Independent Chinese Documentary

Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics

Dan Edwards
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A Note on Terminology

Writing about China in English presents a number of challenges regarding the presentation of Chinese names and terms. Since the 1980s, the pinyin system of Romanisation developed in mainland China during the 1950s has been used in the West, and this is also the system used in this book. The only exception is when scholars are known in English by names that use other forms of Romanisation, such as You-tien Hsing, or when older films are known by titles not based on pinyin, such as Antonioni's Chung kuo.

Chinese names have been rendered in the Chinese style, with family names appearing first. The only exception is Chinese authors who have published books and articles in English using the English-language name order, such as You-tien Hsing, Yingchi Chu or Ying Qian. In these instances the names are cited as published.

Throughout this book I have used the term ‘party-state’ to refer to the governmental authority that has ruled over China since 1949. In theory the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese state are separate entities, and parallel party and state structures exist at all levels of authority. For example, the State Council is theoretically the highest body of governance in China, while the Politburo is the body that governs the Communist Party. In reality the Party penetrates and dominates the state at every level, and state organs invariably reflect and carry out the policies and orders of the Party. Thus, the Politburo Standing Committee is in practice the body that governs China. For this reason ‘party-state’ is the most appropriate description of China’s governance structure.

The final point of clarification relates to the use of the term ‘China’. The political entity of the People’s Republic of China today encompasses the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, but the SAR continues to maintain its own currency, education system, judiciary and laws. Most importantly, the censorship rules and processes designed to shape and guide public culture in the mainland do not apply in Hong Kong, even if their influence has been increasingly felt in recent years. Additionally, the ‘province’ of Taiwan continues to operate essentially as a separate state (officially the Republic of China), despite Beijing claiming jurisdiction over the island. Thus, for the purposes of this study, when conditions are described in ‘China’, this is taken to refer exclusively to the
mainland controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, excluding both Hong Kong and Taiwan.

For reference purposes, a glossary of Chinese terms used in the text appears at the end of this book, and a complete list of the Chinese films and filmmakers discussed appears in the filmography in both pinyin and Chinese characters.
Introduction

By the time Zhao Liang’s camera framed the severed hand of an elderly petitioner torn apart by a passing train I was utterly transfixed. Petition (Shangfang, 2009) is one of those films I could feel searing itself into my memory on first viewing with an emotional heat that has not lessened since. The setting for that first look was the pressroom of the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 2009, but the small television screen did nothing to reduce the film’s impact, which was like a bright flash of recognition that left me reeling. For I had seen the people on screen – or at least people just like them. I was living in Beijing at the time, and I passed petitioners every day squatting outside the gates of various ministries and government offices as I cycled through the streets on my way to work. I had always wondered who they were, since the people who travel to the capital from all over China seeking redress for injustices are a subterranean population living below the mainstream life of the capital. Locals mostly ignore them and the Chinese media barely acknowledges their existence. Their dull, traumatised eyes in the morning light told something of their situation, but until I watched Zhao’s film I had no idea just how dire their predicament was.

That first viewing in the cramped confines of the film festival pressroom was a revelation. Here was a world I had sensed playing out around me during the two years I had lived in Beijing, but had never seen acknowledged, let alone discussed, on Chinese television or in the cinema. It took a trip to Hong Kong to begin to gain access to a filmic realm in which their views and experiences were being represented.

I ended up living in China from 2007 to 2011, and was as seduced as anyone by the glittering skylines, pace of change and sheer energy of a nation opening up after decades of isolation. But the longer I stayed in Beijing, the more I kept glimpsing another reality that never seemed to appear on the nightly news bulletins. I was working as a magazine journalist, initially for a state-owned monthly, and the gap between the unrelentingly upbeat tone of the articles I edited every day and much of what was happening on the streets seemed more profound the longer I stayed. As I got to know some of the filmmakers of China’s independent documentary world, they helped me understand the flip side of China’s explosive
economical growth – and who was paying the price for all those glittering lights. Like countless titles I’ve watched in the years since, Petition probed behind the surface appearance of prosperity into the hidden recesses of China’s contemporary situation. My fascination and commitment to China’s independent documentary world was cemented during that first screening, but the road to really comprehending these films and their attendant culture took much longer to traverse. This book is but a signpost on a continuing journey.

While Petition had a huge personal impact on me and the way I viewed my daily reality at that time, I quickly realised that independent Chinese documentaries – films produced outside the country’s official, state-sanctioned production channels – had been rewriting the rules regarding what can and cannot be shown of China’s contemporary reality on screen for over two decades. Back in the 1990s, Bérénice Reynaud wrote of her experience of seeing the very first independent Chinese documentary made since 1949 in terms not dissimilar to my response to Petition nearly twenty years later. Watching Wu Wenguang’s Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers (Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiangzhe, 1990) in 1991, Reynaud felt ‘a new chapter of representation was being written in front of my eyes’. She saw Wu’s film as a sign that,

Young Chinese are picking up video cameras to bear witness to their realities and to the changes their society is currently undergoing. This in itself constitutes a break with official art, where the mission of ‘representing the masses as they are’ conceals the desire of representing them as they ‘should’ be. [Original emphasis]\(^2\)

As Reynaud’s comment suggests, from this very first independent documentary we can see a marked divergence between the images being presented in independent works and those seen in state-sanctioned representations. But there are also important differences between a film such as Bumming in Beijing and the much later Petition. The former focuses primarily on personal concerns through the everyday lives of five artists living in Beijing. The wider social and political context of late-1980s China, particularly the mass social unrest of the period, flits around the edges of the frame, a ‘structuring absence’ – to borrow a phrase from Chris Berry – rather than an explicitly explored backdrop.\(^3\) Although startling for a number of reasons at the time of its release, Bumming in Beijing is a politically cautious film and a somewhat guarded portrayal of Chinese life – a sharp contrast to the no-holds-barred state violence and critiques of the Chinese political system we see in Petition.

My first step in understanding China’s independent film world was grasping the nature of the changes that had taken place between 1990 and 2009. What was the relationship between the early independent documentaries such as Bumming in Beijing and the contemporary productions I was seeing in cafes and galleries in Beijing and on DVDs passed to me as I sought out the independent documentary culture in the capital? And why did so much academic writing downplay what seemed to me the highly politicised nature of contemporary
Chinese documentary work? These were the questions that sparked my initial research into the field and eventually led to the writing of this book.

Most academic literature on independent Chinese documentary has focused on the first wave of independent work made in the early to mid-1990s that became known as the 'New Documentary Movement' (Xin jilu yundong). This focus on films of the 1990s partly accounts for the downplaying of political content in much academic writing. These early documentaries were either personal in their concerns – such as Bumming in Beijing – or else subtly analysed the broad relations of power operating in Chinese society in a manner I will outline in Chapter 1. In general, these films did not engage directly with specific social issues, and for reasons also explored later, within China were only seen by a tiny audience of filmmakers and their associates. While acknowledging the historical context of these early films, I have instead chosen to focus on the documentaries that have been produced since the arrival of digital technologies on the Chinese mainland from the late 1990s, by filmmakers such as Ou Ning, Hu Jie, Ai Xiaoming and Zhao Liang.

The digital era – a period barely fifteen years old – has seen dramatic transformations in the way Chinese people communicate with one another and represent themselves and their society. Digital technologies have not only facilitated the entry of filmmakers from a much broader range of backgrounds into the independent field, but have also allowed the creation of a more public form of independent film culture than was possible in the 1990s. Independent documentaries may not appear in cinemas or on television but they do appear at well-attended screenings in unofficial venues in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. As we shall explore in Chapter 1, there has also been some effort in recent years to extend this unofficial screening culture into smaller cities and rural areas. Central to this unofficial public culture has been the development of a socially engaged strand of documentary films such as Petition that deal in very direct and interrogative ways with pressing social issues. These socially engaged works are essentially public in their concerns and their address, in contrast to the more personalised outlook and much more limited domestic circulation of the first independent documentaries of the early 1990s. Socially engaged documentaries of the digital era provide a forum to publicise grassroots views and experiences on screen through perspectives that explicitly challenge those offered in state-sanctioned representations. In doing so, these films directly question the terms of the Chinese party-state’s cultural and political hegemony. They circulate among a domestic audience through unofficial screening groups and film festivals, DVDs and online platforms, exploiting the explosion in domestic consumer technologies and privately owned public spaces (such as cafes) that have sprung up as the Chinese economy has been liberalised. It is this combination of the films’ critical engagement with public issues and their circulation among a steadily growing public that has allowed China’s independent screen culture to develop into a nascent alternative public sphere in the digital era – a public sphere in which views, values and experiences excluded from official representations are able to circulate and be discussed. It is this aspect
of contemporary Chinese documentary culture that academia has only recently started to grapple with.

