese practice in connection to concepts and practices of subjective non-fictional filmmaking in the West. Indeed, the rich and varied examples of personal documentary and subjectively driven experimental non-fiction of the Forsaken Generation – elaborate analyses of which span from Chapter 4 to Chapter 5 – form very important and fresh contributions to this important phenomenon of contemporary moving image culture worldwide.\(^5\)

For example, Chapter 4 presents two monumental independent documentaries – often thought of as observational pieces – in the new light of personal documentary: I Graduated (Wo biye le, dir. Wang Guangli, 1992) and West of the Tracks (Tie Xi Qu, dir. Wang Bing, 2003). Both documentaries are revealed to employ a
historically informed narrative structure, subjectively inflected cinematography and editing and a motif of the return of the filmmaker to a site replete with history and memory. In the process they not only observe and document, but also embody and perform an epistemological task of connecting past to present and subjectivity to field. It is the presence and performance of the filmmaker that renders the visual field in front of the camera a historical one.

Chapter 5 demonstrates to the reader other, more radical forms of personal cinema and media that expand the discussion of memory, history and subjectivity in the fields of identity and performance. Through analyses of a plethora of experimental non-fiction videos and new media projects, such as those created by a woman poet (Tang Danhong), queer filmmakers (painter Shi Tou and writer Cui Zi’en), artist (Wang Qingsong) and animator (Feng Mengbo), I investigate these innovative explorations on the treacherous relationship between representation and subjectivity in terms of their creative use of the body in crafting and realising identities and relations. Whether appropriated to confront and console a memory-ridden traumatised childhood in Nightingale, Not the Only Voice (Yeying bushi weiyi de gehou, dir. Tang Danhong, 2000) or mobilised to realise interventions in the social issues of women and queer communities in 50 Minutes of Women (Nüren de wushi fenzhong, dir. Shi Tou, 2005), The Narrow Path (Wuyu, dir. Cui Zi’en, 2003) and Night Scene (Yejing, dir. Cui Zi’en, 2003) or even played with by Feng Mengbo and Wang Qingsong in animation and movie-inspired, staged digital photography to radicalise both the socialist past and the postsocialist present, the performing bodies of the various subjects – or their embodied performances – prove to be an extremely dynamic and empowering channel for critical interventions in a number of issues. Their varied, creative blurring of the boundaries between self and other and between camera and performance makes it clear that subjectivities are not simply observed and documented, but actually imagined, contested and produced in close and conscious relation to representational media and the particular historical moment – in this case, postsocialism – that informs a certain subjective use of media. Shaped from this complex interplay of historical energy, media appropriation and subjective intervention are some of the most interesting, sophisticated and critical subjects of contemporary postsocialist China.

Thus, the chapters start with vestiges of Cultural Revolution propaganda and official socialist representation, trace their lingering and transformed presence in the works of the Forsaken Generation and examine the generation’s gradual and deepening efforts to find a tenable position from where they not only better understand the past, but also are able to exercise conscious agency in participating in the present. In the process, I also hope to produce the portrait of an important denomination of contemporary Chinese whose unprecedented body of independent moving image works registers some of the deepest and subtlest impacts of China’s transition from socialism to postsocialism. It is still open to question how we might view this period in the long run, as the latest stage of China’s century-long transformation into a modern nation. It is the humble but sincere ambition of this book to offer some timely observations on this
important and intriguing moment in the history of Chinese cinema, culture and consciousness.

In his contemplation on photography, John Tagg speaks about the limited, concrete and lively relationship between representation and history:

Histories are not backdrops to set off the performance of images. They are scored into the paltry paper signs, in what they do and do not do, in what they encompass and exclude, in the ways they open on to or resist a repertoire of uses in which they can be meaningful and productive. Photographs are never 'evidence' of history; they are themselves the historical.50

So are the creators of such images and texts. The value of the personal film and media of the Forsaken Generation goes beyond providing alternative accounts of history and reality. Their narratives of the past and documentations of the present are not automatically accurate or authentic. Their visions, like all visions, are necessarily deflected by the particular historical context from which they look backward or forward. The personal and subjective mode of their remembrance and representation does not serve to give them a fixed footing. Rather, it constantly reminds them – and us – of the specificity and relativity of their/our subject position in history. Thereby, they/we become more conscious and, hopefully, more conscientious historical beings.