This book will take a twofold approach to explaining and analysing these shifts in China’s independent documentary world. Firstly, it will explore the unofficial screening culture that has developed around independent films since the late 1990s. Secondly, an in-depth textual analysis of key independent documentaries of the past fifteen years will detail the ways in which these films contest the ideas, values and assumptions informing state-sanctioned public discourse in China. These analyses will also demonstrate how independent documentaries intersect with other forms of ‘alternative’ public discourse that have developed in China since the late 1990s, particularly in the online realm. Much of this discourse revolves around concerns such as urban renewal, the requisitioning of rural land, representations of history, the concept of legal rights and the rule of law, and debates around morality and ethics. Before delving into this detailed analysis of independent documentaries and their attendant culture, however, we need to understand the context in which this culture has developed. The first question we must address is what independence means in a Chinese context. What do we actually mean when we talk about independent Chinese documentaries?

Defining Independence in a Chinese Context

We need to define independence in a Chinese context because it means something quite different to what it usually does in Western settings. In countries such as the United States, independent films are generally considered those made by individuals or small companies, which are often then sold to major distributors or broadcasters. In recent times, even this loose designation has become blurred, as ‘independent film’ has largely become a marketing term, describing small-scale, supposedly stylistically edgy works that are often financed by major corporations. For example, the films of US director-producers Joel and Ethan Coen – commonly known as the Coen Brothers – are often viewed critically as lying outside the Hollywood system, yet their films are financed and distributed by such major corporations as CBS Films and subsidiaries of Universal Studios. Such financing and distribution is typical for much contemporary ‘independent’ US cinema. To understand what is distinct about independent cinema – especially documentaries – in a Chinese context, independence needs to be understood both in terms of production and distribution outside official, state-sanctioned channels. Independence does not just denote films made outside state-owned broadcasters and studios. Many private companies in contemporary China produce work in conjunction with state-owned institutions for official cinema and television screens, and these privately produced films and programmes are subject to the same content restrictions as those imposed on work made directly by the state. In contrast, work made outside state-sanctioned production and distribution channels cannot be screened in officially recognised cinemas or broadcast on television. It is this work made and distributed by unofficial means that constitutes the independent sector as it is understood in this book.
As noted earlier, the first Chinese documentary made outside state-sanctioned channels since 1949 appeared in 1990 – Wu Wenguang’s *Bumming in Beijing*. That same year the first independent dramatic feature was produced, Zhang Yuan’s *Mama*. Wu and Zhang were part of the same social circle, and Zhang went on to make several documentaries during the 1990s alongside his feature film work. It was at a meeting at Zhang’s Beijing home in 1992 that the concept of the ‘New Documentary Movement’ was first mooted. This reflects a close relationship between China’s independent feature directors and documentarians that has existed ever since, and filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke and Wang Bing have continually moved between feature film and documentary production.

Another notable commonality among many early independent filmmakers was their close relationship to various official institutions. Wu Wenguang emerged from state television and Zhang Yuan was a graduate of the prestigious Beijing Film Academy, the institution that had produced the majority of China’s feature film directors since the 1950s. Similarly close institutional ties were a hallmark of most of the first wave of independents. These ties, along with the growing diversity of official content on Chinese television screens during the 1990s, led some commentators to claim that any line between independent and non-independent productions quickly became blurred after the early 1990s. Lu Xinyu, for example, points out that the origins of the New Documentary Movement identified with Wu Wenguang and others lay both ‘inside and outside the system’, and several independents of the 1990s produced content for Chinese television in addition to making films outside the broadcasters. Matthew David Johnson downplays the oppositional nature of China’s independent sector and views independence primarily as a career strategy for filmmakers of the 1990s ‘who sought recognition beyond the boundaries of existing institutional norms’. The fact that some of the original independents, such as Zhang Yuan, have since moved exclusively into official production seems to support Johnson’s claim.

While it is true that many independents have also made work through official channels, it is important to understand that there have always been differences between what can be included in independent films and those made for official screens. None of the completely independent works of the 1990s was ever broadcast or theatrically distributed in China. The experiences of filmmakers such as Duan Jinchuan, who continued making work for broadcasters alongside their independent films in the 1990s, illustrate more about the gap between independent and official content than the blurring of boundaries.

For example, in 1996 Duan made a 100-minute observational documentary about a low-level government office in Tibet entitled *No. 16 Barkhor South Street (Bakuo nan jie 16 hao)* that was partly funded by the national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV). The station shelved the film when they saw the finished product, eventually airing a severely truncated half-hour version at 11.30pm five years after the film’s completion. Duan also made the series *Liberated (Jiefang ah!, 2003)* with Jiang Yue for CCTV, based on survivors’ memories of the ‘liberation’ of various cities by communist forces during the closing stages of China’s civil war. The memories they recorded were not to the
authorities’ liking, and Duan claims he and Jiang were informed ‘there was a problem with their stance’. Having spent the money to make the series, CCTV finally decided to air it, but buried it in a 2.30am timeslot.

Although the examples above reveal a working relationship between some independent filmmakers and official broadcasters in the 1990s and early 2000s, they also illustrate the ways in which the representations offered by these filmmakers were generally marginalised in television schedules, even when the films in question were commissioned by television stations. In addition, these cases demonstrate why any conception of independence in China needs to be understood in terms of distribution as well as production, since all work that reaches the public via official channels is subject to the same forms of censorship, irrespective of whether it is made inside or outside the state-owned broadcasters and studios.

This book will argue that a distinct line continues to exist between what is permissible in work broadcast or distributed through official channels in China and content that appears in independent productions distributed by unofficial means. Furthermore, this line has actually become more pronounced since the late 1990s. This sharpening of division has occurred for two reasons. Firstly, China’s party-state has become increasingly skilled at controlling and guiding official film and television content, making public discourse in many ways more constricted than it was at the end of the 1990s, even as programming appears superficially more diverse. Secondly, as official restrictions have tightened, technological developments have meant that alternative forms of public discourse have become increasingly possible and accessible to a wide public. In terms of filmmaking, digital video technology has opened the field to a much broader range of directors since the late 1990s, some of whom have begun making films with the aim of explicitly contesting the representations offered through official channels. So while filmmaking practices outside official channels have certainly become less marginalised and ‘underground’ than they were in the 1990s, this is not just because some directors have begun making officially recognised work. A distinct group of independents in the digital era continue to work outside official structures, and actually produce films that explicitly criticise the authorities and directly contest the representations offered in state-sanctioned film and television content. These are the socially engaged documentaries discussed in this book. Furthermore, as we will see shortly, this independent work has become a more public practice due to the development of an alternative public sphere since the late 1990s comprising unofficial screening groups, pirate DVD distribution and online platforms, via which these films reach a small but significant local audience.

This is not to say that the independent realm now exists in complete isolation from official channels. Many recent independent documentarians such as Ai Xiaoming have contacts within official media, and are sometimes led to their filmic subjects by concerned journalists aware of certain situations they are unable to report on. Many journalists in China are also attempting to push the limits of permissible public discourse, and frequently suffer loss of employment and
other forms of harassment as a result. In this sense, the work of independent documentarians and the more liberal personnel of China's official media overlap. Some independent filmmakers who have moved into official production, such as Jia Zhangke, are similarly attempting to expand the terms of public discourse from within the system, with varying degrees of success. Even Zhao Liang – director of one of the most politically incendiary independent documentaries, Petition – made a film sanctioned by the Ministry of Health in 2010 entitled Together (Zaiyiqi), demonstrating that the line between independent filmmaking and the official sector is of course never absolute. Interestingly, Zhao was heavily criticised by some other filmmakers for his decision to make a sanctioned production, and Zhao himself later stated that the censorial restrictions imposed on him in the making of Together mean that he will be returning to independent production in the future.

Zhao’s experiences once again highlight the inappropriateness of understanding independence as merely a career move for the socially engaged documentarians discussed in this book. The stark fact remains that many topics and viewpoints are simply not allowed to be aired publicly in today’s China through official channels. It is at the outer limits of the representations permitted through official channels that the representations of China’s socially engaged independent documentaries begin.

Before we begin analysing these independent films and their attendant screening culture, it is necessary to understand the nature of the official public channels that these films exist in relation to. Why has the Chinese state remained so concerned with controlling public discourse and how is this control exercised in the contemporary era? The concepts of hegemony and the public sphere can help us come to grips with these questions and the crucial role public representations play in the functioning of power in today’s China. It will then become clearer how independent documentaries contest these officially sanctioned representations as we analyse some of these films in the following chapters.

**Engineering Hegemony in Today’s China**

Even a casual glance at contemporary Chinese television reveals a highly commercialised and superficially diverse sector. Chinese newsstands sport a similarly colourful range of newspaper and magazine titles. In addition, consumer digital technologies have facilitated the development of alternative forms of public discourse outside official channels, particularly in the online realm. This diversity is a massive contrast to the rigidly controlled culture of Mao’s China as it existed throughout the 1950s, ’60s and much of the ’70s. Yet the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains in power and is just as dedicated to maintaining its rule as it was in Mao’s day. So why has the Party allowed its grip on public discourse to loosen and the media to become financially – if not politically – independent? The answer to this question is related to the broader economic changes instituted by the CCP since 1992, and the form of political rule the Party has attempted to engineer around a fundamentally transformed economy. As the economy has
been marketised, the CCP has attempted to lessen its reliance on overt coercion and control of Chinese citizens, and instead sought to build a form of authoritarian hegemony. Some historical context will help in grasping this idea more firmly.

Unlike today’s commercialised environment, during the Maoist era from 1949 to 1976 the Chinese state directly funded and controlled all forms of media and mass culture, including film, television, newspapers and magazines. Film production was conducted entirely through state-owned film studios according to directives handed down by the party-state. Television broadcasts, though very limited in the Maoist era, were similarly controlled by the authorities and dominated by political imperatives. Public discourse outside state-owned and controlled structures was not permitted, in line with the CCP policy that all culture and media should serve as a vehicle for propagating the Party’s ideology and worldview.

This situation transformed rapidly following Mao’s death in 1976. A power struggle within the leadership in the years after Mao’s passing saw the ascension of Deng Xiaoping, under whose leadership market mechanisms were tentatively introduced and economic planning decentralised to a degree from the late 1970s. As a result, consumer goods became readily available in China for the first time since 1949, facilitating the spread of television sets across the country. In contrast to the estimated 600,000 sets in operation at the time of Mao’s death, China had an estimated 112 million televisions by 1987. The number of stations jumped from 38 in 1979 to 412 a decade later. The rapid rise of television was central to the commercialisation of China’s media, following the introduction of advertisements to broadcasts in Shanghai in January 1979.

Many in the Chinese leadership were wary of financial independence for television stations when advertising was introduced, and initially the move was not intended to presage wholesale commercialisation. As the 1980s progressed, however, the Chinese state was under increasing financial pressure and simply could not afford to underwrite the modernisation and expansion of China’s television sector being driven by the rapid uptake of sets. By the middle of the 1980s, the still small but burgeoning consumer culture developing under the auspices of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms saw television advertising rising steadily. The stepping up of market reforms after 1992 greatly intensified the move towards financial independence for broadcasters and by the mid-1990s the national broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), was almost entirely reliant on advertising revenue. This state of affairs has since become the norm across the television sector.

By the turn of this century, many analysts were arguing that the wholesale commercialisation of Chinese media would inevitably foster greater independence from the state. It was further claimed this independence would allow Chinese journalists to limit corruption and abuses of power by playing a watchdog role over officials and state institutions. But while broadcasters now operate at a much greater distance from the party-state than they did during the Maoist era, the implied opposition between commercial and political imperatives in these
analyses is based on a misreading of the Chinese situation. Commercialism is in line with the CCP’s guiding ideology post-1992, which is essentially a form of corporatism in which the state oversees a capitalistic economy dominated by state-owned corporations and banks. These corporations and banks compete with one another, but the state retains ownership and broad control of the towering heights of the economy, just as it reserves the right to set the general parameters of public discourse within a commercialised media and cultural sector that remains largely state-owned.

Thus, China’s contemporary party-state has constructed a pluralist culture with the superficial appearance of economic and cultural diversity, through which it maintains a crucial yet diffuse influence. Rather than the outright dictatorial controls of the Maoist era, in contemporary times the CCP uses its broad control of societal institutions to try to engender what Antonio Gramsci called hegemony – a form of rule based on leadership and consent, as well as coercion. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is useful in analysing the operations of China’s contemporary party-state, but given that he developed his ideas within an analysis of European societies of the twentieth century, his concept needs to be understood and qualified in light of China’s very specific circumstances.

Gramsci wrote about hegemony in relation to the question of how power functions in modern industrialised states, particularly Western democracies where the state rarely has to resort to overt coercion to maintain its dominance. As the leader of Italy’s Communists, Gramsci’s research was informed by his desire to build a counter-hegemony under the leadership of his party, and eventually undo the hegemonic dominance of the bourgeoisie through a new socialist hegemony, in which the working class would be dominant. It may seem odd to apply a Marxist’s analysis of European capitalist states to the contemporary rule of the Chinese Communist Party, but Gramsci’s ideas are useful here for two reasons. The CCP has deliberately abandoned the Soviet-inspired centrally planned economy and culture of the Maoist and early Dengist periods, and instituted a type of capitalism which bears some similarities to the system that facilitated the early industrialisation of Europe and North America – the same states Gramsci analysed in his writings. More importantly, the CCP has very deliberately attempted to adapt certain aspects of hegemonic rule as it plays out in Western nations, in order to move away from the totalitarian control of society and culture that characterised the Maoist era, towards a form of rule based more on consent.

In Gramsci’s understanding, hegemony is exercised by a ruling class who have made various concessions, usually of an economic nature, to various other societal groups in order to gain their support and form a broad social alliance referred to as a ‘historical bloc’. The support of subordinate groups in this formation is not necessarily active – they may simply passively acquiesce to the existing social order. Hegemony, as opposed to a pure rule by force, is achieved when the ruling class leads as well as dominates, creating sufficient investment in the existing order from enough other social groupings to elicit an at least passive form of generalised consent to their rule.
Under a state of hegemony, competing interest groups are tolerated but implicitly agree not to work towards destroying the existing social order, though they engage in a continuous process of negotiation about the precise terms under which the existing order plays out. Gramsci writes:

The fact of hegemony presupposes that the interests and tendencies of those groups over whom hegemony is exercised have been taken into account and that a certain equilibrium is established. It presupposes, in other words, that the hegemonic group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind.  

An example of such economic concessions in modern Western democracies might be the meeting of certain demands from trade unions. Unions may engage in negotiations and sometimes economically disruptive measures such as strikes to further the interests of their members and influence labour relations, but in return for the state and employers responding to at least some of their demands, under normal conditions unions will not attempt to seize power or forcibly change the established political and economic order. Hegemony, according to Gramsci’s conception, is thus not a fixed system of rule, but an interplay of force and consent, contestation and compromise, that is constantly in flux. In Western democracies this process plays out within a legalistic order maintained by an independent judiciary, in which the ruling classes are expected to make at least some concessions to subordinate classes and other social groupings.

Alongside these economic concessions is a complex cultural matrix over which the ruling class exercises a crucial influence through the dominance of certain ideas and values. Within a truly hegemonic order, a degree of public debate is permitted and legally protected within the realm of what Gramsci terms ‘civil society’ – non-governmental institutions that on the one hand facilitate debate and on the other hand help elicit consent for the existing social order. Civil society for Gramsci was a very broad term that included the judiciary and institutions such as schools, all underpinned by a formalised separation of powers. The mass media also played an important role, which in Gramsci’s day primarily meant newspapers. Gramsci did not, however, view civil society as an idealised realm of free debate and unfettered ideas. On the contrary, an important aspect of hegemony according to Gramsci’s analysis is that the terms of public debate are broadly determined by the ruling class. This is how cultural, as well as economic, hegemony is established and maintained. Stuart Hall describes the process thus:

The dominant class . . . strive and to a degree succeed in framing all competing definitions of reality within their range, bringing all alternatives within their horizon of thought. They set the limits – mental and structural – within which subordinate classes ‘live’ and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them.
In identifying language and the power to define the terms of acceptable debate as key aspects of hegemonic power, Gramsci anticipated many of Michel Foucault’s ideas regarding the link between power and terms of discourse, which Foucault described as ‘the set of rules which at a given period and for a given society define the limits and forms of the sayable’ [original emphasis].

Cultural hegemony, along with economic concessions to subordinate groups, means that a ruling class will not ordinarily need to resort to violent coercion to maintain its dominant position, although it reserves the exclusive right to exercise ‘legitimate’ violence – usually through a police force – should the need arise.

Rather than exercising hegemony as understood by Gramsci, prior to the 1980s the Chinese Communist Party exercised something more akin to what Michel Foucault describes as a ‘state of domination’. Although Foucault believed all human interactions, from the personal to the political, involve relations of power, when a certain degree of freedom exists on both sides these relations of power are ‘mobile, reversible, and unstable’. When a field of power relations is immobilised and any possibility of reversibility is forcibly blocked, the result is a state of domination. Under these conditions, ‘practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited’. If we relate this idea back to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, we can say that hegemonic power relies on maintaining certain relations of power, but these relations of power remain in a state of constant flux and are sometimes subject to significant change or even reversal. If the state falls back on exclusively using force to maintain its power and freezes all public debate and relations of power, it can be said to have reverted to a state of domination.

The level of control extended over all aspects of Chinese society during the Maoist era, including cultural production, distinguished the period as one in which power relations were characterised by a state of domination. All documentary making, for example, took place within state-owned film studios and content was strictly dictated according to political imperatives. Virtually all documentaries in this period were in what Yingchi Chu calls a ‘dogmatic mode’, in which images were simply used to illustrate overtly ideological messages conveyed by all-embracing, monological voiceovers. The party-state strictly controlled all access to filmmaking equipment and monopolised all sites of reception, making film production and viewing outside state-controlled channels impossible. Although the overtly ideological content of documentaries and other cultural products of the Maoist era was intended to generate a working-class investment in a socialist economic order, the fact that workers had no choice but to partake of this system made Maoist rule more akin to a state of domination than hegemony in Gramsci’s sense of the term.

Following Mao’s death, direct control of public discourse gradually loosened alongside some decentralisation of the economy. By the late 1980s, under the leadership of the reformist General Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang, there was widespread debate both within the CCP and in Chinese media about the country’s future direction and the possibility of political reform. These debates found their most public expression in the documentary series River Elegy (Heshang)
broadcast by CCTV in June 1988. The series engendered such a strong public reaction it was rebroadcast with minor changes the following month.

Across six episodes River Elegy constructed a dichotomy between China’s earth-bound ‘yellow’ culture – characterised as inward-looking, agricultural and defensive – and Europe’s sea-faring ‘blue’ culture – characterised as outward-looking, industrialised and aggressive. Controversially, the series contended that China’s yellow civilisation was experiencing the final stages of a long, terminal decline, and that the nation must embrace Western blue culture if the dream of national greatness was ever to be realised. This analysis marked River Elegy as one of the most popular manifestations of the so-called ‘cultural fever’ (wenhua re) that swept through China’s intellectual community in the mid- to late 1980s. As a degree of economic and social liberalisation developed, an influx of Western ideas and literature, particularly in the form of books, suddenly became available for the first time in decades. Cultural fever involved an enthusiastic embracing of the Western philosophy and culture carried within these texts, along with hand-wringing over the perceived failings of Chinese culture in the wake of a century marked by civil war, invasion and totalitarianism under Mao.

In many ways, cultural fever was a reinvigoration of debates around China’s relationship to Western modernity that stretches back at least as far as the May Fourth Movement (Wusi yundong) of 1919. The instigators of May Fourth – mostly Beijing university students – had sought to restore China’s battered national standing through the embracing of Western culture, science and technology in order to place China on an equal footing to European colonial powers and a rapidly modernising Japan. In addition to its emphasis on Western rationality, the May Fourth Movement also contained a democratic body of thought with which River Elegy explicitly aligned itself. In episode six the narration places the series’s formulations in the context of the ‘unfinished business’ of the earlier era:

The May Fourth Movement of 1919, for the first time and with a thoroughly uncompromising spirit, unfurled the banners of ‘science’ and ‘democracy’ . . . But this progressive tide of culture by no means succeeded in washing away the accumulated sediment of feudalism in politics, economics, and in the moral character of individuals . . . Many things in China, it would seem, should all start over again from May Fourth.36

For the writers of River Elegy, ‘democracy’ primarily meant freedom of thought for China’s intellectual elite who, according to the series, were the only social group who could ‘channel the “blue” sweet water spring of science and democracy onto our yellow earth’.37 As such the series remained invested in an elitist vision of Chinese society that, as we shall see, was also evident to a degree in the analytical perspective of many New Documentary works in the early to mid-1990s.

In terms of the development of documentary culture, the significance of River Elegy and the wider ‘cultural fever’ of the 1980s was the revival of an alternative vision of Chinese modernity to the CCP’s authoritarian project. Although
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primarily focused on intellectual freedoms, cultural fever generally, and *River Elegy* in particular, questioned the very basis of the prevailing authoritarian socialist system and the absence of democratic political processes. Although public debates regarding China’s political future were curtailed by the CCP at the end of the 1980s, the ideal of a more democratic and pluralistic nation has never completely disappeared, and in many respects the development of China’s independent documentary culture represents an evolution of the earlier traditions of May Fourth and cultural fever, recalibrated around China’s contemporary environment and a more grassroots democratic vision.

The contemporary environment has been significantly shaped by the events of mid-1989 that saw the public debates typified by *River Elegy* suddenly shut down. In June that year the CCP reverted to an overt state of domination through the imposition of martial law in response to a series of nationwide protests against corruption, cronyism and political authoritarianism that became known as the ‘Tiananmen Movement’. The protests were violently suppressed in Beijing by armed troops backed by armoured columns on the night of 3–4 June, followed by the purging of liberal reformers in the CCP and state institutions. Despite the brutality of the crackdown, leaders such as Deng Xiaoping recognised that exercising long-term rule exclusively through military force was not sustainable if the party-state wished to continue with the model of economic development built on attracting foreign investment that had been tentatively pioneered in the 1980s. The fear and resentment engendered by the bloodletting on the streets of Beijing on 3–4 June also needed to be dampened if the CCP wished to move beyond governance by martial law. Consequently, in the early 1990s the CCP quickly shifted its strategy to developing a form of rule based on hegemony. That is, the party-state actively sought to gain acquiescence to one-party rule by making economic concessions to different classes, and allowing a certain degree of heavily guided cultural pluralism to develop.

The CCP’s strategy from the early 1990s did not mean simply adopting hegemonic rule as it had developed in Western democracies. As Gramsci’s writings make clear, this form of hegemony relies on a separation of powers, a certain tolerance for public debates and expressions of dissent, and the possibility of changes in government – all of which remain anathema to the CCP. Unlike the dominant bourgeois classes in the early-twentieth-century Western societies Gramsci analysed, or the corporate elites who dominate the contemporary West, the CCP is not a broad economic grouping seeking to protect generalised but diverse class interests. Rather, the CCP leadership is a narrow and specifically political elite. It could not exercise hegemony through a parliamentary system comprising competing political parties in the manner of dominant classes in Western societies. For the CCP, hegemony means first and foremost retaining all political power in its own hands, while allowing a certain amount of pluralism to play out on the economic and cultural fronts, instituted in a restricted, top-down fashion.

Economically, since the early 1990s the CCP has sought to build hegemony through the passive consent of China’s urban population, who along with
students had been the mainstay of the 1989 protests. Hegemony has been built in urban areas by providing greater opportunities for individuals to improve their material situation through business practices or wage earning in private enterprises. An urban consumer culture has gradually been allowed to develop so that urbanites can deploy their increased capital to materially improve their living conditions and assert personal choice through aspects of consumer culture such as fashion, travel and the acquisition of household goods. A property market in urban areas has also been allowed to develop, allowing greater geographic and social mobility for those who can afford to buy into the real-estate market.

Alongside this relative enrichment of the urban population, a massive expansion of privatised industrial manufacturing in southern China, mainly financed by foreign capital, has provided opportunities for many rural dwellers to join the new working class casually engaged in light industry (as opposed to the old Maoist category of workers permanently employed in state-owned heavy industry). This has allowed vast numbers of farmers to temporarily move to the cities and engage in manufacturing work, materially improving their situations and rising above what had previously often been subsistence living conditions. In these ways, the CCP has fulfilled one aspect of hegemonic rule as understood by Gramsci – that the ruling group makes economic and social concessions to subordinate groups in order to elicit a degree of consent to the existing political and economic order. State violence is still applied when the economic order is seriously threatened or publicly questioned, as shown in many of the documentaries discussed in this book, but it is generally applied in a much more selective manner than the indiscriminate public slaughter that marked the repression of 1989.

In order to ensure that economic concessions do not, in turn, generate demands for concessions in the political sphere, the CCP has also placed great emphasis on maintaining cultural hegemony by placing firm parameters around public discourse. To this day, *River Elegy* and the subsequent protests the series was blamed for inspiring remain an example for the CCP of what happens when public discourse is permitted to stray beyond parameters set by the party-state. Within days of the massacre in Beijing that ended the Tiananmen Movement, Deng Xiaoping had publicly identified the CCP’s failure in the 1980s to carry out ‘ideological and political education – not just of students but of the people in general’ as the Party’s ‘biggest mistake’.

Based on their experiences of the late 1980s, the authorities have since ensured representations publicly circulating through official channels never question the CCP’s legitimacy, the benefits of one-party rule, or broad economic policies. In contrast to the Maoist period, authorities now largely turn a blind eye to expressions of discontent aired in private, but go to great lengths to prevent such views being publicised. This distinction is important for understanding the nature of the contemporary Party’s rule and the way it has maintained its dominance over China’s public discourse while loosening other social controls. In order to develop this point further, it is useful to introduce the concept of the public sphere as the arena through which public discourse is structured, disseminated and publicised.
Rather than examining the Chinese party-state’s exercise of cultural hegemony through Gramsci’s category of ‘civil society’ (which, for example, would include the workings of China’s education system), this analysis has a narrower focus, centred specifically on the exercise of hegemony through the public sphere of film and television. This is because film and television have the widest reach of all public discourse in contemporary China, with free-to-air broadcasts reaching 92 per cent of China’s population by the early years of this century. Film and television are also the arenas most directly relevant to documentary production. Narrowing the analysis this way provides a focus for this study, but it should be understood that film and television exist within a broader public sphere encompassing print media, publishing, public institutions such as museums and so on, all of which are also guided by the party-state through various mechanisms. Other institutions such as the education system are also directly controlled by the authorities in order to maintain the CCP’s cultural hegemony.

**China’s Official Public Sphere as an Arena of Hegemonic Influence**

There is a long-standing academic debate around the concept of the public sphere (gonggong lingyu) in China, stretching back to the years following the Tiananmen Movement. For example, in April 1993 the journal *Modern China* dedicated a full issue to a symposium on the topic. As Philip C. C. Huang noted in an article in that symposium, nearly all discussions regarding civil society and the public sphere in China up to that time had presupposed ‘a dichotomous opposition between state and society’ based on understandings of the public sphere derived from Jürgen Habermas’s 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

In his seminal study, Habermas analysed the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ as a public arena of eighteenth-century Europe, embodied in the urban coffee houses and privately owned print media of the period. Here the emergent bourgeoisie discussed matters of public concern in order to reach a general consensus over how best to exert their influence and develop their interests in the political arena of the post-feudal legalistic states then emerging in Western Europe. In a recent analysis, Qing Liu and Barrett McCormick note that in Habermas’s extensive writings on the public sphere, he tends to oscillate between using the term as an empirical description of the eighteenth-century European formation described above, and deploying it as a more generalised normative category to ‘express ideals of openness, equality and reasoned debate’ playing out in a public arena outside the market. Both uses of the term are evident in discussions of the public sphere in relation to China, and at times they have been conflated.

For example, a recent study of Beijing film clubs by Seio Nakajima was partly informed by a desire to understand the extent to which these clubs ‘approximate the Habermasian ideal of public sphere’. Nakajima uses the historically specific public sphere Habermas describes as a normative model against which he assesses screening clubs in China. Unsurprisingly, Nakajima finds the clubs...
‘do not constitute a public sphere in the Habermasian ideal-typical sense of the term’, as none of the clubs was founded on a desire to reach consensus on public issues and the more commercially orientated clubs did not operate outside the market. While Nakajima’s study shows the absence of public spheres of a Habermasian ideal-type in China, he does not consider whether other models might provide more revealing insights into how public discourse is structured and disseminated in the Chinese environment.

In other analyses, Habermas’s ideal public sphere has been deployed as a polemical model against which conditions in China are found wanting. For example, in the 1993 symposium published by Modern China, Richard Madsen acknowledged that Habermas’s ideal public sphere may never have existed even in Western countries, but argues that it can provide a model for both Western and Chinese societies to work towards. Similarly, polemical deployments of Habermas’s ideal public sphere have been common in Sinophone writings, where Gloria Davies notes that ‘Habermas’ notion of the public sphere is regularly invoked as an ideal situation of free speech . . . a situation assumed to constrain the powers of the state and to promote democracy in China’. Chinese academic Shijun Tong, for example, argues that a ‘free and enlightened public sphere’ based on Habermas’s normative model is central to overcoming the overly bureaucratic form of socialism found in China and other communist nations. The prevalence of these polemical arguments is understandable in a society in which public debate is so constrained by the state, but they do very little to illuminate actual existing conditions in the contemporary People’s Republic. Furthermore, as Chris Berry points out, measuring Chinese conditions against a normative model historically and geographically grounded in eighteenth-century Western Europe ‘binds us into an Orientalist posture’ in which non-Western societies are inevitably found to be lagging behind supposed historical developments in Europe and the United States.

To overcome the Orientalist posture underlying Habermasian analyses of conditions in China, Berry proposes the concept of ‘public space’ within which televisual and filmic representations are produced and circulated. Berry argues that ‘public spaces are not only multiple and varied but also positively produced and shaped externally and internally by configurations of power’. Analyzing Chinese television as a public space, Berry’s approach usefully reveals how relations of power of both a commercial and political nature help shape the content carried by Chinese broadcasters. His concept of public space productively shaped by relations of power is less useful, however, in understanding how the party-state seeks to maintain its hegemony through official representations. While Chinese television may be regarded as a certain type of figural public space, there are other types of real-world public space that are very deliberately excluded by the party-state from sanctioned televisual representations. Berry’s analysis also makes it difficult to account for the intentional manner in which oppositional works resist dominant relations of power, even as they continue to be partially shaped by wider social and political forces. In order to understand these aspects of public discourse in today’s China, public space needs to be distinguished from...
the discourse by which space is understood and represented. The concept of the public sphere, as the realm via which discourse is disseminated and hence made public, remains useful in making this distinction, but it needs to be extended beyond Habermas’s normative and historical categories.

Qing Liu and Barrett McCormick have developed a conception of the public sphere in China that helps illustrate the crucial role this sphere plays in the party-state’s efforts to maintain its cultural hegemony. Liu and McCormick define the public sphere in the People’s Republic as:

A social realm where public discourses are structurally situated, allocated, regulated, and circulated, while the term public discourse refers to information, images, ideas, arguments, and so forth, that are accessible to a wide audience.

Under Liu and McCormick’s definition, all modern societies can be said to have some form of public sphere, comprising various forms of mass communication such as television, film, radio and print media, through which public discourse is structured and disseminated. During the Maoist era the CCP completely dominated the Chinese public sphere through direct control of all content and ownership of all means of cultural production and distribution. Liu and McCormick characterise this as a ‘monopolistic’ public sphere, occupied by the single productive and ideological entity of the CCP.

Since the commercialisation of the Chinese media and culture industries in the 1990s, the country has moved towards a pluralistic public sphere comprising many voices. It is not, however, a truly pluralist public sphere, because ‘the state still has an overwhelming role and other actors lack firm legal or procedural guarantees to protect their autonomy’. The party-state achieves its overwhelming role by ensuring that it is the final arbiter in deciding the parameters within which a limited pluralism is permitted to play out.

The manner in which the contemporary party-state allows China’s public sphere to function as an arena of limited pluralistic discourse can be further understood through the ideas of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, in particular their analysis of the public sphere of television in modern industrialised states. In their 1972 book, *Public Sphere and Experience*, Negt and Kluge were among the first theorists to conceptualise the public sphere as a modern realm of competing representations mediated by various forms of mass media. They provide a far more useful basis for developing an analysis of China’s contemporary situation than Habermas’s geographically specific historical formation.

Negt and Kluge suggest that the remnants of the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas have long since been overlain by industrialised ‘public spheres of production’. These encompass all industrialised production processes, but Negt and Kluge are particularly concerned with those related to the mass-produced cultural commodities turned out by the ‘consciousness and programming industry’ epitomised in post-war Western societies by television. While Habermas’s historical bourgeois public sphere was primarily embedded in
physical sites such as coffee houses, the public sphere in modern industrialised states plays out as a set of structures and processes deeply imbricated in the market, through which experiences and views are communicated and validated via various forms of publicity within mass culture.

Instead of functioning as a public arena for the emergent bourgeois class to reach consensus on public issues, Miriam Hansen describes Negt and Kluge’s modern public sphere as ‘a site of discursive contestation for and among multiple, diverse and unequal constituencies’. This contestation plays out in ‘an unstable mixture of different types of publicity’ that validates certain views and types of experience, while marginalising or excluding others. Due to their market-driven nature and need to attract audiences, the consciousness industries take the everyday life experiences of broad social groupings as their raw materials, including groups marginalised under the existing social-political order such as the working class, ethnic minorities and women. But the experiences of these groups are appropriated, de-substantialised and repackaged as consumer products within the prevailing social, economic and political order of post-war capitalism.

To take one prominent example of the way experiences are repackaged within the modern public sphere of Western societies, many high-profile US films and television series of the 1970s and ’80s dramatised the experiences of working-class Americans who fought in the Vietnam War, and in line with broad public cynicism regarding the conflict by the 1970s and ’80s, generally represented the conflict in negative terms. However, these dramas very rarely contained any serious consideration of the social and political forces that had led to the US’s embroilment in the conflict. Rather, the war was represented as a personal tragedy for US service personnel in a film such as The Deer Hunter (Michael Cimino, 1978), an ahistorical revenge fantasy in an action film such as First Blood (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), or a pop-music-driven nostalgic comedy in a film such as Good Morning, Vietnam (Barry Levinson, 1987). In all these works, the events of the war were reduced to individualised decisions, emotions and tragedies, precluding any serious reflection upon the reasons for the conflict and the nature of the US’s highly problematic intervention in another country. These representations also presented the conflict almost entirely from the perspective of American suffering. In contrast to the widespread circulation of the feature films cited above, the documentary Winter Soldier (Winterfilm Collective, 1972) – comprising extended testimony from returned US soldiers detailing war crimes and atrocities systematically perpetrated by the US military against the Vietnamese population – was almost totally ignored and marginalised by mainstream broadcasters and print media outlets upon its release in 1972.

As the example of the way different representations of the Vietnam War were accorded quite different levels of publicity and exposure shows, the public sphere does not function simply as a realm of open debate even in democratic nations, and the discourse that circulates here is not necessarily at odds with the state or ruling elite. The public sphere is in fact the arena in which a prevailing ideology – in an unstable and constantly shifting process – is ultimately publicised and
validated. The power configurations informing the workings of mass media, which are a mix of political, social and commercial imperatives, shape ‘what can be said and how and what cannot be said, which and whose experience is considered relevant and which irrelevant’. The key ideological function of mass media in this formation is publicity – that is, taking certain viewpoints and ideas to the widest possible audience while marginalising or limiting the dissemination of others. In the 1970s and ’80s, the US’s involvement in Vietnam was widely regarded as a mistake, and many dramatic representations reflected this. Films that went beyond evoking an individualised sense of tragedy or vague disillusionment, however, were marginalised and received far less attention and promotion than those that refrained from probing the reasons behind American involvement and the policies underpinning US military actions.

An obvious overlap exists here between the working of the public sphere as conceived by Negt and Kluge, and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Drawing on Negt and Kluge’s conception of the public sphere as a realm of discursive contestation, we can see how a broad hegemonic ruling group, rather than simply suppressing the public expression of dissenting views, more often marginalises and delegitimises such views through public discourse disseminated to the widest possible audience via mediums such as television. Alternatively, the experiences of subordinate groups are de-substantialised and repackaged as consumer entertainment products devoid of critical reflection. In this manner, public opinion is broadly influenced and guided by those who have most influence over the means of greatest publicity – the owners of major broadcasters and newspapers, major political parties and their leaders, leading business people and corporations, and so on – thereby keeping public concerns largely within a certain set of discursive parameters that preclude serious questioning of basic principles. Due to the range of competing actors in this matrix, who share a generalised set of interests but may disagree on many specific matters, the discursive parameters of the public sphere can and do gradually shift over time.

In Negt and Kluge’s analysis, television has become the prime site in which this discursive contestation plays out, and where the hegemonic dominance of the ruling class is ultimately maintained. They also allow for the possibility of an alternative public sphere in Western societies, which they described as ‘proletarian’, organised from the ground up according to the real-life experiences of those lying outside the hegemonic groups dominating society’s public spheres of production. Negt and Kluge’s particular investment in class-based cultural resistance to the ideology of post-war consumer capitalism can be traced to the influence of the Frankfurt School in their academic backgrounds. The important point in relation to China is that they envisioned the possibility of utilising modern communicative technologies to forge a different kind of public sphere that might step outside the hegemonic assumptions informing dominant public discourse.

Contemporary China, like the post-war Western nations analysed by Negt and Kluge, is a society deeply penetrated by multiple forms of mass media and communications, as well as a marketised economy. As in Western states, the films
and television programmes produced by China’s commercialised consciousness industries are informed by a diverse set of competing commercial, governmental and bureaucratic demands – a radical shift from the Maoist era, when all forms of mass communication were subject purely to the CCP’s political imperatives. However, as Liu and McCormick note, the party-state still plays an overwhelming and overt role in China’s public sphere, crucially differentiating it from the kinds of Western societies Negt and Kluge were writing about. The shaping of public opinion in Western democracies is a diffuse process in which different commercial and political interests compete and interact. Generally speaking, the views of no one group or political party are able to completely dominate the public sphere at any one time. In China, the CCP reserves the ultimate right, over and above all other players, to oversee the publicising of certain viewpoints, news items and historical episodes, while discouraging or completely suppressing others. If there is a conflict between market pressures and political imperatives, the party-state can and does enforce its will over a cultural arena that is commercialised but still subject to governmental dictates when the occasion demands – as it frequently does.

The formal mechanisms by which the authorities exercise their influence over Chinese film and television are numerous. For example, the CCP retains considerable influence in the hiring and firing of staff, especially senior management figures, in broadcasters and state-owned film studios. Party representatives are also part of all management structures. Personnel in the broadcasters now exercise considerable discretion on a day-to-day basis in terms of deciding what can be aired, but they are still subject to specific directives issued by the CCP’s Propaganda Department (Xuanchuanbu). These directives are often related to news items considered ‘sensitive’ by the authorities. Veteran television producer Wang Qinglei claimed in 2013 that journalists at the national broadcaster CCTV received up to a thousand of these directives annually.63 The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (Guojia Xinwen Chuban Guangbo Dianying Dianshi Zongju, or SAPPRFT, known until early 2013 as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, or SARFT) also regularly publishes general regulations proscribing certain types of television content. The consequences of overstepping the parameters set by these bodies can be severe and self-censorship is pervasive.64

In the realm of cinema, filmmakers are required to ‘purchase’ a state-owned studio’s logo for each production and work under the studio’s nominal supervision. In practice this means a 1,500-word script summary must be approved by SAPPRFT before production commences. The final cut of the film must then go through a second round of approval.65 Without SAPPRFT’s imprimatur no feature film can be distributed in Chinese cinemas. In these ways, the Chinese party-state ensures it exercises a decisive influence over the content of the public discourse publicised through the official public sphere of film and television.

This is not to suggest that the contemporary Chinese party-state is a homogeneous body that always acts in a consistent or unified way, or consistently promotes a unified, coherent ideological position. On the contrary, the modern
party-state is riven with factions, regional rivalries and generational divisions that can lead to substantial discrepancies in the way policies are implemented at different times and in different places. This is why it is more useful to look at the influence of the contemporary party-state as a form of hegemony, rather than the imposition of a rigid ideology. For all its internal divisions and inconsistencies, the party-state represents a general outlook that is economically pro-market and politically authoritarian. These two primary impulses are able to work together because the particular type of capitalism the CCP has fostered since the early 1990s is one in which key sections of the economy remain completely or partly in the hands of the government. Even large private firms are bound to the state through a network of relations with the ruling political elite, who are the prime financial beneficiaries of China’s marketised economy. Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel have aptly described this political and economic matrix as China’s ‘state-corporate hegemonic culture’, and it is this broad hegemonic culture that the party-state actively works to preserve, maintain and promote through the official, state-sanctioned public sphere.

Conceptualising the contemporary Chinese public sphere in this manner also helps us to understand how the party-state is able to maintain its cultural and political hegemony while sometimes allowing representations to circulate that seem to highlight certain social problems or societal scandals. As Negt and Kluge note, in Western societies the experiences of those outside the dominant hegemonic group are taken up in the public sphere in order to de-substantialise and reincorporate them into the prevailing hegemony. This process also plays out to a certain extent in China, although the range of views and experiences completely excluded from the public sphere is also much broader than in Western societies. Some instructive examples of specific Chinese television content will clarify these claims.

The investigative programme Focus (Jiaodian fangtan) provides a good illustration of the way the party-state exercises influence over public discourse in order to subtly reinforce its own legitimacy among the television-viewing public. At first glance the programme – especially during its height of popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s – seemed to confirm that Chinese media had undergone a fundamental transformation under the auspices of economic reform, taking on a watchdog role that challenged the corruption and abuses of the ruling political elite.

Despite Focus’s reputation for biting investigative reporting, Alex Chan has shown in a detailed study of all episodes broadcast in 1999 that the vast majority of corruption cases exposed by the programme during its period of peak influence related to low-level city and county officials. Cases involving even provincial-level cadres were rare. Stories implicating the central authorities in corruption were completely absent. Based on these findings, Chan concluded that ‘criticism was limited to policy implementation by local cadres, not policy formulation by central government, nor problems with existing institutions.’ Through its careful selection of targets, Focus was able to carry out a genuinely investigative role in its heyday, while still promoting the impression that abuses of power primarily took place in the CCP’s lower rungs. In conjunction with
this, the programme regularly followed up its exposés with accounts of remedial intervention by the central authorities, allowing the upper echelons of the Party to appear as a bastion against corruption. The role of one-party rule in fostering China’s nefarious and endemic culture of corruption was never discussed, nor was corruption among state leaders. Thus, by remaining strictly within the parameters set by the central government, Focus was able to appear as a symbol of the Chinese media’s investigative powers and a useful mechanism for controlling lower-level abuses of power, while simultaneously reinforcing the central government’s authority and legitimacy.

A more specific and overt example of the CCP shaping and directing public discourse took place in the wake of the devastating Sichuan earthquake of May 2008. In the weeks following the disaster, Chinese media was able to freely report the staggering official death toll of around 69,000, in marked contrast to the suppression of all casualty figures for the even more destructive Tangshan earthquake in the final months of Mao’s rule in July 1976. The Chinese government was widely praised for permitting such openness in reporting. However, when it began to emerge that the high Sichuan toll was partly the result of the collapse of numerous shoddily built public schools which had been undermined by the siphoning off of building funds by corrupt officials, the authorities stepped in and quickly suppressed all discussion of the issue in the Chinese media. So a relatively free hand was given to the media to publicly report the disaster until investigations began to implicate governmental corruption in the size of the death toll, at which point public discussion of the casualty figures and the collapse of school buildings was forcibly stopped.

A third example from the realm of television drama illustrates a more complex interplay of market forces and party-state guidance. The soap opera Dwelling Narrowness (Woju) was immensely popular when it debuted on Shanghai television in mid-2009, and it earned similarly high ratings when it was rebroadcast around the country in November the same year. The 35-episode series focused on two university graduate sisters from rural Sichuan, struggling to gain a foothold in the inflated property market of a fictional city loosely modelled on Shanghai. While one sister desperately saves money by living in a tiny apartment and subsisting on a diet of instant noodles, the other becomes the mistress of a city official in order to help in her sibling’s quest for a home. As well as attracting huge ratings, Dwelling Narrowness engendered a vast amount of online commentary from viewers. Despite its popularity, the series was pulled in Beijing after the airing of only ten episodes. The precise reasons for the cancellation were never made public, although SARFT (as SAPPRFT was then known) denied it ordered the programme’s removal from the airwaves. Television stations in other parts of the country broadcast thirty-three of the thirty-five episodes produced. On 9 December 2009, the series was attacked by SARFT’s Department Director of Television Dramas, Li Jingsheng, for its ‘bone-baring’ sexual directness, and for using ‘the topics of sex and officials to raise its profile’. A range of measures to limit the production of television drama series was then published by SARFT towards the end of 2009.
Ruth Y. Y. Hung claims that although the authorities were clearly involved in limiting the broadcast of *Dwelling Narrowness* after it sparked intense online discussion about governmental corruption and manipulation of China’s inflated property markets, its initial airing was not simply a case of a series slipping through the censorship net. Hung argues that *Dwelling Narrowness* was initially tolerated because the series actually naturalises the contemporary economic and political order by leaving open ‘no possible suggestion for foundational change’. The characters’ struggles are reduced to the level of overwrought melodrama within a social, political and economic order that is taken for granted by all the figures in the series. This is a good example of the de-substantialisation of the experiences of subordinate classes through dramatic representations as described by Negt and Kluge. *Dwelling Narrowness* was unusually frank in its depiction of these experiences in a Chinese context, but it precluded reflection on the political circumstances that have created the conditions within which these experiences play out, or any possibility of change. It was only when articles and online commentary appeared in public that used the unreflective drama as a springboard for more critical analyses of Chinese society that the series was pulled from the air. The series’s history is particularly instructive in illustrating the uncertain parameters of China’s official public sphere, and the sometimes unpredictable effects of cultural products even within the circumscribed world of Chinese television.

Through these examples, we can see how the workings of Chinese television foster the impression of a diversity of views circulating in the public sphere, while actually carefully excluding certain viewpoints, interpretations and forms of experience. Most important is the exclusion of certain linkages between forms of experience, such as the link between one-party rule and endemic corruption, or corruption and the Sichuan earthquake death toll, or the economic dominance of the party-state and China’s inflated urban property markets. In these ways, even critical reporting and discussions of social problems on Chinese television contribute to ‘denoting a facade of legitimation’ for the Chinese party-state, in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the way the public sphere primarily serves to legitimise the prevailing social and economic order in Western nations. It is this legitimising facade that certain socially engaged independent documentarians of the digital era have set out to puncture and challenge by publicising views and experiences, and linkages between experiences, that are excluded from the official public sphere.

Although the party-state’s mechanisms for controlling and influencing the public sphere remain extensive, the marketisation of China’s economy has also, ironically, provided access for Chinese citizens to the technological means of creating alternative public spheres in which non-sanctioned ideas, values and experiences can be publicised and circulated. Contemporary independent documentary culture is one such alternative public sphere.
What Distinguishes Independent Documentaries from State-sanctioned Representations?

If the official public sphere functions as the arena via which certain ideas and viewpoints sanctioned by the state are structured, disseminated and publicised to the widest possible audience, then independent documentary culture provides a realm where texts representing alternative ideas and viewpoints can be circulated and publicly discussed. This is why understanding contemporary independent documentary work in China requires a grasp of independent screening and distribution culture, as well as the films themselves. Before discussing this screening and distribution culture in more detail, however, I would like to single out a crucial feature of independent documentary representations that distinguishes them from those offered in the official public sphere.

In contrast to the top-down hegemonic parameters imposed on public discourse within official channels, the parameters of public discourse in the alternative public sphere of independent documentary emerge from a direct engagement with Chinese citizens living outside the nation’s political and economic elites. These lives and experiences play out in the realm of minjian – China’s physical and conceptual ‘unofficial’ space that has long been excluded from official public discourse. Literally, minjian means ‘non-governmental’ or ‘the space of the people’, but it also has connotations of folklore and a popular culture anchored in oral histories lying outside the master narratives propagated by the state.

Sebastian Veg offers one of the best definitions of minjian in relation to the content and style of contemporary independent Chinese film:

Independent cinema . . . has sought to provide visual images of how the private stories of ordinary individuals are shaped in public spaces, spaces in which they are subjected to the public gaze and the great institutions that control modern life, but in which they try to give voice to their individual values. This space can also be described as the ‘unofficial’ space referred to in Chinese as minjian.82

Building on Veg’s definition, we can say that socially engaged independent Chinese documentaries are concerned with public issues, but the perspective they offer is from the ground up. It is a perspective shaped by the individualised and subjective experiences of ordinary Chinese citizens, in contrast to the top-down political imperatives that shape and restrict official discourse centred on public issues. The spaces within which independent documentaries circulate also exist outside the great institutions controlling Chinese life – specifically in this context the state-owned broadcasters and film studios, the corporations that control official cinema distribution, and the censorship and propaganda apparatuses that shape representations in the official public sphere.

Chapter 1 of this book will explore the notion of minjian further by providing a brief historical account of the development of China’s independent sector, from
a marginal realm of underground film production in the 1990s to the alternative public sphere of the digital era. In particular, this chapter will examine how stylistic shifts in independent documentaries have taken place partly in relation to the increasingly public nature of independent documentary culture, as digital technologies have facilitated the establishment of unofficial screening groups within which these films circulate and are discussed. The development of independent documentary as an alternative public sphere will also be placed in the wider context of other alternative public spheres that have developed in the digital era, especially online. An overlap between these varying realms of unsanctioned public discourse was initially evident in the way unofficial screening groups utilised unofficial print publications and online forums to extend their discussions beyond group meetings. Since around 2003, unofficial discourse online has become increasingly concerned with public events and issues, reflecting a growing rights consciousness among the Chinese public. These currents have in turn been reflected in the alternative public sphere of Chinese documentary, as certain filmmakers have begun to represent pressing social issues on screen, influenced by unofficial discourses concerning history, legal rights and ethics circulating via unofficial channels.

Chapters 2 to 5 will analyse some of the key socially engaged documentary texts produced since the early 2000s that both address and help constitute the public of the independent documentary audience, and consider how their representations intersect with broader streams of unofficial discourse playing out in China today. Works analysed will include titles from Ou Ning, Hu Jie, Ai Xiaoming and Zhao Liang. These filmmakers have been selected because their films very directly challenge certain fundamental ideas and values underpinning the prevailing cultural hegemony promoted by the CCP in today’s China.

Chapter 2 will specifically examine the way Ou Ning has emerged from the independent screening culture facilitated by the arrival of digital technologies, and has developed a filmmaking practice anchored in the participatory ethos of that screening culture. In both its form and content, his work represents an attempt to construct a more participatory form of public discourse around public issues related to China’s contemporary economic development. Several other participatory initiatives within Chinese documentary culture will also be discussed in order to place Ou’s work within a broader context.

Chapter 3 will detail how Hu Jie’s work challenges official historical narratives promoted by the Chinese party-state that revolve around a story of collective national advancement under the leadership of the CCP. In contrast to these official narratives, Hu Jie focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals who lived through the totalitarian culture of the Maoist period, in order to formulate a new type of historical discourse based on personal memory and the experience of loss. His films are part of a growing body of oral history in the independent documentary realm that centres on individual historical experience.

Chapter 4 will consider how Ai Xiaoming’s activist documentary practice draws on the aims and concerns of China’s Rights Defence Movement to challenge the claims of CCP leaders that China is a country ruled by law. Ai’s films
publicise ordinary citizens’ struggles to assert their legal rights in the face of a compromised legal system, while representing the growth of grassroots activism based on rights assertion and a growing rights consciousness.

Finally, Chapter 5 will examine Zhao Liang’s ‘ethically reflective’ approach to documentary, part of a range of recent films that encourage a critical viewing position that interrogates the power relations between a documentary maker and his or her on-screen subjects. In his film Petition, Zhao deploys this ethically reflective style as part of a broader reflection on the ways China’s authoritarian environment impacts upon interpersonal relationships between citizens.

Alongside the detailed discussion of each of these filmmakers’ works, a range of other titles will be discussed dealing with similar issues. The dissemination and public impact of these films will also be considered. Finally, the afterword of this book will consider the future prospects for the alternative public sphere of independent documentary in an environment in which the party-state seems to be once again favouring overt domination over hegemonic strategies.

In this introduction, I have defined the key terms that will be used throughout this book to frame the analysis of contemporary independent Chinese documentary. The Chinese party-state’s distinctive form of corporatist capitalism has been described as a system in which the economy is commercialised, but the heights of the economy remain in the hands of the party-state through state-owned and state-controlled corporations. The official, state-sanctioned public sphere of film and television has been commercialised under this distinctive political-economic formation, but the CCP continues to view the public sphere as a realm through which it has exclusive right to exercise political and cultural hegemony by setting the parameters of public discourse.

Many independent Chinese documentaries of the past ten to fifteen years contest circumscribed official representations, primarily by bringing to the screen representations drawn from the realm of minjian, or the unofficial China comprising the subjective views and experiences of ordinary citizens playing out in everyday public spaces. Alongside the alternative public discourse represented by independent documentaries, an unofficial screening culture has developed in private–public spaces such as cafes and galleries in major cities, within which these texts are circulated and discussed. It is this alternative public sphere, first glimpsed by myself through the confronting images of Petition in that cramped pressroom of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, that will be analysed in the following chapters.